

## STIMULATING POSITIVE ENGLISH SPEAKING CLASS ENVIRONMENT

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### ABSTRACT

Despite the fact that the skills to communicate in English are crucial in the globalization era, the majority of students in Bogor Agricultural University encounter problems to speak this language appropriately and fluently. When asked to elaborate the inhibiting factors, students generally point out both linguistic and non-linguistic factors. Accordingly, not only do students need to be equipped with adequate knowledge of grammar, a sufficient range of vocabulary, and pronunciation knowledge but their confidence and willingness to take the risk also need to be provoked as well. In fact, the latter points, namely, building confidence and risk-taking willingness generally require hard efforts on the part of the teachers. Practice, is indeed viewed as the best way in such an English teaching-learning process, although, inevitably, there are often questions concerning the how this process is able to provide prominent and meaningful inputs to the students. This paper is written as an attempt to elicit students' opinions on speaking classroom environment which can stimulate and foster students to speak appropriately and fluently. 100 students of Bogor Agricultural University (of Diploma level) who had taken reading class prior to the Speaking I, were randomly selected to be the subjects of the study. Besides completing questionnaires focusing on classroom arrangement and environment, participants were interviewed for further clarification. Results show that teachers play the most prominent role in creating classroom environment, including creating comforting but challenging classroom environment and providing appropriate teaching materials.

**Keywords:** *classroom environment, friendly speaking environment*

Although teaching speaking skill does not completely differ from teaching other language skills, it apparently requires greater endeavors as students are driven to produce sentences in an active way. Meanwhile, being in a new speaking class – where one has to express ideas and opinions – is not always a pleasant experience for students. Quite often, a series of queries appears in a student's

mind: whether they will have an interesting class, a good teacher, nice friends, and so forth. Others might think whether they will be able to accomplish all of their classroom activities, and go through all of the tasks in the learning process for the whole semester. Still, some others wonder whether they are far behind their friends in terms of ability or the same. Such worries may, unfortunately, result in the decline of

students' guts and confidence so that their performance is far below optimum.

It is in such a case, learning environment becomes paramount. If the environment is dreary and discouraging, things will lead to a strenuous and boring situation though the lessons offered are tremendous. If the environment is tempting and motivating, on the other hand, learning may take place more easily as having safe and comfortable feelings, learners will eagerly open themselves to be involved and actively engage in the learning activities. By doing so, they are expected to be able to absorb and master the materials and skills given. But, the questions arisen here is "Who is responsible to create such a stimulating learning environment?"

This paper is written to elicit students' opinion on "Who" or/and "What" can stimulate learners to speak in the speaking classroom.

### **Learning Environment**

The term "Learning Environment" has apparently drawn a relatively wide attention from teachers of languages who then react in different ways as their follow-up actions. A some papers discuss that many language teachers immediately direct their concentration on the physical setting of the classroom – where and how specific things must be placed and arranged as such an organization is believed to benefit young learners in their brain development (Church, 2010). He goes on by mentioning other factors that may affect the classroom environment; namely, material choices as well as provided activities. Byanderzee (2010), furthermore forward the idea that a positive classroom environment can be created by taking learners' preferences and

view points in the design of classroom materials, and this can be covered in specific classroom curriculum design. One specific goal for this is to ensure that students' individual needs will be fulfilled. A larger coverage of the conception of learning environment is not only the "physical" environment but also the emotional feelings of learners created by particular people in a classroom: the teacher, classmates, etc that play a prominent role in stimulating positive learning environment. The feeling of being secure and excited when entering the classroom and conducting all the activities, is one of the examples of desired classroom environment.

### **Methods and Procedures**

100 students of Diploma Program in IPB (from 6 different classes from two semesters) were asked to fill in a questionnaire "Stimulating Classroom Environment for English Speaking Learners". They are free to give more than one answers when describing the preferred teacher, teaching materials, classmates, etc. In order to explore true responses from participants, Indonesian is used, but answers were given in English.

Responses were then tabulated and analyzed to obtain a clear depiction of students' preferences. Words of similar meaning are classified into one to make the grouping easier. Some of these findings some were put into graphs.

In-depth interviews were conducted in order to get clarification of participants' responses on the questionnaire.

### **Findings and Discussion**

It was found that according to the students, the salient factors which have

great roles in stimulating positive classroom environment so as to make them willing and encouraged to speak in English are in the following order: teacher, materials, classmates, classroom situation, learning activities. See Figure 1 below.

