Storytelling in the EFL Speaking Classroom

Xu Jianing
Suzhou Industrial Park Institute of Vocational Technology (Jiangsu Province, China)
jianing61 {at} yahoo.com.cn

Introduction

As English becomes increasingly important in various fields such as business, finance, industry and education, most Chinese students hope they can speak English fluently. However, from my observations and many EFL teachers' descriptions of their oral English classrooms, a considerable number of students are not responding actively in speaking exercises. How to motivate the students in EFL speaking classrooms has long been our concern. First of all, it is necessary to find out the main factors affecting their participation.

What Factors Are Discouraging the Students?

The Students Are Nervous and Afraid of Making Mistakes.

In China, to get high scores in the Higher Education Exam is nearly the only goal of the high school students. For some reason, there is no oral English test in the Higher Education Exam; thus speaking skills are often neglected. More over, since there are usually over 50 students in each class, the students have little chance to practice speaking in class. This leads to the result that the speaking skills of most students are comparatively lower than other skills such as listening, reading and grammar.

Secondly, the fear of "losing face" prevents the students from speaking English (Zhu, 2003). Face is still of great importance to most Chinese. On the one hand, it motivates people to work hard to win face; on the other, people tend to conceal their mistakes and weaknesses for fear of losing face. For many English learners, they believe if they make mistakes or fail to find suitable words to express themselves, they will lose face. To protect themselves from being laughed at, they are reluctant to speak English. So there is the vicious circle: the less they speak, the less they improve their speaking skills, and the more they are afraid of speaking.

The Topics Are Not Interesting.

The dominating oral English teaching materials in China focus on situational or/and communicative function (Chen 2004), aiming to enable students to cope, in the target language, with typical situations in school and work environments as well as in ordinary life. When "practical" is the prime principle, what the learners do most in the speaking classroom is to make dialogues according to the given situations or topics. However, students often complain that they have been repeatedly asked to introduce their families or schools; talk about their hobbies or majors; make dialogues on topics such as job interviews, meeting visitors or shopping. These "practical" topics and situations provide little space for the students to imagine and create; therefore, dialogues on these situational topics are hard to develop in depth and width. People tend to lose interest in what they learn if they find they make little progress.

Another problem with this kind of topic-based speaking training is you can't expect all the listeners to be interested in your hobby or major. Moreover, the other students in the classroom are talking about similar things, which could hardly offer anything new to each other. Consequently, the audiences in the speaking classroom are not very attentive and the speakers just make a perfunctory effort instead of getting involved, not even to mention enjoying it. To many of them, the job is just a job.

The Classroom Atmosphere Is Not Encouraging.

The effect of classroom atmosphere on language learning, especially an oral class, is obvious and immediate. A free and light-hearted atmosphere promotes communications, while a nervous and stiff atmosphere builds invisible obstacles in communications. Dialogues about daily life and routine work lack variation, do not sound enchanting, and are unlikely to create an animated classroom atmosphere.

Feedback of the Listeners Is Not Supportive.

According to my observations in speaking classes, apart from the factors mentioned above, the listeners' feedback also has a strong influence on the performance of the speakers. Very often, at the beginning of the performance, the speakers are confident and active when doing some dialogues or role play exercises. However, when the audience loses interest in the speakers, begin to talk to each other or just do whatever else instead of listening attentatively to the speakers, the speakers tend to, consciously or unconsciously, speed up or cut down their words, trying to flee back to their own seats as quickly as they can (students are often asked to present in the front of the classroom and face the class in order to build better communications since there are usually 40 to 50 students in each class). Even the slightest indifference or impatience indicated by the audience can be immediately felt by the speakers, which, in turn, greatly inhibits their passion to communicate. Of course, teachers can force the audiences to listen to the speakers but it is of no use blaming them. The most effective way is to offer the audiences something different and interesting!

Why Stories?

As we all know, stories have always played a significant role in children's growth. Stories not only help in stimulating children's imagination and understanding of the world, but also in developing children's language ability and appreciating literature (Aiex, 1988; Cooper, 1989; Koki, 1998; Zobairi & Gulley, 1989). It is just as Wright wrote, "Stories which rely so much on words, offer a major and constant source of language experience for children" (Wright, 1995).

The primary reason to recommend storytelling in the EFL speaking classroom is that stories are motivating and immensely interesting, can best attract listeners and promote communication. "The excitement and drama of storytelling provide a context that holds students' attention." (Cooter, 1991; Bla, 1998).

Secondly, stories are an enormous language treasure. For hundreds of years, thousands of stories have been created and passed down. Many old stories are regarded as the models of language and treasures of the culture, from which learners at various language levels and age groups can find suitable stories to read and tell. It would be a waste and pity if they are neglected in the course of EFL/ESL. In addition, stories are easily accessible; storybooks can be found in bookstores and borrowed from libraries or friends. Today, the most convenient and quickest way to find stories is from the Internet. "Storytelling …… costs nothing, is enjoyable, and can be used anywhere and at any time" (Zabel, 1991).

