

FINDING THEIR VOICE

*Reflections on Communication, Confidence, and
Student Participation*

A Ten-Article Series

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About This Collection

This collection brings together ten articles originally published individually on LinkedIn. Written from classroom observation and reflective practice, the series explores student voice, silence, processing time, speaking confidence, communicative language use, eye contact, pair work, psychological safety, behavior modeling, and the different pathways students may take toward becoming more confident communicators.

Across the series, a central concern recurs: students do not all enter communication in the same way. Some respond quickly, while others need time, structure, modeling, reassurance, or a smaller setting before they are ready to speak. The articles examine these differences through experiences drawn from English communication and presentation teaching in Shanghai.

The articles are presented here in their original sequence and wording as a single collected professional series. Together, they document an educator's continuing reflection on how classroom conditions, instructional choices, and attentive observation can support students as they learn to use their voices.

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ARTICLE 1

The Messy Reality of Student Voice

Shanghai, China. As a Communication English teacher working with students aged 10–18, I teach within a public school system where academic pressure is every student's shadow. Many of my students are studying within a highly demanding academic system. High school students are preparing for the gaokao, the national college entrance examination, which plays a significant role in shaping their futures. In addition, they manage a heavy homework load throughout the school year and even during holidays. This level of pressure affects not only how students perform academically, but also how willing they are to speak, participate, and take risks in the classroom.

When “Following the Plan” Was Not Enough

In my first semester at the public school, I followed the lesson plans closely and made very few adjustments. I assumed that students would gradually improve their speaking and presentation skills through practice alone. However, this approach did not work as I expected. Many students struggled with confidence. They were nervous speaking in front of others, hesitant to express themselves, and unsure how to improve. Although they completed tasks, their development in communication remained limited.

The following semester, I changed my approach. I became more active by giving clearer guidance, modeling expectations, and providing direct feedback. I began to see improvement. But this raised a deeper question for me: How were students experiencing my classes?

Creating Space for Student Voice

To better understand this, I started collecting student feedback at the end of each semester in simple ways. I gave students blank cards or small pieces of paper and asked them to respond to open-ended questions such as:

- What did you learn?
- What do you think of your teacher?
- How can what you learned help you in the future?

For younger students, I also included space for drawing. The goal was to create a space where students could respond honestly and freely.

What Happened When Students Were Given a Voice

Their ability to express their authentic feelings amazed me. Many shared that they appreciated being guided and supported. Some said they could see that I tried to care about them as individuals. Others mentioned that the class felt enjoyable and different from their usual learning experience.

A few responses stood out. Some students said they had never thought learning could be enjoyable before. Others highlighted how humor, encouragement, and feedback helped them feel more comfortable speaking. These responses mattered—not because they were positive—but because they revealed something deeper: Students wanted to be understood without being judged.

The Messy Reality of Listening

At the same time, creating space for student voices was not always easy. When students feel comfortable enough to speak honestly, they

do not always say what teachers hope to hear. Some comments were surprising, inappropriate, or difficult to respond to in the moment. These situations required careful judgment. Responding too quickly with criticism risked shutting students down. But ignoring the situation was not an option either. This is where things became complex. Listening without judgment did not mean accepting everything. It meant staying calm, maintaining boundaries, and using these moments as opportunities for guidance rather than punishment. Some situations could be worked through. Others could not. This is an important reality that is not often discussed: real communication in the classroom is not always smooth, it can be uncomfortable, unpredictable, and messy.

Balancing Authority and Trust

One of the most important things I learned is that being nonjudgmental does not mean giving up authority. Students need structure. They test boundaries. They look to teachers for guidance. The key is balance. When students know they can speak openly, but also understand that there are clear expectations, something important happens: trust develops.

Over time, I saw students become more willing to participate, take risks, and express themselves more confidently.

Why This Matters

In many education systems, the focus is heavily on results, scores, exams, and measurable outcomes. But this can overlook something essential: the human experience of learning. From my experience, many students, especially in high-pressure environments, want to feel understood. They want to express themselves without fear of immediate judgment. Listening does not replace academic expectations. It supports them.

When students feel heard, they are more likely to engage, participate, and grow—not only academically, but personally.

Final Reflection: Connection Within Constraint

Over the past three years, I have learned that connection is still possible—even within rigid and high-pressure academic systems. It may not happen with every student or in every class, but it remains one of the most powerful tools educators have. Working across different schools, age groups, and classrooms has shown me that there is no single approach that works for every student. Each class is different. Each student is different. Some moments of connection can be developed. Others cannot.

However, one thing remains clear: grounded, nonjudgmental listening—combined with clear and consistent guidance—can create space for students to grow not only as learners, but as individuals.

ARTICLE 2

Why Students Don't Speak: Understanding Silence in the ESL Classroom

One of the most common frustrations in English language teaching is not incorrect answers — it is silence.

Teachers ask a single student or the entire class a question. Some students understand it and know the answer. But instead of responding, they hesitate, avoid eye contact, or wait for someone else to speak.

For many years teaching English in China, I have observed this pattern across different age groups, proficiency levels, and school environments. At first, silence can be easy to interpret as lack of understanding or lack of preparation. But over time, I began to see something more complex.

