



ISSN 1539-8072 (Print)  
ISSN 1935-9675 (Online)

# *Sino-US English Teaching*

Volume 8, Number 1, January 2011

**DAVID PUBLISHING**  
From Knowledge to Wisdom

David Publishing Company  
[www.davidpublishing.com](http://www.davidpublishing.com)

**Publication Information:**

*Sino-US English Teaching* is published monthly in hard copy (ISSN1539-8072) and online (ISSN 1935-9675) by David Publishing Company located at 1840 Industrial Drive, Suite 160, Libertyville, Illinois 60048, USA.

**Aims and Scope:**

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**Abstracted/Indexed in:**

Database of EBSCO, Massachusetts, USA  
Chinese Database of CEPS, Airiti Inc. & OCLC  
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Ulrich's Periodicals Directory  
LLBA Database of ProQuest  
Summon Serials Solutions

**Subscription Information:**

Price (per year):  
Print \$420 Online \$300  
Print and Online \$560

David Publishing Company  
1840 Industrial Drive, Suite 160, Libertyville, Illinois 60048  
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## Handling the EFL Students' Crisis of Self-confidence to Ask Questions

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It is no wonder that inquiring is an important skill. This paper deals with a research which was intended to see if respect and encouragement could solve the problem of students' self-confidence to inquire in the EFL (English as a Foreign Language) classroom. The research involved a secondary group of students whose self-confidence to ask questions was considered low by the teacher and research collaborators. The data were collected through observation, questionnaire and interview. Based on a pre-observation, problem sources had been identified, i.e., the students were afraid of being thought of as "looking for sensation only", afraid that their classmates would laugh at them, worried of being judged as arrogant or pretentious, did not want to be considered stupid, and wondered if they could produce qualified questions. Teachers believed that fear of asking questions is part of the Indonesian students' culture. The research team agreed upon the way to handle the problem—by respect and encouragement procedure. The first session implementing the procedure was not successful enough in raising the students' self-confidence. Though students had already started to address some questions of this stage, their behaviors did not seem to be improved. They were still afraid, doubtful and unhappy with questioning, which were the signs of lacking of confidence. However, the next cycle was in general a success. The students' questions increased considerably. They looked more enthusiastic, passionate and happier in response to teachers' invitation to inquire, showing that their self-confidence for asking questions has developed.

*Keywords:* self-confidence, respect, encouragement

### Introduction

Responses always raise everywhere when people interact. Their responses could be either positive which support the stimuli, or negative which deny them. In teaching learning process, complex responses come from the students. It is generally known that the complexities are influenced by internal and external factors. The internal factors are related to the students and the external factors deal with the teachers, material, time, place, school facilities and students' social environment. The complexities of students' responses also exist in language learning process, including the English learning process in senior high school. In the English learning process, students' responses are one of the important factors supporting student achievement. It is generally believed that students' responses influence both the students in following the learning process and the teachers in conducting the instructional process. Asking questions in the English classes is a form of positive responses

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from the students. Questions give focus and direction, and provide goals to both the teachers and the students. And when the students generate questions personally, the impetus for education is theirs. If the teachers simply provide the questions and ask the students to find the answers, education would hit or miss.

Unfortunately, students—even higher level students—often run into problems when asking questions. They are always quiet and hang their heads in class when the teacher wants them to ask something they do not understand yet. This is what happened to the second year students of Physics Department at senior high school 4 of Purwokerto. The students were actually clever and have high learning motivation, but most of them had no desire to ask questions when following English lessons. The teacher had to be patient waiting for questions raised by them. From pre-observations, it was inferred that the condition had rooted from a number of causes. Firstly, the teachers were the ones that usually asked questions. The students did not usually tend to ask questions to their teachers, but just answered questions from their teachers. The students felt anxious about their bad pronunciation and poor grammar. Secondly, the students had limited vocabulary that made them feel unconfident to say something in English. Thirdly, they felt afraid of being thought of as stupid students or being judged as “sensation hunter” students, or they were afraid of being laughed at by their friends or teacher, or they were still shy to say something in English. These all are actually rooted from a personality problem, i.e., self-confidence as stated by LING (2004):

