

TEACHING TIPS

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Teaching Tip 5: Speaking to Other Students in English TEFL.NET/EnglishClub.com

How:

1. Put the students into pairs or small groups (See TT1 for further explanation).

Why:

1. Making students speak to each other instead of the teacher maximises STT (Student Talking Time) and minimises TTT (Teacher Talking Time). This is a good thing because the students are the ones who need to practise their English - you, hopefully, don't!
2. A lot of students will be using their English to speak to non-mother tongue speakers anyway so they might as well start getting used to it. For example, my students are Italian and they often need English to speak to other European clients and colleagues. Some of them never use English to speak to mother-tongue English speakers at all!

Extra info:

Students like talking to the teacher because it makes them feel important and that they are getting value for money. While this is fine in a one-to-one lesson it is no good in a group because while one student is monopolising the teacher/conversation everyone else is losing out.

When I encounter students who want to talk to me all the time in a lesson (flattering though it is) I advise them (politely) to consider having individual lessons if they want the teacher's full attention all the time. If that doesn't work I explain like this:

60 minutes divided by 6 students = 10 minutes each; so they can each talk to me for 10 minutes and I will listen to each of them for 10 minutes which is sad really when they've paid for a 60 minute lesson. And, let's face it, it wouldn't really be 10 minutes because you have to take time off for taking the register at the beginning of the lesson, giving everyone time to hang their coats up, sit down, get settled, receive their worksheets, read the instructions, listen to the teacher presenting grammar points or whatever, do a listening exercise or a roleplay, go through homework together, receive more homework, get ready to leave etc. 5 minutes would be more realistic. So there you have it, pay for 60 minutes and get 5. Where's the logic?

If that doesn't work I do this:

Let the student have his/her way. Yup! Smile and listen very attentively. Make sure that everyone else is listening too. Let him/her start rambling, taking up everyone's valuable time and then just pick him/her up on every grammar mistake and correct his/her pronunciation every second word. I find that the student in question usually enjoys this to start with, getting so much attention - having a one-to-one lesson in front of everybody - but the novelty soon wears off. I either correct the student aloud, frequently, or write his/her errors up on the board as s/he goes along ('don't mind me, do keep going, we can all learn so much from your mistakes').

Generally speaking, correcting a student every few seconds destroys the impact of whatever s/he was saying and makes them (and everyone else) lose the thread. Writing their mistakes up publicly on the board tends to make students shrivel up and die (See TT11 for an explanation about how to do error correction nicely). After this, in my experience, the student is generally quite happy to get on with pairwork. And so are all the other students! Sometimes I have students who don't want to speak much until they can be sure of getting it right and not making mistakes because mistakes are bad things, right? (Wrong! See TT11 for further explanation). These students tell me that they want me to talk to them (individually) because they will learn correct English through listening to me. (By osmosis, presumably!) They can't see the benefit of talking to each other because if they make a mistake the other student won't be able to correct them. (Actually, the other student often can correct them, and does correct them and that's what they don't like!)

In such cases I explain like this: Learning English is like learning to play the piano/to drive/to swim etc. When you want to learn to play the piano/drive/swim is it enough just sit and watch other people doing it or do you need to have a go yourself and make mistakes and practise a lot until you get it right? Speaking together gives you that chance to have a go yourself and the time to practice. Or like this: If you honestly think that you will learn correct English by listening to a mother-tongue speaker speaking correct English, why don't you just rent an English video? It's a lot cheaper than paying lesson prices to listen to me.

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