

Sound Bites for Better Teaching

Marcel LaVergne Ed.D.

Classroom language vs authentic real-life language



If we are to prepare our students to converse in L2 outside of the classroom, it is important that they also engage in spontaneous language in real-life situations in the classroom rather than mostly engage in language activities designed to practice vocabulary and grammar. In most cases, the students speak to practice speaking because the teacher tells them to in order to get a good classroom participation grade. The teacher-initiated topic of conversation is very rarely of great interest to the students, does not fill an information gap, and has no intrinsic value. In the common question and answer format, it is usually tied into whatever activity the teacher has planned: homework correction, reading assignment, individual project, etc. Too often, the teacher concentrates on how correctly the students speak rather than pays attention to what they have said. Authentic language is spontaneous, arbitrary, and unrehearsed and what is said is potentially interesting to the participants. People speak to get something, to solve a problem, to reach a decision, to provide information, or to make a social contact.

Self Evaluation (no right or wrong answers)

Do you conduct classroom management in the target language?

Do you plan activities that encourage students to initiate the conversation or do most of the activities cause the students to react orally to something you have said?

Do you encourage the students to speak about topics that interest them on a regular basis?

Do your students speak in the target language because they want to or because you want them to?

If authentic communication happens when speakers tell their listeners something new that they don't already know, how much communication actually takes place in your classroom on a weekly basis?

Can you categorize the type of speaking that happens in your classroom?

Is the motivation to speak intrinsic (personal interest) or extrinsic (a good grade)?

What is more important, accuracy or fluency?

Which happens more in your classroom, interpersonal or presentational communication?

Do you expect your students to speak the target language with you both in and out of the classroom?

TIP

To encourage authentic communication in the classroom, every Monday you and the students can discuss how you spent the weekend and what you planned to do but did not. In an advanced class, you can let the students discuss current events of their choice.