

'My brain leaves the room': what happens when teachers talk too much?

July 19 2024, by Haley Tancredi, Callula Killingly and Linda J. Graham



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About [four students in every classroom](#) will have a language or attention disorder. While some of these students will have an official diagnosis of developmental language disorder (DLD) or attention-deficit

hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), others will be "[hiding in plain sight](#)". These students may often be in trouble for acting out, underachieving or not attending school.

In our [new study](#), we interviewed 59 students with DLD and/or ADHD about their experiences of Year 10 English. This is the only subject all Australian students must do from the first year of schooling to Year 12. And it plays a [key role](#) in their success at school and beyond it.

Students in our study reported some of their teachers talk too much. Why is this a problem? What can teachers do instead?

What are DLD and ADHD?

About two students in every classroom of 30 will have DLD. This is a lifelong disorder that affects language comprehension and expression. People with DLD find it more difficult to say what they mean and to understand others.

About [one or two students](#) per classroom will have ADHD. This can include difficulties with focusing attention, following detailed instructions and self control.

It is also possible for students to have both DLD and ADHD.

While schools are legally required to remove learning barriers for students with disability, students first need to be identified as needing this support. [Research shows](#) students with less visible disabilities, such as DLD and ADHD, are more likely to fly under the radar of schools and so do not get the help they need.

Our study

As part of a [broader project](#) on accessible assessment, in 2022, we recruited more than 200 students from three Queensland public high schools. Through testing, we identified a subgroup of 59 students with likely language and/or attention disorders.

The students were all between 13 and 15. About half identified as female and half as male. Students were taught by 26 different teachers. Almost three quarters of students (71%) in the sample had not previously been identified as having difficulty with either language or attention.

All 59 students participated in individual interviews, which included questions about their classroom experiences.

Do you think some teachers talk too much?

Research [shows](#) removing unnecessary complexity from classroom teaching is really important when helping students learn, especially if they already have issues with language and information processing.

More than two thirds of participants (69%) in our study said some of their teachers talk too much. Eight responded with a forceful "YES!" Importantly, students also described the effect of too much teacher talk—including when teachers "go off topic"—on their ability to sustain focus, attention and engagement.

As Gareth explained: "[The] ones that are just like talking and not doing anything, I'll just zone out and don't do anything." (Names have been changed for this article.)

Bella noted: "Yes. Uh, uh, my brain leaves the room."

Another student, Pippy, told us that once behind, it is difficult to re-

engage:

"I just think, well, like when my teacher's talking, I, my brain kind of, it gets like really slow, and I have to think back about, "Oh, they just said those words, what do those mean?" And then I'm like, "Okay, I'm catching up." And then she's already like gone all the way down like already explained so much more. I've like missed that 'cause I was trying to focus on what she was just explaining before."

What else happens when teachers talk too much?

To learn more about the impact of too much teacher talk, we showed students an iPad and asked them to choose which options on the display applied to them.

The most popular response was students begin thinking of other things. The next most popular responses were their brain shut down and/or they talked to the person next to them. Although no student selected "I get up to mischief" as a standalone choice, four did select "all of the above."

These responses reflect what happens when working memory—the [memory system](#) that provides a kind of "mental jotting pad storing information necessary for everyday activities"—is overloaded. When this occurs, brains really do "leave the room."

What can teachers do instead?

There is no precise figure when it comes to the amount a teacher should talk, but a [good rule of thumb](#) is around one quarter of the lesson. This allows time for active questioning and feedback, and for the completion of activities. It also reduces student passivity and is less exhausting for the teacher.

Just as important as the proportion of teacher talk is [how easy it is](#) to understand them.

Students in our study said "excellent" teachers used simple words and would "go through" things several times in different ways. They also said excellent teachers did not go too fast and paused to allow students to process what had been said. They would also regularly check in with students during the lesson to see if they understood what they needed to do.

Though it might be assumed teachers are already using these simple strategies, our findings suggest otherwise. We asked students about 16 [evidenced-based](#) teaching practices that are all needed to support language and [information processing](#).

Their responses suggest there is inconsistent or ineffective use of these important practices.

For example, nearly three in five students said teachers rarely or only sometimes listed what students needed to do on the board. Almost one in four said their teacher did not consistently check-in with them using verbal prompts to support attention.

What can we do now?

We know language processing, attention and working memory are particular areas of difficulty for students with DLD and/or ADHD.

But these differences do not mean lower academic achievement is a natural or inevitable outcome.

Instead, given the prevalence of students in these two groups, it means everyday teaching must be accessible to them. And in doing so, it will

also make teaching more accessible to everyone in the classroom.

In a [previous study](#) in our broader project, we found targeted professional learning can help teachers make their teaching more accessible, including talking less and more simply.

Our future research will look at how we help teachers adopt these strategies and reach [teachers](#) in regional and remote schools so all students can benefit.

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Provided by The Conversation

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