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Psychological Considerations in Teaching

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While educators give a lot of thought to the methodology they will use in their classroom while conducting their classes, they tend to focus on activities rather than psychological considerations regarding the students. One factor that strongly affects students' in-class performance and foreign language (FL) learning is anxiety. Levine (2003) found that students with lower grade expectations had greater anxiety, which led to less target language (TL) use. Ganschow et al. (1994) confirmed that, while approximately 25 percent of high anxiety students are successful FL learners, the majority of high anxiety students tend to exhibit poorer language skills and FL aptitude. Hewitt and Stephenson (2012) also found that higher anxiety had a negative effect on oral accomplishment: the more anxious students were, the poorer the quality of their English, and MacIntyre (2011) concurred that anxiety has a significant effect on both language learning and communication. Liu and Jackson (2008) found that Chinese students of English were apprehensive about public speaking, feared being negatively evaluated on their speaking, and that their unwillingness to communicate in the FL correlated significantly with their FL anxiety. Horwitz (2000) refuted claims that anxiety is a result of poor FL performance rather than a cause and stated that the idea that anxiety can interfere with performance and learning is one of the most accepted phenomena in psychology and education.

All of this has direct implications on the classroom and indicates the challenge we face in motivating our students, and lower ability level students in particular, to choose to participate in class. MacIntyre (2007) stressed the importance of adapting methodologies to focus on the process of how students choose

whether to initiate or avoid SL communication, and Young (1991) discussed the importance of creating a low-anxiety classroom environment. This might be particularly difficult in Asian classrooms. Japanese students are notoriously risk averse, and although FL students everywhere often cite having to speak in front of the class as the most anxiety-provoking aspect of FL classes, Japanese students can be particularly reluctant to volunteer to speak. Analyzing the psychological ramifications of classroom activities and processes can help us turn speaking in class from a punishment into a reward. Consequently, I have developed a number of activities incorporating psychological considerations.

Everyone Stand/Speak to Sit

When reviewing materials, or when I want students to volunteer to ask or answer questions, I often have everyone stand. Students are told to raise their hands to either ask or answer a question. Once they do either, they can sit down, but the answer must appropriately respond to the question asked. This has a number of benefits.

First, it is sound practice from the theoretical viewpoint of being student centered: all the instructor does is call on students and judge the acceptability (grammaticality, content, suitability) of the utterances. The students do all the talking. They generate the ideas and content for the questions. In addition, they have to interact with each other, i.e., they have to listen carefully to the question in order to be able to answer correctly. It can add a communicative content to the activity that is sometimes missing in pair work activities.

Next, this also introduces, perhaps surprisingly since I have enumerated the problems associated with anxiety, facilitative anxiety, which is slight pressure that purportedly improves performance. Since students are not permitted to repeat questions, they

must pay attention to what questions have been asked, and the longer they wait, the harder it is to think of new questions.

To counteract any negative consequences this pressure might have on students, they should be explicitly taught strategies to deal with the situation. For example, the sooner they speak, the more possible questions they have to choose from; volunteering sooner provides more opportunities.

This method also helps students develop communication strategies. They must decide whether, given the flow of the activity, it is easier to ask or answer a question. Also, by following the flow of the questions and answers, they can tell when the speaker is about to finish, so they can raise their hand and gain the floor (turn-taking skills). Students can also express their creativity in the questions they ask. They can ask humorous questions, and they can ask short or more advanced questions based upon their own language confidence, all of which are rewarded equally by being able to sit down.

The main value in this type of activity, though, is that it turns volunteering to speak in front of the class into a reward rather than a punishment. Rather than the students feeling aggrieved by being singled out by the instructor to speak, they are self-selecting. If the activity is conducted quickly, it develops a momentum with students wanting to quickly participate. Many times, the least interested students suddenly are clamoring to speak first so they can sit down. Furthermore, since numerous students are volunteering at the same time, instructors can discreetly use the speaker selection process to encourage students they feel could particularly benefit from successful participation in a timely manner.

Caution

The first time I do this, I go through the entire class just to give them the idea they will eventually have to participate. After that, though, I only occasionally continue until everyone has spoken, instead finishing after varying percentages of students have participated. Variable-ratio reinforcement schedules produce a high rate of responding; students are never sure how long the activity will continue, so reluctant students have to weigh whether they can safely hang back and hope to outlast the activity against the possibility that they will end up standing for a long time and become increasingly visible to the rest of the class. In addition, this process can become time consuming and tedious in a large class if everyone speaks every time. If the process drags out and takes too long, the momentum is lost, and it starts to lose the ability to excite and motivate students to participate. The psychological benefit of the activity is lost.

