

Little Voice: Students' Confidence and Their Responses in English Lessons^{*}

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In this paper, I shall discuss how students' confidence is reflected in their verbal and non-verbal responses to teachers' questions and in their classroom behaviour. The discussion will be based on qualitative data gathered in several junior secondary classes in Hong Kong that had participated in a three-year case study. The findings indicate that students' confidence (influenced by limited English proficiency and the type of questions asked) affects their classroom responses, verbal or otherwise. To cope with teachers' questions as well as other activities in the English lessons, students develop a number of strategies, such as remaining silent, checking answers with peers and teachers, and speaking softly. The study suggests that it is important for teachers to develop ways to teach their students as individuals who possess a diverse range of confidence levels as well as language needs and abilities. The paper concludes by suggesting ways of enhancing students' confidence in English learning experience.

Since the introduction of the communicative approach in the 1970s and 1980s, oral participation in English lessons has become more important. Some students are unwilling to join in language learning activities or to speak out. While a number of reasons have been suggested, studies show that there

^{*} An earlier version of this paper was presented in the 1st Asia TEFL International Conference, November 7-9, 2003, Busan, Korea.

might be some relationship between students' affect and classroom performance. The objective of this paper is to show how Hong Kong students' confidence is reflected in their responses to teachers' questions and in classroom behaviour. The paper starts by discussing communicative language teaching (CLT) and its implementation in Chinese communities in the past two decades. I describe a study and its results, and suggest several ways of enhancing students' confidence.

CLT AND ITS IMPLEMENTATION IN CHINESE COMMUNITIES

One of the major distinctions between CLT and the previous methodology might be its focus of the use of the language. As Richards and Rodgers (1986) put it, "communicative competence is made to be the goal of language teaching" (p. 66). Howatt (1984) distinguishes between a weak and a strong version of CLT:

There is, in a sense, a 'strong' version of the communicative approach and a 'weak' version. The weak version, which has become more or less standard practice in the last ten years, stresses the importance of providing learners with opportunities to use their English for communicative purposes and, characteristically, attempts to integrate such activities into a wider programme of language teaching. In order to avoid the charge that communicative activities are merely side-shows, efforts are made to ensure that they relate to the purposes of the course as specified in the syllabus, hence the importance of proposals to include semantic as well as purely structural features in a syllabus design, [...]. The 'strong' version of communicative teaching, on the other hand, advances the claim that language is acquired through communication, so that it is not merely a question of activating an existing but inert knowledge of the language, but of stimulating the development of the language system itself. If the former could be described as 'learning to use' English, the latter entails 'using English to learn it.' (p. 279)

Students' participation in English lessons in most cases has become primary consideration of curriculum development. Foreign language learners are expected to work on tasks in pairs or small groups.

The CLT was introduced in Hong Kong in the early 1980s. The English Syllabus for Secondary Schools (Curriculum Development Committee, 1983) stressed that classrooms should provide opportunities that enable students to develop the ability of using the language meaningfully. The 1999 English syllabus (Curriculum Development Council, 1999) makes explicit reference to the communicative approach and emphasises again that 'the use of English in English lessons is [...] communicative and purposeful' (p.4). Although the CLT has been popular in some parts of the world, e.g. language schools in Britain, Australasia and North America, its effectiveness in Hong Kong is in doubt (e.g., Evans, 1997; Leung, 1987; Sze, 1992).

Leung (1987) surveyed nearly 1000 trained and untrained English teachers in Hong Kong about the strengths and weaknesses of the communicative approach, and its feasibility in classrooms. The survey found out that many of the teachers "have accepted the potential strengths of the approach but use it sparingly – only when the situation allows for it" (p. 98). Some of the major problems that hinder the use of the approach are 'limited preparation time, students' English proficiency, examination pressure, resource available, etc.' (ibid.). A decade after the implementation of CLT in Hong Kong, Sze (1992) discussed some of the problems Hong Kong primary schools had encountered when practising communicative language teaching. They range from incorporating coursebook materials into the curriculum, teaching methodology, and testing/evaluation. His critique suggested the need to use local linguistic and sociolinguistic research outcomes, involving frontline practitioners in the process of forthcoming curriculum changes. Regarding the practice of CLT in Hong Kong secondary schools, Evans (1997) discovered that the aim of providing students with greater opportunities for meaningful language use had yet to be achieved. The researcher believed that "teachers still apparently favor a transmissional style of teaching, while the students' main classroom role would seem to be listening to the teachers and working on individual

exercises" (p. 59).

