



# How to get your students to talk

## The challenges

One area of concern for many teachers of English is how to get their students to talk. Learners may lack the confidence to speak in English, and for some groups of learners, such as teenagers, the embarrassment of speaking in front of their peers in a foreign language can prevent them from wanting to communicate at all.

In large classes, and especially if they are monolingual, speaking can be even more of a challenge for both students and teacher. Large classes will often be mixed ability, which requires the teacher to provide differentiated tasks and approaches, and can present challenges around classroom management. However, even in small classes, students can feel inhibited, and the teacher may find it difficult to get them to speak.

With lower-level learners, whether teenagers or adults, students can find the experience of speaking in English difficult, partly because they may lack the language to get their message across, partly because they lack confidence, and also because they can feel personally diminished by their imperfect attempts.

In addition, some students may feel that speaking is less important than learning vocabulary or practising grammar, especially if they have no immediate need for it. However, language is a means of communication, not just a school or exam subject, and it is vital that teachers help their students to overcome their reluctance or fear and provide plenty of opportunities for them to speak.

As a teacher, you play a key role in ensuring that learners see the value in speaking and communication tasks and in making sure that their attempts are successful so that they are motivated to keep trying. If we can help learners to communicate spontaneously and retrieve chunks of meaningful language easily, this will increase their enjoyment and motivation.

Clearly, providing plenty of practice opportunities is important and this means devoting time in class to the use of English, rather than simply talking *about* English. However, when a teacher sees a class for one or two lessons a week, time is also a factor.

Fortunately, there are many things we can do to help students become active communicators and encourage them to talk in English.

## Ten tips for getting your students to talk

### 1 Make your lessons interesting and relevant

Ensure that you select topics that are interesting and relevant to your learners as a way to increase their motivation to talk. This does not mean that you have to choose controversial topics, which students may feel uncomfortable or reluctant to talk about. Instead, choose things which are important in your learners' daily lives or part of their life experiences.

With this in mind, wherever possible, approach your teaching materials with a critical eye, and look for ways you might adapt, omit, or supplement coursebook activities to make them more relevant to your students. If you can create interest and personalize your teaching materials, your lessons will be more meaningful, and the likelihood is that they will be memorable.

### 2 Provide clear instructions

Many speaking activities are unsuccessful or do not realize their full potential because learners are not clear about what they are supposed to do. Giving vague or general instructions, such as 'discuss X for a few minutes and then report back' makes the task very open-ended, and learners will be slow to start speaking and may quickly run out of things to say. Setting tasks with clear, specific outcomes provides a better structure for learning, e.g. 'Find three differences between your picture and your partner's picture' or 'Read the story and discuss what you think will happen next' or 'Ask your partner five questions about her family'. This kind of instruction works well because learners know exactly what they have to do and when they have finished.

### 3 Provide support

Give your students appropriate language support to ensure they have the means to complete the task. For example, do some practice activities before a free speaking task; do plenty of repetition of key phrases; build up a 'class answer' on the board for the students to refer to; or provide cues or prompt words on the board.

If a task is too difficult, students will be disheartened and reluctant to participate; if it is too easy, they will be bored. Getting the right level for your students is often a question of judging how much language support and practice is required to challenge but not discourage them.

If students have access to some of the key phrases or vocabulary they need, they can approach the speaking task feeling supported and confident, rather than anxious that they don't have the means even to get started.



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### 4 Don't put students on the spot

Allowing students to confer is a key part of increasing 'student talking time' and decreasing 'teacher talking time'. Rather than nominating one person to answer a question or give feedback in front of the whole class, you could ask students to talk to a partner first. This increases the number of students talking at any one time, and avoids shining a spotlight on a learner who may not know the answer or who feels embarrassed to speak in front of their peers. By monitoring discreetly and listening as the students talk together, you can check that everyone is participating and encourage or help those who need more support.

