

Reducing Teacher Talk and Increasing Learner Talk

Close your eyes and picture teachers in a classroom. Where are they standing? What are they doing? Many people will picture a teacher standing at the front of the room and talking. While talking to the class is a part of teaching, it shouldn't be the only thing that teachers do. Limiting the amount of teacher talking time (TTT) benefits learners in a variety of ways. Most people learn best by doing, rather than listening. English language learners need time during class to practice speaking; learners improve their language skills more quickly when they are given opportunities to practice what they're learning. Classes that are focused on having learners practice are more interesting and engaging to learners and teachers alike. Since learners are practicing more, there are more opportunities to get useful feedback. For some learners, the English classroom might be the only place they practice speaking English. If the teacher talks too much, learners may end up with only a few minutes to practice speaking out loud. As teachers, we need to figure out when talking is helpful and when to let the learners do the talking. We have to break free from the idea that it is the teacher's job to always speak, and the learners' job to always listen.

Of course, there are times when it's essential that the teacher speak and the learners listen. Learners benefit from hearing a fluent English speaker pronounce words correctly, and they need to hear as well as see explanations. Asking questions of learners and prompting to give feedback and suggestions help learners to grasp concepts. Telling stories or anecdotes to personalize lessons is motivating, and it's more interesting to talk about real issues than reading or listening to stories of people, places and events that they have no connection to. Our goal as teachers isn't to reduce our TTT to a bare minimum, but to make sure that the speaking that we're doing is helpful, to the point and high-quality.

Let's look at six strategies for reducing TTT and encouraging learners to speak up.

1. Keep Instructions Short and Simple

Much unnecessary TTT comes from giving instructions for activities. Teachers want to make sure that learners are prepared for practice activities, so they repeat themselves and over-explain what learners are supposed to do. This results in a wall of words. Let's compare two examples.

Example 1:

"The next thing that we're going to do is write down the phone number that you hear me say. So you're going to find the blank on the worksheet, and write down the phone number as I say it out loud. Don't say the numbers as you're writing them, think them in your head and write them down on the worksheet, and then we'll check together as a class after I've repeated them several times."

A way to avoid this is to give short clear instructions and check that the learners are able to follow along with each step. This is particularly important for learners with lower levels of English.

Example 2:

Teacher puts the worksheet on the overhead projector. *“Everyone put your finger on number one.”* Teacher checks that the learners are pointing to the correct number. *“Listen to the phone number. 837-599-0132. 837-599-0132.”* Teacher writes the phone number down in the blank.

“Now you write. 837-599-0132. 837-599-0132.” Teacher walks around and checks that everyone has written the number down in the correct space.

“Let’s do number two. Write the phone number.” Teacher mimics writing on the paper.

“Please don’t talk.” Teacher puts a finger to their lips.

Adding in gestures helps to simplify the activities, and provides the additional support of a visual.

2. Model

Many people prefer seeing what they are supposed to do rather than just hearing the instructions. Modeling how learners are supposed to complete an activity provides a helpful visual and naturally cuts back on teacher talk. Let’s compare the two examples below.

Example 1:

“I’m going to give you a card with either a vocabulary word or a definition on it. You’re going to walk around the room and ask people what’s on their card. You can’t show each other the cards. You’ll walk around the room and talk to people and when you find the person who is your partner they’ll have the vocabulary word that matches your definition or the definition that matches your vocabulary word and you’ll sit down together and that’s your new partner. Remember that you’re not going to show anyone your card and when you think you’ve found your new partner you’ll sit down together. Are you ready?”

Let’s see what these instructions look like when we add in modeling and follow up with some comprehension checking questions.

Example 2:

“We’re going to practice our weekly vocabulary. First we will match up the word and the definition.” Teacher gives five learners cards with words or definitions on them and gestures to those learners to stand up.

“My card has a word on it. The word is electrician.” Teacher walks up to one of the standing learners. *“What does your card say?”*

Learner starts to show the teacher their card. *“Don’t show me, tell me.”* Teacher models hiding their card.

The learner reads their card, saying: *“Drives truck, makes deliveries.”*

Teacher asks the class, *“Is that the definition of electrician? Yes or no? No? I need to talk to a new person.”* Teacher goes up to a different standing learner. *“My card says electrician. What does your card say?”*

The learner reads their card saying, *“Receptionist.”* Teacher asks the class, *“Is that the definition of electrician? Yes or no? No? I need to talk to a new person.”*

Teacher goes up to a different standing learner. *“My card says electrician. What does your card say?”* The learner reads their card saying, *“Connects/fixes electricity in houses and offices.”*

Teacher asks the class, *“Is that the definition of electrician? Yes or no? Yes? This is my partner. We sit down together.”* Teacher and learner sit down.

