

# Can We Use an Outside-Expert, Conversational ESP Stimulus with Adjustable Oral Communication Anxiety to Motivate Chinese ELL, First Year, Undergraduate Students During the Final Semester Quarter?



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**Abstract** This chapter presents the ESP in an EFL class initiative taken by the author/teacher of first-year undergraduate, international trade students at Shandong University of Science and Technology to promote practical ESP dialogue between the students and working business experts via Skype. Consisting of a short lecture, followed by a question and answer period, this task was introduced after extensive, preparation in speaking/listening skills, continuously scaffolded during the semester. The ungraded “opportunity”/exercise incorporated both writing skills as mandatory prepared questions and communicative speaking skills as “live” dialogue initiated voluntarily by the students. Thus, Oral Communication Apprehension (OCA) was adjusted by the individual students according to his or her comfort level. This approach served to thwart the normal waning of student motivation in the last quarter of the semester by offering them the opportunity to speak English with real international business people. Normally neglected by universities, this basic contact with professionals in the cohort’s major proved to be a great impetus for the students to actively participate in spontaneous dialogue, productively control their anxiety and connect with their major in a real world situation.

**Keywords** EFL · Chinese university students · ESP experts · Spontaneous dialogue

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## **1 Introduction**

### ***1.1 Statement of the Problem***

Several factors work against Chinese university students in their quest to bridge from ELAC (English Language and Culture) courses to upper-level content courses that utilize ESP (English for Special Purposes) and assume an EFL (English Foreign Language) comfort level in comprehension and communication. This is particularly evident in Chinese university undergraduate freshmen; most of whom are unfamiliar with the student-centered western teaching style and its emphasis on a participatory classroom environment. L2 speaking and listening causes the most anxiety to ELL students. Yet, although Chinese universities are quickly becoming internationalized, L2 oral practice rarely extends beyond the formalized tasks of podcast or video notetaking, presentations and limited student responses to in-class teacher queries. Additionally, during the closing quarter of a semester, students tend to lose much of their motivation to learn, having transferred their energy to “cramming” for final exams. Lastly, ELL classroom practice usually does not include the integration of a first year cohort’s major, even though the achievement of professional success is a primary motivating factor for Chinese ELL students.

### ***1.2 Data Collection***

This chapter is based on teacher observations and student feedback in an ELAC course, for a specific conversational ESP task, presented in the last quarter of the semester to first year, international trade students at Shandong University of Science and Technology in Jinan, China. This task was employed four times, using varied expert speakers active in the cohort’s field of study.

### ***1.3 Research Questions***

1. Can direct contact with English-speaking experts, actively working in a university cohort’s major, motivate students in the last quarter of the semester?
2. Can a conversational task be created to both reduce and positively utilize freshman oral communication anxiety (OCA)?
3. Can an ESP content speaking tasks in an ELAC course encourage freshman students to learn oral ESL?

## 1.4 *Aims and Objectives*

The main objectives of this chapter is to report the effects of employing a spontaneous, conversational task with the purpose of exposing the students to experts in their field of study, using ESP as a motivational tool in an ELAC class, applying anxiety concepts to the students' advantage, and centering learning around the speaking aspect of communicative English. This author contends that offering dialogue with speakers other than a native, English teacher during the last quarter of the semester, as the logical consequence of incorporating ESP/content-based materials in ELAC classes, will help incentivize students to bridge the gap between freshmen ELAC speaking skills and upper-level content-based classes that utilize ESP.

## 2 Literature Review

### 2.1 *Western Teaching Style in Chinese Universities*

Most Chinese university freshmen are unfamiliar with the student-centered teaching style of western native English teachers, and because of their foreign language anxiety (Liu & Jackson, 2008; Xiao & Petraki, 2007), such students rely on the Chinese concept of silence in the classroom to save face (Liu, 2001). This communication apprehension (CA) is most debilitating to the learning aspect of speaking (Jing & Junying, 2016; Kahn, 2015), even though university graduates are expected to be confident in oral communication in order to function effectively in their academic and professional lives (Allen, 2002; Kahn, 2015).

In spite of their heretofore dependence on passive learning, most EFL students wish to participate actively in the ELAC classroom (Liu & Jackson, 2008). Many studies have suggested ways in which teachers can incentivize students to participate in learning a second language, namely English (Jing & Junying, 2016), such as providing varying opportunities to practice, giving positive feedback, allowing advanced-level peers to offer support, implementing strategies that build confidence (Ibid., Kahn, 2015), and creating a welcoming classroom atmosphere by reducing fear of mistakes and encouraging risk taking (Liu & Zhang, 2013, citing Mak, 2011).

