

Article



# From Silence to Spoken Interaction: A Foreign Teacher's Perspective on Teaching Colloquial English in Chinese Higher Education

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**Abstract:** This paper presents a pedagogical practice report examining the challenges and possible solutions involved in teaching Colloquial English to large, mixed-proficiency EFL classes in a Chinese higher-education context. The study is based on the author's teaching experience at Wenzhou Business College, where an elective course was delivered to 173 students aged 18–23 across five class groups with diverse linguistic backgrounds and proficiency levels. Drawing on classroom observations and anonymous student questionnaire responses collected after the final assessment, the paper explores strategies for increasing learner engagement, encouraging spoken interaction, and creating a supportive classroom environment. The report identifies several context-specific challenges, including limited voluntary participation, language anxiety, heterogeneous proficiency levels, and the difficulty of designing activities accessible to all learners. To address these issues, the article describes a pedagogical approach combining rapport building, demonstration-based instruction, Technology-Enhanced Language Learning (TELL), particularly the use of Kahoot!, and continuous assessment practices. The implementation of these strategies suggests that interactive activities, practical language content, and low-stakes opportunities for communication may contribute to increased student participation and motivation. While the findings are limited to one teaching context, this case study provides practical insights for EFL teachers working in large multilingual classrooms, particularly those seeking to balance communicative language teaching principles with the realities of Chinese higher education.

**Keywords:** foreign teacher perspective; intercultural communication; Technology-Enhanced Language Learning (TELL); continuous assessment

## 1. Introduction

This paper analyses my teaching experience in elective Colloquial English classes at Wenzhou Business College, Zhejiang, China (hereinafter WZBC), attended by students aged 18–23. 173 students' views were collected through anonymous open-ended questionnaires administered after the final assessment of the course. Participation was voluntary, and all participants provided informed consent for their anonymized responses to be used for research purposes.

Students' majors range from Art, Accounting, Marketing, and Logistics to English Language and Business,

and they attended the course across five class groups of varying sizes. These heterogeneous groups, ranging in size from 20 to 55 students, began the course with differing expectations. Ideally, they seek to improve their English proficiency, gain greater intercultural awareness or just practice what they have already learnt. However, for the most part they expect an easy-to-pass and entertaining class and they want to spend some time with a foreigner, in this case me, the teacher. Transforming a heterogeneous and often unmotivated large group into a productive classroom environment requires considerable pedagogical effort on the teacher's part which this article offers several practical insights into.



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The first part of this article examines the teaching context, the challenges arising from it, and underlying causes for these challenges (Sections 2 and 3). The second part presents a comprehensive pedagogical approach incorporating classroom rapport building, student engagement through Technology-Enhanced Language Learning (TELL), specifically the online student response system Kahoot!, and an assessment strategy designed to increase student motivation (Sections 4 and 5). The implementation section then discusses students' feedback and behaviour in greater detail (Sections 6 and 7). Finally, the paper reflects on the outcomes of the proposed approach, its limitations, and possible directions for future research.

Overall, the paper puts an emphasis on the student as the central active participant in the EFL classroom while the teacher is rather a guide and a presence which creates a safe environment for each student.

## 2. Teaching Context

The presently discussed elective Colloquial English course complemented students' compulsory EFL courses, many of which focused primarily on IELTS preparation and examination-oriented language learning. In contrast, this course emphasized everyday communication and authentic spoken interaction. As the course was always scheduled in the evening following a full day of instruction, maintaining student engagement remained an important consideration, particularly during paper-based learning activities (Responses to the questionnaire suggest that, despite the selection of texts based on students' needs and interests, paper-based learning activities often initially result in reduced engagement and are perceived as having limited practical relevance. This reaction may be understood as a form of conditioned response, as traditional textbook materials frequently include topics that do not directly correspond to learners' immediate communicative needs. Consequently, students may be expected to discuss relatively specialized topics, such as the advantages and disadvantages of different irrigation systems, while lacking vocabulary necessary for everyday interactions, such as the expression "scan the code". However, once students recognize the relevance and practical value of the material, their engagement in the class typically increases significantly.). The course is taught in relatively large classes (20–55 students), which may contribute to a sense of anonymity among students and pose additional challenges for maintaining active participation. Recent research in Chinese university EFL contexts further suggests that students' willingness to communicate is closely associated with the classroom environment and with learners' emotional experiences, particularly enjoyment, anxiety, and boredom (Li et al., 2022).

The course consists of eleven classes. The first ten classes are divided into three teaching periods, with the first two devoted to paper-based learning and the third to Technology-Enhanced Language Learning (TELL) activities. The final class is reserved for the oral examination.

One feature of the classroom organization is the use of group seating arrangements throughout the semester. Combined with a strictly implemented policy prohibiting the use of translation devices, this encourages students to cooperate whenever they encounter difficulties, thereby promoting communication in English and the active use of newly acquired vocabulary. At the beginning of the course, students are informed that electronic devices may only be used when explicitly permitted by the instructor. If a student is using a device without permission, they are asked to place it in the designated storage pockets available in every classroom. On average, between eight and ten devices—including mobile phones, electronic translators, smartwatches, and headphones—are placed in storage during each class.

