

Teaching Yourself and Your Students Not to Fear English

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Abstract

This paper addresses how teachers can overcome the fear of English that their students have and that they themselves may have by altering their own use of English as well as when and how they have students speak English. Suggestions include how to get past fear with teachers actually speaking more English, students speaking only in small groups, and English being viewed as an opportunity for expression rather than a set of rigid rules. These changes can foster confidence in speaking and make both English and our classes more appealing.

Introduction

This paper is based on Barratt (2016). In that article, I addressed the conflict between the concerns of teachers that their students are unwilling to speak and the complaints of students that speaking is difficult. That article proposed that teachers modify their classroom practices. This work will focus on those suggestions, which are to model willingness to communicate by using English from the first class, requiring students to speak in pairs and small groups rather than in front of the class, and encouraging students to focus on getting their meaning across rather than on monitoring themselves for what they think is acceptable/correct.

#1 - Model กล้า not กลัว

Do you usually provide instructions, explanations, and feedback in English or in Thai? Is most of the class time spent in English or Thai? Do you usually make explanations of English texts and grammar in Thai? Do you translate immediately whenever you use an English word or see that your students are confused? While not all teachers are afraid to speak English, many teachers are anxious about speaking and, hence, avoid using English whenever possible. When teachers are afraid to speak, they exemplify dread rather than willingness to take risks. If they then try to get their students to talk, the message their students get is “do as I say but not as I do.” The students end up learning about English but not learning English.

Instead of modelling fear or กลัว, we need to model bravery, กล้า, and what Dweck (2006) calls a Growth Mindset. A person with a Growth Mindset understands that we are continuously learning throughout our lives, and we can change what we are able to do, but we must be willing to try and keep trying even when we make mistakes or fail. Anyone can learn a language, but learning takes work and perseverance. Learning a language involves making mistakes, misunderstanding, and misspeaking, but a Growth Mindset will help learners keep working toward improvement rather than giving up. Teaching the class using English and modeling a Growth Mindset is crucial in moving students away from the Fixed Mindset that English is hard, and they cannot become good at it. By pointing out our own errors, teachers can help students see that anyone’s English can be improved.