FACT SHEET 2: BUILDING CONFIDENCE IN THE CLASSROOM

Introduction
As discussed in Fact Sheet 1, confidence can be seen broadly as an individual’s belief in their ability to do something in a situation, and to feel accepted (Eldred, Ward, Dutton, & Snowdon, 2004). As teachers we need to build learners’ confidence in two main areas: in learning and in using the language. This Fact Sheet will look at how teachers can build learners’ confidence in class, while Fact Sheet 3 will address the issue of how we can help prepare learners and build their confidence to use English in the world outside the classroom.

How can we help students become more confident learners?
Many immigrants come to the AMEP classroom with experiences of teaching and learning that are very different from the communicative approaches favoured in Australia, and so it is crucial to minimise the potential anxiety that can come with uncertainty and confusion. In order to make sure that learners feel comfortable and secure, it is important to:

- give an overview of the lesson or module
- be very clear about the objectives
- give learners clear pointers of where the lesson is going so that they can predict what is coming next and know exactly where they are going and why
- be explicit about what you expect them to do
- tell them clearly what you will be doing and why.

ACTIVITY: Base camp
To help learners be clear about the learning goals of the class (and see their progress), the teacher can bring in a large poster of a mountain and stick it to the wall. Each week/day the teacher can then attach a strip which gives the broad goal of the class/topic/skill area at the appropriate place on the mountain so that the class can see what they are doing as they progressively make their way to the top (from Hadfield and Dörnyei, 2013).

As teachers, we can help learners feel more confident by not only making our expectations very explicit, but also by providing them with the tools they will need to find out and check what is going on for themselves. To this end, it is useful to actively teach both the language and the communication strategies that they will need to ask for help, check instructions or show that they have not understood what is required. Research has shown that this kind of
teaching – ‘Participation Instruction’ – leads to greater classroom participation and satisfaction, as well as improved performance on assessment tasks (Tsou, 2005).

**ACTIVITY: Classroom language**

In this activity, learners must choose (with the teacher’s guidance) which is the most appropriate question form to use (and why) if they would like the teacher to repeat something they have not understood. For example:

**Student:**  *Say it again. / Can you say that again, please? / Repeat.*  
**Teacher:**  *Yes, sure.*

Learners can then make short classroom conversations based on the models and practise these in pairs, swapping roles.

Extending this idea, we can also make it explicit how the learners can manage pair and group work classroom language. For example:

*It’s your turn. / I’ve/we’ve finished. / We’re ready.*

**ACTIVITY: Well done!**

Teach the language that class members will need to congratulate each other, such as:

*I’ve heard you have just VERB + ed. Well done! / Great stuff. / Goodonya.*

*Congratulations. / Well done on VERB + ing.*

Model a few examples to the class, such as:

*Congratulations on getting your driver’s licence.*

*I’ve heard that you’ve passed your test. Terrific!*

Make sure you discuss what phrases are most appropriate for different occasions.

Prepare cards or strips of paper with different causes for congratulations written on them, e.g.

*You have won a television. / You gave a really good presentation.*

Learners can then mingle, congratulate each other and practise giving an appropriate response.

**ACTIVITY: Hidden strengths**

This activity is aimed at boosting learners’ confidence generally and creating a positive learning environment. Students write down one sentence, e.g. *I am good at VERB + ing* to describe themselves. They can work in pairs or teams if they find that easier. Once each learner has a sentence, the activity can be organised in various ways:

- as a mingling activity where students find someone with the same ‘hidden strength’
- as a mingling activity in which the teacher writes on the board all the things that class members are good at. Students then have to ask the people they meet what they are good at in order to find out everyone’s hidden strengths
- as a circle activity where students recall what the previous person said, e.g. *Ryoko is good at cooking and I am good at playing tennis*, until the chain becomes too long to remember
- as a team game where other teams guess who a sentence refers to.

You can extend the activity by asking learners to prepare a short talk about something they are good at (or enjoy doing) which they then present to each other in small groups or to the whole class.
Boosting learners’ willingness to communicate

As discussed in Fact Sheet 1, many factors can impact on a learner’s willingness to communicate, and the confidence to ‘have a go’ works on at least two levels:

1. an overall feeling of confidence in being able to communicate in English; and
2. a situation-specific confidence which can vary according to context.

