



Time to think

Paul Morin identifies a key ingredient for better speaking classes.

Imagine that you're at the ticket counter of a bus station in a foreign country, and the ticket agent asks you a question in a language that you're still trying to learn.

After a few seconds, you figure out what he asked, and your brain gets started on putting a response together: *OK, what's the word for 'round-trip'? It's uh ... Oh, and how do I say 'different city'? Um, it's ... And what's 'terminal' again? And 'window seat'?*

Words crowd into your head with no rhyme or reason, while others completely vanish. The ticket agent is drumming his fingers, and suddenly you feel like you can't speak the language at all. You sense the impatient stares of the other people in line behind you. You start to sweat. You wish things would just *stop* for a minute so you could gather your thoughts and sort out your response.

Even if you've never been in this situation, I'm sure you can imagine it.

So now imagine your own students in your own speaking class. You ask them a question. Some words crowd into their heads, while others vanish. They sense you waiting, feel the eyes of the other students on them. They wish things would just *stop* for a minute.

It's an awful situation to put them in. Luckily, *you* have the power to give them something the ticket agent didn't give *you*.

A step closer to genuine communication

Sometimes you have a discussion in class that comes off beautifully. Everybody is talking, debating the issue, chiming in with additional thoughts, agreeing and disagreeing – in short, *communicating* – surprising you and probably even themselves by the amount and sophistication of the English they are using. You didn't do anything to make it happen; it seems like an accident.

You can take a step closer to that, and a step away from the ticket agent experience, with one simple addition to your lesson plan: *preparation time* before speaking – time for your students to plan what they'll say, or simply to gather the vocabulary and grammar they might need.

Reasons to pause

It stands to reason that, when given time to prepare what they want to say in a task, students say it better, with greater fluency and accuracy.

Giving students preparation time also levels the playing field. You probably have some talkative students who don't have any trouble contributing to a discussion – or even completely taking it over – alongside more reticent ones who struggle to express

their opinions. With preparation time, you can put your timid or quiet students on a more even footing with the students for whom speaking comes easily.

Whether they are confident or not, you will want *all* your students to push their language beyond what they already know, to take it further by trying to say things that they've never said before. You may already be giving them preparation time, especially when the class is taking on a serious discussion of a heavy issue, such as the death penalty. But you don't need to reserve preparation time for the big, serious discussions only. Whether short or long, simple or complex, any speaking task will benefit from a period of thinking time beforehand, to give the students a chance to get ready.

An example

At the start of a lesson, do you ever ask your students what they did over the weekend, or what they did last night? What kind of answers do you get?

Even though these are simple questions, you can't deny that the students' responses would benefit from some preparation time, in which they can put together a better answer than they might give otherwise. Instead of *'I study'*, you might get: *'I studied at the library with my roommate. After that, we ate pizza.'* An answer like that offers a lot of possibilities for further exploration (eg *How was the pizza? What kind of pizza?*).

Making time

If you look at your average lesson plan, you'll see that there are countless opportunities to give the students time to prepare. The following are some ideas, roughly in order of task complexity:

Simple

Sample task: You ask the students to describe what they did over the weekend, as above, or describe a photo in their phone or a picture in their textbook. Note that there are no wrong answers here, and that their responses will be fairly short.

In a task like this, the students probably already know the vocabulary and grammar they need to respond adequately. That doesn't mean they have it at their fingertips, though. Offering a minute or two for preparation gives them a chance to flesh out an answer that addresses the prompt more fully than they would have otherwise, a chance to recall the words and possibly even the grammar they'll employ.

So, after you assign the task, you might introduce the preparation time by saying: *'OK, take a minute. Think of the words you will need, especially the verbs. Maybe write them down.'*

At this point, you might have some students ask permission to get out their phone to look up a word. Let them, because this is a sign that your strategy is working – they would never have thought to seek out the word otherwise.

Intermediate

Sample task: You give the students an information-gap activity to do in pairs, with the partners required to trade information in order to complete the task. This category would include any task in which student speech requires some kind of accuracy or

completeness for the task to be successful. There *are* right and wrong answers.

In a task like this, the students may not need time for organisation, but they may for accuracy. You want to give them a chance to sort out exactly how to use the specific language they will need. You might say: *'OK, take a few minutes, and think about what you'll have to say. Try to think of the exact words you need. How will you use them? I can help. Write them down if you want. You don't have to write full sentences.'*

Difficult

Sample task: You ask the students to decide in groups which of four fictional job candidates should get a fictional job. Any issue-oriented discussion that introduces the potential for differing opinions falls into this category.

In these tasks, if it's a discussion about a contentious issue, words themselves will not be enough: the students need time to decide what their opinion actually is, form it into complete thoughts in English, and organise those thoughts, if necessary.

So you might say: *'We're going to take some time to write down what we think. Then we'll talk about it. So put some sentences down. You don't need to write paragraphs. I don't want you to read out your opinions – this is a speaking class. Just write the important points. Use other words to remind you.'*

In an advanced task like this, the students might also be required to reach a consensus in groups. The activity may, in fact, extend over two or three stages. In such a case, there's no reason you can't give the students two or three opportunities to put their thoughts in order silently.

Try it out

If you're not sure whether preparation time will benefit your classes or not, why not ask your students? After assigning a task or posing a question, simply ask them: *'Do you want time to think about your answer?'*

Another idea you might try is to give your students preparation time in some tasks but not others, and keep track of which tasks are more successful.



The chances are, if you add preparation time into your lesson plans, and make sure your students take advantage of it, over time their class contributions will get better and better, their voices gradually gaining in confidence and pride. ■



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