

Speaking in the Classroom

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Abstract

Too much speaking and indiscipline in class is an on-going problem for any teacher, it is at its least disruptive and at most it destroys a good positive classroom atmosphere. This article recognizes this and continues this debate and suggests key clues to support teachers in their efforts to maintain a positive classroom atmosphere and discipline so that those students who do want to speak and give answers can do so without being drowned out by other more confident students and any other distractions. At the same time it also suggests activities and practices that teachers could use to teach students to become more independent and responsible in class and enhances the idea of self regulation in student's attitudes towards their own learning so that they learn to concentrate on what's important which aims to give other students a chance to speak up and be heard.

Introduction

One of the most challenging tasks for any ESL teacher is motivating students to speak English in class. Shyness, apprehension, laziness, competition, with more confident students and a fear of failure can all inhibit students to speak up and be heard, even when they know what to say. The task is made even more difficult when other students are talking at the same time and this is where good classroom management skills are essential. A further point is; should students be allowed to use their native speech in an English class? If, so how much? These are questions that constantly flash through my mind as I am assessing the class minute by minute and trying to manage some forty three students at the same time.

Should students be encouraged to use more English in an ESL class and how much native language should students use in an ESL class?

There is little formal research on this subject and although this seems like a logical and obvious idea, it's easier said than done. I started this as an experiment a few years ago with my bilingual students (about 50 students in various classes) who were being taught in all subjects with an English speaking teacher. So their English abilities were a little above average, so both they, and I knew it was possible to use more English in a natural way in the class to practice fluency and accuracy. The rules were simple, they could talk as much as they liked and say what they wanted, as long as it was in English.

At first, everyone went a bit quiet; shock I think, and then as the class progressed some of the more confident students began to use their new found freedom enthusiastically, and with a mixture of hysteria and excitement they giggled and sniggered all the way through the first lesson.

I was beginning to think that I had found the Holy Grail of learning and progressing, their English speaking abilities, past that of formal classroom instruction and constructed conversations from books and worksheets. They were actually using it to ask each other to borrow pens and erasers and to take part in minor class gossip and it allowed them and me to see what parts of their speech needed polishing up.

But after a few months of conforming to the rules and experiencing some success; the enthusiasm began to wear off and the conversations eventually reverted back to native Thai. I reflected on this as I do on most things and came to the conclusion that over the period, I was spending just as much time correcting their conversations or they just didn't know how to say what they wanted to say in English. Then I was actually trying to teach them the finer points of political science or the structure of a 1st conditional sentence. Further to this I was the only teacher doing this and none of the other teachers wanted to adopt the idea nor had any enthusiasm for it. I also discovered that the Thai teachers who were assigned to the class and who were teaching them English grammar were using Thai to do it. Further to that no one in management took any notice of what I was doing. I still insist on them using English as the main language as much as possible but I am aware of its limitations.

Classroom Discipline

Creating the right atmosphere in the class can also help in maintaining classroom discipline whilst students attempt to speak when giving answers and is another powerful model that a teacher can use to show what they require. Related to this is the theory of reciprocal determinism first put forward by Albert Bandura, it states that a person's environment causes their behavior, true; but behavior also causes environment as well. The world and a person's behavior cause each other (Bandura).

In other words creating a pleasant and positive atmosphere in a classroom can only develop good results. Conditioning students to know what is an acceptable atmosphere so that they can all practice giving answers takes time, patience and practice.

Part of this long process can also be found by taking a few minutes out of class from time to time to teach students essential self study skills that they can use in developing self regulation (Bandura) like mind mapping, note taking and so on. Study skills teach them the methods they need in the classroom as a means to successful study. And after a while they can practice self study skills automatically when starting a new page, paragraph or subject without being told what to do and they have the confidence in knowing that it's the correct way to study.

This way they can start to work with a certain amount of independence and learn to concentrate on their own and this helps to distract them from those external factors like talking to their friends, phones, comics and the like. But students should also understand that studying is after all, a serious business and is hard work and the classroom is not an extension of face book or an opportunity to extend their social networking skills, and that when they are studying with their worksheets, and their writing exercises, and reading it is, at the end of the day designed for their benefit and

no one else's. Such an attempt to guide students towards being more responsible for their own learning is a further example of how to condition students to learn to concentrate on their work and is called affirmation teaching, (Witmer 2011) which attempts to guide students toward success by helping them see and understand how their efforts pays off in the classroom. It relies upon creating an environment where students are successful as a result of their own efforts (Pintrich and De Groot 1990).

Why incorporate speaking activities in the classroom?

There are three main reasons why teachers should incorporate speaking lessons in the class rehearsal, engagement and feedback (Harmer 1998). Rehearsal is the idea of giving students opportunities to have discussions where they can use language that they already know and can use. Role -plays are best for this as they allow students to be creative and allows, them to experience real life situations in the safety of the classroom even dressing up for each part can add to the excitement. Good speaking activities should be very motivating and if students are engaged in the activity they are motivated to participate well. And it's true that role-playing and problem-solving activities are intrinsically enjoyable in themselves. During the speaking performance and after it has finished are areas where the teacher can give feedback to the students.

These speaking activities allow the teacher to know what aspects of the language the students know how to use and what areas they need improving on. Students can also discover for themselves parts of the target language they have learned and can actually use. To this, speaking activities can be enormously encouraging to students and the very act of speaking is liberating even in a language they are learning.