Silence can be an absence of knowledge, but not always. More often, it is a presence of hesitation.

In many classrooms, regardless of students' age or proficiency level, they may be managing several pressures simultaneously:

1. Translating mentally before speaking.
2. Concerned about making ANY mistakes in front of their peers and “losing face”.
3. Wondering whether their answer is “correct enough” to share publicly in front of the teacher.
4. Waiting for reassurance that it is safe to speak.

This is where the structure and dynamics of the classroom environment become essential. In my experience, students are far more willing to speak when these three conditions are present:

1. **Low risk of judgment**—When students feel that errors are treated as part of learning rather than failure, participation increases noticeably. The tone of correction matters as much as the correction itself.
2. **Structured speaking support**—Open-ended questions alone are often not enough. Students benefit from scaffolding — sentence frames, guided prompts, and modeled responses that reduce cognitive load and help them enter the conversation.
3. **Predictable speaking routines**—When speaking becomes a routine rather than a performance, anxiety decreases. Pair work, small group discussions, and repeated speaking formats create familiarity, and familiarity builds confidence.

I have also learned that silence is not always something to eliminate immediately. Often, it is a necessary stage students need to build confidence to process and speak in their own voice in a second language. In addition, it can be a cultural or psychological response to classroom expectations. As educators, the question may not always be “Why aren’t students speaking?” but rather: “What is happening that stops them from feeling ready to speak?”

This shift in perspective changes how we design lessons. It shifts us from expecting immediate responses to building conditions where output becomes more natural, smooth and less cumbersome over time. In many ways, teaching speaking in a second language is not only about language production. It is about creating environments where students feel safe enough to take the risk of being heard through their mistakes, imperfections and errors.

And that, I have found, is where real communication begins.

ARTICLE 3

Before Students Speak, They Need Time to Think

Picture this scenario. You. An instructor. Stand in your classroom, in front of your students and ask a single student a question and expect an immediate answer. When no one responds after two or three seconds, you repeat the question, call on another student, or assume that no one knows the answer. Your class lasts between 40 minutes to 1 hour or more at a time. There is a myriad of content to get through, yet there is usually not enough time. As English teachers, we often measure students' silence with a timer.

In my personal experience over time, however, I have observed that those few seconds of silence often tell us very little about what students know. For them, those quiet moments are often filled with reasoning and contemplation. Every student experiences this silence uniquely and differently.

Before many students answer a question, they may be doing several things simultaneously:

1. Translating their ideas into English.
2. Organizing their thoughts into a logical response.
3. Searching for the vocabulary they need.
4. Checking whether their grammar is "good enough."
5. Building the confidence to speak in front of their classmates.

All of this can happen in just a few seconds. When we interrupt that process too quickly, we may not be measuring what students know.

Instead, we may simply be measuring how quickly they can process information under pressure. Over the years, I have noticed something interesting in my own classrooms. Students who remain silent during

whole-class questioning often become much more willing to participate after discussing the same question with a partner.

At first glance, it might seem that they suddenly "found" the answer. After countless cycles of observing student behavior in my classroom, I realized something. In most cases, they were simply given something they needed: time. Time to mentally organize their ideas. Time to hear and speak about a different perspective on the question. Time to reduce the internal tension that often comes with speaking a second language in front of others. Over the years, being attentive to this nuanced need for moments to process things has gradually changed the way I ask questions in my classroom.

Rather than expecting immediate responses, I have become more comfortable allowing moments of silence. Sometimes I ask students to think quietly before answering. Other times I ask them to discuss a question with a partner before sharing with the class. What appears to be a simple pause often becomes an opportunity for better thinking and richer discussion.

This does not mean that every student needs a long time to respond or that lessons should lose their pace. Rather, it reminds us that learning to communicate in another language is not simply about recalling information. It involves processing language, organizing thoughts, managing emotions, and finding the confidence to speak.

As teachers, we often ask ourselves:

"Why aren't my students answering?"

Perhaps another question is worth considering:

"Have I given them enough time to think before asking them to speak?"

In my experience, those few extra seconds are rarely wasted because thinking time allows students to process, organize, and communicate their ideas more effectively.

In conclusion, meaningful communication doesn't happen with speed; it happens with patience.

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ARTICLE 4

Cultivate Speaking Confidence Before Accuracy

Evasive eyes. Nervous twitches. Fumbling with pens. Voices so low you can hardly hear them. Tension filled classrooms. Shaky postures. Red flushed faces.

As a teacher who has instructed students from kindergarten through Grade 12 for more than twelve years in Shanghai, I have observed these situations numerous times. You ask a question or ask students to further explain a concept or express their ideas or opinions about something. Some students may or may not know how to answer or have the vocabulary and grammatical structures to do so. The hesitation and reluctance fill the classroom like humidity in the summertime.

As teachers, we sometimes assume the problem is a lack of knowledge. But what if the problem is not what they know? What if the problem is whether they feel confident enough to use what they know? Throughout my experience, I have noticed something compelling. Many students do not begin speaking because they are waiting until their English is "good enough." They want to use correct grammar and vocabulary and avoid making mistakes in front of their classmates.

