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English Language Speaking / Oral Communication Lessons: Inhibiting Factors and Practical Solutions

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Abstract

Although the importance of English language Speaking / Oral Communication lessons are self-evident, numerous common realities frequently threaten to reduce their actual and / or perceived quality and - in extreme cases - basic educational worth. This article will identify and examine the most salient and pressing of those problems, then advise on how best to forestall, eliminate or ameliorate them.

Key words : English Language Speaking / Oral Communication
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1. Introduction

Given the international role and consequently high importance of the English language, the acquisition of 'intermediate' and 'advanced' level English language skills and - to that end improvement of one's existing English language abilities - has for decades in Japan been widely acknowledged among the general public to be a worthy and potentially highly beneficial objective; one that all full-time students should attempt to realise for as long a time as seems prudent. At present, there continues to be a major and still increasing

long-term public and private-sector demand for Japanese workers with reliable 'intermediate' and 'advanced' level English Reading Comprehension, Listening Comprehension, Writing and Speaking / Oral Communication (OC) competency, perhaps most notably in service industries such as the tourism-hospitality and consumer retailing sectors. The professional, career-related and broader quality-of-life benefits that are likely to accrue to those who do manage to acquire such competences are substantial. As with skill and qualification acquisition generally, high(er) overall

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English language competency tends to improve one's career opportunities, earning potential, workplace performance, professional development, promotion prospects and - at least partly as a consequence - much else besides. The more technically proficient and impressive a Japanese job candidate's demonstrable English abilities are known or thought to be, the greater the chance of their being hired, all else being equal. Suffice it to say that compelling evidence of excellent overall, 'advanced-level' English language Reading Comprehension, Listening Comprehension, Writing and Speaking / Oral Communication *proficiency* is highly valued by a large and probably growing number of increasingly internationally-oriented and / or globally aware Japanese individuals, governmental institutions and larger-sized private-sector commercial and non-profit entities. In sum, it generally pays at least over the long(er)-term to develop advanced English language competency.

2. Necessity For Oral Communication Lessons

Why, exactly, are Speaking / Oral Communication classes necessary and worthwhile, even in the least favourable conditions? What plausible points can be made in their defence to this effect? The following is a tentative and very likely far from exhaustive answer to this question:

In line with common sense, lessons dedicated in full or part to Speaking / Oral Communication skill practice and enhancement at the junior school, high school and university level have always or long been considered crucial components of all serious language teaching programs and remain so. Clearly, one of the four central reasons

for - and perhaps most venerated aim of - all English language studies is to acquire robust, advanced-level English language Speaking / Oral Communication skills. By definition, effective Speaking / Oral Communication skills are a central prerequisite component-and measure-of overall, comprehensive language competency. People with only poor or mediocre Speaking / Oral Communication competency clearly cannot plausibly be said to possess demonstrably 'excellent', 'good' or even merely 'acceptable', comprehensive language capability.

Effective Speaking / Oral Communication tuition that helps students retain and markedly improve their ability to make themselves understood effectively in real time, without excessive, unreasonable difficulty or delay and to understand what others say, effectively in real time, without excessive, unreasonable difficulty or delay, are surely as valid and necessary as those teaching efforts intended to enhance Reading Comprehension, Listening Comprehension and / or Writing competency.

Moreover, discernible cognitive advances in Reading Comprehension, Listening Comprehension, Writing and / or Speaking / Oral Communication competency are more likely than not to be at least casually related, interlinked and, to albeit varying extents, interdependent. Student advances in any one of these four fundamental, core disciplines may well i) be facilitated or even enabled by earlier advances in one or more of the other three and ii) subsequently bring about - or contribute to - tangible progress in one or more of them. In other words, an advance in competency in any

one may well have beneficial, reinforcing spill-over effects as regards one or more of the others. Also, the case can be made that even if this were not so, Speaking / Oral Communication lessons would still be of educational value since, if nothing else, they often instil in many students greater appreciation of the advantages of overall English competency and / or greater liking for the study of English as a whole. The student who detests and / or fails - at whatever stage - to perform well in Speaking / Oral Communication lessons, may be moved to devote more effort to the study of English as a whole in a bid to improve on such a state of affairs. In any case, unless one has compelling evidence to think and act to the contrary, it appears to be a sound policy to proceed in ways that seem most liable to foster such virtuous cyclical processes.

While the necessity to differentiate between Reading Comprehension, Listening Comprehension, Writing and Speaking / Oral Communication disciplines for practical teaching and study-revision purposes is unavoidable and obvious, there is perhaps too often an 'every day' danger of conceiving of and viewing each of these closely-interconnected core disciplines too much as an autonomous realm and - most dubiously - even an entirely detached discipline. In this connection, it is of course important to note and remain cognisant of the fact that, humans don't just speak 'conventionally', they silently voice and immediately listen to their own thoughts along with the words that they themselves read, write and hear (themselves and others say).

