FACT SHEET 4: BUILDING CONFIDENCE IN THE COMMUNITY

Introduction
In Building Confidence Fact Sheet 1 we looked at the nature of confidence in language learning, and in Fact Sheet 2 we suggested some techniques and activities that teachers can use to build learners’ confidence in the classroom. Fact Sheet 3 looked at how we can help build learners’ confidence in class and prepare them to use English in the world outside the classroom. In Fact Sheet 4 we look at linking the classroom to the community and encouraging community participation.

The community and the language learner
When thinking about confidence it is important to keep in mind that language learning is a two-way process. How learners develop confidence depends on their personalities, learning styles and motivation levels and it is also affected by their interactions with their teachers, friends and members of the broader community. We need to bear in mind, however, that not all communication partners are supportive, and students can find it frustrating and challenging to communicate with local English speakers, particularly if these ‘native’ English speakers are unused to or unwilling to accommodate the learner’s level of English proficiency. Many learners also have limited opportunities to use English beyond the classroom and connect with the wider community. It is therefore useful if we can help support learners in making these links, while at the same time acknowledging the difficulties that they face in doing this. In the first part of this fact sheet we look at activities that help learners transfer skills beyond the classroom, and in the second section we look at ways to increase participation in everyday life in Australia.

Linking the classroom to the outside world
In order to foster participation and a sense of belonging in the Australian community, it is important to encourage learners to take the skills that have been practised in the supportive and familiar classroom and use them outside. Just as we grade and sequence learning activities in the classroom, so can we scaffold the transfer of skills to everyday situations.

Out-of-class homework
One way of encouraging learners to use English outside the classroom and to take advantage of communication opportunities that come along is to use a language log. In My Success Log, learners record successes related to communication.
For example:

I spoke to my neighbour about the weather.
I watched an English program on TV and could understand more.

Confidence grids can promote learners’ confidence by helping them focus on positive experiences as they monitor their feelings of confidence and progress over time. For example:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Situations: Talking</th>
<th>Very confident (+ +)</th>
<th>Confident (+)</th>
<th>Not confident (-)</th>
<th>Not at all (- -)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>to my class teachers</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>at the doctor’s</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>in a shop</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>to my neighbours</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>to my child’s teacher</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>to other parents at school</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Such activities can, of course, be conducted on-line so that learners are simultaneously developing their digital literacy. They can, perhaps, progress to contributing to blog sites that are open to an audience that is wider than just the class – perhaps with a pseudonym for shyer members.

Homework tasks that specifically ask learners to transfer what they have learned in a lesson to the world outside are also very useful.

**Out-of-class homework**

As part of a teaching-learning sequence focusing on shopping, teachers can use the following activity:

- learners first practise the necessary vocabulary and phrases in class for shopping in a particular setting
- they then actually go to a shop to buy an item (this may take a little careful reflection on the part of the teacher now that so much shopping occurs in large supermarkets or on-line!)
- learners should then reflect on and evaluate their performance. For example, as part of the homework task, they can be asked to individually rate their performance and/or confidence, perhaps by noting two things they did right and one thing that they found they did not know or could improve on
- in class, learners can then share experiences and discuss and compare language choices and communication/coping strategies.
Managing stress/language anxiety

Communicating with native speakers outside the classroom usually ranks as a major stressor for learners. As they are likely to experience different degrees of anxiety in different situations, it can be helpful for them to reflect on which they find the most stressful and to rank these from the least to the most stressful.

For example, if the class has been working towards the learning outcome *participating in casual conversation*:

- learners could list 5 people they might chat with outside the classroom and rank these from those they feel most confident chatting with, to those they feel least confident chatting with
- they could work progressively through the list as homework, leaving the most stressful conversation until last when they are feeling more confident

Individual goal setting

Individual learning plans are part of the curriculum, and as discussed in Building Confidence Fact Sheet 2, questionnaires and surveys can help learners to identify their goals. However, they often want to choose very broad goals such as ‘I want to improve my speaking’ or ‘I want to improve my vocabulary’ which makes it difficult for them to see progress. Since experiencing and perceiving successful learning is bound up with feelings of confidence, it is important that learners choose goals that enable them to see that their language and skills are developing. Introducing S.M.A.R.T. goals (Day & Tosey, 2011) helps learners develop specific and realistic language goals together with a plan to achieve these.

**SMART** goals are:

- **S** = Specific
- **M** = Measurable
- **A** = Achievable
- **R** = Realistic
- **T** = Time bound

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Xiao Fang from China explained how she actively uses shopping as a way to practise English: ‘Shopping is the only way I can I can train my English out of class... I try to ask them I try to ask them some question...er, do you have something, do you have (blah blah blah) and er, and then er tell them I can’t find it...then they, er, they will, er, they will lead me to the to the section, and er, I try to ask them, er, some more question about the products’.
If a learner identifies, for example, ‘improving speaking’ as a goal, he/she can use the SMART goal framework to narrow this down.