The Chinese EFL classrooms discussed in this article comprise students with highly diverse levels of English proficiency. While some transfer-related errors (Selinker, 1972), such as the omission of the verb *be*, past tense marking, or plural morphemes, are widespread, students also differ considerably in the vocabulary they have already acquired. Furthermore, the elective Colloquial English course examined here covers a broad range of topics, including telephone conversations, death, relationship problems, making appointments, lying, and even swearing. As a result, students' performance often varies across topics depending on their prior exposure to the relevant vocabulary and communicative situations. This heterogeneity makes it challenging to prepare teaching materials and design classroom activities that are appropriate for all learners.

## 3. Pedagogical Challenges

Large classrooms (not only in China) often create a sense of anonymity and encourage teachers to adopt teacher-centered, lecture-based instructional approaches. While such approaches may have been effective in educational contexts characterized primarily by information transmission, particularly before the widespread availability of online resources and in more theory-oriented disciplines, they are generally less effective in EFL classrooms, where active language use and interaction are essential for language development. In the present teaching context, this approach is frequently associated with lower levels of student engagement and reduced participation in classroom activities, thereby limiting opportunities for meaningful language learning.

Even if this fundamental pitfall is avoided, numerous challenges may still arise. Based on my previous experience

in teaching in both European and non-European educational settings, such as Mexico, I observed that teenagers and young adults display a number of similarities across cultures, including a lack of self-confidence or, conversely, excessive self-confidence; inappropriate responses resulting from limited experience, vocabulary, or cultural knowledge; and attempts to circumvent classroom rules through cheating or absenteeism.

At the same time, the Chinese EFL context presented several distinctive characteristics. Research with Chinese EFL learners has shown that affective factors such as foreign language anxiety and boredom are associated with lower willingness to communicate (Bai, 2023). This suggests that reluctance to participate should not necessarily be interpreted simply as disengagement, but may reflect a combination of affective, linguistic, and situational factors. One of the most salient was an educational tradition that places greater emphasis on rehearsed responses and modesty than on spontaneous interaction and self-expression, often leaving students less prepared to participate in spontaneous discussions or voice their personal opinions. As a result, learners frequently produced formulaic expressions, e.g. “broaden my horizons, enrich my life, very convenient”. While grammatically acceptable, these expressions are over-represented in Chinese EFL contexts and often reflect textbook language and memorized chunks rather than naturally occurring spoken English.

Furthermore, students naturally relied heavily on their own cultural background when responding to different communicative situations (e.g., using maybe as a standalone response). In many cases, they also appeared to have had limited exposure to cultures beyond China, which required lengthy explanations of cultural contexts on my part and occasionally resulted in pragmatically inappropriate language use or culturally inappropriate communicative behaviour (e.g., “What did you do at the weekend?”—“Sleep.”). According to Krash (1998), such differences in communication may be explained, at least in part, by the principle of linguistic relativity. Put simply, language both reflects and shapes habitual patterns of thought. Consequently, achieving natural communication in a foreign language involves not only acquiring linguistic forms but also developing intercultural communicative competence.

As this article focuses on the Chinese EFL context, one of the most relevant concepts when it comes to pedagogical challenges is the so-called “Chinese wall of silence” (Jing, 2010; Liu & Jackson, 2008; Peng, 2012; Wen & Clément, 2003), which refers to the limited voluntary participation of Chinese students in discussions and other classroom activities requiring spontaneous communication in a foreign language. Overcoming the “Chinese wall of silence” represents one of the major challenges for a language teacher. While the students cannot learn to speak without actually speaking, they are educated in an environment

where mistakes are often stigmatized. However, it has been widely recognized at least since Selinker (1972) introduced the concept of interlanguage that language learning does not take place when no mistakes are made. Interlanguage is the evolving linguistic system learners create while acquiring a foreign language. It is influenced by both the learner’s native language and the target language and reflects developmental processes such as transfer, over-generalization, and hypothesis testing. It is therefore a natural stage of Second Language Acquisition.

As a foreign teacher, I can very easily comprehend students’ reluctance to participate in discussions if they do not understand even the basic topic or question. During an EFL class, this can happen every time the activity changes. Very often, it is the language barrier which keeps students from starting to work.

Another challenge is encouraging spontaneous spoken interaction in classes with learners of varying English proficiency. Learners with lower proficiency often hesitate to participate because they need longer time to process oral or written prompts, while others are reluctant to speak due to fear of making mistakes. The process of producing spontaneous utterances is indeed beneficial for the students, but it might also be time-consuming and extremely straining and exhausting. Consequently, classroom activities may lose momentum before students even begin engaging with the task.

While it is not possible to ensure all the students will learn and understand everything, it is possible to increase the likelihood that most of them will remember at least some concepts from class. Each student may be at a different stage of learning, starting from the first introduction of the word over activating a passive item in the vocabulary up to simply encountering an active vocabulary item in a new context. The chart of the FLOW state in Figure 1 illustrates the risks of aiming too low and too high in language instruction.

