

SEMINARS & TUTORIALS: Suggestions for action

Addressing language issues in seminars

The most common reasons international students give for remaining silent are concerns about language, both at the level of words but also in the overall meaning of others' contributions. Some say they fear others might judge their pronunciation; others, that it takes time to work in another language and that by the time they choose what to say, the discussion has moved on.

Teachers can help all their students, not just those with language issues, by:

- Encouraging turn taking and stopping interruptions
- Modeling active listening, waiting and nodding approval
- Holding back from finishing comments

Slowing down the flow of interaction will probably help all students construct more thoughtful answers. You could build in rehearsal and preparation time by giving students any materials that you want them to read in the seminar the week before. In the seminar itself, you might try:

- Increasing the time you wait for replies. Most teachers wait barely 1 or 2 seconds whereas waiting up to 6 or 8 often gives students time to formulate an answer (Cortazzi and Jin, 1998).
- Encouraging paired discussion of key themes or questions before seeking a response from the group. In 'same –language' pairs, they might rehearse ideas before shaping a response in English whereas in 'mixed-language' pairs, both could share vocabulary and come up with a joint answer. Small groups often give students no choice but to try and speak.

Organising participation in seminars

Some students hold back in seminars because they are not clear about how and why teachers wish them to participate. Many students would welcome organisational structures which explicitly make space for their contributions. If the format in use (such as unstructured discussion) privileges the confident and perhaps allows native speakers to dominate, then the rest can feel overlooked or even disrespected. (Ryan and Viète, 2009) Another reason for holding back might be that students' previous experiences of silence were positive - in many contexts, silence is a way of showing respect and/or demonstrating an empathetic understanding. In seminars, on the other hand, only listening in silence means the silent student might both miss out on the full benefits of the seminar plus deprive fellow students of hearing the full range of experiences and knowledge in the group.

You encourage all to participate by:

- Telling students precisely how discussion aids learning and what you wish them to discuss
- Making clear what is not acceptable (for example, no interrupting, no making joking remarks about others' beliefs, etc) as well as what is encouraged
- Taking steps to build a group rather than an audience, by ensuring students know each other a little. At a minimum, can students learn each others' names and perhaps have time for brief informal chats? Might students benefit from sharing information about their previous experience, communities and/or cultures?

Probably the most helpful thing teachers can do is to choreograph participation. You might:

- Use structured discussion formats such as rounds or turn-taking systems
- Set up small subgroups with feedback from a spokesperson (make sure it's not always the same person)

Including everyone may be a counsel of perfection but it can be all too easy to almost stop noticing the quiet ones, letting them stay quiet. Instead, you might experiment with allocating your attention more equitably by:

- Moving about the classroom – this often encourages students to be more alert and willing to answer and you can ask more privately if they need assistance. International students (and indeed any student) may feel more confident in talking quietly with you one to one as you pass by.
- Noticing who is and is not answering.
- Discouraging students from interrupting or ignoring less confident English speakers.

Adopting even some of these ideas is likely to improve the seminar experiences of all students.

Top Tip

Asking direct questions

Some teachers see posing questions directly to an individual student as a sign of inclusion and others as intimidation. If you decide to ask students direct questions, it's worth thinking about how to increase the chances of uptake. You encourage less confident English speakers (and all students) if you:

- Ask several students the same question in turn, perhaps leaving those who might need time to later 'slots'. Of course, this needs to be a question where hearing many views or takes on the issue will be of benefit.
- As you ask, make eye contact with the student using his/her name, then pause for a few seconds to watch the reaction – is silence a sign of thinking or withdrawal? Is there any sign of readiness to reply? You could re-phrase the question and ask again if you judge the student as preparing to reply.
- Once the student starts to answer, let the student complete what he or she wishes to say. Use supplementary / follow-up questions with care, especially in the early days. Follow ups for clarification ('When you mention child adoption, are you thinking about...?') will be likely to encourage whereas challenging questions ('So, what else should you be thinking about besides x?') might deter future attempts.
- If a student seems not to understand a question, you could either repeat it verbatim or rephrase it. Both approaches can help though the challenge comes in knowing which best fits the situation. Either way, understanding is a joint responsibility between you and the student.