

## Techniques to Encourage Classroom Participation from ESL/EFL Students

### Saving 'Face'

Class participation can be very unattractive to ESL/EFL students. Why?

- a) They are reluctant to do what they see as a sure-fire way to embarrass themselves in public.
- b) They have been culturally conditioned to 'listen and soak up knowledge' rather than see learning as a collaborative exercise through active discussion.<sup>1</sup>
- c) It's easier to sit back and listen than betray non-comprehension or unfamiliarity with the cultural context or materials. And they may be too shy to ask for clarification or explanation.
- d) And a whole host of other reasons, including the simple fact that they may be thoroughly intimidated by the instructional situation. Engaging with the instructor instead of worshipping at his feet (i.e. coping with the idea that the teacher is not a 'sage' but a 'facilitator', or comparing regurgitation versus co-creation of knowledge), as well as the forthright way in which American students participate in class, may be enough to scare ESL/EFL students into perpetual silence.

- How can language be used in a way that saves 'face'?
- How can instructors encourage ESL/EFL students to participate in class?
- What is class participation? Why is it important?
- What are some different forms of class participation?
- What problems might ESL/EFL students face when it comes to class participation?
- When we say that students should be actively involved in classroom discussions on a frequent/regular basis, what do we mean?

**A guideline for instructors on fostering equitable classroom participation (excerpted in the italicized section below) recommends that instructors deliberately 'seed' opportunities for class participation. This is good, and certainly should be done. Assuming that instructors do this, what problems might language learners face with each section below, and what coping mechanisms might they use? What can course instructors do to help address problems that arise from negative coping mechanisms? (e.g. What can instructors do to avoid 'pillion-riders' in group work or skill-selective collaboration that highlights academic difficulties that ESL/EFL students are more susceptible to given that they are still acquiring English language skills?)**

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<sup>1</sup> Despite this, beware of the urge to consider a student a representative of their culture instead of an individual. Many academic misapprehensions are largely individual instead of collectively cultural, although mindsets may be influenced by a particular way of thinking. Let students know that you are aware of how their cultural background may hinder appropriate classroom participation, but help them see that they need to respond as individuals to different academic situations and that they can evolve positively as contributors to an ongoing discussion.

## ***Plan Ahead for Class Participation<sup>2</sup>***

*It may seem to go without saying that instructors should plan ahead, but we find that many instructors think of planning in terms of what they will be teaching, and often think of participation as something that spontaneously arises during class. However, equitable class participation rarely happens by accident.*

*Making decisions about class participation in advance, and making them explicit to students, can go a long way toward aligning student expectations with instructor goals for more equitable class participation. Here is a range of possibilities to consider when planning ahead:*

Goals for Participation – possibilities include:

- discovering new material
- *exploring different perspectives*
- *inviting students to relate relevant experiences*

Types of Participation – possibilities include:

- large group discussion
- small group activities
- face-to-face or online

Student Preparation – possibilities include:

- reading assignments
- reflective writing
- small group work to prepare for large group interaction

Facilitating Participation – possibilities include:

- managing "wait time" in a discussion
- acknowledging student contributions
- incorporating student input into following instruction

Assessment of Participation – possibilities include:

- communicating expectations to students
- providing assessment criteria
- providing clear feedback

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<sup>2</sup> Source: Foster Equitable Class Participation  
<http://depts.washington.edu/cidrweb/inclusive/foster.html#Plan>

Here are a few examples of ways to invite student participation:	What are some potential problems this can raise for ESL/EFL students?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ <i>Give students time to formulate questions or responses. The wait time will often seem longer to you than it does to students, so be sure to give them enough time to catch up, think through the issue, and put their thoughts into words.</i></li> </ul>	<p>Many Asian students are conditioned to wait out silences; they may feel intimidated by silence, and of being put on the spot by the instructor, but they may not break such silences, especially if the instructor becomes uncomfortable with the wait time and goes on with the lesson. A useful technique here would be to ask the student a question, then say that you'll come back to them after a few minutes – this will give them time to think about it and formulate an answer. But be sure to go back to them (i.e. hold them to the commitment).</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ <i>Acknowledge all contributions, even if they aren't what you were looking for. In questions of fact, point out what's partially right in a wrong answer, as well as where it goes off-track.</i></li> </ul>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ <i>Remind students that questions are welcome, and that the person who asks a question is doing a favor for all the other students who are silently wondering the same thing.</i></li> </ul>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ <i>Require students to visit TAs' or instructor's office hours once every two weeks.</i></li> </ul>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ <i>Use group activities or pair work. Students who are hesitant to speak in front of the full class are often willing to contribute to smaller groups of classmates.</i></li> </ul>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ <i>Give specific tasks and instructions so each person has a role in the group.</i></li> </ul>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ <i>Look for opportunities for you to interact with individual students in addition to the interactions that are possible in front of all the other students; for example, before and after class, in the transition to group work, or while groups are working.</i></li> </ul>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ <i>Select several students a day to summarize key points from previous day, bring up a question from the chapter, or comment on other work that they can prepare outside of class time.</i></li> </ul>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ <i>Acknowledge other forms of participation; for example, contributions to the class discussion list, comments made in journals, or ideas that you overhear mentioned in small groups which don't get reported to the larger group.</i></li> </ul>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ <i>Consider calling on students by name<sup>3</sup>, but keep in mind that being called on can be both motivating and intimidating. Be sure students have had a chance to prepare for answering the question, and that they are given a reasonable amount of time to formulate a response.</i></li> </ul>	

<sup>3</sup> Note: Please make sure to pronounce the student's name correctly as far as possible.

The same guideline for course instructors on fostering equitable class participation has set out these tips to encourage classroom participation. **Note: These are examples of good practice.** However, while generally successful, these tips can be potentially problematic for ESL/EFL students. Think of ways to adapt these good practice guidelines for ESL/EFL students in your class.

### ***Look for Opportunities to Invite Participation<sup>4</sup>***

See the problems?

What other strategies can instructors use to circumvent these potential difficulties or reduce the drawbacks?

#### **LANGUAGE FORMS AND FUNCTIONS**

Classroom participation is signposted by language that the ESL student may not be familiar with. Brainstorm as many examples of language that can be used to fulfill each function below and write them down. Then teach these to your students as language strategies. Armed with a handful of these key phrases, your students will soon learn to use them as segues into classroom conversations.

*Tip: You may want to give these as a handout in an initial conference session to your ESL students, and encourage them to participate in class by saying that you look forward to observing their contributions in the next few sessions.*

1. Asking for Clarification (Language & Content)
2. Asking the Instructor to Repeat
3. Asking the Instructor to Reformulate
4. Providing a Reformulation to Confirm Accuracy/Comprehension
5. Interrupting (Politely)

Responding to the Instructor or a Classmate:

- a) Agreeing
- b) Disagreeing
- c) Agreeing to a Certain Extent
- d) Offering a Different Viewpoint
- e) Adding to the 'Conversation'
- f) Others...

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<sup>4</sup> <http://depts.washington.edu/cidrweb/inclusive/foster.html#Invite>