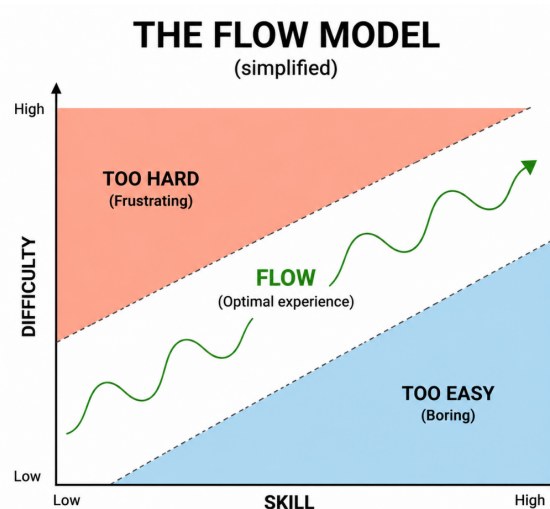


**Figure 1.** Relationship between learner ability and task difficulty (based on Csikszentmihalyi, 1990).

In heterogeneous EFL classrooms, the same activity may be overly demanding and therefore frustrating for some students, while being too easy and consequently boring for others. Designing activities that maintain an appropriate balance between challenge and learners' abilities is therefore one of the key pedagogical challenges. The following section presents the classroom practices I use to achieve this balance.

#### 4. Pedagogical Approach

A key question is how to encourage Chinese students to participate in spoken interaction and help them understand that making mistakes is an inevitable and necessary part of the learning process. For a foreign teacher in China, this challenge can be somewhat alleviated by the already mentioned fact that students often choose such courses due to their interest in interacting with a foreign teacher. I try to build on this motivation by showing students that foreigners, including teachers, are ordinary individuals who also make mistakes.

Thus, although my Mandarin proficiency is only at a pre-intermediate level, I deliberately use Chinese in class to demonstrate that effective communication is possible despite linguistic inaccuracies. Based on my classroom observations and questionnaire responses, such situations contribute to the development of intercultural rapport. In this article, I adopt Spencer-Oatey and Franklin's (2009) rapport definition, i.e., "people's subjective perceptions of (dis)harmony, smoothness-turbulence and warmth-antagonism in interpersonal relations."

To further promote rapport, I explicitly establish classroom expectations and repeatedly explain the reasons behind my teaching practices, including why I correct students' English, why I encourage spontaneous speaking without preparation, why students work in groups, and, most importantly, why they should actively listen to their peers. The last expectation appears particularly important, as many students are not accustomed to learning through observing classmates' responses. Listening to peers express ideas, make mistakes, and receive teacher feedback provides learners with a model of the learning process and gradually increases their willingness to take similar risks themselves.

##### 4.1. Paper-Based Sessions

As noted above, the first two 45-min sessions are paper-based. The handouts are based on *Colloquial English: The Complete Course for Beginners* (King, 1998) and *Taboos and Issues* (MacAndrew & Martinez, 2001). Students are primarily engaged through task-based activities and communicative practice. To reduce the impact of the language barrier, I adopt a demonstration-before-explanation approach. This strategy is based on the assumption that the teacher plays an important role in designing activities and providing instructions that

enable the majority of learners to participate successfully. Rather than relying on lengthy verbal explanations, I introduce new tasks through brief demonstrations or mock rounds following a concise introduction.

For example, when students are asked to create a short dialogue incorporating an English idiom from the materials, I first provide a specific idiom (e.g., kick the bucket) and demonstrate the expected outcome. This allows learners to observe the task requirements before attempting the activity independently.

In classes of approximately 50 students, one or two groups typically understand the task immediately and are able to perform the dialogue within two or three minutes. Their performance subsequently serves as a peer model for the rest of the class, reducing initial uncertainty and facilitating a smoother transition to task completion.

This gradual, scaffolded approach enables the teacher to clarify any remaining ambiguities while fostering a classroom environment in which experimentation and problem-solving are encouraged rather than avoided. As the course progresses, students become increasingly willing to engage with unfamiliar activities, reflecting both their growing familiarity with the instructional approach and the development of collaborative relationships within their groups.

In my classes of Colloquial English, I try to address not only on verbal expression, but also gestures like air quotes meaning sarcasm; cultural content, whether in the form of music, movies, books or visual art, as such references frequently appear in idiomatic language, e.g., *May The Force Be With You*; and direct communication strategies as well as preparation for participation in Western-style classrooms as many of my students plan to study abroad in future.

My approach to teaching is based on immediate responses to awkward or pragmatically inappropriate student expressions as merely listing problematic constructions and more appropriate alternatives would result in teacher-centred instruction. While this approach means that the number of language issues resolved is lower, based on responses in students' questionnaires the retention rate appears to be relatively high. By taking the space and analyzing the problematic aspect of a real classroom situation, the students develop a deeper understanding. Let me give an example.

A student approached me during the class with an apology for leaving the class earlier. His words were "I've got some business to deal with." In this situation, I am able to explain to the whole class that this phrase has a cinematic or tough-sounding tone in English, especially in American media. Even if the student intended to be polite, native speakers of English might perceive unnatural formality and mild rudeness or laugh at the phrasing. This situation provides an excellent opportunity to elicit from students a few possible phrases on how to deal with this situation in a better way and because they have just

witnessed an authentic communicative misunderstanding, they are more interested. I also usually note down these examples and I continuously add them to my Kahoot! game with the topic “How not to sound awkward”.

