



GETTING PUPILS TO SPEAK ENGLISH

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Young teachers, especially those sent to rural schools or to the smaller towns, frequently ask how they can get their pupils to speak in English. When pupils do not even understand instructions they cannot be expected to make sentences or ask questions and as a result the teacher feels he is unable to carry out the lesson as planned.

This is the burden of most of the letters I receive from newly-qualified ex-students of mine, and also the complaint of students on their return from teaching practice.

I would like to recommend the following activities which have been found to be useful.

1. Spend 5 to 10 minutes daily on Imperative Drills whether in Standard 1 or a weak Form 3. Regular listening practice coupled with activity not only provide an opportunity for hearing and understanding the language, but in the later stages, on using it as well. In other words, carry out Imperative Drills at the receptive level first then only at the productive level. It is essential that you prepare a graded list of requests/instructions which will include those frequently used in the classroom as well as those which will be useful in pupil's encounter with other adults outside the classroom or with their playmates. Here are two examples:

List I

Stand up.)	
Sit down.)	
Raise your hands.)	Group Activity
Put them down.)	
Show me your pencils.)	

(Ali) come here.)	
Clean the board.)	Individual Activity
Go back to your place.)	

List II

- (a) Revise group activity in List I. Add one or two new requests.
- (b) Individual activity, e.g.
 - (Ali) come here.
 - Take this (book).
 - Give it to (Ah Meng).
 - Go back to your Place.
 - (Muthu) shut the door.
 - Open the window.
 - Go back to your place.

There should be a long-term view of what you intend to do and proper planning of the lists. Each list can be practised for a week with the time gradually reduced from 10 minutes on Monday to 5 minutes on Friday. At the beginning, of course, the teacher has to demonstrate the actions but by Friday you should expect a very quick response. Subsequent lists should always include some of the items from previous lists. As pupils increase in understanding vary the requests e.g. instead of "Go back to your place" you can say "Now, you can go back" or "Return to your seat".

2. Spend another 5–10 minutes on a variation of Palmer's Conventional Conversation. Have a bag, any bag, which you keep for the purpose – into which you put a few articles (change them every week). Walk round the class talking about what you have in your bag in a natural, conversational way, e.g.

Teacher: (Putting her hand into the bag), I wonder what I have here? Ah – a ball. (Taking it out). Look, a ball. What colour is it, Ali? Yes that's right. It's red. It's not **green**. It's not **yellow**. It's red. Look, I can bounce the ball. Can you bounce the ball? Ah Meng, come, try – bounce this ball. Good. Now let's see what I have here, etc.

It does not matter if pupils do not know some of the phrases you use. Gradually they will come to understand what you mean and in time will use them themselves.

3. On alternate days, or once or twice a week, make conversation about the weather, the pupils in the class, e.g. "Who sits behind you, Ali? "Who is your best friend, Ah Meng?" "Where does your father work, Muthu?" and personalities they are interested in e.g. T.V., artistes, sports figures, even important politicians. Sometimes bring an enlarged cartoon or an interesting picture and discuss it with your pupils.

Again what must be borne in mind is the regularity of these brief periods and the repetition of the vocabulary and structures used, otherwise pupils will tend to forget what they have learnt.

It is much better, in my experience, to put aside 10-15 minutes from your teaching periods of 30-40 minutes to do this kind of informal drilling, than to spend a whole period on teaching a structure, especially in the weaker classes. Of course, drilling of the Imperative and general conversation as suggested above are not necessary in a class where pupils speak English quite well.

When you first enter a class and find that your pupils do not respond in English when you speak to them, it is advisable to put aside your scheme of work based on the structural syllabus for a few days and just concentrate on Imperative Drill incorporating greetings (e.g. Say "Good Morning, Miss Lim"), social expressions (e.g. Give this book to Ali. Ali say "Thank You"), requests, and instructions. Many of these will be found in the structural syllabus. It will be necessary to use plenty of gestures and even translation.

The important thing to remember about using translation is to get back into English the moment your pupils have grasped the meaning and then to keep on using English.

Another important thing to remember when teaching students who are poor in English is to use the English textbook only as a guide. Do not expect your pupils to read all that is laid out in the lesson. Select the examples you think are within their comprehension (and which they are able to read) and drill these orally. The emphasis should be on speaking, not reading. Do not turn the lesson on structures into a reading lesson. When the structure has been fairly well mastered then only give a written exercise or two.

If I have stated the obvious in this article it is because so many of our young teachers are unsure of themselves, and are confused about objectives. I have to clarify their thinking as well as support those who are already along the right lines.