

Encouraging English Language Learners to Participate in Class

When students who are in the process of developing academic English language skills are integrated into classrooms with a majority of native English speakers, one common development is for them to be quieter or less likely to volunteer their thoughts orally. They worry about getting the grammar right, about an accent that might make them harder to understand, about not having the right words to describe exactly what they mean, as well as sharing similar worries to native speaking students: sounding smart, trusting they understood the reading correctly, not offending classmates. Discussion situations in which the instructor asks the whole class a general question like, "What did you think of the reading?" can be especially intimidating.

Here are some things you can do to encourage ELLs (and everyone else!) to participate in class:

1. **Ask some questions that allow for answers based on students' personal experiences.** Students are more likely to feel comfortable speaking about topics they know.
2. **Discuss current events in class.** Students who are new to the United States are more likely to be familiar with an event that made headlines recently than with one that occurred ten years ago.
3. **Let students know the topic of discussion in advance.** This will give ELLs time to organize their thoughts and prepare their ideas. If they feel prepared, they will be more likely to participate.
4. **Don't spotlight shy students by calling on them without warning.** Give them a chance to rehearse (jot down ideas/discuss answer with a neighbor) before speaking.
5. **Allow for some wait time between asking a question and requesting an answer.** To make the wait time effective, try to prevent outspoken students from blurting out the answer, perhaps by giving everyone a couple of minutes to write down their thoughts. This is not only helpful for ELLs: many students like to have a minute to gather their thoughts before speaking in front of a group. If the quickest raised hand always gets to answer, the class is missing out on hearing from students who may have other perspectives.
6. **Call on an ELL if you notice behavioral clues.** A half-raised hand or brief eye contact may indicate that the student would like to answer but is hesitant.
7. **Have ELLs initially answer questions that require brief responses.** This will boost their confidence and encourage further participation.
8. **Don't grade ELLs poorly for nonparticipation in discussions that ramble off topic or flare out of control emotionally.** These types of discussion may make ELLs confused (I thought we were talking about...?), uncomfortable, or they may not have the cultural background and experience to contribute an opinion.
9. **Divide the class into small discussion groups. Give everyone in the group a responsibility.** ELLs will be more likely to voice their ideas in a smaller, less threatening setting.