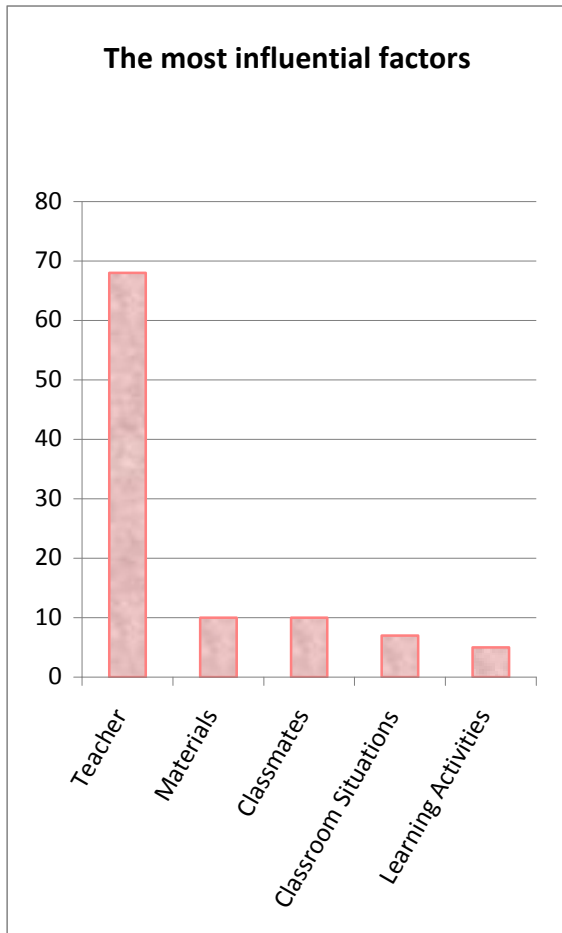


Figure 1: The most influential factors in creating positive learning environment

Results indicated that the majority of the participants (68%) pointed out “the teacher” as the most crucial factor in making them speak, compared to other factors such as materials (10%), classmates (10%), learning situations (7%) and learning activities (5%). Teacher factor is evidently far above the other choices, meaning that teachers are viewed to have a vital role in providing valuable learning environment.

Regarding detailed teachers’ characteristics, teaching materials, classmates’ characteristics, and so forth that students preferred in-depth interviews were conducted. Responses mentioned by participants in each category are discussed individually.

### 1. Teacher (as the Most Influential Factor)

What are the aspects of an influential teacher brought up by the students in the questionnaire and interview?

Regarding teachers’ characteristics that students preferred, students raised teachers’ being friendly, supportive and giving respect as the highest in frequency. See Figure 2 below.

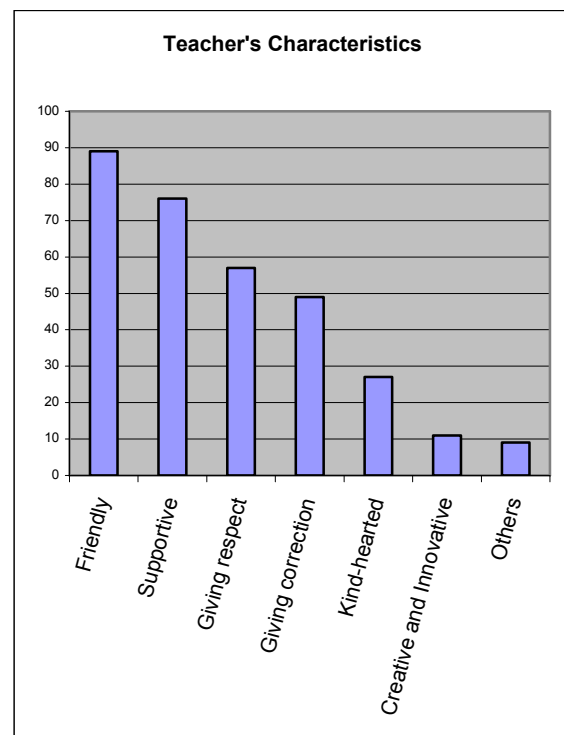


Figure 2. Teacher’s Preferred Characteristics

Responses students raised in the questionnaire are as described in the following:

### 1. *Being friendly*

The most outstanding teachers' characteristic raised by the majority of the students (89 %) – which also means what students concern the most about their teacher – is “friendliness”. Although it is described in a variety of words; including, being friendly, always smiles, always shows friendly face, the body language shows friendliness, and the like, students point out that this characteristic has a great impact on their feelings towards the classroom environment. This can make them feel at ease and comfortable and also reduce their nervousness so that they can enjoy the lesson and find it easier to express their opinions.