In their minds, accuracy is a requirement before any communication can begin. However, language learning often works in the opposite direction. Students often need opportunities to communicate before accuracy can fully develop. When students speak, they are not only using language. They are taking a risk, allowing others to hear their ideas, and making themselves vulnerable. For many English learners, especially in front of their classmates, speaking requires more than knowing the correct answer.

It requires confidence.

Over time, I have observed that some of the students who improved the most were not always the students who started with the strongest English ability. They were often the students who became willing to speak, make mistakes, adjust, and try again.

Through this process, their accuracy gradually improved. This does not mean that accuracy is unimportant. Grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, and language structure all matter. However, accuracy without confidence can create hesitation. Students may know the language but remain silent because they fear using it incorrectly. Confidence creates the opportunity for practice, while practice creates opportunities for improvement.

After watching all of this in my classroom, I began to change how I taught speaking and presentation. I paid more attention to my students' nonverbal communication. I could tell which students needed to have my verbal support and motivation to practice speaking more and I reassured them that speaking without perfection was still important and valuable. Because they had a safe space to do this with me, I increasingly prioritized communication before perfection. I encouraged students to speak and gradually take the stage, even when doing so initially felt uncomfortable or intimidating. Sometimes I allowed students to share an incomplete idea and focus first on whether they communicated their meaning before correcting every mistake.

Because the first step toward becoming a stronger communicator is often simply being willing to communicate. As teachers, we often ask ourselves:

"How can I help my students speak more accurately?"

Another question is worth considering:

"How can I help my students become confident enough to speak?"

Before students can improve their communication, they first need the courage to begin. Confidence does not replace accuracy. It creates emotional and mental conditions in which accuracy can grow. Holding a safe space where students can express themselves through imperfect grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, and language structures matters more than we may realize. It requires patience, consistency, and an understanding that every student develops at a different pace. By consistently applying this approach over time, I witnessed my students' confidence in speaking and giving presentations gradually increase. Their speaking accuracy also improved as their confidence grew. Confidence encouraged practice, and practice supported greater accuracy. This cycle repeated itself and consistently produced positive results.

In conclusion, cultivating speaking confidence before accuracy with consistency can slowly transform nervous student energy into confident student energy.

ARTICLE 5

Knowing English Isn't the Same as Using English

My fellow English as a Second Language educators, please close your eyes and picture a scenario in your mind. Your class's grammar worksheet answers are complete and pristine. The vocabulary has been memorized, and everyone practices dictation diligently. Suddenly, you practice free talk with them and ask one student to tell their favorite season and why they like it. Then you ask a second student their opinion on which is the best season and why. Student #1 blinks repeatedly, breathing heavily and speaking nothing. Student #2 looks down, searches for words, and waits for the moment to pass.

Please open your eyes now.

Is this only an imagined scenario, or has it also been a reality in your classroom?

From kindergarten through high school, many students are taught English primarily for the purpose of passing examinations.

Throughout my teaching experience in training centers, a bilingual school, and public school, I have observed this pattern repeatedly. Students may perform well on written examinations, select many correct answers, and complete fill-in-the-blank exercises smoothly.

However, if you ask them a question such as "What is the weather like today?" or point to a blackboard for example and ask them, "What shape is it?", you will be able to hear wind blowing because it is so quiet.

A student may know vocabulary, grammar rules, sentence structures, and correct answers on paper, yet still struggles to:

- retrieve the language quickly;

- organize an idea while speaking;
- respond without preparation;
- adapt language to another person;
- tolerate mistakes and uncertainty;
- and continue speaking when the sentence does not come out perfectly.

If the student knows the English on paper, why can the student not use it orally?

Communication involves more than being able to recite words and memorize sentences and grammar. It requires integrated practice in reading, writing, listening, and speaking. It is language retrieval, confidence, responsiveness, organization of thought, attention to another person, and the willingness to continue despite imperfection.

I began to distinguish between different levels of language use. Some students could recognize the correct answer or produce a rehearsed response, but they struggled to recall language without prompts, respond spontaneously, sustain an interaction, or communicate meaning when the exact vocabulary was unavailable. Taking notes is an active part of language learning when students use those notes to organize ideas, record useful structures, and prepare for communication. It is not the same as copying dictated sentences or memorizing isolated vocabulary lists without meaningful application.

After considerable classroom observation and reflection, I recognized that students engage with language in different ways. Some benefit from hearing language repeatedly. Others process ideas more effectively through writing and note-taking. Some need to speak aloud, even when their structures and ideas remain incomplete. Others benefit from reading and working through ideas in written form. After

recognizing these differences, I expanded my teaching strategies to include:

- moving from controlled practice to freer speaking;
- giving thinking time before expecting answers;
- using pair work before whole-class speaking;
- using purposeful notetaking to support language processing and later speaking;
- teaching ARE or PREP to organize ideas;
- asking follow-up questions;
- allowing paraphrasing when students lack an exact word;
- using presentations, oral tests, and quick-response activities;
- and treating communication as an ability developed through a combination of reading, writing, listening and speaking rather than memorization alone.

