

More Student Talk, Less Teacher Talk: How to Get There

Susan Mast¹

English Language Fellow in Bangladesh, 2023-2024

U.S. Department of State

Received: 14/04/2024

Accepted: 25/12/2024

Published: 22/02/2025

Abstract

Students and teachers of English as a Second Language were surveyed concerning their perceptions of the relative amounts of teacher talk time and student talk time in their classrooms, as well as beliefs, values, and attitudes regarding proportions of teacher and student talk time. The teachers were then asked about their experiences with and attitudes toward specific techniques, presented in four categories: techniques to increase student talk, reduce teacher talk, foster an atmosphere that encourages student talk, and measure teacher talk in ESL classrooms. Teachers expressed interest in trying new techniques to improve the talk time balance.

Key words: perception, attitude, experience, talk time, ESL

Introduction

As teachers, we are aware that student talk time makes a difference in language learning. Students learn when they are interested and engaged, but make little

¹sjmast@gmail.com

progress in communicative competence if they sit passively in the classroom and are not given opportunities to communicate verbally in the target language.

A lesson becomes more relevant and compelling when the student takes an active role in formulating utterances, expressing opinions, and negotiating meaning by participating in the discourse of the classroom. In the words of Wilga Rivers, "Students achieve facility in using a language when their attention is focused on conveying and receiving authentic messages. This is interaction." (Rivers, 1987, p. 4).

In the constructivist understanding of language learning, learners build linguistic understanding and competence in their own minds while the teacher guides and facilitates this process. In a communicative, student-centered classroom, students participate actively and learn by doing. Language capabilities "flow from the actual usage events in which people communicate linguistically with one another. The linguistic skills that a person possesses at any given moment in time... result from her accumulated experience with language across the totality of usage events in her life." (Tomasello, 2000, pp. 61-62)

Therefore, it is crucial for language teachers to find ways to get language learners speaking more in class. Based on simple math, this means that teachers must devise ways to speak less themselves: "If the teacher talks for half the time in a 60 minute lesson with 15 students, each student gets only 2 minutes to speak" (British Council, 2020).

Method

In March 2023, surveys using Google Forms were sent electronically to teachers and students of English as a Second Language at Lancaster-Lebanon IU13 Community Education in Lancaster, Pennsylvania. This is a publicly funded adult education center which provides classes such as high school equivalency, family literacy, job training, and citizenship in addition to ESL. At the time of the surveys, most classes were still being held virtually. (Appendices 1 and 2)

The following month, a shorter version of the teacher survey (Appendix 3) was administered via QR code during a conference presentation at Pennsylvania Association for Adult Continuing Education (PAACE), and the results were displayed immediately for participants to see on the screen.

At the PAACE conference, this survey served as an introduction to a discussion of many specific techniques in the categories of increasing student talk, reducing teacher talk, developing a classroom atmosphere that encourages student talk, and measuring teacher talk.

On January 20, 2024, a similar set of techniques was presented at an international conference on "New Roads in English Language Teaching: Achievements, Challenges, Solutions" at the Uzbekistan State World Languages University in Tashkent. Here, most participants were highly experienced ESL teachers at the university level. Due to technical difficulties, it was not possible to survey the teachers present with regard to teacher talk time and student talk time in their own classrooms. Nonetheless,

many participants reported that they were already using nearly all of the techniques mentioned.

While presenting this research on February 10, 2024 at the 2nd TESOL BD International Conference 2024, "TESOL in Transition: 4th Industrial Revolution and Beyond," a very short presentation time frame again made it impossible to survey the participants. However, anecdotal reports as well as my observations while teaching at a university in Bangladesh would suggest that English language teachers here are also talking for well over half of the time in their classes.

Fig. 1. Outline of initial surveys in March 2023 (Detailed questions and results in Appendices 1-2)

Survey of teachers

1. Which statement best describes the students in your class?
2. How would you estimate the talk in your ESL class?
3. What would be the ideal for your ESL class, in your opinion?
4. What are some of your favorite techniques to increase student talk?
5. What are some of your favorite techniques to reduce teacher talk?

