



Strategies to Transform Introverted Students into Better Public Speakers: A Case Study

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Abstract. In the communicative process, the introvert personalities display negative influences on foreign language acquisition. However, teachers' scaffold can increase introverted students' willingness to venture into new ZPD and go through a transformation. Despite the obvious necessity of supporting and assisting shy individuals to expand the scope of their social experiences and realize their personal potential, there is a knowledge gap in the field of "supportive strategies for lowering the threshold of new ZPD for introverted students". To fill in this gap, we conducted a project-based case study in the setting of a high school in China, and employed the method of action research to document its operating procedures and specific supportive strategies. The results proved our two hypotheses that teachers' scaffold can lower the threshold of ZPD and that the flow experience can serve as a trans-formative power of intrinsic motivation. This study is a pilot experiment and will be generalized to more follow-up experiments.

Keywords: introvert · ZPD · scaffold · flow

1 Introduction

1.1 The Potential of Introverted Students

In the communicative process, two personalities—extrovert and introvert—greatly influence students' language acquisition and learning outcomes. An extroverted student is more likely to succeed in mastering a foreign language than an introverted counterpart. The explanation behind this difference is that language teachers find that students with an extroverted personality will actively create more opportunities to get himself engaged in learning activities of the target language [1]. By contrast, introverted personalities display negative influences in the process of foreign language acquisition for the following reasons: 1) Introverted students are generally not good at communicating with others and language expression. 2) In interpersonal communication, they are frequently aware of various degrees of inferiority complex, paranoia and even depression. 3) It is difficult for learners with an introverted personality to adjust to the increase of socialization in

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learning and life [2]. People experiencing anxiety when speaking in public have a tendency to avoid situations which required them to be exposed to the spotlight. If they must speak in public, they generally suffer severe anxiety and fear. Eighty out of a hundred suffer public speaking anxiety to different degrees. Every four of ten people rate public speaking fear as one of their apex three fears [3].

However, confident public speakers are more than born. They are trained too. Learning is dynamic. Vygotsky is the first one to have found the zone of proximal development (ZPD), which is defined as “the distance between the actual development level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers” [4]. Here “adult guidance (scaffold) and collaboration with more capable peers (social construction)” are two key concepts in Vygotskian perspective. Vygotsky placed greater emphasis on adult scaffold to raise children to a higher platform and to enable them to develop in a highly meaningful and structured context [5]. Simply put, teachers can play a crucial role in lowering the threshold of a new ZPD, making the process of learning and transformation for the shy students easier.

1.2 Hypotheses and Literature Review

1.2.1 Teachers’ Scaffold Can Lower the Threshold of ZPD

Studies show that the nature of shyness is the approach–avoidance tension, which is to say that in spite of willingness to become more social, the individual is inhibited. In this way, shyness is distinct from avoidance (the action of avoiding others deliberately) and unsociability (a lack of motivation to socialize with others). There are two types of inhibitions: being sensitive to new or changing environments and being sensitive to unfavorable feedback from the surroundings [6]. The novelty-based sensitivity is likely to reoccur when encountering new situations and unfamiliar people, but are highly likely to function well with acquaintances; on the contrary, high sensitivity to negative feedback might contribute to uncomfortable feelings even with familiar people.

As a consequence, teachers must be aware that students of these two types want to change. They have a desire to become more talkative, sociable [7], and visible to others, especially their teachers [8]. What they need is scaffold. When students feel that they are supported by the teachers, they develop positive attitudes toward school [9]. The shy students are likely to build a stronger bond with the teachers, which has a protective role for introverted students and gives them a sense of a secure base in school, allowing them to open up to the exploration of their social environment [10].

As a result of a supportive relationship with the teachers, the shy students are more engaged and tend to become more active in classroom, display perseverance, accept instructions, consider criticism, deal with pressure better, and put more trust in the teachers. Moreover, according to Hughes [11], support and care from teachers can also create a friendly classroom atmosphere, which has a significant influence on students. When anxious introverted students were included by the peers, their social skills were improved [12].

Teachers are privileged to have the right to consistently monitor the behavioral changes of the students and contribute to the acquisition and preservation of new behavioral patterns [13]. As professional figures in children’s learning setting, they are given

the special opportunity to see the child as a whole [14]. But teachers' advantageous position and systematic intervention have not received enough emphasis in students' knowledge construction and character building.