Knowing English gives students the tools for communication, but possessing those tools does not automatically mean they can use them in real time. Students need repeated opportunities to retrieve language, organize their thinking, take interpersonal risks, and communicate imperfectly. Through this process, language knowledge can gradually become communicative ability.

Are we teaching students only to know English, or are we creating enough opportunities for them to use it?

To help students use English effectively, we must design lessons that integrate reading, writing, listening, and speaking while giving them meaningful opportunities to communicate.

ARTICLE 6

Eye Contact is a Communication Skill

A student's eyes can offer a glimpse into their awareness and inner state before a single word is spoken.

Let us say you are teaching a lesson on impromptu speaking. You're showcasing the A.R.E. (Answer, Reason, Example) method to structure a verbal response to a question. You try to show an example of this to the class and ask a student to come to the stage and practice this with you. The student walks to the front and blinks at you repeatedly as you explain what you and he or she will do. Their eyes stare blankly at the ceiling with no words voiced. As you, their instructor, glance into these eyes, you can sense they are confused.

I have observed this many times during my years of teaching English communication and presentation skills. At first, it can be tempting to assume that a student who avoids eye contact is simply shy, nervous, or lacking confidence. Sometimes that is true. However, over time I began to see eye contact differently.

Eye contact is an underrated communication skill, and I teach it as a necessary component of connection. It helps a speaker:

- connect with listeners;
- check whether the audience is following;
- communicate attention and sincerity;
- regulate pace;
- and become more aware of the interaction.

When students stand on stage speaking with a partner or addressing an audience, communication involves more than producing correct sentences and grammar. The speaker uses eye contact to see whether

the audience is attentive, notice facial expressions, and create a sense of connection. A student may know exactly what they want to say but still struggle to communicate effectively if they never visually acknowledge the people listening.

I understand that direct eye contact carries different meanings across cultures, personalities, and situations. Some students may feel embarrassed and uncomfortable maintaining direct eye contact with students and teachers. To demonstrate how to do this, I modeled this behavior by speaking various sentences while directing my gaze towards different students in the classroom. I guided and reminded them to learn to look at their audience periodically while speaking. They could briefly glance at their notes and then return their attention to their listeners. These small behaviors help them gradually become more comfortable speaking to other people rather than simply speaking in front of them.

Sometimes I would ask students to practice looking up after completing one sentence. Other times, I encouraged them to choose one or two friendly faces in the classroom and speak toward those people first. During presentations, I reminded students that their notes were there to support them, not to read them word for word.

When speaking to students, I tried to show what natural eye contact looks like. I looked around the room. I paused. I made brief visual connections with individual students. I wanted them to see that good communication involves awareness of the people receiving the message.

Over time, I noticed that some students gradually changed.

A student who originally stared at the floor might begin looking up for one sentence. Later, that same student might look at several classmates

during a presentation. Their posture sometimes changed as well. Their voices became stronger. Their faces became more expressive.

Their improvement revealed itself gradually and I learned to value those small changes. For a nervous student, briefly making eye contact with an audience can represent a significant step toward becoming a more confident communicator.

I carefully gave feedback by asking the student or sometimes the class to stand up and practice together looking at the audience. Over time, I observed that demonstrating the desired behavior was more effective than simply explaining it.

“Maintain eye contact with your audience throughout your presentation.”

“Look at your notes, find your idea, and then look up before you speak.”

“Glance at the left, middle and right parts of the audience while presenting.”

Specific guidance makes the skill feel achievable. This helped me understand something larger about communication teaching. We sometimes evaluate students on behaviors that we have never explicitly taught them.

We may expect students to stand confidently, use eye contact, speak loudly, organize ideas, and respond naturally. Yet many students have had very little opportunity to practice these behaviors. If communication is a skill, then the behaviors surrounding communication also need practice. Eye contact is one of them.

It can help speakers connect with listeners, but it can also help students become more aware that communication is an interaction rather than simply the delivery of correct English.

The goal is not to create students who perform flawlessly. The goal is to help them gradually develop communication behaviors that allow genuine confidence to grow. For some students, that process begins with something very small: looking up, seeing the person listening, while continuing to speak.

As teachers, are we simply expecting students to make eye contact, or are we teaching them how to build visual connection as part of communication?

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ARTICLE 7

Why Pair Work Isn't Just Pair Work

Educators, do you have this situation? In class, we often ask our students questions to engage them and elicit participation. The question was asked. A strange quiet settles over the room as everyone avoids eye contact with you. You see a student sitting stoically in class. Never speaking. Paying attention but not wanting to talk above an audible whisper. Meanwhile, the same more active students tend to respond repeatedly.

How do you deal with this?

As an instructor, I've come to understand over the years more about the complexity of learning a second language. For many years, I used to think silence was a confidence and opportunity problem. Students needed more vocabulary, more speaking practice and encouragement. I am aware that in the classroom environment with 20, 30, 40 and more students it is challenging to give attention to each student. Students respond to language learning in very different ways. Some can stand up and stand out amongst their peers and speak easily with no inhibitions. Others are nervous, deeply introverted, embarrassed and terrified to stand up and speak.