Survey of students

1. How much do you speak in English class every day?
2. How much does your teacher talk in class?
How much do the students talk in class?
3. How much do you want to talk in ESL class?
4. What is important about student talk and teacher talk?

Results

In the initial surveys (Appendices 1 and 2), responses were received from nine teachers and 70 students. All of these teachers indicated that they talk for at least half of class time. Specifically, 78% of teachers said that they talk about half of the time, and the rest said that they talk more than three-quarters of the time. However, almost all said they would prefer to be doing less of the talking.

While 56% of the teachers said that every student spoke English in class every day, 44% said that a few students in their classes generally remained silent or muted the whole time.

The survey asked teachers to type in their own words about techniques they use to increase student talk, reduce teacher talk, and develop a classroom atmosphere that encourages student talk. Each respondent mentioned at least one or two techniques in each category.

Responses were also received from 70 ESL students at levels ranging from high beginner to advanced. On average, the students felt that their teachers were talking a little more of the time than the teachers said they were. 42% said that their teachers talked 50-60% of the time, and 49.3% said their teachers talked more than three-quarters of the time. However, 8% said that their teachers talked less than 50% of the time.

Regarding their own preferences, most students said that they wanted to talk a lot in class every day, and 40%

wanted to talk at least a little. Only one student didn't feel any need to talk in class.

The survey also asked the students to type comments in their own words on why student talk time is important. Twelve said that practice is needed for improvement; another twelve said that talking improves communication and understanding; and eight mentioned pronunciation. Interestingly, three said that the reason for students to talk in class is to get corrections and feedback from the teacher. One student expressed the realization that talking makes students feel more interested and motivated.

In a separate survey at the PAACE conference, 22 conference participants submitted responses via Google Forms on the spot. In similar percentages, these teachers also reported that they spoke most of the time, but wanted their students to do more speaking. In this survey, participants were also asked about their use of specific techniques to increase student talk, reduce teacher talk, and develop a classroom atmosphere that encourages student talk. The results are shown in Appendix 3.

The discussion of techniques that followed this survey was well received. Many of the participants expressed enthusiasm about trying out some of these techniques in their classes.

Due to technical or time limitations, quantitative data was not gathered during presentations on the same theme at conferences in Uzbekistan and Bangladesh. However, teachers at both conferences expressed interest in trying new techniques in their classroom for the purpose of improving the ratio of student talk time to teacher talk time.

Discussion

A survey using an online platform such as Google Forms is an easy way to gather information. When conducted during a meeting such as a conference session, the results can be projected immediately, showing participants how their own responses compare to those of their peers. In addition to providing data, this kind of survey can serve to encourage reflection and spark discussion. Therefore, it can be a thought-provoking introduction to a topic such as this one, which is of significance for language teachers all over the world.

Techniques were compiled and presented in four categories: Increasing student talk, reducing teacher talk, fostering an atmosphere that encourages student talk, and measuring teacher talk. Although there is some overlap among these categories, It can be helpful to look at the problem from multiple perspectives.

Some of the techniques are relatively new, including the flipped classroom model and the use of technology to measure and analyze teacher talk. The latter is a hotbed of innovation as multiple AI-driven tools have emerged in the past year, including Sibme AI, Vosaic AI, and M-Powering Teachers (Spector, 2023). However, most of these techniques are familiar. Teachers may have learned them during teacher training or professional development, or reinvented them independently. Still, there is a tendency to fall into familiar routines, and simply being reminded of additional techniques may be enough to spark ideas and innovations in planning future lessons or devising new solutions for problems and challenges in the classroom. Fig. 2: Techniques for increasing student talk, reducing teacher

talk, fostering an atmosphere that encourages student talk, and measuring teacher talk

Ways to increase student talk

Use debates and whole-class discussions.

Call on students in turn.

Assign conversations in pairs or small groups, and circulate to listen in and help.

Use breakout rooms for open-ended conversations on the topic, not only to complete specific tasks.

Get students to do the reading aloud. It's easier for learners to pay attention to a peer than a teacher, and you'll get a bit of formative assessment of pronunciation and comprehension.

Use communicative tasks that are realistic and engaging, such as solving a problem or planning a trip.