### 2. *Being supportive*

Similar to the first characteristic, this second one was also written by 77% students as one of the teacher's ideal characteristics. They have more courage if the teacher always provides support for his/her students, particularly when they make mistakes or do not know what to say. Thus, expressions such as “That's good, so what about ...” in order to remind them of what they have to focus on, or “Right, but how do you pronounce ...” when trying to correct their pronunciation can make them keep going.

Another expression that students use in the response is that they like to have a teacher who always gives motivation so that they feel the need to learn more and more. This can be conducted when giving them assignment or at the end of the lesson, for instance, depending on the classroom situation. Saying “Practice again and again so that in the next meeting you can speak much better than this time...” can give a significantly positive impact on the students.

### 3. *Giving respects*

Although it is not mentioned as often as the above two characteristics, more than half of the respondents (57%) mention that they need to be given respects by their teacher. A teacher who respects students, listens to what they say, provides the same opportunities for all students to speak or ask questions, and does not criticize nor give bad judgment in front of others is sincerely appreciated. A teacher should also be able to accept students' weaknesses wisely.

### 4. *Being eager in correcting students' mistakes*

Both eagerness and willingness of a teacher to address students' mistakes in a positive way is another concern (51%) since students believe that they still make lots of mistakes when speaking. A teacher, accordingly, is expected to show and correct these mistakes, as by doing so, students will be aware of their mistakes in the hope that they can avoid making the same mistakes at other times.

### 5. *Being kind-hearted*

In addition, many students (46%) would like to have a teacher who has genuine understanding upon his/her students' level of English proficiency, including understanding their difficulties and anxiety while learning English. In their words, they like a teacher who “can understand students' situations” and do not become furious easily. A teacher has to have a great patience in her/himself.”

#### 6. *Being creative and innovative*

To a smaller extent (11%), students stated that a creative and innovative teacher can create good environment in the classroom since he/she can make classroom alive with the materials and activities provided for the students.

#### 7. *Other characteristics*

There are, still, other teachers' characteristics preferred by students although only in a very small number (7%). These include being able to explain clearly and become a role model, having sense of humor, being professional, and close to the students. Moreover, teachers should also be serious in a friendly manner.

From the findings, it revealed that only a very few number of the participants point out teacher's intelligence, knowledge, and smartness as profound aspects in creating friendly speaking environment. These cognitive characteristics were not as highly favored as affective characteristics as discussed above. It is definite, therefore, that to provide friendly speaking environment, teachers' personalities have to be given more attention. This is a great input for language teachers to introspect and check whether the above points are built in themselves.

The above-mentioned findings are, in fact, in line with previous studies (eg., Purjayanti, 2008). Similar hints to teach speaking class are also stated by Kelly (2010) who points out that both "teacher's behaviors" and "teacher's characteristics", particularly "teacher's personalities" have a great impact on how a learning environment is created. Whether or not a teacher is even-tempered, sarcastic, serious, patient, or optimist, is viewed to be the most important factor in creating a

stimulating classroom environment as it appears that every student mentions this in their response.

What needs to be done then? Personalities, indeed, have to come first. Giving genuine smile and showing a happy face can be the first thing a teacher has to perform. Language teachers do not only assist students but also learn from others; sharing both knowledge and experience with students at the same time may help language teachers maintain the positive environment.

Included in the personalities that a language teacher needs to possess is the choices of words he/she uses in the classroom. Words of appreciation, inspiration as well as keenness are always good to use. A list of word choices and expressions used by language teachers in the classroom is proposed by Andrew (2009:1); he mentions that saying "*raise a hand if in need of assistance*" creates a more positive environment than saying "*do not call out answers*".

Regarding teacher's attempt to correct students' mistakes which is very common to occur in a speaking class, again, words play a great role. Suess (2010); therefore, suggests that a teacher should conduct this activity wisely:

*"Always start with positive statement; praise them for trying. Praise is a powerful positive motivation tool"*  
(Mc-Daniels in Suess, 2010:2)

Above all, a more crucial tip for teacher's personalities is provided by Suess who states that the heart of creating stimulating classroom environment is teachers' "enthusiasm" as well as "excitement" towards the lesson being taught. Teachers should always try to be enthusiastic and eager with the valuable job being conducted. It is this excitement

that will finally spread throughout the whole classroom and spark students' enthusiasm to learn.

It is, definitely, a big fortune if all the characteristics and behaviors that students preferred become the parts of language teachers' daily life in order to make students feel the comfort, respect, and even love from teachers. The most important questions that need to be addressed now is probably, "Are language teachers able to keep up the same performance from time to time?", or "Can they always control their emotion in all kinds of situations?" Whatever the answer it takes, it is always good to take Kelly's affirmation into account:

*"your behavior is the one factor that you can completely control"* (Kelly, 2010:1)

### Materials

The second vital components that can stimulate learning environment, as the participants respond on the questionnaire includes are both teaching materials and classmates. These are discussed with teaching materials discussed first and followed with classmates.