The above-mentioned strategies should allow university English teachers great leeway in choosing and/or creating lessons. As recommended by Chapman and Apsin:

...teachers should have the ability to create an active learning environment and, as a result, shift from passive learning to students taking responsibility for their own learning (Chapman & Apsin, 1997).

It has also been recommended that teachers should develop critical thinking skills lessons which encourage students to ask questions and form opinions about a topic (Afshara & Rahimi, 2014). This is especially important, not only for oral

participation, but as preparation for upper-level, content classes which require such analytical reasoning and the application thereof. Present communicative teaching methods are largely limited to short concept questions with little follow-up. Whereas, in a class, accustomed to systematic and routine critical thinking exercises and Socratic discussion and debate, student oral engagement becomes a central focus.

## **2.2 *ESP in ELAC Courses***

Also of interest to the present study, is introduction of content in the freshman English class, namely that which is related to the cohort's major. Granted, ESP materials should be basic in lexicon and concepts for easy cognitive consumption. Yet, freshman, many of whom barely have an idea of what their major entails, are fully aware of the learning gap between first year English, EAP (English for Academic Purposes) or ELAC (English Language and Culture) and the content courses they will encounter in the following years ahead. Many students, including those in the present study, have complained about this particular issue. In response, some universities have begun to recognize the necessity of introducing ESP into college English teaching (Guo, 2017). Students equally understand its importance for their careers. Authentic and appealing tasks provide a relevance to the students' interests, creating stimulation for the students in developing the related competencies (Mitchell, 1993). Therefore, including materials from a cohort's major subject of study at an early stage can serve as another motivational tool that teachers can use, if scaffolded carefully, to ensure a student's achievable pace of success.

## **2.3 *End-of-Semester Motivation***

However, sustaining this upward learning progression proves to be more difficult over the course of the semester. Early semester motivation is highly influenced by a teacher's instructional strategies (Jang, Kim, & Reeve, 2012; Reeve & Lee, 2014). If successful, students will learn autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Ryan & Deci, 2000). For such a learning climate to be maintained it must recognize progress and improvement, (Ames & Archer, 1988; Urdan & Schoenfelder, 2006) and have task-specific expectancies (Elliot & Church, 1997).

There is growing evidence that students' stress levels increase over the semester, especially as they approach exams (Morrison, Goolsarran, Rogers, & Jha, 2013). Thus maintaining a high level of student motivation throughout the semester becomes a challenge to teachers, especially since motivation and engagement are reciprocally related (Reeve & Lee, 2014). Predictably, student motivation drops significantly in the last quarter, as students focus on final exams, the epicenter of Chinese scholastic evaluation. This likely causes the *end-of-semester syndrome*

(i.e., worse performance by students at the end of the semester) (Grimm, Markman, & Maddox, 2012).

Yet, students still retain a degree of cognitive flexibility that can be drawn upon to stimulate engagement. Additionally, it has been suggested that a certain degree of task-induced stress can have the positive effect of keeping fatigued students alert (Liu & Zhang, 2013), an element essential to student learning. This study maintains that successful use of these two active factors depends on the task(s) presented by the teacher. Thus the challenge for the teacher is how to provide the correct context to motivate students to engage in and learn at the end of the semester.

### **3 Pedagogical Factors as Groundwork**

#### ***3.1 Western Style Classroom Preparation***

The author's end-of-semester, conversational task experiment would not have been possible without proper preparation throughout the semester. The western teaching style was implemented on the first day of class. Students were informed that the focus of learning university English would be engaging in an interactive, student-centered classroom, centering on oral communication. To aid the students, mobile phones were allowed to remain operable in class in order to have easy access to a translation app when needed. Credit was given for "trying" on a daily basis via speaking. Defining the parameters of class success, failure/mistakes were not only acceptable, but considered an essential part of learning. Negative teacher feedback was avoided. For those students of slower learning capabilities, peer assistance was encouraged. With constant exposure to oral English in a non-threatening environment, the students felt less and less anxious about using the target language and routinely finding their own translations for speech communication.

