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# Motivating Students to Talk: TED Conference in University-Based Chinese Language Classrooms

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## Abstract

This paper presents an innovative teaching method that uses TED conference to stimulate and support learners of Chinese in improving their speaking skills. In non-target language countries, students are often reluctant to use Chinese in real life. This study overviews a case where TED conferences were integrated into a university-based Chinese language course in New Zealand. It also discusses the major findings emerging from implementing this innovative pedagogy as well as the recommendations for future research. While motivating students to use Chinese in public setting, the approach has also enhanced critical thinking skills and co-learning in language classrooms. This paper ends by providing food for thought on designing engaging pedagogy in building and sustaining a knowledge-sharing culture in advanced Chinese courses in universities.

**Keywords:** speaking, anxiety, TED, oral presentation, assessment

## 1 Introduction

Student attrition in university language programmes has become a critical issue, particularly in Australia and New Zealand (Martin, Jansen, & Beckmann, 2016). A recent survey on the issue in a university language programme has confirmed that a lack of speaking opportunities has become one of the major reasons why students choose to stop learning second languages in New Zealand. Their classroom learning experience was described by such students as “traditional”, “boring”, and “irrelevant to real life”. The current approach adopted by most university language programmes is a combination of the grammar-translation method and audiolingual method, which emphasises a detailed study of grammar, memorisation of patterns and characters, extensive translation exercises and a strong preference for written language and literary classics. However, in reality, the actual motivation of students’ for studying a foreign language has shifted from literary study to human interaction. By and large university language courses have failed to respond to such change, hence resulting in the increasingly high student attrition rate over the years.

A contextualised and situated learning context is essential to motivate students in using the target language and leads to better understanding and more meaningful learning (Gee, 2012; Richard, 2015). The most effective way to learn a language is to participate in a community in which the target language must be used for communication in a real-life situation. In such an environment, the language learner is forced to think and speak in the target language, allowing them to become immersed in an input-rich, natural, and meaningful context in which the target language can be acquired. Many communicative language teaching approaches have followed this principle in motivating students to speak. However, immersing them into a learning context powered exclusively by the target language can also lead to very high levels of second language anxiety (Wang, 2016).

While learning anxiety is by no means unique to languages, it is notably the only risk factor specific to the language-teaching context. Some students who reported anxiety related

to speaking, listening, and especially the oral interview nevertheless persisted in their language studies. Although prior literature has suggested that there are many generic reasons why a student may discontinue his or her enrolment in a university language course, students being burdened by second language anxiety deserves more research attention (Lobo, 2012). Second language anxiety is defined as the feeling of tension and apprehension associated with second language contexts, including speaking, listening and learning (Onwuegbuzie, Bailey, & Daley, 1999). It is closely linked to performance in oral examinations or other forms of language production in the classroom and is considered one of the biggest causes of foreign language attrition (Horwitz, 2010; Wesely, 2010). In a recent research from Sydney University, Lobo and Matas (2010) confirmed that second language anxiety – primarily driven by concerns over oral interview assessment tasks—was a key factor reported by students who withdrew from their language course.

Paradoxically, students desire opportunities to speak yet are frightened to speak. This paper argues that second language anxiety in speaking is caused by the stressful settings of oral examinations. At the University of Auckland, for example, graded oral tests in language courses such as German, Spanish, Japanese, Korean and Chinese normally take place in the lecturer's office in a one-on-one interview format. Students take turns having a short conversation with the lecturer, who is normally a native-speaker of the target language. Their speaking ability is assessed in this de-contextualised, form-focused, teacher-led, and memorisation-based setting twice a semester, once for the mid-term and once for the final. During the oral test, students play a rather passive role in a near complete one-way communication model, where spontaneous conversation is discouraged due to the existence of a time limit for each student. As a result, students reported high levels of anxiety in learning languages in university. Their desire to speak and communicate is stifled, and such dissatisfaction leads to discontinuation of language study.

This research paper aims to explore a new pedagogy that is expected to transform the current disengaging environment of second language learning in universities by creating a more socio-culturally meaningful and critically challenging situation in which students learn Chinese. Specifically, this study aims to find out (1) whether this new approach has motivated students to speak more Chinese; (2) whether it has improved students' Chinese speaking skills; and (3) whether it has contributed to a better satisfaction with the course that could lead to future engagement in Chinese learning.

