



## Tips for Teachers

### Turn-Taking Strategies to Motivate Reluctant Speakers

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#### Introduction

ESL and EFL teachers often struggle to help silent or reluctant students feel comfortable participating in whole-class activities, such as checking homework, relating personal anecdotes, or discussing current events. Teachers can feel frustrated when the same few students volunteer, while other students fear speaking in front of their peers or teacher. Special attempts to call on those students who do not usually raise their hands or to extend wait time for reticent students can backfire, leaving the teacher exhausted, confident students bored, and reluctant learners even more uncomfortable than usual. This teaching tip grew out of such moments and offers inclusive, engaging alternatives to the usual routines of asking for volunteers or calling on individual students directly.

#### First Things First

If students are to willingly engage with each other and voluntarily participate in full-class activities, they must first perceive the language class as a supportive, stress-free environment. This means they must have positive rapport with their teacher and with each other. Such a relationship cannot be created in a few minutes during a single lesson; it must be carefully cultivated from the beginning of a course. While it may sound like extra work for a busy teacher, building positive group dynamics can make all the difference in how students view classroom activities. One means of building such rapport is for teachers to model the attitudes, behaviors, or words we want them to employ. For example, we can show our students that we respond to our own mistakes—as teachers and as language learn-

ers—lightheartedly. We can also acknowledge our limitations. For example, when students ask questions that we have not heard or researched before, we can honestly say, “I don’t know” and then make sure to follow up in the next lesson to show an example of self-directed learning. (For more on the subject of group dynamics in language learning, see Dörnyei & Murphey, 2003). Assuming that a positive classroom atmosphere has been created, the four types of strategies described below can create lively, novel, even fun variation in turn-taking routines.

### Removing the Surprise Factor

Even when group dynamics are positive and students are not afraid, they can still feel caught off guard by spontaneous requests to speak in whole-class settings. Providing just a bit of thinking, preparation, or rehearsal time can make all the difference. Here are four strategies for giving students time to think before needing to speak.

1. *Solo thinking time.* Simply giving students time to compose their thoughts and mentally rehearse their words can increase participation. For example, we can tell students today what the discussion topic will be tomorrow. We can also post questions, prompts, or topics on the board before class begins so that students can think about them as class gets underway. Finally, we can extend the wait time between posing questions and calling on volunteers to answer them.
2. *Think-Pair-Share.* This is a common cooperative learning technique that begins with solo thinking time. The teacher asks a question or invites discussion and then gives students time to think about their response. Next, students turn to a neighbor and share their responses. This step provides gentle, but forced output, giving students important practice in putting ideas into target language words. It also boosts confidence and provides an opportunity for meaningful practice and communication. When the teacher invites volunteers to share their responses, more students feel prepared to do so.
3. *Pyramid Up.* This is similar to Think-Pair-Share except that students discuss their responses with progressively larger groups of peers. The teacher sets a task, and students find a classmate who has the same opinion or answer. They share their ideas and practice their words with each other. Then, they form a group of four with another student pair and share their responses, negotiating their words, and agreeing, disagreeing, and, most importantly, revising their words and ideas as they learn from each other.

Asking students to form groups provides a “safety in numbers” sense of security, so if called upon later, they know they have the backing of others and are less likely to suffer from stage fright.

4. *Numbered Heads Together.* This strategy begins with students in groups of three or four. They choose numbers for themselves, 1 to 3 (or 4). The teacher poses a question or prompt and gives a few minutes for students to discuss their ideas or consolidate their thinking as a group. Then, the teacher designates reporters by, for example, calling the Number 3 students to respond.

### Role Reversals

Putting students in charge of turn-taking injects an element of novelty and gives students autonomy over one aspect of a lesson. They enjoy both benefits.

1. *You go next.* Once a question or prompt has been stated, the teacher chooses the first student to respond. The next time a student response is elicited, the Number 1 student chooses Number 2. Later in the lesson, when a new speaking opportunity arises, Number 2 chooses Number 3, and so on. This chain then continues throughout the lesson and may stretch over several days. Often students know each other better than teachers do, so they know who to call on for a thoughtful, surprising, humorous, or relevant personal anecdote for a particular question or prompt. Adaptations on this technique might include alternating gender or choosing someone who is wearing a particular color.
2. *Teaching Assistants.* This technique is a way to minimize the demotivating effect that highly fluent or attention-grabbing students can sometimes have on reticent students. When the eager students volunteer, instead of hearing their response, the teacher directs them to nominate a subgroup of the class to respond, for example, students who have part-time jobs, students who have siblings, or students who have relatives living abroad.

### L1 Turn-Taking Routines

Sometimes, when students are overwhelmed by challenges or fear of the target language (L2), it can be beneficial to use familiar routines from their first language (L1) culture. All languages have routines, chants, or word play designed to determine who goes first in a game or who is on the “hot seat.” Students’ affective filters are lowered with these games because they are fun, familiar, local and because the turn-taking is assigned to luck rather than a teacher’s decision. The sense of antic-

ipation inherent in such games also increases the engagement of students who are onlookers, not only those who are playing at any given moment.

1. *Rock Paper Scissors*. This is a quick, low tech, engaging activity familiar to learners around the world. It requires few, if any, words, and therefore, works well in multilingual environments as well as those where one language is dominant. The teacher selects two students to begin play. The loser (or winner, depending on the local rules) answers the question, provides an example, or states an opinion on the teacher's question.
2. *Choosing Chants*. This is a classroom application of the children's chant Eeny, meeny, miny, mo that English teachers are likely to be familiar with. There are regional and dialectical variations of such chants, but no matter where one is, there are likely to be locally-appropriate equivalents.

### Utilizing Technology

Mobile apps and websites that are digital versions of "pulling a name out of the hat" can quickly and randomly select students to respond to questions or complete tasks. The use of technology adds an element of interest to nearly any class, and the obvious randomness of computer selection reassures students who fear they might be picked on by a teacher. Here are three easy-to-use web tools for randomly selecting students. Teachers can easily find them with an internet search, using their favorite browser.

1. *ClassDojo*. This is a popular teacher and student app that has a random student selector with an engaging visual of the app circling through the student names until one is chosen. Students and teachers must download and sign up for the app although it is free for both. It offers additional teaching and learning features, such as awarding virtual points, setting quizzes, creating an interactive class forum, and recording learning logs. ClassDojo is best suited for those who are comfortable with a greater degree of technology in the classroom and for environments in which everyone has mobile phones.
2. *The Random Student Generator*. This website requires no sign up, no download, and only one person to operate it. The teacher enters students' names in a column and then presses Select. It retains the sense of suspense as when students are being selected in class but with an added visual of the names circling before one is selected. The website can also sort students into groups if desired.

3. *Random Name Picker*. This site does not have animation, but it rather instantly chooses a student's name from a list.

Most sites such as these can also be used for other classroom purposes besides just taking turns. For example, teachers could enter vocabulary items, quiz questions, or discussion topics, and the random generator can choose the phrase, question, or topic for students to work on.

### **Caveat and Conclusion**

All of the techniques described above are engaging ways to vary turn-taking routines in language classes. However, they are not all equally effective in all circumstances. For example, some are suitable for rapid-fire Q&A or homework checks while others are more appropriate for communicative, discussion-oriented lessons. Either way, students often perceive them as more engaging and fair than relying on eager volunteers or calling on reluctant speakers.

### **Reference**

Dörnyei, Z. & Murphey, T. (2003) *Group dynamics in the language classroom*. CUP.

### **About the Author**

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