*My students often told me that they refused to participate classroom activities because they were afraid of making mistakes and because they didn't know how to do it. They also avoided eye contact with me in class. Consequently, I had to spend a lot of time persuading and encouraging my students and sometimes I couldn't finish my teaching plan. I would try my best to change the situation, and realized I should focus on improving my students' self-confidence.*

Unfortunately, sometimes, teachers are unwise in response to students' questions by getting angry or saying something that hurts their students. The authoritarian teachers and unorganized teaching methods are other factors. Material factor may also be responsible for lacking of confidence for asking questions. The material may make the students feel bored (e.g., grammar), or the material that they have to learn is so much that they cannot manage themselves to concentrate. Those above may be the reasons why the students used to appear quiet with no questions raised while the English classes were going on.

HUANG (as cited in LING, 2004) argued that promoting students' self-confidence become more important when one knows that a person with poor self-confidence has less initiative to develop his/her different kinds of abilities. As we know, the students' silence and no participation in classroom activities are partly due to the lack of general and professional knowledge, which also result in lack of self-confidence in their study.

All the reasons mentioned above are enough to cause students to have low or even no self-confidence, which finally make them reluctant to ask questions to the teachers, although they perhaps really want to and need to do so. This condition of course makes teachers worry a lot, and brings about disappointment as well. However, it is important to help teachers organize students improve their self-confidence for asking questions in classroom more effectively in order that they would make great progress in their future language learning. To solve the self-confidence problem, the author and the teacher collaborators agreed upon the use of respect and encouragement as a mode for motivating students to develop self-confidence in learning English. The method is focused on psychological treatment to the students.

### Research Methods

This research is a CAR (Classroom Action Research). The CAR employs the Kemmis and McTaggart's

(1988) spiral model. With this model, the research steps taken were as follows (see Figure 1):

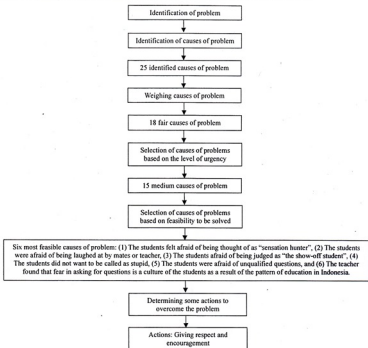


Figure 1. Main steps taken in the research.

The research lasted for three months, taking two cycles with three sessions in each cycle. The research data were collected through interviews, classroom observation, questionnaires and photos. The first step to take in analyzing the collected data was to assemble the data across sources. The next step was to code the data. This is a process of attempting to reduce the large amount of data that may be collected to more manageable categories of concepts, themes or types (Burns, 1999, p. 157). Once the data have been categorized in some way, comparison was made to see whether themes were repeated or developed across different data gathering techniques. After assembling, coding, categorizing and comparing, the next point was to build interpretations which made some sense of the meaning of the data. It was done together with collaborators. In attempt to get the valid data, triangulation was done. The triangulation method type (Burns, 1999, p. 272), i.e., using different methods to compare data (e.g., observation and interviews) to see whether they corroborate one another. These were valuable

to help the author decide the specific focus of the research. The author also kept other documents relevant to the research, such as lesson plans and checklists of classroom monitoring and students' questions quantity checklists. Data were also gathered through questionnaires to evaluate the effectiveness of the implementation. The author delivered questionnaires to all students at the end of the pre-observation and at the end of each cycle to assess students' perception about the classes in relation with problems under investigation. The teachers also completed questionnaires on problems they have in classes. And the author also interviewed the students during pre-observation and at the end of each session to get some insight into changes in self-confidence for asking the teachers and how they had felt about the implementation. The teachers had been interviewed to get some insight into their perception of the implementation and suggestions on how it might be improved.

## Results and Discussion

### Cycle 1

**Session 1.** Implementation of Cycle 1 started on April 27, at 8:30 a.m. in 2006 with a session in which the author acted as the teacher. The collaborators sat in the last row, observing the teaching-learning process and completing the checklists on the teacher's actions. Encouraging students to increase their awareness of the importance of questioning became the first priority of this session.

