

Spontaneous Talk

The following sections concern three aspects of classroom talk: the teacher role, student–teacher talk, and finally, student–student talk. In each section, the focus will be on practical strategies to improve target language talk, in terms of both teacher and student language use.

The teacher role

When considering strategies to increase students’ spontaneity in speaking, it is useful to consider teacher use of TL in the classroom, and how this can be used to support learners as they try to make themselves understood. This is important because teachers are uniquely placed to create very particular interactions with students that provide learning opportunities that are not to be found, in the same way, in pair and group work.

These interactions should ideally have the following features¹:

- hand over the role of primary knower to the student; that is to say, the communicative impetus must be with the learner at times in the interaction (*Una mawazo gani? Unafikiri nini? Kwa nini?*).
- have a predominance of open questions so that, even when closed in form, questions are open in function (e.g. *Anaitwa nani?* can be an open question when the class is hypothesising about the identity of an unknown person in a photo stimulus).
- feature conversational responses to learner utterances, characterised by an interested tone of voice, phatic echoes, repetitions with raised intonation, and exclamations (*Kweli? Yaani..., Sema basi, Sawa ...*).
- help to ‘buy’ learners time to construct their response; the teacher holds the interactional frame and fills pauses with padding (*kwa hivyo ...* + repetition of question/rewording).
- contain any correction with implicit re-casts, so that the conversational frame remains intact for as long as possible.
- include humour, both from teacher and students.
- be inviting; students need to want to take part, to feel they can initiate and take part. The teacher needs to solicit learner opinions and contributions actively (*Zamu yako sasa. Unasemaje?*).
- include (ideally) a stable topic of conversation, but allow for the unpredictability of individual contributions: the unpredictability retains the interest of learners and provides opportunities for noticing, whilst the stability gives learners time to process for meaning and to think about their own contributions.

Student – teacher talk

Much of the target language that students routinely need to use in the classroom can be predicted. It can therefore be integrated into schemes of work and taught over time in the same way as any other language input. The teacher then needs to insist that students use it whenever the opportunity arises. The key word is ‘insist’! There is no magic to this. Given the choice, students will revert to using English, as it requires less effort to do so. Therefore it is the teacher who needs to be consistent in reinforcing the expectation to use the target language.

Student – student talk

Much of this talk is accomplished through specific speaking tasks. There are many speaking tasks that generate spontaneous talk. Here are just a few suggestions:

Target talk

Students are given a question and a target number of words to use in their answer. For the first question, they must answer with the exact number of words in the target. The second question has the condition of a minimum number of words, which could be eight, nine, ten, or whatever is felt appropriate to the class. The conditions or ‘targets’ can be many and varied. It almost doesn’t matter what they are, as the point of putting a condition there is to cause students to think their sentences through carefully as they build them. It makes them much more aware of what they’re saying. Also, making a sentence of exactly seven words will usually involve a very short clause with a simple connective, or several items in a list. A higher target will push students to produce an extended answer, with a reason and/or justification, or additional details.

Spend the words

This task can be configured in lots of different ways, but the essential premise is that students have to have a conversation on a theme (they can be given specific questions, as appropriate, or more freedom to frame the questions themselves). Note that the simplest way for beginner learners to structure their own conversation is to make a statement and then ask for someone else’s view.

¹ ‘A case of exercising: effects of immediate task repetition’. Lynch, D. and Maclean, J. (2001) in M. Bygate, P. Skehan and M. Swain (eds) *Researching pedagogic tasks: second language learning, teaching and testing*, London: Routledge (141–162).

In the course of the conversation, students need to try to use up all the words they have been given. They can be given all the words on one sheet and tasked to work collaboratively as a group, or can be given a set of word cards each: in this context, they have to ‘spend’ their own words, putting them in the centre of the table as they do so.

In this way, the task can be made collaborative or competitive, as appropriate to the group lesson.

Speaking line

There is empirical evidence in support of the benefits of repeating speaking tasks immediately². The teacher or students can choose the level of support the first time around, the aim being to decrease the amount of written support (bullets → individual words → pictures → nothing) each time the speaker moves to a new partner.

Say something else

Students are presented with a few sentences and have to change something in the sentence – it could be one detail, it could be the whole thing, or it could be adding an additional detail to ‘grow’ the sentence.

This task is particularly useful with more experienced classes as a warm-up before launching into a more independent speaking activity. The level of challenge and spontaneity required can be increased by asking students to change one element of the sentence they have just heard, rather than returning to the original written sentence each time.

Picture talk

There are many ways to exploit pictures. One of the best things about pictures is that they allow teachers to ask closed questions which function as open questions, and which can have multiple ‘correct’ answers. A question as simple as ‘What is he/she called?’ functions as an open question when the person is unknown. In the absence of known answers, students are free to create identities and, therefore, to use the language they know.

It is useful to remember how much potential talk can also be generated by asking questions in the negative. For example: in response to a photo of a girl on holiday in Zanzibar, the answer to the question, ‘Where did she go on holiday?’, will not elicit as many responses as, ‘Where didn’t she go on holiday?’, where students are free to name any other location they can produce in the target language.

² Translation, Literary Texts and Classroom Talk toolkit for Studio KS3 French, Stimmt KS3 German and Viva KS3 Spanish - by Rachel Hawkes (Pearson, 2015).