



Common Mistakes in Teacher Talk

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Communication in English should be an integral part of an EFL classroom.

A communicative approach in English as a foreign language (EFL) classroom is valuable because, at the end of the day, students need to be able to use the language. The English language input from the teacher is essential, especially when students are only exposed to English in the classrooms. Good teacher talk promotes students' language proficiency and classroom interaction. In this article, characteristics of communicative teacher talk with some examples of classroom interactions will be discussed.

Using quality teacher talk can promote effective student-centered interactions.

Teachers and students have limited time together. If a teacher talks too much during class, students have less time to interact with their teacher and peers, making it harder to develop their communicative language skills. However, quality teacher talk, especially through **giving task instructions, questioning, feedback**, and appropriate **language modifications**, are essential in increasing the amount and quality of the time students can communicate with others in English.

Indeed, it is important for teachers to give plenty of language input to their students in the EFL classroom. However, quality talk and empty babbles are distinctly different. Teachers ought to prepare to give quality talk that students can learn through modeling. For example, in a beginner level EFL classroom, teachers' questions and responses should be short and clear. Teachers should also make lessons communicative to give students enough time and space to practice the language the teacher is modeling. In this way, teachers do not dominate the talk time. As teachers we should pause and add more talk and interaction with and between students.

Common mistakes can be found in teacher talk, but can be overcome with reflection and practice.

Teachers will make mistakes in their teacher talk. It's only natural. However, as teachers learn to analyze the speech and behavior in their teacher talk, these mistakes will become less common with consistent practice. Take a look at the following examples of teacher talk. See if you can identify the teacher's mistake in Examples 1 and 2. Then compare the two teacher talk models in Examples 3 and 4 to check their effectiveness.



Example 1.

T: What did you do yesterday?
S: It was a nice day, so, with my friends I went to...uh...
T: To the park?
S: Uh...yes.

In Example 1, the teacher does not give this student the chance to think of the right word, but suggests an answer when the student seems to struggle in giving a response. This teacher may seem to be helping the student, but in fact takes away the opportunity for the student to get it right and risks embarrassing the student in front of others. It is good practice to wait a bit from suggesting possible answers until the student asks for support.

Example 2.

T: Carlos, please read sentence number one on the handout.
S: "The young man goes to bed..."
T: "...at midnight." Monica, please read the next sentence.

Similarly, in Example 2, the teacher is a sentence finisher. This time, the teacher fails to provide enough time to the student (Carlos) to figure out the unfamiliar vocabulary and pronounce it on his own. This teacher definitely risks hurting the confidence of this learner by quickly reading out loud the rest of the sentence and impatiently moving onto another student. However, such mistakes can be overcome by first encouraging the student and giving a little extra time to the student to figure it out on his own. When the student is obviously struggling, the teacher may suggest,

T: What do you think this unfamiliar word is? Let's break it up and see if you recognize any part of the word. "Mid" and..."night." That's right!

Example 3.

T1: It was the best of times, it was the worst of times.

T2: It was the best of times, (1 second pause), it was the worst of times.

This example may be more obvious. The second teacher demonstrates the preferred way. Again, giving time seems to be critical in successful teacher talk. That is the sign of the teacher considering the students' levels and reception. When a teacher speaks naturally or reads out loud, giving even a one-second-pause in sentence breaks (often indicated by a comma or a period) can help students understand what they are listening to or read better. This pause serves as a way for speech modeling when students interact with each other as well. It especially makes a big difference for beginner language learners because teachers so often don't realize they are speed talkers (or pause eaters).

Example 4.

T1: Now, I would like to write a question on the board, asking you what you did over the weekend. I am just going to grab the chalk, which is on my desk. There it is. I've got it. And...

S: Teacher, Is that the present perfect tense in that sentence?

T2: As a matter of fact, yes. Because my dog was sick yesterday and the day before, and he was still sick this morning. Remember, we use the present perfect, among other things, to show that an action started at some point in the past and continues until now....

Sometimes, teachers believe the more language input they give, the more learning happens. That is not always true as you may have noticed in the two scripts. Especially, if the teacher is teaching a language using the target language, s/he should be careful not to be a commentator or an over-explainer. So, which one do you think is a commentator and which one is an over-explainer?

We can agree that the first teacher talk example is a case of a commentator. Teachers can think that these comments can work as Think Aloud language samples,

Reference

Adapted from McCaughey, K. (2017). Teacher talk: presentation skills for teachers. *American English*. Retrieved January 19, 2021 from https://americanenglish.state.gov/files/ae/resource_files/6.1_presentation_slides_-_final_version_for_website.pdf

but when giving clear instructions, all of these side comments can distract students who are trying to determine the task instructions. Unless it is necessary, it is best not to become a commentator to every action you are thinking of doing.

The second teacher talk is an example of an over-explainer. The student asks a simple yes/no grammar question. When the teacher gives extra information, the listening student can feel overwhelmed by too much teacher talk. The best way to answer this student's question is by simply saying, "Yes it is." You may explain the other form (grammar) related information later in an appropriate time and plan.

The emphasis on teaching English by using English is broad because effective teacher talk can become a good communicative model from which students learn. You can improve your teacher talk in your EFL classroom by carefully reflecting on your instructional language and the behavior that you model to students.

For more examples of good teacher talk, feel free to watch this presentation by McCaughey (2017) from the American English teacher resource.