It was found that the stimulating materials include real-life topics, interesting topics, simple (trivial-matter) topic), and others. See Figure 3 below.

Real life topic includes topics about daily life, current issues and situations, any other current issues appear in the society. Students perceived such topics to be un-threatening topics to discuss since they are mostly have the knowledge on them; thus, it is relatively challenging.

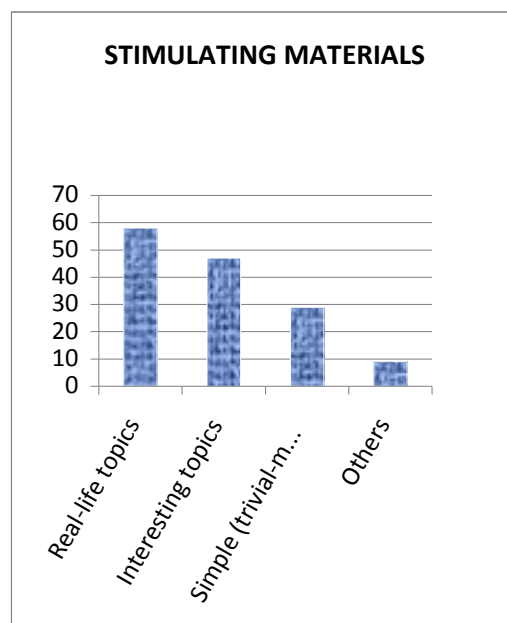


Figure 3. Stimulating Materials

Interesting topics include the ones providing new or more knowledge or information are also found interesting. On the other hand, the ones that students are not familiar with are more difficult to express. Third, simple topics are the ones related to the real-life topics. Topics on politics or laws, for instance, are fairly hard to discuss. Finally, other topics include the ones which are challenging, of their own choice, and fun.

### Classmate

Placed in the same rank as teaching materials, classmates were pointed out by 10% of the participants to be one of the factors influencing the learning environment. What kinds of classmates are they exactly expecting to make them encouraged to speak? See Figure 3 below.

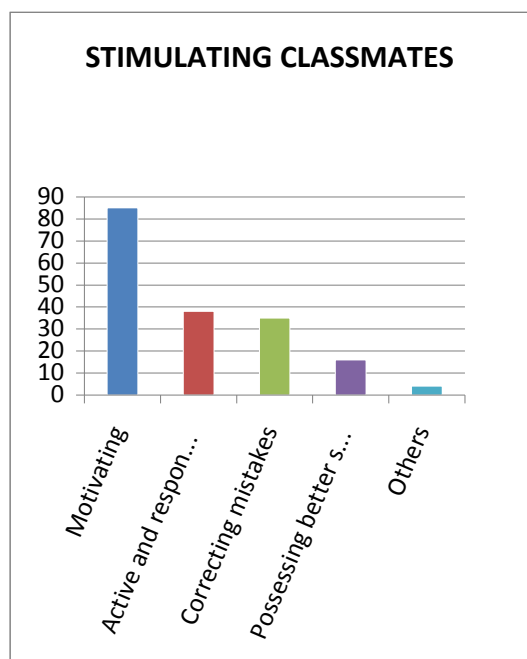


Figure 3. Stimulating classmate characteristics

From the above figure, it can be seen some stimulating classmate characteristics. Therefore, following characteristics of classmates are expected.

#### 1. Being great motivators

85 % students affirmed that they are encouraged to speak when their classmates are the ones who can give them motivation. This kind of classmates are those willing to help and do not expect too much in return. These classmates also appreciate whatever their other friends performed and gave necessary suggestions.

#### 2. Being active and responsive

58% students; furthermore, pointed out that these classmates are relatively active when conducting conversations with them, active asking questions and giving opinions during class presentation. Such classmates can radiate energy to them so that they finally become active.

#### 3. Willing to give correction

Similar to the hope addressed to teachers, some students (27%) feel happy to be corrected by their friends. They found that most of the time, they forget grammar or certain pronunciation due to nervousness or concentration breakdown. Having correction from their friends will make them fresh again and able to carry out their speaking.

#### 4. Possessing better skills

This finding was found relatively surprising. 16% of the participants stated that they can apparently have more courage when facing classmates with better ability. They revealed that these kinds of friends will indirectly radiate their great spirit to the others who realize that they have to learn more and more.

