

Developing Student Confidence in Speaking English

Xu Lihua, Huiyang Teachers College

Speaking is a productive or active skill which is absolutely vital in the encouragement of communicative efficiency. But Chinese students are comparatively quiet and shy, which works to their disadvantage in speaking. They are afraid of making mistakes. The cultural concept of "losing face" if they make mistakes is the biggest obstacle to language learning. These associated psychological problems make speaking, the productive/active skill, the more difficult for Chinese students.

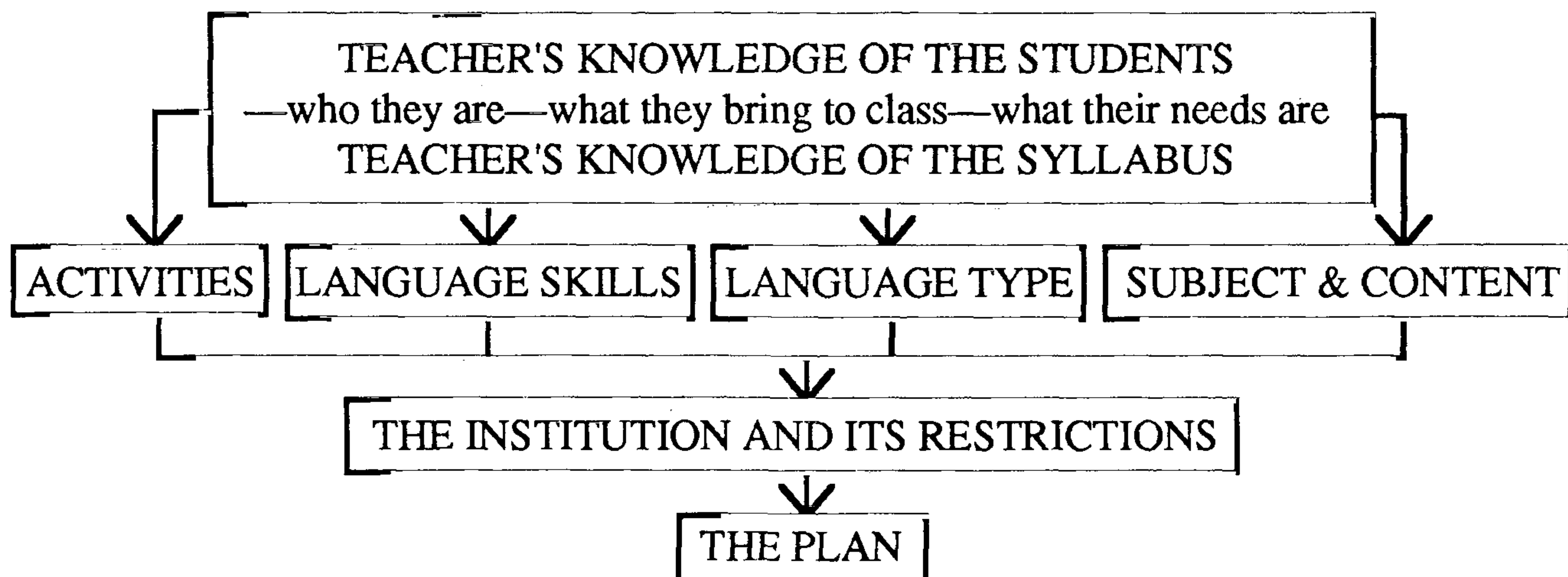
To improve their speaking skills, the teacher must enable the students to overcome their psychological problems and must help them develop their self-confidence. These require careful planning, skillful motivation, varied techniques, patient instruction, relaxed atmosphere, visual stimuli, and good humor.

