



Building speaking confidence in language learners

Introducing Pearson's AI Speaking Tutor

Nicolas F. Chapparo G. | Aslihan Oszen | Robert King

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Introduction

For many language learners, success is not defined by passing an exam or completing a course. It is defined by being able to communicate. Learners want to order food confidently, navigate an airport, participate in conversations, and express their ideas in another language. Yet for many students, speaking remains the most challenging skill to develop. Fear of making mistakes, comparison with peers, limited opportunities for practice, and anxiety about being evaluated often become barriers to communication.

In Section 1 of this paper, Nicolas Chapparo explores how teachers can support speaking confidence by creating meaningful opportunities for communication, making progress visible, and fostering safe learning environments where mistakes are viewed as a natural part of development. Drawing on classroom experience and supported by research in language learning, motivation, and communication, the discussion highlights the importance of communicative goals, learner-centered practice, and teacher guidance in helping students move from knowing English to using English. Ultimately, speaking confidence develops not through perfection, but through repeated opportunities to communicate with purpose, reflect on progress, and experience success in real-world situations.

Section 2 introduces Pearson's AI Speaking Tutor, developed to support learners build confidence in their speaking skills. Founded on learning science and drawing on the latest in AI technologies, Speaking Tutor provides learners with the opportunity to practice speaking skills in a real-world contexts but in a low-pressure environment.

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Section 1: Building confidence in speaking

Speaking is the goal for most learners

Language educators have long recognized an important difference between language learning and many other school subjects. When students choose to learn a foreign language, their primary goal is rarely grammatical accuracy or linguistic analysis. Their first objective is usually much simpler: *“I want to speak.”*

Students may eventually become curious about syntax, vocabulary systems, or language structures. However, what many teachers observe, and what many of us experienced as language learners ourselves, is that the ultimate goal is communication. Learners want to reach a point where they can confidently say: *“I can speak English.”*

This is what makes language teaching unique. Language is not simply academic content. It is lived experience. People use language to share stories, describe experiences, express emotions, build relationships, solve problems, pursue opportunities, and achieve personal goals. In that sense, English is not merely a subject: it is a tool for participating in the world.

Every person on earth began life without understanding any language. We could have been born in any country and learned any language spoken around us. We listened first. We experimented with sounds. We made mistakes constantly. Nobody expected perfection. Nobody expected complete sentences from the beginning. Yet somehow we learned.

This perspective can be liberating for learners. When students understand that becoming proficient in a new language follows a process similar to first-language development, they often become more willing to take risks. Before speaking comes listening. Before fluency comes experimentation. Before confidence comes practice.



Babies listen before they speak. They babble before they communicate. Sounds become words. Words become sentences. Sentences become meaningful interaction.

Language learning follows the same principle.

As educators, we understand the theories, frameworks, methodologies, and assessment systems that support learning. We analyze strengths, identify weaknesses, and adapt instruction. However, all of these tools ultimately serve a single purpose: helping learners achieve their goal of communicating.

Why speaking feels difficult

The comparison to babies is useful because babies do not naturally fear communication. Fear develops over time.

Some fears emerge from personal experiences. Others are shaped by social environments. In language classrooms, many students are not afraid of the language itself. They are afraid of what might happen if they make mistakes while using it:

- What if I pronounce a word incorrectly?
- What if my answer is wrong?
- What if other students laugh at me?
- What if everyone remembers my mistake?

“English is not merely a subject: it is a tool for participating in the world.”



The fear of speaking is often not fear of language. It is fear of judgment.

Unlike babies, adults and adolescents are highly aware of social evaluation. They become concerned about how they appear to others. They compare themselves to classmates. They worry about making mistakes publicly.

This is one reason why speaking can feel so difficult.

Classrooms have the potential to be highly rewarding environments for some learners and highly intimidating environments for others. Personality plays an important role. Some students are naturally outgoing and willing to take risks. Others are more reserved, even in their first language.

Add evaluation to the equation and communication can become even more challenging.

Zimbardo (1977) describes shyness as a form of social anxiety characterized by tension and concern in situations where individuals feel they are being evaluated. These characteristics closely resemble what many language learners experience when asked to speak in front of peers.

As teachers, this raises an important question:

How do we help students achieve their goal of communicating if the classroom itself sometimes becomes a source of anxiety?

Comparison is another important factor.

Many educators have encountered students who consider leaving a program not because they lack ability, but because they compare themselves to classmates whom they perceive as progressing faster. This can be frustrating for learners and teachers alike. Students may begin to measure their success against others rather than against their own growth.

When comparison becomes the primary measure of progress, motivation often suffers. Learners may become discouraged, lose confidence, and eventually disengage from the learning process altogether.