Assign student presentations, optional or not, followed by Q&A and small group discussions on the same topic.

Use icebreaker activities and interactive games.

Ways to reduce teacher talk

Plan what you're going to say ahead of time.

Questions instead of explanations: Elicit whenever possible.

Use pictures instead of spoken explanations (picture dictionaries, textbooks with visual explanations, quick searches in Google Images).

Use examples to reduce spoken explanations: Show examples with gradual progression of complexity, showing clear contrast between structures, and ask students to tell the difference.

Give clear, concise instructions; write them down and have a student read them aloud.

Ask open-ended questions, not only yes/no questions.

Wait after asking a question; don't answer it yourself. Teacher silence gives students space.

Consider the flipped classroom model.

Use classroom routines that students can do without much teacher talk. For example, each student names another to ask the next question in an exercise.

Don't talk about grammar (much)! Use examples and elicit with clear charts. Betty Azar's English Grammar textbooks make this easy.

Ways to foster an atmosphere that encourages student talk

Class cohesion: Students know each other. Try to gather online classes once in person.

Feeling included: Each student is greeted and called on. Use a second monitor for screen sharing in virtual classes

so one entire monitor can be used to see all students. Consider signing into Zoom with two accounts.

Feeling involved: Don't let a few individuals do all the talking. Get quiet ones involved too.

Feeling confident: Provide adequate scaffolding.

Feeling comfortable: Help students relax about mistakes. Give feedback on content in addition to form. Try to find something to accept in every response. Reinforce correct usage.

Provide correction in a friendly, positive manner, without pressure. Encourage students to self-correct their own mistakes. When correcting pronunciation, have everyone repeat the word, not only the individual.

Feeling engaged: If students look bored, change something.

Seeing each other: Cameras on. Discuss this expectation at the beginning of a course.

Valuing active learning: Be sure students are aware that they learn more by talking.

Tools to measure teacher talk

Record your class. Listen to the recording later.

Ask someone to observe your class.

Use Self-Evaluation of Teacher Talk (SETT), a detailed

tool to reflect on and improve classroom discourse.

Try AI-driven apps like TeachFX or Visible Classroom to record and analyze classroom audio, including teacher talk time and types of questions.

Acknowledgment

This paper is based on a project that I conducted with Kristine Stoesz, IELCE Instructor at Lancaster-Lebanon IU13 Community Education, and presented at a conference of the Pennsylvania Association for Adult Continuing Education (PAACE) on April 25, 2023.

References

- British Council. (2020). *Teacher talking time*. Teaching English.
<https://www.teachingenglish.org.uk/professional-development/teachers/knowning-subject/t-w/teacher-talking-time>
- Rivers, W. (1987). *Interactive language teaching*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Spector, C. (2023). *Feedback from an AI-driven tool improves teaching, Stanford-led research finds*. Stanford News

<https://news.stanford.edu/2023/05/08/ai-feedback-tool-improves-teaching-practices/>

Tomasello, M. (2000). First steps toward a usage-based theory of language acquisition. *Cognitive Linguistics*, 11, 61–82.

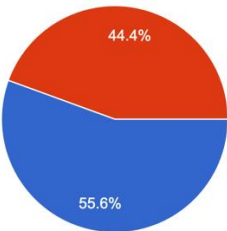
Walsh, S. (2006). *Investigating Classroom Discourse*. New York: Routledge.

Appendices

Appendix 1. Survey: Teacher talk in our classrooms
(March 2023)

Which statement best describes the students in your class?

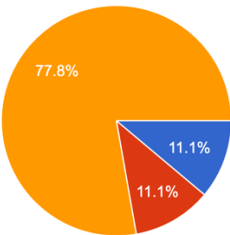
9 responses



- Every student speaks English in class every day.
- Most students speak English in class, but a few students generally remain silent or muted the whole time.
- Around half of the students speak up on average, and the rest remain silent or muted the whole time.
- A few students speak up, but many students remain silent or muted the w...

