

Dealing with learner reticence in the speaking class

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This paper describes an oral English course for non-English majors at a university in the People's Republic of China. In the first year of the course, the students were very resistant to participating in group-based speaking activities, and their end-of-year results were disappointing. In the second year, the teacher decided to involve the students actively in designing their course and planning activities which would meet their needs and reasons for wanting to speak English. The aim was to increase their motivation and overcome reticence by getting them to talk about what and how they wanted to learn. It was expected that both their confidence and their ability to speak English would improve through more personal engagement with the course. The effectiveness of this approach was assessed using self-evaluation forms, classroom observations, and tests which showed significant progress in the students' speaking.

Introduction

This paper reports on a Chinese university teacher's efforts to improve her learners' confidence and ability to speak English by involving them in making decisions about the content and organization of their oral language classes. Conventionally, it is assumed to be the teacher's role to make such decisions, but the concept of a negotiated syllabus which is determined jointly by teacher and students is now a well-established alternative to the idea of the teacher being solely responsible for course planning. Sharing decisions about key aspects of a course with the group and accommodating their different ideas and learning preferences allows 'an unfolding compromise between the original pre-designed syllabus and the individual teacher's alertness to those aspects of learner agendas that may be revealed during classroom work' (Breen and Littlejohn 2000: 9).

The teacher believed that reticence to participate in speaking activities was preventing her learners from making progress and achieving the outcomes intended for the course. In the first year, classroom activities designed to improve their speaking skills such as role-plays, simulations, and group discussions aroused resistance among students, who considered them a waste of class time. Some students chose to be silent or sit at the back of the classroom to avoid being noticed and called upon to participate. These negative attitudes and behaviours led to frustration and failure both for the teacher and for the learners. In the second year, the teacher decided to try involving the students more actively in the course design process as a way of

helping them to appreciate the importance of practising speaking in groups, and the way in which personal engagement contributes to improved speaking skills.

Reticence and its effect on the development of speaking skills

Getting learners to speak in class can be difficult. Among the factors which contribute to learner reticence, according to Tsui (1996), are learners' inability to understand what the teacher is saying, teachers' low tolerance of silence (they tend to answer their own questions if a student response is not immediately forthcoming) and, perhaps most significantly, learners' fear of embarrassing themselves by making mistakes. Less proficient learners worry that their lack of ability to use the language may lead to them being viewed as incompetent (Allwright and Bailey 1991). This fear increases communication apprehension (Tudor 1996), which blocks positive learning behaviours and deprives learners of the practice that they need in order to improve their speaking skills and become confident language users. It is safer to keep silent, withdraw from voluntary participation in activities which require them to speak, and adopt a generally passive role in the classroom.

The importance of output

Yet as studies by Swain (1985) and others have shown, language learning is far more effective when learners are pushed to use the target language (TL) in productive tasks. Swain observed that immersing Canadian learners of French in the TL had a very positive effect on their ability to understand French, but that this effect did not transfer to their ability to speak or write French themselves. The learners' level of achievement in the productive skills of speaking and writing was much lower than in the receptive skills of listening and reading. Swain's research highlighted the importance of learner output in the development of language skills. Students who are passive and reticent in class have fewer opportunities to practise the language and therefore make slower progress. One reason for this, according to Swain, may be that such learners are less aware of the gap between what they want to say and what they are able to say in the TL and, therefore, less likely to challenge themselves to improve. The slower the progress they make, the less likely they are to perform well when called upon to speak.

Is reticence a particularly Chinese trait?

Asian learners are often considered to be more reticent than their Western counterparts (Tsui 1996). The Hong Kong teachers cited by Tsui all view reticence as a major problem in their classrooms, and their comments express frustration at the behaviour of their students who are 'unable to bring themselves to participate actively in class', 'generally shy and unwilling to speak in English', and 'too passive ... most of them simply sit there doing nothing but listening or sometimes daydreaming' (Tsui 1996: 146). However, in a large survey into the attitudes and expectations of both Asian and European learners of English, Littlewood (2000) found that the stereotype of Asian students as 'obedient listeners' sitting passively in class does not reflect the way these students really want to learn. His data indicated that Asian learners are just as keen to be active and independent as European learners and that they like working in groups towards a common goal. Littlewood's tentative conclusion is that the passive behaviour of Asian students is not innate but has been instilled into them by

growing up in a cultural and educational environment which discourages independent thinking and regards the teacher not as a facilitator of learning but as a person in authority and a ‘fount of knowledge [to be] delivered’ (Liu 1998: 5).