“ How do we help students achieve their goal of communicating if the classroom itself sometimes becomes a source of anxiety? ”

“Most learners do not abandon language programs because they fail. They abandon them because they cannot recognize their own growth.”

Progress changes everything

One of the greatest rewards of teaching is hearing how learning becomes part of students' lives. Many teachers can recall moments when former learners returned to share meaningful experiences that were made possible through language. These stories remind us why we teach.

One particularly memorable example for me involved a student who took his first international trip with his family to an English-speaking country. Upon returning, he enthusiastically explained that he had become the family's unofficial translator. He ordered meals, asked for directions, communicated with locals, and helped navigate everyday situations throughout the trip.

His family was proud of him. More importantly, he was proud of himself.

As he described these experiences, something became clear. He was not thinking about grammar rules or language structures. Instead, he was talking about things he could do. He could order food. He could ask for help. He could understand information. He could participate in conversations.

Those experiences closely reflected the communicative objectives that had guided classroom instruction. Lessons had not been designed around isolated grammatical content. Instead, they focused on practical outcomes supported by communicative goals and Can Do statements from the Global Scale of English¹.

The result was language use that extended beyond the classroom.

Experiences like these illustrate an important principle: students often continue learning when they can see progress. Most learners do not abandon language programs because they fail. They abandon them because they cannot recognize their own growth.

When lessons include clear, meaningful objectives, students gain opportunities to evaluate their development more effectively. They understand what they are working toward. They recognize achievements. They identify next steps.

Visible progress strengthens motivation. And motivated learners are more likely to persist.

¹ The Global Scale of English (GSE) is a framework of learning objectives to describe what learners Can Do at different levels of proficiency. For more information about the GSE and access to free resources, visit: [The Global Scale of English - English language learning](#)

What meaningful speaking practice looks like

If speaking confidence develops through communication, then classrooms must provide opportunities for meaningful communication. Teachers play a crucial role in creating environments where students feel safe enough to participate, experiment, and make mistakes. Several principles can help support this process.

Give students a reason to speak

Students rarely benefit from speaking activities that exist solely for the purpose of speaking. Meaningful communication requires purpose.

One of the strengths of communicative learning objectives is that they help teachers move beyond “speaking for the sake of speaking.” Learners communicate to solve problems, explain ideas, compare perspectives, make decisions, negotiate meaning, or share experiences. When communication has a purpose, participation becomes more natural and authentic.

“ Technology does not replace the teacher. It supports the teacher. The educator remains the person who creates the environment in which learning occurs. ”



Normalize mistakes

There is often a critical moment in language development when learners acquire enough vocabulary and structure to begin expressing themselves more confidently. This stage can be fragile. Students want to speak, but they also make frequent errors.

If every mistake is corrected immediately, learners may begin to associate communication with interruption and failure. Over time, this can reduce willingness to participate. This does not mean avoiding correction. It means using feedback strategically.

Effective teachers recognize that not every error requires immediate intervention. Sometimes communication deserves priority over accuracy. At other times, focused feedback can support improvement without disrupting confidence.

As Dörnyei (2001) argues, shyness is not fixed. It is influenced by personality, experience, and context. Because it is contextual, it can change. The classroom environment plays an important role in that change.

Build confidence before complexity

Many educators can remember their own struggles as language learners. For some of us, progress only began when someone explained a concept in a way that finally made sense.

The challenge was not always the language itself. Sometimes it was the way the language had been presented. Students do not always need more complexity to progress. Sometimes they need more clarity.

Confidence often develops when learners experience success with manageable challenges before confronting more demanding tasks. Ensuring content is within the zone of proximal development (Vygotsky 1978) means students will be working with that manageable level of challenge.



Celebrate communication

One of the most rewarding moments in teaching occurs when communication becomes natural. Many teachers have experienced situations where students become so engaged in conversation that they momentarily forget they are in a classroom. The teacher becomes an observer while communication takes center stage.

These moments may not be perfect linguistically. Mistakes still occur. Vocabulary may be limited. Structures may be incomplete. Yet communication is happening.

Those moments deserve recognition.

Teachers can take notes for future instruction, identify opportunities for improvement, and plan follow-up lessons. But they can also celebrate what matters most: learners successfully using language to connect with others.

Sometimes a student's smile says more about learning than any test score ever could. Motivation remains one of the most powerful forces in education. Students can learn without motivation, but motivated learners often participate more actively, take greater ownership of their progress, and persist through challenges.

Creating dynamic, engaging, and supportive learning environments helps sustain that motivation.