It is undoubtedly true that many or most foreign language students fail to progress equally well with regard to all four fundamental, core disciplines in any given time-frame, but it is safe to say that demonstrable attainment of reliable 'intermediate' or 'advanced' level competency re. any one of them, i) probably requires - and stems from - the study of all four and ii) indicates potential ability to similarly master one or more of the other three. The student who comes to excel at, for example, English Writing but not English Speaking / Oral Communication, or vice-versa, can hardly be assumed to permanently lack the requisite intelligence, knowledge or means to rectify such a failing. Such a rectification - if attempted - may be a comparatively more difficult and daunting undertaking for the individual concerned and their teacher(s), but the inherent potential for progress and thus eventual success cannot be doubted.

In a very real sense, Reading Comprehension, Listening Comprehension, Writing and Speaking / Oral Communication are four equally important disciplines. Ambitious it may well be, but as common sense suggests, a comprehensive 'broad-front' approach centred on the simultaneous teaching of all four fundamental core disciplines to an equally intensive degree appears optimal and quite possibly vital for maximal success. No comprehensive English language program worth its salt can surely for long soundly accord higher priority or status to any one or subset of the four fundamental core disciplines. To do so seems to entail embarking on the academically indefensible. The four fundamental, core disciplines are surely-

of equivalent significance and thus equally deserving of attention. Teaching time, study time and resources should thus normally be apportioned equally between the four, or - if that simply is not feasible - as close to equally as possible. Teachers and students of native and certainly foreign languages neglect or accord lower significance to any one or more of these four fundamental, core disciplines at their peril. All foreign language students should aim and strive to develop excellent Reading Comprehension, Listening Comprehension, Writing and Speaking / Oral Communication competency in unison.

Whenever teachers et al consider individual students or classes to be under-performing vis-a-vis any of the four fundamental core disciplines, appropriate, properly-targeted and tailored additional, remedial lessons ideally ought to be provided with a view to ameliorating and overcoming such shortcomings. Such measures are quite different from - and greatly preferable to - any curtailment or discontinuation of the simultaneous and equally intensive teaching of all four fundamental core disciplines.

Though a majority of students may perhaps think Speaking / Oral Communication to be the most awkward, difficult and demanding of the four fundamental core disciplines (given the need for direct human interaction and immediacy), there are, of course, nevertheless plenty of non-native English language users who are entirely justified in considering their Speaking / Oral Communication skills to be their strongest, not weakest language asset. Foreign language

students may tend, statistically-speaking, to be better at comprehending written / printed and heard information and expressing themselves via writing rather than orally, but this can never be assumed. Plus, even if an individual's Speaking / Oral Communication skills are - at whatever stage - conclusively found to be the least well developed, most problematic of all four competences, this need not remain the case permanently. Performance variation across the four fundamental core disciplines fluctuates over time, along with student study practises and preferences.

3. Literature Review: Context

i) According to Richards (2008), the teaching of English Speaking / Oral Communication underwent something close to or approximating an outright transformation in the two or three decades after 1970, away from what had until then been a rather 'traditional', formal and at times overly 'rigid' regime, to what can perhaps best be described as a substantially freer, more relaxed and 'contemporary' approach that championed more flexible, 'natural' and experimental lessons. The latter increasingly came to be viewed as more effective vis-à-vis the development of truly functional / serviceable Speaking / Oral Communication competency.

Prior to the 1970s, monotonous repetition, drilling and the verbatim memorizing of dialogs, were major and generally dominant activities in many or most 'English as foreign language' Speaking / Oral Communication classes worldwide. However, finite goals and above all methods and tactics altered quite profoundly. Dissatisfaction

with results and thus earlier practices led to an increasingly strong and widespread desire to improve median communicative competency in general and capacity for successful self-expression in particular. This groundswell of sentiment in favor of a change of emphasis and tactics led educators to progressively place greater weight on so-called 'active', 'task-based' and 'problem-solving' activities that required students of all current ability ranges to consider and attempt to build Speaking / Oral Communication competency of the calibre required for successful speech-based interaction in authentic, everyday, real-life situations... something that is nowadays on the whole, still held to be advisable.

ii) Unsurprisingly, Pathan (2013) concludes that pronunciation, intonation, word stressing, sentence construction and lack of sufficient vocabulary are leading factors that generally serve to frustrate and curtail effective English language Speaking / Oral Communication for English language learners, as much today as in earlier years.

iii) Juhana (2012) discusses psychological factors that hinder students from speaking in English class. According to his research, psychological factors, including fear of making mistakes, shyness, anxiety, lack of confidence and motivation, inhibit or prevent students from speaking well in English Speaking / Oral Communication lessons. As one would predict, Juhana suggests that the magnitude of these problems can be reduced if teachers create and maintain a friendly and relaxed, relatively informal in-class atmosphere (although student's not always ideal interpersonal

relationships largely have to be accepted as a given). Juhana's research also indicates that teachers should provide regular opportunities to practice proper pronunciation and intonation, etc with students, since this will probably make some of them progressively more confident to speak in English including in front of audiences. Lastly, Juhana plausibly asserts that lack of student motivation can be mitigated if teachers give regular consolation, support and encouragement.