This principle also applies to other problematic, blocking or situation-specific vocabulary items/functional language chunks that emerge during classroom interaction. Immediately after each lesson, I incorporate these examples into the Kahoot! activity. As a result, students quickly become aware that any vocabulary or functional language I write on the board and is discussed during the first two sessions is likely to reappear in the TELL session. This encourages them to take notes systematically and to review newly encountered lexical items throughout the course, thereby promoting continuous vocabulary recycling and long-term retention.

#### 4.2. TELL Session

In Section 3, I identified several challenges, including the so-called Chinese “wall of silence”, encouraging spoken interaction despite general language barriers, and designing activities suitable for learners with different levels of proficiency. While I do not advocate replacing paper-based learning materials entirely, I consider the integration of digital technologies into language education an important component of contemporary teaching practice. However, technology should not be implemented merely as a form of technical innovation; rather, it should serve the purpose of increasing learner interaction, engagement, and participation (Based on my experience, the use of technology in EFL classes in Chinese higher education is often limited to animated PowerPoint presentations used to display textbook answers or the use of AI tools to assist students in preparing responses for classroom discussions. Although these approaches can increase efficiency by accelerating answer checking or supporting idea generation, they do not necessarily promote active participation. Presentations are frequently delivered in a teacher-centred manner, while AI-generated responses can typically only be shared with the class by a limited number of students.). Recent research with Chinese EFL learners similarly suggests that digital communication activities can enhance learner engagement and willingness to communicate (Han et al., 2024).

Kahoot! provides one possible practical response to these challenges by enabling simultaneous participation, supporting mixed-proficiency groups, and increasing learner engagement through interactive activities.

Kahoot! is an online student response system (hereafter SRS) that enables the integration of gamification into a wide range of EFL activities, including grammar instruction, vocabulary revision, and student presentations. This game-based learning platform is widely used internationally (Wang & Tahir, 2020), and one of the aims of this article is to explore its potential contribution to

learner engagement and highlight its applicability in Chinese higher education contexts and beyond.

With students typically carrying internet-connected devices, even large groups can participate simultaneously in responding to questions. After a brief registration process, during which students scan a QR code (Figure 2) and join the game, the teacher can begin the activity and proceed directly to the questions (Figure 3).

After each question, students receive immediate feedback by viewing their ranking on their devices and the correct answer displayed on the screen (Figure 4). Correct responses are awarded points based on both accuracy and response speed (Figure 5). The teacher can then briefly clarify the answer or include an additional Kahoot! slide providing further theoretical explanation.

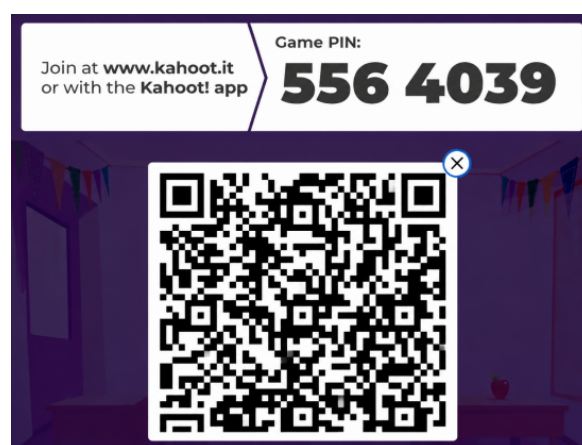


**Figure 2.** Kahoot! registration interface used for students to join classroom activities. Screenshot from the author's Kahoot! session, included for illustrative purposes.

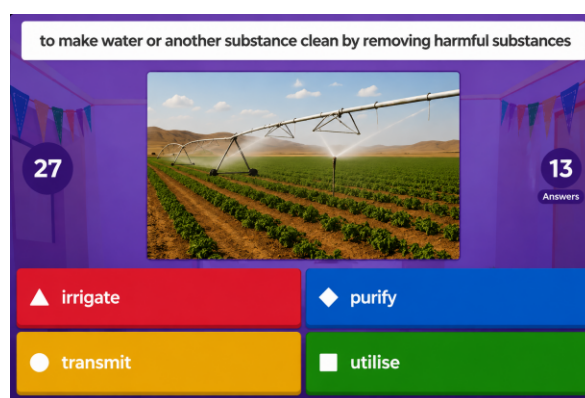


**Figure 3.** Kahoot! example question used for vocabulary practice during classroom activities. Screenshot from the author's Kahoot! session, included for illustrative purposes.

Creating a Kahoot! activity requires only a limited amount of preparation time, and once created, individual games can be reused and adapted for future classes. Vocabulary items can be prepared in spreadsheet format and uploaded directly, while AI tools can assist, for

example, in generating plausible distractors for multiple-choice questions. In addition, a large number of publicly available Kahoot! activities can be accessed free of charge by searching for relevant keywords on the platform.

