

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Developing B1 level EFL learners' speaking skills through the audio-lingual method

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Abstract. This article examines how the Audio-lingual Method (ALM) can be systematically applied to develop speaking skills among B1 level EFL learners. Structured around three central pedagogical questions—what to teach, who to teach, and how to teach—it draws on behaviorist learning theory, structural linguistics, and current research in L2 pronunciation instruction. B1 learners, as defined by the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), produce intelligible speech despite phonological imperfections. The ALM's emphasis on habit formation, dialogue memorization, and pattern drills aligns with the developmental needs of this level. The article concludes that when combined with explicit pronunciation feedback and carefully sequenced oral activities, the ALM offers a viable and evidence-based framework for EFL speaking instruction at the B1 level.

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1. Introduction

Speaking is one of the most challenging yet essential skills in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) instruction [4]. Despite its centrality to communicative competence, oral production is often underrepresented in language curricula, particularly where structured practice is limited. The Audio-lingual Method (ALM), rooted in behaviorist psychology and structural linguistics, offers a systematic framework for developing oral fluency through habit formation, repetition, and pattern practice [4].

The ALM emerged in the United States in the 1950s and 1960s as a direct application of structural linguistics to language pedagogy. Its core premise is that language learning is habit formation: learners must form correct linguistic habits through systematic practice

before those habits can be automatically deployed in communication [4]. This principle has continued relevance, supported by contemporary research on explicit pronunciation instruction and oral skill development [3, 2].

This article addresses three fundamental pedagogical questions: what to teach at the B1 level, who the B1 learner is and what they need, and how ALM techniques can be deployed effectively. The discussion draws on the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages [1], Larsen-Freeman's authoritative account of ALM [4], and empirical studies on L2 pronunciation instruction [3, 2] to argue that the ALM provides a sound foundation for B1-level speaking development.

2. What to teach: speaking skills at B1 level

At the B1 (threshold) level, the CEFR describes learners who can handle most situations likely to arise while travelling in areas where the target language is spoken and can produce simple connected text on familiar topics [1]. The key speaking components requiring focused instruction at this level are pronunciation, fluency, accuracy, and spoken interaction.

Pronunciation.

Intelligibility—the degree to which a listener understands a speaker—is the primary goal of pronunciation instruction. At B1, the CEFR states that “pronunciation is clearly intelligible even if a foreign accent is sometimes evident and occasional mispronunciations occur” [3, p. 154]. Targeted instruction in segmental features (individual sounds) and suprasegmental features (stress, rhythm, intonation) is therefore essential. Without explicit pronunciation work, learners frequently exhibit fossilized errors that impede long-term intelligibility [3].

Fluency.

Fluency refers to the ability to speak with appropriate speed and without excessive hesitation. The ALM directly addresses fluency by automating high-frequency

patterns through overlearning—repeated oral practice until a response becomes habitual and effortless [4]. This behavioral approach to automaticity is supported by research showing that structured repetition creates the procedural knowledge that underpins spontaneous speech.

Accuracy.

Accuracy concerns grammatical correctness in spoken output. ALM's structural drills—substitution exercises and question-answer sequences—train learners to produce grammatically correct utterances without conscious monitoring [4]. At B1, systematic attention to formal accuracy prevents the entrenchment of errors that impede communication.

Spoken Interaction.

B1 learners should be able to initiate, maintain, and close conversations on familiar topics using common conversational formulas [1]. ALM's dialogue memorization technique directly targets this competency by exposing learners to authentic conversational sequences that model appropriate register and turn-taking [4].

3. Who to teach: the B1 EFL learner

The CEFR B1 descriptor represents a threshold level at which learners transition from basic to independent language use [1]. B1 learners possess a working knowledge of core grammar structures and sufficient vocabulary for everyday interactions, but typically struggle with spontaneous speech production, complex pronunciation patterns, and fluent output without preparation.

Phonologically, B1 learners often exhibit fossilized errors—persistent pronunciation mistakes that resist correction through incidental exposure alone [3].