“ Teachers play a crucial role in creating environments where students feel safe enough to participate, experiment, and make mistakes. ”

The role of the teacher

Modern educators have access to more resources than ever before. Textbooks, digital platforms, online communities, multimedia content, and AI tools provide new opportunities to support learning. These resources can enhance instruction, personalize practice, and increase access to language input and output.

However, technology does not replace the teacher. It supports the teacher. The educator remains the person who creates the environment in which learning occurs.

At my institution, we refer to teachers as tutors. We adopted this term because teaching extends beyond delivering content. Teachers facilitate learning, guide development, adapt to learner needs, and help students build confidence.

A colleague once shared a reflection that has stayed with me for years: “*Teachers have superpowers. We can destroy just as easily as we can build.*” That statement may sound dramatic, but there is truth behind it. Many people who claim to dislike English often trace those feelings back to a negative educational experience. Their frustration is not necessarily with the language itself. It is with how the language was presented to them.

This reality reminds us of the responsibility educators carry. We help shape future opportunities for our learners. We influence how students perceive themselves. We contribute to the confidence they bring into future learning experiences.

Technology can support students in remarkable ways, but the human connection between teacher and learner remains irreplaceable. Students need mentors, guides, and trusted adults who believe in their potential and help them navigate challenges.

“ Students need more speaking opportunities than most classrooms can realistically provide. ”

Extending speaking beyond the classroom

Despite the importance of classroom instruction, one reality remains difficult to ignore: Students need more speaking opportunities than most classrooms can realistically provide. This is particularly true in contexts where English is learned as a foreign language rather than used regularly in everyday life.

Classroom time is limited. Teachers work with groups of learners. Students have competing responsibilities and interests. Even the most effective lesson cannot provide unlimited opportunities for individual speaking practice.

This creates an important challenge. How can learners continue developing their speaking skills beyond the classroom? Additional practice opportunities become essential. However, these opportunities must be meaningful and motivating.

The more opportunities learners have to communicate meaningfully, the more likely they are to develop confidence and fluency over time. AI apps like Pearson's Speaking Tutor provide learners with unlimited opportunities to practice in real-world contexts, outside of the classroom, in a way that is still pedagogically controlled for level of challenge.

In the next section, we will explore Speaking Tutor in more detail, examining how theories of language learning, confidence building and motivation have underpinned its development.

Section 2: Introducing Pearson's AI Speaking Tutor

Speaking is a productive skill that develops through repeated opportunities to communicate meaningfully. While classroom time inevitably limits how much each learner can speak, Speaking Tutor extends those opportunities by providing learners with a private space in which to speak English out loud, as much as they like, with no one watching or judging them. And just like a human tutor, Speaking Tutor lets them know what went well and what to try next.

Speaking Tutor has been created around a *Speaking Confidence Loop*: five stages that each remove common barriers to speaking while preserving the level of challenge needed for learning to take place. Throughout the experience, learners receive personalized support in real time, while teachers have access to data that provides richer evidence of how every learner is developing, enabling them to provide more targeted support where it is needed most.