#### 5. Others

What includes under this category are, among others, having sincere classmates – the ones who give their complete attention when others are carrying out their tasks –, can also provide the spirit for them to speak. They also like classmates who never laugh at their friends' mistakes

It is worth noting that classmates can, indeed, have a relatively big influence in the learning environment, particularly in a speaking class. It is necessary, therefore, for all language teachers to give their attention to this matter. Mc-Daniels words, quoted by Sues (2010:2) can be used as a great reminder:

*“Make sure students respect one another by teaching them help rather than laugh at each other. They should be reminded how they would like to be treated, and should treat others that way.”*

### Learning/Classroom Situation

Although this is not discerned as a really influential factor in creating the learning environment, few students stated some preferences on the classroom situations. See Figure 4 below.

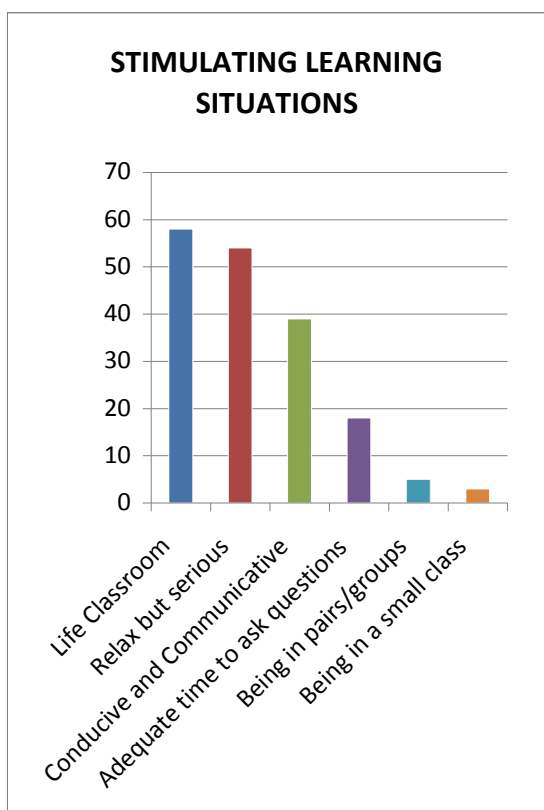


Figure 4. Stimulating situation/environment

From the data collected, it was found out that students like the following (in order of preference):

- 1) to have a life classroom where everyone can express their opinions without fear
- 2) to be in a fun and relax but serious situation (as opposed to an intense classroom)

- 3) to be in a warm, conducive, and communicative classroom
- 4) to be given an opportunity to speak or ask questions
- 5) to be placed in pairs or groups
- 6) to be placed in a small class ( not too many students in it)

It was found that students, indeed, like to take part by expressing ideas in their speaking classroom, whether they are as a presenter or audience. This is believed to be able to provide as pleasant classroom environment so as not to make students feel discouraged and disrespected.

It was also worth noting that – as mentioned by a number of students – placing students in pairs or small groups is one way to make students feel comfortable and relax (as opposed to be individual). The first reason might be because they know each other, and secondly they have more turn and opportunity to express their ideas. Having this, therefore, it is expected that students can have better involvement, and hopefully better learning results.

### Learning Activities

Students revealed that activities they like to perform in a speaking class are:

- 1) the ones involving asking and answering questions
- 2) presentation
- 3) group discussion
- 4) graded level of difficulty (to start from the easiest then move to the next grades)

The above findings, in fact, confirmed students' high desire to get more time to perform speaking in the classroom. Thus, the enthusiasm is there with the students. The question arisen will be "are students



given a opportunity to carry out the real speaking? Or, instead, is their high spirit “killed” simply because the language teachers do not provide an environment that can keep students’ high desire?

### Conclusion

Generating a stimulating learning environment means creating safe, comfortable, secure, and friendly situations where students feel welcome, accepted and respected. Nervousness, anxiety or even stress due to the fear to produce utterances may be reduced or even hampered by such a friendly environment. In this kind of environment, learners are put in the centre of the classroom activities where they can explore and share knowledge, information, and experience in their own way. It is expected that in this way, learners can build their confidence and grow their willingness to express their ideas in their speaking class so as to make them speak better.

Now, as previously discussed, it is the duty of the teacher as the “most influential” person – whom the students rely on – to make every effort in order to provide the above findings for students to learn more eagerly. This is in line with McDaniels’ (2012:1) statement:

*“All students, even those who have learning difficulties and extraordinary personal challenges can do well when they are physically comfortable, mentally motivated and emotionally supported”.*

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