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CREATING A SAFE SPEAKING ENVIRONMENT AND GIVING FEEDBACK TO LANGUAGE LEARNERS

Agadzhanova Radmila,
Senior Lecturer of the Department of Pedagogy, Foreign Philology and Translation
Simon Kuznets Kharkiv National University of Economics

Language educators are often faced with a paradox: students tend to measure their own competence in English through their ability to speak it. Yet, creating environments that encourage students to speak is cited by practitioners around the world as one of the biggest challenges in this field. Reasons for this vary, from the insecurities that students have about speaking to the more general doubts of teachers, administrators, parents or the students themselves as to whether time dedicated to speaking is time well spent.

This article offers a brief overview of current research into language learning and teaching and shows that, although these concerns are entirely legitimate and require close attention, many can be addressed by a judicial and skilful application of pedagogical principles for creating a 'safe speaking environment'. By that we mean an environment in which time for speaking is valued not simply as time for extra practice of previously learned material but as time in which new learning opportunities come to life [1].

Many, if not most, English language teachers are sympathetic to the principles of communicative language teaching, and their teaching includes activities that could be described as 'communicative'. Despite the fact that there are many different interpretations of the term 'communicative approach', there is general agreement that learners will benefit from participating in fluency-based, meaningful, communicative speaking activities. Researchers do not agree on the precise mechanisms through which communicative competence develops in communicative speaking tasks, but most conclude that such tasks are necessary for the development of automatized language knowledge, or spoken fluency [2].

It is worth noting that a safe speaking environment also means a space that treats the people who inhabit it as a cherished resource. It engages students' identities, future visions and hopes through the design of immersive tasks; it is responsive to students' agency by honouring topics that are close to their worlds; and it takes seriously the human relationships that are central to all communication. And finally, a safe speaking environment is one where feedback whether focused on specific linguistic features or on meaning is given in the service of students' communicative accomplishments.

There is widespread agreement among students, language educators and researchers about the importance of interesting and motivating tasks in the language curriculum. Flow theory, first introduced by Csikszentmihályi and later adopted for language education contexts, has often been used as a guiding framework for understanding what makes tasks motivating. Flow refers to the kinds of immersive experiences where people are so absorbed in whatever they are doing that they become unaware of what is going on around them. It is when people are in the 'flow' that they

are thought to perform at their best, which is why researchers and language educators have become interested in the application of flow theory to the design of immersive language learning tasks. The task features that have been identified as supporting such experiences include:

• optimal challenge, achieved by balancing the level of difficulty and the students' current language skills;

• a focus on performing and accomplishing the task rather than on practising language;

• relevance to students' interests;

• students' sense of control over the task processes and outcomes [1].

To appreciate more fully the role that immersive speaking tasks play in the design of a 'safe speaking environment', therefore, it may be helpful to think of them less in terms of their features and types and more in terms of their capacity to generate immersive conversations. By that we mean conversations which students will want to join – not simply because they need to practise the language but because they feel they have something important to say. More specifically, these are conversations that enable students to use language to relate to one another through shared challenge, laughter, wonder, creativity, but also in discussing injustices and misconceptions that affect them in their worlds outside the classroom.

Engaging students in speaking tasks means treating students as language users rather than merely as language learners. As research investigating the use of L2 in various communication settings around the world has shown, it is when students are enabled to bring their personal identities, histories, future visions and pains into the classroom that a space for immersion in authentic conversations emerges. Creating such spaces in the classroom requires a conscious effort on the part of language educators to re-envision well-known types of language tasks that already exist in their repertoires can be harnessed to generate immersive conversations – that is, to engage with students as language users and meaning makers.

Many authors have concluded that the types of tasks which have the potential to become immersive include, among others:

• solving a problem;

• discussing an issue;

• narrating a story;

• sharing opinions and experiences;

• making things [1].

Planning such tasks requires a careful consideration of topics, task types, and linguistic goals. But in order to turn these tasks' potential into an immersive reality for the students, something else is also needed: the teacher's reflection on the broader educational purposes of engaging students as persons. Below, two methods are offered as a guiding framework.

In order for tasks to engage language learners in authentic conversations, they need to reflect students' current identities as people and not just language learners. These, however, are often difficult to guess at beyond a superficial level without the teacher's deeper understanding of who the people in the classroom are and what they genuinely

care about. One of the overarching purposes that an immersive language task can serve, therefore, is to facilitate such an understanding.

