TESOL Connections
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Speaking and Listening Strategies for Job Interviews

by A. C. Kemp

For 25 years, I've taught ESL to many different populations in many different contexts, but one thing has remained constant: Many of my students hope to get a job in an English-speaking country—especially in the United States.

Unfortunately, language can be a barrier to that dream. U.S. companies tend to give the interview portion of the job hiring process much more weight than companies in other countries (Gatewood, Feild, & Barrick, 2008), which puts international English language learners (ELLs) who lack strong speaking skills at a disadvantage.

Another area of difficulty is listening. Understanding speech can be difficult enough in face-to-face conversations, and initial interviews are often conducted on the phone or on video chat platforms, which do not always sync—meaning that students can't use visual cues.

Though cultural norms, such as interview structures that include small talk and storytelling, also play a large part in the success of candidates seeking jobs in North America, I focus here on key linguistic strategies that ELLs can use to prepare for job interviews in all English-speaking contexts.

Speaking Strategies

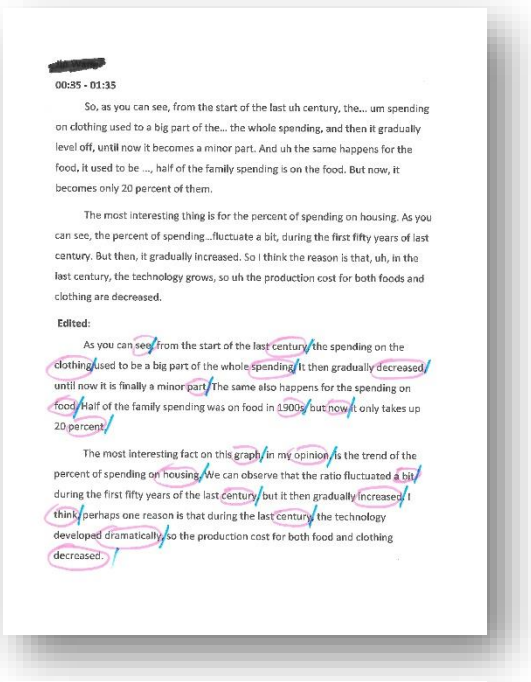
Under pressure, the graduate students I teach often race through familiar and frequently used words in their fields. Essential terms like "electrical engineering" and "supply chain" become a blur, rendering otherwise clear sentences incomprehensible. Grammatical endings disappear and thought groups are broken up with "uh" and "mmm." Therefore, there are two main challenges: helping students slow down by giving them more time and teaching them to take advantage of that time to be more accurate.

Improving Accuracy

Activity 1: Building Awareness

In class, make videos of students giving impromptu or prepared talks about their job skills and/or current research. For homework, each student then makes a word-for-word transcript of 60

seconds of their talk, including long pauses, filler words, and incorrect grammar. Next, the student revises the transcript, editing for errors. If the class has studied pronunciation elements such as thought groups, focus words, or intonation, those can also be marked. The revised portion is rerecorded and submitted with the before-and-after transcripts (see Figure 1).



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So, as you can see, from the start of the last uh century, the... um spending on clothing used to a big part of the... the whole spending, and then it gradually level off, until now it becomes a minor part. And uh the same happens for the food, it used to be ..., half of the family spending is on the food. But now, it becomes only 20 percent of them.

The most interesting thing is for the percent of spending on housing. As you can see, the percent of spending...fluctuate a bit, during the first fifty years of last century. But then, it gradually increased. So I think the reason is that, uh, in the last century, the technology grows, so uh the production cost for both foods and clothing are decreased.

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The most interesting fact on this graph, in my opinion, is the trend of the percent of spending on housing. We can observe that the ratio fluctuated a bit during the first fifty years of the last century, but it then gradually increased. I think, perhaps one reason is that during the last century, the technology developed dramatically, so the production cost for both food and clothing decreased.

Figure 1. Activity 1 example.
(Click here to enlarge)

Vocabulary is also important to accuracy, and job interviews have a particular lexicon, which can be found in career guides online. The MIT *Career Development Handbook* is useful, though it has a U.S. bias, but there are hundreds of career guides available online for free.

