2 Interactive discourse in small and large groups

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As students sign up for a foreign-language class, their expectations and their fears are often similar to those they bring to the study of any other subject. They look forward to acquiring a new skill and they fear personal failure. They are rarely aware that learning the forms of a language and using them appropriately is quite different from learning math or history. By entering a foreign-language classroom, students leave behind the social reality created by their native tongue and start constructing a new reality, which is potentially very different from the one they just left.

Indeed, the foreign language is not only a tool for future encounters in the outside world; it is the instrument that creates and shapes the social meaning of the class itself. “Speaking a language means more than referring to the world, it also means relating to one’s interlocutor” (Kasper 1979: 395). Learning takes place in a double context: On the one hand, students learn words and grammatical structures that refer to an established distant culture, the external context of language. On the other hand, they use these words and structures to communicate with others in the classroom. This internal context of language brings about an interaction that is created anew by every group of teacher and learners. It is through the interaction with this social group that the language is used and learned. In turn, it is through the use of the language that the group is given a social identity and social reality (Berger and Luckman 1966). Learning a language is a socially mediated process (Vygotsky 1978: 126).

The microworld of classroom interaction

The dual nature of the language-learning task – learning the forms and learning how to use them – creates tension between individual work and group work, between teacher-controlled and group-managed learning. This tension characterizes the microworld of the foreign-language classroom.

The interaction continuum

The interaction among group members in a classroom moves between the two poles of a continuum consisting of what Stern calls “instructional
Interactive discourse in small and large groups

Table 1. The Interaction Continuum

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Instructional discourse</th>
<th>&quot;Convivial&quot; discourse</th>
<th>Natural discourse</th>
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<tr>
<td>Roles:</td>
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<tr>
<td>Fixed statuses</td>
<td>Negotiated roles</td>
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<td>Tasks:</td>
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<td>Teacher-oriented</td>
<td>Group-oriented</td>
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<td>Position-centered</td>
<td>Person-centered</td>
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<td>Types of knowledge:</td>
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<tr>
<td>Focus on content,</td>
<td>Focus on process,</td>
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<td>accuracy of facts</td>
<td>fluency of interaction</td>
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options" (1983: 506). These concern the roles of participants, the tasks they accomplish, and the type of knowledge that is exchanged (Table 1). At the one end are the fixed, institutionalized statuses (Cicourel 1972: 231) of teacher and student, with their expected and predictable behavior patterns, acquired through years of schooling. At the other end are a variety of roles and tasks, negotiated by speakers and hearers brought together by the common foreign language and engaged in natural conversation. Neither extreme ever exists in its pure form exclusively. Between the instructional and the natural, we should aim at establishing a “convivial” form of discourse, which, to use Ivan Illich’s definition, is “the autonomous and creative discourse among persons and the intercourse of persons with their environment...” in contrast with the conditioned response of persons to the demands made upon them by others, and by a man-made environment” (Illich 1973: 11). In other words, social roles have to be, to a greater or lesser extent, negotiated between teacher and learners for the successful completion of learning and teaching tasks.

Tasks also vary along the interaction continuum: On the one hand, we have “position-centered” teaching and learning (Applegate and Delia 1980: 277), in which information is conveyed and received. Focus is on the content of the lesson or what is learned. Position-centered teaching stresses accuracy in the use of the language and the individual acquisition of linguistic skills. On the other hand, we have “person-centered” communication, in which information is exchanged and a speaker’s utterances must be adjusted and readjusted to fit the hearer’s ability and willingness to understand the meaning intended. Emphasis is on the interactional process itself; that is, the way in which each learner interacts with the material and negotiates intended meanings with the other members of the group (see Rivers, this volume, p. 4). Toward this end of the continuum, learning how to learn, or how to acquire control over the discourse of the classroom, is at least as important as what is said and learned (Allwright 1984; Breen and Candlin 1980: 90). Here, the accent is placed on ease and fluency of language use and the acquisition of interactive skills.