## **2 Theoretical framework**

### **2.1 Situated Learning**

This study draws upon the notion of “situated learning” (Gee, 2012) with a focus on the “community of practice (CoP)” (Wenger, 1999). By applying these two theoretical frameworks, this study looks deeper into the importance and functionality of context and community to second language learning.

The situated language learning approach treats learners as active constructors of knowledge who “bring their own needs, strategies and styles to learning, and skills and knowledge are best acquired within realistic contexts and authentic settings, where students are engaged in experiential language learning tasks” (Felix, 2002, p. 3). Through situated learning, students are able to work together, learn skills and accurately apply those skills they have learnt. According to Gee (2012), the situated learning approach allows students to gain experience through participating in authentic learning activities, and from this experience they are able to be more productive in their lives after they graduate.

This model of situated learning proposed that learning involved a process of engagement in a community of practice. In their seminal work, Lave and Wenger (1991) argued that learning should not be viewed as simply the transmission of abstract and de-contextualised knowledge from one individual to another, but a social process whereby knowledge is co-constructed and shared. They suggested that such learning is situated in a specific context and embedded within a particular social, physical and meaningful environment.

Under the framework of CoP, knowledge is viewed as reciprocally constructed within the individual's environment interactions (Barab & Duff, 2000). Language learning should always be situated and progressively developed through activity concepts. According to Wenger (1999), only situated and contextualised practice leads to deep understanding and meaningful learning. A person's intentions to learn are engaged and the meaning of learning is configured through the process of becoming a full participant in a socio-cultural practice.

Within this theory, there is a concern with identity, with learning to speak in ways that make sense within the community. Learning as increasing participation in communities of practice concerns the whole person acting in the world (Lave & Wenger, 1991). The focus is on the ways in which learning is "an evolving, continuously renewed set of relations" (p. 50). In other words, the community of practice promotes a relational view of the person and learning. Students are able to maintain and elevate their sense of selfhood by making their own voice through active and full participation in learning communities.

In contrast, our current teaching and assessment methods are classroom-based instead of community-based. Students have very limited opportunities to participate in an authentic and meaningful community of language use. Implementing a situated learning environment is vital for advancing Chinese language learners. Their knowledge and use of Chinese can determine their employability in the competitive market, and the depth they are able to engage in China-related careers. Their final Chinese language course in university should involve meaningful and authentic situations in order to prepare students for living and working in Chinese speaking communities. However, to date, little work has been done in New Zealand universities to examine the situated learning approach in motivating students to participate in communities of second language learning. This paper will fill the gap by looking at a case study from the University of Auckland.

## 2.2 "TEDxUoA Chinese" as pedagogy

Numerous studies have demonstrated the importance of multimedia in creating a situated learning environment for second language teaching and learning. Multimedia provides the most desirable and rich contexts and resources in modern L2 education from kindergarten to university. It is used in a wide range of learning stages for many different pedagogical purposes such as class ice-breakers, vocabulary boosters, as well as a stress reliever during the learning process (Chang & Huang, 2015; Coxhead & Bytheway, 2015).

TED stands for Technology, Entertainment and Design. Found in 1984, TED is a non-profit media organization that posts short and powerful talks online under the slogan of 'ideas worth spreading'. TED conferences invite professionals from a variety of communities, disciplines and cultures to share their achievements and innovations through tightly timed onstage presentations. The videos and transcripts of their talks will then be made freely available online for sharing and study.

The variety of genre prototypes and cross-disciplinary topics within TED conferences are valuable for not only do they serve as useful instructional material (Coxhead, 2018), but they can also help students understand and emulate genres that are potentially akin to their future careers (Loya & Klemm, 2016; Park & Cha, 2013). As learning materials in advanced

Chinese language courses are usually adapted from original news articles, readers' digest's or classical literature, students do not get the chance to learn how to discuss and study ideas from other mediums and disciplines, which is something extremely important for engaging students from science, medicine, law and business backgrounds. Integrating TED conference concepts into Chinese language curriculums has great pedagogical potential in motivating students to participate in more meaningful speaking activities.