One of the concerns about the practicability of adopting CLT in Chinese classrooms is related to the influence of national cultures. Cortazzi and Jin (1996) explain the 'Chinese culture of learning' by tracing the traditional socio-economic influences. They illustrate the issue with the example of students asking questions. In their study, 135 mainland Chinese students studying in the UK were asked: 'Why don't students ask questions?' Many of the Chinese students reported that they do not want to 'lose face'. One of the students commented, "Students in China are not as extrovert as those in the West. They often prefer to be asked to answer a question rather than initiate one. It's a kind of cultural difference" (p. 195).

It is also reported (e.g., De Andres, 1999; Williams & Burden, 1997) that affect and confidence seem to be related to foreign language students' classroom performance. Williams and Burden (1997) observe that successful learners feel competent and capable of learning. The two researchers believe that there is a strong relationship between a positive self-image and performing well on learning tasks.

RESEARCH DESIGN

Against this background, my study (Tong, 2002) was conducted in an attempt to identify the relationship between national cultural influences and CLT in Hong Kong. The data, including the Little Voice episode, were taken from the study. The research was a qualitative case study lasting for three years. In total, two schools, six class settings¹ and 181 students of 12-15 years old participated. In these two schools, English was a school subject. Both the teachers and the students are ethnic Chinese. They speak Cantonese, a dialect widely used in southern China. The researcher visited each of the classes on average twice a week for a school year, from September to June

¹ The six class settings are coded Site 1 to Site 6 indicating the order of their occurrence.

and collected a range of data, like video recording, classroom observation notes, documentation, conversation and interviews with the participants.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

In this section, I will present and analyse the qualitative data and the Little Voice episode, in which indicate how the students' reactions to the teachers' questions or requests are related to the students' confidence.

Nil / Hesitant Responses

Student performances that might be associated with their confidence were observed. The two observation notes below show that the students concerned have nil or delayed responses to their teachers' instructions.

This was a Reader lesson. The teacher asked the whole class: 'Any volunteers to read aloud this following paragraph?' The students immediately lowered their heads. No student had volunteered. The teacher had waited for about half a minute and he nominated a student to read it aloud. (Observation 3, Site 2)

The teacher wrote some of the new words on the blackboard. He explained the meanings of the words. Then the teacher asked the students, 'Any problems concerning vocabulary in the Reader?' Most of them kept quiet. A few of the students talked softly among themselves. None had asked any question. (Observation 5, Site 2)

Student participation has been a discussion topic for sometime in Hong Kong. In an ethnographic study of university lecturing in Hong Kong, some lecturers expressed concern about student participation and their failure to ask questions (Flowerdew & Miller, 1995):

LI: [...] students are not as participatory as I'd like them to be ...
LD: [...] They don't (ask questions) they sit there like goldfish with their mouths open waiting for me to pour information into them. (p. 26)

The students' inertia or reluctance towards speaking out, according to several lecturers, might be attributed to fear or a feeling of being threatened.

LA: [...] I would say they are afraid (to ask questions) and I suspect there are a lot more questions waiting to be asked than are actually asked. (p. 27)

Research findings indicate that anxiety has reverse correlation with confidence (Gardner & MacIntyre, 1993; MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991). The situations in the two observation notes (Observation 3, Observation 5, Site 2) would be very stressful, especially for students who lack confidence. In both situations, if the students responded to the teacher's requests, their language abilities would be exposed to the teacher and other students. The students who volunteered to read aloud or asked question would be in the spotlight. As a result, they chose to remain silent.

