

Preparing & Encouraging Students to Speak

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in an activity. Therefore, requirements of the national syllabus and features of each course need to be explained time and time again. What is the starting point? What level can they reach after finishing the course? What major problems are going to be solved at the present stage? How is the teacher going to teach? How should they learn and cooperate? Answering these questions clearly is an essential first step. Once the goal has been made clear, students will usually become active, and in the process they will gradually adjust their ways of learning English.

Good teacher-student relationships also play a very important part in a successful lesson. It is advisable for teachers to visit their students often, make friends with them and understand their difficulties and needs, so that they can deal with course requirements flexibly according to their students' real level. A good relationship enables the teacher to prepare his lessons vividly and humorously. e.g., a proper quotation from students' slang or colloquialisms often greatly amuses the whole class and achieves unexpected good results. It also helps the teacher create a light and agreeable classroom atmosphere in which the students will feel comfortable speaking English.

Buzz Groups—A Good Way to Keep Everyone Talking

When students begin to be active, the next challenge is to maintain and develop the impetus to speak. Proper organization of students and activities is absolutely

necessary in order to accomplish this goal. Usually, classroom activities are mainly carried out either with the whole class or in groups. Problems of the text are solved and models are demonstrated when the whole class is together; but numerous drills can be done only in groups because it is impossible for everyone in a class of thirty or more students to practice a lot within the 45 minutes of one class period.

In this situation, buzz groups (i.e., groups formed by two pairs of students sitting in front of and behind each other) have proven to be convenient and effective in ensuring that every individual has a chance to speak. All needed oral drilling can be done in these pairs or buzz groups. When group practice time arrives, students just turn around to face each other. There is no need to move a chair, and not a single minute is wasted. When students get used to the procedure, the whole room will immediately begin to buzz as soon as they are given a drill item.

When they enter into such a situation, class members very often forget their ages, and everyone tries to be the first to speak. They play their own part actively and argue on topics given by the teacher so heatedly that some forget that it is just a drill. They take it for real and argue in English (but sometimes in Chinese, unfortunately)!

The teacher's job is merely to walk quietly around and smile with satisfaction. When a problem arises, the teacher should explain it right on the spot, leaving only common difficulties to be explained after drills.

When buzz groups are used, student practice occupies most of the classroom

time. The course begins to be a student-centered one. Students start to learn actively.

Keeping Buzz Groups Working

Is everything OK after buzz groups are formed and functioning? The answer is negative. Unless they receive proper guidance, we cannot hope they will remain successful from beginning to end.

It is not unusual to come across the following situation: When meeting with some people, one has a lot to say, and the conversation goes on very harmoniously. With other people, however, one often fails to think of a sensible topic, so everybody simply sits awkwardly having nothing to say, not daring to look at each other's faces. Occasionally, one member of the group wishes to break the ice, so that person beats his brains and at last murmurs a sentence, but unfortunately, it has not been thought out. His partners either cannot carry on the conversation or the topic is immediately blocked by one of them. This is just like an old saying in China: When the conversation gets disagreeable, to say one word more is a waste of breath. Everyone in the group suffers. They learn no English, but instead, bring the situation to a deadlock.

Our buzz groups sometimes experience this situation owing to different family backgrounds, ages, English levels, etc. of the group members. To remedy this difficulty, we try our best to create an atmosphere of friendship and harmony in the class, and change students' seats regularly so that everyone has a chance to practice with different people over the two years of their college education.

The Best Guarantee of Good Results in Teaching.

Having cleared away most of the obstacles that prevent students from actively practicing English, we still cannot be sure that a lesson will succeed. In the long process of helping students learn to speak, we have realized how important the teacher's complete patience and permanent enthusiasm are in helping adult students learn English. Somebody has said, "A teacher who always puts on a long face can teach math well, but can never do a good job in language teaching." A language teacher's smiling face, humor, easy going attitude and versatility influence his students greatly. With the same lesson, even the same teaching method, the results can be radically different if the lesson is taught by different teachers. In some cases, the students may learn a bit of bookish knowledge. In others, they learn skills to use the language and proper, vivid words to communicate. Without a warm heart towards teaching and students, without a good relationship with the students, and without their respect and cooperation, it is never easy to have good results in teaching.

About the Author

Zhou Qingjin teaches in Huizhou Educational College, Guangdong, China. He has ten years experience teaching adult Chinese students and has been vice-chairman of the English Department. His works include the translation of L.G. Alexander's Longman English Grammar and essays on translation and teaching methods.

Preparing and Encouraging Adult Chinese EFL Students to Speak

Zhou Qingjin, Huizhou Educational College, China

Municipal colleges of education in China enroll adult students who are junior high school teachers. They will go back to teach in the same school after two years' study. Their English background is varied. Only a few had a chance to go to normal schools. Most of them are high school graduates with years of teaching experience but with poor knowledge of English. Despite all their differences, they all have one surprising thing in common—they are not prepared to speak English in college!

Their level of maturity places them in a difficult predicament. They are not willing to say easy things because they think it too naive for their age (the oldest is up to 40). Nevertheless, they are unable or hesitant to say difficult things for fear of losing face.

This reluctance to speak is a major challenge in improving their English skills. If a teacher can make his students speak, his work is already half done. Our goal as English teachers is not only to help students understand English—which can simply be done by explanation—but to help them learn to use it, which demands practice. The teacher can only guide, help, or (at most) force, but he can never take the place of student practice.

Preparing Students to Speak

Most adult students are married and have children. They are not like carefree children who are happy to follow the teacher anywhere. They want to know why, how, and where before they decide to participate

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