**Specific**  Learners should specify exactly what kind of speaking they want to improve; that is, which interlocutors and in which situation. They need to be encouraged to be concrete in their selections, e.g. ‘making a doctor’s appointment’ or ‘starting a conversation with parents outside my children’s school’.

**Measurable**  It is important that learners are able to monitor their progress. The teacher can help them to say how they will ‘measure’ or recognise this.

**Achievable**  So that they are able to feel a sense of achievement, learners should also be encouraged to break their goals into small steps and identify how they can achieve them.

**Realistic**  They also need to consider what is practical for them; for example, how much time they are able to spend on the task, how often and for how long they can practise the skills needed.

**Time-bound**  It is important that learners identify a timeline so that they have an end-date against which they are able to measure their progress.

As discussed in Building Confidence Fact Sheets 1 and 2, we can also ask learners to identify the goals they would like to achieve and help them to create a vision of their *Ideal English-speaking self*. For example:

- they can write down positive and negative role models for different aspects of their goals
- they can then draw a timeline with forks in the road to illustrate possible options.

Hadfield and Dörnyei (2013) have an excellent chapter on helping learners define their goals and put them into practice. They provide teachers with a range of classroom activities to scaffold the learners’ journey from a broad vision (why) to ever more specific goals (what), plans (when) and strategies (how). The activities can easily be adapted for learners at different levels.

**English in everyday life**

Making links with the English-speaking community not only benefits learners’ English, but also increases their motivation and confidence. How they engage with the Australian community can have a significant impact on their social and work environments, and on feelings of being included, respected and valued within their newly adopted home country (Yates, 2011, p. 457).
Our students often tell us that they would like to make friends with ‘Australians’ but the reality is that many have few opportunities to speak English outside class and the interactions they do have in English are often limited to brief exchanges, for example, when they are shopping or catching public transport.

**How can we help learners connect with the community?**

There are many activities that can assist migrants to increase their participation in the community.

*Local councils and volunteering*

Local councils are a good place to start. Each council provides information on leisure and community courses, so introducing learners to their local council’s website can be a good classroom activity. Council websites offer information about sporting activities and facilities, short courses, helping the elderly, etc., and many have community centres that offer English language tuition. The investigation of local council websites can be incorporated into learning activities on computer skills and literacy. Community and local council representatives are often happy to come to class and talk about services they provide.

Many migrants have found that volunteering offers an important link with the Australian community and have also found that it can help to build confidence. For volunteering, the following websites may be useful:

- **Go Volunteer:** [www.govolunteer.com.au](http://www.govolunteer.com.au)
- **Volunteering Australia:** [www.volunteeringaustralia.org](http://www.volunteeringaustralia.org)
- **Australian Volunteer Search:** [www.regionalaustralia.gov.au](http://www.regionalaustralia.gov.au)

Another useful website that teachers can introduce learners to is: [www.australia.gov.au](http://www.australia.gov.au). This website provides information and links to sport, education facilities etc.

*Local libraries, schools and community events*

As many migrants have school-aged children attending local schools, they might find they can play a role in their local school community. This could be volunteering in the school canteen, listening to infants (K–1) reading, helping out in classrooms (e.g. covering books, sharpening pencils, helping on excursions) or chatting with other parents in the school playground. Many learners will not be aware of these opportunities and may even feel daunted at the prospect of approaching their child’s school teacher, and so we can help to ‘show’ learners what to say and how to introduce themselves through specially designed scaffolding activities.

As teachers, we can plan visits to local councils and libraries and encourage learners to join their local library which can be an important source of contacts and information about the local community. Classroom activities about such events as *Harmony Day* and *Clean Up*
Australia Day can introduce learners to the language they need in order to participate in a range of community activities.

Although venturing out into the community is likely to be very useful for their English language development, there is no escaping the fact that it is challenging to speak English with people they don’t know very well. Our learners often report finding this quite terrifying, especially at the beginning, so the more we can do to prepare them for this experience and encourage them to keep trying, the better.

At the time of her first interview Winnie from China was very nervous about using English outside the classroom: ‘I don’t by myself go to shopping. I’m scared the people come to ask me something’. By Interview 4 she was a lot more confident and explained: ‘...but now at least when they say hello, how are you? Like I can smile and thanks’.

A final word on confidence and the local community...

The important role played by community members in helping immigrants to build the confidence they need to speak up must not be forgotten. Unfortunately, though, many people don’t seem to appreciate just how scary speaking up in a new language can be. As teachers, we have developed excellent skills in understanding learners whose proficiency is only just developing. Others outside the classroom do not necessarily have the same skills and may be wary themselves of talking to learners of English – especially to those at lower proficiency levels – and they may also be unsure about what to do if communication breaks down. We can therefore play an important a role in educating the community about our learners, what they need and how to help them.

References


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