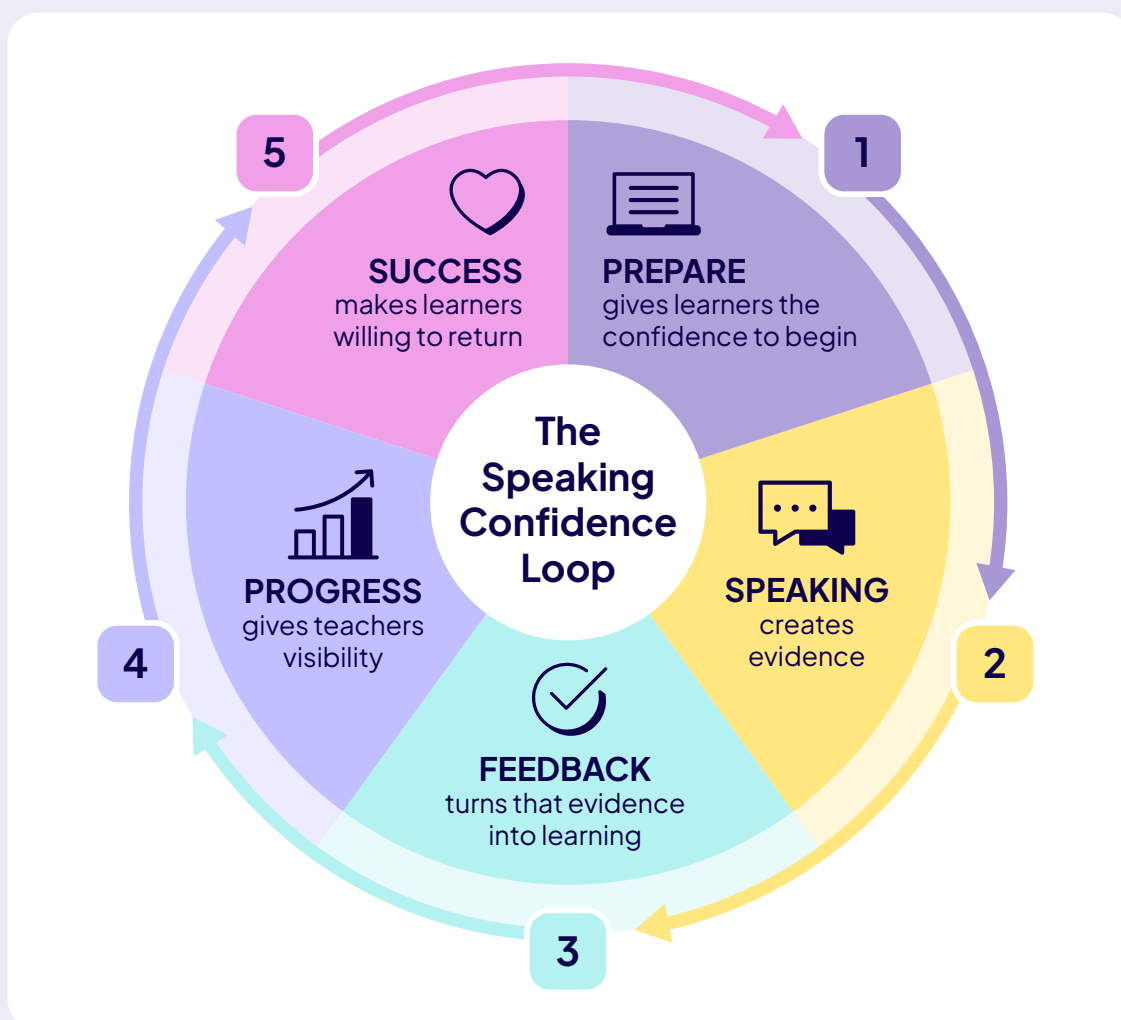


Fig 1. *The Speaking Confidence Loop*

As we explore the design of this loop in more detail, we will see how AI has been supported by established learning science in the development of Speaking Tutor.

Prepare

Each conversation begins with a short preparation screen, matched to the learner’s proficiency level and aligned to a specific Global Scale of English (GSE) Speaking Learning Objective. Constructive Alignment theory (Biggs and Tang 2011) argues that learning activities should directly reinforce intended learning outcomes. By aligning every Speaking Tutor conversation to a GSE Learning Objective that learners have already encountered in class, the product creates a coherent bridge between instruction, practice and feedback. Rather than practicing isolated language, they are leveraging classroom learning to achieve authentic communicative goals.

