

Effective Teaching Strategies for High School Speaking Classes in China

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0 Introduction

As a language skill, speaking is accepted by most language educators as an important goal of language learning and teaching. The enthusiasm in research into effective approaches and strategies for teaching speaking, both in theory and classroom practice, has never faded, but rather is always increasing. However, despite its widely accepted importance, speaking remains neglected in some language classrooms, with the result that many language learners fail to develop as equal a level of communicative ability as other skills. This is especially true in many foreign language teaching settings, in which China is a case in point. This paper focuses on the teaching of English speaking in high schools in China. It reviews the relevant theories about speaking and the teaching of speaking. Then it investigates the current situations of English speaking teaching in China, together with its difficulties and possible reasons. Finally, conclusions will be drawn about the most suitable and effective strategies and activities for teaching speaking to Chinese students.

1 Speaking

It is generally accepted that speaking is of great importance in learning a language. For example, when people say they know English, their first meaning is that they can speak English^[4]. In addition,

speaking is a skill on which people usually base their first impressions about others. In other words, people generally judge another person's language competence according to his speaking ability rather than any of the other skills^[14]. As a result, for many students, learning to speak a language competently is a priority. According to Horwitz^[9], "speaking is the hallmark of second language learning". Nunan^[15] also supports that the competence in another language is generally characterized by the ability to speak that language.

Then what do we mean by "being able to speak"? Speaking is so familiar a term that people usually take it for granted and don't notice its complexity. However, as a language teacher, it is beneficial that we know as much as possible about speaking itself and its characteristics. Brown^[1] gives a definition to speaking. According to him, speaking is a "purpose-driven, spontaneous, and interactive" process of constructing meaning, which involves "receiving, processing and producing information". Florez^[3] concludes the twofold requirements for successful speaking. On one hand, in order to convey information, speakers need to produce specific points of language such as pronunciation, vocabulary and grammar, which are labelled linguistic competence. On the other hand, for the purpose of interaction with the interlocutor, speakers have to attain certain degree of communicative competence, which covers a wide range of conversational and sociolinguistic skills that tell them how to say what to who and when. The participants of speaking can be one person, as is the case of making a speech and presentation. If two or more people take part, as in conversations and discussions, it becomes more complicated because speakers should consider

things like topic management, turn taking as well as pauses and fillers^[14].

Taking into account the importance as well as the complexity of speaking, it makes sense to attach more attention to the teaching of speaking.

2 The Teaching of Speaking

At present, language classes are held throughout the world to teach millions of people how to speak a second or foreign language. However, there are still many debates among researchers and educators with regard to the teaching of speaking, due to the many different aspects entailed in it. This section discusses five major arguments in this field.

The first argument concerns the teachability of speaking skills. What is the role of speaking classes? Should teachers only provide enough opportunities and organize different activities for students to practise, or should they give explicit instructions on how to speak? Many linguists have expressed their support for the teaching of speaking. For instance, Shumin^[18] contends that learners need explicit instruction in speaking, which can be improved through learning and practice. Slade^[19] also supports this view by noting that explicit features that can be taught include both macro-level and micro-level speech functions.

The second argument centres the goal of teaching speaking. For many years, people taught speaking by having students repeat sentences and recite textbook dialogues, or by assigning students general topics to discuss and then getting them to talk on certain subjects^[18]. The reason lies in the belief that learners can learn to speak by practicing grammatical structures and then later using them in conversations^[16]. With the development of communicative approach, teachers begin to be aware of the importance of communicative competence in speaking teaching. Therefore, the goal of teaching changes accordingly. As Hudge states (2000), students should be enabled not only to speak in a controlled way to achieve accurate pronunciation, vocabulary, and structure, but also to use these features more freely in real-life interactions. Horwitz^[9] also suggests that the ability

to communicate spontaneously with a native speaker should be the goal of second language learning.

The third relevant debate falls on the distinction between fluency and accuracy. Fluency refers to the amounts of language produced in the speaking task, which includes such features as “responding coherently within the turns of the conversation, linking words and phrases, using intelligible pronunciation and appropriate intonation, and doing all of this without undue hesitation”^[8]. On the contrary, accuracy is defined as the linguistic correctness of people’s output^[4]. In teaching a second language, should teachers encourage fluency and get students to talk as much as possible or is it better to focus on accuracy and correct students’ mistakes? This is a choice language teachers need to make before their effective teaching of speaking.

