

What Productive Talk Looks Like in the Elementary Grades

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Communication Skills

Using sentence stems to scaffold classroom discussions guides students to speak, actively listen, and build on each others' ideas.

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I used to think that the perfect classroom had students sitting in rows, hands folded, with their eyes on me. “All eyes on me” was in fact my favorite teacher line. Having an attentive audience was one of the reasons teaching was fun for me.

Fast-forward 35 years to my last year of teaching before I transitioned to being an instructional coach—my students were at tables or sitting knee-to-knee in small groups. They weren't quiet, and they were facilitating their own learning. The chatter was rigorous and the ideas were flowing. How did we get there? I taught my fifth-grade students talk moves—sentence stems and key phrases that help students speak, actively listen, and build on each other's ideas.

I presented the talk moves over four days. After I introduced each talk move, we practiced what it would sound like in our classroom. For example, when students wanted to expand their peer's thinking, that sounded like “What do you mean by that?” or “Can you give an example?”

On the fourth day, after students had learned the talk moves, a group of four students modeled them. The rest of the class observed and then gave the group feedback by naming the talk moves they saw their peers use.

I kept a bulletin board in the classroom with the talk moves up all year long. This gave my students key phrases to activate their talking, thinking, and listening—like “I respectfully disagree because ___.” Building the routines takes time, but in the long run it saves time by engaging students and making the time much more productive. As the school year progressed, we would sometimes need to revisit the talk moves to reflect on how the talk looked—students sitting facing each other, in a circle or knee-to-knee—and what it sounded like when it was working well. The bulletin board was used as a reference guide most every hour of our day.

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Time to think: When I introduced this to students, we quickly discussed why it’s important to allow each other time to think—having that think time helps students articulate their thoughts. To practice this talk move, I gave students time to jot down a few ideas before they started talking, and during conversations they could say, “I need time to think.” Allowing for quiet moments and thought to become routine will encourage think time to happen as students later work in small groups or with a partner. I also brought to students’ attention when I used this move as a teacher. I’d say, “Notice, I just used think time.”

Say more: Too many times people talk and don’t listen. This talk move gets students listening as they ask their classmates for clarification. Having students ask questions like “Can you say more about that?” “What do you mean by that?” or “Can you give an example?” encourages active listening and back-and-forth discussion between students.

So, are you saying ___? Summarizing helps students check their understanding and verify with speakers that they communicated what they intended to. Some helpful sentence stems: “Let me see if I understand what you are saying: ___” and “Are you saying ___?”

Who can repeat or rephrase that? Students have to listen carefully if they are going to repeat what someone else said. Having students ask each other, “How can we say that differently?” or “Can you put that in your own words?” also deepens content understanding.

What is your evidence or reasoning? As students explain their thought process, they deepen their own thinking as well as their classmates’. In all subjects, students should be making claims and backing them up with evidence. They can ask each other

questions like “What is your evidence?” “Why do you think that?” “Is there anything in the text that makes you think that?” and “Where did you get that information?”

Challenge or counterexample: When students are introduced to a conflicting example, it pushes their thinking and deepens their understanding. They can gently challenge each other’s thinking by asking questions like “Does it always work that way?” “How does that idea work with a different example?” and “What if it had been ___ instead?”

Agree and disagree: Conflict isn’t always easy, but it’s important for students to learn how to respectfully express their opinions and know that it’s OK to change their mind when they are introduced to new information. These sentence stems can help facilitate constructive communication: “I respectfully disagree because ___,” “I agree with ___,” and “Are you saying the same thing as ___?”

Add on: Sentence stems like “I would like to add on to that,” “Adding on to what [another student] said, ___,” and “Can I push that idea a bit further?” helps students work together to build upon their prior knowledge.

Explain what someone else means: Having students put their peers’ responses into their own words gives more students ownership over the answer, exposes them to different ways about thinking about the answer, and allows you to check for understanding. You can get this talk move started by asking, “Why do you think he said that?” and students can initiate it by saying, “I can explain what ___ means by that” or “I can put that into my own words.”

Teaching students to talk productively in the classroom is the most important change I’ve made in my teaching career. I’ve used talk moves with students in all areas of the curriculum. As an instructional coach, I find that teachers benefit from using talk moves in professional development, too. We all need to talk, process, and share to be truly learning.