After watching a plethora of classes, however, I noticed something else. Sometimes students were not unwilling to communicate.

Sometimes they were simply not ready to communicate in front of everyone yet. This realization changed how I viewed pair work. Pair work is often considered a simple classroom activity. Teachers use it to increase speaking time, allow students to practice language, or make lessons more interactive.

However, I began to see pair work as something more important. It can become a bridge between knowing an answer and having the confidence to share that answer publicly. When students speak with one partner first, this process relieves pressure. They speak to one person first rather than the entire classroom. This modest interaction allows students to check and clarify their understanding, organize their thoughts, test their ideas, make mistakes, and adjust their language before presenting to a larger audience.

For language learners, this process matters. Practicing speaking a second language as you are learning requires risk. Students are not only searching for vocabulary and grammar. They are also managing uncertainty:

- Is my answer correct?
- Will my teacher and classmates understand me?
- Will someone laugh if I make a mistake?
- Can I express my idea clearly?

A whole-class discussion often requires students to overcome all these concerns at the same time. Pair work reduces this pressure and creates a smaller space where students can begin.

In my own classroom, I often prepared pair discussion activities using the following sequence:

1. Introduce the concept.
2. Present the task.
3. Give students a short period to think individually.
4. Pair students to discuss their ideas.
5. Invite them to complete or share the task with the class.

This structure gives students time to prepare both mentally and linguistically. I found that students who rarely volunteered answers during whole-class discussions often became more willing to

participate after discussing with a partner first. Sometimes the difference was not their ability. Some students already had an idea but needed time to organize it. Others needed interaction with a peer before an idea began to take shape or before they felt ready to share it.

One student remains especially memorable to me. He sat by himself and almost never spoke in class. In fact, the only time I regularly heard his voice was during roll call, when he quietly confirmed his name. Throughout the term, he rarely volunteered, participated orally, or spoke above a whisper. Then came the final presentation. He was paired with a classmate. To my surprise, he sat with her in the front of the classroom, walked to the front with her, and spoke during the presentation. It was not a long speech, and he did not suddenly become an outspoken student. But he spoke. After watching him remain almost completely silent for so long, I was genuinely amazed.

That moment reminded me that progress does not always look dramatic. Sometimes confidence appears first in very small steps. For this student, having a partner seemed to provide enough support for him to do something he had not been willing to do alone. This also changed how I thought about classroom participation. A student who does not immediately raise their hand is not always disengaged. A quiet student may be processing. A student may need time to organize their thoughts. A student may need a safer first step before taking a larger risk. Teachers often praise the students who speak quickly and confidently. Those students serve as models for the rest of the class, and this is fine. However, we also need to create pathways for students who develop confidence more gradually.

Pair work provides one of those pathways. It does not replace whole-class discussion, presentations, or independent speaking. Instead, it prepares students for those moments. The purpose of pair work is not simply to make a classroom louder. The purpose is to help students

become more comfortable using their voices. When students practice speaking in smaller, supportive environments, they gradually develop the confidence to communicate in larger ones.

Communication confidence does not appear suddenly. It develops through repeated experiences where students learn:

- My ideas are worth sharing.
- My mistakes are part of learning.
- I can communicate with others.

Pair work may look like a simple classroom activity. But sometimes the smallest classroom structures create the biggest changes. A conversation between two students may become the first step toward a student finding their voice in front of many.

As teachers, are we using pair work simply to increase speaking time, or are we using it as a bridge that helps students develop the confidence to communicate?

ARTICLE 8

Creating Psychological Safety in the Language Classroom

Fellow educators, have you encountered a student who raises their hand to answer a question. They start answering, then pause, look around the classroom, then suddenly stop speaking.

Sometimes the student knows the answer and has already prepared what they want to say, yet something prevents the words from coming out. Other times, the student may have no idea what to say but still want to try anyway. For many years of teaching English communication, I became increasingly intrigued by the space between knowing and speaking. What happens during that moment when a student has an idea but hesitates to share it? These may be some of the thoughts running through the student's mind:

- Will I be laughed at?
- Will the teacher correct every word?
- Will I lose face?
- Will my classmates think I am unintelligent?
- Will I be rushed?
- Will my unfinished idea be dismissed?

At first, I thought the answer was simply confidence. Students needed more speaking practice, preparation time, vocabulary, and encouragement. These are crucial elements in learning a second language. Over time, however, I observed that something else was required as well: safety. Psychological safety. Students need to feel safe enough to take a risk exposing themselves in the language learning classroom. A psychologically safe classroom is not one without expectations. It is one where students can meet high expectations without fearing humiliation. This is where psychological safety

becomes an important part of language learning. The teacher plays a key role in setting the tone for how mistakes are managed.

A language classroom is different from many other classrooms because students are constantly being asked to expose their thinking. When students speak another language, they are not only sharing ideas. They are also revealing what they do not yet know. They may make pronunciation mistakes, choose the wrong word, create a sentence that is understandable but not grammatically perfect and pause while searching for vocabulary. Every time a student speaks, they take a small risk. The classroom environment influences whether that risk feels manageable. I learned that students pay close attention to how teachers respond:

- When a student makes a mistake, do they feel corrected or supported?
- When a student gives an incomplete answer, do they feel encouraged to continue?
- When a student struggles to express an idea, do they feel that their attempt has value?