Correcting Assignments

Correcting assignments in class can be very anxiety inducing for students. Not only are they being singled out by the instructor to speak before the class with everyone watching them, there is the real chance the instructor will tell them directly that they are wrong. This is problematic for a couple of reasons. First, in Japanese communication style in Japanese, people do not like saying no directly. To be directly told they have the wrong answer can be embarrassing for students. Take the following situation:

> Instructor: Kenji, what's the answer to question 1?
>
> Kenji: True.
>
> Instructor: No, I'm afraid not.

Not only is Kenji embarrassed, but who is taking all the responsibility for answering the question? Obviously, it is the instructor. If the instructor continues, "Yumiko, what do you think?" even if Yumiko has true, the instructor did not like that answer, so she will probably answer false.

Instead, when I correct such exercises, I call on students for the answers and write whatever they say on the board without comment. The first time I do so, I see many students changing their answers to match what the instructor wrote, assuming they have the wrong answer. After the questions are all answered, though, I ask if anyone has different answers. I write any different answers offered on the board without comment. Then, when everyone is finished, I go over all the questions and confirm the

correct answers with the information that explains why questions are true or false.

There are a number of psychological reasons for doing it this way. First, it removes the correction from the student who made the mistake. Rather than a student being directly corrected by the instructor, one of two answers on the board is crossed out. By that time, the direct connection to whomever gave the answer has been broken, and the students have greater anonymity for wrong answers. With less fear of being singled out, they have greater willingness to answer.

Next, responsibility for the correction is being removed from the instructor to classmates. The instructor does not indicate the wrong answers initially; students are increasingly trained to speak up and initiate responses. Even if they make an incorrect correction, they also are not directly contradicted. This helps accustom students to volunteering, initiating communication rather than just responding to direct questions, and it provides a less threatening classroom environment where anxiety is reduced.

"Voting" in Class

A variation on the "everyone stand up" tactic is useful when students are reluctant to commit to an answer in cases such as T/F or multiple-choice questions. Some textbook questions are poorly written or are particularly difficult, and many students have each of the answers. If I ask, "How many think the answer is T? How many think it's F?" and only a few of the students raise their hands, I have everyone stand. I then tell everyone who thinks the answer is T to sit down and then those who think it is F to sit down. Usually, everyone will sit down, although some do so hesitatingly. I then say, "Good. Everyone voted that time." This is a lighthearted way to encourage everyone to make a decision. Even if they are afraid of being wrong and will not risk raising their hand, even students with no clue or who did not answer the question will usually sit down for one of the choices; it is a group action. I want to convince them that communication is the goal, rather than perfection.

This is particularly useful for poorly written questions where the answer is ambiguous: they are all right! The point is, though, that I don't care if they have the right answer to the question or not – I just want them to commit to an answer. There is no punishment, and since everyone is participating, they are not singled out (unless they get embarrassed by being the lone person standing there not knowing what to do, which usually only happens once, in which case I just pause for a few seconds and they usually sit down). If they are unwilling to take a risk and say true or false, they are unlikely to be able to speak up in public or participate in conversations. This has the further advantage of waking everyone up and getting them to pay attention. A little exercise is good for the blood flow, and for those not paying attention, it focuses their attention on what the question is.

Pairwork

Certainly everyone knows the rationale for using pair work in class. Besides the obvious benefit of greatly increasing the amount of time students spend speaking in class, though, having students work in pairs also has psychological benefits. When answering questions in pairs, they have a chance practice their answers. They can receive feedback from their partner about their vocabulary and grammar, which can help develop increased confidence to give their answers in front of the whole class. In addition, they can consider the content of their answers before having to perform in front of everyone. The added advantage for more open-ended questions is that they have the opportunity to think of more answers and more details. The depth and breadth of answers tends to expand when students have a chance to try them out on a partner first. By increasing the chances of a successful response, we reduce anxiety and encourage the will to respond.

Conclusion

When the instructor calls on only a few students to speak in class, there is much more pressure on the few who are chosen. The speaker sticks out, feels vulnerable, and anxiety rises. If everyone is speaking a lot in pairs, though, speaking and listening to other students in class is not unusual, and there is less of a spotlight when a sole student speaks.

If we can normalize the practice of speaking in class, if we can accustom students not only to speaking willingly but also to initiating speech, if we can maximize their chances of success and reduce any perceived negative results for mistakes, we can reduce the anxiety that using the TL produces. In the process, we can psychologically empower our students to take an active role in class, to gain confidence in using the FL, and to increase their fluency in it.

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