

How to Build Your Students' Confidence and Self-Belief

by Erin O'Byrne

It's been a strange couple of years, hasn't it? Some of us became unemployed, some of us started working online immediately after we were sent home and some of went on temporary unemployment. I was in the latter group.

Time alone indoors gave me space to think. I've always loved my job but I was starting to get a little bored delivering the same lessons over and over (sorry, English File...), so after many a fruitful conversation with a former colleague-turned-neurolanguage coach, I decided to follow her example: put the *human* at the centre of your lesson.

But Erin, I already do that! Do you, though? I'm pretty sure you put the *student* at the centre of your lessons: You have your lead-in discussion or brainstorm, they check their answers together, they collaborate, you have a follow-up discussion or speaking activity, all planned out in neat little timed segments on your lesson plan. But what's the point of marking out dedicated spaces in your lesson plan for students to speak if they can't or *don't want to*?

Do you have shy or unconfident students? This is something I have come across time and time again in my teaching career. This fear can stem from a number of places, from cultural reservation to students who are terrified to speak for fear of judgement. Age is by no means a limiting factor in lack of confidence either. Fear and anxiety are indiscriminate.

In addition, if your student is coming into your class stressed or anxious about speaking English, learning will not happen. If you are able to dig deeper and find where these learning barriers come from, more power to you. In the meantime, what you *can* do in class is make a concerted effort to build your students' confidence and sense of 'I can'. There are a number of ways you can do this.



Source: <https://www.tmc.ac.uk/employers/blog/self-confidence-7-ways-build-and-maintain-it/>

Here are some ideas you can build on in class but I always say, you know your students best. Think about the following suggestions and how they will respond:

Rome Wasn't Built in a Day

...and neither is a confident attitude. This process will take time. Think about your own self-esteem – it's a daily battle that has to be worked on consistently. Apply this logic to your students' confidence levels but don't forget to be patient with both them and yourself.

Think: *Which students of yours could do with a change of mindset?*

Only Nominate Students if you Know they are Willing to Speak

Some will be ready, some won't. The first step is to find out why, which will influence your course of action. Some students need a little time to build their confidence (please see my first point). When they speak, praise them. They will visibly relax and they might even crack a smile!

Teach your Students Common Phrases to Communicate with Each Other as well as with you

This is essential! How often do you teach 'classroom language' that is just communication between you and your students? Think about the phrases they need to speak to each other. Consider when they're checking an exercise together: are you finished? Shall we check together? What do you think about number 1? These chunks are invaluable and will encourage your student to communicate. Repetition of these phrases will build confidence so make sure students use them every time they have to work together. Make the phrases you want them to use visible every time they use them – absorbing and using these chunks will take some time and praise the shyer students for using them or producing any English when you hear it. Compelling Conversations by Eric H Roth is a good resource for this.

Think: *What tasks in class require your students to communicate with each other and what phrases might be useful?*



Source: <https://www.alamy.com/stock-photo-handwritten-inspirational-quote-time-to-think-on-a-chalkboard-composition-89833355.html>

Give Students More Time to Think and Formulate their Answers

I think we're all guilty of asking a student a question and filling that awkward silence with another question, followed by another question. Your poor student is probably still processing the *first* question! Talk about stress! It can be excruciating waiting for them but maybe they just need that time: ride the silence!

One possible solution or scaffolding technique could be to provide your students with material in advance of class.

Think: *Do you give your students enough time to think and answer? Do I encourage groups to give each other time and space to answer in discussions?*

Praise is Everything

Never underestimate it. No one is too old to hear positive messages from their teacher. Take the time to give your *really* shy students a little extra attention and *heap* that praise upon them. It can be a game changer.

Think: *What opportunities for praise will present themselves in your next lesson?*

Get Students to Share

‘‘What’s the point of marking out dedicated spaces in your lesson plan for students to speak if they can’t or don’t want to?’’

Do activities that get students to talk about themselves, their lives or something where they can show a part of themselves to you and their classmates. A simple example is personal photos: there are so many activities you can do with just a little imagination. Only today, I asked my students to dive into their bags and pull out something to show their group and talk about it. You would be surprised what they have in their bags.

Think: *What and how can you get your students to share in your next lesson?*

Give your Students Choice

Choice is very empowering: it increases engagement and motivation, which are two essential factors in learning effectively.

Here are three very simple things you can do immediately:

- Students the output of a project or homework: do you want to write, or make a short video?
- Who would you like to work with?
- Do you want to work alone or in pairs for this writing task?

Think: *How many simple ways can you give your students choice?*



Source: <https://nwtcsocialmediamarketing.home.blog/2021/09/17/how-to-set-smart-goals-sam-hirbod/>

Work on Positive Mindset and Mindfulness

Use S.M.A.R.T goals and anything else you can find in an article, a Ted Talk or a Youtube video. Memes are also good for this, as they provide a springboard for discussion. For example, find a quote like 'Small steps in the right direction can turn out to be the biggest journey of your life'. My personal favourite is from RuPaul: "if you can't love yourself, how the hell are you gonna love somebody else?"

Don't forget to use collective breath too. It can be a very powerful tool for focus, energy, discipline and stress levels. Another game-changer.

Think: what kind of mindset work would be suitable for your students?

Leadership

Choose some students and give them a supporting role – can they assist weaker students by helping them when they're stuck, explaining things to them, being the leader of a group when checking their answers or be a project manager if there is group work. They can also praise the students they help. Don't forget that these students need training – monitor and support them and watch them flourish. This also takes the pressure off you. Win-win!

Think: write down the names of your students who would make natural leaders.

Build your Community

Students need to trust each other too. Getting them to share, work together, having leaders in each class. Leave time for students to reflect and discuss how they feel. Give them surveys. Do lots of task and project-based learning. Promote collaboration. Spend a couple of minutes breathing at the beginning of your lesson. The possibilities are endless.

Think: what community-building activity would my students respond to?

My mantra is that *everything in life is a process*, especially things that need a little work. With this in mind, making your students reflect and feel good about themselves is a constant endeavour. This is just as important as the traditional content you deliver.

How can you incorporate a little positivity and confidence-building in your classroom every day?



About the Author:

Erin O'Byrne is a teacher trainer and producer of Everything EFL Podcast. She has been in the ELT industry for almost 20 years and has been a teacher, ADOS, Junior Programme Manager and Teacher Trainer. Her passion is teacher development.