### 5 Pairwork, group work, team work, class work

Try different ways of working to increase the amount of speaking time in class. Even if your classroom has a fixed layout, students can practise speaking with the person sitting on either side of them, and the person in front and behind. In more flexible classroom formats, students can work in pairs, groups, teams, or table groups. By having the class working simultaneously in this way, participation is increased, student talking time increases, and you are free to monitor and provide support as needed.

### 6 Allow time to speak

Devote enough time in class to speaking activities so that students are regularly required to talk and it becomes a normal part of your lessons. This will indicate to your students that speaking in English is an important part of the programme. When you're planning your lessons, make sure that you allow sufficient time for speaking activities, not just five minutes at the end of a lesson.

It is also important to seize opportunities to include everyday English in your interactions with your students. You can use the time at the beginning and end of a lesson as your students enter and exit for everyday chat, such as *How are you today?*, *How was your weekend?*, *What are you going to do next?*, *What are you planning to do after school today?* This enables everyday topics and expressions to become familiar and internalized.

### 7 Allow learners time to prepare and repeat

In some situations, allowing students 'thinking time' before they speak can be helpful. Letting students practise their answers in pairs or groups before trying it out with a new partner or group means that they won't feel they are approaching a task unprepared. This has implications for your lesson planning, and you will need to allow enough time for students to be able to practise and repeat tasks.

### 8 Think about when to correct mistakes and give feedback

It is important not to over-correct students during speaking activities. Try to create a supportive atmosphere and good rapport in your classes. This will encourage students to speak without worrying about making mistakes. You should also encourage a positive attitude to mistakes – they are an opportunity to learn and improve.

Delayed error correction is an effective way to handle errors in a free speaking activity, and should go alongside praise and feedback on what the learners did well.

All speaking tasks should have a feedback stage, so that the students are made aware of the value of what they have done.

### 9 Vary the tasks

Aim to use a variety of communicative activities to expose your learners to different types of speaking practice. This can include role-play, memorized dialogues, mix-and-mingle activities, discussions, guessing games, information gap, board games, competitions, competitive timed practice activities, cooperative problem-solving, brainstorming tasks, and project work. By using a wide range of student-centred speaking activities, their interest and motivation is maintained, and you are able to cater for the range of learning preferences within your group.

### 10 Prepare and evaluate your activities

It is always a good idea to prepare speaking activities carefully before the lesson, and evaluate how successful they have been after the lesson. Preparing a task thoroughly before the lesson will help to increase the chances of success, which will be motivating for you and your students.

In general, if a task is simple to prepare and run, it probably has a greater chance of success. If the task has lengthy or complicated instructions, students may fail to grasp what is required or be unable to do the activity at all.

If a task requires a lot of preparation, try to re-use or adapt it for other classes, so that you get the most out of it. If a task required a lot of preparation but only produced limited practice, it's a good idea to review what went wrong, what you might do differently next time, and reflect on if you can revise it, or simply decide not to use it again.



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## Feedback and correction

Giving the right kind of feedback and correction for a speaking activity can help you and your students get the most out of the experience. Here is a procedure to help you achieve this. It can be used with all kinds of freer speaking activities.

- 1 Set up the speaking activity with your class, remembering to include clear instructions and plenty of support.
- 2 Withdraw slightly from the class, e.g. by going to your desk for a few minutes. This should act as a signal to the class that they should get on with the activity.
- 3 Once they have started, monitor the students' progress from a distance. You could use a piece of paper or a notebook to jot down some examples of good use of language and any common errors that you feel deserve attention. However, do not interrupt the activity unless students specifically ask for help. The aim at this point is to encourage autonomy and fluency by letting the students talk without interference.
- 4 Don't let the activity continue for too long. Try to stop it just as most, but not all, of the students are starting to finish.
- 5 This is the feedback stage. First, ask the students for their feedback on the task: 'How did you get on? Did you find out anything interesting/surprising?' Then give your feedback on their language use and overall performance. This should include examples of what students did well, and praise for individuals and groups, where appropriate.
- 6 Finally, do the error correction. One way to do this is to write three or four examples on the board of any incorrect language you heard when you were monitoring the activity, and ask the class to correct them. There is no need to say which students made the mistakes – the aim is to draw the attention of the whole class to important areas of language and vocabulary.