Activity 2: Targeting Vocabulary

Students start by identifying unfamiliar words in a list of action verbs (e.g., Appendix A, from the MIT *Career Development Handbook*, 2019, p. 23). If there are a large number of unfamiliar words, students begin with passive learning, such as flash cards with a word on one side and the definition and pronunciation on the other. Once they feel confident that they know the meanings, they move on to recording sentences as homework to practice context and pronunciation. Finally, the words are used actively in exercises like the one in "Hesitation Gambits," following.

Hesitation Gambits

Students need to learn strategies to give themselves time to form fluent answers. To do this, they can learn and practice hesitation gambits, so that these gambits can be easily accessed later, buying the student time to think. Expressions such as "Let me think" or "I hadn't thought of that" do not come naturally to most students, so they must be practiced in a low-stress environment before students go into a job interview.

Activity 3: Buying Time

In this exercise, adapted from Gorsuch, Meyers, Pickering, and Griffee (2013, p. 163), the object is to practice using hesitation gambits so that they become automatic to students.

Each student receives the same gambits, but five different impromptu questions to ask a partner. These questions are hidden from the other student, and asked one at a time. After the question is asked, the asker begins to tap on the table. The respondent must begin talking, using a hesitation strategy to buy time, before the third tap. After using the gambit, they should answer the question briefly.

Following are some sample questions related to job interviews, but you could also use general knowledge questions, such as "What are five synonyms for *beautiful*?", "Without looking, tell me the smallest item in your backpack," or "Define snow." Questions should require some thought but should not be impossible to answer. This exercise takes 10–15 minutes and helps students to master a skill that can then be used in job interviews.

Sample Hesitation Gambits	Sample Job Interview Questions
• Oh, I haven't thought about that. • Hmm. Let me think. • Just give me a second to think about that. • Well… • Let me see.	• What do you think will you be doing in 10 years? • What makes a good boss? • Define success. • What are your greatest strengths as an employee? • What did you like most about your last job?

Listening Strategies

Of course, students can't deliver a clearly spoken and well-thought-out answer if they are not sure of the question. Following are strategies for improving comprehension both before and during the interview.

Unsurprisingly, vocabulary is also important here. In a discussion of comprehension of unscripted spoken English, Nation (2006) suggests that as with reading, listening comprehension ideally requires an understanding of 98% of the word families used—perhaps more because of "the transitory nature of spoken language" (p. 79). However, though a large lexicon is required for this skill, much of the key vocabulary in interviews is predictable.

Predicting

The same aforementioned career handbooks—along with an advertisement for a job—can be used to improve students' understanding of an interviewer's remarks and questions.

Activity 4: Planning Ahead

Students bring two copies of an advertisement for a job that interests them, a list of typical questions from a career guide (e.g., Appendix B, from the MIT *Career Development Handbook*, 2019, p. 58) and the list of action verbs they created for speaking. Using these, students create a word list to predict what they will hear in the interview.

Students quickly skim the sample interview questions in the career handbook and answer the following questions:

1. What questions are you most likely to be asked?
2. In those questions, which words and phrases are repeated often?

Students circle these and compare answers with a partner.

Next, students review their job ad. They circle the words they think are important in the description and requirements and check with a partner to see if they agree. Then, they make a list of the words from both sources. If any words are unfamiliar, they look them up and make note of the meaning and pronunciation. Finally, they add these to the vocabulary from Exercise 2.

The words and phrases on this list are what can be expected. Once students know the meaning and pronunciation of each one, they have done much of the work of understanding the questions likely to come up in an interview.

Clarifying

Activity 5: Understanding the Question

I find students generally have a small repertoire of clarification phrases, and their go-to is "Could you repeat that?" Unfortunately, this is rarely the best strategy. If the student doesn't understand the vocabulary, it's better to ask for the question to be rephrased.

However, one of the most powerful tools is to understand how new information is stressed in English. If a student misses some words, but understands many or most of them, they should repeat as much as possible in their question. Because what is left out of the question is new information, the speaker will stress the words that were not understood the first time.

> Example: (**bold =** stressed)
>
> *Interviewer*: Tell me about a time when you surpassed your **job requirements**.
> *You*: I'm sorry. When I did **what** to my job requirements?
> *Interviewer*: When you **surpassed** your job requirements.

Even if the student is unfamiliar with the word "surpassed," they are now in a position to ask for that information specifically.