Apart from its accessibility and diversity, TED conferences are also useful as they help generate discussions in the classroom and stimulate critical thinking skills (Taibi et al., 2015). However, TED conferences can also teach a more intriguing and subtle skill, the art of presentation. These presentations provide a research-based analysis of thousands of the best TED talks to determine what makes a good presentation and how to engage audiences in public speaking. Since 2010, numerous books have been published and online tips given for potential presenters on how to deliver a good presentation (Anderson, 2016; Gallo, 2014). These resources serve as a very useful presentation guide for language learners in improving their presentation skills. While history has clearly been shaped by important speeches, good presentation and public speaking skills can increase a students' self-satisfaction and leadership in university.

There has been widespread acceptance of TED talks in English-language classrooms (Pittenger, Miller, & Mott, 2004; Zappa-Hollman, 2007) for its meaningful content, which can inspire teaching and learning as well as motivating discussions, knowledge-sharing and lifelong learning (DaVia Rubenstein, 2012). Nevertheless, other language curriculums have yet to recognise the pedagogical importance of TED conferences due to their use of English as its dominant language of presentation.

In addition to the content presented in English, the format of TED conferences themselves serve as the best assessment method for incorporating the concept of communities of practice. In this regard, the study attempts to investigate how the use of TED conference formats creates a situated learning environment that reforms the assessment setting.

Having received consent from the TED organisation at the University of Auckland (TEDxUoA), we named our TED conference "TEDxUoA Chinese". They granted us the privilege to becoming a standalone community on campus for giving public speeches in Chinese. The speaking course could also become a public event for all learners of Chinese.

### **3 Instructional Design and Implication**

#### **3.1 Course**

The course involved in this study was one of the most advanced at the University of Auckland. Having finished this course, students' Chinese proficiency level is expected to have reached C1 on the scale of the Common European Framework of References for Languages. This level of proficiency requires learners to use the conventions of the communicative task effectively to hold the listeners' attention and to communicate straightforward and complex ideas as appropriate. The course syllabus asked students to be able to speak with ease and confidence when dealing with specific social situations. They also needed to be able to initiate, maintain and close a general conversation with a number of strategies appropriate to a range of circumstances and topics for face-to-face conversations. The textbook for this course was the HSK Standard Course 5A, which includes topics such as marriage and family, culture and tradition, health and science, travel and city life and so on.

### 3.2 Students

There were 30 students in the course who had already established some sort of familiarity with Chinese culture over many years of learning Chinese. Most students in this course have had at least one study abroad experience in Mainland China. They were already familiar with many popular Chinese social media platforms and a variety of Chinese shows from either their class and/or their Chinese buddies. The students came from 22 different majors including law, health science, physics, accounting, engineering and a couple of Arts based disciplines.

### 3.3 Procedure

Students were informed of this speaking assessment throughout the course. From the beginning of week 8, students were given instructions on choosing a topic for their speech. In two weeks' time, they had to submit their first draft of their speech script. One week before the TED conference, we organised a mock TED talk to give students a taste of the format of speaking assessment. In week 12, we held the conference successfully.

Each student was given a lanyard with their name and were addressed as “presenters” instead of “students” in the conference. Students were required to give a two-minute speech using at least three new vocabulary covered in the textbook. Their performance was evaluated based on five different aspects: organisation and clarity of ideas, speed per minute, presentation style, pronunciation and grammar use. Their presentations were all video-recorded. In the course of one hour, students took turns giving their individual speeches, wrote comments for other presenters, and selected the best presentations for an award.

### 3.4 Effect Assessment

This research employed a good range of methods to collect data for analysis. Before the “TEDxUoA Chinese” concept was introduced, an informal focus-group interview was held. The course lecturer consulted student opinion before implementing this assessment method. All students knew about TED talks and by and large had watched one or two episodes before. They were familiar with the unique format and standards of TED presentations. In the interviews, students demonstrated enthusiasm for this new method of assessment.

Throughout the course, we offered 12 office hours every week for students to drop by to practice Chinese and receive feedback. At the end of the semester, students were asked to complete a course evaluation where students' rated the course and gave their formative comments anonymously. In order to protect their identity, this paper will remove the words in the quotations of their comments that could lead to exposure of their names.

The course lecturer also did an informal survey with students to elicit students' opinion about this approach. In the following section, this paper will discuss some of the key findings from this study.