Valuing Students as People

Encouraging students to talk need not be only for the classroom either. By seizing those casual moments around school out of class with a wave and a smile acknowledging students & to exchange a few friendly words of encouragement can, with some students go a long way. As a good teacher one must also value students and their work. Show them that you are listening to them when they talk to you. Showing good listening skills is a good habit for any serious teacher. This includes a range of responses, from acknowledgements that the listener is engaged and indeed listening using expressions like huh, uh-huh, etc to responses with more content, such as that's right, wonderful, that would be (nice), etc. In this way, the listener does more than just listen silently and process the message; he or she is an active and engaged listener, displaying what we call good "listenership." (McCarten, J. Cambridge University Press)

Even when walking with them to the class is an ideal opportunity to have a small chat with them along the way, it allows them to understand you are interested in them and even tell them what they are going to study or even ask them what they want to study. All these points help in establishing a bond of trust that helps the teacher manage students in the classroom and makes them feel confident when being encouraged to speak in class.

When teaching in class start with things that you know are familiar to them, review the highlights of a previous lesson and try and deliver it as a game. This allows some aspects of competition and if there are rewards then all, the better. Teachers should use pictures and drawings to illustrate a teaching point, even if you can't draw very well, as sometimes the worst pictures can open a natural opportunity for the teacher and students to comment on the quality of the drawing and the students get a chance to giggle at the expense of the teacher at the same time.

What kinds of speaking activities can students do in the class?

Speaking is as an important skill as listening, reading and writing and they should understand that speaking is important in their learning. It also helps them to build confidence and they should know that practicing is important and it prepares them for speaking. Reading a story or a selection of sentences may be an ideal way to get them started in speaking and as soon as they have finished reading the information it should be still in their minds and this should be the ideal opportunity to ask questions.

Start with easy knowledge questions ones that you are sure they can answer, these are questions that begin with where, what, when and how. Then you can move in to more comprehension style questions that require more complex thinking.

If any of this is too difficult then ask them to write it down first then they can read it then move on to speaking the answers without using their books. Keeping the questions short will require short answers and are an ideal way to get them started in a small conversation.

Using pictures can also enhance memory and speaking skills. A simple but effective game is to hand out pictures to students or in groups and ask them to look at the picture for about a minute. Then turn the picture over and ask questions about the picture. For young students they can actually look at the picture while the teacher is asking the questions and again this helps their listening and focusing skills. Games like this are ideal for starting a lesson because it gets everyone involved right away and helps to focus their minds on one thing and not the other competing stimuli in the class or for finishing a lesson and to leave the class on a high note along with the rewards.

Teach them a song! Many students just love to sing don't they? Jones quotes from Biggs, Homan, Dedrick, Minick, & Rasinski, 2008; et.al. That music and songs support motivation to speak after using repeatedly read texts. Singing also helps the shy ones blend in with the more confident ones and its fun too. It's also an opportunity to teach them some words that are connected to the singing like decibel, loud, off key, tune etc..., tell them to use their voice to reach the highest decibel and they will try!. And, if what they are doing helps them to learn and re-enforce new words in that classic teaching method of learning by doing (Dewey) and why not teach them a few small dance steps to add some fun and excitement. Do something to make them laugh even if it's at the expense of the teacher. A great comedian once said that if you can get the audience laughing with you within the first five minutes then you have started well.

Another great little exercise is to ask them to write about things that they like to talk about. The latest pop groups and their latest songs are always a great start. Ask them to prepare a small presentation to the class in small groups and they can add pictures to it to make the presentation all the more interesting. But they should also be encouraged to read small sections of the story they have prepared then put paper down and talk about what they have just read. This kind of reading and remembering activity takes a little practice but after a while their reading should become automatic and if they forget then they can start again and it's not so bad if they make a mistake.

But as students achieve a certain level of speaking; and any learning for that matter it's the job of the teacher to raise the steaks. Paraphrasing is an excellent way of allowing students to use their own words to express how they understand a sentence. Ask them to read a certain sentence and ask them to change the words using the same information. They can write it down in their books first and then the teacher can make minor adjustments prior to speaking and as they speak the teacher can scaffold the difficult parts and encourage them all the way through with pronunciation and intonation.

Another activity is to ask students to read a paragraph and then ask someone to come to the board and rewrite one of the sentences from memory. They can take a friend with them and they can do it together. But they can't read from the book. Do this for all the paragraphs on the page. Then when the board is full or the whole page is done the students can read from the board. That's the easy part. Now take the eraser and wipe some words from some of the sentences and ask the students to read the text again then wipe some more off and so on.

The erasing of key words from the story makes the students focus more each time and it helps them to remember. They can also be helped by other students with pronunciation.

A Word about Games

Any game that helps students speaking even marginally is worth trying out. Games help to diffuse teacher domination of a class and allow students to feel free and more in control of their own learning with the teacher acting more in the role of facilitator. But games must have a clear linguistic aim. It's also true that most language games make learners use the language in a natural way to that of thinking about learning the correct forms. There are many advantages of using games. Hanson quotes Amato in the ESL Depot as saying that "Games can lower anxiety, thus making the acquisition of input more likely" (Amato 1988:147). And also that "they are highly motivating and entertaining, and they can give shy students more opportunity to express their opinions and feelings" (Hansen 1994:118). They also enable learners to acquire new experiences within a foreign language which are not always possible during a typical lesson (Rafiq & Karim Habi).

How should teachers correct speaking?

There doesn't seem to be no hard and fast as to what are the proper ways to correct students as they speak. The secret here is watch listen and give feedback, in that order. But constant interruptions by the teacher during speaking activities not only breaks the flow of the discussion it's irritating for the students. Individual students should not be singled out during feedback, it's always best to state the importance of the correction not the student who needs it. If the discussion is a minor one and the teacher knows the students well then small corrections made quickly as they occur can be effective

especially small words that tend to be mixed up like "she go to see her friend" when it should be "she went to see her friend". (Harmer 1998)

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