We also saw how it is important to tackle confidence that has both a cognitive dimension (to do with the way a person thinks) and an emotional one. This means that we should use a range of strategies that help learners build confidence in the way they think and in the way they feel generally, and we should use methods that target a range of different situations.

Below we suggest some activities that can help learners to better understand the nature of language learning. They also encourage reflection on how much they have already achieved as a way of raising their self-awareness of their own abilities and achievements.

**Learner self-evaluation**

Self-evaluation is a useful way of helping learners to develop this self-awareness, but if they have been used to more teacher-centred approaches to learning, they may need guidance and encouragement on exactly how to do this. Self-evaluation activities can take a range of different forms. They can:

- relate to the objectives of a particular module or a specific task
- cover language elements (e.g. pronunciation, grammar), skills, strategies or knowledge
- be written (questionnaires, grids) or pictorial (e.g. use drawings, photos, or stickers)
- cover specific situations that learners know they find particularly difficult.
**ACTIVITY: ‘Can do’ statements**

In this type of self-evaluation, the learner reflects on their progress and achievements. The following example is taken from a theme on computers for lower level learners.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>I can...</th>
<th>Checked by me</th>
<th>Checked by teacher</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>understand an internet plan.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>find a website to help me with English.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>talk about a useful website.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**ACTIVITY: 100 verbs**

This activity helps learners to think about how much they already know. It is described below using verbs, but can be used with other language items such as vocabulary on a theme (e.g. school, cooking) or in a lexical field (e.g. food items, jobs, hobbies, emotions).

1. At the end of a class, the teacher asks each learner to write down their estimate of how many verbs they know in English and then elicits their answers.
2. As a homework task, the class reflects on this question to see if they want to make any changes to their estimate.
3. In the next lesson, the teacher asks the question again to see if anyone has revised their estimate. They then mime a verb that has been used recently in class and ask learners to guess what it is.
4. A team of 2 or 3 learners is assigned the role of word secretary to write down all the verbs the class suggests.
5. Learners in the class then take turns at miming verbs, and the activity continues until there is a list of 50, 75 or 100 words.
6. The teacher collects the list and distributes copies (electronically or on paper) to the class in the following lesson. Class members are often surprised at how much they know collectively.
7. This list can then be used for a range of follow-up activities, for example, vocabulary reinforcement, pronunciation practice, role-plays or text creation tasks.

**ACTIVITY: Questionnaires**

Questionnaires and rating scales are another way of getting learners to think about and monitor their skills. The following checklist focuses on classroom participation.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>Sometimes</th>
<th>No</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I ask the teacher questions.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I ask my classmates questions.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I talk to my partners in a group.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I talk in front of the whole class.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
ACTIVITY: Self evaluation of confidence

We can ask learners to reflect on their feelings of confidence in particular situations using rating scales or graphs. For example:

*How confident are you? 1 = very low and 5 = very high*

I am confident talking about shopping  1  2  3  4  5
I am confident describing my favourite food/reading a menu, etc.

ACTIVITY: My learning graph

As an alternative to writing-based activities, we can ask learners to graph or draw their progress over a period (e.g. a month), a learning module or a semester. Learners can map the pace of their learning during that time. Students can share their learning journeys in groups. For example, Maria, whose graph is shown below, might say she felt that she worked hard and was making progress at the start of the course, but then things got busy at home so she didn’t have much time for English. When she could see things were not improving she decided to make an effort to study again. By reflecting and talking explicitly about her learning and her motivation, she is taking an important step towards taking control of how she feels about her English.

These kinds of evaluative activities can be repeated at intervals so that learners can review their individual progress over time. The teacher can also use the information to give (de-identified) collective feedback to the class so that learners can reflect on how they are doing in relation to the group.

Reflection point

1) What can you do if learners find that this kind of self-awareness is actually de-motivating for them?