Most language learning tasks that satisfy the flow criteria mentioned above have the potential to shed light on the students' real lives if we choose to exploit it. Some can be as simple as asking students to share stories with each other so as to generate rich immersive conversations. Others have the potential to be expanded into bigger questions. One possible task is to ask students to think of an interesting proverb in other languages they know, teach it to their peers, translate it collaboratively into English, find equivalents in English as well as in students' other home languages and notice how history and culture can shape how we speak, how we see and how we live. Other tasks will encourage students' engagement over a longer period of time. These include creating various types of individual or group narrative, such as autobiographies told in 'chapters' where each chapter represents a significant milestone in the student's life. Or students may be asked to document their experiences of using L2 through written reflections, audio diaries, or visual narratives and share these in various discussion tasks in the classroom. All these tasks require careful planning. However, treating them as opportunities to engage students' identities as people and not just language learners can enhance their potential to generate immersive conversations.

The second method which can be adopted to transform a language task into an immersive one is placing emphasis on engaging students' visions as future L2 speakers. It is obvious that students' vision of themselves as competent L2 users is closely connected to their motivation to learn and speaking in the classroom can help access such visions. Tasks designed with this in mind therefore stand a good chance of generating immersive conversations. All immersive task types discussed previously, such as sharing experiences, problem solving or making things, lend themselves to this educational purpose. More specific templates which link these types with the future vision idea include:

• Creating vision boards of future L2 selves. Students are asked to think about their future vision and how their competence as L2 speakers features in it. Using relevant resources, such as materials related to their jobs, images in travel/lifestyle magazines, newspapers or brochures, they design and then discuss with others a visual display of their vision.

• Sharing 'future histories'. Students are asked to share with others their future plans as if they have already experienced the outcomes (i.e. they have to use the present/past tense to describe their projected experiences).

• Making role models of successful L2 learners a central feature of tasks. Students are asked to gather stories of successful L2 speakers because these can often inspire students' own future vision. The findings can be used as part of a more specific task aim (e.g. come up with advice on how to overcome speaking anxiety, how to practise speaking if opportunities are rare, etc.) [1].

It should be noted that in any typical language learning course students are presented with a variety of opportunities to speak. Teachers often divide these opportunities into two broad categories: (1) activities that are intended to develop accuracy (i.e. where the primary focus is on accurate production of language features, such as grammar, vocabulary or pronunciation), and (2) activities that are intended to

develop fluency (i.e. where the primary focus is on communicating meanings to another person, and not on the accurate production of language forms). This article focuses on feedback in the second type of activity, examples of which include discussions, debates, presentations, role plays, and problem-solving tasks. In each of these activities, there will be:

• some sort of outcome that is non-linguistic (e.g. reaching a joint decision);

• some interaction between learners.

Learning outcomes for such activities cannot be reliably predicted in advance, but the potential benefits include:

• gains in self-confidence and motivation;

• gains in automatized language production;

• opportunities to experiment with the full range of linguistic resources at the learners' disposal (i.e. develop more complex language);

• opportunities to learn from the language of other learners;

• opportunities to obtain feedback from other learners through the processes of clarification, rephrasing and confirmation, which will drive language acquisition.

From the list of potential learning benefits, it can be seen that fluency-based activities are concerned with more than just developing fluency. Researchers have found that fluency-based activities can lead to greater accuracy and complexity [3]. The challenge, for teachers, is to ensure that the conditions under which communicative speaking activities take place allow for these benefits to be realised. At the very least, it is important that students should (1) speak a lot, and (2) push themselves to use language at the upper range of their ability level. One of the conditions that teachers control – feedback – can impact on these potential benefits.

Feedback is any kind of information that learners receive about their performance. This can be corrective feedback which focuses a learner's attention on errors, or it can be non-corrective, in the form of praise or encouragement, for example. However, the feedback can also be about the performance of peers. In fact, some learners benefit more from hearing this kind of feedback than feedback which concerns them more directly. It is also useful to bear in mind that feedback does not only go to the learner; it can also go to the teacher. A student's performance in a communicative speaking task is a rich source of information about the teacher's teaching. In a fluency-based task, it is often the things that students did not say that provide the richest feedback to teachers. It is these gaps that can suggest the features of language that a teacher may wish to provide feedback on, especially in delayed feedback.