Careful Planning

The most important consideration a teacher undertakes is his careful

preparation of a lesson. A speaking class should not be improvised. The teacher has much to think about while conducting the lesson without having to rack his brains for the next activity. Good lesson planning is the art of mixing techniques, activities, and materials, to create an ideal balance for the class. The two principles of good lesson planning are variety and flexibility. Variety means involving students in different activities. Flexibility means the ability to use different techniques and not be a slave to one methodology. Harmer (1984) summarizes the teacher's knowledge about the plan in the diagram below.

Also the teacher should have a detailed plan about teaching techniques, speaking activities and materials, all of which should meet the students' needs. The goal the teacher sets for oral lessons must be high enough to aim at and low enough to reach.



Skillful Motivation

Motivation is an important factor in learning English. It is the internal drive that encourages students to pursue the learning goals. If we have a goal and if the goal is really attractive, we will be strongly motivated to achieve it no matter how difficult it may be. A teacher will find a strongly motivated student with a goal easier to teach than a student without a goal. The poorly motivated student studies English simply because it is a part of his curriculum.

A student's attitude is also strongly influenced by factors around him—the teacher's treatment of him and what happens in the classroom. If the atmosphere in class is deadly dull and if the teacher does not treat him with kindness and patience, the student will never stand up to speak. The teacher must motivate the students' enthusiasm for speaking by telling them that teachers respect and help students who try--no matter how many errors they make and that they have no respect for students who do not try for fear of making errors. But of course, teachers should help them form good habits of speaking standard English, not Chinglish (Chinese English).

Different Techniques

Teaching Spoken English in Chinese schools calls for a variety of techniques. The teacher must know how to give many lessons with different techniques. He should carefully plan and execute the lessons so that the new language material is soundly integrated with the old, the difficult with the easy. The new and difficult should be taught thoroughly, while the old and easy can be covered

quickly. "Like a stream, a good lesson flows more rapidly over the shallower sections and more slowly over the deeper." (Broughton, et al., 1980)

The teacher should know to adjust priorities at different stages. (Speaking is the basic course for the first and second years.) At the elementary stage, he should put emphasis on phonetics; at the intermediate stage, the teacher should lay emphasis on a wide range of English usages which ordinarily confuse students; and at the advanced stage, the emphasis should be on fluency and accuracy in speaking English.

The teacher should constantly change the activities in speaking practice. "No topic or device should be overworked, however good an idea it is or however much preparation it has entailed. It is always better to stop whilst everyone is enjoying it and wants more, rather than pursue it to the bitter end. Then a repetition on another day provokes eager anticipation rather than groans." This is Broughton and his cohorts' (1980) idea about effective topics and devices.

The same is true of useful textbooks. Good textbooks offer lively and interesting material, but if the teacher depends too much on the textbook by following lesson sequence repeatedly, the class may become boring, and the students may find the routine less and less motivating. Consequently, the textbook is an aid, not a Bible. The teacher should use it skillfully but never let the textbook use him. I have heard students complain about a good teacher who was highly praised in the beginning lessons. I asked them why and they told me, "He follows the same steps without any changes: first, listening

to the tape with the books closed, then asking questions, then opening the books, explaining the language points, reading aloud, and finally, doing exercises." These steps are exactly what the author of the textbook recommends. Boredom can be avoided only if the teacher can introduce a fresh approach to learning by changing the material, activity, and teaching method.

I have designed some training methods for the teaching of speaking: stories, picture-talks, free talks, speech training, discussion-summary, role-playing, debate and language games which stimulate students' interests. I usually use three training items in the program for a speaking class. For example, I first have a role-play, then a discussion in small groups, and a game or a story at the end. I change the program every week. If students are particularly interested in the activity, I will lengthen it; if they lose interest, I will omit it. Stories by L.A. Hill (1978) are very interesting and humorous. Students enjoy them very much but get tired of only teacher's telling and students' listening. So I change the routine: telling the story from the beginning, stopping at the climax, and then asking the students to continue. The story "A Traveler's Tale" begins, "I was walking on a narrow path to my camping place after hunting all day. On my right was a dark forest. On my left was a big river. Suddenly I saw two green eyes among the trees. A man-eating tiger was ready to jump at me. When I looked into the river, an immense crocodile was opening its big mouth to welcome me. I was so frightened that I shut my eyes..." I stop at this point. Now the students are so active that they all try to continue the story. Thus I change the students' role from passive listening into active producing, which

sparks the students' imagination and their willingness to speak.