4. Speaking / Oral Communication Course Objectives

All foreign language students should aim and thus strive to develop the capacity to communicate orally with native (and, by extension, minimally competent non-native) users of the targeted foreign language in an adequately efficient, dynamic, reliable and otherwise effective fashion. This being the case, the specific purpose and objective of any standard, mainstream contemporary Speaking / Oral Communication course or class is to i) help students' develop their ability to speak fluently, expansively, coherently and confidently in a clear manner that ensures that they will be understood by their interlocutors and - as a necessary corollary - ii) give students the opportunity to bolster their Listening Comprehension skills since the latter are clearly a vital prerequisite for effective Oral Communication.

Best Practice

In light of the foregoing, it is at all times imperative for teachers to have / let their students during each of their Speaking / Oral

Communication lessons communicate orally to the maximum degree possible and to correct them whenever they make serious and unacceptable (as opposed to minor and / or 'for the time being' acceptable) errors, unless doing so is, in special instances, felt likely to be counter-productive.

Advanced Level Students

For advanced-level students already in possession of superior and admirable Speaking / Oral Communication skills, Speaking / Oral Communication classes (at least if small) are likely to be very straightforward and in fact not only easy but actually highly enjoyable for the well-motivated, interested and attentive tutor (native English-speaking or otherwise), as long as he / she takes due care, as always, to teach to the appropriate level; only introduces new words and phrases etc in appropriate quantity and at an appropriate pace; explains what needs to be explained thoroughly but succinctly and lucidly; refrains from talking excessively and - most critically - uses activity materials and chooses or devises assignment tasks that all but a tiny minority of students find accessible, relevant, engaging and ultimately stimulating for, if need be, quite long periods of time.

Advanced-level students can and should to a more pronounced degree be left to their own devices as regards precisely what to say, not least because they are in general both the least likely to require major teacher assistance and the most likely to request help when they deem it to be necessary, advisable or advantageous. In addition, such students are precisely those most likely to

fully understand and act promptly and eagerly in response to their teacher's oral injunctions, instructions and suggestions (delivered to them whenever they are found to have made errors of sufficiently serious magnitude to warrant overt corrective intervention).

Currently Less and Minimally Advanced Level Students

It is very easy for English teachers - especially native-speaking ones - to underestimate both the amount of effort and degree of benefit that even the least currently able and accomplished students can and do frequently respectively exert and derive from Speaking / Oral Communication lessons. And as the reader will hopefully agree, such students are evidently almost always far better off attending such lessons than not doing so. The basic fact however is that Speaking / Oral Communication classes for currently less and minimally advanced students with comparatively far more limited or seriously deficient current Speaking / Oral Communication competency, are likely to be markedly less straightforward and not necessarily as satisfactory as those for advanced speakers, even in the minds of the most experienced, best-motivated, most interested and astute teachers... Why does this tend to be?

What Constitutes Success?

Constructive, beneficial and thus wholly successful English language Speaking / Oral Communication lessons are those that can be deemed (on the basis of objective and suitably rigorous, thorough-going appraisal) to have: 1) ultimately succeeded in making students speak / orally

communicate in the target language sufficiently 'well' for a sufficiently long period of time (in aggregate) in ways considered to be sufficiently compatible with - and relevant / responsive to - the teacher's instructions, guidelines, targets, prompts, questionings, suggestions and corrective interventions; 2) to have done so with sufficient cognitive understanding of precisely what they were doing (i.e. saying) and why. Whenever these two fundamental conditions are thought to have been met, it can be logically inferred that the student has successfully performed in ways liable to contribute to a (qualitative and / or quantitative) reinforcing and / or expansion of their overall Speaking / Oral Communication competency for the short, medium and / or long term. Therefore, wholly un-constructive, non-beneficial and thus unsuccessful English language Speaking / Oral Communication lessons are those that cannot be so deemed to have ultimately succeeded in respect to both (1) and (2). Constructive, beneficial and thus wholly successful English language Speaking / Oral Communication lessons are therefore those that can be deemed (on the basis of objective and suitably rigorous, thorough-going appraisal) to have ultimately caused / forced students to have utilised appropriate vocabulary (be it pre-taught in whatever class or introduced 'on the day' during the actual Speaking / Oral Communication lesson) in appropriate fashion. In essence, this requires that students perform sufficiently well with regard to grammatical accuracy, pronunciation accuracy, diction, enunciation, word order, sentence construction, speaking pace, vocal-oral audibility and (to some minimal degree at least) cerebral-intellectual 'creative' input. This being the case,

the core objective and expectation of Speaking / Oral Communication lessons is to raise the likelihood, that - by way of regular and relatively intensive practice and error correction - students will gradually begin to communicate with sufficient efficacy.