In Chinese culture, a person with authority is seen as having a caring, nurturing, and benevolent role. This is rather different from the Western view that authority is a constraining and restricting influence on those over whom the authority is exercised (Ho and Crookall 1995). The Chinese preoccupation with face, which requires people to protect each other’s self-image and feelings, can also make it uncomfortable for Chinese students to present opinions which differ from those of their teacher or a classmate. Fear of losing face can mean that a Chinese teacher will find it difficult to invite discussion, share decisions with students, or relinquish control to them. All these may explain why reticence is considered to be a particular characteristic of Chinese learner behaviour.

Overcoming reticence by giving learners more control

Although language teaching syllabuses in the People’s Republic of China today claim to promote communicative and learner-centred approaches, in reality, the roles of teachers and learners remain much as they always were. Most students have little say in what they learn or how they learn, and there is little encouragement to practise speaking in ways which promote meaningful interaction (Shu 2006). For a learner-centred approach to be effective, the roles of learners and teacher must change, and students must assume a more active and participatory role in their learning process. The basic idea, according to Tudor (1993: 22), is that ‘learning activities will be more relevant if it is the students, as opposed to the teacher, who decide on the conceptual and linguistic content of these activities’. It also assumes that ‘students’ involvement and motivation will be greater if they can decide how activities are structured’ (ibid.).

The remainder of this paper describes an attempt by one Chinese teacher to run her oral English class in a more learner-centred way, by involving her students in deciding the aims, content, and delivery of the second year of their course. The first part explains the students’ background and how decisions about the involvement of the students in the course design were made. After that, the main procedures used to implement the course are presented. The final part describes how self-evaluation forms, classroom observations, and tests were used to assess learners’ progress in speaking and to evaluate the course.

A case study of how problems of reticence were addressed Background

The setting is a university in north eastern China where one of the authors is employed as an English teacher. The participants are a class of 60 students majoring in automobile construction. The textbook for their English course is *Twenty-First Century College English* (Zhai, Zheng, and Zhang 2002). This textbook is widely used to teach non-English major students in Chinese universities and has topic-based units covering all the skills. Oral English is taught as a separate component, with one two-hour class per week over 18 weeks. The students have already had one year of oral English with this teacher, who introduced interactive activities such as role-plays, simulations, and group discussions in the first year to involve the students in realistic practice of spoken English. However, the teacher

observed that some students were very reluctant to participate and to volunteer ideas. The results of an end-of-year speaking test indicated that progress was rather limited, and in feedback questionnaires, 54 per cent of the students listed 'too many discussions' as the most negative aspect of the course. In follow-up interviews, the students told the teacher that they felt they did not have the ability to express profound ideas in English, they believed that they would benefit more from listening to lectures from the teacher, and they were afraid of picking up errors from their classmates when working in groups.

At the end of year one, both teacher and students experienced a sense of failure. In the second year, the teacher decided to try a different approach, which would involve the students more actively in the process of designing their own course and organizing the speaking activities. It was hoped that this approach would increase the learners' sense of responsibility for their learning, heighten their motivation, and encourage them to put sustained effort into accomplishing the course objectives.

Identifying language learning needs

The first step was to ask the students to consider their own language learning needs and objectives. The teacher drew a picture of a river, with an east and a west bank. She explained that the east bank represented their present English-speaking skills, and the west bank represented their oral English goals. The challenge was how they could get across the river to the west bank. Various approaches were possible, as represented by people swimming, rowing a boat across, and so on. The students were asked to think about three questions:

- 1 why they wanted to speak good English
- 2 how they could learn to speak good English, and
- 3 what classroom activities could help them improve their speaking skills.

They formed groups of four to discuss these questions at length. The teacher moved between the groups, listening and sometimes joining in the discussions. Each group then presented a summary of their ideas to the whole class. Some reasons for learning English that they identified were:

- to increase their self-confidence
- to enable them to communicate and share ideas with native speakers
- to get a good job and increase their chances of promotion
- to impress other people
- to prepare them to study abroad in the future
- to feel a sense of personal achievement and self-fulfilment.

Getting students involved in identifying their needs in learning to speak the language gives them a sense of ownership and control of their learning (Graves 2005). This sense of ownership is an important determinant in motivation (Williams and Burden 1997) which can be expected to increase their self-esteem and lead to improvement in their oral fluency.