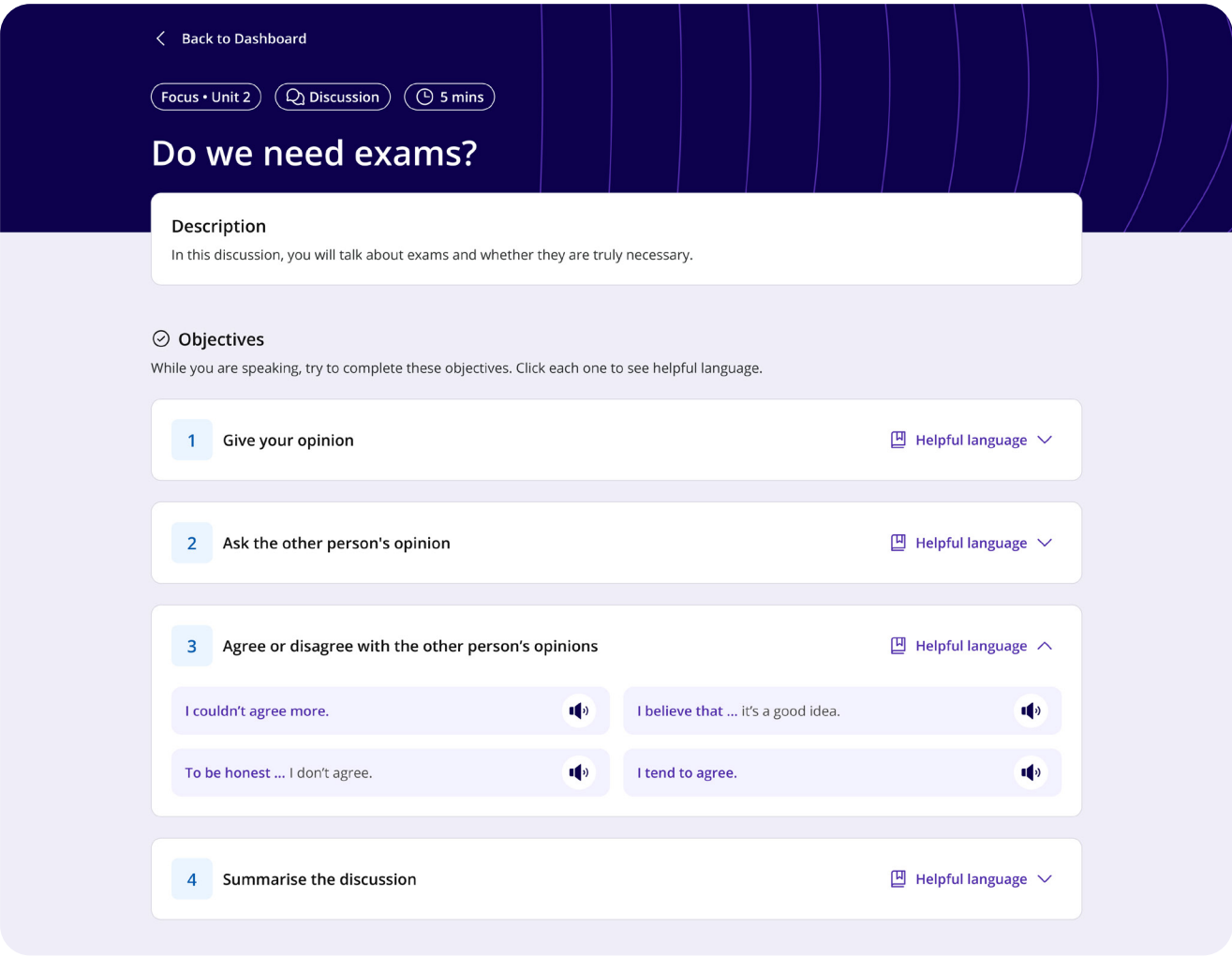


Fig 2. Sample preparation screenshot

Before they begin, the preparation screen (see Fig 2) explains exactly what they will do, with clear learning objectives and useful, level-aligned phrases they might choose to use (“I couldn’t agree more.”).

A lot of speaking anxiety comes from uncertainty about what to do as much as the production of language itself. By making the goal explicit, reducing unnecessary confusion and activating recently learned language, learners can focus their attention on communicating rather than trying to work out what is expected of them. Cognitive Load Theory (Sweller 1988) suggests that reducing unnecessary mental effort allows learners to devote more attention to the task that actually matters – in this case, speaking English rather than figuring out the activity itself.

Speak without judgment

Speaking Tutor activities have been designed to ensure learners speak freely, giving opinions, agreeing, disagreeing and responding naturally rather than repeating drills or memorized sentences. A conversational AI partner keeps the interaction feeling like a genuine conversation rather than an assessment.

“ The best part was knowing that I wasn’t being observed like in an exam, but that it was like talking to a friend. ”

Student quote collected during piloting of Speaking Tutor, Italy
(translated from Italian)

A learning product cannot do the learning for the learner. Practice only becomes learning when learners actively retrieve language, think about meaning and communicate for themselves. This means the conversation must achieve two things simultaneously: it must feel psychologically safe enough that learners are willing to take risks, while remaining sufficiently challenging that those risks lead to learning. Too little challenge offers little opportunity for growth; too much quickly becomes discouraging.

“ There is not really any pressure about making mistakes when talking to a robot. ”

Student quote collected during piloting of Speaking Tutor, Italy
(translated from Italian)

Because learners within the same classroom often have very different levels of spoken proficiency, Speaking Tutor continually adapts the conversation in response to how the learner is performing. Throughout the interaction, the AI considers evidence such as whether the learner has understood the question, how fully they respond and whether they successfully achieve the conversational objectives. Learners who are struggling receive simpler questions, additional prompts and greater conversational support. Learners who are responding confidently are encouraged to explain ideas in more detail, justify opinions and engage in more complex exchanges.

This adaptive approach situates learning within the Zone of Proximal Development (Vygotsky 1978), providing learners with the support they need to work on tasks they cannot yet perform independently. As learners become more confident, the support gradually reduces while the challenge increases. This approach also reflects the principle of Desirable Difficulties (Bjork and Bjork 2011) in which learning is strengthened not when activities become effortless, but when they require learners to think, retrieve and communicate without becoming overwhelming. The goal is not simply to make conversations easier or harder, but to keep every learner within a productive zone where they are both supported and stretched.