The way in which students learn how to use the language thus depends largely on what information is exchanged, how and by whom, and where the three parameters of classroom communication we have discussed are placed on the interaction continuum. But it is also determined by the way in which members of the group present themselves in relation to the others, and how they deal with the uncertainty and insecurity of the language-learning situation. We will address these issues in the next two sections.

Presentation of self in the foreign-language classroom

We can distinguish three factors affecting the way in which teacher and learners present themselves to one another in the classroom (Brown and Levinson 1978).

Relative Power

Notwithstanding the institutionalized authority of the teacher, power in the foreign-language classroom can have various origins and be unevenly distributed. It often stems from a greater knowledge of vocabulary and grammar, but is usually due to a better control over the interaction. It seems that after a certain level of proficiency is attained, control of group or dyadic interaction is largely due to the mastery of discourse or communication strategies. In whole-class exchanges, some students know how to monopolize the teacher’s attention (Allwright 1980); in small-group discussion, some retain this control by making others talk or by eliciting help, or by the skillful use of short and long turns (Brown and Yule 1983; Porter 1983). Teachers know how to keep control of classroom discourse by managing the dialogue away from trouble sources.

Social Distance

The closeness or distance learners wish to establish with one another has to do with how well they know each other, how it will affect their self-image (e.g., the socially expected behavior of males and females, or whites and blacks in each other’s presence), and what benefits they hope to gain from it (Bourdieu 1982). The concept of social distance is, moreover, culturally determined. In multicultural classes, differences in the value attached to verbal versus nonverbal communication can affect the distance learners wish to maintain in the foreign language. Hall (1976) has shown, for example, that students from cultures in which behaviors are highly predictable because of the homogeneous normative structure of their society (e.g., Japanese or Korean) tend to underestimate in Eng-
lish the importance of rhetorical skills and of the communicative dimensions of discourse. By contrast, these are essential in a society such as the North American, where, on the whole, individuality is prized and where social relationships have to be more or less negotiated in every communicative situation. Japanese students' lack of verbal involvement in class interaction may be perceived by a North American ESL teacher as the maintenance of an inappropriate social distance toward the group and thus lead to misunderstanding.

SOCIOTRUCTURAL IMPOSITION

Each language has its own rules of usage as to when, how, and to what degree a speaker may impose a given verbal behavior on his or her conversational partner. For instance, in North American culture, paying a compliment to someone obligates that person to answer "Thank you," whereas in another culture such a response might be both inappropriate and embarrassing. Norms of imposition vary also according to the social and personal habits of the speakers. Silence or withdrawal on the part of some students may make others feel imposed upon to speak more than they normally would. The directness of North American questioning patterns may threaten ESL students and in turn affect negatively the way they use classroom interaction to learn the language. Female group members may feel obligated to adopt a male style of participation in group discussion, and vice-versa (Treichler and Kramarae 1983).

The degree of imposition exerted by the various members of a group on one another in the language classroom requires a great deal of what Goffman (1967) calls "face-work," which we will now examine.

Saving one's own and another's face

"Life may not be much of a gamble, but interaction is." This statement by Goffman (1959: 243) underscores one of the major concerns of language learners – not to lose face when using the language incorrectly or inappropriately. As members of a group, they want to maintain both their positive face, that is, their need to be appreciated by others, and their negative face, that is, their freedom from interference by others. Not being able to continue speaking because of a lack of vocabulary is a threat to one's positive face, but asking for help may be perceived as a threat to one's negative face. In their native tongue, speakers have a host of strategies to avoid a difficulty, to self-correct, or to ask for help in case of linguistic trouble. They also know how to show others that they acknowledge and appreciate them, without unduly imposing on them. In short, they know how to save both their own and the other speaker's positive and negative face.