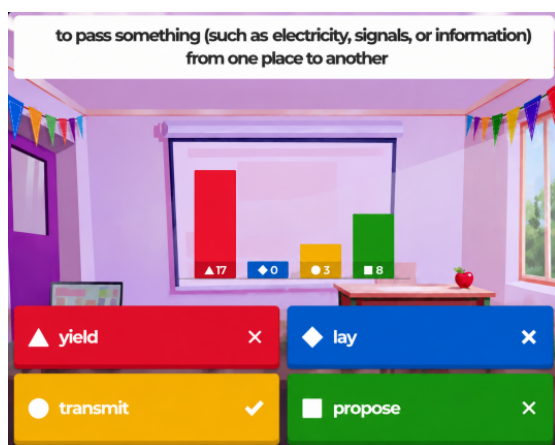


**Figure 4.** Kahoot! answer feedback screen showing response distribution and immediate correction. Screenshot from the author's Kahoot! sessions, included for illustrative purposes.

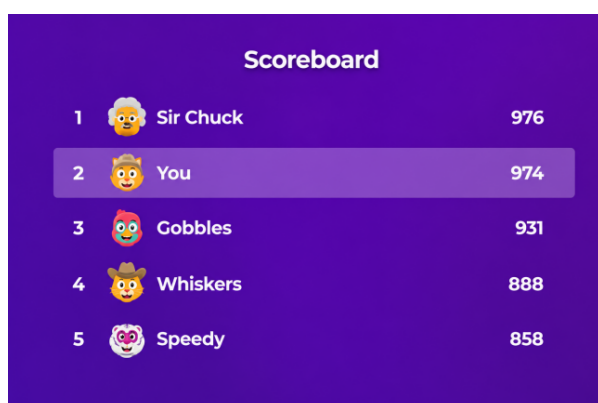


**Figure 5.** Kahoot! scoreboard displaying student rankings after classroom activity. Screenshot from the author's Kahoot! session, included for illustrative purposes.

One of the principal advantages of Kahoot! is the flexibility of its question formats, which makes it particularly suitable for implementing spiral learning (Bruner, 1966). Teachers can continuously revisit previously introduced vocabulary, grammar structures, and communicative functions while gradually increasing complexity. Kahoot! allows instructors to modify activities through multiple-choice questions, true/false items, gap-fill exercises, definition matching, synonym and antonym recognition, image-based prompts, pronunciation identification, audio-based listening tasks, dialogue completion, sentence reordering, matching exercises, polls, puzzle/order activities, quiz slides, contextual interpretation tasks, short reading comprehension questions, and open-ended responses.

As learners repeatedly encounter the same language items through different task types and modalities, knowledge is recycled rather than taught only once. This gradual revisiting of content aligns closely with Bruner's (1966) spiral learning theory, according to which learners deepen their understanding through repeated exposure in increasingly sophisticated contexts. Furthermore, at the present time, there is a consensus on several concepts which support language learning. Kahoot! is potentially an instrument for spaced repetition together with active recall and retrieval practice.

While Kahoot! is not primarily designed for developing speaking skills, it provides valuable opportunities for presenting and assessing grammatical knowledge, as well as reviewing and expanding vocabulary. These activities are conducted through an intuitive and user-friendly interface that remains accessible even to learners with very limited English proficiency. To further support lower-proficiency students, I frequently encourage more advanced learners to translate for them target vocabulary items or explain why alternative answers are incorrect, thereby promoting peer-supported learning.

Through immediate feedback, music, visual elements, and game-like features, it transforms practice activities into a more interactive and engaging learning experience. Ultimately, reducing boredom and fatigue does not depend solely on shortening tasks or increasing variety, but on creating conditions in which learners remain actively involved throughout the learning process.

While the process of producing spontaneous utterances required during the first two sessions and after playing Kahoot! is beneficial for the students, it might also be straining and exhausting. Kahoot! then represents the opposite situation on the scale of comfort as the students are engaged in anonymity under a nickname and avatar they choose themselves. While there is still clarification and practice of the problematic vocabulary or grammar, it is done without direct reference to the students who made the mistake. At the end of each game their success is celebrated and that way a positive learning atmosphere prevails.

Based on the questionnaire which students filled in, they enjoy learning with Kahoot! regardless of their language proficiency. This may partly explain why students reported enjoying Kahoot! activities, as the combination of challenge, immediate feedback, and active participation shares some characteristics with Csikszentmihalyi's (1990) concept of FLOW.

The Kahoot! games I prepare typically require approximately 15–25 min of classroom time. In some classes, students are given the opportunity to present their own Kahoot! activities and temporarily take over the role of instructor, while in others, the time allows for additional communicative activities focused on spoken language production.

To provide students with more opportunities for spontaneous interaction in English regardless of their

proficiency level, I rely on visual and auditory stimuli, such as short video clips, rather than relying on teacher-generated oral or written questions to initiate discussion.

To illustrate this classroom activity, Figure 4 presents examples of visual prompts used to initiate spontaneous speaking activities. These types of images were selected because they provide an accessible starting point for discussion and allow students with different levels of

English proficiency to participate. Rather than requiring learners to first understand a complex verbal question, visual stimuli encourage interpretation, description, and speculation, generating multiple possible responses and supporting spontaneous language production. The images in Figure 6 are taken from the author's personal archive and are included solely for illustrative purposes. No identifiable information is presented.



**Figure 6.** Examples of visual prompts used to initiate spontaneous speaking activities. Source: author's personal archive.