“ I felt comfortable in speaking with the AI model because it actually seemed like speaking to a real British person. ”

Student quote collected during piloting of Speaking Tutor, Italy
(translated from Italian)

Feedback that builds confidence

The approach to feedback in Speaking Tutor is informed by Hattie and Timperley's (2007) work which argues that feedback is most powerful when it helps learners understand where they are, where they are trying to get to and what they should do next. Rather than attempting to judge broad communicative competence from a single conversation, Speaking Tutor looks for evidence of specific communicative behaviors related to the GSE Learning Objective targeted by the activity, such as giving reasons, making suggestions or asking for more information. The focus is on the learner's ability to demonstrate the communicative capability represented by the GSE objective.

“ I found the advice and especially the exercises to improve my pronunciation at the end very useful. ”

Student quote collected during piloting of Speaking Tutor, Italy
(translated from Italian)

When the conversation ends, learners receive feedback across multiple dimensions of speaking performance, including how successfully they achieved the conversational objectives, the clarity of their communication and how effectively they expressed their ideas.

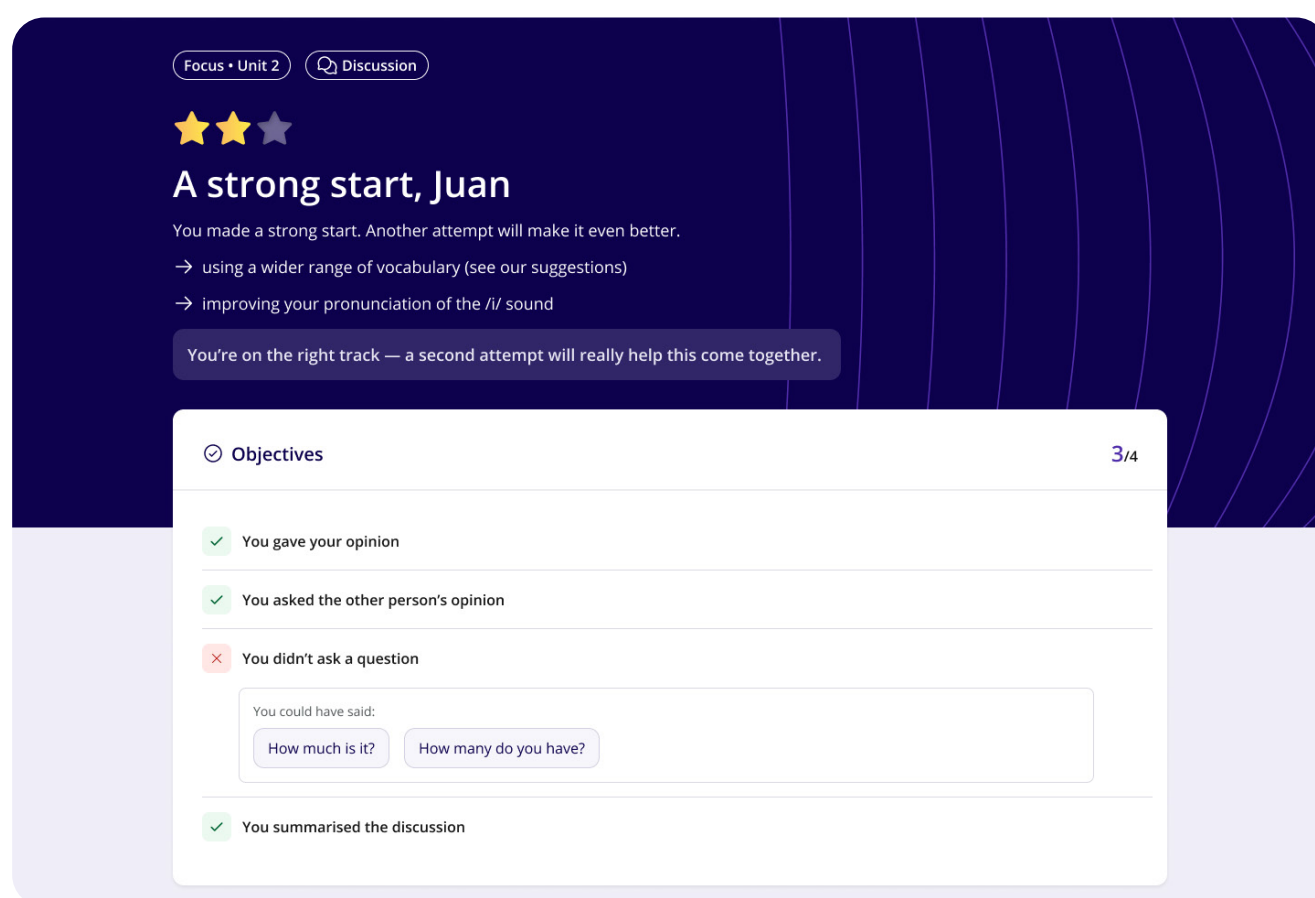


Fig 3. Sample feedback screenshot highlighting what the learner did well

Rather than presenting a long list of corrections, Speaking Tutor begins by highlighting what learners did well (see Fig 3) before offering one clear next step for improvement. This helps learners focus their attention on a single achievable improvement rather than becoming overwhelmed by everything they could have done differently.