Many researchers are also concerned about the materials used in speaking classes. For a long time, the materials produced for classroom use are mostly scripted. Despite some sound pedagogical reasons for using scripted speech samples, such as simplifying the context, providing normal ideal situations, their status has been challenged in recent years. For example, Burns^[2] argues that scripted materials can hardly reflect the “unpredictability and dynamism” of conversation, nor can it represent the features and structures of natural spoken discourse. He further comments that students who are taught only in scripted spoken language are not well prepared for the unforeseeable interactions outside classrooms. As a result, there is a call for coursebook writers as well as teachers to include more authentic spoken materials into speaking classes.

Finally, with the further development into the field of speaking teaching, more and more speaking activities, with their advantages and disadvantages, are available for teachers’ choice. The typical ones include pair work, group discussion, information gap, problem solving, role play, debate and games.

3 English Speaking Teaching in Chinese High Schools

After some discussion of the general picture of speaking and the teaching of speaking, it is now time

to narrow it down to the specific context in China. In the last two decades or so, English language teaching has been gaining importance and popularity at a fast rate in China. Millions of students are studying English as a school subject; huge resources and efforts have been expended for the effectiveness of teaching; impressive progress has been made in curricular development, syllabus design, and textbook production; innovation and experimentation have been encouraged^[11]. However, despite all these developments, the traditional grammar-translation model still dominates the English classes, especially the high school classes, in China. The teaching of speaking gains little attention, if not totally neglected, with the result that a majority of Chinese students are strong in grammar but very weak in speaking^[12]. The possible explanations for the difficulty in teaching speaking lie in the following factors.

The first factor concerns the English teaching environment in China, which includes examination pressure, big class size and lack of motivation for speaking. Although both the Chinese students and teachers are becoming more and more aware of the importance of speaking English, they still pay more attention to grammar, because all the language tests are written and grammar-based. The big class size, the typical being 50 students per class, makes it difficult to ensure every student a chance to speak and to carry out such activities as free discussions and games. Lastly, as in most English as a foreign language (EFL) settings, there are few chances for Chinese students to use English outside the classroom. Therefore, they have no need and thus no motivation to practice speaking ability.

The second difficulty comes from students' reluctance to speak, which in turn can be divided into three subsets, namely cultural factors, past experiences, and affective factors. In traditional Chinese culture, learning is considered as a process of acquiring knowledge rather than using knowledge to solve real-life problems^[10]. That's why both teachers and students pay more attention to language input (reading and listening) than output (speaking and writing). In addition, Chinese students are usually accuracy-oriented. All these may explain

why they tend to be reluctant to speak until they are sure of themselves. Secondly, many students, before they enter high schools, have been educated in large classes where opportunities to speak are severely limited for many years^[15]. These previous learning experiences will strongly influence students' learning styles and habits in their further studies. Affective factors include students' shyness and anxiety for speaking, and their fear of mistakes and derision. This is not only true for beginners, but also for some students who are well advanced in their English proficiency^[5].

The third difficulty falls on the part of the language teachers. The Chinese language classes are still teacher-centred. Teachers not only talk most of the time, but also control the content and procedure of the lessons, choose topics for discussions, and even decide which students to take part^[20]. The fact that Chinese teachers are not native English speakers sometimes also prevents them from carrying out speaking activities. Teachers often feel more comfortable to convey language knowledge and deliver grammatical presentations than to organize speaking activities and then give feedbacks^[9]. Besides, teachers' intolerance of silence, which means giving students little or no wait time, also results in the difficulty for speaking classes^[4].

Considering this existing situation as well as difficulties for teaching English speaking in China, it seems every teacher's responsibility to try changing the low status of speaking and making joint efforts to search for the most suitable and effective strategies to teach English speaking.

4 Strategies for Teaching English Speaking in China

This section discusses some of the important points which need teachers' attention in designing speaking classes.

To begin with, it is useful for teachers to form good relationship with students and create friendly classroom climate. As indicated above, most students may feel reluctant to speak. In this case, before anything else, teachers need to gain students' trust. As a language teacher, we should let students know that we understand the difficulty for speaking

and that we do not expect them to speak perfect English^[5]. It may take a long time for students to feel comfortable enough with a teacher and actively participate in speaking in class, but teachers need to work patiently and hard on it, because only then can speaking happen^[4].