Confirming with Classmates / Teachers

Another kind of student performance that might reflect their confidence seems to be confirming answers with their classmates or teachers. I observed:

This was a coursebook lesson. The teacher had nominated a student to write her sentence on the blackboard. The student was unwilling to do so. She looked at her neighbour. Then she stood up slowly holding her book. Before she left her seat, she asked her neighbour, 'Is this the sentence?' Her neighbour nodded her head. The student asked again: 'Is this correct?' She was pointing to the sentence. Her neighbour looked at the student's exercise book and did not reply. At this moment, the teacher signalled the student again to go to the front. The student went toward the teacher. She then asked the teacher: 'I've written the sentence like this. But I'm not sure if it's correct.' At the same time, she showed the sentence to the teacher. The teacher read her exercise book and said: 'It's correct.' Then the

student wrote it on the board. (Observation 22, Site 2)

The student's performance suggests that she was not confident enough to write the sentence on the blackboard straightforward. In order to avoid an embarrassing situation, the student sought confirmation from her classmates and her teacher.

I have recorded a similar situation when I chatted with a student about her learning of Putonghua after a classroom observation.

In today's recess, a student talked with me about her Putonghua lessons. She said: 'I've learned it for three school terms.' I asked the student to say a few words in Putonghua. The student replied: 'No, I can't. My Putonghua is very poor. I've learned only a little.' She then looked down, smiled and thought for a while. She said: 'All right...but you must not laugh at me.' After getting my promise, she then asked me in Putonghua, 'Did you have breakfast this morning?' (Student conversation after Observation 31, Site 2)

Students in Hong Kong whose mother tongue is Cantonese need to learn Putonghua in lessons along with English. This conversation took place after I had visited the class more than 30 times and a good relationship had been established. Still, the student was anxious about being ridiculed by someone she knew well. Tsui (1996) reveals that students in Hong Kong are afraid of making silly mistakes or being teased, and they tend to be reticent. Some secondary school teachers reported that:

They [the students] are unwilling to speak in English for fear that they make silly mistakes in front of the brighter students.

[T]here are reasons why the students don't respond to my question. It may be that they don't know the answer to the question, or they know the answer but they don't want to give [the] answer because it is so simple or complicated that they are afraid to be laughed at ... (p. 150, Tsui's emphasis)

It seems, from my conversation with the student (after Observation 31, Site 2), that the students' timid behaviour is not restricted to the use of English language, but that she has similar lack of confidence with Putonghua.

Humble Responses

In the research course, I encountered some humble responses from the students.

This was a coursebook lesson. The students were doing a written exercise. The student in the first row consulted her neighbour about the exercise. Her neighbour looked at her exercise book for a while and then she started explaining. The student listened and nodded her head. The student with a smile, said: 'Thank you. [...].' I asked the two students what had happened. The student said: 'I don't understand how to do this [pointing to one of the sentences] and she has explained it to me.' I praised the student being consulted that her English must be good. Her neighbour added: 'She's very clever...and hardworking.' The student replied: 'I'm very foolish.' I asked her why she said she was foolish. The student said: 'My mum very often says so.' (Student conversation after Observation 4, Site 6)

In this situation, a student had helped another student solve a problem. When I praised her good work, her response was, to my surprise, 'I'm very foolish.' Chinese people believe that the student's response was humble and polite. In Chinese tradition, education has long been highly regarded and parents commonly set high standards on students' academic achievements, which could bring honor to the families. As a result, children tend to work under great pressure and to work harder. Parents rarely show their satisfaction with their children's work and rarely praise or compliment them. In a Hong Kong-based survey, over a quarter of the 2000 11-12-year-old respondents (*Singtao Daily*: 3 January 2000) feel that they are 'unintelligent'. The survey also showed that over half reported that they are 'worthless' and 'lacking self-confidence', 45% that they have 'no sense of achievement' and 30% 'unhappy'. When explaining his masterpiece Pyramid, Maslow (1968) highlights the

significance of meeting the needs of security, belonging and self-esteem. The fulfilment of these needs is seen as the prerequisite of realising the need for self-actualisation. Rogers (cited by De Andres, 1999) views the need for being respected as the most powerful drive behind human behaviour. Coopersmith (cited by De Andres, 1999) raises the point that children's self-esteem is decided to a large extent by the life experiences, by the way the 'significant others', e.g. teachers, parents, see the children. Chinese parents' practice has given children an impression that they are not hard-working enough. Their confidence and self-esteem are affected.