See Appendix C for a handout combining Exercises 4 and 5, which is useful for both in-person and telephone interviews. In addition to clarification questions, it includes ones to check comprehension.

Conclusion

The interview plays a major role in the job searches in the Anglo-American world. Though this emphasis has the potential to be a drawback for English-learning job candidates, these exercises focusing on speaking and listening can help them to gain the confidence and skills they need to be successful.

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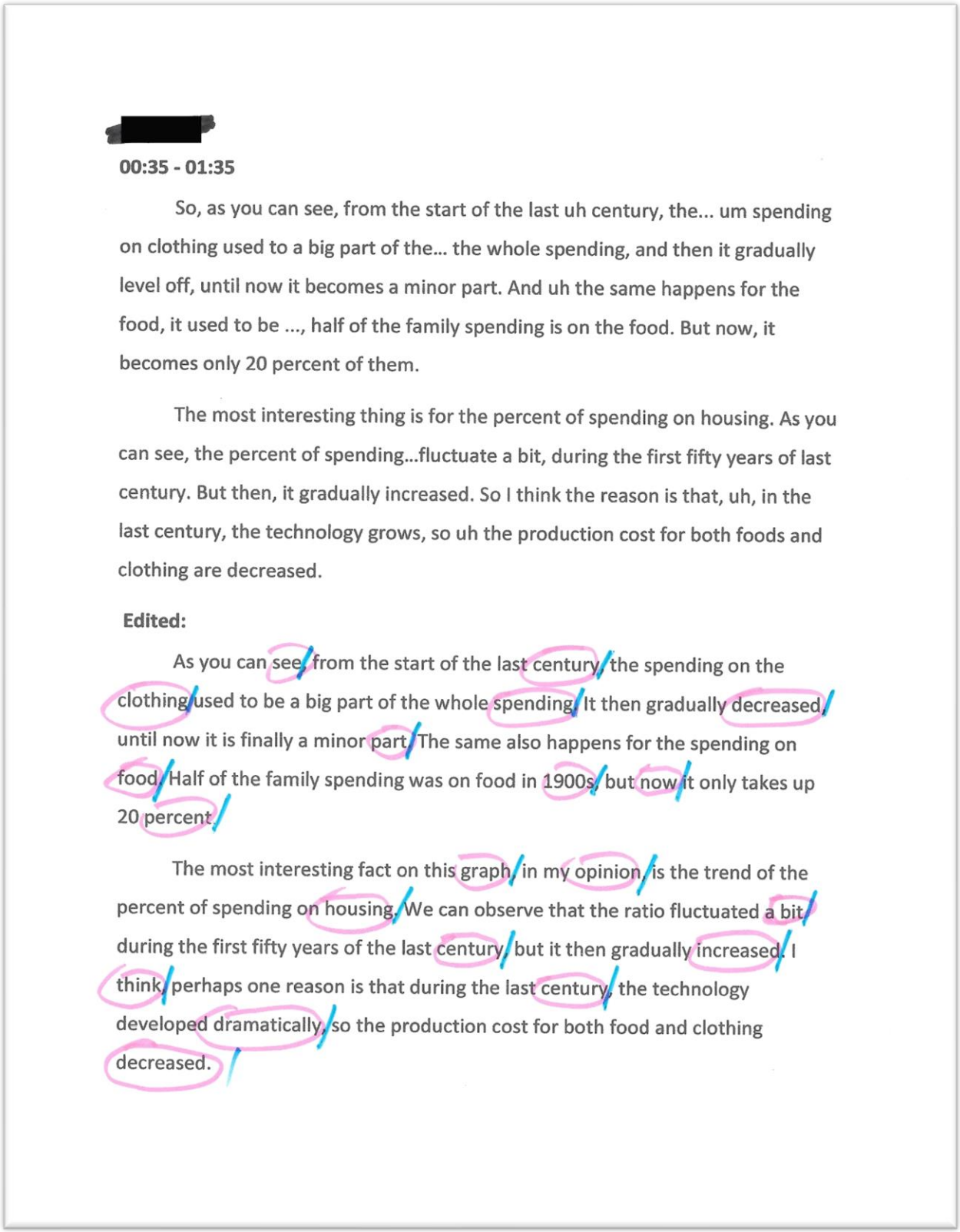
Figure 1



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