The internet provides a wide range of short video clips that can be used to activate colloquial vocabulary and encourage spontaneous reactions without requiring students to fully understand a complex verbal prompt. Furthermore, these descriptive tasks can be easily adapted to different proficiency levels. Lower-proficiency learners can respond using individual words or short phrases, while more advanced learners can be encouraged to speculate about emotions, intentions, or events occurring before or after the scene shown in the video.

In addition to video-based activities, I incorporate various technology-enhanced speaking tasks, including sound-guessing activities using audio clips, digitally supported versions of Never Have I Ever, Chinese Whispers with projected prompts, collaborative story creation based on visual stimuli, and a final pub quiz session. These activities provide learners with multimodal input and clear communicative purposes, lowering the threshold for participation while encouraging spontaneous language production.

Through final quiz-night which is designed as a consolidation activity, I allow students to revisit vocabulary, cultural content, and communicative expressions introduced throughout the course in a

collaborative and engaging format. While less proficient learners can participate through recognition and short responses, stronger learners have opportunities to demonstrate their linguistic abilities by explaining answers, negotiating within groups, and providing additional information. By combining visual, auditory, and interactive elements, TELL activities create an inclusive environment in which learners with different levels of proficiency can participate meaningfully and experience success.

## 5. Assessment

Active participation is essential not only for students' learning outcomes but, based on my experience, also influences teacher motivation. When learners are actively engaged, lesson preparation becomes a more collaborative and rewarding process, potentially creating a positive cycle in which successful classroom experiences encourage further effort from both students and teachers. However, in large classes, participation cannot be assumed, and assessment can function as one of the external incentives supporting students' active involvement.

As discussed above, students may have different reasons for limited classroom participation, including language anxiety, differences in proficiency, or reluctance to speak in front of peers (While research on Chinese EFL learners' willingness to communicate, classroom silence, and learner agency provides important theoretical perspectives (e.g., Ali, 2025; Chen, 2020; Hu, 2021; Peng, 2012), the scope of this article is limited to practical approaches for increasing engagement and spoken

interaction in a communicative English course. Therefore, these areas are acknowledged but not explored in depth.). Therefore, in large groups, I consider it necessary to implement a system that allows the teacher to monitor individual participation throughout the course (see Table 1). I prefer to maintain this record in a paper-based format, as it allows me to add notes while moving around the classroom; however, an equivalent digital system could also be implemented.

**Table 1.** An example of students' activity tracking <sup>1</sup>.

| Name | Pinyin<br>(or English Name) | C 1 | C 2     | C 3 | C 4     | C 5 | C 6     | C 7 | C 8      | C 9 | C 10 | C 11    |
|------|-----------------------------|-----|---------|-----|---------|-----|---------|-----|----------|-----|------|---------|
| 沈程   | Shěn Chéng                  | A   | ✓<br>64 | V   | ✓<br>70 | R   | —<br>79 | K   | ✓<br>100 | ✓   | A    | ✓<br>+1 |
| 王欣延  | Wáng Xīnyán                 | ✓   | V<br>85 | ✓   | A<br>0  | ✓   | ✓<br>93 | ✓✓  | ✓<br>75  | R   | ✓    | ✓<br>+2 |

<sup>1</sup> The names shown in Table 1 are fictitious and are used solely for illustrative purposes. They illustrate how Pinyin or English names may be used to facilitate student nomination when instructors are unable to read all Chinese characters. No actual student information is presented.

The check marks in Table 1. indicate that a student produced spoken English during class, whether by reading an answer, responding to a discussion question, or asking the teacher a question in English. Two check marks indicate the student has spoken more than once. "V" indicates participation in video-description activities, while "R" indicates reading a longer text aloud in front of the class. The symbol "—" indicates that the student was either not selected for participation or did not produce an answer in the target language. "K" indicates the student created and presented a Kahoot!. "A" indicates absence. The numerical values represent in-class test results, while the final column contains final examination results. The additional space below students' names allows for brief notes regarding language level or other characteristics that support student identification.

Assessment procedures should reflect the learning objectives of a course. In theoretical subjects, such as morphosyntax, students can demonstrate their mastery of course content relatively easily through a final written examination, for example by defining and applying relevant terminology. However, spoken language competence cannot be assessed adequately through written testing alone.

For this reason, oral assessment represents the most appropriate option for the present course, as its primary objective is the development of spoken communicative competence, interactional ability, and real-time language production. Assessment procedures should reflect the nature of the skills being developed; therefore, evaluating spoken competence requires methods that capture learners' ability to communicate effectively in real time. Although the broader question of what constitutes language mastery remains actively debated within linguistics and TEFL, contemporary perspectives

increasingly recognise that language ability extends beyond grammatical competence to include communicative ability, social participation, and the interaction between cognitive and environmental factors (DeKeyser, 2020; Ellis, 1994; Ellis & Wulff, 2020; Kim, 2025; Krashen, 1982; Long, 1996; Selinker, 1972; Swain, 1985; VanPatten et al., 2020). From a pedagogical perspective, grammatical and pronunciation accuracy alone are insufficient for effective everyday communication. Learners also need to develop pragmatic, intercultural, and interactional competence, and teachers have a professional responsibility to address and assess progress in these areas. Although oral assessment inevitably involves a certain degree of subjectivity, it enables direct evaluation of pronunciation, fluency, spontaneity, and communicative strategies, which are difficult to measure through written examinations (Brown & Abeywickrama, 2019; Fulcher, 2003; Luoma, 2004).

