You ask a question and the same students signal their readiness to answer it. Or you ask a specific student a question and that student is flustered, embarrassed, or simply not ready to share a response. As teachers, we sometimes correlate a student’s inability to answer a question on the spot with a lack of preparation or intelligence. In fact, human beings process information at different rates, and it may be that the student in question simply needs a bit more time to organize his/her thoughts. English learners, in particular, need extra time to process the question and formulate a response in English.

Beginning as early as Kindergarten, the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) for Speaking and Listening (see, for example, SL.K.1) emphasize that students should be able to participate in collaborative conversations. Standard SL.K.3 specifically states that students should be able to “ask and answer questions in order to seek help, get information, or clarify something that is not understood.”

Teachers play a vital role in helping students learn how to “buy time” before answering a question. One way teachers do this is by making their thinking processes visible (e.g., “That’s a good question. I’m going to need a minute to think about how to answer you.”). They also can teach students explicitly how to respond to a question with something other than “I don’t know.”

The resource on the following page is designed to help you teach or review this skill. Display the page and discuss it with students. Print out a copy and encourage students to refer to it when they feel “on the spot.”

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Click here to go to the Reading Gallery and have students practice buying time to think in the context of the questions associated with each reading.

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Buying Time to Think

Picture this: your teacher asks a question and all the hands around you seem to fly up. You know the answer, but it takes you a little time to gather your thoughts. Or maybe your teacher asks YOU a question. You feel embarrassed, flustered, or on the spot. Maybe your instinct is to say, “I don’t know.” Next time this happens, consider “buying” yourself some time to think about a response.

Here are a few alternatives to saying “I don’t know”:

- May I have a minute to think?
- Would you please repeat the question?
- I’m not sure what you are looking for. Can you ask the question in a different way?
- Could you give me a little more information?
- May I ask a friend for help?
- May I look at my notes first?
- I’m not sure. Where can I find information about that?
- That’s a good question. One idea I have is ______.
- So I think you’re asking ______. Is that right? Or are you looking for something else?
- I’m guessing ______.
- I’m thinking ______.