

Conversation Classes and Speaking Practice: Building Confidence at AELO Swiss Academy

A few Octobers ago, a student walked into my conversation class, sat down, and told me her https://www.reddit.com/r/flyingeurope/comments/1nnhrnv/anyone_from_aelo_swiss_any_advices/ goal in a single sentence. She wanted to survive a work lunch without switching to English. Her name was Katarzyna, she worked as a financial analyst, and she could write a flawless email in her second language. She had finished grammar workbooks that would make a linguistics student weep. And when a waiter came to take her order at a restaurant, she pointed at the menu and smiled.

That gap between what you know and what you can say out loud, under pressure, with a real human waiting for your answer, is the whole reason conversation classes exist. It is also, honestly, the most interesting problem in language teaching. At AELO Swiss Academy, speaking practice is not treated as a reward you earn after finishing a grammar book. It is the main event, trained from week one, alongside everything else. Here is how that works in practice, and how to get the most out of it.



Why speaking is the scariest skill

Writing is private. You draft, you check, you correct, and only then does anyone see it. Speaking happens in real time, in front of witnesses, and there is no backspace key. Your inner critic gets a live microphone.

Most of the fear I see in class has very little to do with grammar. People are not usually afraid of forgetting a verb conjugation. They are afraid of a silence. That half-second where everyone looks at you, waiting, and your mind goes white. Some students handle it by translating in their heads first, which means they are always three sentences behind the conversation. Others handle it by staying quiet, nodding, and letting the confident people talk. Both strategies feel safe. Both also make the problem worse, because the only way to get faster at speaking is to speak slowly and badly, in public, many times.

I tell my students about the time I ordered wine in French, noticed it was corked, and completely lost the word for it. I gestured at the glass. I said the wine was "tired." The waiter understood anyway, we both laughed, and the world kept turning. That story does more for a nervous student than any grammar chart, because it makes the

stakes visible and small. You will say strange things. People will mostly figure out what you mean. The disaster you are rehearsing in your head almost never happens.

What actually happens in a conversation class

New students often arrive expecting a test. Someone will ask them questions, they will answer, and their mistakes will be collected and graded. What they find instead is closer to a gym.

In our conversation classes at AELO Swiss Academy, the setup is deliberately simple. Chairs in a horseshoe, no desks, phones face down. Small groups, usually somewhere between six and ten people, because that number is big enough to give you breathing room and small enough that silence is noticeable. Sessions run about ninety minutes. The first ten minutes are low stakes: what you did on the weekend, one small piece of news, anything to get words moving. Then comes the main task, which might be a debate, a role play, a story circle, or a discussion built around a short text or image. The last five or ten minutes belong to corrections.

Here is the number that surprises people. In a good conversation class, the teacher should be talking maybe a fifth of the time, at most. If the teacher is talking more, the class has quietly become a lecture with interruptions. You are not paying to watch the trainer lift the weights. You are paying for the weights.

Correction without bruises

The question every student asks, usually in the first session, is some version of "will you correct me every time I make a mistake?" My answer is no, and the reason matters more than the answer.

Immediate correction, stopping someone mid-sentence, has a cost. It teaches the mouth to hesitate, because part of your attention is always waiting for the buzzer. In conversation practice, fluency beats accuracy most of the time, because a sentence with three small errors that arrives on time is worth more than a perfect sentence that arrives after the topic has moved on. So the default in class is delayed correction. I keep a notepad, I write down what I hear, and near the end of the session we go through the interesting ones together, anonymously. "Three people said this. It is completely understandable. Here is the more natural version." Nobody is singled out, everybody recognizes themselves, and the correction sticks because it came from a real moment, not an exercise.

There are exceptions. If an error causes genuine confusion, we deal with it on the spot. And some errors are fossilized, meaning the student has repeated them for years and no longer hears them. Those sometimes do need interruption. But it has to be negotiated. I had a student, Diego, who said "I am agree" in every single class. He asked me to stop him every time it happened. Three weeks later he caught himself saying it, corrected himself mid-word, and never said it again. It worked because it was his request, not my crusade.

From scripted to spontaneous

Confidence is built in stages, and skipping stages is where most self-taught learners come undone. They jump from memorized phrases straight into free conversation, freeze, and conclude that they are hopeless at languages. They are not hopeless. They just tried to run before building the habit of walking.



The progression we use looks something like this:

| Stage | What it sounds like | Why it works |

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| Rehearsed | "I'd like the salmon, please. Could I see the wine list?" | The words are in your mouth before you need them |

| Role play | A card: "Return a broken kettle. The clerk is stubborn." | You rehearse feelings and negotiation, not just words |

| Prompted | "Tell us about a decision you regret." | The structure holds you up while you improvise |

| Free conversation | Open discussion, teacher only nudges | This is the target situation |

| Real-world mission | Order lunch, ask for a platform, make a phone call | The classroom follows you out the door |

The role play stage deserves a word, because adults sometimes find it embarrassing. I get that. Pretending to be a customer at an imaginary bank feels silly when you run a department in real life. But role play is where the emotional vocabulary gets trained, the softening phrases, the polite disagreement, the moment where you have to hold your position while someone pushes back. That is exactly the muscle that fails at the work lunch. And the real-world missions matter too. Students sometimes get sent out with a small task, ask a pharmacist a question, call a shop and ask their opening hours, then come back and report. The street becomes the exam hall, except nobody is grading you.