## 4 Findings

The study found that students' motivation to speak Chinese generally increased and their speaking skills were also improved as a result of integrating TED conference into the assessment. Their overall satisfaction with the course, out of 5, rose from 3.83 in 2017 to 4.68 in 2018.

### ***(1) Motivated to use Chinese***

The creation of the “TEDxUoA Chinese” branding gave students a sense of community, which improved students’ engagement in learning activities. This confirms the benefits of having a community of practice, that L2 learners succeed by becoming members of a community made up of active participants in their chosen field. As students said, this assessment method truly motivated them to use Chinese.

I really enjoyed giving a TED talk and thought that was a nice way to finish the last Chinese paper. It was very different from the other oral tests as we could not cue cards but I felt like it truly helped motivate us.

It was the first ever stimulating exercise I've ever got to do since I started studying Chinese. Without it, I probably would have lost interest in the subject and wouldn't have pushed myself to at least try.

Being pushed was really good, for all of us I think, because it meant we had to sit down and put time into vocab, grammar and all of it. In this course, I really feel like I've learnt something.

Students were involved in the entire process of the new learning and assessment method. The design of the pedagogy is focused on students participating in a community that they developed by and for themselves. It is not about them participating in an unfamiliar community the teacher created or simply for the exams. Students volunteered to host the talks and to keep time for each presenter. They also learnt to make eye contact and to applaud each presenter on the stage as a form of emotional support, something rarely seen in other formats of oral assessment.

The course coordinator became an event facilitator in this course. Once students understood the assessment details, they were given time to design their methods of practice. The teacher provided one-on-one consultation sessions to help students with their scripts and pronunciations. Students were the organisers and participants of their own oral tests. The teachers’ job was to provide the scaffolding instead of dominating the classroom learning.

### ***(2) Improved Chinese speaking skills***

Students came to realise that they also need to improve their presentation skills in general. Presentation is a generic speaking skill that requires systematic and professional training. Many L2 assessment methods however fail to separate out the generic skills and the newly acquired L2 knowledge and ability. Students’ L2 ability was dragged down by their poor presentation skills. However, this study helped students with their presentation skills separately before students applied them to the Chinese speaking test.

I'm doing Law so I can handle it. But I know some other students don't get the chance to speak in front of people.

I practiced a lot at home. I went to a few office hours to practice and got Chen Laoshi to record her saying my speech to help me memorise and pronounce right. It's the first speech I gave out of memory.

It's just fascinating to see how fast I can speak. The first time I could only speak about a hundred words but at the mock, I finished my whole script, which was almost two hundred.

The oral tests were really challenging (in a good way) and pushed me to develop my speaking and presentation skills.

Clearly, students understood that there is a gap. When their L2 speaking ability is measured, it is often assumed that they do not have problems with presenting. L2 oral presentation is a combination of multiple skills, and course designers should consider how to reconnect the language-specific skills with the generic skills.

### ***(3) Integrated discourse pragmatic knowledge***

Students' pragmatic awareness was generally improved. Learners with high grammatical proficiency can still make pragmatically inappropriate faux pas in comparison with native-speaker (Li, 2012). Li, Xie, and Wu (2014) have called for increasing L2 learners' pragmatic awareness. Their study found that students' speech scripts did not show sufficient attention being paid to pragmatic functions of language use.

Discourse markers come up most prevalently in oral speech. As they are grammatically optional or syntactically independent, students did not write them into their scripts or used them in their oral speech. One of the major tasks teachers faced in consultation times was helping students add necessary discourse markers to their speech scripts such as *ránhòu* (then), *érgiě* (moreover), *jiùshìshuō* (that is to say), *qíshí* (actually), etc.

Moreover, Chinese courses need to teach students pragmatic discourse knowledge in addition to structure knowledge. Students in New Zealand are not taught to use Chinese primarily for oral communication. Because L2 pragmatics is teachable and instruction in it does make a difference in student output, students must know how to make their speech sound "polite" and in line with norms of the native language culture.

I finally learned to add an opening and closing to my presentation by saying something like 大家好 (Hello, every one) and 谢谢 (Thank you).