It was a reading class. The teacher (the author) began the lesson with a list of difficult words from the text. The words were written on pieces of paper, a piece for each word, and then were attached on the whiteboard. The teacher asked students whether they knew the meaning of the difficult words on the board. The teacher invited them to ask, because none of them knew the meaning of the words given. The teacher started to encourage students, emphasizing that questioning was an important thing, especially when they found confusion or did not know about something, and ensuring them that asking teacher questions did not necessarily mean stupidity. Finally, a student raised her hand and asked one of the difficult words followed by another four students, which meant that all the words had been answered. The teacher said "thank you" to students before they gave answers.

The lesson continued with the text. The students were expected to read and comprehend the text carefully and do the exercises that followed. The teacher, once again, asked them to ask questions if they found difficulties while reading or doing exercises. No question was addressed until the first break bell rang.

The students continued the exercises. The teacher encouraged them to ask questions if they experienced difficulties about the lesson in that day. No student raised their hands. The lesson continued with checking the exercises results until the time was up.

**Session 2.** On Wednesday, May 3, 8:30 a.m., the author and the collaborators implemented the action in another session. It was a writing lesson on weather. It began with checking homework instructed in the previous week lessons. The teacher offered the students who wanted to answer voluntarily. Because nobody wanted to do that, the teacher pointed out two students for the first two items. The remaining items were checked together. The teacher asked students to read the text which talks about weather in England. Then, students were asked whether they liked the weather as described in the text. The first break bell rang.

The teacher got students to write about weather in Indonesia within 50 words in no more than 20 minutes. The teacher offered students chances for asking if they found difficulties, but nobody asked. After 30 minutes, the teacher walked around the class for checking students' works one by one, corrected mistakes and answered students' questions. The students asked the teacher individually when the teacher came to their desks for

checking their writing. It took the remaining time for the lesson.

**Session 3.** The following day after session 2 (May 4), the planned action was once again implemented. The action remained the same as that implemented in the previous lessons, focusing on encouraging students to ask questions and respecting those who did it. The class activity that day was just reviewing "the future tense", the material that had been taught in the first year.

The lesson began with discussing homework given the day before. The students collected their homework to be corrected. After checking student assignments, the teacher gave some new ones to students. They were asked to find out difficult words in the text "Flood" and write down the meaning under each word in the text, then write down the results on the paper. Then, the lesson break came. The lesson continued with a review of "the future tense". Having given explanation, the teacher invited the students to ask questions if they still felt puzzled with the material. As the students replied that they did not have any questions this time, the teacher continued to explain. Having finished the explaining, the teacher, once again, invited the students to ask questions. Almost all of the students seemed to agree that they had nothing to ask the teacher. The lesson continued with practicing "the future tense" through pictures on the book. Some students practiced it in turn until the time was over.

In the first session, the students did not know the meaning of the vocabularies given. Besides, they looked hesitated, afraid and also doubtful in responding the chances given to them to ask. Some students together asked the teacher a question which could not be understood. When the teacher invited them to ask individually, they just said nothing. The teacher encouraged them, told them some reasons why they did not have to feel afraid of asking and also told them that teacher would help them when they had problems in arranging the questions. Students still looked hesitated and seemed to wait for others to begin. Finally, a student raised her hand and asked with hesitation. Other students looked at her, as if an extraordinary thing had happened. Out of 38 students, there were only seven questions asked by seven students who delivered questions during the first session. Unfortunately, there was no maximum effort from the teacher in giving praise words as a form of respect after the students delivered questions.

In session 2, the students were just as quiet as they had been in the first session. When the teacher offered them a chance for asking a question on something unclear, they looked confused, but no single question was addressed. The teacher asked students more than he/she was asked by the students in spite of the fact that he/she had offered students a chance for asking some questions. It was because the material did not allow the students to have chances for asking during the class. While doing the writing task, many students asked the teacher individually when walking around the classroom whether their grammars were correct or not. Some of them looked shy to ask when teacher approached them.

