

Successful speakers... take responsibility for the conversation

At Trinity College London, we have studied the scripts from hundreds of our speaking exams. We wanted to find out what makes some test takers more successful than others. One thing that test takers who perform better do is take a more active part in the conversation. They take responsibility for helping the conversation to carry on.

How can you take responsibility for a conversation?

- You can be a supportive listener
- You can ask questions
- You can comment on what the other speaker has just said
- You can make suggestions

Here are two examples taken from Trinity exams.

Trinity tip

Being responsible for a conversation does not mean that you have to speak all the time. For a conversation to flow, it is important to create opportunities for the other person to speak.

Activity 1

Read the conversations between a test taker <TT> and an examiner <E> aloud. Which test taker is taking responsibility for the conversation?

Corpus extract

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| <p>A</p> <p><E> Okay, erm...more and more people seem to be doing most of their shopping on the internet these days. I prefer seeing things in the shops.</p> <p><TT> [Silent]</p> <p><E> Because it's cheaper. Is it cheaper?</p> <p><TT> Erm...some things, yes. Er some things no. Erm, no it isn't cheaper. But, erm someone had to get it for you so, if you paid this person, it's the same price.</p> <p><E> Really?</p> <p><TT> So...</p> <p><E> Okay. Am I right to be worried?</p> <p><TT> Erm...</p> <p><E> Am I right to be worried about the internet?</p> <p><TT> Erm...</p> <p><E> Do you think that I'm correct?</p> <p><TT> Yes.</p> <p><E> Worrying.</p> | <p>B</p> <p><E> My friend's son is really good at sport. He's thinking of giving up full-time education and concentrating on that as a career.'</p> <p><TT> Okay.</p> <p><E> He's asked for my advice and I'm not sure what to tell him.</p> <p><TT> Erm...how old is the boy?</p> <p><E> He's eighteen.</p> <p><TT> Eighteen</p> <p><E> Hmm</p> <p><TT> And where is he living?</p> <p><E> He, he lives with his parents here in London.</p> <p><TT> Yeah, okay...and what has he studied so far?</p> <p><E> Well, he's eighteen so he's done his GCSEs and I think he's in the middle of A levels.</p> <p><TT> A levels, hmm, yeah...</p> <p><E> Yeah.</p> <p><TT> Hmm, I think if he's in the middle of A levels he should at least complete the A levels at the moment.</p> <p><E> Hmm, mmm...</p> <p><TT> Ermm...that would be really good.</p> |
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Trinity tip

While you are thinking of what to say, you can echo something that the other person has said.

- <A> He's eighteen
 Eighteen, mm...

This shows that you have been listening and are thinking about the conversation. To do this successfully, you should echo the main point, not just random words.

Trinity tip

To help someone continue speaking, you can ask simple questions to move the conversation along.

Activity 2

Read aloud. Tick the ones that show good echoing.

- a) 'I'm thinking of taking up mountain climbing.' 'Taking up...'
- b) 'I'm thinking of taking up mountain climbing.' 'Mountain climbing...'
- c) 'He's still only sixteen but he thinks he knows everything!' 'Sixteen...'
- d) 'He's still only sixteen but he thinks he knows everything!' 'He knows...'
- e) 'She's just got her degree and now she wants to do an MA.' 'An MA...'
- f) 'She's just got her degree and now she wants to do an MA.' 'She wants...'

Activity 3

Practise echoing what someone has just said. Use these prompts:

- a) I'm thinking of moving to Paris.
- b) She's only sixteen!
- c) You can find anything on the internet!
- d) He's really tall and he can never find clothes that fit him.

Trinity tip

Another way in which you can take responsibility for the conversation is by making small comments as the other person is speaking.

For example: 'I see' 'Right' 'Yes' 'Yeah' 'Oh'

If you say 'Yes' and 'Yeah' when someone is speaking, this doesn't mean that you are necessarily agreeing with them. It means that you are encouraging them to continue speaking.

Activity 4

Read aloud with a partner and add short comments.

My partner has suggested that we go on a trip. He wants to go somewhere really unusual, like the jungle in Borneo. But it will cost so much money and I'm not sure that I want to do something like that. I think I'd rather go to a nice hotel with a pool!

Activity 5

Choose from these topics:

- a) Someone you admire
- b) How to live a healthy life
- c) How to be a good friend

First, one of you tries to speak for a minute with no encouragement or comments from the other speaker. Then do the activity again, this time with one of you doing the main speaking and the other echoing, commenting and asking short questions.