Teacher hands out cards to the learners, then asks instruction-checking questions. *“Do you show people your card? (no) What do you do?”* (read your card) *“What do you do when you find your partner?”* (sit down).

In the second example for both sets of instructions, the teacher breaks the instructions into short and simple chunks that are supported by modeling and non-verbal gestures. The teacher checks that the learners understand the instructions by asking them specific questions that require the learners to repeat back parts of the instructions, which increases learners’ opportunities to speak.

3. Be Direct

It can feel rude to speak very directly, but when working with English language learners, using hedges and tentative language to sound more polite can result in a lot of unnecessary teacher talk. Let’s look at the two ways that a teacher asks a learner to come to the front of the room to write a sentence on the board.

Example 1:

“Faduma, would you mind coming on up to the board and writing sentence number three so that we can all check our answers and see what you wrote?”

Example 2:

“Faduma, please write sentence three.” Teacher holds out the marker to the learner.

The second example is much more direct, but is still polite. It will result in the learner having a better understanding of what they are being asked to do, so they will feel more comfortable following the instructions.

4. Ask Eliciting Questions/Let Learners Figure Things Out

The questions that you ask throughout the lesson can encourage learner participation and speaking. For example, if you are showing the learners a picture to set the context of the lesson, ask the class questions about what they see rather than describing the picture to them. Here are some examples of eliciting questions that you can use while teaching:

What do you see?

- What do you think will happen next?*
- Can you explain your answer?*
- Can you give me an example?*
- Has anything like this ever happened to you? What happened?*
- What do you do when...?*
- Tell me about what you just read.*

You can also ask questions to get them to recognize patterns for language and grammar rather than telling them. This is called “guided discovery,” and often leads to better and more complete understanding. Let’s look at this example of elicitation and guided discovery around prepositions.

The teacher writes the following sentences on the board:

1. Kadra’s interview is at 3:00.
2. Azin’s interview is on Wednesday at 2:30.
3. Manuel’s interview is in September.
4. Ali’s interview is on Friday.
5. Halima’s interview is on August 30.
6. Martin’s interview is in October.
7. Mariana’s interview is at 3:30.
8. Amin’s interview is on September 1 at 10:45.
9. Luca’s interview is in November.
10. Sadiya’s interview is on August 23 at 4:15.

The teacher has the learners come up to the board and circle the prepositions *on*, *in*, and *at*. Then the learners underline the time, day, or date after the preposition. The learners then get in small groups to complete the following chart.

What comes after <u>IN</u> ?	What comes after <u>ON</u> ?	What comes after <u>AT</u> ?
September	Wednesday	3:00
October	Friday	2:30
November	August 30	3:30
	September 1	10:45
	August 23	4:15

The teacher follows up this activity with a discussion, where the learners help write the rules as they respond to the following questions.

- When do we use “at?”*
- When do we use “on?”*
- When do we use “in?”*

Thanks to Sheri Lear from Lake Street Open Door Learning Center for this example

5. Use Pair Work, Group Work, and Team Work

The easiest way to cut back on TTT and give learners more opportunities to speak is by using more pair, group and team activities. Learners often feel more comfortable speaking to a peer or in a small group rather than speaking in front of the whole class. Have learners read a dialogue or a paragraph out loud with a partner, complete a worksheet and check their answers in a small group or take turns writing sentences in a paragraph. When learners are doing pair or group work, it gives you the chance to move around the room and listen to all of the learners as you answer questions and provide feedback.

Let's look at how elicitation changes the dynamics when a learner asks, *"What does exhausted mean?"* from Example 1 to Example 2.

Example 1:

"Well, exhausted means that you feel very, very tired and sleepy. Like you have no more energy and can't do anything else. For example, if I don't get a lot of sleep at night, and then I have to get up early and go to work all day, I'm going to be exhausted. I'm going to be really tired."

Example 2:

Teacher: *"That's a good question. Has anyone heard the word exhausted before?"*

Learner 1: *"No sleep?"*

Teacher: *"Yes, if you have no sleep, you will feel exhausted. Anyone else?"*

Learner 2: *"I have much tired."*

Teacher: *"Yes. Exhausted means you are very tired. Do you ever feel very tired?"*

Learner 2: *"I go to work 8 hours then cook food and go to school. I am very tired."*

Teacher: *"That's a very long day. You are exhausted. Good example. Anyone else?"*

Learner 3: *"My baby is sick, no sleeping."*

Teacher: *"A sick baby will make the mother and father exhausted. They can't sleep. Good example. Who can tell me what exhausted means?"*

Learner 1: *"I am very tired. I don't sleep. I have a lot of work."*

Teacher: *"Great! Let's use it in a sentence."*

Learner 2: *"I work too much. I am exhausted."*

In the second example, the learners come up with the definition with a little prompting from the teacher, then show their understanding by using it in a sentence. This type of group discussion keeps the class engaged, and makes it more likely that they will remember the new vocabulary.