Constructive, beneficial and thus successful English language Speaking / Oral Communication lessons can and certainly should therefore be undertaken with students of all ages and apparent current ability ranges. However, it is clearly the case that the less advanced, assured and impressive a student's current overall English language competency, the more pedestrian, remedial and potentially fraught English language Speaking / Oral Communication lessons become.

5. Common Speaking / Oral Communication Problems

(1) Deficient linguistic-lexical and / or phonetic ability

A fundamental lack of linguistic-lexical and / or phonetic ability is clearly the preeminent reason why so many students (and / or their teachers and external assessors) remain dissatisfied with their English Speaking / Oral Communication capabilities if not English Speaking / Oral Communication lessons.

i) As is to be expected, a large proportion of students in any given population and time-frame do not learn or retain (in the long-term) minimally sufficient vocabulary with which to express themselves with adequate accuracy or clarity.

Nor are they reliably able to select and employ appropriate (retained) words with sufficient speed and / or accuracy.

ii) Another problem is grammatical accuracy. To some extent, this can be overlooked but there is, naturally, a limit to how far one can turn a blind-eye to grammatical errors. In the final analysis, the more grievous grammatical errors definitely need to be pointed out to students at least from time to time in a bid to reduce their observed frequency. That said, teachers must do their utmost to prevent students from letting awareness of grammatical complexities and attendant 'pitfalls' directly impede on speaking performance and / or obscure equally or even more important considerations and risks.

iii) In the opinion of this writer, pronunciation errors need to be pointed out immediately at all times in view of the fact that sufficiently accurate pronunciation is vital for effective Speaking / Oral Communication. Correcting mispronunciation can also usually be done quite rapidly and is more often than not met with immediate partial or full understanding on the part of the student concerned.

iv) Word choice, ordering and overall sentence construction performance are core or central failings. Most students i) do not know and ii) frequently cannot select words necessary or suitable for their expressive purpose. This key problem may or may not extend to Writing lessons. As is well known, students who are currently hard-pressed to produce even a small

number of basic sentences orally in good time may have no such problem in their Writing lessons or vice-versa, though such an extreme performance discrepancy is the least likely. Things like pronunciation and spelling act as (perhaps primary) inhibiting obstacles / hurdles in Speaking / Oral Communication and Writing lessons respectively.

(2) Deficient Listening Comprehension

Some students may fail to perform well in Speaking / Oral Communication lessons principally due to deficient listening comprehension. In the worst cases, this can lead to fundamental, chronic lack of understanding on the part of the student as to what precisely they are expected to say (above all in 'English only' lessons) and failure to respond effectively in two-way conversation. Observed Listening performance in Speaking / Oral Communication lessons may be worse than in Listing Comprehension classes owing to factors like immediacy and the non-scripted nature of much oral (class) communication (activity).

(3) Student-Student Listening Failure

Another serious problem to contend with in Speaking / Oral Communication lessons is the frequent failure of students to listen carefully to one another other, most evidently and seriously when single or small groups of students are required to give formal class presentations / demonstrations, one by one. Excellent students will pay attention at all times to all speakers and any interventions made by the supervising teacher and similarly attentive students. Yet a considerable percentage of currently less

advanced students cannot be expected to do so consistently or for long. All too often, the latter regard the time used by presenting students as their own 'preparation time' or 'time out' to relax in, when - in fact - teachers prefer (and presumably instruct) them to listen carefully to what each and every presenter says, not only for the inherent educational worth of doing so, but so as to be ready to ask and answer questions at the end of each presentation. Clearly this issue might well flow from deficient listening ability and / or general lack of interest but not necessarily: one other possibility is that students are more interested to listen to some of their classmates than others, either for interpersonal reasons or conceivably as a result of having made judgements about their peers' respective currently English competency levels being too low or too high or closer to boring than stimulating, etc. Even first-class students may at times ignore the presentations and demonstrations of perceived 'rivals' and students whom they rate lowly and / or do not much care for. Such problems are probably most likely to present themselves when variance in current competency levels among students of the same, single class is great.

