

Encouraging Students to Speak in a Chinese EAP Context

By Don Jack; Sarah Butler

Teachers new to EAP teaching in China face a number of challenges. One of the most immediate is encouraging students to speak in class. Teachers coming from academic environments where students readily speak out often find themselves searching for strategies that will help to encourage their students to participate more fully in lessons. This article aims to suggest some useful approaches that can be applied to encourage student participation in speaking activities. It will first outline some of the reasons why students might be reluctant to speak in class before going on to offer some practical ideas.

Why are Chinese students reluctant to speak?

Cao (2011) has pointed out that there are a number of factors that inhibit students' "willingness to communicate" within an L2 context. She lists the following: "... his/her shyness by temperament, or a topical knowledge deficit and linguistic inadequacy, or an influence of his/her cultural background, an uncooperative interlocutor, or a combination of all these factors in the particular classroom culture" (2011, p. 2). Each of these factors may be displayed within a Chinese EAP environment, especially with first-year university students. These students come from a background of teacher-led classes that leave little scope for the type of student interaction often required in Western-style approaches to learning. A consequence of this is that speaking may be the most "rusty" skill for many students entering EAP classes. This in turn may make this type of interaction more stressful than dealing with other skill areas, and so leave students less willing to participate. Students might also feel reluctant to speak because they are afraid of losing *face*, which can be defined as the "deeply held, although subtle feelings of honor, respect, es-

teem and the self in public and private interpersonal relations" (Xiao & Petraki, 2007, p. 7).

Practical suggestions for teachers

Teachers need to become aware of the various factors that might prevent students from speaking in class. It is also worth bearing in mind that students are expected to speak in a variety of different situations (discussions, role-plays, debates, presentations, Q&A) and may be more confident in some situations than others. Becoming attuned to these factors allows teachers to employ strategies to overcome them. The following list of practical ideas for encouraging Chinese students to speak is based on techniques that have been used in the classroom and that have proved successful. The list is meant to be suggestive, rather than exhaustive, and teachers are encouraged to use it as a springboard for the development of other strategies more suited to their particular situation and the particular needs of their students.

In addition to the suggestions outlined here, as students gain more skills, language and confidence, they should become more willing to contribute in class, participate in discussions and volunteer answers.

References

1. Cao, Y. (2011). Investigating situational willingness to communicate within second language classrooms from an ecological perspective. *System*. doi: 10.1016/j.system.2011.10.016
2. Xiao, H., & Petraki, E. (2007). An investigation of Chinese students' difficulties in intercultural communication and its role in ELT. *Journal of Intercultural Communication*, 13. Retrieved from <http://www.immi.se/jicc/index.php/jicc/article/view/90/59>

Learn and use students' names

Using a student's name begins to establish a personal relationship between teacher and student that goes some way towards breaking through the barrier that often places the teacher at a distance. The teacher should also encourage students to use each other's names for many of the same reasons. In addition to being reluctant to speak to the teacher, many students are often also reluctant to speak to each other. Getting them to know each other is an important initial step and one that is often overlooked.

TIP: The teacher can ask students to nominate the next student to read out an instruction or question. The student could be encouraged to call on someone he or she has not worked with before. This encourages students to learn names and also gain more confidence speaking in front of others.

Rotate students

Following on from the above, it is useful to move students around the class to encourage them to get to know their classmates. This has the double advantage of increasing student confidence, while also providing them with the opportunity of dealing with a variety of approaches to negotiating meaning.

Choose specific students to answer questions

Remembering and using names also allows the teacher to call on students specifically, rather than just pointing at students. It is important not to choose the same student every time for this, but rather teachers should make sure that they ask all the students to offer contributions.

TIP: It is also helpful to check that the student you select to answer a specific question has the correct answer. This can be achieved by effective monitoring. If, however, the student is unable to provide an answer or provides a wrong answer, the teacher should deal with this positively, perhaps by providing scaffolding in order for the student to arrive at the correct answer. Alternatively, the teacher can redirect the question back to the class as a whole.

When appropriate, pick names or teams randomly

When students have prepared presentations or topics for open class discussions, they generally appreciate this random method as it means neither the teacher nor the students have chosen the student to speak.

Prepare for open class discussion by having small group discussions

It is often the case that students are more comfortable speaking in smaller groups than speaking in open class discussions. Having small group discussion/brainstorming sessions allows students to test their ideas and language skills in a less intimidating situation.

Sit with groups during small group discussions

While some teachers may argue that sitting with students may inhibit them too much, positive feedback and scaffolding within small group discussions can strengthen confidence. Teacher presence during small group discussions also contributes to the breaking down of the distance between teacher and student that many Chinese students carry with them from their previous educational experiences.

Use appropriate error correction

It is important to take a sensitive approach to error correction during speaking activities so as not to negatively affect confidence.

TIP: Teachers can instill confidence with positive non-verbal gestures.

Give students repair strategies

This allows them to deal with false starts and breakdowns in communication. Other strategies that may be useful are those that allow students to politely express opinions that are opposite to those held by peers, as Chinese students are generally reluctant to disagree with their peers.

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