Ways of meeting these needs

The students were next asked to consider ways and means of meeting the needs they had now identified. After discussing this in the same groups as before, they presented suggestions for improving their English inside and outside the classroom. These included:

- taking an active part in discussion activities, role-plays, simulations, pair work, etc., in the classroom
- seeking opportunities to use the language, for example, chatting with friends in English
- imitating native speakers
- finding a regular partner to practise speaking English every day
- watching English language television broadcasts and movies
- attending the weekly English party in the school coffee house
- learning to sing English songs
- attending foreign teachers' office hours (there are several foreign teachers in the school and each of them has a regular office time when they are available to help students with their English study).

Although some of these ideas were not original, having already been introduced in the first year of the course, discussing them in groups helped the students to appreciate how these first year activities had been designed to encourage realistic oral interaction. Developing this awareness was a first step towards greater success in the second year as the students began to take more responsibility for their learning. By analysing their needs and suggesting ways of meeting them, the students achieved clarity about where they were, where they wanted to get to, and how to get there, which increased their motivation to learn.

Sometimes additional discussion was needed when there was a lack of consensus between the students and the teacher on ideas for improving English, for example, whether reading aloud and imitating native speakers were good learning strategies. The students were asked to consider the advantages and disadvantages of these strategies and even argue with each other. In this process, they came to realize that each strategy had its limitations and they should not rely on only one strategy to improve their English. By considering at length how a particular learning strategy could be helpful in certain areas of the language, they increased their motivation to try it.

Classroom activities

The students were now able to create their own classroom activities. As well as activities previously used by the teacher in the first year (role-plays, group discussion, simulation, pair work, presentations, peer teaching and learning), the students also had new ideas for activities such as debates, mini-plays, speech competitions, interviews, and oral games.

While the textbook provided topics, the students were at liberty to decide what sort of activity they would create to explore the topic. The only rule was that they must speak English. Preparation could be done either individually or in a group. For example, one of the topics they worked on was 'The gratitude we need and ways of expressing our gratitude'. Students used a variety of ways to present their ideas about this topic, including a mini-play (a taxi driver going to great lengths to return a wallet left by his customer), an interview (an interviewer asking an interviewee to talk about her experience of giving and receiving gratitude from others), a dialogue (two students talking about the difference that gratitude makes in people's daily lives), a news broadcast, and a television programme (a man is unable to find someone who helped him many years before, and expresses his gratitude to

that person through the media). The variety and unpredictability of the students' interpretations of the topic made the class genuinely communicative and also generated a lot of laughter.

By taking on the responsibility of performing speaking activities which they had designed themselves, the students came to realize how their ability to speak English was improving. As a result, they were willing to invest more time and effort in the class and also developed a better rapport with the teacher. In addition, they became aware of the real value of classroom activities in improving their spoken English, supporting the claim by Williams and Burden (1997: 125) that the greater the value that students attach to an activity, 'the more highly motivated they will be both to engage in it initially, and later to put sustained effort into succeeding in the activity'.

Evaluation

The second year course was evaluated using student self-evaluations, teacher observation, and formal achievement tests.

Self-evaluation forms

A student self-evaluation form (see Appendix) was adapted from Taylor (2002) and used to record students' own perceptions of their progress and behavioural changes. Students completed the form twice during the course, the first time a month into the course and the second time at the course end. A comparison of students' responses showed that the students had made significant progress in the development of their speaking skills and in the level of their class participation. To the statement 'I speak English in class', 49 per cent of the students responded 'A little' on the first evaluation form, while 53 per cent endorsed 'As much as possible' on the second form. To the statement 'I speak my own language in class', 37 per cent of the students gave the answer 'often' on the first evaluation form, while 44 per cent of them chose 'only when necessary' as their answer on the second form. Some questions asked students to complete sentences in their own words, explaining how they dealt with specific difficulties in learning and using spoken English:

- To understand unfamiliar English words, I _____.
- If I can't think of an English word, I _____.
- When I feel nervous in speaking English, I _____.

Their sentence completions indicated that they made use of a range of learning strategies including circumlocution, asking for clarification, appealing for help, etc., to gain access to the TL and maintain communication. The learners' self-evaluations supported the teacher's own observations as discussed below.

Classroom observations

Observation was used by the teacher to monitor changes in learner behaviour and attitudes to speaking English in class.

During the first year, the teacher had noticed that some students were very reluctant to speak in the class and they would try to sit at the back of the classroom. When the teacher encouraged them to voice their ideas on a topic, they either gave limited responses or avoided eye contact with the teacher. In discussion activities, the students would use Chinese if the teacher was not monitoring them. Some students kept looking at their watches and waiting for the class to end.