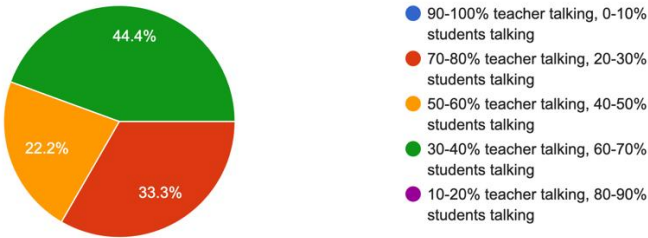
How would you estimate the talk in your ESL class?

9 responses



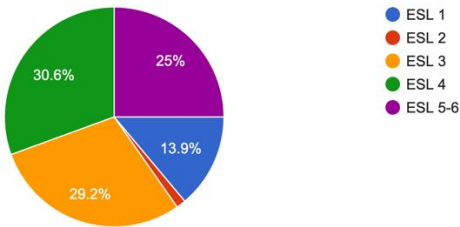
- 90-100% teacher talking, 0-10% students talking
- 70-80% teacher talking, 20-30% students talking
- 50-60% teacher talking, 40-50% students talking
- 30-40% teacher talking, 60-70% students talking
- 10-20% teacher talking, 80-90% students talking

What would be the ideal for your ESL class, in your opinion?
9 responses

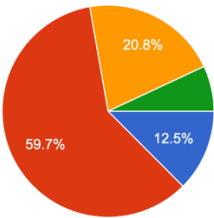


Appendix 2. Student survey on ESL talk (March 2023)

What is your ESL class?
72 responses

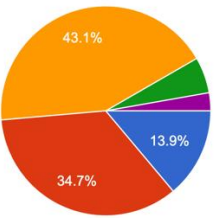


How much do you speak in English class every day?
72 responses



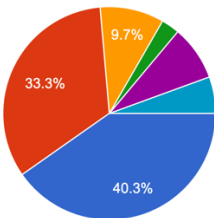
- I talk a lot. (I talk more than other students.)
- I talk about the same as the other students.
- I don't talk very much. (I talk less than other students.)
- I usually don't talk in class. I only listen.

How much does your teacher talk in class? How much do the students talk in class?
72 responses



- 90-100% teacher talking, 0-10% students talking
- 70-80% teacher talking, 20-30% students talking
- 50-60% teacher talking, 40-50% students talking
- 30-40% teacher talking, 60-70% students talking
- 10-20% teacher talking, 80-90% students talking

How much do you want to talk in ESL class?
72 responses

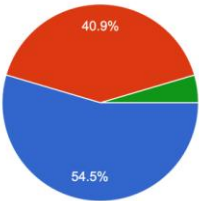


- I want to talk a lot, every day.
- I want to talk at least a little, every day.
- I don't need to talk every day, but sometimes I want to talk in class.
- I only want to listen. I don't want to talk in class.
- I want to talk at least a little, every time I go to class.
- I want to talk a lot, every time I go to class.

Appendix 3. Teacher talk time survey at PAACE

Which statement best describes the students in your class?

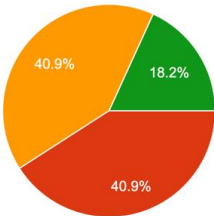
22 responses



- Every student speaks English in class every day.
- Most students speak English in class, but a few students generally remain silent or muted the whole time.
- Around half of the students speak up on average, and the rest remain silent or muted the whole time.
- A few students speak up, but many or most remain silent or muted the whole...

How would you estimate the talk in your ESL class?

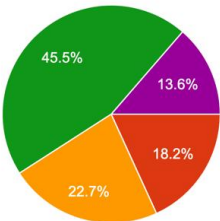
22 responses



- 90-100% me talking, 0-10% students talking
- 70-80% me talking, 20-30% students talking
- 50-60% me talking, 40-50% students talking
- 30-40% me talking, 60-70% students talking
- 10-20% me talking, 80-90% students talking

What would be the ideal for your ESL class, in your opinion?

22 responses



- 90-100% me talking, 0-10% students talking
- 70-80% me talking, 20-30% students talking
- 50-60% me talking, 40-50% students talking
- 30-40% me talking, 60-70% students talking
- 10-20% me talking, 80-90% students talking