In my experience as an educator, I have guided, calmed, and reassured many students who were too afraid, embarrassed, or shy to speak. Their nervousness was often visible before they said anything. I could see it in their faces, posture, movements, and body language. I remember one student standing on stage trying to say a sentence while visibly shaking. Rather than raising my voice or rushing the student, I deliberately lowered the tone of my voice. I spoke more calmly and gently, trying to reduce the pressure of the moment and help the student settle enough to continue.

Experiences like this taught me that a teacher's response is not communicated only through words. Our tone, facial expression,

patience, pace, and body language can either increase a student's anxiety or help make the situation feel manageable. Sometimes supporting a student means recognizing the nervousness before asking for more performance.

I also made a point of telling students directly that mistakes were acceptable in my classroom. I would say things such as: "It is okay to make mistakes. In my class, that is alright. I would rather you try. I will never be upset with you for trying. I will be more concerned if you do not try. Making mistakes is part of the learning process, and I understand that learning English can be difficult and challenging. It is okay."

I wanted students to hear this clearly from me because I did not want them to interpret every mistake as failure. I wanted them to understand that effort mattered, that imperfect language was still worth attempting, and that the classroom was a place where they could try without fearing that I would become angry or disappointed simply because they made an error. Over time, I came to see these kinds of statements as part of creating psychological safety. Students need more than general encouragement. Sometimes they need the teacher to say explicitly, and repeatedly, that mistakes are expected and that genuine effort has value.

The teacher also has a responsibility to set clear expectations for how students treat one another when mistakes happen. It is not enough for the teacher to say, "It is okay to make mistakes," if students fear being mocked, laughed at, bullied, or embarrassed by their classmates.

Students also need to know that ridicule and humiliation will not be tolerated in the classroom. For me, creating a psychologically safe environment meant making it clear that students were expected to respect one another's attempts to communicate. A student who mispronounced a word, used incorrect grammar, forgot what they

wanted to say, or struggled to complete a sentence should not become the target of mockery.

Peer reactions matter. A classroom can quickly become unsafe if students learn that speaking carries the risk of public embarrassment from classmates. For that reason, psychological safety depends not only on the teacher's encouragement, but also on the classroom behavioral norms the teacher establishes and protects. Students need to understand that making mistakes is part of learning and that respecting one another during that process is a shared classroom responsibility.

These moments may appear small to a teacher. For students, they can influence whether they choose to speak again. In my own classrooms, I tried to create an environment where communication came before perfection. This did not mean lowering expectations. Students still needed to develop accuracy, vocabulary, grammar, and organization. However, I wanted students to understand that mistakes were part of the learning process rather than evidence that they should remain silent. I often encouraged students to try first and refine later. A rough answer could become a better answer. A simple sentence could become a more complex idea. A hesitant response could become a confident contribution. Confidence develops through experiences where students realize:

- "I can try."
- "I can make mistakes."
- "I can improve."
- "I can speak."

I also learned that psychological safety does not mean that every classroom moment is comfortable. Learning requires challenge. Students need to be pushed beyond what they already know. The goal

is not to remove discomfort completely. The goal is to create a classroom where students believe they can handle discomfort. There is a difference between “I am uncomfortable because I am learning” and “I am uncomfortable because I am afraid of being embarrassed.” The first can lead to growth. The second can lead to silence. As teachers, we sometimes focus heavily on what students produce.

- Did they answer correctly?
- Did they use the right grammar?
- Did they complete the task?

These questions matter. However, we also need to consider a deeper question:

- Did the student feel safe enough to try?

Because before students can become confident communicators, they need opportunities to communicate. To do this, they need to believe their voice belongs in the classroom. Psychological safety is not created through one activity or one classroom rule. It develops through repeated interactions. The teacher listens carefully and responds respectfully. It develops in a classroom where students learn that mistakes are not moments of mockery and embarrassment, but opportunities for growth.

When students feel this environment, something changes. They begin to speak more. They take more risks. They become more willing to participate. The classroom becomes more than a place where students practice English. It becomes a place where students discover that their ideas have value. Over time, I have watched students become more confident in the classroom. Students who were once nervous, shy, or hesitant gradually began to stand up, speak more clearly, and participate with greater confidence. The changes were not always immediate, and they did not happen in the same way for every student.

But I saw the results. Students who once struggled to speak in front of others became more willing to try. Students who once avoided attention became more comfortable expressing themselves. Students who once seemed overwhelmed by speaking tasks gradually became more composed and confident.

These experiences reinforced my belief that creating a psychologically safe classroom makes a real difference. When students know that mistakes are part of learning, that their efforts will be respected, and that they will not be humiliated for trying, they are more willing to take the risks that communication requires. It works. Not because students suddenly stop feeling nervous, but because they begin to believe that they can move through that nervousness and still be heard.