In the second year, the teacher noticed that those students who had been quiet in group discussion were becoming more active, and most students were actively trying to use learning strategies taught in class. The students became more self-directed and able to deal with problems or breakdowns in their communication. This meant that the group discussions were usually more interesting and most students were more eager to participate and argue their points. One particularly quiet male student started volunteering to answer questions in class, which surprised the teacher.

Peer teaching and learning turned out to be particularly effective in encouraging responsibility in the students. In peer group activities, students showed more enthusiasm in selecting materials, deciding what to teach, and how to present their work. For example, one group of four students taught the rest of the class how to play cricket, a sport not familiar to most Chinese. Student A decided the teaching content and the order of presentation and gave a short introduction to the sport; Student B talked about the origins of the game and how it was played; Student C presented some phrases related to cricket such as 'it's not cricket', 'playing with a straight bat', etc., while Student D presented some pictures of cricket games that he had found on the Internet and talked about them. Everybody played a part in this activity and some students who had previously been very passive in the English class demonstrated their potential by presenting their materials in interesting and original ways.

At the same time, the teacher observed that many students were attempting to use new language and were not afraid to employ gestures to aid communication. The students were becoming altogether more confident, to the extent that they were even asking for more sessions to be given over to this kind of activity.

Tests at the beginning and end of the study

There were two tests, one at the beginning and one at the end of the course. The students were assessed in pairs using a test format (based on the Cambridge ESOL model) which included interviews and peer interaction. The tests were scored by four non-native teachers who are trained Business English Certificate (BEC) oral examiners, and the BEC analytic marking system was used. The four assessors worked in pairs, which is considered to result in more reliable scores than when a single assessor is used (Underhill 1987). For purposes of comparison, another class taught by the same teacher using a more traditional approach to the design of the course was also tested.

As shown in Table 1, the test results at the course start showed little difference between the two classes (average mean scores: 73.5/71.5). However, by the end of the study, the students who had been involved in their own course design were clearly outperforming those in the other class (average scores 84.5/74). In particular, their average scores in the category of interaction communication (21.5 out of a total of 25, compared to 17 in the other class) showed a significant difference. The teacher believed that this improvement was a direct result of the students' willingness to grasp every opportunity provided to them either in or outside class to practise the language.

	At the beginning of the course		At the end of the course	
	Class 1 (involved in the course design)	Class 2 (not involved in the course design)	Class 1 (involved in the course design)	Class 2 (not involved in the course design)
Pronunciation	18.5	17.5	21	19
Grammar and vocabulary	17.5	18	20.5	18.5
Discourse management	19.5	19	21.5	19.5
Interactive communication	18	17	21.5	17
Total	73.5	71.5	84.5	74

TABLE 1
Test performance of
Class 1 (target group)
and Class 2 (control
group)

Conclusion

Involving the students in making decisions about the design of their oral English course encouraged them to take charge of their learning, which resulted in positive attitude change and increased motivation. By being actively involved in the creation of activities, they acquired a better understanding of the learning process and were more self-confident in developing the skills they needed to progress towards their own goals in speaking English.

In particular, the stronger students (those who scored higher on the first test) achieved dramatically higher scores in the second test. It would be interesting to undertake a closer examination of how they used the opportunities provided by a more learner-centred approach, and what specific strategies they found most helpful.

Overall, this study supports the view that learner reticence can be overcome by an approach which gives learners more say in the design of their course, and allows them to create their own opportunities and activities to practise speaking.

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Appendix Self-evaluation form

1 I give myself the following grades for progress on this course. (Score 1–10)

Speaking ☐

Listening ☐

Using learning strategies as much as possible ☐

Participating in classroom activities ☐

2 I speak English in class:

as much as possible ☐ a lot ☐ often ☐ a little ☐

3 I speak my own language in class:

only when necessary ☐ often ☐ a lot ☐ too much ☐

4 My favourite class activities are:

5 I don't enjoy:

6 In my free time, I practise English using

videos ☐ TV ☐ radio ☐ cinema ☐ theatre ☐ novels ☐

other books ☐ magazine ☐ newspapers ☐ computers ☐

7 The main difficulties I have with speaking are:

8 To understand unfamiliar English words, I _____.

9 If I can't think of an English word, I _____.

10 When I feel nervous in speaking English, I _____.