FACT SHEET 3: BUILDING CONFIDENCE OUTSIDE THE CLASSROOM - PREPARING LEARNERS

Introduction
Building Confidence Fact Sheet 1 looked at the nature of confidence in language learning and Fact Sheet 2 suggested some techniques and activities that teachers can use to build learners’ confidence in class. In this Fact Sheet, we look at how we can help learners build their confidence in using English in the world outside the classroom. Fact Sheet 4 looks at linking the classroom to the community and how to encourage community participation, while Fact Sheet 5 provides an annotated bibliography of some references for teachers interested in finding out more about how to build and maintain the confidence of their learners.

How can we build learners’ confidence outside the classroom?
The ultimate aim for most AMEP learners is to be able to communicate effectively and easily outside the classroom. They are often very aware of the value of speaking English in everyday situations and frequently tell us how much their language improves when they do this. However, for many learners it is precisely these situations that cause the most difficulty and stress.

Below we consider some of the ways in which teachers can prepare their students to overcome some of these stresses and help them to feel more confident about speaking English with a wide range of people outside the classroom. We can approach this by:

- preparing learners in class for situations beyond the classroom, and
- creating links from the classroom to outside (see Fact Sheet 4).

Preparing learners for life outside the classroom
There are a number of techniques and activities we can use during class time that can help learners develop the skills they need to become more confident speakers outside the classroom. In thinking about how to approach this, it is important to remember that transferring skills learned in one context and applying them in another is very complex and
not simply a matter of ‘exporting’ them and using them in another setting. Although some situations might be quite close to what has been practised in class, others might differ considerably and will require tremendous effort and creativity. No situation can be a complete replica of the situation practised in class.

Classroom environments and real-world situations are very different. Students have usually practised their language skills in the familiar, positive environment of the classroom where they are provided with input that is comprehensible, their attempts to communicate are supported, and tasks are scaffolded to give them every chance of success. However, real life communication is often very different. An important task for teachers is therefore to try to minimise the gap between inside and outside the classroom so that learners can interact more confidently and more easily transfer what they have learnt.

**Introducing difficulties into the classroom – increasing the pressure**

In Building Confidence Fact Sheet 2, we outlined different strategies for building confidence in the classroom. An important part of building confidence is to reduce anxiety. However, if learners are perpetually shielded in class from the real-world problems they are going to encounter in the community, then they are likely to become disheartened when they do encounter them. They will very soon find that most of the world outside the classroom does not have the communicative skills and understanding their teacher has! How often have you heard a learner say ‘I understand everything the teacher says, but I can’t understand anything at work/ on the bus/ in my local shop’?

‘Teachers here are talking slow, slow and we sometimes thought well, we understand but when we go outside it’s different.’ (Rezarta from Albania)

Once learners have had opportunities to practise and have developed some confidence in the protected environment of the classroom, it is important that they begin to build their confidence in dealing with some of the pressures of real-world interactions. These can be introduced progressively as they become more confident.

**Time pressure**

One way of introducing a pressure that learners are going to feel in authentic exchanges outside the classroom is to introduce time limits for speaking tasks. For example:

- if the activity is to interview a partner on a particular topic, the teacher can set a time limit of, say, 30 seconds or 1 minute to report back to the class
- competitive team games where teams/pairs are awarded points for the quickest answer also introduce time pressures.
**The 3/2/1 technique**
Activities or tasks can be repeated under conditions where learners have progressively less time with each ‘repetition’. In this situation, learners must adapt their language resources to the changed conditions, so that rather than being a repeat, each presentation is, in fact, a variation. This is central to the effective transfer of learning. The following is an example activity:

- learners write a story then tell their story to a partner in a specified time, e.g. 3 minutes
- they then re-pair and tell their story in less time, e.g. 2 minutes
- they can then re-pair a third time for an even shorter re-tell, e.g. 1 minute.

The same 3/2/1/principle can also be applied to role plays and many other kinds of activities.

**Have a go**
As discussed in Building Confidence Fact Sheet 2, pre-task planning and rehearsal time are classroom strategies that can decrease learners’ anxiety and promote confidence. They are also a means of introducing ‘desirable difficulty’ into the classroom and can be manipulated to prepare students for real life interactions. We can encourage learners to ‘have a go’ in the low-stakes classroom environment where they do not need to fear negative evaluations, and the consequences of making mistakes are limited.

**The unsupportive interlocutor**
In role play practice students are often interacting in situations where everything goes smoothly – their partner understands and never interrupts and all goes according to plan. To make these classroom activities more authentic, we can create difficulties so that learners have opportunities to practise what might happen under less ideal conditions. For instance, one partner in a pair can be instructed to interrupt, be unfriendly or angry or deliberately misunderstand.