It is common for teachers to delay all or most feedback until the end of a fluency-based activity, and such an approach is often supported by the advice in the guides for teachers that accompany coursebooks. According to a frequent procedure of delayed feedback, teachers keep a note of language items which they wish to focus on while the students are speaking. They later select from this record a limited number of items. They write these on the board or read them aloud and invite students to identify and correct problems. They are more likely to discuss the problems in open class than to direct questions at an individual student. Teachers may choose to give positive, non-corrective feedback on the content of the students' discussion, as well as highlighting examples of accurate and appropriate language use, before focusing on errors. As an

alternative to this approach, audio or video recordings are made, and these are used as the basis for later feedback. Teachers may also provide feedback sheets to individual students.

Despite the widespread use of delayed feedback, there has, until recently, been little research that has investigated its effectiveness. For the time being, there is simply not enough evidence to claim that either delayed or immediate feedback is more effective than the other [3].

It is a matter of common knowledge that speaking in another language, especially for lower-level learners, is stressful, putting them under intense pressure. In addition to the demands of finding things to say and finding ways of saying them in comprehensible English in real time with limited resources, students must deal with the fact that they must do this in public, in front of others (peers or teachers) who may be judging how well they perform. The potential for debilitating anxiety about loss of face can be huge, especially for shy learners. Corrective feedback from the teacher that highlights their mistakes can make things worse. In the most extreme cases, students may say nothing at all. More often, they may adopt a strategy of limited participation: the less they say, the fewer mistakes they will make. When this happens, the potential learning benefits can clearly not be realised. Most teachers are well aware of such dangers and have experience in the classroom of fluency-based activities where students were reluctant to speak. In response, teachers adopt a variety of strategies to avoid generating additional anxiety or, at least, to minimize its impact. Let us consider a number of strategies, which may be used individually or in combination.

1. Using praise. Praising students for good performance is believed to increase motivation and to foster positive attitudes to learning. Singling out an individual student for praise in front of the whole class may not be welcomed by the student concerned. Catching a student for a few positive words after class may be a better strategy.

2. Highlighting accurate and appropriate language use, rather than indicating errors. In general educational contexts, it has been found that feedback on correct responses is more effective than feedback on incorrect responses. Confirming that a student has produced accurate and appropriate language in a particular instance (e.g. avoiding a very common mistake) is likely to benefit both the individual student and others in the class, who will have their attention drawn to the language item in question.

3. Planning the monitoring of speaking activities. It is not easy to monitor group-speaking activities and it is easy to focus attention on errors. Teachers should decide, in advance of the activity, that for some groups they will focus on the content and for others they will focus on examples of accurate or appropriate language use.

4. Adopting a supportive manner. The potential for anxiety will be reduced if teachers maintain a tactful, supportive and sensitive manner in any intervention during or after a speaking activity. With some classes and some individuals, it may be worth devoting some time to ensuring that students understand the purpose of corrective feedback if this lowers their anxiety levels. Teachers should always try to model good listening skills, including appropriate body language, nods, gestures and confirming expressions.

5. Encouraging positive feedback from peers. At the end of a pair or group work activity, students can be asked to tell their peers one or more things that they did well.

6. Showing interest in the content of what students have said. If students are to focus primarily on communicating their ideas (rather than on accuracy), teachers will need to show interest in and respond to the ideas they have expressed. Comments such as 'That was an original idea', 'I'd never thought of that' or 'X was saying something interesting about Y, but I didn't catch all of it – could you tell us again?' (so long as they are genuine) can act as positive reinforcement to the focus on the content of the speaking activity [3].

It is clear that a fluency-based task is an opportunity for learners to participate in extended speaking, using the full range of their linguistic resources and experimenting with new language. Although the focus of these tasks should be on communication, learners will make language errors and teachers need to decide how to handle them. However, although most learners want to be corrected, teachers need to handle feedback sensitively so as not to affect students' willingness to speak.

In conclusion, it is necessary to emphasize that an environment in which students will feel safe to speak is vital for supporting students' language learning. Creating such an environment, however, appears to be a rather complex task, requiring constant juggling of multiple elements, including time, tasks, topics, peer relationships and feedback. In many ways, however, the task is also a most joyful one, for it goes far beyond creating conditions for a mere exchange of information in order to rehearse specific language features. Creating a safe speaking environment allows teachers to forge spaces – no matter how limited these may be within the countless constraints that most language educators face – which open up opportunities for students to lose themselves in the conversations that matter to them and that are consequential to their relationships with others and with the world around them. It takes time, endless patience and careful observation to transform possibilities that classroom talk offers into the actual benefits for students' language learning. But just like with speaking, this, too, is time well spent.

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