

Tips for Teaching Conversation in the Multilingual ESL Classroom

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Introduction

Leaving aside completely the matter of potential cultural conflicts and misunderstandings, teaching conversation in the multilingual classroom presents challenges beyond those faced in the monolingual classroom. The difficulties inherent in a conversational ESL class--namely, speaking and listening in another language--are multiplied when the participants in those conversations are neither native speakers nor from the same linguistic background. Problems ranging from grammatical mistakes to vocabulary limitations to, perhaps most troublesome, pronunciation issues complicate the process of conversing in a foreign language.

From a classroom management standpoint, however, a bigger challenge is when such obstacles turn to frustration and students from differing linguistic backgrounds begin to tune each other out or, worse, exhibit irritation. Fortunately, when handled well, a multilingual classroom is a great place for students to try out their real-world conversation skills. If they can make themselves understood not only to ESL teachers and to others linguistically like themselves, but also to the world at large, then they are communicating.

The following are some suggestions for increasing cross-cultural student-to-student engagement and understanding in the ESL classroom.

Mix It Up

- Incorporate as many communicative activities as you can into your lesson plans--role plays, Q&A sessions, information-gap exercises, realistic problem-solving tasks--and group students from distinct linguistic backgrounds together.

Keep the Student on Their Toes

- After a student answers a question, tells a story, or makes a sentence, throw a mini listening pop quiz. Choose a student from a different linguistic background to see if he understood the original student's comments. Ask him to rephrase, repeat or summarize what he heard. This is a good double-check on both speaker and listener.
- Play linguistic Hot Potato in the classroom: If a student asks you a question, divert the question back out to the class to see if another student can provide an answer or explain it to the others. In this way, students won't tune out while the others are talking and they have yet another chance to interact with each other.

Let the Students do the Work

- At the beginning or end of class or after a comprehension exercise, have students ask each other questions about the material covered. That will get them used to listening to each other's accents, not just to yours. Plus it provides an oft-needed review of the frequent problem of question formation in English.
- Try not to echo your students or summarize their comments. If you "help out" students with pronunciation difficulties in this way, the others will feel free to ignore them and wait for you to repeat it more clearly.

Work on Everyone's Difficulties

- If you are doing a pronunciation exercise or discussing a false cognate for one linguistic group follow it up with one for another group. This will help teach the students to be patient with each other's linguistic limitations, as they learn that while the problems may not be the same for each group, each group has its own problems.

Explain It to the Students

- Emphasize that communicating effectively means not only speaking so that a teacher can understand, but speaking so that everyone can understand. Students who speak the same language often understand each other not because they speak correctly but because they make the same mistakes. If you can do so tactfully, you can use a multilingual conversational exercise to point out the difference between what a student thinks he is saying and what his classmates actually hear.
- As students tend to forget, communication also means accurate listening, not just to the video or to native speakers, but to each other as well. For those students who think it is pointless or even detrimental to listen to other non-native speakers, remind them that in today's global society, the chances are that they will find themselves conversing, doing business, or otherwise interacting in English with other non-native speakers.

Have Fun

- One of the best aspects of multi-lingual classrooms is that the widely varying cultural, linguistic and personal backgrounds of the students provide a constant source of interesting conversational material. Use this to your advantage by creating activities where students have to speak--and actively listen--to each other describe how things work in their culture or country.