

Sound Bites for Better Teaching
Students Learn to Speak by Speaking
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Teacher talk



Student talk

It's no secret that teachers love to talk as they impart their knowledge to their students. In fact, they set all topics of conversation or discussion so that the talking exercises are designed to practice and to learn the vocabulary, the grammar, or the reading of the lesson. They ask questions, they correct homework, they explain rules, and they direct conversations so that most of the student talk consists in giving answers to the story, in correcting homework, or in drilling vocabulary or grammar rules. Thus, student talk consists mostly in responding to lower-level thinking activities. But if we are to prepare the students for real talking as it exists outside of the classroom, we need to create opportunities for them to initiate conversation, to be orally creative, to be expressive of their thoughts and opinions, and to ad lib, all of which involve higher-level thinking skills. The teacher needs to step aside and to allow more speaking-time practice in the classroom. That can only be done if the teacher becomes less "the sage on the stage" and more "the guide on the side." After all, one learns to drive by driving, to dance by dancing, and to ski by skiing.

Self Evaluation (no right or wrong answers)

Are you aware of how much class time the students actually have to practice interpersonal speaking?

Do you consider that sufficient for them to develop speaking proficiency?

Do you regularly schedule free speaking time wherein the students get to speak to each other on topics they choose?

Do you normally correct every student mistake when they engage in free conversation?

Are you familiar with Krashen's affective filter theory?

What does student talk consist of in your classroom?

How much time is spent in correcting homework? In doing drill work? In answering yes-no questions?

How much time is devoted to interpersonal vs. presentational communication activities?

Do you expect the students to speak the target language to you outside of the classroom, or in the local mall?

How much time is spent in the classroom in speaking the target language vs. English?

Have you ever conducted an entire class period exclusively in the target language?

Do you test the students' speaking proficiency on a regular basis? How do you do that?

TIP

Cooperative Learning Activities are an effective way to engage the students in free speaking interpersonal situations. Resolve to include such an activity in your lesson plans on a daily basis.