



"Let's Talk"

Designing Meaningful Interaction

Between ELs, Former ELs, and English Only Peers

It's a classic classroom dynamic: comfort often wins over challenge. Some students reach the point where they have the tools, but they lack the social urgency to use them. They gravitate toward native language (L1) peers because it's their "home" space—it's where they can be funny, nuanced, and relaxed without the cognitive load of a second language.

To bridge this gap, teachers have to move away from "telling" them to speak English and start designing the environment so that English becomes the most natural path to a shared goal. Here are a few ideas to get started:

The "Information Gap" strategy

Students talk to their friends in their L1 because they already know what their friends are thinking. To get them talking to English-only peers, give them a reason to need information that only those peers have.

- **Split Tasks:** Give Student A one half of a map or a set of clues, and Student B (the English-only peer) the other half. They *must* communicate to solve the puzzle.
- **Expert Jigsaw:** Make the former EL the "expert" on a specific topic. If they are the only ones with the "key" to the group's success, the English-only students will naturally lean in to listen, and the former EL will feel the status boost of being the knowledge-holder.

Leverage "High-Status" Roles

Sometimes, former ELs stay in their linguistic silos because of a perceived social hierarchy. You can disrupt this by assigning roles that require cross-group interaction:

- ☐ **The Facilitator:** Ensures everyone in the mixed group speaks. This forces the student to direct the conversation.
- ☐ **The Reporter:** Summarizes the group's findings to the class which creates a formal "performance" requirement in English.
- ☐ **The Interviewer:** Must collect 3 unique opinions from outside their group. This provides a structured way of forcing the initiation to talk.

Use "Low-Stakes" Gamification

If the conversation feels like a test, students may retreat to their L1. If it feels like a game, they'll take risks.

- ☐ **Conversation Bingo:** Give students a card with prompts like "Find someone who likes spicy food" or "Find someone who has a sibling." They have to mingle with the whole class to fill it out.
- ☐ **The "Speed Dating" Format:** Set up two rows of chairs facing each other. Give them a controversial or funny prompt (e.g., "Is a hotdog a sandwich?") and 90 seconds to debate before one row rotates. The rapid-fire nature prevents people from settling into "comfort zones."

Normalize the "Struggle"

Often, students avoid English-only peers because they are afraid of looking "less than" if they trip over a word.

- ☐ **Model "Code-Switching":** Acknowledge that knowing two languages is a superpower but explain that "English-only time" is like weightlifting for the brain—it's supposed to feel a bit heavy.
- ☐ **Public Praise for Risk-Taking:** Don't just praise correct grammar; praise the student who partnered with someone new or pushed through a complex explanation.

Strategic Seating & Grouping

"Random" groups often result in students dragging their chairs back to their friends. Try an **Appointment Book:**

- ☐ **The Setup:** Students have a daily planner page with three slots: 8:00 AM, 12:00 PM, and 4:00 PM.
- ☐ **The Constraints:** Teachers "hand-assign" the 12:00 PM slot to ensure an adequate pairing, while letting them choose their 8:00 and 4:00 slots.
- ☐ **The Benefit:** It frames the conversation as a "professional consultation" rather than just "talking to a classmate."



[Appointment
Book Template](#)



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