(4) Actual, authentic Lack of Interest

A fundamental lack of student interest, motivation and thus willingness and / or ready capacity to comprehend, engage with, concentrate on, and attempt to satisfactorily complete the task(s) at hand for the required length of time is sometimes observed in Speaking / Oral Communication lessons. This is usually because of i) lack overall current ability; ii) fleeting natural causes such as

fatigue or moodiness or iii) a merely temporary failure to understand how to proceed, etc. Such students might well consequently suffer from new or intensified negative psychological feelings as a result (see below), rationally based or otherwise, which might then compound matters. As such, 'lack of interest' is likely to be only a result or symptom of other, more fundamental problems; an effect rather than a cause. But this is not the only possibility: the chances of regularly encountering a student with good or excellent overall current English competency who nevertheless appears to be fundamentally disinterested may be low (assuming good lesson planning and execution, etc) but not necessarily zero. While such students will usually be fundamentally interested or at least eager to complete assigned tasks well or to the best of their ability, even they can, at least on occasion, become broadly disengaged, lethargic and / or distracted such as when they decide that assigned activities are too easy, (if not too hard), boring and / or derivative and therefore unimportant and unnecessary, at least for them.

(5) English Language Creativity Deficits?

As regards 'cerebral-intellectual' / 'creative' input, many students on occasion - including very able ones - report they cannot think of what they want to say... only what they don't want to say! If accurate, this is clearly a separate issue from inability to choose and order words or construct sentences satisfactory, etc. Since it seems to be especially prevalent when students are asked to reveal and elaborate on their opinions or give advice, it may to some extent sometimes be a reflection of the apparent fact that many

students in Japan are not used to doing such (in the Japanese language) and / or would rather not do so for private, personal reasons, especially as regards topics they consider risqué or taboo.

(6) Speaking Pace

Whether speaking pace is judged by teachers to fall within acceptable parameters is normally governed by the degree to which the student is able and willing to demonstrate sufficient competency as regards grammatical accuracy, pronunciation accuracy, diction, enunciation, word choice and order, sentence construction and (to some minimal degree at least) cerebral-intellectual 'creative' input. Failure to speak quickly enough and / or to avoid making an excessive number of overly long, hesitant pauses, usually betrays insufficient ability in one or more of these critical areas and - sometimes - pre-existing or resultant inhibiting psychological hang-ups (see below). However, it is clearly possible for highly competent and capable students to similarly fail to speak quickly enough and / or avoid making an excessive number of overly long, hesitant pauses. This is often only because such students are (thankfully) prone to make strenuous efforts to choose their words carefully and express themselves with flare as well as precision, but sometimes stumble when being particularly ambitious (perhaps overly so) in this respect.

(7) Insufficient Vocal-Oral Audibility

As for insufficient vocal-oral audibility, failure to speak loudly enough so as to make oneself heard may likewise flow from the weaknesses listed above and-sometimes-pre-existing or resultant

inhibiting psychological hang-ups (see below). But again, it is clearly possible for highly competent and capable students to similarly fail to make themselves heard on account of their being naturally soft-spoken and / or reserved.

(8) An Acquired Taste

For various reasons, many Speaking / Oral Communication students who cannot be said to be seriously impeded by any social-psychological problems (see below), at heart dislike or are less than enamoured about speaking English (especially for extended periods) in the presence of their class-mates (and even perhaps native speakers), especially when they know or believe that their overall current level of competency is lower than that of some or a majority of their classmates and / or they consider the task(s) at hand very demanding, too ambitious and thus partially or fully beyond their capacity to execute with sufficient effectiveness.

(9) Social-Psychological Problems

Based on extended observations of high school, college and adult Speaking / Oral Communication lessons (in Japan) over a period of 14+ years, the present writer agrees with those who contend that various psychological factors can be said to frequently adversely affect and degrade student performance to greater or lesser degrees in regular class time - and if only by extension - formal examinations. While they may not outwardly indicate such, many students do become nervous about attempting to speak in English in front of - and even with - some if not all of their classmates (especially new ones) and may sometimes

or generally be very much afraid of making errors or even ‘signalling’ / ‘revealing’ their English Speaking / Oral Communication prowess, or lack thereof, to teachers (especially ‘new’ ones) and / or peers. This problem tends to be most acute when students are required to carry out / perform more formal, demonstration and presentation exercises. Afflicted students typically become more reserved, reticent, unforthcoming and inarticulate than usual if not tongue-tied.

Common psychological factors are summarised as follows: **1)** a natural, inherent shyness and / or nervousness about being the real or imagined locus of attention unrelated to English language studies but quite possibly exacerbated and brought to the fore by them, above all Speaking / Oral Communication lessons; **2)** an overriding ‘perfectionist’ desire to minimise the number of mistakes one makes under any circumstances, regardless of occasion, audience presence, size or salience; **3)** an overriding desire not to be seen to make mistakes (for whatever reasons including perhaps the vain desire to retain one’s dignity and / or boost one’s prestige); **4)** an overriding fear of being criticized or reprimanded and / or being given low grades as a result of making numerous serious mistakes; **5)** an overriding fear of appearing - in one’s own estimation - to be comparatively less skilled, dim-witted and / or foolish in comparison with one’s classmates as a result of making numerous serious mistakes; **6)** an overriding fear of being understood or thought by one’s classmates to generally underperform (for whatever reasons, regardless of whether one makes mistakes); **7)** an

