

“Why Is My Teacher Talking So Much?” by Bella Hanson

MaryAnn Cunningham Florez* talked with a group of adult learners about their learning experience in a beginning level ESL class. She noted that the learners were telling her what they valued in their teachers’ practice. She shares her findings in an article in *Focus on Basics*, “Beginning ESOL Learners’ Advice to Their Teachers.”

One of her offers of advice is, **“Know when to say, ‘That’s all you need to know right now.’”**

Another one is, **“Watch your teacher talk.”** – noting that teachers use very complicated language that distracts or confuses them in the course of presenting materials and lessons. Florez encourages us to be doubly aware of the vocabulary and language structures we use to present, explain, and even ‘fill’ the time in and around lessons.

This advice is from a beginning level ESL group. It might be a good idea to ask higher level ESL students about our “teacher talk.”

Why do we think that the more we talk, the more they learn? Why do we think that the more we elaborate the better they will understand directions, etc.?

But...let’s not leave them in the dark either. We need to talk enough when giving directions, demonstrating a skill, and explaining learning activities.

When is teacher talk helpful (and enough)?

It is simplified, clear, and concise.

Feedback about how they are doing is consistent and concrete.

Explanations are broken into short sentences and short paragraphs to encourage or invite students to interrupt, comment and ask questions.

Typical examples are given when teaching new vocabulary or structure.

The teacher gets regular feedback through questions, especially ‘open questions’ or ‘two-step questions’.

Planned teacher-talk is required when teaching good listening skills.

Can you think of more examples?

Think of yourself as a newspaper reporter. You give the headline and facts. They can ask questions for more information – especially if you ask them if they have questions.

How much of the lesson can be teacher-talk?

One teacher told me that, depending on the subject, you should be talking from about 5% to 30% of the lesson. For speaking or writing, more than 10-15% would probably be too much. Most lessons should be student-centered, not teacher-centered.

What can we do to get students to talk more?

- _ Students in the same survey said they want practice in speaking in pair work and choral response.
- _ They want to talk about language related to issues they identify.
- _ They want not only to practice vocabulary but to use the words – in sentences, in dialogues, and in completing other tasks.
- _ They want and need to talk about their own experience so they can connect their background knowledge to the content.
- _ They want to practice words and syntax in interactive dialogue with the teacher and other students.

Let's imagine little balloons over our students' heads with the following thoughts in them:

She is using too many words.

I got lost after the first two sentences.

Why can't she just explain the directions step by step without saying a whole bunch of other words?

I only asked her about whether the word was an adjective, and she is telling me way more than I want to know right now. I didn't ask her about verbs, so why is she telling me all about verbs now?

I feel a little like she wasted about 5 minutes of my time.

I wish he would ask me to repeat the sentence after he says it (instead of just him repeating it) so I would know for sure if I am saying the words right.

How am I going to learn to say that word myself if only she repeats it and she doesn't ask me to repeat it?

Let's apply some metacommunication (new word) to our approach and see if our communication is transformed and the balance is tipped. Let's imagine different words in the balloons over our students' heads.

In the words of Robert Greeleaf, "Many attempts to communicate are nullified by saying too much."

Bella Hanson's thirty-year career in Adult Basic Education was in Saint Paul, MN, where she was a teacher in basic skills and ESL, instructional supervisor, and supervisor. After early retirement she earned her Ph.D in education. She presently is contracted for various projects with the ABE section in the Minnesota Department of Education.

**MaryAnn Cunningham Florez* is the volunteer coordinator of St. Anthony of Padua Catholic Church's ESL Program in Falls Church, VA. She is also assistant director and web coordinator at the National Center for ESL Literacy Education in Washington, DC. She has more than 10 years experience working with adult English language learners.