6. Don't Be Afraid of Silence

When learning a new language, it takes time to process questions and come up with answers. It's essential that we provide learners with the space and time that they need to figure out how to respond. It's common for teachers to feel uncomfortable with silence in the classroom, but learners need time to think and process the information that they have just heard. Don't feel like you have to fill up silence

with unnecessary talking. Learners need time to figure things out independently and they need processing time between instructions and after explanations. Teacher talk can be counterproductive when the learner just needs time to think of their answer.

Where Should I Begin?

Timing yourself is a good way to get a sense of how much TTT you have in your lessons. Keep an eye on the clock or use your phone to time yourself with a stopwatch. Whenever you are giving explanations, instructions, or lecturing the class, time yourself. After class, calculate how much time you spent talking versus how much time the learners spent talking. If you spent a majority of time talking to the whole class, reflect back on your lesson. At what points in your lesson could you have cut out some of the speaking? Could you replace it with pair or group work? Are there questions that you could have asked the class to get them talking?

You may find it helpful to make more detailed lesson plans with specific questions that you can ask to elicit speaking and check comprehension. It can also be very helpful to practice explanations and instructions out loud before teaching. This will allow you to figure out how to say things in the most direct and simple way.

Reading Reflection Questions:

1. Why should teachers avoid too much teacher talking time?

2. What are two examples of helpful teacher talking time?

3. Which two strategies for reducing teacher talking time will be the most useful for you personally? Why?

4. Which strategy for reducing teacher talking time will be the most challenging for you? Why?

Teacher Talking Time: Video Reflection Questions

Classroom Video 1: Beginning Level

What issues did you see with the teacher talking time during this video?

How did the learners respond to the teacher?

How would you suggest this teacher modify their teacher talk to better support the learners?

Classroom Video 2: Beginning Level

What methods does the teacher use to control the quantity and quality of their teacher talk? Check all that apply.

- | | |
|---|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Keep instructions short and simple | <input type="checkbox"/> Ask Eliciting Questions/Let learners figure things out |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Model | <input type="checkbox"/> Use pair work, group work and team work |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Be direct | <input type="checkbox"/> Don't be afraid of silence |

Did the methods seem effective? Why or why not?

How did the learners respond to the teacher?

What are some ways the teacher could have increased learner speaking time?

Teacher Talking Time: Video Reflection Questions

Classroom Video 3: Intermediate Level

What issues did you see with the teacher talking time during this video?

How did the learners respond to the teacher?

How would you suggest this teacher modify their teacher talk to better support the learners?

Classroom Video 4: Intermediate Level

What methods does the teacher use to control the quantity and quality of their teacher talk? Check all that apply.

- | | |
|---|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Keep instructions short and simple | <input type="checkbox"/> Ask Eliciting Questions/Let learners figure things out |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Model | <input type="checkbox"/> Use pair work, group work and team work |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Be direct | <input type="checkbox"/> Don't be afraid of silence |

Did the methods seem effective? Why or why not?

How did the learners respond to the teacher?

What are some ways the teacher could have increased learner speaking time?

Teacher Talking Time: Video Reflection Questions

Classroom Video 5: Beginning Level

What methods does the teacher use to control the quantity and quality of their teacher talk? Check all that apply.

- | | |
|---|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Keep instructions short and simple | <input type="checkbox"/> Ask Eliciting Questions/Let learners figure things out |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Model | <input type="checkbox"/> Use pair work, group work and team work |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Be direct | <input type="checkbox"/> Don't be afraid of silence |

Did the methods seem effective? Why or why not?

How did the learners respond to the teacher?

What are some ways the teacher could have increased learner speaking time?

What are your top three takeaways from the videos?

What advice would you give a new teaching colleague who is concerned that they will talk too much to their class of beginning level learners?

Teacher Talking Time: Your Turn!

Activity 1: The next time that you teach, chose a 10-15 minute period during the class to record yourself. You may want to choose a time when you typically speak a lot: giving activity instructions, explaining new concepts, etc. Turn on your phone’s voice or video recorder and place it on a table while you teach. After class, listen back to the recording and reflect on the questions below.

How many opportunities did learners have to speak and/or interact during the time you recorded?

Where could you have cut back on your teacher talking time?

How could you have increased learner talking time?

Activity 2: Select one or two methods below for controlling your teacher talking time that you will try the next time you teach. After you teach, reflect on the following questions.

- Keep instructions short and simple
- Model
- Be direct
- Ask eliciting questions/Let learners figure things out
- Use pair work, group work, and team work
- Don’t be afraid of silence

How effective were you at controlling your teacher talking time? How did the learners respond?

What was challenging? What do you want to continue to work on?

What are two goals you have for teacher talking time in your future teaching?