overriding desire to deliberately under-perform so as to ‘fit in’ and / or avoid the possible humbling, embarrassing, humiliating or annoying of one’s classmates (when one’s current Speaking / Oral Communication competency is known or thought to be superior to theirs); **8)** an overriding fear of having to subject oneself to the ‘lime-light’ on a regular basis, especially when one feels lonely and / or - rightly or wrongly - detached and alienated or ostracised from - or ill-treated by - some, most or all of one’s classmates; **9)** an overriding belief (accurate or merely imagined) that one’s grammatical accuracy, pronunciation accuracy, diction, enunciation, word choice, ordering, sentence construction, speaking pace, vocal-oral audibility and / or cerebral-intellectual ‘creative’ input are not of adequately advanced calibre to warrant ‘public’ demonstration; **10)** an overriding desire to impress and entertain audiences in academically incompatible and sometimes disruptive ways that preclude good performance: eg. ‘acting aloof’ and / or ‘cool’, ‘ham-acting’, ‘playing the comedian’, and feigning or exaggerating feelings of disinterest, etc. This last phenomenon may or may not stem from a desire to effectively obscure or hide one’s known or imagined Speaking / Oral Communication shortcomings or (less likely) superiorities.

While it does appear to be the case that the most currently able of Speaking / Oral Communication students tend to be the least likely to generate, experience and exhibit such psychologically-rooted nervous impediments, it is surely unsound to conclude that they never do so. A more realistic belief is that such students tend to have

far higher confidence in their ability to perform satisfactorily or well and at least partly for that reason, greater capacity to prevent any negative thinking from gaining in significance to the point where it begins to adversely affect behaviour and degrade performance. One cannot ever confidently assume that the currently least able of Speaking / Oral Communication students automatically tend to be the most likely to exhibit symptoms consistent with such psychologically-rooted impediments. Psychological factors that serve to adversely affect and degrade performance may be more prevalent - statistically speaking - among Speaking / Oral Communication students with lower overall current competency but very likely frequently harm to varying extents the speaking performance of all students, including the currently more able ones. As such, psychologically-rooted impediments appear to be a common and serious problem for Speaking / Oral Communication students, one that teachers need to be constantly mindful of and continuously eager to mitigate or better.

(10) Pair and Group Work Issues

Pair and small group work are highly beneficial confidence raising, warming-up and clarifying exercises but the teacher must constantly and carefully check that they are being conducted and carried on by all students to an acceptable standard and extent, something which may at times be challenging with very large size classes. All too often, less well motivated and / or more easily distracted students (who are more likely to be those) with less advanced or low current Speaking / Oral Communication competency

levels are liable to view pair and group work half-heartedly, somewhat lackadaisically, with inadequate seriousness, and / or excessive caution. They are also the students most likely to tire of these activities too rapidly. Partly for this reason, pair and small group work can undoubtedly lead to currently more able students overly dominating proceedings at the expense of currently less able students and / or the less assertive and motivated ones with potentially unwelcome, lopsided outcomes if not interpersonal frictions.

Another problem is that - for social reasons - students may perform very differently depending on which partner or group they choose or are told to work with, so teachers must take care if and when they / themselves opt to determine pair and group composition.

(11) Teacher Versus Student Perception Disparity

i) It is important to note that wholly and relatively successful (and for that matter, wholly and relatively unsuccessful) English language Speaking / Oral Communication lessons - as defined above - may well not be considered to approximate such by all participating students. For a multitude of reasons, some percentage of English language Speaking / Oral Communication students will - at times if not systematically - assess their own personal competency and / or performance very differently from that of their teachers. Lacking equivalent or sufficient capacity to judge objectively, students are generally more likely to over- and under-estimate their own competencies and / or in-class performances than

are their teacher(s). It is hardly a rare thing for students to over-estimate their own competencies and / or in-class performances at one point in time and then underestimate them at another. At least some students may be liable to persistently flip-flop between such over- and under-estimation on a frequent basis and within extremely short periods of time. Worse still, such fluctuations and the negative changes in student mood and attitude etc that they may well sooner or later precipitate are not always immediately or otherwise perceptible / noticeable, even to teachers who are familiar and on good terms with the student(s) in question.

The great majority of Speaking / Oral Communication students - at least in Japan - are surely apt to suffer not from an excess of confidence but from a lack thereof. They are far more likely to underestimate their overall English language Speaking / Oral Communication competency than overestimate it. Over-estimation is a real but, less common and conceivably far less serious problem... at least when it does not bring about major, crises - or permanent losses - of interest, motivation, enthusiasm and / or confidence.

ii) Students who are or seem to be discouraged and dejected regarding their Speaking / Oral Communication lessons potentially threaten to harm and undermine the morale of classmates, if only unintentionally, even if they don't become distracting or disruptive.

iii) The possibility that some students may strike teachers and / or other students / as appearing

to feel elated or dejected with regard to their Speaking / Oral Communication performances when they are actually neither is a further consideration.