1.2.2 Flow: A Transformative Power of Intrinsic Motivation

With teachers' scaffold, introverted and shy students may feel more comfortable and confident to venture into a new ZPD, where the students can experience more academic challenges, improve their interpersonal skills and expand their opportunities to realize their potential [15]. In the process of jumping the hurdles of anxiety and fear,

1) the challenge the new ZPD poses, the teamwork with supportive teacher and peers, their positive feedback, the satisfaction about overcoming the challenge, together with a better control of anxiety and fear, bring about an optimal experience to the withdrawn individual. That moment of the optimal experience is called "flow" [16], which usually arises when a person's body or mind is stretched to its limits in a voluntary effort to accomplish something difficult and worthwhile.

2) In spite of the challenges such experiences pose in the process, gradually they build up a sense of control, a sense of participation in determining the meaning of life, which comes as close to what is usually meant by happiness as anything else we can conceivably imagine. It is worth mentioning that the flow is a state in which people are so involved in an activity that they forget about the outside world. The experience itself is so pleasant that people want to repeat it for the sheer sake of doing it [16].

3) The idea of flow experience has been considered useful by psychologists studying intrinsic motivation. During flow, people typically experience a sense of control—or, to be more exact, a lack of anxiety about losing control that is typical of many situations in daily life. Worrying is one of the major sources of psychic entropy in daily life, and its reduction during flow is one of the reasons why such an experience becomes enjoyable and rewarding [16]. This enjoyment becomes an intrinsic motivation for shy students to willingly venture into ZPD, thus serving as a trans-formative power to awake the self-driven learner in the shy individual.

Based on the above studies, a case study was designed to test whether the following step-by-step operating procedures can be used to activate introverted students and improve their desire to venture in to ZPD. The main body of this paper includes: 1) The design of the case study; 2) Method; 3) Operating procedures; and 4) Discussion.

2 A Case Study of Strategies to Activate Introverted Students

2.1 The Design of the Case Study

To test the above hypotheses, a case study was designed and conducted in a PBL (Project-based Learning) setting, where an introverted student Hou went through the transition of "refuse to do the project" to "I want to do the project for my own passion". Hou is a 17-year-old high school sophomore boy in a public high school in Chongqing, China.

In the English language classroom, when the teacher raised the question: "Are you willing to do our new project in Unit 2 of our textbook, which is a presentation of public speaking with the topic – Building Bridges between Cultures, not Walls?" Among 106

students from 2 classes, 93 students said they were happy to do the project, because they loved “teamwork, fun activities and practical skills” based on the project. 13 students said “no” for the following 4 reasons: lack of time, lack of confidence, lack of interest and lack of interpersonal skills.

Among the 13 students, Hou arrested our attention because he appeared very nervous and timid, never having eye contact with the teachers and unconsciously stooped, embracing his own shoulders with crossed arms (a low power gesture). He stated that “I am very afraid of other people’s judgement and I have never talked in public”. According to Asendorpf, Hou belongs to the type of “sensitivity to negative assessment by the surroundings” [6] and has the tendency of growing up to be a cautious and reserved adult, leading to development of an avoidance pattern [17], which could be harmful and dangerous.

Targeted at Hou’s case, specific supportive strategies were designed to help him build confidence, obtain sub-skills for the presentation and experience the flow state. The duration of the experiment was one week. The strategies include: 1) Prospective support; 2) Moral support; 3) A sense of control; 4) Technique support; 5) Listeners’ feedback culture.

2.2 Method

This project-based case study employed an action-research method, which is defined as any systematic inquiry conducted by educators in the teaching and learning process or setting with the aim of collecting data about how their schools operate, how they teach, and how their students learn [18]. Action research allows teachers to study their own classrooms about their own instructional methods, their own students, and their own assessments—to better understand them and then improve the effectiveness. It focuses on the unique characteristics of the targeted group with whom a practice is employed or with whom some action is taken to increase utility and effectiveness for the practitioner [19].

The basic process of conducting action research consists of four steps: 1) Identifying an area of focus; 2) Collecting data; 3) Analysing and interpreting the data; 4) Developing a plan of action [18]. To collect data, tools such as observations, questionnaires and interviews were employed. To analyse and interpret data, tools such as documents, video clip conversation transcription were employed.

2.3 Operating Procedures

2.3.1 The Preliminary Interaction

Objective: to provide perspective support and moral support

Setting: the teacher’s office

The teacher approached Hou in a friendly way and asked him why he was unwilling to participate in the new project. His answer was “I just like watching others giving public speeches.”

The teacher saw the potential of Hou's interest in being more sociable [7] and that he had the desire to be more visible to his teacher [8]. As a consequence, the teacher offered prospective support: "I will help you if you want to try." Hou's answer was "I'm just afraid to walk onstage."

The teacher saw the change of Hou's role—from a bystander to an anxious speaker—and kept providing possible future support (such as writing skills and public speaking skills) Hou might need if he agreed to participate. The teacher's prospective support lowered the threshold of Hou's new ZPD. Hou calculated that with the teacher's assistance, he might be able to jump over the hurdle which used to be impossible to clear. This prospect generated a state of willingness and he nodded, saying he wanted to try.

