

# Teacher Experience Report

## Starting point

As teachers, we have to fulfill many tasks simultaneously: creating a pleasant and motivating atmosphere in our classroom, adapting to the diversity of our students, teaching them the planned curriculum, ensuring their progress in all dimensions of their development, accompanying them in the peaceful resolution of their conflicts...

Lectures are no longer the primary modality of teaching and we know that students learn best when they can actively engage in the lessons. We rely on our students to help us move the course forward with the questions they ask and the answers to the questions we ask. Each lesson is also an opportunity to develop their listening and speaking skills - relevance, accuracy, quality of language, consideration of others' opinions...

Of course, we also know that our students all have different characters, strengths and areas where they need to improve further: some are comfortable speaking, others may have difficulties, whether they have a proven disorder - dysphasia, stuttering -, a poor knowledge of the language in the case of students who have recently arrived in the country, or simply students who are more reserved or insecure. The family upbringing, and in particular the space left to the child to express himself, shapes the attitudes of our students in class.

## Observations

At the Lab School Paris, we often use cross-observations: we go to a colleague's classroom to simply observe the interactions between teacher and students, without participating.

In this position, it is easier to see how unevenly the speaking can be distributed: some students may intervene more than a dozen times in the lesson, while others never participate. Often, it is the more advanced students who are the most active, and who take even greater advantage of these opportunities to increase their skills. Inevitably, these repeated opportunities to practice widen the gaps between students: those who speak little speak even less, and those who speak a lot do not learn to listen to others and develop an attitude that is more respectful of everyone's right to speak.

## Research findings

Various sociologists' studies have shown the differences between the ways in which girls and boys speak - empirically, we have found them in our classes, despite our desire to develop an egalitarian education.

Other studies also show that teachers ask the most complex questions of boys and children from more privileged social categories, quite unconsciously - also because these students are often more solicitous and more active.

Obviously, when student participation is low, it is easy and comfortable for teachers to rely on students whose responses or comments we know will help us move forward in our lesson, or whose responses or comments we know will provide useful information to the whole class. We may also be concerned about making students who do not volunteer to participate feel uncomfortable (for example, if they do not raise their hands or do so infrequently).

We also have a particular problem in France with language classes, where students are reluctant to participate for fear of not having a good accent and being teased. Generally speaking, as the Pisa surveys have shown, French students, more than those in other countries, are afraid of making mistakes and prefer to avoid answering rather than expose themselves to the consequences of errors.

### Changes in practice

This is why, after several periods of observation, we turned to the research to implement other strategies to promote more equitable student participation: a guarantee of better learning but also of better consideration of each student in the class. We believe that this is how they will all have a sense of legitimacy to participate in the life of the class, and then in democratic life, which should not be reserved for a small number of people who already have an advantage initially.

The first thing we had to do was to accept the fact that we were not giving a fair voice in our classes - this may be an unpleasant fact, but it is essential to be aware of our biases.

We implemented simple tools in a systemic way, as recommended by the research, which we share with you.

### Results

We've found that engaging more students enriches our lessons with new ideas and perspectives, and that once-silent students are able to express new facets of their personalities - other students also change the way they view them. We also believe that we are helping all of our students to be more tolerant and understanding, including those who have difficulty expressing themselves or need more time to respond. By making it clear that we listen to everyone, we also reduce the sense of injustice of some students who are given less voice.

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