**Support Students With Class Discussions**

When thoughtfully supported, classroom discussions provide opportunities for students to grapple with multiple perspectives and practice effective communication. To set up conditions for effective discussions:

* **Co-create agreements specifically for discussion**. Similar to [classroom shared agreements](https://schoolguide.casel.org/resource/sample-lesson-plan-generating-classroom-shared-agreements/), these agreements focus on communication skills and ensure all students feel safe to speak up and share their point of view. For example, “challenge the idea and not the person.”
* **Set the tone**. The teacher’s verbal and non-verbal responses set the tone for engagement. Through modeling, teachers can promote intellectual risk-taking and participation. For example:
  + Practice patience when students take time to formulate ideas.
  + Respond to errors by validating confusion and asking scaffolded questions.
  + Encourage students to express disagreement with you, suggest alternatives, or ask for clarification.
* **Frame mistakes as part of learning**. For some students, engagement feels threatening. They want to protect themselves from being exposed as “not knowing the answer.” Disarm this anxiety by noting that mistakes are how we learn and expressing admiration for productive struggle (Hammond, 2015).

**Strengthening Communication Skills**

Like any skill, building communication skills requires a scaffolded approach. The following techniques offer ways to get the conversation started and build communication skills:

* **Provide opportunities for rehearsa**l. Have students write ideas down or discuss ideas with a partner before sharing out with the class. This gives a chance to process and revise ideas before sharing widely.
* **Use sentence starters.** At the beginning of the year, provide sentence starters, such as “I agree with Anthony about X, but want to add Y” or “I disagree that X, because in the text it says Y.” These frames help build students’ communication skills. The complexity and number of frames may differ depending on the age group.
* **Allow for wait time**. After asking a question, pause for 10 seconds before calling on anyone. This allows everyone to think before the discussion begins. Also pause before responding to a question to allow learners time to think.

**Managing the Discussion**

Here are some discussion techniques to help keep the conversation going:

* **Ask open-ended questions**. You can foster more inclusive, engaging, and effective classroom discussions by asking questions that do not have a single correct answer.
* **Ask facilitative questions**. To keep students’ attention focused on one another and build social awareness, ask questions that guide students to respond directly to one another. For example:
  + Who has some thoughts connected to what [Sarah] just said?
  + Do you agree or disagree with what [Pablo] said, and why?
  + What questions can we ask [Martine] about what she shared?
  + What can you add to what [Abdul] just said?

**Meeting the Needs of English Learners**

For English learners, rich classroom discussions provide essential opportunities to practice language in context. The expansion of content knowledge and conversational strategies go hand in hand (Bunch, Kibler, Pimentel, 2012).

Keep in mind, however, that social interactions, including classroom discussions, are culturally grounded. Learning about the speaking and listening conventions of your students’ home cultures will help you be a resource for students negotiating classroom conversations. Even so, some students may feel self-conscious about their emerging language skills as they are developing.

As with the broader class, be sure to explicitly call out the value of academic risk-taking (e.g., “Let’s hear from a couple of people who want to challenge my idea.” or “Thank you for your willingness to ask that question, Paul. It will help our whole class to better understand mitosis.”) This strategy helps to build a culture where mistakes are viewed as an important part of the learning process and alleviates pressure around speaking for both English learners and other students.