Little Voice Episode

The Little Voice episode occurred in an Intensive Reading lesson. In this school, a number of simplified readers are chosen for class discussion and students are usually asked to read certain pages beforehand as preparation. The Reader used was *Day without Katie*. This was my fifth visit to the class (Site 6). The lesson, which lasted for 70 minutes, was videotaped and transcribed by the researcher. Most of the students as shown in the following excerpt replied to the teacher's questions in a little voice.

- T²: [...] How is John described here, S10?
S10: [unintelligible]
T: S10, a bit louder.
S10: He walked slowly.
T: He walked slowly. He walked slowly. Under what situation, he walked slowly. Where is he going to? ... From where to where? ... Can you guess where he is going to and from where? .. He was on his way home from work. ... Where is he going to and from where?

² "T" denotes Teacher. "S10" refers to Student 10. [unintel] means the voice was unable to be recorded.

"=" indicates that the utterances overlap. "{ }" refers to contextual notes

S11: From somewhere to New York. =
= T: Speak louder!
S11: I don't know. =
= S12: Going to New York?
S13: [unintelligible]
T: {The teacher speaks to S13.} I can't hear you. Speak louder!
What has he [John] just finished, S13?
S13: Work.

In this short episode, the students spoke quietly and the teacher needed to ask the students to repeat loudly. In Tsui's (1996) study, when the students are "called upon by the teacher to answer a question, they speak in a very soft voice, which is barely audible to the teacher and not at all audible to the whole class" (p. 150). It was reported in her paper that in a 15-minute segment, the teacher asked 20 questions, with 10 students "whispering the answer" (p. 150).

Coopersmith, one of the first researchers investigating self-esteem, discovered that children who are reluctant to express their opinions are likely to have low self-esteem. According to Coopersmith, self-esteem can be defined as:

The evaluation which the individual makes and customarily maintains with regard to himself; it expresses an attitude of approval or disapproval, and indicates the extent to which an individual believes himself to be capable, significant, successful and worthy. In short, self-esteem is a personal judgment of worthiness that is expressed in the attitudes that the individual holds towards himself (cited by De Andres, 1999).

In the above episode and other data of my study (Tong, 2002, p. 221), most of the teacher's questions were based on the Reader (*Day without Katie*). In the Little Voice case, the students responded to the teacher's questions, but very softly, demonstrating their lack of confidence.

Retracting an Answer

Another kind of student behaviour that mirrors their confidence level is retracting an answer. In the Little Voice episode, S11 attempted to answer the teacher's question. The teacher asked S11 to repeat but S11's response was 'I don't know.' I interpret the student's reaction to mean that she was not confident about her answer and she retracted her attempt by saying 'I don't know.'

I recorded a similar scenario in a course-book lesson.

The teacher began the lesson by revising the 'if' pattern... The class was discussing the use of 'unless'. The teacher asked the students to complete a writing exercise in the coursebook. The exercise was to create several sentences using 'unless'. [...] After this, the teacher asked the students to write their sentences on the blackboard. [...] One student wrote: 'Unless you with me, you will lose our friendship.' [sic] The teacher asked her: 'Tell us the meaning of your sentence.' Once the student heard this, she immediately waved her hands and said: 'No, no...' The teacher said: 'I don't understand the meaning only.' The student continued to wave her hands and said: 'No, no...I don't know. Please erase the sentence for me.' The teacher attempted to explain again. Still, the student insisted: 'No, I don't know the meaning of the sentence.' The student then stood up, walked to the blackboard and erased the sentence. (Observation 27, Site 3)

In this excerpt, the student had written her sentence on the blackboard and the teacher sought clarification. In response, the student refused to elaborate and then erased the sentence on the board. Presumably the student interpreted the teacher's clarification as a query. The student chose to retract her attempt by erasing the sentence from the board. This retracting an answer would be a sign of a low level of confidence.

SUGGESTIONS

Williams and Burden (1997) suggest that a positive self-image, self-esteem

and self-confidence among the learners should be encouraged. I believe teachers, as students' significant others, have a strong role to play in enhancing students' confidence. It was observed in this study that the format of teacher-led whole class discussion, in which teachers asked and students responded, had been adopted. Based on the above discussion, I propose four pedagogical strategies for teacher consideration.