Tang Lixing (1983) compares teachers with conductors in his work *TEFL in China*: "Good teachers should be like conductors of orchestras, who lead their orchestras to work on the same piece of music, and at the same time attend to the individuality of players of different instruments. In other words, they should attune the learning interests of their students to general teaching aims and lead them step by step towards the final goal."

Patient Instruction

Patience is another virtue greatly needed for a teacher. Students are growing as they produce and correct mistakes. Correcting mistakes calls for great patience.

At the elementary stage, some students cannot understand English, nor can they speak it. Their pronunciation is poor. So they think they cannot learn English. Sympathetic understanding for their frustration is essential. The teacher must gently but firmly discourage them from withdrawing and encourage them to listen more and to imitate. Mistakes in pronunciation are not easily corrected since habits of poor pronunciation have been formed. Their listening ears are not keen at first. The teacher's efforts often seem to produce nothing, and the students' progress is often slow. These mistakes should be corrected repeatedly and patiently until new habits are formed.

A new problem will appear at the beginning of the intermediate stage while they not only find it hard to express themselves, but also make mistakes once they open their mouths. Beginning

students often naively believe that they will be able to put English to immediate use. When they realize that this is not so, they become disappointed. A student told me impatiently, "I know what to say, but I cannot speak out." Learning to ride a bicycle is just the same. People cannot ride a bicycle without practice. Speaking is a skill, not unlike riding a bicycle, in that practice is the only way to improve it. A teacher's patient and sympathetic instruction prevents withdrawal.

Problems occur at the advanced stage when the students want to make a public speech. The inexperienced speakers suffer discomfort just at the thought of standing before an audience. When they actually do face their listeners, discomfort becomes fear. The knees quake, the voice quivers, the throat goes awry and the mind goes blank. The teacher should help them overcome their fear and increase self-confidence by being friendly and helpful, yet not criticizing their efforts. But some teachers act counter to this. "It is not uncommon to see teachers who stop a student numerous times to correct errors in his speech. They do not realize that they are running the risk of silencing the student forever and, what is worse, of scaring the rest of the class" (Tang, 1983). It would be much better to make a note of all errors (including phonetic, grammatical and lexical errors), but do not interrupt speakers until there is a convenient pause. Then tell them how well they performed (the teacher should "flatter" students when they do well in order to instill enthusiasm), cite any problems and explain how they can be corrected. Immediate feedback is extremely valuable to students, and it is much more effective when followed by extra practice.

Actually, errors and mistakes are an unavoidable and even valuable part in foreign language learning. If students are making mistakes, they are learning and practicing. If they do not make mistakes and correct mistakes, they will never become perfect (Tang, 1983). Therefore correction should be gentle without making a big fuss. Gentle correction involves statements such as "Well, that's not quite right...", "Usually people don't say...but they do say..." and other thoughtful expressions. Thus the teacher corrects the mistake without discouraging the student. Sometimes silly but interesting mistakes make the class burst into laughter, and the student becomes embarrassed. I would soothe him, "Don't mind it. Your classmates are just friendly. You can get a deeper impression from it and never repeat this error again." No matter how many mistakes and errors they make, the teacher should never forfeit hope for his students. Remember, bake the pie in a slow oven.