Importantly, the final examination is currently designed as a supplementary assessment component rather than a high-stakes summative measure. Although it formally accounts for 35% of the final grade, a safeguard is applied to ensure that students' existing process-based grade cannot be negatively affected by their performance in the examination. Specifically, the examination score cannot be lower than the student's process-based grade. The final examination can therefore maintain or improve, but not reduce, the student's overall result. This approach acknowledges the developmental nature of spoken language learning and reduces the impact of a single assessment event on students' overall evaluation.

This assessment system has evolved over the course of the program. During the previous two semesters, the oral examination constituted 50% of the final grade, with the assessment rubric focusing on cross-cultural

communication, content, language proficiency, and time management. In the following semester, I reduced its weighting to 35%. Ideally, however, the final examination would account for approximately 10% of the final grade while remaining a compulsory component of the course. At such a lower weighting, the safeguard described above would no longer be necessary, as poor performance in a single examination would have only a limited effect on the overall course grade. This arrangement would more closely reflect the principles of formative assessment and continuous evaluation.

A single final examination provides only limited information about students' overall development, particularly in courses where the objective is improvement of communicative ability. If students were assessed solely according to their spoken English performance in the final examination, my classroom records suggest that more than 60% of students would not meet the expected standard for university-level language performance. However, this would fail to acknowledge progress made throughout the semester.

One of the main challenges mentioned above is the considerable variation in students' entry proficiency levels. As the elective course is open to students with different levels of English, the objective cannot realistically be the assessment of absolute proficiency alone. Instead, evaluation should also reflect individual improvement and sustained engagement with the learning process. This requires continuous assessment data collected throughout the course.

Throughout the semester, students complete three to four group video assignments, each lasting between one and three minutes. Students receive feedback on pronunciation, intonation, grammatical accuracy, and overall communicative performance, and I dedicate time to addressing their questions regarding this feedback. These assignments constitute 40% of the process-based grade.

During regular lessons, students participate in discussions related to syllabus topics and have opportunities to read texts aloud, providing additional input for subsequent conversations. I record individual oral participation, including contributions to discussions and responses to classroom tasks. During the third period of selected lessons, students practise language through Kahoot! activities; they may also create and present their own Kahoot! games, explaining correct answers while classmates participate. Furthermore, TELL sessions provide additional opportunities for spontaneous speech production, for example through describing events shown in videos. As voluntary participation in speaking activities is relatively rare, I frequently nominate students to ensure more balanced participation. Classroom activity constitutes 30% of the process-based grade.

All tests are conducted online during class in an open-book format. Students are permitted to use their notes and course materials but are not allowed to leave

the testing interface. Half of the questions are open-ended and manually assessed. These tests constitute 20% of the process-based grade.

The final component consists of students' handwritten notes. Since electronic devices are not permitted during lessons, students are required to record relevant vocabulary and expressions manually. Research suggests that writing vocabulary by hand can support retention through deeper cognitive processing, repeated exposure, and active engagement with lexical items (Dunlosky et al., 2013; Ellis, 2002; Nation, 2001; Schmitt, 2000). Student notes therefore constitute 10% of the process-based grade.

The strong emphasis placed on final examinations in many educational systems, including Chinese higher education, reflects wider concerns regarding assessment validity, standardization, and measurable learning outcomes. Nevertheless, scholars in applied linguistics and educational assessment have increasingly questioned whether traditional summative examinations adequately represent communicative competence and long-term language development. Consequently, there has been growing support for formative, continuous, and learner-centred approaches to assessment (Alderson, 2005; Bachman & Palmer, 1996; Carless, 2011).

## 6. Implementation

The implementation of the described pedagogical approach was further informed by anonymous student questionnaire responses collected after the final assessment. In total, 173 students completed the questionnaire, providing feedback on course content, classroom activities, and their overall learning experience. The responses were analysed thematically to identify recurring patterns related to students' perceptions of course relevance, engagement, and opportunities for communication.

One of the strongest themes emerging from the questionnaire responses was the perceived relevance of course content. A total of 121 students (69.9%) explicitly mentioned that they appreciated learning practical English connected to everyday communication, real-life situations, and cultural contexts. This corresponds with the main objective of the course, which was to move beyond textbook-based language practice and provide learners with opportunities to develop communicative competence in situations they may encounter outside the classroom.

The importance of authentic and culturally situated language was particularly evident in the lesson focusing on swearwords and emotionally charged expressions. Although such language requires careful contextualisation, students responded positively to explicit discussion of pragmatic limitations and appropriate usage. In total, 95% of respondents selected this lesson as one of their preferred topics, suggesting that

learners valued exposure to language that is frequently encountered in informal communication but often absent from traditional EFL materials.