“Despite making many mistakes, it encouraged me by telling me the parts I said well, and it helped me with my pronunciation.”

Student quote collected during piloting of Speaking Tutor, Italy
(translated from Italian)

Areas for improvement (see Fig 4) focus on what learners have recently studied within their course. This strengthens the connection between classroom learning and independent practice, making feedback feel timely, relevant and instructionally coherent.

Vocabulary

You used some great phrases:

- In my opinion
- To be honest...
- I disagree

Next time, try using these phrases:

- made an impact

You could use this [explanation].

For example:

Titanic really **made an impact** on me.

- take a step back

Show more phrases

Pronunciation

You need to work on the /i/ sound in words like 'hit' and 'sit'. To make this sound, [pronunciation tip]. Listen to these words and practise saying them.

bit hit sit

Show more examples

Response relevance

How many do you want?

No, thank you.

Your response was not relevant because the server wanted to know the number of things you wanted. Your answer answered the question 'Do you want any?'.

Show more examples

Fig 4. Sample feedback screenshot highlighting areas for improvement

See progress, inform the teacher

Every conversation builds evidence that busy classrooms rarely have time to collect: a picture of how each learner actually performs when they communicate. And because every activity is mapped to a GSE Learning Objective, this evidence demonstrates progress within a recognized framework for communicative development rather than as isolated task scores. Teachers can see not only who is speaking confidently and who may be struggling, but also which communicative objectives learners are consistently demonstrating and where additional support may be needed.

Rather than replacing teacher judgment, Speaking Tutor extends what teachers can observe beyond the classroom, helping them make more informed decisions about where to focus their limited in-class time and attention.

Success leading to return

Each journey around the Speaking Confidence Loop gives learners another opportunity to retrieve and reuse language they have encountered previously. Research into Retrieval Practice (Karpicke and Roediger 2008) demonstrates that actively recalling knowledge from memory strengthens long-term learning more effectively than simply reviewing it. By repeatedly returning to meaningful conversations built around familiar communicative objectives, learners strengthen both fluency and confidence over time. Confidence does not appear overnight. Instead, it grows through repeated experiences of successful communication, with each conversation making the next one a little easier to begin.

“Most of them shy away from speaking because of peer pressure. An AI partner is definitely less embarrassing.”

Teacher quote collected during piloting of Speaking Tutor, Türkiye
(translated from Turkish)

Early evidence of success

During the spring of 2026, 109 secondary students across three schools in Italy used Speaking Tutor during their normal lessons. 145 authentic learner conversations were analyzed alongside surveys with both students and teachers.

These early findings are promising. 81% of students said they felt no judgment or pressure while speaking with the AI, and 86% understood what they were expected to do without any assistance or further explanation. Both suggest that the low-stakes environment successfully reduced barriers to participation.

The feedback experience proved equally encouraging. 100% of teachers highlighted feedback as one of the product's strongest features, while 70% of students found it useful, with pronunciation feedback receiving the highest praise.

Whilst this data cannot yet prove that Speaking Tutor improves speaking proficiency over time, these early findings do suggest that learners feel safe enough to speak with the AI tutor and safety is the foundation on which meaningful speaking development depends.

From speaking practice to speaking confidence

For most learners, language learning begins with a simple aspiration: to speak.

Yet speaking confidently requires much more than vocabulary lists, grammar exercises, or completed lessons. It requires opportunities to communicate, permission to make mistakes, visible evidence of progress, and supportive environments where learners feel safe enough to take risks.

When learners see their progress, communication becomes less intimidating. When classroom activities connect to real-life purposes, language becomes more meaningful. When teachers create supportive environments, confidence begins to grow.

Speaking confidence is not built in a single lesson, nor does it emerge from perfect performance. It develops gradually through experience, reflection, and successful communication.

