

## **Simple Ways to Increase Student Talk in Your Classroom**

by [Amanda Hilliard](#)

With the rise of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) and a growing emphasis on oral communication skills, the role of student talk in the language classroom has become more important than ever. In order to improve students' speaking skills, proponents of CLT recommend engaging students in authentic, meaningful communication; yet, many EFL/ESL classrooms worldwide are dominated by teacher talk with little chance for students to converse at all. Here are some strategies and tips for teachers wishing to reduce teacher talk time and increase student talk time in their classes.

### **Create a Communicative Classroom Environment**

Fear of negative evaluation from peers and teachers, negative self-evaluation, negative attitudes towards English classes, and fear of failure have been shown to contribute to students' anxiety toward speaking in class (Mak, 2011, p.210). Teachers can create a classroom environment conducive to oral communication by

- offering positive encouragement,
- limiting error correction while students are talking,
- allowing adequate wait-time for students to speak,
- giving students preparation time before speaking in front of the class, and
- ensuring that other students offer positive feedback and support (Mak, 2011, p. 210).

Furthermore, by increasing opportunities for students to speak in class, teachers can help build students' confidence while reducing anxiety.

### **Implement More Authentic, Communicative Classroom Activities**

Anything from pair work and group work, to discussions and debates, to task-based activities and games can be utilized within a CLT framework. Think about how your students will use English outside of the classroom, and develop meaningful classroom activities around your students' interests and motivations.

#### *Example Activities: Business English*

For example, if you teach business English, you could have students prepare a business presentation, role-play a negotiation or job interview, or call to set up a business meeting.

#### *Example Activities: Academic English*

Students studying academic English at a university could be asked to research an academic topic for class discussion, role-play a meeting with a professor or advisor, or ask for directions around campus.

By focusing on real-world English applications, you can develop authentic speaking activities that will motivate students and help build their oral proficiency skills.

### **Incorporate Speaking Games Into Your Lesson Plans**

Students usually enjoy games, welcoming a change of pace from their normal classroom routine. Moreover, games can be developed to review almost any language function or strategy. Here is one example of a game called “Alibi” which can be used to help students practice or review the past tense.

#### *Example Activity: Alibi*

One game that can be used to increase student talk time is called “Alibi.” In this game, students are divided into two teams: police officers and suspects. After introducing a fake crime, suspects are given time to create an alibi while police officers create questions for an interrogation. Next, with all students participating, all police officers question all suspects one-on-one and try to find differences in the suspects’ stories. After the police officers have a chance to question each suspect individually, the differences, or “lies,” are counted up and the roles are switched. Once the cycle has been completed one more time, the team with the fewest “lies” is the winner. This game is a great way for students to practice past tense questions and answers, especially when teachers include a past tense grammar review before or after the game.

When teachers are creative and come up with meaningful games like this, students are motivated to speak more in class.

### **Start Each Class With a Speaking Activity**

Have students speak for 5 to 10 minutes at the beginning of each class. Students will appreciate the routine of the daily speaking practice, and topics and activities can be tied to the lesson for each day. Here are some great ways to start each class with speaking:

- Prepare a picture of the day for students to talk about.
- Open with daily discussion questions.
- Begin each day with short conversation starters.
- “Two Minute Conversations ”: have students talk to a partner nonstop for 1 minute about a daily topic, followed by 1 minute of nonstop questions from their partners. Then have them switch roles.
- For homework, have students find information about a current event from their own country or from around the world. Start the class by having the students discuss the current event, and rotate the group discussion leader each day.
- Give students the first sentence to a story and have them complete it by adding a new sentence, one at a time, in groups.

### **Let Students Do the Work for You**

In a traditional language classroom, teachers generally control all aspects of language content and procedure, talk most of the time, and ask all the questions (Walsh, 2002, p. 4). Tasks that have traditionally been the language teacher’s role can be given to students to increase student talk time while decreasing teacher talk time. Students can be allowed to

- pick the topic of discussion,
- lead the class in speaking activities,
- call on other students,
- read directions or instructions aloud,

- offer peer feedback, and
- answer questions posed by other students.

#### *Example Activity: Small Talk*

This activity, developed by Hunter (2012), makes students responsible for picking topics and leading class discussions. Teachers objectively observe students' conversations and give language feedback at the end of the class. Hunter found that this type of activity was an effective way to increase speaking opportunities in class and raise students' speaking fluency while still providing beneficial error correction and feedback.

#### *Example Activity: Talking Circle*

Similarly, Ernst (1994) discusses the implementation of a "talking circle," in which teachers and students gather at the beginning of a conversation class. Students are encouraged to discuss anything of interest to them with the goal of helping students develop conversational language forms through practice. Students are more willing to speak when they have control of the topic, and the talking circle gives students the practice they need to become better communicators (pp. 315–316).

### **Have Students Ask More Questions**

Teachers ask the majority of questions in EFL/ESL classes; yet developing the ability to ask for information is a vital skill for becoming a competent English speaker (Walsh, 2002, p. 4; Ernst, 1994, p. 293). Instead of asking all the questions yourself, think of ways you can give students the opportunity to ask questions. Here are some good opportunities:

- After a reading or listening activity, let students write their own questions to check comprehension, or have students read comprehension questions from the book and call on other students themselves.
- If students give a presentation, designate other students to ask questions afterwards.
- Encourage students to ask questions in class by using information gap activities or jigsaw activities in which students must work together to fill in missing information.

Take any chance you can to increase student-initiated interactions, which helps them develop the ability to ask for information themselves.

### **Have Students Summarize**

Teachers often summarize after completing a reading or listening activity, or after students give an answer to a question; however, this is yet another skill students need to develop for themselves.

#### *Example Activity: Scaffolded Summarizing*

One activity to help students learn to summarize is to have students read a short paragraph, write down 10–20 words on a note card, and then retell the paragraph three times to three different students using only their notes. This forces students to summarize using their own words while letting the notes act as scaffolding to aid in remembering the paragraph's contents.

#### *Example Activity: Summary Pair Work*

Another way to encourage students to practice summarizing is for students to tell stories or answer questions in pairs and then relate their partner's story or answers to three different students.

## Conclusion

This article has focused on ways teachers can increase their students' talking time in order to provide more opportunities for speaking practice and improve students' oral proficiency. Consider incorporating some of the suggested activities into your next lesson to maximize learners' contributions and create a truly communicative classroom environment.

## References

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