**Taking a message**
The teacher can also adjust the level of support they provide so that learners can practise inside the classroom those situations in which they feel less confident. Learners frequently find it stressful to talk or take messages over the phone (see Corazon, Building Confidence Fact Sheet 1), and so support can be progressively reduced as they practise these activities in class:

- teacher introduces/ revises useful language for clarifying and checking information on the phone
- learners practise in pairs in the classroom
- learners then ring the teacher/ a tutor to get a message.
They could then try this outside the classroom; that is, they could ring another pre-prepared location to get a message. This message could initially be a recorded message, and they could then progress to taking a message from a real on-line person.

It is important that the teacher does not scaffold the interaction so that learners have the opportunity to experience and manage the pressures of speaking on the phone. The message could involve typical information relayed over the phone or more unexpected material needed for a class activity, such as part of a jumbled story/account where learners have to write down the message to order to sequence the story in a subsequent class.

As a variation on this activity, the class could first practise some of the elements of an automated system that we regularly have to negotiate — for example, when we top up a pre-pay phone or make a booking — and then practise navigating a similar system with another service.

**Developing communication strategies**

Given the fact that life and communication are seldom straightforward, it is useful for learners to become more aware of the strategies they can use when they get into difficulties, such as clarifying questions and paraphrasing. Although they can already do this in languages they speak well, it is quite another matter to do it in a language they are learning. Learners also need to see how conversations can develop in many ways and practise responding flexibly. Below we suggest some simple activities that can help learners practise these skills that they may need outside the classroom.

**ACTIVITY: What comes next?**

Since no two conversations unfold in the same way, it is useful to give learners opportunities to notice variation by slowing conversations down and to gain practice adapting their language. For example:

- Using any recording, the teacher plays part of a conversation and then stops and elicits what the next speaker could say. This places learners in a situation which has some parallels with real-world conversations where they don’t know what will happen next.
- In pairs or small groups, learners discuss what the speaker could say next. The teacher can write up the suggestions and discuss the range of possible responses.
- The teacher then plays the speaker’s actual next turn.

This type of activity not only highlights the many language choices that speakers can make, it also gives the teacher the opportunity to remind learners about similarities with previous tasks and to help them to transfer language or communication strategies across situations. Learners often need help with seeing these connections which are critical for the transfer of classroom learning to actual situations outside.
We can also use these techniques to ‘re-play’ actual situations that have been difficult for learners or have made them feel anxious. Re-playing difficult situations in this way, and exploring possible language choices and communication strategies, can help learners to approach similar situations more confidently in the future.

**ACTIVITY: Re-play**

When a problem situation has been identified:
- two learners can role play the conversation
- the teacher can stop the interaction and elicit possible responses from the group
- the speaker then chooses the response he/she is most comfortable with and the role play continues.

Alternatively, one of the speakers can stop the role play and ask for suggestions from the class.

**Making small talk**

Language learners are often unsure how to keep conversations with Australians going once they have got past the initial greetings and ‘How are you?’ This can be a problem both at work and in social situations, and one factor can be a lack of knowledge of suitable topics. Teachers can design activities to practise small talk and can suggest familiar conversation topics such as leisure activities (How was your weekend?), sport (Did you see the footie last night?) and TV shows which can provide learners with a ‘way in’ to social chat.

Jae-Sun from Korea watches programs on Australian television so that she can improve her English as well as learn about Australian culture. She watches ‘Friends’, ‘Masterchef’ and ‘The Amazing Race’: ‘I love the show’.

**ACTIVITY: TV talk**

Many of our learners tell us that they enjoy watching reality TV and game shows and this can be used to expand their repertoire of appropriate conversation starters.
- Learners watch a section of a popular TV program, e.g. Masterchef or The Voice
- In pairs or small groups they brainstorm a list of conversation starters, e.g. *Did you watch the Voice last night?* / *Who is your favourite contestant?* / *What do you think of ...?*
- The class reviews how to keep a conversation going, e.g. follow up questions and expressions for showing interest (e.g. *Really, Uh-huh*)
- In pairs, learners write and then practice a short conversation. This could then be done as a whole class ‘mingle’.

As a homework task, learners could be asked to try and find a situation where they can make small talk and then report back to class.
A final word...

In this Fact Sheet we have looked at using classroom-based activities to help prepare learners for communicating in situations in the broader community. Learners may need support to transfer these skills to everyday situations and to participate in the wider community. These issues are addressed in Building Confidence Fact Sheet 4.

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