As teachers, are we only creating opportunities for students to speak, or are we creating environments where students feel safe enough to use their voices?

ARTICLE 9

Why Behavior Modeling Matters in Communication Teaching

You are an educator teaching your students about presentation skills. You tell them to make eye contact with their audience, look up, project their voices, stand upright, and avoid reading directly from their notes. Yet when they stand in front of the class, many do exactly what we told them not to do. They stare at their notes, their voices become quiet, their posture hunches over, and their eyes drift toward the floor.

For a long time, I understood that students needed clear instructions when learning presentation and communication skills. However, in many instances, I noticed that explaining the skill was not enough; the students needed to see it. This became one of the most useful lessons I learned while teaching communication and presentation skills. I began deliberately modeling the behaviors I wanted students to mimic.

- If I wanted students to make eye contact, I showed them what natural eye contact looked like.
- If I wanted them to use notes without reading word for word, I stood in front of the class with notes and demonstrated how to glance down, find the idea, look up, and continue speaking.
- If I wanted an upright posture, I showed them the difference between standing with the body upright and standing hunched over while facing the audience.
- If I wanted students to project their voices, I demonstrated what happened when I spoke too quietly and then repeated the same sentence using stronger vocal projection.

The difference in student attention was noticeable. Instead of simply listening to another set of instructions, they were watching

communication happen. They could see the behavior, hear the difference, and compare one example with another. The expectation became visible. That mattered. Communication is not only intellectual. It is physical.

We communicate through our voices, our faces, our posture, our eyes, our pauses, and our awareness of the people around us. Many of these behaviors are difficult to learn from verbal explanations alone. A student may understand the instruction “maintain eye contact,” but still not know how often to look at an audience. A student may understand “use your notes as support,” but still not understand the difference between referring to notes and reading an entire presentation from the page. A student may understand “stand confidently,” but have no clear picture of what confident posture looks like.

Modeling turns an abstract instruction into something students can observe. I also noticed that modeling changed the atmosphere of the lesson. Students became more engaged by watching and reacting. They would smile and laugh when I deliberately exaggerated an ineffective presentation behavior. They noticed differences and commented on what they saw. Instead of being talked at, they became part of the learning process. This distinction became increasingly important to me. Students need to participate in their learning actively and not passively.

I also learned that modeling alone was not always enough. In some classes, students could watch me demonstrate each desired behavior and still struggle to understand what I wanted them to do. At those times, I had to make the learning even more physical. I would ask the entire class to stand up, come to the front, and practice the behaviors with me. We would stand upright, look toward the audience, lift our voices, glance at notes, and then look up again. Instead of only

watching the skill, the students had to physically do it. They could begin to feel what the posture, projection, eye contact, and movement were supposed to be like. That experience taught me that some communication skills are difficult to understand until students experience them with their own bodies. Seeing an example can make the expectation visible but physically rehearsing it can make the expectation more concrete.

There is a difference between telling students what effective communication looks like and helping them recognize it for themselves. When students participate in that process, their understanding can become deeper. They are no longer simply memorizing a list of presentation rules. They are observing communication, interpreting it, and beginning to apply what they have seen.

Sometimes I would demonstrate the weaker version first:

- Look only at my notes
- Mumble my words
- Slump onto the table
- Avoid looking at the audience

Then I would ask students what they noticed. Afterward, I would demonstrate the same presentation again using stronger eye contact, clearer posture, better vocal projection, and more awareness of the audience. The students could immediately see the contrast. They did not need a long explanation; the difference was instantly visible. This also helped students become more active observers of one another. As they learned what effective communication looked like, they became better able to recognize those behaviors during presentations.

- They could notice eye contact.
- They could notice voice.

- They could notice posture.
- They could notice whether someone was connecting with the audience or simply reading words aloud.

Their understanding moved beyond knowing the terminology. They began recognizing the skill in practice. I eventually realized that this principle extended beyond presentation skills. Students often understand more when they actively participate in learning rather than simply receive information from the teacher.

- To observe.
- To compare.
- To try.
- To make mistakes.
- To receive feedback.
- To try again.

Modeling creates a bridge between explanation and action. The teacher demonstrates. The student observes and practices. The teacher responds. The student adjusts. Learning becomes interactive. This does not mean teachers should perform everything for students. Students still need independence. They still need opportunities to solve problems, make decisions, and develop their own communication style. But before asking students to demonstrate a skill, we should consider whether we have made that skill visible enough for them to understand what we are asking them to do.

One of the most important things I learned from teaching communication was that students do not always need more instructions. Sometimes they need an example. Sometimes they need to see the difference. Sometimes they need the teacher to step forward and demonstrate the very behavior being requested of them. When students can see, hear, and experience the skill, they have something

concrete to work with. When they become active participants in that process, their understanding can change.

I noticed changes in some students' presentation behavior after I modeled these skills and had them practice the behaviors with me. The changes were not identical for every student, and they did not happen all at once. But in some students, I saw more eye contact, stronger posture, clearer vocal projection, and greater awareness of the audience. Those changes reinforced for me that modeling and guided practice could help students translate an abstract expectation into visible behavior.