6. Solutions / Advice / Tips

(1) It is first of all supremely important to ensure that all students are given i) as many opportunities as possible to do extended presentation, demonstration and discussion speaking etc on ii) numerous and widely varying topics that greatly or adequately appeal to them (males and females). When this is ensured, the probability of satisfactory or superior student performance is likely to be at its highest. Student attention is immediately or rapidly captured in full or large part and there is a good chance that it will remain so for a satisfactory period of time. Moreover, overall student effort and performance is liable to be better than it otherwise would be. As such it is a good idea for the teacher to regularly canvass students for ideas and opinions regarding future activities. Even if the teacher tries hard to enliven and animate, topics that do not greatly or much impress or interest students may well result in inferior performance and perhaps lead some students to doubt their teacher's broader judgement.

(2) In addition, Speaking / Oral Communication teachers should of course always try especially hard to create a suitably relaxed, warm, friendly and otherwise conducive atmosphere where students do not feel overly put-upon, overly concerned about making mistakes.

(3) At a minimum, it is vital for any Speaking / Oral Communication teacher to ensure that all of their students understand prescribed vocabulary and dialogues before using them. But this can sometimes threaten to take up inordinate time.

(4) As stated above, pair and group work need to be constantly supervised if they are to have optimal impact.

(5) Half-hearted; lethargic behaviour and early disengagement in connection with any activity ideally ought to be nipped in the bud not least because it may be contagious!

(6) This writer contends that regardless of the current median student competence level, Speaking / Oral Communication lessons in general and university-level ones in particular, need not - be more than a secondary venue for the introduction and teaching of new words, phrases or important grammatical rules and structures, etc. Rather, Speaking / Oral Communication classes should approximate practical workshop-style forums in which (ideally only very small numbers of) students are afforded maximum possible time and opportunity to vocally test, practice and experiment (relatively freely) in substantial part with English language 'content' that they have already been taught elsewhere and which a large majority of their number have to varying degrees mastered. In this kind of educational space, it should be the chief, overriding task of the Speaking / Oral Communication teacher (apart from maintaining good order and similarly important though mundane tasks) to coach and

whenever necessary coax and goad students to be at once as forthcoming, clear, coherent, articulate and concise as possible. This writer as such contends that:

(7) Many students (especially those with currently less advanced Speaking / Oral Communication competency) perform better and derive more value and satisfaction from Speaking / Oral Communication lessons when permitted and encouraged to make extensive notes and / or write or type out desired sentence formulations in full, prior to making speeches, presentations and demonstrations. So long as students are prevented from plagiarising and from subsequently just reading verbatim what they have produced in written form, this approach can and frequently does ensure far more extensive, richer and impressive student contributions... and leaves both students and teachers with more of a documentary record of the fact to boot.

(8) In instances where students are at a loss to know what to say next, or clearly indicate that they will not likely be able to satisfactorily express themselves with sufficient fluency, clarity or coherence in good time, it is incumbent on the teacher - as a last resort - to put suitable words into student's mouths. As the lesser of two evils, to do so is a legitimate act... at least if the teacher makes clear to the beneficiaries that - in his or her opinion - they are being helped out of necessity, that they are at all times free to reject such help in full or part and, most importantly, alter and modify suggested word and proposed sentence constructions as they see fit.

(9) If and when Speaking / Oral Communication textbooks are to be utilised, they should contain high quality dialogue scripts and feature suitably rich vocabulary and / or stimulating information eminently usable for discussion and debating. Some supposedly dedicated Speaking / Oral Communication publications, including titles produced by major US and European publishing houses fail to meet these elementary criterion.

(10) The audio recording of student performances is a good idea for assessment purposes and, when conducted openly, can illicit greater effort on the part of students at least initially or when recording is done only occasionally. Video recording might well be useful but is also felt by some students to be an excessive measure, one overly invasive and / or off-putting. Normally, such visual archiving ought to be used only sparingly.

(11) Use of appropriately accessible and animating video content such as that which can readily be found on Youtube is usually a good way of priming students for constructive, successful personal presenting and discussion work whenever they have computing devices to hand.

(12) It is important to note that when teachers come to consider whether a student has in fact succeeded in speaking / orally communicating in the target language 'sufficiently well' for a 'sufficiently long period of time' during any given Speaking / Oral Communication lesson, they should - in the interests of fairness if nothing else - use two separate assessment measurement criteria. Firstly, they should, of course, assess how

near the student has managed to get to delivering the desired 'ideal' or 'model' performance'. Secondly, they should also then go on to compare the student's most recent performance with earlier ones in order to determine whether the student's latest performance is inferior, equivalent or superior to those observed previously. Only if this is done repeatedly can the existence of progress or the lack thereof be soundly suspected and inferred, if not ascertained beyond doubt.

