

Encouraging student voices in a Chinese classroom

By *Bonnie Insull* (China)

Teaching English in a Chinese university brings challenges that are not typically found in other countries. Not only does the sheer number of students in the large, tightly-packed classes discourage individual participation, but-more importantly-the system that has educated these students does not encourage them to actively express themselves or voice their real opinions (Liu 1997).

A graduate student in one of my classes at Dalian University of Foreign Languages, Shi Ling, commented,

"In China, the teacher is the center of the class; the students are only listeners. They listen to the teacher all the time, hoping to get the correct answer from their teacher, receiving information without using their own minds. In order to save time or finish the teaching task on schedule, the teacher also gives students the answers, not encouraging them to think why."

As a non-Chinese teacher of English in China, I find myself constantly looking for strategies to activate student participation and encourage their candid feedback. I have successfully used the following two activities and found that they help to give Chinese students a stronger voice in their own learning process.

Student facilitator

The first activity that has been especially successful in motivating students to speak has been dubbed "student facilitator" by my classes. The idea developed in the second month of the semester, when students were accustomed to taking an active part in small group discussions and were somewhat comfortable with reporting back to the large group. One day in class as I observed them talking in small groups, I realized that a team of students could take over my job of eliciting group reports back to the whole class. It was one of those unexpected realizations that arises in the moment, and I immediately dropped my lesson plan to try it.

After writing "facilitator" on the blackboard and discovering no one knew the word, I asked students to describe what I usually did to get class ideas onto the blackboard. We came up with the following definition:

A good facilitator...

- encourages as many students as possible to volunteer their ideas
- writes ideas on the board so all can see
- positively acknowledges all responses
- withholds own opinion or works within a timeframe

I then asked for three volunteers—a facilitator, a secretary and a timekeeper—who would work together as a facilitation team. Here in China, a teacher must wait with an expectant and confident demeanor for quite a long time until a student volunteers. After one brave volunteer raised his hand, two more quickly joined the team, and I knew the strategy would work. We defined the timekeeper's job as giving a two-minute warning and announcing the end of the allotted time, the secretary's job as summarizing student ideas on the board, and the facilitator's job as eliciting classmates' comments. In this communally-oriented learning context, having a team of three was crucial for the idea to work.

This strategy provides an alternative to the teacher-centeredness that is still very much the norm in China and provides enough structure for students to dare to step into a position of active leadership. In fact, as the semester wore on, students began to compete to be a member of the facilitation team, were more active in volunteering answers to their peers than to me, and offered more argumentative, controversial and original ideas to their classmate-facilitator. By the end of the semester, even the shyest of students had volunteered. Student Facilitator is a confidence-building activity. It provides additional speaking time for the students and structures their ability to productively control the class.

One of the side benefits of the facilitation team is that the teacher gets to sit in a student's chair and observe the class. I was able to jot down language problems that came up during student facilitation and bring them to the attention of the class after the facilitators sat down. In addition, observing the class from a student's desk provided a tangible reminder of the students' physical environment. When standing in front of the class, it is easy to forget what it is like to sit in the back of a crowded, poorly ventilated classroom, barely able to see the blackboard, and unable to move the seat closer or further away. Sitting at a student desk never fails to prod my awareness about logistics, such as how big to write on the blackboard or when to open a window.

No-Fuss feedback

When I am teaching in a foreign country, I find it especially important to find out whether the content and methods I use are effective for my students. Cultural differences may interfere with learning in ways a foreign teacher might not suspect. In China, getting candid feedback from students is not always simple. It is easy for the teacher to get a group opinion on a question, such as "Where shall we go for our class outing?" but it is quite a challenge to get students to voice their individual opinions about how effective the class is.

This is due in part to the traditional relationship of teacher and student in China. While this model is gradually becoming outmoded, the teacher is still generally seen as a keeper of knowledge who transmits information to the students, who are seen as the empty vessels. After all, if the teacher is the undisputed authority in the classroom, isn't it the teacher who should declare the learning environment to be effective? Even though this concept is waning, my Chinese colleagues assure me that there are students who look down on a teacher who asks for feedback on class effectiveness. Hence, the teacher must precede such an activity with a thoughtful explanation of its value.

Furthermore, if students feel exposed during the activity, or if the group sentiment is obvious to all (as in a hand vote) the teacher will get either no response or the same response from everyone. This may be an issue elsewhere in the world, but it is a special challenge in China, due to the strong cultural pull of collective thinking. I countered this tendency toward homogeneity by scheduling the feedback exercise right after students had completed a survey about their individual learning styles. After the survey, they were amazed by how many kinds of learners there were in their class. When we did the feedback exercise, I reminded them there would be different opinions in the class, just as there are different ways of learning, and that this was normal. This seemed to cut down on students' copying from neighbors, as only three out of 146 students handed in feedback that was identical to their neighbor's.

A final concern in a feedback activity is how long it takes. With a typical class size of 40 students, a feedback technique must use class time efficiently and be easy to tabulate. With relatively little planning, No-Fuss Feedback can address most of these concerns and provide a teacher with candid student feedback. Here's how the activity works: I tell students I want their opinion on whether certain class activities are helpful for their acquisition of English. They draw a large circle on a blank piece of paper and listen to the short list of class activities I've chosen. As each activity is read, they write the item inside the circle if it is useful for their acquisition of English, outside the circle if it is not, and on the circle if it is neither (see figure 1). Following the completion of this task, which takes less than 10 minutes, students are given several more minutes to write anything they want about class, especially about the activities that weren't helpful. The author of the example in figure 1 wrote: "1) The songs do not agree with our taste; 2) Last year too many skits made it boring; 3) Jigsaw is boring because it takes too much time or oral practicing."

After class, I tabulate the results and make them into a bar chart that is later posted in class. In the chart for my class of 37 students (figure 2), 28 felt Student Facilitator was helpful for their language acquisition, three thought it wasn't, and six felt it neither helped nor hindered. One student wrote, "The Student Facilitator is a good way for us to improve ourselves." Another wrote that he had "already heard enough 'Chinglish' and didn't need to hear more from a classmate posing as teacher."

Comments like these gave me important feedback about how students perceived the effectiveness of their classes and what I might consider changing. In addition, the frankness of the comments suggested that the feedback tool was working: students felt secure and confident enough to give candid feedback.

It is worth noting that this activity works best when getting feedback on a small number of items; in fact, the list of eight activities used in the example in figure 1 seemed to push the maximum in terms of getting focused, candid student attention. Currently, I use only six or seven items for No Fuss Feedback. The technique itself is simple, and compiling the results is equally quick and easy. The information for figure 2 was tabulated in only 15 minutes. The challenges for the teacher are choosing the items for feedback wisely and then deciding how to use the feedback.

Conclusion

While teaching English in China, I have encountered challenges, such as classes of 40, desks bolted to the floor, students who are culturally conditioned against speaking individually in class, and a teaching system that has traditionally devalued critical thinking. In the words of Shi Ying, the student quoted at the beginning of this article, "A teacher should let the students be the center and owner of learning." These two activities, Student Facilitator and Non Fuss Feedback, evolved in response to my desire to empower my students and to rethink the traditional notion of teacher.

Reference

Liu, Li-ting, 1997. *Chinese versus English: The language and education connection*. TESOL Matters, 7, 2, p. 13.

Bonnie Insull is a U.S. Department of State English Language Fellow at Dalian University of Foreign Language in Dalian, China.