2) How can you help older or slower learners who compare themselves unfavourably with others who seem to learn things more quickly?
Language anxiety
A learning environment that allows plenty of time for experimentation and opportunities for repetition and rehearsal can help to minimise language anxiety and stress, and maximise learner confidence. Below we suggest a few strategies and activities that can help the teacher ensure that learners have the time and practice that they need.

Wait time
It is important to give learners enough time to respond in class. In a lesson where teachers are keen to keep students interested, the amount of time that learners need to formulate an appropriate response can easily be misjudged. Some learners may also come from cultures where it is considered rude to respond too quickly, especially if this means that other students may not have the chance to answer the question or provide information. Far from being embarrassed, learners often appreciate a little extra time in which to construct their responses and give a suitable answer.

Pre-task planning time
When learners are trying to put into practice something that is new, giving them extra time to plan their responses can really boost their confidence. Research shows that introducing pre-task planning time of up to 10 minutes can help to improve fluency (Rossiter, Derwing, Manimtim, & Thomson, 2010). This can be done very easily, but if you are used to lots of talking and noise in class, it can take a little time to get used to the quiet when you first include planning time in your lesson.

ACTIVITY: Think-Pair-Share
Language learners can find whole class activities stressful, because they have to use English in front of others under time pressure, and this can be face-threatening. High levels of anxiety are associated with low levels of classroom participation and low motivation. Here is a well-known strategy which consists of two stages before learners are asked to take part in the whole class activity:

Stage 1 ‘Think’ — A silent phase where learners plan their answers.
Stage 2 ‘Share’ — Learners share answers with a partner before discussing as a whole group.

Rehearsal
Silent rehearsal can also be a form of pre-task preparation that learners find useful.

When it comes to using English in public, Adam from Somalia sometimes feels very confident, and at other times feels embarrassed if he says something wrong or doesn’t know what to ask for. He often practises what he wants to say in his head before he says it out loud: ‘When I, when I, when I speak, ah, ah, when I speak ah, before I try and I, I consider that what I, what I, what I will saying, yeah, what I, what I will, what I will, what I want to say’.
**Drills**

Drilling fell out of favour with the rise of communicative language teaching but it remains a useful classroom technique. Although it can be conducted in many different ways, the most familiar format is the choral or individual drill. Other variations include simple guessing games, disappearing dialogues or ‘rub-outs’, and mingles. In simple guessing games the teacher introduces new vocabulary and then sticks pictures on the board back to front so that learners have to guess which picture is which. Disappearing dialogues or ‘rub-outs’ introduce a game-like aspect to drilling as the teacher progressively erases sections of a dialogue or a list of words/phrases until the board is blank, but learners still have to say the whole text.

**Repetition**

Learners at all levels of proficiency benefit from opportunities for repetition so that they can get their mouths around new sounds and practise saying new words or phrases. Repetition activities range from very controlled exercises such as drilling, which could be very familiar to lower level learners, to pronunciation activities (see the November 2002 AMEP Fact Sheet *Teaching pronunciation: Approaches and activities*), and freer repeat practice activities, such as Concentric Circles and Mingles, which enhance learners’ fluency. Such activities allow for either controlled or freer speaking practice, provide plenty of opportunities for repetition, can be readily adapted for learners at a wide range of levels used with very short as well as more extended speaking tasks. They have been shown to build confidence and improve learner fluency.

**ACTIVITY: Concentric Circles (also known as Onion Rings)**

Learners are divided into two equal-sized groups and invited to form two circles, an inner circle and an outer circle, so that each learner is facing a partner.

Each pair practises their questions and answers or dialogue and then, on the teacher’s signal, all the outer circle learners move one place to their right and form new pairs. The new partners repeat the task.

Depending on the length of the material to be practised, this activity can be done standing or sitting. Alternatively, learners can form a line of pairs – ‘seats on the bus’. They practise in pairs and then all inside learners move back a ‘seat’.