(13) Finally, time allocation is an important consideration and cannot always be accurately estimated by the teacher in advance. Sometimes students require less time than anticipated, but more often than not more. Though students sometimes need to be chivvied, it is very important for the teacher not to underestimate the time that students need to prepare as well as perform good OC work. On the other hand, too long a preparation or activity can be deflating as well wasteful.

7. Conclusions:

The capacity **(1)** to express oneself well enough and - consequently **(2)** to comprehend via listening to what others mean when they do likewise - determines the current Speaking / Oral Communication competency level for foreign language earners. The former depends on the degree to which students successfully demonstrate the ability to select appropriate words, employ them in appropriately structured sentence formulations and then pronounce them clearly and loudly enough for listeners to correctly ascertain intended meaning. The latter requires

students to accurately process and access heard words and sentence formulations in order to correctly ascertain intended meaning. Only relatively advanced foreign language students have the capacity to do these two things semi-reliably. Beyond any seemingly important roles played by 'natural aptitude' and environmental exposure / emersion factors, this is so because they have studied and practiced using the English language with sufficient intensity and commitment for sufficient periods of time. In order to prevent skill atrophying and regression and to progress further, they need to study more. Similarly, all currently less advanced students have yet to study and practice using the English language with sufficient intensity and commitment for a sufficient period of time. They need to do so if they are to progress to 'intermediate' and then 'advanced' learner level.

Along with Reading Comprehension, Listening Comprehension and Writing lessons, English language Speaking / Oral Communication is one of four, equally important fundamental, core disciplines (and two communicative disciplines) that ought to be studied simultaneously. Progress made with regard to any one of more of these fundamental, core disciplines tends to raise the probability that advances will be made with one or more of the remainder. Consequently, ALL students of English from novices upwards need to attend, try to participate and perform satisfactorily in regular Speaking / Oral Communication lessons. To do so is usually hard due to both insufficient knowledge learning and / or retention and - to greater or lesser extents - inhibiting socio-

psychological factors either related or unrelated to that knowledge deficit. Yet it is precisely because of that lack of capacity that all students of English require regular Speaking / Oral Communication lessons (along with as much 'real' informal practice as possible). Without these, capacity is unlikely to expand and will likely eventually begin to contract.

To ensure that all Speaking / Oral Communication classes are successful if not always enjoyable for participating students, teachers need to be suitably pro-active, responsive, flexible and varied in terms of approach depending on prevailing circumstances and conditions.

Great caution and patience are frequently required if identifiable student deficiencies are to be progressively reduced even slightly (rather than left unaddressed and / or exacerbated) and existing strengths optimally safeguarded and further nurtured.

It is crucial for teachers to clearly communicate their opinions (formally and above all informally) regarding each student's Speaking / Oral Communication performance. This they should do regularly at timely intervals (both during and after actual performances) since doing so can 'reign in' and 'bring down to earth' at least 'a peg or two' those students with overly inflated appreciations of their own current competency and performance and, by the same token, help convince excessively gloomy students that all is far from lost... However, teachers must certainly take great care at all times not to

inadvertently make matters worse rather than better regarding this important task. Teachers need to pass on (formally and above all informally) their honest opinions of student Speaking / Oral Communication performance but ought to do so at all times in a / considerate, encouraging, and thus positive-constructive manner.

Not to do so, is to risk being viewed by some students as overly critical, cold, brutal and unrealistic: a state of affairs that might well be as bad or worse than failing to communicate with students altogether. Ultimately, it makes no sense for any teacher to refrain from being encouraging (without, that is, being misleading) regardless of his or her student's current median ability level(s). The offering of regular (intelligible) though not excessive encouragement - including, when deserved, measured praise - is an essential part of overall learning facilitation and thus teaching best practice. Failure to encourage and reassure sufficiently, constitutes a dereliction of duty. Teachers on the one hand need to teach. This requires them to point-out, and whenever necessary discuss, with sufficient seriousness and gravitas, major errors and deficiencies in order -

hopefully - to bring about a reduction in the probability of their replication at later junctures. On the other hand, they must of course take pains not to adversely erode or destroy what can often be only fragile student confidence and limited capacity or motivation / willingness to continue or begin to 'give things their best shot', regardless of past experiences. Basically, the higher the current ability level of students, the blunter and more demanding and exacting the teacher ought - as a general rule - to be.

Finally, it is strongly recommended that teachers quite regularly (but not excessively) discuss recent student performance if only briefly with the individuals concerned during office consultation hours. Certain more outgoing and uninhibited students - those who are not shy and who want to talk as much as possible in and about English Speaking / Oral Communication with their English teachers - may actually demand such, but other, shyer, more aloof and timid types, quite possibly including those who stand to gain most from such additional, supportive interaction, often don't... and thus have to be sought out!

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