Firstly, I suggest that a wider range of question types could be asked. As indicated notably in the Little Voice episode, most of the questions being asked were display questions, which get students to display knowledge. In order to provide an enriched language environment for the students to communicate their ideas and express their feelings, teachers might consider that open-ended / referential questions should be asked as an alternative. For instance, in one of the classes, the teacher asked the students to describe their idol pop singers. The students could then choose to describe, e.g. the appearance, the favourite hits or the albums of the singers. This activity attracted a lot of interactions among the students (Tong, 2002).

Secondly, I propose that students' collaboration could be encouraged. Although the students involved in the above episodes were hesitant about speaking up, they tended to be more willing to confirm their answers and ideas with other classmates, or talk among themselves. I view this kind of peer collaboration as a resource among students. This could supply students with a chance to show mutual support and assurance. It was reported that students become more confident and willing to express themselves after they sought support from their peers. Some teachers have allowed 'students to check their answers with their peers before offering them to the whole class' feedback:

Usually students tend to be more confident to speak up if they have done some discussion with their peers.

Some not-so-confident pupils were more willing and more confident to give their ideas. It might be because the pupils gained more confidence after discussing with their classmates and they felt less [threatened] ... (Tsui, 1996, p. 162)

Teachers can consider allowing students to compare notes before they offer their responses, so as to boost the students' confidence.

Thirdly, I suggest that teachers could be more patient and tolerant about hesitant responses to their questions or requests. The data in this paper show while some of the students are unwilling to provide the answers in the first instance, once they received teacher's or classmates' confirmation, they were capable of producing answers. If practical, after the teacher has asked a question, students could be given more time to think and organise. This amount of time would be particularly valuable for those who are junior and whose language proficiency is inadequate. Although I recognise that the syllabus could sometimes be very crammed, it is important to note that teachers' patience might provide students with space to think and, ultimately, grow.

Fourthly and related to the previous suggestion, teachers can be more sensitive in setting appropriate standards or expectations upon students' classroom performance. Some of the students in this study show extreme sensitivity about teachers' queries or feedback. It is also recognised that getting appreciation from others is treated as a backbone of personality growth. I suggest that teachers should handle students' responses to their questions with great care, e.g. responding in an encouraging tone, and giving positive feedback. That is, instead of rejecting the students' replies directly, teachers could use such alternative expressions as 'Try it again' or 'Getting closer this time'.

Although the effectiveness of the above suggestions will need to be tested out by further research, the goal of these four suggestions is to build a classroom of "care, respect and mutual support" (De Andres, 1999, p. 100).

CONCLUSION

This paper illustrates the relationship between students' confidence and their classroom responses as well as behaviour, including remaining silent,

confirming answers with classmates or teachers, speaking inaudibly and retracting answers. It seems that in most of the cases, students knew the answers. Some volunteered but many were unsure about the correctness of the answers. The students developed several strategies to deal with the lack of confidence. When they were asked to read aloud a paragraph, there was no volunteer. When the teacher asked if the students had any question about vocabulary, though some of the students talked among themselves, none asked in public. Indeed, it was found that the students tend to be more willing to share their answers with their classmates than to tell the whole class directly. Humility after praise or compliments might be attributed to teachers' or parents' high expectations. As shown in the Little Voice episode, some students volunteered the answers but in a soft voice because they apparently lack confidence. Students were extremely sensitive about teachers' queries and in some cases the students retracted their attempts, e.g. by saying 'I don't know'.

The students' lack of confidence could be attributed to national cultural influences but there are other factors, such as language proficiency, types of question teachers ask, previous learning experience, at home or at school. Holliday (in press) opines that certain types of established ideologies or cultural heritage may be present in a society, 'which has been institutionalized in many aspects of life. This does not mean that everyone has to be bound by it or to be bound by it in the same way' (Chapter 5). Teachers of English need to understand their students as part of a cultural entity, and equally significantly, when developing teaching and learning activities, they should treat them as individuals who have different language needs and abilities and levels of confidence.

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