As teachers, are we simply telling students what effective communication looks like, or are we giving them opportunities to see it, experience it, and practice it for themselves?

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ARTICLE 10

Not Every Student Finds Their Voice the Same Way

You stand in front of your class and ask a question. One student who is always active eagerly raises his hand and says, “I know, I know, me teacher, me teacher, I know the answer.”

Another student sits calmly and quietly. This student hardly speaks and is very laidback in class.

In every classroom, there are students who make themselves known quickly. They raise their hands, answer eagerly, and speak loudly. Other students seem hesitant, passive, introverted, shy, or simply unsure of how to enter the conversation. For years, I became increasingly aware of these quieter students. Some of them were paying close attention. Some were thinking and understanding more than they were willing to say. Others needed more time. Some needed support from a partner or needed to see an example first. Finally, some simply did not communicate in the same way as the most outgoing students in the room. That distinction became important to me. The goal was never to make every student equally loud. The goal was to create enough different pathways that each student had a genuine opportunity to communicate.

These experiences changed how I thought about participation. If I relied only on volunteers, the same confident students would repeatedly dominate the discussion. By asking a question and expecting an immediate answer, the students who processed more slowly could disappear into the background. If I assumed that silence meant disengagement, I risked misunderstanding what was happening. Over time, I slowed down, became more attentive and patient and began trying diverse ways to bring all students into the learning

process. I gave them thinking time before asking for a response. I asked them to discuss an idea with one partner first. I used small groups before moving to whole-class discussion. Sometimes I gave students sentence structures or speaking frameworks such as A.R.E. or P.R.E.P. so they had something to organize their thoughts around. I allowed them to use notes as support. I also modeled the communication behavior first so they could see what I was asking them to do. I would gently encourage a student who was very shy or timid to say something, while reassuring them that it was all right to try and that they were safe. A student who said little might still be following the conversation closely. A student who avoided speaking in front of the class might become animated with one trusted classmate. A student who needed several seconds before responding might eventually give a thoughtful answer. A student who appeared passive might become more involved once the task felt manageable. The more I observed, the more I realized that inclusion in a communication classroom cannot mean expecting every student to participate in the same way. Students bring different temperaments and personalities into the room.

Through repeated observation, I became more intentional about balancing participation in my classes so that quieter and less active students also had genuine opportunities to speak. I paid attention to what seemed to help, what did not, and how different students responded. I tried different approaches, adjusted them, and looked for ways to make participation feel more manageable. Over time, I noticed that in some quieter students, both their confidence and willingness to speak increased noticeably. It was striking to see what guided encouragement, patience, and the right amount of support could bring out in some students.

They also bring various levels of confidence, previous classroom experiences, language ability, social comfort, and willingness to take risks. A student who finds it easy to speak in front of thirty people is beginning from a vastly different place than a student who finds it difficult to speak to one person. That does not mean expectations should disappear. I still wanted students to communicate and develop confidence. I expected them to practice speaking, presenting, listening, and responding. However, I began thinking more carefully about the route each student might need to get there:

- For one student, the route might begin with answering a question in front of the whole class.
- For another, it might begin with quietly discussing the answer with a partner.
- For another, it might mean writing the idea first.
- For another, it might mean using notes.
- For another, simply looking up and speaking one complete sentence could represent real progress.

This taught me to pay attention not only to the final performance but also to the starting point. A quiet student does not need to become extroverted to become a stronger communicator. An introverted student does not need to become the loudest person in the room. A shy student does not need to lose their personality. Growth can mean becoming more comfortable expressing an idea.

- It can mean speaking a little louder.
- It can mean volunteering once when they never volunteered.
- It can mean collaborating confidently with a partner.
- It can mean standing at the front of the classroom when that once seemed impossible.

The progress may be subtle, but subtle progress is still progress. I also learned that quieter students can easily become invisible if teachers are not intentional. The fast responders naturally attract attention. The outspoken students make participation easy to see, but teaching requires noticing the students whose growth may appear differently:

- Sometimes it means asking a quieter student a question privately.
- Sometimes it means pairing students thoughtfully.
- Sometimes it means giving encouragement without putting someone unnecessarily on the spot.
- Sometimes it means recognizing that a student is not ready today but may be ready later.
- Sometimes it means accepting that communication confidence develops gradually.

There is no single personality type that owns effective communication. Confident communication can be energetic and expressive. It can also be thoughtful, measured, quiet, and deliberate. Students need to discover a way of communicating that feels authentic to them and expands their communication breadth simultaneously. That was one of the most important things I learned. I was not trying to manufacture identical communicators; I was trying to help students realize the capabilities they have. Some would always be naturally outspoken. Others would always be more reserved:

- Both could learn to express ideas clearly.
- Both could learn to listen.
- Both could learn to connect with others.
- Both could develop confidence.

They simply might not arrive there in the same way. In my classes, I tried my best to make sure that all students had the opportunity to

speak and express themselves. I tried to be just as attentive to the quieter students as I was to the more active ones.

As teachers, are we creating one narrow definition of what a confident communicator should look like, or are we making room for students to find their voices in ways that reflect who they are?

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