

ESL STUDENTS: HOW TO SPEAK UP IN CLASS

Speaking up in class can be a big challenge if English is not your first language. It is important, however, to make your opinions heard and to ask questions when you find the information confusing. If Canada is a new country to you, the cultural norms of the classroom may differ widely from your own; they may also differ widely from class to class. Some classes are so large that very few students ever ask questions. On the other hand, in smaller groups, some professors expect their students to ask and answer questions during the lecture and may even be evaluating your participation!

BEFORE CLASS

- **Preview the chapter or course outline;** don't read the whole chapter if it has not been assigned, but notice the main ideas, read the headings, look at the vocabulary list, read the summary if there is one. This will prepare you to understand the class.
- **Take time to think about the topic** - do you have questions? What themes or main points do you think the professor may talk about? Take a moment to prepare what you think about the issues: "If the prof. asks about this, I could say this and this..." Make a little plan (one or two phrases or sentences) of what you could say.

IN CLASS

- **Sit up front**, listening intently. If the professor usually says that certain topics will be discussed, quickly note down any thoughts you have about them.
- **Answer when you can** and be quick to start speaking, otherwise someone else will say it! If the professor says, "What was this chapter about?" you can list the main topics of the chapter. If you do this, you have spoken up, the professor and students have noticed you, and you have shown that you are interested and prepared for the class.
- **To enter a discussion, rephrase what someone else has said as a way to begin what you want to talk about.** For example, you can say, "So what you're saying is...." This gives you practice in saying the ideas and also gets other people to listen to you.

AFTER CLASS

- **Talk to yourself in English**, rehearse conversations and explanations you might need to use.
- **Repeat the vocabulary you have just heard** imitating the sound and intonation.
- **Ask a native speaker** to repeat the pronunciation of key terms, then practice the words.
- **Work** in a group during class; participate!
- **When you don't understand expressions or slang**, simply say, "I don't understand, what does it mean?" People will be happy to help you.
- **Join in class discussions no matter how scared you feel.** Learn to interrupt a discussion by saying, "Excuse me, do you mean...?" or, "I don't understand, could you explain it another way?"
- **If you want to be heard and listened to** you'll need to match the volume of the people you're with - try to speak louder, especially if you have a quiet voice.
- **Don't worry about making mistakes:** if you are too sensitive about making mistakes and trying to convey information perfectly, you may take too long and your listeners may lose interest. NOBODY is going to judge the way you speak. In fact, most classmates will only be interested in whether your question is important or if the answer might be something on the next exam!

REMEMBER: the more often you speak in class the easier it will become!