Found this course stimulating, relatable, and the content I feel confident to be able to use in my daily use of Chinese. My Chinese friends said I have become more polite.

There was a lot of effort put into ensuring we would leave the course with knowledge to get us through living in Chinese society.

During the mock presentation, only 5 out of 30 students incorporated an opening and ending to their presentations. Most of students started and finished their speeches rather abruptly. Though the course has provided samples of good speech transcripts which highlight the functional discourse, students' pragmatic awareness remains low. Pragmatics instruction is therefore important, and the role it plays in promoting L2 pragmatic development is worth more empirical investigation.

#### ***(4) Empowered students' participation in L2 community***

The “TEDxUoA Chinese” has empowered students to fully participate in a L2 speaking community. This style of authentic assessment has the ability to combat the phenomenon of “Tall Poppy Syndrome” – a cultural experience that specifically occurs in New Zealand (New Zealand Herald, 2013). Within this culture, people fear being more wealthy, successful, or gifted than their peers – and this has made students more reluctant to demonstrate their talents and skills in front of the class. As a result, New Zealand students are often found to be unwilling to communicate or struggle to speak. Unlike students in Asia and America, students in New Zealand are identified as “shy”, “quiet” and “timid”. As some students explained as follows.

Expectations in here are like we want people to be all the same, rather than excel. You don't want to make other people feel bad.

We all kind of know the answers, but we don't want to be the one to answer it.

This culture is in fact quite repressing of students' personal development, and detrimental to their L2 learning experience. With this TED conference, students felt they did not have to conform to the norms of their local culture.

TED is good. It makes me feel I'm here to share ideas not to impress the teachers.

Keep pushing! Even though half the class don't know how to cope with this new idea and just do it. It's so beneficial for us.

They could demonstrate their brilliant ideas in front of the class without the fear of backlash. This new format of speaking test has empowered students in this culture to speak their minds. More research should be done on the culture of learning needed to further engage New Zealand students into learning Chinese.

## **5 Conclusion**

The implementation of this innovative approach to improve students' motivation in speaking Chinese has made some positive and sustainable impacts on student learning. Not only has it effectively engaged students in a university language course, but it has also reduced their fear of participating in speaking activities in front of class and has developed their presentation skills for potential job markets. Throughout the course and the preparation for “TEDxUoA Chinese”, it is evident that students' motivation for using Chinese has significantly improved, though not quantitatively measured.

TEDxUoA Chinese is an innovative pedagogy with an engaging assessment method. Multimedia has made this assessment format authentic and meaningful. Participating in this type of oral assessment format requires students to give presentations that matters to them. Instead of focusing merely on grammar and vocabulary, most students talked about their daily lives, introducing new concepts and cultural phenomenon popular among the younger generations. Topics included 如何看待吃播的流行 (Why eating breakfast gets popular?), 为什么可爱的动物总是让你想咬一口 (Why cute animals always make you want to take a bite?), 华裔新西兰人的怪癖 (Strange habits of Chinese New Zealanders). Knowing that they were doing a TED talk that needed to engage their audience, students worked on their topic and content carefully, which encouraged a content entrepreneurship.

In China, the digital age has entered into an age of ‘citizen journalism’. In Chinese, WeMedia, a buzzword based on the Chinese *zì mèiti*, or “self-media” has developed. As the ‘self’ suggests, the term refers to content produced by common media users who operate outside of the traditional media industry. Our advanced Chinese learners need the ability to participate in this self-media era. Chinese programmes need to integrate the spirit and skill of being active in Chinese social media, particularly in advanced Chinese courses.

For teachers and researchers who are interested in further developing this approach, here are a few suggestions. First, this approach will operate better with smaller groups of students. Having 30 students in one speaking course has caused longer waiting times for each student to get feedback. Second, scaffolding is essential for students to effectively integrate their knowledge of Chinese and skills of presentation into their talk. Sufficient preparation time is also required to ensure that the TED conference runs smoothly for all students. Teachers will need to ensure that equipment such as PowerPoint, sound system, video-recording, programme, nametags, seating arrangements and so on are all in order. Finally, much hard work and time has to be spent on building such a knowledge-sharing culture among students. It is not only helpful for them to become better engaged in the learning and using of Chinese, but also for creating long-lasting memories of taking on challenges and making changes together as friends.

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