The problem for learners is to save face in a classroom situation where possibilities of avoidance and escape are more limited than in natural settings. Arguably, the need for face-work in teacher-controlled classrooms is greatly reduced by the "fool's impunity" that accompanies the institutionalized status of learner and by the institutionalized authority granted the teacher. However, where turns-at-talk are up for grabs, where the actions and reactions of others have to be anticipated and intentions correctly interpreted, where the risks and consequences of speaking up have to be weighed, students need strategies of indirectness in discourse.

To save their own face, they can be taught how to gain time while talking ("As I was saying before," "This is a rather difficult question to answer"), how to hedge ("Well, it's hard to say..."), how to acknowledge their limitations and ask for help ("I'm sorry, I don't know how to say...;" "How do you say...?"); and how to participate in a group conversation even if they have nothing new to say, by commenting, paraphrasing or expanding on what others have said. To avoid putting a conversational partner directly on the spot, a student can learn how to save the other's face by using, for example, prefacing markers ("Could you please...?;" "May I ask you a question?;" "Excuse me, but..."), mitigators ("Would you mind repeating..."), echoing statements ("You mean to say..."), or feedback techniques ("Yeah/right/quote/good point") (Edmondson and House 1981).

As we have seen, there are two types of language used in the classroom: (1) the lesson content that is taught and learned, for example, grammar, vocabulary, cultural facts; and (2) the interactional language that is used by teacher and student to deal with the lesson content, for example, "Please speak louder.", "What do you mean?", "Now let's turn to...". Traditionally, the second type of language has been under the control of the teacher. In a group-oriented classroom, students have the chance to use it within a variety of group formats. Whether these groups are large or small, whether they include the teacher (whole-class activities) or not, they are socially held together by the joint efforts of the participants, who are in turn speakers, listeners, addressees, or bystanders. Speakers achieve a desired interactional climate by the way they take or avoid, sustain or yield turns-at-talk; by the way they initiate, build, and steer topics; and by performing the repairs required by actual or potential breakdowns in communication.

The interactive discourse of groups

Turns-at-talk

Observers of language classrooms have noted the power that comes from controlling the turns-at-talk in the classroom (Mehan 1979). In teacher-
oriented interaction, the teacher selects the next speaker and automatically selects him- or herself for the succeeding turn. There is little motivation for students to listen to one another, and the only motivation to listen to the teacher is the fear of being caught short on an answer.

Teaching students how to take turns, as easy as this might seem, requires teaching a number of skills that are not automatically transferred from the mother tongue. Students must learn to listen to the utterance of the previous speaker across its delivery, process it as it is spoken, interpret it, create and formulate a reply as they listen, find a natural completion point in the speaker's discourse, and take the floor at the appropriate moment. This requires a concentration and combination of listening and speaking skills that need to be practiced.

In group-oriented interaction, the teacher should systematically encourage the students to take control of the turn-taking mechanism by adopting some of the features of natural discourse:

- Tolerate silences; refrain from filling the gaps between turns. This will put pressure on students to initiate turns.
- Direct your gaze to any potential addressee of a student's utterance; do not assume that you are the next speaker and the student's exclusive addressee.
- Teach the students floor-taking gambits; do not grant the floor.
- Encourage students to sustain their speech beyond one or two sentences and to take longer turns; do not use a student's short utterance as a springboard for your own lengthy turn.
- Extend your exchanges with individual students to include clarification of the speaker's intentions and your understanding of them; do not cut off an exchange too soon to pass on to another student.

By moving toward more group-controlled forms of turn-taking, classroom interaction also gives the group more practice in the management of topics.

**Topic management**

Control of the turn-taking mechanism generally gives the teacher control of the topic. At one end of the continuum, the information exchanged between teacher and students and among students is predictable and most of the time ritualized. Questions are mostly display questions: questions in which the student is requested to display a knowledge that the teacher already knows. At the other end of the continuum, the questions of the teacher show the information gap characteristic of natural discourse, in which speakers ask questions only when they need information they do not have. Answers are not judged according to whether they correspond to what the questioner had in mind, but are assessed according to how well they contribute to the topic. Perceptions and intentions are the object of negotiation and constant readjustments between speakers.

