

Getting Students to Speak Up: Classroom Atmosphere Is Key

Getting students to speak up in class has long been a challenge for English as a foreign language (EFL) instructors. In East Asia and the People's Republic of China (PRC) especially, students are often accustomed to an educational system that encourages them to be relatively passive receivers of knowledge, speaking up only when prompted by the teacher (Snow, Sun, and Li 2017). This makes it challenging for EFL educators whose goal is to get students to use and improve their English-speaking skills. If the learners are not going to speak, how can they improve their speaking? Even though my students in the PRC have a high level of English by the time they get to the university classroom, most of them have rarely been asked to utilize their English conversational skills in any substantial way in the classroom. Strategies such as think-pair-share—where students are given an opportunity to think before they speak, share their ideas with one classmate, and then speak up to the rest of the class—are often suggested as remedies to the situation. Such pedagogical techniques can be helpful, but they are also limited. What if you want your students to speak up in class in English independently, unprompted, and in an authentic way as in an everyday conversation? How can an instructor get a classroom full of shy and/or hesitant students to do that? Think-pair-share and other such activities can only take your students so far.

In my own professional journey of having moved to the PRC from the Middle East, where I taught a very different population—generally orally adept and confident speakers—the challenge of getting more-reluctant students to speak up in class in English has been significant. I have constantly experimented at getting my students to speak English in class authentically, unprompted by me. After a lot of trial-and-error attempts, I arrived at some general conclusions from

experience and specific strategies that have worked for me. In course evaluations, my students report that our “classroom atmosphere is really engaging” compared to similar classes. Shy students report that they tend to speak up more, which leads me to conclude that getting students to speak English in class is not necessarily about pedagogical techniques like think-pair-share, but more about transforming the entire atmosphere of the classroom so that it is a

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place where students want to speak up and feel comfortable and safe in doing so. How exactly can that be achieved? Upon my own reflection, I suggest the following five general strategies, along with specific tips that I hope can be applied to your own pedagogical situations.

1. Individualized Attention

As language educators, we all probably know it's important to greet students at the start of class, and of course a friendly smile doesn't hurt. However, transforming the atmosphere of your classroom requires more than just friendliness on the instructor's part. What has worked for me is *individualized attention*—greetings and chats with students, for example, that demonstrate that you have been paying attention to who they are, their efforts in your class, and their lives in general. In other words, you are giving each student personal attention; it need not go too deep, but it is tailored to individuals. For example, at the start of class, as students are unpacking their things, I might ask a student about a paper they had mentioned they were working on or casually chat about an upcoming university-wide lecture. Perhaps I might mention the names of a couple of students who I think might be interested in that lecture—"I know you like working with computers, Bobby and Helen; you both might find it interesting"—within earshot of the whole class. These kinds of informal comments can go a long way, as they demonstrate that you are engaged with your students personally and are paying attention to

them. Not selecting the same students every time is important, as is not selecting only the top-performing students. Everyone in the class is deserving of individualized attention, and that is important for all students to see. Making your students feel "seen" and comfortable in your classroom environment is the first step towards building the kind of atmosphere that causes students to speak up.

One tip to track individualized attention is to create a specialized chart that includes the names of the students in your class. All you need to do is tick a box for each one-to-one interaction, even if minor or brief. This way, you can be assured that your attention isn't just focusing in on the outspoken students, for example. Tracking this information allows you to make adjustments accordingly so that all students feel seen and heard. The interaction with the student need not be an extended one, but it must be personalized for the box to get ticked. With my small classes of just 12 students, ticking the box for each student every class is not an insurmountable task, but for larger classes, it can be. Perhaps making it a goal to have a tick next to every student's name at least once per week is more realistic. You can keep track electronically or on paper—whatever is most convenient. It doesn't take long to tick a box, and it can be done either during or at the end of class (or both). Usually, a quick reflection after class as I complete my chart takes just about a minute. I look at my list to see if any names have not been checked and set a goal for the next class to seek out those students in some way.