Relaxed Atmosphere

Speaking class can be a total failure, with the class silent and embarrassed and the teacher racking his brains for some means of keeping the lesson alive. As mentioned, Chinese students are quiet and shy. They feel uncomfortable in their first attempts at speech in English and they are afraid of failure, laughter, and ridicule. Sometimes they maintain silence only in order to avoid being the ice-breaker. When I ask a question and I am sure they can answer, the students lower their heads as though to hide. This situation perplexes the teacher, especially the foreign teacher, and it is a waste of time. But I know that, although their desire to speak is real, the psychological and social obstacles to

speakers are just as real. They do not talk because of the serious atmosphere.

Psychologically, people become more talkative in a relaxed atmosphere. Via (1976) once said, "If the atmosphere is one of tenseness and tightness, our bodies become tight and tense, and we are not able to concentrate properly on what we want to do. But when the atmosphere in the classroom is one of relaxation, happiness, and fun, our whole bodies relax and we are able to receive, we are able to learn." Our department has two speaking classes each week during the third and fourth periods before lunch. Since students are weary, a boring class would put them to sleep. To overcome their speaking barriers, the teacher must first cultivate a relaxed atmosphere, in which students feel free to develop oral confidence and the ability to project themselves and enjoy themselves in the foreign language. Geoffery Broughton and his collaborators stated in *Teaching English as a Foreign Language* (1980), "Even with more serious materials and teaching, there should always be room for games, songs, and puzzles."

Visual Stimuli

The visual element is another source of oral English practice. This includes pictures, maps, cartoons, slides, tapes and other items. With attractive visual stimuli, the students' interest and attention are aroused, a relaxed atmosphere is created in which students are eager to talk, and most importantly, a live language situation is brought into the classroom, which is indispensable to any meaningful learning. For example, a picture can be used as a discussion starter,

a situation for a dialogue or a talk. The teacher should try to gather available visual stimuli or make his own, both of which add to the active classroom atmosphere.

Good Humor

Humor is an indispensable quality for a teacher. Moskowitz (1978) has shown that good teachers provide for and utilize humor as a part of the classroom atmosphere. Traditionally, some Chinese teachers like to maintain their dignity as an authority figure, which is another obstacle to the students' speaking from the teacher's side. Humor can bridge the gap between the teacher and students, and relax students for talk. So it is wise for the teacher to insert a little humor occasionally into the activity to cause laughter, which clears away the boredom in the classroom and keeps the learning process fresh.

When students are aroused to talk, the teacher must withdraw and make the classroom student-centered. Experience shows that 70-80% of the speaking class time should be given to students for practice. In other words, the teacher must talk concisely and encourage the students to talk, talk, talk. With the teacher's concentrated efforts, students will certainly progress towards the goals. Learning English is just like taking Chinese medicine—the effect will come slowly, but surely.

References

- Broughton, G., C. Brumfit, R. Flavell, P. Hill & A. Pincas. (1980). *Teaching English as a Foreign Language*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.

- Harmer, J.. (1984). *The Practice of English Language Teaching*. London: Longman.
- Hill, L. A. (1978). *Elementary, Intermediate and Advanced Stories for Reproductions*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Moskowitz, G. (1978). *Caring and sharing in the foreign language class*. Rowley, Mass.: Newbury House.
- Tang, L. (1983). *TEFL in China: Methods and Techniques*. Shanghai: Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press.
- Via, R. A. (1976). *English in three acts*. Honolulu: University Press of Hawaii.
- Dobson, J. M. (1978). *Conversation in English*. New York: American Book Company.
- Snyder, B. and C. DeSelms. (1983). "Personal Growth Through Student-Centered Activities," in A. Garfinkel, *The Foreign Language Classroom: New Techniques*. New York: National Textbook Company.
- Widdowson, H. G. (1983). *Teaching Language as Communication*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Woronov, N., and Y. Qu. (1981). *Modern American English*. Shanghai: Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press.

About the Author

Xu Lihua is an assistant professor of English at Huiyang Teachers College in Guangdong, China.

Additional Recommended Reading

- Black, C. (1978). *A Handbook of Free Conversation*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.