The teacher proceeded to a new strategy: to provide moral support by verbalizing feelings and giving encouragement. The teacher looked at Hou, with an understanding smile: "It can be embarrassing to speak in front of so many people. It's natural to feel that way. But I observe you are always a fast learner in my class. I trust you will learn how to control your anxiety fast. You will do your presentation well." Hou returned a smile, without saying anything. But in the questionnaire answered by him after the project, he reported that "I do want to improve my public speaking skills and this time I don't want to fail."

In this brief interaction, the teacher connected verbally and non-verbally with Hou. Prior to any actual instructions, by providing prospective support and moral support, the teacher skilfully scaffolded Hou to generate the confidence to venture into ZPD.

2.3.2 Three One-on-One Mentor Sessions

Objective: to provide technique support and to generate a sense of control

Setting: the study lounge

Duration: 30 minutesX3

Session 1 Plan Ahead and Make a Choice

Through brainstorm and discussion, the teacher enabled Hou to plan ahead a one-week schedule for the project. In this situation Hou knew what to expect in advance, he felt more in control and this lowered his anxiety when facing a new challenge.

The teacher helped Hou narrow down the topic selections and Hou made a choice about the topic he was comfortable with. This "being given choices" strategy also increased Hou's sense of control as he was familiar with the content and this would increase his confidence.

Hou cooperated with the teacher and made a rough logical draft of the speech. He contributed several brilliant ideas about "exchange, feminism and bridging" and displayed increased interest in discussing the topic he chose.

Post Mentor Session Observations

The teacher found Hou became more active in English class. One day after the first mentor session, he raised his hand to answer questions twice. His volume was louder than usual. He had more eye contact with the teacher.

Meanwhile, Hou became more comfortable with the teacher too. He came to the teacher's office several times, updating his new progress with the project. He even asked to do his homework in the office as it was more convenient for him to consult.

Session 2 Polish the Draft

The teacher gave instructions in the revision of the draft. The teacher provided Hou with copious examples to flesh out the skeleton of the argument.

Feedback from Hou's Parent

Hou's mother texted the teacher, expressing gratitude as she saw her son's change at home. Hou was enthusiastically devoted to preparing for the presentation at home, doing research and discussing with parents.

Hou's mother shared with the teacher his son's traumatic primary school experience. Once Hou was appointed to give a speech in front of the whole school. Well-prepared as he was, he became petrified for 5–6 min as a result of anxiety and fear. He didn't make it to deliver the speech. After that experience, he avoided speaking in public.

Session 3 Practice, Feedback and Improve

According to the agreed plan, Hou had practised delivering the speech with a small number of people whom he felt at ease with for several times (parents and friends). He had sought feedback from the audience each time and made improvement. Then in mentor session 3, he gave a speech to the teacher. The teacher recorded the process, analysed his performance and gave instructions about sub skills for public speaking, for example, eye contact, gesture, posture, being material-focused instead of audience-focused. Hou watched the clip for self-criticism too.

2.3.3 The Final Presentation and Feedback

One day before the final presentation, Hou approached the teacher, requesting to be No. 1 speaker. He was afraid that other speakers' performances would influence his mood and confidence.

As the No. 1 speaker, Hou wrote his topic and new vocabulary on the whiteboard in advance. During his speech delivery, he faced his audience with a smile, spoke at a moderate pace and volume. He used well-structured PPT to aid his speech. He never referred to his script. The following are feedback entries from his audience:

- (a) Dong: "It is hard to believe it was his first time to give a presentation in class. Although his voice was a little low, his presentation was wonderful."
- (b) Long: "Hou's speech on Ailing Zhang was very impressive and had a strong impact on me. His strong logic and beautiful speech was unforgettable."
- (c) Ma: "His pronunciation was fluent and the person he chose to make this speech was unexpected."
- (d) The teacher: "Your speech is terrific! And by saying that, I do not only mean the content itself (BTW: I do love the sentences you quoted in your speech, very impressive!), but also the way you deliver the speech—your confidence and fluent oral English!"

In the post presentation interview, Hou was asked to answer the following question. TEA: "When you read the feedback from the teacher and peers, what did you feel? What will this feedback influence your future learning?"

Hou: “Upon reading this, I feel a little bit nervous and when I got it, I really became afraid to read it, afraid to face the Hou in others’ eyes. But after pushing myself to read it, I got deeply moved by not only the cheerful words and acceptance my peers have shown to me, but also the teacher’s considerate ideas as well as the pure will to help me get improved, getting out of the comfort zone. And thus, now I can try to accept their opinion and advice and be determined to say I can and I will do better in the future. When facing tasks, I will think about fighting more than giving up. I am truly surprised.”