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2. Class as Community

Ensuring the class develops as its own community is another way to achieve the right atmosphere to get students to speak up. The beginning of class, the end of class, between activities, and even chance meetings in the hallways are all valuable opportunities to build community in the class; the importance of these little moments should not be underestimated. As the instructor, I try to set the tone for us all. After a few weeks into a semester, for example, we all start to notice one another's patterns—some students typically arrive early, others a few minutes late, some armed with a huge coffee, others with a skateboard or a sandwich in hand, and so on. I will often make gentle, playful comments pointing out these patterns to students, such as, “Has our skateboarding friend, Layla, arrived yet?” or “You weren't early to class today like usual, Jenny—I almost called for the search and rescue team to find you.” We are a group of people who are engaged in a shared enterprise in our class, and gently and playfully acknowledging one another's habits helps build that community.

Offering up a self-deprecating comment or two for students is another way to make them feel more at ease and the instructor to feel more accessible. It can also decrease the high power-distance dynamic between teacher and student that so many students are accustomed to and that can sometimes inhibit them (Hofstede, Hofstede, and Minkov 2010). Dismantling the high power-distance dynamic helps students open up, gets them to relax, and builds community. An instructor who acknowledges minor foibles such as their typical slowness in technology use or

who perhaps shares a cross-cultural faux pas they committed, for example, helps to lower students' affective filter (Krashen 2003), opening the pathways for communication. Students can see that even the instructor makes mistakes and laughs about it, so speaking up with mistakes is fine in this environment. Learning about one another and feeling comfortable in one another's presence help to foster community and build a communicative atmosphere.

Having a social media presence within the class, too, where students share informal content with one another and the instructor, is one concrete way to help build that community. Students can share links or funny memes with content that is only tangential to topics in the course or not even related at all. An instructor could label this discussion board or group as “Random” or something of the sort and inform students that there is no grading; the ground rules are that they should not share inappropriate content and must be polite and respectful of one another. Quieter students who don't often speak up in class seem to feel free from the pressure of being assessed and tend to pop up here to express themselves. I've noticed that my active participation in such forums seems meaningful to students, who appreciate connecting with their instructor in such an informal way. I might share a short video or news article that relates to a topic that has come up in class, and students appreciate this engagement, without the worry of being assessed on comments they make or content they share themselves. It's also an opportunity for the instructor to model the behavior of making connections between course content and the outside world, which helps build critical-thinking

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skills. Instructors need not spend too much time with students in these social media platforms, either; sharing a link, video, or informal comment from time to time is enough. Such a forum also provides content to bring up with students in face-to-face interactions before and after class and allows everyone to feel part of the experience.

3. Reward Risk Takers

When students do attempt to speak up, it is vitally important to reward them for doing so, whatever the quality of their contribution. However, offering up a vague comment like “Good!” or “Great!” has limited effectiveness. A more effective approach, in my experience, is to demonstrate that you have heard what the student said and that the perspective has value. This can be done by paraphrasing the student’s point and possibly making it sound even more compelling than it actually is or has been articulated. I once had a typically silent student suddenly attempt to speak up in front of the whole class, but she had trouble with her contribution in the moment, suddenly getting stage fright. However, I could see the point that she was getting at. Rather than coming to her rescue and finishing the answer for her, I listened to her attentively. When she was finished (looking crestfallen and feeling defeated), I made sure to paraphrase and articulate her point: “Yes,” I said to the rest of the class, “Irene’s point in saying XYZ is well taken, and she’s offering a valid contribution here. Would other people agree? Other thoughts?” The student, Irene, rather than feeling defeated, perked up and was suddenly feeling better. I had basically demonstrated that her words/ideas had value. Seeing this made other students want to speak up, too, as they realized that I was there to offer support to students who took the risk to speak up. Students tacitly learn that even if they have trouble expressing themselves,

the instructor will take their points seriously. I might even refer back to “Irene’s important point from the other day” in future classes. After Irene’s experience, other students started getting a little braver than usual with their contributions. These interactions build upon one another, and the quality and amount of output tend to increase. But the important point is that risk takers must always be rewarded by the instructor to get the ball rolling.

