

## How We Can Help Our Students Feel Visible

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*Summary: This article will describe activities that can help students develop conversational techniques that they can use to help them feel visible (i.e., noticed, recognized as individuals, and heard) in the classroom, on campus, and in their community.*

*Keywords: activities, conversational techniques*

In the documentary, *Becoming*, Michelle Obama is asked about feeling invisible (Hallgren, 2020). This made me think more about how many of our students in EAP and Immigrant/Refugee programs can feel invisible in classes, on campus, and in society, and how we can help them.

In Durden (2016), one young man described feeling invisible this way,

*“The problem is that to many people, I am simply invisible. Nobody says ‘hello’ to me. Nobody nods to me. Nobody recognizes me as a person with something to say. Nobody listens to me. People make assumptions about me on the basis of my color and where I come from... But I am a person and have something to say—both as an individual and on the basis of my distinctive experience.”*

In our classrooms, we can see the students who are probably feeling invisible. They are the ones who are not greeted by others, are looked past, and excluded by others who start talking to more familiar friends. These are the ones overlooked when their classmates are told to find a partner for an activity, or who sit silently seemingly unnoticed in group discussions.

### How to help ESL students feel visible

In *Becoming*, Michelle Obama says, “We can’t afford to wait for the world to be equal to start feeling seen.... You’ve got to find the tools within yourself to feel visible, and to be heard, and to use your voice.”

One of the most powerful tools that students can use to feel visible is asking questions, especially follow-up questions. In fact, research shows that people who ask questions are considered more likeable (Huang et al., 2017).

FOR A READING OR DISCUSSION ACTIVITY FOR STUDENTS ABOUT THIS RESEARCH, SEE [MORE LIKEABLE](#).

And best of all, we can help them develop this technique by including the following in our classes.

1. **Assign a pair-work activity (Student vA/Student B) that focuses on asking follow-up questions.** For this, it’s best to match students with someone whom they probably don’t tend to talk to often. In some ways, the activity is a kind of “set up” for helping students to feel visible. For example, Student A reads a question, and Student B answers. Then Student A has to ask a follow-up question based on Student B’s response. Thus, Student B will feel like someone actually listened to them and was interested in their ideas.

FOR A DOWNLOADABLE ACTIVITY SEE [ASKING FOLLOW-UP QUESTIONS](#).

2. **Include a whole-class mixer activity.** After students become accustomed to asking follow-up questions, a great way to practice it and to help students feel more visible is this mixer activity. In this, students are given a list of survey questions. Standing up, they circulate among each other, asking a question and at least one follow-up question and then move on to another classmate.

PRACTICE FOLLOW-UP QUESTIONS WITH THIS [CONVERSATION CLASS MIXER ACTIVITY](#).

3. **Promote asking follow-up questions during small-group discussions.** We can encourage students to ask follow-ups by including a reminder with the discussion questions. For example: “This is a discussion question. We should all answer this and ask follow-up questions. *Do you think social media causes loneliness or keeps people from being lonely?*”

SEE READING AND DISCUSSION: [LONELINESS MIGHT NOT BE WHAT YOU THINK .](#)

4. **Practice using rejoinders.** Another powerful technique to use to acknowledge others is rejoinders such as *I see / That's great! / That's too bad. / Cool!* Rejoinders show that you are being heard.

SEE THIS DOWNLOADABLE [REJOINER ACTIVITY](#) TO HELP STUDENTS PRACTICE.

5. **Give focused feedback.** When giving feedback to students concerning their participation in conversation or discussion activities, we can include items about their tendency to ask follow-up questions and to use rejoinders.

SEE A SAMPLE CONVERSATION FEEDBACK FORM [SHORT AND LONG VERSIONS.](#)

## Why these techniques are powerful for helping students become visible

If all the students (those who feel more visible and those who feel less visible) practice these and are encouraged and/or required to use them, listening and responding to each other will be built into every activity. As a result, students will feel more visible in our classroom. Also, there tends to be a carry-over in that students will use these not just during formal activities but also with each other when they arrive at class, between activities, during breaks, or as the class is letting out.

For the students who feel invisible outside our classes, they will have tools (follow-up questions and rejoinders) that they can use to engage with others. As Michelle Obama said, "We can't afford to wait for the world to be equal to start feeling seen." If students are feeling invisible around other people, instead of silently waiting for someone to notice them, they can try to interact with others by asking questions and responding with rejoinders. In most situations, the others will reciprocate.

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## REFERENCES

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