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Finding effective ways to increase students' confidence to speak English in class

Problems and Rationale

The teaching of speaking L2 is usually considered to be the most difficult part for English teachers as Hong Kong is a Chinese-dominated society. English teachers always find ways to help students master the speaking skills. Undeniably, assisting our next generation to speak English competently is an important task as we all know that it is very vital to maintain the international status of Hong Kong in future.

Most of the students in Hong Kong are found to be passive and unenthusiastic in English speaking. The students of our school have no exception. Due to the weak foundation of English Language, inadequate training in primary schools and personalities, they are sky and unwilling to speak English in class even though they are forced by teachers. It is very common to see that only few students are brave and competent to answer teachers' questions confidently. The attempt to create a negotiating and students-centered learning atmosphere in English by teachers is usually unsuccessful. The achievement of effective communicative teaching becomes a daily headache to all English teachers. Inevitably, the lack of students' participation leads to the teacher-centered learning in English lesson. The purpose of this research is to find ways to increase students' confidence in speaking English in class. It aims to help student develop interests in speaking English and motivate them to acquire better communication.

Methodologies
1) Cultivate a negotiating atmosphere which provides opportunities for students to speak English
2) Let students choose their own topic to promote students-centered learning approach
3) Strengthen students' confidence in speaking English by dividing them into groups
4) Adopt encouragement teaching to increase students' participation
5) Organize competition to arouse students' interests

Jeremy Harmer: The Practice of English Language Teaching, Longman 2001

Steps

1) Pre-Task activities were introduced

Few days before the oral lesson, I would select 3 topics for students to do their oral activities. It is the first time for me to allow students to choose their favourite topics. Students are frequently made nervous by speaking English. It looks incredibly difficult to them. The result will be very demoralizing if teachers provide students difficult tasks or those are not their interests. Selecting the wrong topics for them may create boredom in class. Let students choose their favourite topic may be a good attempt to arouse their interests. The 3 topics included teen problems, Hong Kong famous tourist spots and food. Among the three, most of the students preferred teen problems. I allow students to choose the topic for their task in the hope of arousing their interests in speaking English. They would find the task easy, funny and encouraging.

In addition, I have prepared a vocabulary list of teen problems for students so that they could do some preparations beforehand. As a facilitator, I had to provide enough help to enhance students' learning capacity. The provision of a vocabulary list was a drilling activity as some weaker students might feel unfamiliar with the topic. Drilling activity is a must-do action before asking students to perform productive tasks. Each student would receive a vocabulary list and they were encouraged to check the meanings of words at home. To a larger extent, the performance of productive skills of students relies on their levels of receptive skills. The stronger the receptive skills the students have, the better tasks they perform in writing and speaking. The students were requested to bring back their vocabulary list with preparation to the oral class.

2) Students were formed groups with mixed-ability to achieve cooperative learning

On the day of the oral class, students were divided into groups. Mixed-ability approach was adopted in dividing groups. Each group consisted of high achievers and low achievers. I was responsible for assigning one high achiever for each group to make sure that the mixed- ability approach was carried out. For the rest of the members, the students were allowed to find their own partners. Cooperative learning of students in groups was experienced. The more brilliant students of each group offered help to the weaker students.

3) Clear instruction was made by teacher

Each group was given a picture that describes a teen problem. Also, they receive piece of card paper and a marker. The pictures received by groups are different. Each picture reflects one common teen problem.

Before the start of the competition, I would give a clear instruction to the students, showing them the rules of the games and what they had to perform in the oral tasks. They were given 7 minutes to read the pictures and write their descriptions of the teen problems on the card paper. Simple sentences were allowed to use in the descriptions.

When they have finished, each group had to select one presenter to describe the teen problem mentioned in the picture to their classmates. During the presentation time, the whole group had to come out as team spirit would be promoted. The time limit of the presentation was about 7 minutes. Presenters were encouraged to do an elaboration of their teen problem. The rest of the class had to listen to the presentation carefully and wrote down their feedbacks to the presenters.

4) Active communication among students was promoted

At last, each presenter would ask a question to seek advice from the rest of the class. The question was *'If you were the boy/girl in the picture, what would you do to solve the problem?'* Any students of the rest of the class could answer this question. The requirement was that they had to use the second type of conditional sentence to give feedback to the answerer. To request students to use the second type of conditional sentence aimed to revise the grammar for the students they have learned before. If they know the advice, they can raise their hands and give response to the presenting groups. The two-flow communication was carried out and it made sure that all the students in class were attentive and they were doing the same task. During the students' communication, I was not involved in order not to interfere too much in their oral activities.

5) Immediate feedbacks were made by teacher

I would give immediate feedbacks to each group after their presentations and wrote down their scores on the blackboard. Writing score on the blackboard immediately was used to achieve a. stimulating effect. Taking part in a game, students are always nervous about their marks. When their communication took place, I was writing down the errors they have made. After the whole competition had completed, I gave the comments and suggestions in class. Therefore, the students would know their problems and improve them later. The students who have

answered the questions correctly could also receive scores.

6) Conduct marks and gifts were given as an extrinsic motivation

For group presentation, the best three received both conduct marks and gifts. For the individual outstanding performance, three best performers were also selected to receive the prizes. Setting the short-term goals and giving small prizes are the motivational drive for our students.

Observation and Reflection

From my observation, most of the students were very delighted to have a competition in class. Game or competition is stimulating activities to children. According to Jeremy Harmer, children need frequent changes of activity: they need activities that are exciting and stimulating their curiosity: they need to be involved in something active. The span of concentration of our students is less. Thus, we have to assign some interesting activities to draw their attention.

When they knew that the winners would receive conduct marks and gifts from me, some passive and sky students were brave enough to speak something. It is a good start for them. At first, some inactive students still kept their mouth shut when the atmosphere was not warmed up. When the game has gone over for more than 10 minutes and the more active students started to put up their hands one by one, those passive students followed suit. Each group come out to present their pictures. The elected presenter was responsible for presenting their description of the pictures and the rest of the members stood around. Two members were holding their card paper and it allowed the listeners to see their words clearly.

However, there were some inactive students remained silent and embarrassed in class. Those non-presenting students seems embarrassed when they come out and stood in front of the class. Their body movements and facial expressions reflected that they didn't have much experience previously.

In language forms, most of the presenting groups made a lot of mistakes in their presentation. Only a few groups with very outstanding members made fewer mistakes. However, I don't think it was a fatal problem. It is very common to see people make mistakes in communication. Even the native speakers cannot avoid the problem. If the communicative purpose was achieved, the performances of the students are regarded

to be successful. At least, they get started to speak English.

The achievement of effective communicative learning needs efforts of teachers and students. Teachers are the facilitators to help students to learn effectively while students' participation is also necessary and it is the responsibility for teachers to arouse their interests.

The game was very encouraging as a lot of students were involved in the task. I will try different ways to diversify my teaching strategies, aiming at creating an interesting and active environment for students to learn English. In fact, various kinds of oral activities can be carried out in class, such as story telling, reading poem aloud, singing songs. I think they are all welcomed by students. In the coming days, I will continue to enhance my teaching skills, improving myself in order to make students to achieve the best.