Rewarding the risk takers also helps to build community and make the classroom feel like a safe space for participation. Instructors can track speaking up in support of risk-taking behavior by ticking a box next to students’ names, as they would when they give students individualized attention. They can then follow up by sharing the unique thought or idea that the student originally expressed, later, in front of other students. Students feel heard and valued when instructors do this, and it encourages them to speak up more.

4. Address Students’ Reality

Another technique to create a communicative classroom atmosphere is to ask questions of students that they can readily speak to, that are based on their everyday reality and perspective. Create tasks, too, that are closely tied to their reality—what they know, their life experiences, and their interests. That allows them all to have input right at the tip of their tongues. The literature in English language teaching confirms this approach (Graves 2000); as instructors, though, we sometimes might think we are addressing students’ reality, but we are actually missing the mark. It is important to try to put yourself in your students’ shoes as much as possible when creating the tasks and discussion questions that will most easily get them to talk. Discussion questions that

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require students to reflect on their everyday experiences as a start, and these discussions can lead to broader, societal-level issues that require more critical-thinking skills.

For example, in the content-based language courses that I teach on culture, starting small by discussing classroom interactions that my students have with international students from other countries naturally segues to wider discussions on international cooperation and conflicts. Beginning at the micro level, where all students will have something to share, and then scaffolding up to the macro level is effective. This approach too, incidentally, is how the IELTS speaking exam is structured. This is not surprising, as it is a useful way to get reluctant students talking even if/when they have little language or content to do so.

For many instructors, though, understanding their students' reality is easier said than done. There can be age gaps and cultural divides between instructors and students. That's where the informal social media presence with the class mentioned previously can help. It also allows instructors to learn more about the reality of students—what's funny, interesting, and relevant to them when there's no pressure of grades or following instructions. Engaging online with your students in an informal context can improve your teaching and your ability to develop content that encourages them to speak up.

5. Encourage Different Perspectives

As language instructors, we must encourage different points of view in our classroom, even those we disagree with, as that will help all students feel comfortable in speaking up. We probably already know this. However, after

attending class for a while, students often get a sense of what the instructor wants to hear, whether the instructor realizes it or not. Students might want to please their instructor by saying what they believe the teacher wants to hear, even though they might not agree with the idea. But that does not necessarily make for engaging classroom discussions that develop critical-thinking skills. Always praising students who say what you want to hear can silence some students. Modeling alternate points of view, taking different sides of an issue, and genuinely demonstrating that you see the value of different perspectives will encourage students with differing views to speak up. This makes for an actual discussion instead of a class session geared to pleasing the teacher. Discussions become more interesting and valuable for learning when a variety of perspectives are included. Students start to enjoy being in class. As educators, we need to set that all-embracing tone because it will help to bring some students out of their shells.

One strategy I use when I teach potentially controversial content in the classroom is to deliberately avoid sharing my personal opinion. In a content-based language course on culture, for example, we focus on the ideas of social psychologist Geert Hofstede, whose work, though well respected, is also controversial. I will emphatically take the position of both his supporters and his detractors so that students are not exactly sure what I personally believe. That gets students to feel more comfortable about sharing their opinions, no matter what their point of view. The instructor, they see, is open to all sides, including their own. I knew I had succeeded in doing this one session when a student came to my office hours afterward specifically to ask me, "So what do *you* believe

about Hofstede’s work and ideas?” I had allowed the students’ views to populate the classroom so much that finally, in the end, this student was just curious to know what I personally believed. When instructors focus on the views and expressions of their students like this, these same students feel a lot freer to speak up.

CONCLUSION

Using the strategies and tips described in this article can transform the atmosphere of your language classroom from one of uncomfortable silence to a more lively, comfortable, communicative environment that results in more of your students speaking up in authentic, spontaneous, and natural ways. Such a classroom is sure to result in students feeling both free and able to develop their conversational skills in English, leading them to become successful speakers in the language classroom and beyond.

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