

SILENCE IN CLASS

Silence in language classes has long been considered as a challenge for instructors and for ESL/ELL students especially in academic classroom discussions (Liu & Jackson, 2009). As an ESL instructor myself, I often observe this reluctance to speak in class among my students.



Context

The course I teach is *Foundations of Communications for Graduate Students*, which is designed to lay the foundation for successful professional and academic communication in oral and written English for international ESL students. One of the key course objectives is to develop strong speaking skills in both formal and informal contexts such as participation in discussions, group work, individual oral presentations, etc.

To achieve this course objective and to address the problem I observe, I have been trying to explore different strategies to encourage students to talk and to practice academic communication skills. One of the strategies that I use in my class is “Chalk Talk”.

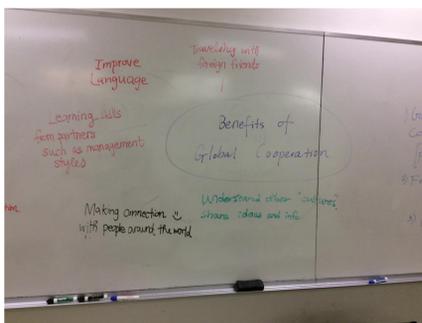
THE CHALK TALK STRATEGY

A “Chalk Talk” is a protocol developed by the Coalition of Essential Schools. In a typical chalk talk, the instructor usually writes a word, phrase, or question on a chalk or white board about a topic of interest. Then all students are encouraged to silently stand around the board and take turns to write their answers or opinions based on what has been written previously (Roberts, 2013).



CHALK TALK IN MY CLASS

The topics I often write on the board are related to the course materials students read. For example, one of the topics that students needed to discuss and write as an essay is *Why is global cooperation important?* One discussion prompt I put on the board is *Benefits of global cooperation*.



In this type of chalk talk, students were asked to brainstorm their ideas related to the given topic and took turns to write them down on the board.

Break the Silence

I find this chalk talk to be an effective strategy in increasing participation in class discussions. There are several strengths of this strategy that I observe:

- It provides students especially those who are reluctant to speak an opportunity to share their ideas;
- It provides students time to think and organize their thoughts first before sharing with the whole class;
- It allows students to comment and build on the ideas of their peers.

Yes, the white/blackboard filled with ideas always looks like a productive project. What's next?

Beyond the Chalk Talk

To build and develop their speaking skills, students need verbal talk in addition to “chalk talk”. Once students complete writing, I go through their ideas by inviting each of them to elaborate a little bit more.

Here are some key academic communication skills that I often attempt to address in class.

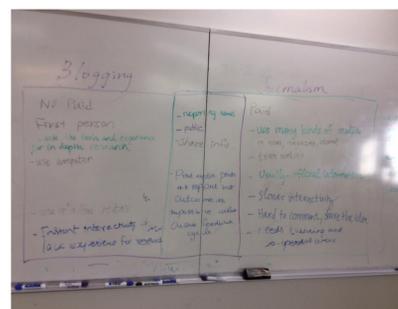
- Elaborate and clarify
- Support ideas with examples
- Build on and/or challenge a partner's ideas
- Paraphrase
- Synthesize conversation points

(Zwiers & Crawford, 2011)

Here are what I often do to extend the “chalk talk”:

- Provide students graphic organizers to sort out their chalk talk ideas and to scaffold their talk;
- Provide students sentence frames for prompts and responses;
- Model sentence expressions by using the sentence frames;
- Provide students time to practice in pairs or small groups before sharing with the whole class.

Here is an example of one type of graphic organizer I use to guide students' thoughts when doing chalk talk and sharing their ideas.



The students were asked to share their thoughts about the similarities and differences between blogging and journalism.

APPLICATION

Here are some practical uses for chalk talk in class:

- Assessing prior knowledge – instructor can use this strategy to assess what students already know about the topic in order to plan instruction.
- Assessing what was learned – instructor can use this strategy to assess what students have learned and to compare it with the expected learning outcomes.
- Discussing difficult issues – instructor can use this strategy to promote discussions about some difficult or controversial issues.

(Fenton, n.d.; Roberts, 2013).



REFERENCES

Fenton, J. (n.d.). Using chalk talk in the classroom: An opportunity to have a conversation in writing. Retrieved from: <http://teachersnetwork.org/ntny/nychelp/mentorship/chalktalk.htm>

Liu, M. & Jackson, J. (2009). Reticence in Chinese EFL students at varied proficiency levels. *TESL Canada journal*, 26 (2), 65 – 81.

Roberts, S. L. (2013). The “Chalk Talk” 2.0: Using Google docs to improve the silent discussion in social studies. *The Social Studies*, 104, 130 -136.

Zwiers, J. & Crawford, M. (2011). *Academic conversations. Classroom Talk that fosters critical thinking and content understandings*. Portland, ME: Stenhouse.