The following example ensures that learners are well-prepared before they are asked to speak:

*Learners draw a family tree or bring in photos and then prepare to talk about their family. Half the group is a ‘host’, the other half is a ‘visitor’. One visitor asks the host questions about his/her family and then moves onto the next host to ask questions.*

This activity can also be used with informational texts such as short biographies of famous people or texts about interesting places to visit. Learners first work in pairs to create a poster and become ‘experts’ on their topic before dividing into visitors and hosts and then swapping roles.
**ACTIVITY: Mingles**

In contrast to the teacher regulated activity Concentric Circles, Mingles involve learners in finding a partner, using the target language and then moving on to practise with other learners at their own pace. They can be used, for example, to practise vocabulary items on a theme:

- each learner starts with a picture of, say, an item of food, and then finds a partner
- the pairs teach their words to each other, swap pictures, and then move off to another learner.

This kind of mingling activity can also be used to ‘Find someone who’ and to conduct class surveys – activities which involve repeated practice but also include elements of freer practice.

**ACTIVITY: Best response**

In this activity learners record several responses to the same task and then choose their best response. Although a language lab is an ideal place for this activity, it can also be done in the language classroom or as homework using the learners’ own mobile phones or computers.

Learners can make global judgements of their own best response, e.g. which was the best sentence, or they can make judgements on a specific feature depending on what has been the focus of work in class. For example, if you are focusing on a feature of pronunciation such as word stress, learners can pick their response with the clearest stress patterns.

This type of activity can easily be used with a wide range of materials and allows learners repeat practice with a purpose in mind.

**Reflection point**

1) **How long is it appropriate to wait for a response:**
   - from an individual?
   - from an open question to the class?

2) **Think of an activity that you like to do in class and reflect on how you can build in some extra pre-task planning time and rehearsal.**

**Nurturing an English-speaking identity**

Learning English and being confident communicating in English in a new environment impacts on a person’s identity. This means that the way in which learners see themselves, not only now but in the future, is very relevant to their ability to confidently work through difficulties. As we saw in Building Confidence Fact Sheet 1, a learner’s view of their ideal English-speaking self and their view of the kind of person they can be through English can be very powerful motivators. It follows that strengthening learners’ vision of themselves as users of English can help to build both their linguistic confidence and their motivation.
In addition to helping learners set goals and increase their self-awareness of how their language and specific skills are improving, it is also important to help learners develop positive thinking about their futures and their future language development.

**Positive imagery**
Using the same concept as sports trainers use with elite athletes, learners can be introduced to positive imagery of themselves performing a task.

**ACTIVITY: Positive imagery**
In this example, learners visualise themselves giving a perfect presentation. The teacher can say to the class something like the following:

*Close your eyes and imagine today you are doing your presentation to the class. You have prepared and practised your talk. You look in the mirror at home and you look happy and confident. You come to class and then the teacher asks you to come out the front. You smile and look at the class. You give your talk and your classmates give you a big clap and you know you did a good job. Keep this feeling of confidence and success and open your eyes.* (Adapted from Magid and Chan, 2012).

**Drama-based activities**
Warm-up activities taken from drama sessions can encourage learners to feel more confident as English speakers. Hardison and Sonchaeng (2005) describe using relaxation and voice projection exercises with adult ESL learners.

Drama-based activities such as role plays can also help reduce learners’ anxiety when speaking in English. There are many different types of role plays. They can be:

- fully scripted
- partially scripted from prompts
- built up in class with the assistance of the teacher and memorised
- constructed in a scaffolded way by the learners as part of the cycle of work.

Improvised role plays can allow learners to play themselves in relevant scenarios, and also to take on new roles and characters. While scripted role plays, such as those found in textbooks, can offer less proficient learners the opportunity to participate in more extended stretches of language than they could otherwise manage by themselves and to focus on accuracy and control, freer role plays give learners an experience that is closer to the feeling of speaking ‘on-line’ in real time outside the classroom. In improvised scenarios, the emphasis is on fluency and communication rather than accuracy so that learners have the opportunity to experiment with language and communication strategies. They can be based on a whole range of situations that are likely to be encountered outside the classroom, or they can be more playful and imaginative; for example, learners can create ‘commercials’ to sell something to the class. Either way, it is important that learners have enough time to plan **but not** to script.
A final word...

In this Fact Sheet we have looked at some of the techniques and activities that teachers can use to boost learners’ confidence in the classroom. In Fact Sheet 3, we suggest some approaches to improving learner confidence and preparing them to use English outside the classroom.

References


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