

Modelling speaking tasks for students

Teacher Talking Time (TTT) has long had a poor reputation in English Language Teaching circles. Since the **Communicative Language Teaching** revolution of the 1970s and 80s, TTT has been discouraged and even demonised. "Keep your TTT to a minimum," trainees are told; "Don't tell your students what they could tell you" they are warned, followed by "The less time YOU spend talking, the more time your students will have to talk." Novice teachers are told to ask questions rather than give explanations, to 'increase opportunities for Student Talking Time (STT)' and to 'use gestures to replace unnecessary TTT.' The basic thrust of the argument has long been that TTT and STT exist in a kind of seesaw relationship - if the seesaw swings towards one, it will inevitably swing away from the other. TTT and STT are depicted as existing in opposition and any more complex relationship between them is generally glossed over.

Obviously, in many classrooms, TTT still prevails. Far too many teachers either, indulge in a kind of aimless chitchat, or else fall back on the school ma'am approach and lecture at great - and often tedious - length about the complexities of the grammar system and the derivation and etymology of the lexicon. It would be foolish to deny that TTT is alive and well and either boring many students to death or else simply entertaining them without even remotely educating them. The point here, however, is certainly not simply that more TTT is inherently good.

Talking IS something that language teachers spend a large proportion of their working lives doing and is also something that has a profound impact on both the classroom dynamics we teach in and on the kind of learning experiences we provide for our students. Far from being something best avoided, TTT, and, more particularly, WHAT we say when we engage in it, is actually at the heart of good teaching. If we are serious about improving the quality, and quantity, of our students' talking then TTT has a central role to play.

One example of TTT that can be very useful is **modelling** as a lead-in to Student Talking Time. When students are about to engage in some talking, first give them a couple of minutes to read through the questions and check they understand them. They may wish to ask about one or two pieces of vocabulary or be unsure as to exactly what a certain question means. Then tell students they are going to discuss the questions with a partner, but that first you'll give your own answers to one or two of the questions. Let's say, for example, that you want students to discuss the following questions, as a lead-in to a reading about an example of film censorship:

1 Before you read

Discuss these questions with a partner:

1. Do you think film censorship is a good thing? Give an example.
2. Did your parents ever stop you watching anything on TV? What? Why?
3. Have you ever seen *Robocop*? What did you think of it?

You could begin by relating something along the lines of the following:

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To be honest, **I've got mixed feelings about** film censorship. **On the one hand**, I think people should basically be free to **make up their own mind** about what they do or don't want to watch. **On the other hand**, I do think some images can really damage people and I know that certain people **get hooked on** - become addicted to - violent images for example, so that's maybe an argument in favour of censorship. I agree with **limiting access** to certain kinds of films, making it difficult for under-18s to see things, but I guess that **in my heart of hearts**, I don't really agree with banning things just because they might **be offensive** to some people. I think it's a dangerous road to start going down, and I personally wouldn't want the state telling me what I can and can't read or look at. Banning things tends to make them more attractive to me, anyway!

The words highlighted in bold could be stressed as you say them, to draw attention to them and hopefully encourage students to notice them, and can also be glossed or paraphrased. Once you get used to doing this kind of modelling, you can quite consciously include expressions and words you know you have taught in the last few lessons, thus covertly recycling the language for the students.

Perhaps this looks like fairly simple stuff, but it is vital for two main reasons. Firstly, it gives students an idea of exactly what kind of turn you expect them to now take when they attempt to relate tales and ideas and opinions from their lives. Secondly, this kind of TTT helps position you as a human being - a real-life person - in the classroom, rather than simply as a teacher. Yet it also does so in a far more focused way than any naive attempts at chitchat and small talk could ever do!

Whilst the example of teacher modelling outlined above is based on a pre-reading task, there are also obviously applications when it comes to preparing students to do some talking using lexis or grammar they have just studied. Any modelling that you might do in these circumstances exposes students to useful lexis and grammar that they might then be more able to use themselves in their own STT.

One final point to make about modelling is that the examples and stories you tell yourself do not have to be true. It is, of course, better if they are, but sometimes you may have a story you've heard elsewhere, perhaps even from another student in an earlier class, that fits the bill perfectly. In these situations, it is perfectly acceptable to take ownership of this and use it to your own ends. Similarly, stock stories you've told before to other classes at similar junctures in a particular coursebook also work well. The more often you tell a story, the better you get at grading the language within it, knowing where to pause and what to stress and thus the better you can deliver it to your audience.

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