

The shy speaker

Renata Simunkova
tackles the task of teaching
timid students.

In recent years substantial attention has been directed at the development of speaking and communicative skills. Today the term 'communicative language teaching' is a byword for language teachers. Indeed, the single greatest challenge in the profession is to move significantly beyond the teaching of rules, patterns, definitions and other knowledge 'about' language to the point where we are teaching our students to communicate genuinely, spontaneously and meaningfully in the second language. There is no need to question whether it is important to teach speaking or not. More pertinent questions, however, might be: What is the right proportion of free speaking activities? and In what circumstances are they suitable for the majority of students?

Problems with participation

In order for a speaking activity to be successful, it is essential that students take an active part in it. Unfortunately this is often not the case, as I have found out on the basis of two questionnaires given to about 300 students and 20 teachers at secondary schools in Prague and Liberec in the Czech Republic. The results suggest that:

- students consider free speaking activities important and therefore they would probably welcome the opportunity to participate in them as often as possible.

- problems caused by shyness, less talkativeness and lack of self-confidence represent more than one quarter of all investigated problems and therefore should be paid more attention.
- both students and teachers know about problems with participation; they consider them important, but they do not know what to do about them.

Among other general problems such as motivation, choice of topic, grouping, atmosphere in the classroom, etc, which are often mentioned and sometimes dealt with practically in literature on methodology, I would like to mention one more. As far as I know, this has not received any thorough attention up to now, and yet the questionnaires imply it might be worth investigating. That problem is shyness.

What is the right proportion of free speaking activities and in what circumstances are they suitable for the majority of students?

Shyness

Shyness is a common problem, most visible in teaching speaking, and probably quite difficult for the teacher to cope with. Shyness is a general term which includes such things as self-consciousness, introversion, less talkativeness, etc. Shy students are those who never willingly participate, and when called on they speak very quietly. This, however, doesn't mean that they are stupid, have nothing to say or don't know what to say, or even that they are unable to express themselves in English; some of them may have an excellent command of the language. They just don't know how to make themselves speak.

Shyness doesn't mean incapacity to learn a foreign language. Shy students can have great potential and a strong desire and even motivation to learn

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English. They, however, are working under conditions which are more difficult than those of other students. In research carried out by Zimbaro, more than one quarter of students questioned declared themselves to be shy, and his prediction was that the number would rise in the future. These facts, in my opinion, call for analysis of the problems of shy students in order to make their learning conditions less handicapping and threatening.

Suggested solutions

Shy people are usually most afraid of exposing their inner world to others. They may be willing and happy to discuss the weather or paraphrase an article or a story, but they are uncomfortable telling you what they like, feel or think. They can talk relatively easily to a person they know well, but get into great difficulties when forced to talk to someone different. They may never say a word if there is no exact indication of when it is their turn to speak.

All of these aspects can be taken into account when choosing a particular activity, without making the activity itself less effective. The following strategies should help teachers to make shy students participate:

1 Time to speak

From my personal experience as a student and from my teaching, I have found that many shy students will not talk unless they know exactly when it is their turn, or unless they feel a necessity to speak.

One possible way to treat this problem is always to call on a particular student at the same time when working with the whole class.

Another and probably more efficient technique is to prepare activities which consist of advance planning and have an easy-to-follow time structure. It is not important whether the planning is

done by the teacher or the students. One example of such an activity is roleplay. Following the sequence of a story, each student knows exactly when to speak. Many problem-solving or information-gap exercises would also meet the criteria; a student has to provide the information he or she has when that specific piece of it is demanded.

2 Groupwork

Since the main source of shyness for each individual is other people, it is clear that a shy person will feel more at ease when not required to perform in front of a large group of people. Group- and pairwork might be the answer, on condition that the students choose their partners themselves.

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3 Something to say

It follows from the characteristic of shy people that they are afraid of talking about their inner world: their feelings, opinions and attitudes. They dread revealing their true selves. Speaking about oneself is not something that everyone does with ease. It is possible to adapt subjects of communication to some extent in order that shy students are not forced to go against their nature. Activities that give such students something to say, rather than those which require invention, may help with this problem.

4 Focus on facts

One option is to discuss facts rather than opinions. Various types of descriptions (of pictures, situations, places, events, etc) are emotionally neutral, and still they create space for practice of a variety of structures,


expressions and notions. Another possibility might be paraphrasing a story or a book. Although it means repetition of something that has already been presented, practice can range from controlled to free because, after all, it is their own words that the students produce.

Problem-solving and information-gap activities might also represent an excellent answer. These involve talking about, exchanging and comparing facts, and at the same time they provide practice, which inevitably leads to some kind of result.

5 The way in

It is clear that expressing students' own opinions and attitudes cannot be completely avoided: they have to learn and practise the structures necessary for doing it, and this cannot realistically be done in any other way. In addition, for some students the chance to express themselves is highly motivating. When it is not possible to adapt the topic itself, it might be possible to adapt the way in which this topic is approached. If shy people are afraid to speak for themselves, they might feel better if allowed to speak for someone else. Roleplay again, if performed only on verbal grounds and not as a drama lesson, may prove useful here.



The problem of how to encourage shy students to speak is a very complex one. My intention here is not to present any revolutionary solutions. I should just like to remind teachers of the problem and to stress the usefulness of logically structured speaking activities in helping students to overcome their shyness. 

Zimbaro, P G *Shyness*
Wesley Publishing Company 1977



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