Fouz-González [3] demonstrated that learners benefit significantly from explicit pronunciation instruction targeting fossilized segmental features, confirming that systematic phonological training must begin no later than the B1 stage to prevent error entrenchment. Similarly, Ducate and Lomicka [2] found that regular oral production practice, even when immediate measurable gains in accentedness are modest, substantially increases learners' metalinguistic awareness and motivation—factors that support long-term speaking development.

The B1 learner profile therefore calls for methods that provide extensive controlled oral practice, offer immediate corrective feedback to prevent error reinforcement, and build automaticity in high-frequency patterns [4]. ALM is particularly well suited to this profile: its insistence on error prevention aligns with the goal of avoiding fossilization, and its step-by-step progression—from controlled imitation to guided pro-

4. How to teach: alm techniques for B1 speaking

The ALM provides a coherent and sequenced set of techniques grounded in the principle that language learning is habit formation [4]. The following core procedures are especially effective at the B1 level.

4.1 Dialogue Memorization.

ALM lessons begin with a short, culturally relevant dialogue that models the target structure or function [4]. Learners listen, repeat, and memorize the dialogue until they can reproduce it accurately and fluently. This builds a bank of ready-made utterances supporting both fluency and contextual appropriateness. The teacher first models the dialogue aloud while students follow, then students repeat each line chorally before individual practice [4].

4.2 Choral and Individual Repetition.

Choral repetition—the whole class repeating a model utterance simultaneously—reduces individual anxiety while training the articulatory habits required for accurate pronunciation [4]. Ducate and Lomicka [2] confirmed that regular oral production practice of this kind builds learner confidence and metacognitive awareness of pronunciation, even when measurable changes in accentedness are modest in short interventions. Individual repetition follows choral work to ensure each learner internalizes the target pattern.

4.3 Backward Build-up Drill.

When a sentence is long or phonologically complex, the backward build-up technique breaks it into segments beginning from the end of the utterance and progressively adding elements [4]. For example, for *I'd like to book a double room for three nights*, the teacher begins: *three nights* → *for three nights* → *a dou-*

ble room for three nights and so on. This ensures learners master the rhythm and connected speech patterns of each component before combining them [4].

4.4 Substitution Drills.

Single-slot substitution drills present a model sentence and require learners to substitute one element in response to a cue [4]. For instance: *"She goes to the library every day"* → *[office]* → *"She goes to the office every day."* Such drills automate grammatical patterns and extend lexical range in spoken production without requiring learners to monitor form consciously during speech.

4.5 Positive Reinforcement and Error Prevention.

A key ALM principle is that errors must be prevented rather than allowed to occur and corrected after the fact [4]. The teacher models the target form, students repeat the correct form, and immediate positive reinforcement is provided for accurate production. Pronunciation research confirms that explicit instruction followed by immediate feedback is more effective than implicit correction alone [3], making this principle especially valuable at B1, where fossilization risks are high.

4.6 Sequenced Lesson Structure.

An effective ALM-based B1 lesson follows a clear progression: (1) warm-up dialogue presentation; (2) choral repetition; (3) backward build-up for complex segments; (4) substitution drills; (5) question-answer drills for interactive practice; and (6) a freer role-play activity in which learners deploy the practiced language in a semi-authentic context [4]. This sequence moves learners from controlled imitation toward guided production, gradually building autonomous speaking ability.

5. Conclusion

The Audio-lingual Method, when applied systematically and with awareness of B1 learners' developmental profile, provides an effective framework for EFL speaking instruction. By addressing what to teach (pronunciation, fluency, accuracy, and spoken interaction at the B1 threshold [1]), who to teach (learners requiring structured scaffolding and error prevention to avoid fossilization [3, 2]), and how to teach (through

dialogue memorization, repetition drills, backward build-up, and positive reinforcement [4]), the ALM offers a principled pathway to oral competence development.

Current research on L2 pronunciation confirms that explicit instruction, systematic practice, and corrective feedback are essential for speaking development [3, 2]—principles that lie at the core of the ALM.

While the method should be complemented by communicative activities in a balanced curriculum, its structural foundation remains a valuable resource for EFL teachers building solid speaking skills at the B1

level. Future research might usefully explore the optimal balance between ALM-based drills and task-based speaking activities for learners at this threshold stage.

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