More difficult was the introduction of critical thinking that went beyond limited concept questions derived from ELAC text book materials. This Socratic Method of teaching centered on giving students facilitative questions rather than answers. The process placed the learning responsibility on the students through development of logical thinking skills and guided the students to finding their own, reasoned answers. Vigilant scaffolding of inquiring scenarios gave students achievable goals on a constant basis. Additionally, use of unexpected materials and tasks further stimulated alertness to the task at hand. Students soon became adept at both objectively looking at varied, situational fact patterns, and forming and defending a particular point-of view about them. This was achieved through teacher-made materials for class discussions and one-on-one teacher-student explorative dialogues, emphasizing spontaneous, conversational interaction.

The introduction of business-related materials was by mutual agreement between this teacher and the students, who, up to that time, had had no real exposure to international trade, their major course of study, and were eager to learn about it. Some

authentic materials were used, though some concepts and definitions were simplified and texts were edited and adapted to the students' English proficiency levels for easier understanding. This content-based teaching approach was merged into problem-solving exercises and debates, again emphasizing conversational speaking. Practiced routinely, the Socratic Method supported students in the process of overcoming their fear of communicating in English. As the exercises progressed in level of difficulty, the students were able to match and sometimes surpass expectations in their critical thinking, creativity, and spontaneous, conversational skills.

### ***3.2 End-of-Semester Motivation***

In the last quarter of the semester, the end-of-semester syndrome struck the class, as the students' focus was redirected toward preparation for final exams. In addition, the student-teacher rapport had reached a level of familiarity that was predictably comfortable and therefore, somewhat de-motivating. The students had become used to both the instructor's teaching methods and voice. Therefore, a certain relaxation of alertness naturally followed. The positive use of anxious anticipation in unpredictable lesson materials had to be rejuvenated. Therefore, an experimental exercise in a new scenario was designed to address the issues of spontaneous conversation and inclusion of ESP into the ELAC class, while attending to reduction in speaking anxiety, balanced with the positive, motivating factors of task-induced stress and student cognitive flexibility.

## **4 The Present Study**

The given exercise was used to investigate the level of speaking courage among students, when given the opportunity to engage in spontaneous conversation with an expert in their field of study, International Business.

### ***4.1 Speakers***

The speakers were native or near-native English speakers, actively engaged in international business and culture, and all located in the USA. Four speakers, of diverse ethnic and business backgrounds, accepted the assignment:

- SWOT International Corporate Trainer (female, native African-American).
- Culture and Language Training Director for foreign corporate employees working long-term in the USA (female, native European-American).

- Multi-media Company Research Manager (male, Danish immigrant to the USA with near-native English proficiency).
- Director of University of Pennsylvania, Legal English Program (male, native Korean-American).

## ***4.2 Speaker Assignment***

Speakers were asked to prepare a 5–10 min talk to be given via Skype, followed by a Question and Answer period. The content of the talk was to generally cover their employment position and interaction within the international and American communities. It was the speaker’s choice whether to use PPTs or other visuals in their presentation. The assignment was not intended to require a prolonged or in-depth lecture by the presenters. The criteria were designed to encourage participation in this exercise by offering maximum flexibility in regard to time length, content, and use of presentation aids, while necessitating minimal preparation. For additional preparedness, the speakers were informed of possible student questions and areas of student interest in the experts’ fields. This information was gathered from the student-participant portion of the exercise discussed below. Speakers were also made cognizant of the students’ general and ESP English levels and advised to speak to that audience.

## ***4.3 Participants***

The participants were 33 Chinese freshmen, aged 18–20 years old, from Shandong University of Science and Technology in Jinan, China. Their major was International Trade. All had several years of pre-university English language learning. Their English language levels ranged from basic user (A1, six students) to upper intermediate/independent users (B2+, two students) on the CEFR (Common European Framework of Reference for Languages) scale. The remaining 25 students were classified as B1 to B2 speakers at the time of the exercise.

## ***4.4 Participant Assignment***

The exercise was presented to the students as a non-graded “opportunity” to interact with industry professionals, and consisted of three parts:

- A. Writing Exercise—Mandatory for all students
  1. Students were informed of each speaker’s occupational background and cultural circumstances.

