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Establishing and practicing conversational rules

Goal

The students discover and practice rules that are important for successful discussions in pairs and in groups. Thus, they expand their communicative and social competences and learn to conduct themselves effectively in their first language in terms of group discussions as well.

2nd–9th grade

15–30 minutes



Materials:
possibly a poster

Hints:

- A prerequisite that allows for productive talks and discussions in the first place is the adherence to certain rules of discussion and democratic behaviors. This applies for private discourse, but even more so in the context of the school, where communicative competence is one of the target areas of social and language education. It is self-evident, however, that establishing such a culture is a long-term process which requires time and again sustained work and practice.
- Aside from the explicit rules for the students, there still exists another, equally important dimension. It concerns the role of the instructors and their conduct in talks and discussion rounds, as indicated in chapter 3c in the introduction. As a reminder, the pertinent key words include: restraint on the part of the instructor, reflective formulation of open questions and suggestions, delegation of moderator functions to the students.

Structure and central elements of speech education:

- As a starting point, an authentic situation would perhaps be best where, for instance, a communication process was disturbed by someone who repeatedly interrupted and unfairly attacked the other speakers. Such a situation may prompt a discussion of how to better communicate and “how to discuss issues as fair and equal partners”.
- The first two or three rules (at most!) are discussed, agreed upon, and written on a poster. It is important that the students formulate the rules themselves, rather than adopting the teacher’s version. It is most likely that the students are already familiar with the culture of conversation and its rules from their regular curriculum classes. Examples of conversation rules are shown on the next page.
- In the following 2–3 weeks, the rules are practiced repeatedly. Someone from the class can be selected as the responsible moderator who can intervene immediately if someone violates a rule.
- In the next few months, the rules are expanded and further refined and practiced, as described above.
- There should also be regular discussions of the question how our culture of conversation has changed, and where the students still see a potential for improvement.
- Many rules can also be supported with little helpful strategies. See examples on the following page.

Examples of conversation rules:

- I speak loudly and clearly.
- I listen to the speaker(s).
- I do not interrupt anyone.
- I raise my hand if I want to speak.
- I respect the opinions of my classmates.
- I will not ridicule or laugh at anyone, based on his/her opinion.
- I will not deviate from the discussion topic.
- I will make reference to the previous speaker's comments.
- I make eye contact with my audience when I speak.

Examples of "supportive strategies" for the implementation of certain rules:

- Concerning the rule not to interrupt anyone: the student who speaks holds a ball (or a stone) in his/her hand. When s/he is finished speaking, s/he passes the ball on to the next designated speaker. This signifies clearly that only the child who holds the ball is authorized to speak.
- Concerning the concept of active listening, i.e., the rule of making reference to the previous speaker's comments: for 2–3 discussions, every opinion voiced has to begin with the sentence "XY has said that ..., I personally see it this way: ...". See also #12 with pertinent, specific sentence building blocks.
- Variant of active listening: every student must ask at least once during the discussion ("XY, did I understand you correctly: you mean that ...?").
- Helpful strategies, so that the instructors can withdraw from her central position:
 - a) The students themselves call on each other (or pass the ball on to someone, see above).
 - b) An upper class student is selected as moderator for every larger discussion. This student prepares for the discussion together with the instructor, formulates the beginning questions or prompts and moderates the further process. The instructor only intervenes in case of need. See also #14 and 15.
- A helpful strategy to encourage everyone's participation: each child receives three buttons, paper clips, or paper strips. The students sit in a circle and those who contributed to the discussion place one of those clips, etc., in the center. The goal is that all students deposit their items. This approach prevents some students' dominating the conversation, while others hardly ever have the chance to speak.