



# Over, Under, and Beyond Words: Alternative Strategies for Observing Talk in Classrooms

# Beyond Words: Introduction

In the book *Choice Words: How Our Language Affects Children's Learning*, Peter Johnston writes about the importance of teacher talk with students. He notes, "Teachers have very different ways of thinking about who they are, who their students are, and what they think they are doing, and these ways of thinking strongly influence the language they use automatically" (p. 82).

Talk is the engine that drives learning in any classroom. By focusing on conversation, colleagues and coaches can assist their peers by teasing out some of those patterns that are most helpful to (or most inhibit) the growth of the learning community.

Observing talk in classrooms is the first step toward helping teachers understand the language they use automatically. It is one thing to acknowledge talk is crucial in classrooms; far harder to analyze, reflect upon, and move toward changing talk patterns.

The guide includes some possibilities for classroom observations focused on talk. You can start by asking the teacher what he or she is noticing about talk in her classroom before the observation:

- What kinds of talk are encouraged?
- When is talk encouraged?
- What is the teacher working on in his or her own language with students? (i.e., more open-ended questions, longer wait time)
- What does he or she want you to observe and note in the classroom?
- Is there a particular student or group of students he or she would like you to focus on?
- Is there a specific time he or she wants talk observed?

Once you have a sense of the teacher's interests, you might try some of the alternatives in this eGuide to traditional notes during classroom observations, and see how they affect your view of talk among teachers and students. It's always a good idea to ask the teacher who will be observed to pick the focus in advance. That way, he or she has more interest and investment in your findings.

This eGuide includes five different options for observing talk in classrooms. If you are honing your observation skills, you might want to try out a different strategy each week, or switch from one strategy to another frequently to see which gives you more helpful data over time.

If you are collaborating with a team of colleagues intent on diversifying observation methods, you could try one new strategy a week, and set up a meeting or study group time to discuss together what strategies proved to be most useful for you and the teachers you observed.

## Reference

Johnston, Peter. 2004. *Choice Words: How Our Language Affects Children's Learning*. Portland, ME: Stenhouse Publishers.

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## Strategy 1: Who Talks?

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**During the Observation:** Briefly sketch out who is sitting where in the class, and then put a check next to each student each time they talk. You might also want to note if the person talking is a boy (b) or girl (g), to get a sense of gender patterns.

**After the Observation:** Tally how often each student talked. Make a special note of students who didn't talk at all. Calculate the ratio of male to female talk.

**Discussing the Findings:** Ask the teacher to predict who dominated discussions. You might also ask the teacher to predict the ratio of male to female talk. Discuss what surprised both of you in the observation. What did you observe that the teacher notes as atypical for the group? What did you note that he or she perceives as a problem with talk patterns?

**Follow-Up Possibilities:** Complete the same task, observing during a different time of day (i.e., during a whole class discussion instead of small group work).

**Alternative:** If you know the names of the students in the class, you needn't sketch out who is sitting where – you can work directly from a class list to check off every time a student speaks.

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## Strategy 2: Traffic Patterns

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1. Choose a one-hour time to observe when students will have some opportunities to move freely throughout the classroom.
2. Sketch the classroom and placement of desks or tables, noting when students move with arrows and lines. Write additional anecdotal notes about who moves where as you note the traffic patterns.
3. After your observation, spend a few additional moments writing quietly. Which areas of the room seem to be the most popular? Which are the noisiest? Are there areas any that are particularly congested? Which areas are never visited?
4. Discuss the findings with the classroom teacher, or your students if you have observed in your own classroom.

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## Strategy 3: Teacher Questions

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Observe a colleague who is interested in talk patterns in his or her classroom. In a half-hour observation, write down every question the teacher asks.

Tally the number of questions that are:

1. Yes/no questions
2. Short answer questions (requiring just a brief, factual response)
3. Open-ended questions

Ask the colleague to observe your teaching, tallying questions in the same categories over the same amount of time. Compare and discuss results.

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## Strategy 4: Talk Sketch Close-Up

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Sketch out one small portion of the classroom that is particularly noisy during reading or writing workshop. Sit near this area, and write down what students are saying as they work and chat. Get as much of the actual language down on the page as possible.

- What makes the area noisy?
- Do the students in the area change over time?
- Why do students move to or from the area?
- What are the benefits and drawbacks to the talk going on in the area?

Discuss the findings with a colleague or your students.

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## Strategy 5: Not How Often – How Much

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Arrange to observe a whole-class discussion in a colleague's classroom where you know the students, or have a colleague lead a discussion in your classroom. Working from a class list, note every time a student participates in the discussion, marking only the length of the utterance.

Put a minus mark ( - ) next to one- or two-word contributions.

Put a star ( \* ) next to one- to three- sentence contributions.

Put a plus sign ( + ) next to longer contributions.

After your observations, discuss your notes with a colleague:

- What patterns do you notice?
- Who never talks?
- Who never says more than a word or two?
- Are there students who rarely contribute, but when they do, talk at length?
- Did you misjudge the quality or quantity of a student's contributions based on how much or how little their utterances are?
- How will the observation inform the way you lead class discussions?