2. Instructions were to write 1–3 questions of interest to the student and relevant to either the speaker’s expertise and/or cultural interactions.
  3. Student questions were reviewed by the teacher and corrected for grammar and formal character, relevance, appropriateness, and suitable conversion to a speaking format. Business vocabulary use was included.
  4. Teacher recommendations for the final two choices of possible questions to be asked were made.
- B. Dialogue (via Skype)—Voluntary
1. After listening to the speaker’s presentation, students were invited to voluntarily interact with the speaker during a Q&A session by approaching the computer camera connected to Skype, asking one chosen question, and remaining visible to the speaker while listening to the answer.
  2. Students were then free to dialogue further with the speaker if desired.
- C. Informal post-talk class discussion.

## 5 Results and Discussion

Regardless of English language proficiency level, all students were actively motivated to create applicable questions for the various speakers. This part of the exercise was mandatory in order to guarantee participation by all students in the task. Without exception, the questions were well thought-out and exemplified the students’ interest in learning about international business and culture. Approximately half of the questions were in regard to business aspects, including job expectations and required criteria for such employment. An almost equal amount of remaining questions addressed the cultural aspects of an international work environment, and specifically how Chinese employees acclimate both business-wise and culturally.

Gauged by their created questions, students were most interested in learning about western business communication and how it contrasted with their own cultural communication. Voiced by each of the four speakers, one of the greatest challenges to Chinese working or studying in the west is the necessity of active oral communication. This was of upmost interest to the ELAC students. In the post-talk class discussions, students shared their surprise that westerners would judge silence as lack of understanding, rather than etiquette. The difference between the Chinese practice of silence and the Western promotion of oral engagement highlighted how cultural/business norms can be misinterpreted and how a Chinese natives must acclimate themselves to a western business culture if their career is to thrive in that environment.

Students were able to control their anxiety levels by having the choice to participate by (1) partaking only in the writing part of the exercise, (2) reading (or speaking by memorization) their question to the speaker and listening to the answer, or (3) extending their conversation with the expert by engaging in follow-up dialogue. For



the initial speaker, the first student participant admitted that his anxiety in speaking English had returned because of the new context of this interaction, and he had to be prompted to approach the microphone to ask his question. However, after the opening “push” from the teacher, students actively sought, at a minimum, to ask the experts their prepared question. Student participation grew with each speaker and reached a high point of approximately 25% (eight students) interacting with the speaker, with 22% of those students asking follow-up questions and engaging in actual, spontaneous conversation. One student, who waited until the end of the Q&A of the final speaker, to ask her question, commented afterward, “I was afraid, but I wanted to try it.”

The speakers were given great credibility because they were actively involved in the daily operations of international business and culture. Participants were pleasantly surprised to find that not only general, but business English vocabulary had practical, career use beyond the classroom and university grading expectations. The task also gave the students the perception of being more prepared for upcoming content courses.

The results show that flexibility in presenting innovative speaking ESP tasks that include experts in a cohort’s subject of study can motivate and inspire ELAC students to continue learning in spite of the end-of-semester syndrome and oral communication apprehension (OCA).

## **6 Limitations and Recommendations**

This observational study was limited to one freshman class of 33 international trade students. Some student concerns were in regard to glitches in the audio quality, the novelty of listening to a different speaker’s voice using English and looking directly into the face of someone of authority whom they did not know. Additionally, the coordination of scheduling the talks with speakers residing in different time zones proved complicated in some cases.

Further, the speaking preparation, including ESP content, had been ongoing from the beginning of the semester, thus indicating that such an exercise is best presented after a degree of ELL speaking skills and comfort level are present. The exercise also demonstrates that an opportunity to speak with experts from the students’ major subject area can be an important impetus for student engagement to counteract the end-of-semester syndrome, though the negative and positive aspects of OCA must be judiciously balanced.

In addition, the author was fortunate to know and have access to international business experts, who were actively working and willing to participate. Other ELAC teachers may have to coordinate with content teachers and/or rely on outside assistance to recruit speakers. No formal surveys or questionnaires were used because the quantitative assessments could so readily be ascertained through the student questions created, level of active participation, and post-talk student observations.

It is recommended that ESP conversational tasks that contain interaction between students and experts, whether in-class, or via Skype or another video-call device, should be included in ELAC classes to (1) encourage spontaneous dialogue utilizing ESP vocabulary, (2) expose students to experts actively engaged in their university major's subject matter, (3) motivate students in the last quarter of the semester, and (4) both reduce oral communication anxiety and utilize the positive aspects thereof for students' success in speaking English.

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