Secondly, it is helpful for teachers to talk with students about the features and importance of speaking and offer explicit instruction on speaking skills^[8]. For example, if teachers are stressing the importance of speaking all the time, the students will also be aware of it and willing to practise gradually. Besides linguistic features, it is also desirable for teachers to give instructions on other aspects of speaking, such as politeness, turn-taking, topic shift, interruption and closing^[14]. Teachers need also consider when and how to teach speaking strategies, such as asking for clarification and using fillers.

Thirdly, teachers should give students practice with both fluency and accuracy. It is believed that an obvious way to improve students' speaking skills is through actual speaking. Therefore, in a speaking class, teachers need first focus on fluency tasks, which should not only allow but also encourage students to speak^[4]. At the beginning level, it is also beneficial to inform students that making mistakes is a natural part of learning a new language. Then with the improvement of their speaking skills, teachers need to pay more attention to accuracy and begin to select and treat students' errors.

The fourth point concerns error correction in speaking. Recent years have seen a debate about the value of error correction in classrooms. The dilemma is that if teachers do not correct mistakes, these errors may become "fossilized", while if teachers do correct them, they may interrupt the "flow" of speaking as well as influence students affectively^[13]. Therefore, it is advisable for teachers to consider carefully what errors to correct, as well as when and how to correct them. One suggestion is that teachers correct the *systematic errors*, which shows a learner's current stage of interlanguage, and leave the *mistakes*, which may be caused by carelessness, tiredness and distraction, to the learner's self-correction^[8]. There is also a need to balance negative error correction with positive encouragement on the

students' attempts to speak, so that they will not feel frustrated and may be willing to take more risks in speaking the next time. Lastly, teachers need not only think about the impact of correction on the students being corrected, but also its effect on the whole class^[8].

Finally, in the case of English teaching in China, where most attention is focused on reading and writing, it is valuable if teachers can integrate speaking into reading and writing activities. For instance, suitable reading materials can lead to creative production in speech. Story-telling can be required after reading a narrative writing. Oral reports or summaries are also good ways to combine speaking and reading^[18].

Apart from the above mentioned strategies, teachers need also to make a choice between different speaking activities for those most suitable in their context.

5 Speaking Activities Suitable for High Schools in China

Considering the big class size and the characteristics of Chinese high school students, not all activities proposed by researchers are suitable. For example, in China, due to most people's serious attitudes towards learning, the role of songs and games as learning activities is always doubted^[17]. Consequently, this section only focuses on two feasible speaking activities for Chinese high schools.

The first activity is free discussion, whose benefits are evident. It can provide students with opportunities to talk about a wide range of topics depending on their interests, opinions and experiences. By sharing ideas with other speakers, it also improves students' communicative abilities. In addition, since it can be carried out between either pairs or groups, it is feasible in large classes. However, there are also problems to overcome. Shumin^[18] notes that if teachers simply assign a topic to students for discussion, the effects cannot be guaranteed. Therefore, it seems better to follow the three stages suggested by Green et al.^[6]. They are pre-discussion in which groups are formed, topics chosen and responsibilities assigned, discussion, and

post-discussion with peers' and teacher's feedbacks. Another problem comes from the so-called uneven participation^[7], which means even when discussing in small groups, it does not ensure participation from all members. It often happens that some extrovert and more competent students dominate the discussion. In this case, it depends on the teacher to monitor the discussion and offer some support, such as adding a quiet time for brainstorming before the discussion and changing the group members from time to time^[8].

Another useful activity is role-play. A large quantity of benefits has been claimed for role-play. For instance, it involves more students' participation; it offers preset situations and roles, so that it reduces the difficulty^[8]; it often gives clear purposes and directions. In addition, because of the different roles for students to play, this activity can create great interest and motivation from students. However, as every coin has two sides, there are also some limitations, such as the distance between the roles and students' real lives, as well as the time allotted for successful role plays.

Finally, it should be pointed out that not every activity can ensure that students practise the required skills and strategies. Also we should notice that the same activity will not work if used all the time, and the same activity may have different effects on different students and teachers. Therefore, the best solution is to find an integration between different activities and search for those suiting your particular situation and students.

6 Conclusion

This paper briefly reviewed the related theories about speaking and the teaching of speaking. By analysing the current situations, difficulties and possible reasons for the English speaking classes in China, this paper has tried to seek the strategies and activities of speaking teaching which best suit the Chinese high schools. However, since there are always benefits as well as limitations of these mentioned approaches, it is advised that teachers carry out future research and teaching practice depending on their own situations. It still seems safe

to conclude that speaking, as one of the central elements of communication, is an aspect that needs special attention and instruction.

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