

9 Strategies for Getting More Students to Talk

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A state Teacher of the Year shares her techniques for increasing the number of students who talk and share their ideas in class.

By [Rosie Reid](#)
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While it is possible to learn by listening, I've found that oral participation leads to greater gains in student literacy and engagement. English language learners in particular benefit from ample talk time, but they are not the only ones.

Yet I've also found that without careful planning, a few students do most of the talking while the majority of the class remains silent. My students all have ideas, but only some of them share those ideas on a regular basis. Adding wait time after I ask a question helps more students get into the conversation, but still the more confident students are more likely to raise their hands.

Because of this, I pay close attention to who is participating in my high school English classroom and to the structures I'm using to promote participation. I mix and match from the following strategies depending on the students in the room and my goals for the lesson.

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1. Who talks first? When students turn and talk, I decide who talks first. The person on the right? The person whose birthday is coming soonest? The person with the longest hair? Without this direction, some students dominate partner talk time.

2. Write, pair, share: Many of us use the think, pair, share model, but substituting writing for silent thinking can improve both the quality of the conversation and the

number of students who contribute. As students write, I walk around, reading over their shoulders and writing things like, “That’s good. Say that!” on the papers of quieter or less confident students. I can also see which and how many students are stuck, so I know if I need to add more scaffolding.

3. Pairs and squares: I assign students a partner (pair) to work with for three weeks, as well as a square (two pairs combined). I promote camaraderie in pairs and squares by having students learn each other’s names (with spelling and pronunciation), gender pronouns, and something people can’t tell by looking at them. They also make up a handshake they use each day to greet each other.

They talk in their pairs from bell to bell between direct instruction about the topics of the day. Currently, my sophomores are engaging in a nonfiction unit on happiness, so today we discussed the correlation between money and happiness, and students worked in their pairs to annotate an article, but when we analyzed some rather complex graphs and charts, they moved into their squares so they could have more brain power.

After three weeks, each student thanks their partner for something they did for them and shares what they think was the pair’s best moment together. By the end of the year, every student has worked with every other classmate—either in pairs or squares—which promotes a strong classroom community and helps students feel more comfortable participating.

4. Nonverbal agreement or disagreement: I have my students use the American Sign Language signs for “yes” and “no” in whole class discussion to show their agreement or disagreement with the speaker. This keeps students engaged, gives the speaker immediate feedback on their ideas, and gives all students a nonverbal voice.

5. Metacognitive goal-setting: Every few weeks, I have students reflect on their participation habits and set goals for a particular discussion. Students get an index card at the beginning of class and write a quantitative and a qualitative goal for their participation for the day. As they set their quantitative goals, I encourage them to think of “stepping up and stepping back”—what would be a healthy number of times for them to speak that day? Should they talk more frequently, or refrain from talking in order to make space for others to talk?

For their qualitative goal, they consider whether they need to ask more questions and whether they should do things like build on others’ ideas or use text to support their points.

Throughout class, students take notes on their own contributions to the discussion, write down what they said (and didn't say), and tally the overall number of times they talked. They end class by reflecting on their participation. Did they meet their goals? Why or why not? Can they set some new goals for themselves? This card is their exit ticket for the day.

6. Talking piece: For some small group discussions, we use a ball as a talking piece that students pass around—only the person holding the ball can speak. Every student gets the ball once before anyone gets it a second time. This is particularly effective when discussing very emotionally charged topics, like issues of race or gender, when we want to be certain that everyone has the opportunity to share their experiences.

7. Musical give one, get one: When I want students to hear a lot of ideas, I have them write down their thoughts and then stand up, walk around to as many people as they can, and write down one idea of each person they talk to. I usually do this to music—students need to get to as many people as they can before the song ends.

8. Musical shares: This is similar to the last idea but is better for sharing longer, more in-depth answers. I put on a song, and students walk or dance around the room. When the music stops, they talk to the person closest to them about their ideas. I use a timer to ensure equity of sharing here—each person speaks for one minute.

9. Keeping track: I keep a blank grade book roster on a clipboard, and while students are working in pairs, I put a tally mark next to each student's name every time I hear them speak during class. I'm sure I don't catch everything, but the act of keeping track forces me to notice the participation patterns in the room and to seek out those who have learned to fly under the radar.