2.4 Discussion

Based on the above case study, we have proved our two hypotheses.

1. Teachers’ scaffold can lower introverted and shy students’ anxiety and fear into ZPD

1) Teachers must be aware that “between the actual development level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers” [4], there is a distance (ZPD) which can be closed with the joint effort of the teacher and the student. This distance is constantly changing. Teachers should be sensitive to students’ ZPD and serve as an observer of students’ potential development.

2) Some introverted and shy students want to change and can change. Each student is an entire world. This world is dynamic. In Hou’s case, the teacher’s moral support and academic support helped him regulate his willingness to learn. Hou experienced responsive, supportive and positive interactions with the teacher. As a result, he became more confident and motivated within the academic contexts of schooling.

3) In Hou’s case, it was found that he enjoyed teamwork with the teacher because of specific supportive strategies designed for him. The strategies include being able to plan ahead, being given the choice of his more comfortable topic, starting with an audience of a small number, practising several times before the final presentation, receiving constructive feedback, and knowing professional support is always available. These strategies gave him solid support and lowered his anxiety and fear. He became confident in being a better public speaker. And he became more relaxed to be visible to others.

2. The flow experience can serve as a transformative power to awake the self-driven learner in the students.

1) The teacher designed a space of meaningful freedom, in which Hou could explore with a knowledge of allocation of resources available. He enjoyed the pleasure of his own discovery—more control over his fear, more trust established with the teacher, increased public speaking skills and positive feedback from peers. For several times, he was lost in his own world. Hou reported he had spent one whole night preparing his speech, not feeling tired and not aware of the passage of time. The experience itself was pleasant enough to be repeated.

2) According to Csikszentmihalyi [16], this experience was “flow”, which occurred when his body or mind was stretched to its limits in a voluntary effort to accomplish his specific challenging and meaningful task. During flow, Hou experienced a sense of control—or, a reduction of anxiety. Worrying about failure used to be the major sources of distraction and uncertainty in his precious risk-avoiding reluctance of speaking in public, and its reduction during flow was what made this experience so pleasant and

thus rewarding [16]. This enjoyment will become intrinsic motivation for shy students like Hou to willingly venture into an upcoming ZPD, thus serving as a trans-formative power to awake the autonomous learner in the shy individual.

3. Generalization and data-based method

- 1) To prove the effectiveness of above strategies, a case study is far from convincing. It is just a pilot project. More experiments need to be carried out to generalize the effectiveness.
- 2) One disadvantage of action research in this case is the lack of statistical representation. It is perspective-based and may be biased. By involving more research objects, a data-based analysis can be integrated in this research.

3 Conclusion

Based on the discussion above, the following five conclusions are drawn:

- (1) In the communicative process, the introverted and shy personalities display negative influences on foreign language acquisition. However, it is important for teachers to be aware that shyness is different from unsociability and avoidance. With teachers' scaffold to lower their anxiety and fear, some shy students want to open up and become talkative and visible [7]. They are willing to venture into new ZPD and go through a transformation.
- (2) Although research indicates the necessity of supporting and assisting shy individuals to expand the scope of their social experiences and realize their personal potential [15], how to approach withdrawn students and what systematic support to be provided have not been dealt with in much detail. There is a knowledge gap in the field of "supportive strategies for lowering the threshold of new ZPD for introverted students".
- (3) The above project-based case study (designed to fill in this gap) employed the method of action research. Its operating procedures included the following three steps and their respective accompanying strategies: (a) During the preliminary interaction, the perspective support and moral support were provided; (b) During the one-on-one mentor sessions, technique support like planning ahead, being given a choice, writing skills, public speaking skills and practice strategies were provided; (c) During and after the final presentation, "feedback for further development" strategy was employed.
- (4) The challenge that the new PBL project posed, the satisfaction of overcoming the challenge, the teamwork with supportive teachers, together with a better control of anxiety and fear, brought about an optimal experience (flow) to the withdrawn individual. When flow experiences add up in the long run to a sense of mastery, it becomes a sense of participation in determining the meaning of life. The flow experience itself is so enjoyable that people will do it for the sheer sake of doing it [16].
- (5) During the flow experience, people typically feel a reduction of anxiety, which is one of the reasons why the experience itself is an enjoyment and thus an intrinsic rewarding [16]. This enjoyment will become a drive for shy students to willingly

venture into another upcoming ZPD, thus serving as a trans-formative power to awake the self-driven learner in the shy individual.

To test the effectiveness of the above strategies, more experiments will be conducted in extended student groups.

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