Thirdly, the lively atmosphere and real life environment created by stories encourages the students to talk and discuss with each other. When telling and listening to a story, the learners will easily be plunged into the plots and the scene and forget about themselves, which will, to a great degree, relieve their nervousness. Colon-vila (1997) also commented that storytelling helps EFL learners become more self-confident to express themselves spontaneously and creatively. However, teachers have not been zealous to use it in the classroom (Alvey, 1977).

Some students say that they have no time to meet with their partners and practice dialogues when they fail to do it well. Though sometimes it is just an excuse, nevertheless, storytelling helps solve the problem: partners are not indispensable to practice storytelling though it is better to have an audience.

To Whom to Use Stories?

Stories are often connected with children. In fact, they are not only loyal listeners; they also like to tell stories. The language classroom is just the place for children to share stories and show their language abilities. In China, there are various kinds of storytelling competitions in kindergartens and schools, attracting many children to participate. As long as the teacher gives proper instruction, children would be very pleased to learn storytelling in English. Besides, many stories can be adopted into

short plays and children enjoy performing.

It should also be pointed out that stories are not only for children. There are many stories for EFL learners of different levels and ages. I have tried using stories in college English classrooms and found that even the poorest storyteller can be the center of attention.

How to Use Stories?

The following are just a few examples of using stories in the EFL speaking classroom arranged in the order of difficulty. At first, if the students are not confident in their speaking skills, it is recommended that the students be given enough time to prepare. As the students build their confidence and the classroom language environment becomes more free and active, the teacher could gradually increase the difficulty and make the game more versatile. To motivate and encourage the students, points and prizes are granted to good tellers and groups each time.

Warming Up

The students listen to some stories downloaded from the Internet and repeat as they listen. This gives them an opportunity to improve their pronunciation, stress and intonation. They are offered three stories each time and required to practice the one they like best. A competition is held every two weeks. When every student has learned to tell three to five stories naturally and expressively, they feel much more confident in telling stories in English than before.

Activity 1

Divide the students into groups and each group prepares a story. Each member of the group tells two to three sentences and the next one continues until the end of the story. The length of the story could gradually increase from two or three minutes to four or five minutes. Before the lesson, the students could divide their tasks in advance and practice their own parts. They could also be given a few minutes to practice in class the whole story if necessary. The teacher moves among the groups and chooses two or three groups to present their stories before the class. Because the students have enough time to prepare and they are working together, this helps them build confidence and create a lively and brisk atmosphere.

Activity 2

Ask each student to prepare a story (about two minutes long) in advance. Divide the students into groups with four to five members in each group and ask them to tell his/her story in the group. The best storytellers in each group win ten points and compete for the best storyteller of the class. The winner wins another ten points for each member of his/her group and the second best wins eight points and so on. Since the performance of each representative is connected to the score of everyone, the students will be greatly involved in the whole process and listen to the stories attentively, which will in turn promote the performance of the storytellers.

To avoid the few best storytellers dominating the activity, the best storytellers will be arranged in the same group next time. They will have to work harder in order to win again. This will make the winners stronger and at the same time, increase the opportunities of others and promote the whole class participation.

Activity 3

Divide the students into four to five groups and each group is given an opening of a story and asked to finish the story in about 20 minutes. Then select one student from each group to tell their story in the class and the best one wins 10 points for their group.

To get everyone fully involved and avoid the liability that each group just asks their best storyteller to do the job, the storytellers are selected by drawing lots instead of being chosen by themselves. This also helps enliven the atmosphere of the classroom. So each group must work together to make the story as interesting as they can. An alternative way is to ask each member of the group to tell a part of the story and make a whole.

Activity 4

Ask each group to hand in an incomplete story and redistribute them among the groups. Give the students 20 minutes to read their stories and finish them. After each group presents their story, compare it with the original one. The most interesting one and the one closest to the original win.

Activity 5

The teacher gives the first sentence to the class and then each student adds one more sentence to make a whole story impromptu. Because there is no preparation and no body has any idea about what the next person will say and where the story is going, there are often lots of fun and surprises in the game.

This game is suitable to the classes with no more than 20 students. If there are too many students, the students will wait too long to make his/her sentence, which is likely to make the game sluggish; also, the students may not hear each other clearly and this will reduce the success of the game.

In the process of using stories, the teacher could, in different cases, choose to encourage the students to rewrite the stories, using their own language or ask them to keep the original language as much as they can. The former way encourages the students to understand the stories and adds their own characteristics to the stories and the latter prompts them to learn to use new words and expressions. Besides, pictures, movies and other materials would also be great help in storytelling. After a few months, the students' speaking ability can be improved to considerable degree.

Conclusion

There are many ways to use stories in the oral English classroom. It is also advised to encourage the students to find more interesting stories and create different ways to use them. Besides, in the course of looking for, rewriting and completing stories, their reading, writing and imagination can be further developed; teamwork and friendship will become stronger by working in groups. So let stories be a member of your oral English class!

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