Another recurring theme was students' positive evaluation of interactive classroom activities. Seventy-eight students (45.1%) referred to games, competitions, or technology-supported activities as enjoyable aspects of the course. Kahoot! was explicitly mentioned by 31 students (17.9%), while other responses referred more generally to quizzes and competitive activities. These responses suggest that technology-enhanced activities may support engagement when integrated into meaningful pedagogical tasks rather than used merely as entertainment. In particular, Kahoot! enabled simultaneous participation from all students, reducing the pressure associated with individual public performance while providing immediate feedback.

Students also frequently commented on opportunities for communication and interaction. Ninety-two respondents (53.2%) mentioned speaking activities, discussions, or opportunities to use English as a positive aspect of the course. This is particularly relevant in the context of large mixed-proficiency classes, where creating sufficient opportunities for individual language production represents a significant challenge. The combination of group activities, student presentations, video-based tasks, and low-stakes classroom interaction allowed learners with different proficiency levels to participate according to their abilities.

The classroom atmosphere was another important aspect reflected in students' responses. Eighty-seven students (50.3%) commented positively on the supportive learning environment, teacher encouragement, or reduced anxiety when speaking English. These responses correspond with the emphasis placed on intercultural rapport and the deliberate creation of a classroom environment in which mistakes were treated as a natural part of language learning. Rather than expecting immediate spontaneous participation, the course design aimed to gradually increase learners' willingness to communicate through repeated exposure and structured opportunities for interaction.

At the same time, student feedback revealed several areas for further development. Some learners requested more opportunities for individual speaking practice, while others suggested additional vocabulary support to the already given for more challenging topics. These comments reflect the continuing challenge of addressing diverse proficiency levels within large elective classes. Although scaffolding strategies, peer support, and differentiated activities helped accommodate learner diversity, further adaptation remains necessary.

Overall, the questionnaire responses indicate that students perceived the combination of practical content, communicative activities, technology-enhanced learning, and a supportive classroom environment positively. While these findings represent one specific teaching context and cannot be generalised beyond this case study,

they illustrate how learner feedback can contribute to reflective teaching practice and inform the continued development of communicative approaches in large mixed-proficiency EFL classrooms.

## 7. Limitations

This report is based on teaching practice in a single EFL classroom at one Chinese university. Consequently, the observations should be interpreted as context-specific rather than broadly generalizable. Further research involving multiple institutions and comparative classroom settings would strengthen the findings.

Several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the analysis relies partly on teacher observations and self-reported student perceptions, which may be influenced by subjective interpretations or positive response bias. Second, the study does not include pre- and post-intervention measures of language development; therefore, it cannot determine whether the described practices directly resulted in measurable learning gains. Finally, the positive reception of technology-enhanced activities may partly reflect the novelty effect of using digital tools in a classroom environment where such activities are less common.

## 8. Conclusions

Teaching spoken English in large Chinese EFL classrooms requires addressing challenges that extend beyond linguistic knowledge alone. Limited voluntary participation, fear of making mistakes, heterogeneous proficiency levels, and students' previous educational experiences can significantly influence learners' willingness to engage in spontaneous communication. This paper has argued that increasing student participation requires not only appropriate classroom activities but also the creation of an environment in which learners feel sufficiently supported to take communicative risks. This interpretation is consistent with recent research in Chinese EFL contexts highlighting the relationship between classroom environment, affective factors, and willingness to communicate (Li et al., 2022; Bai, 2023).

The pedagogical approach described in this report combines several complementary elements: explicit rapport building, scaffolded task introduction, practical and culturally situated language content, Technology-Enhanced Language Learning through Kahoot! and other interactive activities, and a continuous assessment system that rewards engagement throughout the course rather than relying exclusively on a final examination. These practices aim to position students as active participants in the learning process while allowing the teacher to function primarily as a facilitator of communication.

Student questionnaire responses indicate that learners particularly valued practical language use, interactive activities, opportunities for communication,

and a supportive classroom atmosphere. Although these responses represent perceptions within a single teaching context and cannot be interpreted as evidence of causal effectiveness, they provide useful indications that the described approach aligns with students' expectations and may support greater engagement in communicative EFL classrooms.

At the same time, the implementation of this approach requires continuous adaptation. The diversity of learner proficiency levels remains a central challenge, and further refinement is needed to ensure that both lower- and higher-proficiency students are consistently challenged while maintaining a sense of achievement. Future research could investigate the effectiveness of similar approaches across different institutions, compare student engagement patterns across teaching contexts, and explore more systematically the relationship between technology-enhanced activities, assessment practices, and willingness to communicate.

Ultimately, successful communicative language teaching in large EFL classrooms depends not on a single technique or technological tool, but on the integration of meaningful content, supportive relationships, purposeful interaction, and assessment practices that recognize language learning as a gradual developmental process.

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## Institutional Review Board Statement

The study was approved by the Institutional Review Board of Wenzhou Business College (reference number WZBC20260902; approval date: 2 September 2026).

## Informed Consent Statement

Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study. Participation was voluntary, and all responses were anonymous.

## Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

## Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

## Use of AI and AI-Assisted Technologies

During the preparation of this work, the author used ChatGPT (OpenAI) for language proofreading, including checking grammar, clarity, and academic style. The tool was not used to generate research data, analyses, or conclusions. After using this tool, the author reviewed and

edited the content as needed and takes full responsibility for the content of the published article.

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