The last session in Cycle 1, session 3, was dominated by teacher questioning, which was responded actively by the students. When the teacher offered them a chance for asking, they replied by saying "No" meaning that they had nothing to ask. Every student seemed to understand the material well. It was because the material under discussion was an old material. Questions that were raised during the first cycle was tabulated in Table 1.

Table 1  
*Number of Students' Questions During Cycle 1*

Cycle	Session			Total
	1	2	3	
1	7	0	0	7

The success of the planned action implemented in the first cycle was analyzed by using SWOT (Strength, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats) paradigm as follows: (1) Strength: It is effective enough in motivating students for asking. Students are more active, the material is not disturbed, (2) Weaknesses: It needs more time to implement the action, (3) Opportunities: It still has a big chance to solve the problem, and (4) Threats: The students will wait for the encouragement and respect from the teacher before they ask.

Based on those aspects, discussion together with collaborators was conducted to decide whether the action needed revising or not. The form of the revised planned action was presented and implemented in Cycle 2. The revised plan was to give rewards to those who asked the teacher. Actually, a reward here is a concrete manifestation of respect and encouragement scheme. The planned action of Cycle 1 was still implemented in Cycle 2, however, it would be implemented more effectively.

#### Cycle 2

**Session 1.** The research entered Cycle 2 on May 10, 2006. The first session was a writing class whose topic was application letter. The author had a discussion and agreement with the collaborators about the use of reward in this cycle. Except for the first session, a reward in the form of snack was not included, because it would be given if the result was still unsatisfactory this time. The teacher began the lesson with touching on the last daily test administered in the previous meeting. Then, she asked the students about their ambition after graduating from a university. The teacher elicited their responses. Then, the teacher asked the students to mention kinds of jobs around them. About 39 kinds of jobs, which came from students' answers and the teacher herself, were written on the board. The teacher also asked students to explain each job. Every student got a turn, because the number of the students was the same as that of kinds of jobs available. The teacher invited the students to ask her if they did not know the meaning of the words on the board. The teacher encouraged them not to be afraid of asking questions and told a story which described the importance of questioning. Having finished telling the story, the teacher encouraged them to ask again. Panji was the first influenced student. He raised his hand and asked the meaning of the word "genecology". After expressing thanks, the teacher answered it and made Panji as an inducement for others not to be afraid of asking. Then, the second asker finally delivered a question after having looked doubtful. The teacher said "good" and told her that asking was better than feeling confused. All students had their turns to describe the jobs. The lesson continued with material on application letter. The teacher asked if there was something unclear, but no single question was asked. In the last 15 minutes, the teacher asked students to write application letters and submitted them at that time or the day after.

**Session 2.** The second session was held on May 11th in 2006, and the author was the teacher. The material was reported speech. At this meeting, reward was given to those who asked the teacher. The teacher still encouraged the students who never asked. The teacher explained the material for several minutes, and then gave the students chances for asking questions. It was also announced that every question meant a snack. Students smiled widely and looked happy. A student raised her hand and asked the example of the present perfect and the future use in direct and indirect speech. After the teacher said "very good" and got a name, the teacher let the student choose the snack and answer the question. Having noticed that, some students looked more passionate than before. Four students followed to receive rewards from the teacher because of their questions. Three of them asked after the break time. About 20 minutes was left before the time was up. To spend the remaining time, the teacher asked the students to do exercises in the book.

**Session 3.** The last planned action implementation was conducted on May 24, 2006. It was a grammar class, reviewing all the English tenses that had been learned before. The teacher offered rewards for every question students asked. More students tried to put questions forward. The teacher asked them to remember the pattern of some tenses orally. She invited the students to ask if they had difficulties. She encouraged them by showing the rewards they would get for their questions. Two students got rewards for their questions after they got praise words from the teacher. Then, the teacher trained the students' abilities in making interrogative sentences with simple past tense type. They were just invited to ask the teacher about the activities that had done the day before by using the pattern being trained. The questions with right pattern would deserve rewards. In the first round, there were about three students who raised hands to try and the fastest was chosen by the teacher. Not all students could deliver questions with the correct pattern. When this happened, the chance was passed to others. About three students raised their hands to try the teacher's challenge in the beginning. Once a student was incorrect, others looked more enthusiastic while raising their hands. The teacher offered a chance for questioning before going ahead to the exercises. Finally, a student who became the first asker of the day asked again about the differences between the English past perfect continuous and present simple. She got her second reward. The teacher gave brief explanation to her and the whole class as well. The teacher distributed copies of exercise paper to all students. It was a 40-multiple-choice-item exercise to do. The teacher gave 15 minutes for the first 20 items and then checked it out by getting students in turn to answer. When the bell rang, all the exercises had been done and discussed.