**Variation** With smaller classes, you could give 'hot cards' to individual students – a piece of paper or card with individual feedback on things they did well and any mistakes they made. With large classes, you could do this with a different group of students in each class. In mixed-ability classes, this is a good way to support weaker students or provide more challenge for stronger students.

## Three activities to get your students to talk

### 1 Classroom posters

**Aim** To encourage learners to use everyday classroom English in their lessons

- 1 Hold a brief class discussion to elicit phrases, questions, and sentences that students think would be helpful for them in English lessons. (The discussion could be in their first language with monolingual groups.) Students can work in groups or individually to select the phrases they think are the most useful, e.g. *I'm sorry, I don't understand.*, *Can you say that again, please?* *Sorry, can you speak more slowly?* *Excuse me, how do you say \_\_\_\_ in English?* *Do you want to be my partner?*, *It's my/your turn.* *Shall we practise that again?* *Can I borrow your ruler/dictionary/pen, please?*
- 2 Put students into groups and give each group a sheet of flip chart or A3-size paper and coloured pens.
- 3 Get the students to design clear, colourful posters showing one piece of useful classroom language per sheet of paper.
- 4 Display the posters in the classroom and refer to them often during your lessons. You can do this just by pointing at the appropriate poster when a student needs help.

**Note** Students can make their own list of useful classroom language in their notebooks or on a separate piece of paper or card for easy reference.

### 2 Fill the gap

**Aim** To increase the amount of student-centred interaction through supported pair work

This activity requires students to work in pairs or groups to talk and exchange information. The idea is to create a 'gap' of information which is filled by discussion and communication, e.g. an *information gap* (where students have different information and have to share it in order to complete a task or solve a problem); a *knowledge gap* (where one student teaches their partner to do something or explains something that their partner doesn't know); or an *experience gap* (where students share different experiences). Here is an example of a simple experience gap activity.

- 1 Students work in pairs. Ask student A to write down three facts about a place they have visited, e.g. *When did you go? Where did you stay? Did you enjoy it?* You could write prompt words on the board: *when? where? enjoy?* Ask student B to write down three facts about their last holiday or day out, e.g. *Who did you go with? What did you eat? What was the most interesting thing about the trip?*



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Prompt words on the board might be *who? eat? interesting?* Students must not show each other their notes.

- 2 Set a time limit for students to find out the information from their partner. They should not write the information down.
- 3 Each pair joins another pair. Each student then takes it in turn to retell what they found out from their partner.
- 4 Provide feedback and error correction.

**Note** This activity can be used with a wide range of topics. You could also use it to make your teaching materials more interactive, e.g. by adapting a coursebook activity to create a 'gap'.

### 3 Any ideas?

**Aims** To increase practice opportunities; to build confidence through repetition

This activity allows students to repeat a task several times. It's best used after you have presented and practised the target language and are ready to move on to freer speaking practice. The example here focuses on making suggestions and giving advice.

- 1 Set up the classroom so that students can move easily to the next partner, e.g. you could have two lines of students facing each other or an inner circle facing an outer circle. You will need a stopwatch or timer.
- 2 Write the topic on the board, e.g. 'I'm looking for a new hobby. Do you have any suggestions?' Students discuss the question with their partner. Set a time limit and clap your hands or use another signal to indicate when the time is up.
- 3 Students then move to the next partner, e.g. by going to the other end of the line or by stepping one pace to the left in the circle to face a new person.
- 4 Students repeat the activity with the new partner.
- 5 Repeat as many times as required. You could shorten the time limit after two or three rounds, to add urgency to the activity.
- 6 Ask students to share their discussions with the whole class: 'How many different ideas did they get? What was the most interesting suggestion? Which suggestion do they think they will follow up?'
- 7 Provide feedback and error correction.



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