Activities that quietly do the work

A conversation class lives and dies by its tasks. A few that I keep coming back to, because they work on something specific without ever feeling like a drill.

The story circle. Each person adds one sentence to a shared, increasingly ridiculous story. It sounds like a party game, and it is, but notice what it trains: listening carefully, because your sentence has to follow the last one, and producing fast, because the pause before your turn is short and everyone is smiling, which lowers the stakes. Some of the funniest sentences I have ever heard in a classroom came from students who claimed they "could not speak."

The debate with assigned positions. You argue a side you privately disagree with. This sounds cruel and is actually liberating, because the ego leaves the room. If someone attacks your argument, they are attacking the position on the card, not you. The shyest student I taught one year turned out to be a devastating debater once she was given a side she did not hold. She told me afterward it was the first time she had spoken in class without her heart pounding.

Speed rotations. Change partners every four minutes. A conversation that dies now has a natural ending instead of an awkward one, which is a mercy for beginners. It also means you talk to everyone, not just the friendly person who sat next to you.

The forbidden word game. You cannot say "good," "nice," "very," or "interesting." Suddenly people reach for vocabulary they forgot they had. Half the battle in speaking is not missing words. It is that your brain defaults to the safest ones.

The group is part of the method

Six to ten people is not an arbitrary number. Above twelve, the quiet students vanish, and the two most confident voices carry the whole session. Below five, there is nowhere to hide, which sounds virtuous but is genuinely hard for some people, especially in their first weeks. A slightly bigger group lets a nervous student listen, prepare a sentence, and deploy it, which is a legitimate way to participate.

Mixed levels are a trade-off worth naming honestly. A weaker student hears better models and gets to steal phrases, which is one of the fastest ways to learn. A stronger student consolidates by explaining and by being understood by people who do not share their vocabulary. The risk is that the gap gets too wide, and that is where a teacher has to actually teach, pairing and regrouping so nobody is coasting and nobody is drowning.

And there is something less measurable that happens over a term. Regulars develop inside jokes. Someone's story from week three gets referenced in week seven. The group becomes a team, and attendance stops being about a course and starts being about people who will notice if you are gone. That social pull is worth more than any app notification.

Between classes: talking to yourself is not crazy

Ninety minutes a week is a foundation, not a plan. The good news is that the between-class work is cheap, needs no partner, and can be folded into a life you already have.

- Narrate what you are doing, out loud, while cooking or commuting. Wrong words and all. Fluency is partly a motor skill, and the mouth needs mileage.
- Shadow a podcast: play one sentence, pause, repeat it back with the same rhythm and melody. Rhythm carries meaning, and stealing it makes you instantly easier to understand.
- Record a one-minute voice memo each day about anything at all. Listen to last week's memo. The progress you cannot feel day to day becomes audible.
- Find a tandem partner for thirty minutes, fifteen in each language. It is free, and it is real conversation with built-in forgiveness.
- Rehearse tomorrow's likely conversations the night before: the coffee order, the small talk, the question you have been avoiding at work.

Fifteen minutes daily beats two hours on Sunday. The brain consolidates speech overnight, not in heroic weekend sessions. And if you are in Switzerland, you are sitting on an advantage most learners would envy. Depending on

your canton, you can walk out your front door into French, German, or Italian. The bakery counter is a conversation class that never closes, and the staff have heard worse accents than yours, I promise.

How long until it clicks

The honest answer, from watching a lot of students go through this: a learner who already has decent vocabulary and does one conversation class a week plus daily self-talk usually feels a shift in two to three months. Real comfort, the kind where you stop rehearsing before you speak, tends to arrive somewhere between six months and a year. Anyone promising fluency in weeks is selling something.

Plateaus are normal, and here is the strange part. The feeling of getting worse often comes right before a jump, because your ear has improved faster than your mouth. You suddenly hear your own mistakes, and it feels like decline. It is the opposite. It is the moment the feedback loop connects.

Some students also go through a quiet stretch where they barely speak at all. Teachers call it a silent period. It is not failure and it does not need fixing. The words are assembling somewhere, and when they arrive, they arrive in bulk.

Katarzyna, from the start of this piece, survived her work lunch after one term. After two terms she was arguing about project deadlines, on the phone, without notes. Her grammar in that second term was barely better than in the first. Her nerve was unrecognizable. That is the trade conversation classes actually make: they rarely make your grammar perfect, and they reliably make your grammar irrelevant to whether you open your mouth.

Getting the most out of your first term

If you are starting a conversation class soon, at AELO Swiss Academy or anywhere else, a short checklist from someone who has watched a lot of first terms:

- Volunteer to go first at least once per class. The dread beforehand is always worse than the doing.
- Keep a small notebook for corrections and reread it before class, not after. Arriving with yesterday's fixes in your head is how they become permanent.
- Bring one topic you actually care about each week. Passion outranks vocabulary every time.
- Tell your teacher which mistakes you want interrupted. It hands you the controls.
- Accept that some conversations will flop. Dead silences, misunderstandings, jokes that land nowhere. Everyone has them, including native speakers.

A conversation that dies is not a failed class. Confidence, in the end, is not the absence of mistakes. It is the decision that mistakes will not stop your mouth from moving. A conversation class is just a room where that decision gets made forty times a night, among people making the same decision, until one day you make it outside the room without noticing. That is the entire trick, and it is a good one.