At the beginning of Cycle 2, the students still showed their hesitation when receiving teacher's invitation for asking. A female student looked shy, hesitated, and unconfident to ask question, but finally, she delivered a question after the teacher kept on encouraging her. It also happened to other students who needed to be more encouraged until she asked her question. The students tended to ask their friends. At last, another female student also asked a question. So, there were only two questions from two students.

In the second session of Cycle 2, students responded better for the chances of asking. The teacher kept on encouraging them. Some students smiled and looked more enthusiastic when the teacher offered them to ask. Other students did not look at those who asked anymore. The class atmosphere was happier than before. More students delivered questions. Five questions came up at this stage.

In the last session of the project, the students were enthusiastic in responding for the chances of asking. They did not wait for the teacher's encouragement any more. They looked very happy, and were not afraid of delivering questions to the teacher. Even some students who had chance for asking got their second chance without feeling shy or afraid. For every chance given, there was more than one student raising hands. It was because the teacher did not blame them but kept encouraging them not to be afraid of making mistakes. In short, their attitude towards invitations for questioning had changed: They looked more active for asking. Moreover, 12 questions were raised by the students during the last session. Questions that were raised during the second cycle were tabulated in Table 2.

Table 2  
*Number of Students' Questions During Cycle 2*

Cycle	Session			Total
	1	2	3	
2	2	5	12	19

The questions raised in sessions of the Cycle 2 increased. The biggest increase occurred in the last session. From Cycle 1 to Cycle 2, there was an increase of 32.1% in number of questions: from 7 to 19. Based on the SWOT analysis model, threat was the factor worth underlying. It is partly right to say that the students asked because they desired for the reward, not being challenged by the question itself. In the beginning, reward might become the target, but for some time the students would have become accustomed to asking activities, as stated originally in Indonesia by the teacher when being interviewed: "Yes, there is a progress although not too big, it's enough. Though the motivation is to get reward at first, hopefully it becomes a habit for them that they will ask whenever they don't understand, like that...". Building confidence takes time. The author has identified similar opinions elicited through interviews in the Indonesian language with the students:

My motivation for asking was just to know what I don't know yet. Second, it becomes clearer, if we don't understand yet, then asking doesn't mean stupid, don't we? Next was ... reward also one of the factors, Miss.

Yeah ... looking at my friends asking, I also motivated in doing the same too, because ... because ... what is it...reward could be support.

Very confident because ... what is it ...I've practiced so often, which makes me more confident now.

Yes, confident because my classmates were enjoyable, so I didn't shy.

Very confident because I've asked many times so...I don't feel nervous to ask any more.

The students said that they were encouraged to ask because of rewards, but this finally built confidence for them. When the author asked them whether they felt more confident afterwards, all the respondents said that they were confident. Some said "quite confident" for asking, because they had asked several times, which made them familiar with questioning activities. So, the material reward was a temporary target to the students. This had led them to a questioning habit formation.

### Conclusion and Suggestions

Based on the data analysis that has shown a steady increase in the questions quantity over time and an improvement on behavior and attitude, it could be concluded that the integrated respect-encouragement approach applied to solve the students' crisis of self-confidence for asking questions has been appropriate. Thus, this approach, while seemingly old-fashioned, is highly recommended for use when similar problems happen in classroom. One obvious and serious weakness of this classroom action research is the absence of clear criteria predetermined to judge success of an implemented action. It is suggested that other classroom action researchers consider this, for action success criteria predetermination, is part of the classroom action research fundamental principles.

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