



# TUTOR TIPS

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## Substantive Conversations *- What's that?*

In classes with substantive conversation\* there is considerable interaction among learners, and between the tutor and learners. The interactions are reciprocal and promote shared understanding. Substantive conversation includes intellectual substance, dialogue and sustained exchanges. To help learners have substantive conversations, here are some ways to begin:

### Set the scene for a substantive conversation

- Small groups
- A topic (a reading text, a current event, a local concern)
- Tools:
  - > A photo, text or object
  - > 30-40 minutes
  - > Posters as described below



### Give learners the tools they need to have a substantive conversation

- Model attending behaviour and make it explicit:
  - > Discuss appropriate eye contact for your context
  - > Lean forward slightly in your chair
  - > Use vocal attending cues: hmmm, yeh, etc.
  - > Use non-verbal encouraging cues: head nods, smiles, head tilts, etc.
- This A4 poster may be useful:

- Share what you know with others.
- Look and listen to the person talking.
- Give reasons for your answer.
- Encourage everyone to speak, eg "What do you think?"

- Write on an A4 poster the kinds of questions or statements that characterise the particular skill (below) that you want to concentrate on.

\*"Substantive conversations" is a key part of Productive Pedagogies - a balanced theoretical framework enabling teachers to reflect critically on their work (Curriculum Implementation Unit, Teaching and Learning Branch, Education Queensland).

## Oral skills to emphasise in your session

The following are skills that may be a focus for a substantive conversation and questions or statements which can be used to start and continue a substantive conversation:



### Activating background knowledge

- What do I already know about this subject?
- How do I know?
- What do you know about this?  
How do you know that?
- Who are the people/things in the photo?  
Where are they? What are they doing?
- I wonder if....

### Predicting and giving reasons

- This is going to be about... because....
- This will tell me... because....
- This article is about.... The reason is....

### Setting a purpose for reading

- Why are we reading this?
- What are we looking for?
- Can we think of some questions to guide us?

### Asking critical questions

- What is this text about?
- What people are in the text? Why?
- Who is left out of the text? Why?
- Who is the author?
- How does the author want me to feel?  
Think? Act?
- What view of the world is being built?
- What other versions of the topic could be presented?
- Who benefits from the way this topic is presented?
- Who is disadvantaged by the way the topic is presented?

### Decoding word meanings

- What does \_\_\_\_ mean?
- This word sounds like....
- This word looks like another word I know - \_\_\_\_.
- Can I skip over this word and still make sense of the sentence?
- Is it in the dictionary?

### Clarifying vocabulary in context

- Are there any clues in the sentence?
- Have I heard this word before?
- I think it means....
- What do you think this word means?  
Why do you think that?
- Does it mean the same thing as...?
- Can I replace it with another word?
- Why did the author choose this word?

### Monitoring and repairing comprehension

- That doesn't make sense because....
- Have I missed out a word?

### Visualising

- I can picture....
- I have an image of....
- What do you see when the author describes...?

### Paraphrasing

- How can I say this in different words?
- I think the author is trying to say that....
- In other words....
- Do you think the author means that...?

### Inferring

- Does this mean....?
- Is this about....?
- Is this related to...?

### Reflecting

- In my experience, this does not seem true because....
- I remember when I had a similar experience....

### Recognising confusion

- What?!
- I didn't quite understand you.  
Can you please repeat that?
- I've never heard that before.

### Developing a metaphor for understanding

- Would that be like the relationship between \_\_\_ and \_\_\_?
- Is that the same as \_\_\_?

### Summarising

- I think that all the author is trying to say is....
- In short, I believe it is saying....

### Giving opinions and reasons

- I believe that... because....
- I don't think that... because....
- I think that's accurate because....
- I agree with this because....
- I feel strongly in favour of this because....
- I oppose that idea because....
- I don't think that is the answer because....
- Yes, I see your point... [add new information]

### Expressing uncertainty

- I'm not sure that I agree because....
- I don't know about that as my experience tends to be mostly....
- I'd like to find out more about that so I can clarify my thoughts.

## More tips

- Ask complex, "fat" questions:
  - Can you tell me more about that?
  - Do you have a story about that you can share?
  - What would you do in that case?
  - Would you do anything differently in that case?
  - Can you think of an example?
  - What do you mean when you say....?
- Be sure to let time do its work.
- Ask learners to pass the question on to another rather than the tutor moderating the discussion all the time.
- Ensure learners are patient with each other.
- Allow uhms, and silences and false starts.



## Recognise this speech event

## ...and take the opportunity to:

"irrelevant" change of topic

Look for the intertextuality reference and acknowledge the relevance

Pun or joke

Enjoy the humour

Play on words

Draw learners' attention to levels of understanding showing depth of knowledge

Short, interjected assertions without reasons; answering for another student

Acknowledge learners' participation in the speech event, expressing solidarity with other learners; discuss the importance of allowing all learners to have time to participate in the discussion; discuss how to give reasons for an assertion

"Going on too long" - extended talk

Recognise that saying 25-30 words in a single stretch allows the speaker to give an opinion and a reason or justification - highly valued in some contexts.

Ensure that all understand the importance of allowing all learners to have a chance to talk.

Exaggerated pronunciation, playing around with words, using unusual word combinations

Recognise that this increases learners' language practice

Play-acting

Refer to and discuss the context that the learner is using and the practice they are gaining

Silences, eye avoidance

Discuss during a "safe" time (ie with individual student or in small group); acknowledge learner's right as a participant to constitute the situation by not speaking; discuss contexts where silence is appropriate and where it is not valued; practise words that express learner's feelings (ie "I can't find the words I wanted to say"; "I need a bit more time to think about this")