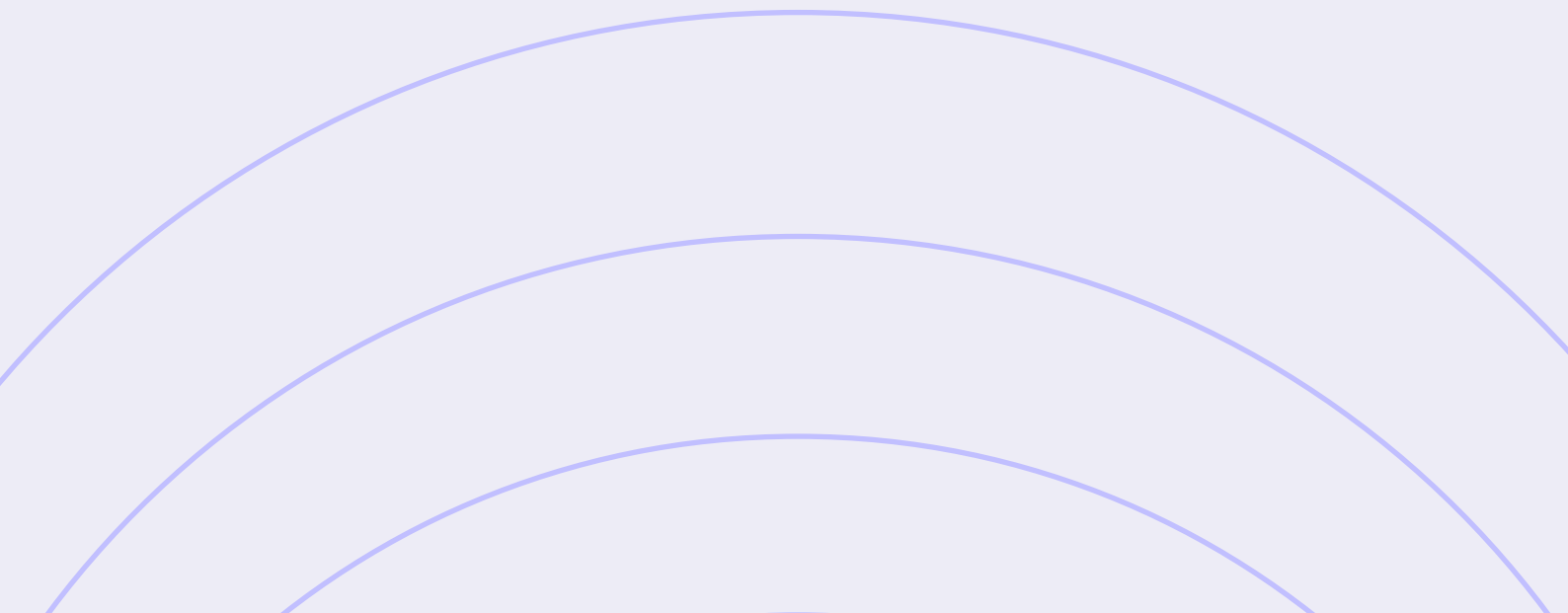
Speaking Tutor is a digital resource that supports learners to develop proficiency in spoken communication in a safe, low-pressure environment – connected to their courseware in a consistent and coherent way. Built on learning science and supported by the latest in AI technology, Speaking Tutor is another tool in the teacher's arsenal to support learners and build their confidence.

**To find out more about
Speaking Tutor, visit:**

[https://www.pearson.com/languages/
why-pearson/digital-learning-platforms/
speaking-tutor.html](https://www.pearson.com/languages/why-pearson/digital-learning-platforms/speaking-tutor.html)

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About the authors



Nicolas F. Chapparo G.

Nicolas Chapparo is Chief Training Officer at American School Way, the largest English language school in Colombia. He holds a bachelor's degree in basic education, specializing in humanities and languages. After working as a systems technician, he discovered the power of technology to enhance learning, sparking his passion for dynamic, tech-driven education. He firmly believes that anything is possible when you believe in yourself, and his goal is to inspire students to live and love the language-learning journey.



Aslihan Ozsen

Aslihan Ozsen is a Product Manager at Pearson. She started her career in economics and business development, spending four years in developing countries promoting investment opportunities. Her master's in behavioral economics deepened her fascination with how people actually change. That led her to a role in product development, where she would be able to design for positive behavior shift. She joined Pearson to focus on education because she believes that's where real change happens. Her goal in developing Speaking Tutor is to help learners become more confident, capable versions of themselves through AI-powered practice.



Robert King

Robert King is an Advanced Specialist Learning Scientist at Pearson, where he has spent the past decade designing digital learning experiences that combine advances in AI and educational technology with evidence-based pedagogy. Holding an MA in Applied Linguistics from the University of Birmingham, he is passionate about ensuring that innovation serves a simple goal: helping learners learn more effectively while making teachers' lives easier. His work spans learning science, language assessment, conversational AI, and product design, with a particular interest in translating emerging technologies into practical, human-centered educational experiences.

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