Oral Communication as a Learning Tool

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August 2018

Introduction

Oral communication in the form of student talk can be described as focused group conversations or collaborative conversations that are usually facilitated and/or monitored by an instructor. Eliciting student talk encourages the use oral language to express their understanding of a concept or idea. It is more than just knowledgeable peers sharing answers; it is the use of language as a tool to construct meaning. Research suggests that students learn more from giving explanations than receiving explanations (Chi et al, 1994; Sparks, 2013; Webb, 1989); hence the benefit of incorporating student talk into class time. It has been shown to be effective across disciplines, from Biology to Language Learning (Karrema, 2014; Tanner, 2009) as well as in small classes to 600-person lecture halls (Tanner, 2009).

According to renowned developmental psychologist Lev Vygotsky (1896-1934), talk is one of the primary tools for communication. Communication in particular helps students negotiate meaning and connect prior knowledge, resulting in the development of thought and practice (Vygotsky, 1978). Not only can student talk help them better construct understanding of an idea or concept, it can also signal to the instructor whether a particular activity is supporting student learning and whether they are reaching course learning objectives.

Student talk supports learning by
- Providing opportunities to clarify thoughts, generate conclusions, develop theories and ask new questions
- Establishing norms that ease students' inhibitions, motivates sharing and promotes respectful communication
- Exposing learners to new ideas and perspectives from each other's examples
- Connecting what students already know and what they think they know, to what they are being asked to learn
- Acknowledging the value of student's ideas and empowering them to take more responsibility for their learning
- Building an understanding of a collaborative nature of learning
- Privileging the expression of personally meaningful ideas and the use of everyday language rather than focusing on the correct answers and the use of perfect language

Implementation

1) First determine the purpose of student talk and articulate how it aligns with your course learning objectives. You might find yourself answering some of the following questions
    a. What do I hope students get out of this?
    b. What is the end goal?
    c. Are there non-content related goals for this activity?

d. How might this designed student talk align and contribute to departmental/unit/university expectations and missions?

2) Define your role carefully.
   a. Some researchers suggest that students should work independently as the instructor comes around and listens to conversation (if within small groups). Others suggest the instructor facilitates the conversation by posing or answering questions. This depends on size of class, amount of time you'd like to spend on student talk, and your learning goals.

3) Design questions and when they will be asked.
   a. Questions should be asked throughout the class period, one at a time.
   b. Questions should elicit more than one word answers (yes/no, I agree or disagree) that can be supported with evidence.
   c. Questions do not need to start complex; follow-up questions can add depth and complexity.
   d. Anticipate student responses and how you might facilitate continued talk.

4) Explain the purpose of the activity, set the ground rules, and define expectations of students. Students can develop the ground rules themselves, or they can discuss previously-determined ones. This provides them ownership in the process. Sharing understanding and knowledge of the ground rules help decrease student anxiety and boost productivity. Ground rules might include…
   a. Listening without interrupting
   b. Committing to learning and not debate
   c. Opinions must be supported by evidence
   d. Avoid inflammatory language
   e. Critiquing ideas rather than people/each other
   f. All voices are welcome and expected (whether during class ability to individually connect with faculty after class about topic)
   g. Students can share concerns with you privately / you will interrupt if necessary and redirect when rules are not being followed

5) Reflect on the questions and how the students responded. Make notes and refine for future semesters.

Frequently Asked Questions

a. *How do you make sure the students are interested and engaged*? The activity should be something that piques student curiosity and require them to collaborate and communicate.
b. *How do I make sure the students know what to do*? The instructor needs to establish clear goals and objectives for the exercise. Communication should be directed so as to focus on the task at hand. Modeling and practice can help students understand their role.
c. *How does this work in large classes*? Research suggests that strategic planning and choreography can prompt productive student talk in any size classroom. Individual accountability in large classes can be assisted by student response systems designed to capture individual student responses and hold them accountable. (Mazur, 1997; Smith et al, 2009).

d. *How do I grade this type of activity?* Evaluation should be based on individual and group participation expectations. Clearly defining the objectives of the oral communication and providing parameters for engagement (rubric) can be useful.

e. *How much time should this take?* While student talk could run an entire class period, short bursts of student talk can take no more than a few minutes; as described in Think-Pair-Share. Think-Pair-Share or providing students with a set of questions prior to class can help decrease student anxiety regarding real-time oral communication.

f. *When should students do this type of activity (starting, middle, end of class)?* This can take place at any point of the instructional loop; prior to class, at the beginning, middle, end, or as a post-activity.

Some instructors are not comfortable with the idea of less teacher and more student talk. However, when well-structured and designed, it can be a very effective technique. In addition to reviewing the implementation steps, you can refer to other Teaching Tools in a Flash for engaging students in meaningful talk: Wait-time, Jigsaw, and 3-Stay 1-Stray.

Other Resources

Guides to Help Elicit Student Talk/Have Productive Conversations

- Kennesaw State Center for Excellence in Teaching & Learning. Eliciting And Using Student Thinking. https://cetl.kennesaw.edu/eliciting-and-using-student-thinking
- University of Maryland Teaching & Learning Transformation Center. Class Discussions https://tltc.umd.edu/classroom-discussions
- Carnegie Mellon University Teaching Excellence & Educational Innovation Eberly Center – Discussions https://www.cmu.edu/teaching/designteach/design/instructionalstrategies/discussions.html
- Exploratorium. (2015) Science Talk: A Tool for Learning Science and Developing Language. Educators Guide for Inquiry-based Science and English Language Development. Insitute for Inquiry. https://www.exploratorium.edu/sites/default/files/pdfs/ifi/ScienceTalk.pdf
- Student Talk Flowchart & Protocols. (2015). STEM Teaching Tools. http://stemteachingtools.org/assets/landscapes/FullSet_StudentTalkProtocolsandFlowchart1_c.pdf
- Why Talk is Important in Classrooms. ASCD Publications. – Fisher (2008) http://www.ascd.org/publications/books/108035/chapters/Why-Talk-Is-Important-in-Classrooms.aspx
- Procedures for Classroom Talk. ASCD Publications –Fisher (2008) http://www.ascd.org/publications/books/108035/chapters/Procedures-for-Classroom-Talk.aspx

Grading resources

- *Rubric for grading class discussion: Utexas.edu-* https://facultyinnovate.utexas.edu/sites/default/files/Classroom_Discussion_rubric.doc
- *Grade range descriptions:* http://gantercourses.net/class-participation-guidelines-and-grading/
- *Chronicle article about grading class participation:* https://www.chronicle.com/blogs/profhacker/how-to-grade-students-class-participation/23726

- *Not grading participation, but rewarding it - faculty focus article*
  https://www.facultyfocus.com/articles/teaching-professor-blog/time-rethink-grade-participation/

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