If students are to take an active part in interactions, they must be shown how to control the way topics are established, built, and sustained, and how to participate in the teaching and learning of lessons. The following suggestions for teacher behavior can be useful here:

- Use the target language not only to deal with the subject matter, but also to regulate the interaction in the classroom. You will thus offer a model of how to use interactional gambits in natural discourse.
- Keep the number of display questions to a minimum. The more genuine the requests for information, the more natural the discourse.
- Build the topic at hand together with the students; assume that whatever they say contributes to this topic. Do not cut off arbitrarily a student's utterance because you perceive it to be irrelevant; it may be very relevant to the student's perception of the topic.

**Repair tasks**

Linguistic errors and other sources of trouble, such as procedural problems or problems of transmission, are addressed at one end of the continuum mostly on the initiative of the teacher. The teacher alone points out linguistic errors, and requests speakers to correct their own or fellow students' mistakes. To show that there is a problem (grammatical error or inaudible speech, for example), the teacher usually withholds evaluation, ignores the answer given, and repeats the question, repeats the trouble source as a query, or changes addressee. Procedural problems, such as misunderstandings in the activity rules (e.g., individual response instead of choral response), are also taken to be an "error" on the part of the students and are redressed by the teacher.

In a group-oriented class, errors are considered to be natural accidents on the way to interpersonal communication. Natural forms of interaction in the classroom would therefore require that the teacher frequently adopt the following communicative behavior:

- Pay attention to the message of students' utterances rather than to the form in which the utterances are cast (unless you are engaged in a structural drill, where only the form is important). Keep comments and repairs for later.
- Treat the correction of linguistic errors as a "pragmatic" or interactional adjustment, not as a normative form of redress, for example, by restating the incorrect utterance in a correct manner rather than pointing explicitly to the error.
Diversifying interaction formats

The versatility of interaction formats through which the language is used and acquisition can take place in the classroom should reflect the multiple communicative needs and purposes of the social group engaged in the learning process. Restricting classroom interaction to the public, teacher-monitored, and teacher-controlled discourse of twenty-five students answering display questions is not only an unnecessary reduction of the interaction potential of the classroom, but it ignores the social dimensions of language learning. The fear that errors will be transferred from one student to the other if they are not immediately corrected by the teacher is an unwarranted behaviorist view of language. A study by Porter (1983) shows that in small-group work only 3% of the errors are incorporated into the speech of peers. Moreover, if language learning is an “innovation and experimentation” process (Rivers 1983: 53), making mistakes is part of the hypothesis testing and negotiation of intended meanings necessary for communication. Learning to recognize one’s mistakes on one’s own from the interactional context in which they are made, and having the freedom to act upon this awareness, can be developed within a variety of interactional contexts and group formats.

Although much has been argued in favor of pair and small-group work (Brumfit 1984: 76–82; Gies 1985; Kramsch 1981a, 1983; Long et al. 1976), many teachers are still reluctant to have students do in small groups what they feel they can do more conveniently, quickly, and accurately in a teacher-controlled, whole-class situation. They fear the potential chaos and conflicts arising within groups and, in classrooms where students share a common native language, the schismatic use of the mother tongue.

The argument made here is that group behavior in the foreign language can be taught and that the various forms of discourse must be demonstrated and practiced for different interaction formats. The following will illustrate some of these options (for further activities, see Kramsch 1981ab, 1983, 1984). They have all been used successfully in foreign- and second-language classes. They all present a very specific task that requires deliberation and negotiation among members of a group. This task is to be achieved within a strict time limit. Introduction of interactional constraints reduces the uncertainty and potential anxiety inherent in any group-controlled situation and lowers the level of communicative stress (Brown and Yule 1983: 107).

Large group work

GROUP DECODING OF A TEXT

A reading has been assigned overnight as individual homework. Students sit in a circle; the teacher acts as recording secretary. The group brainstorms lexical items they find important toward understanding the story (time limit: four minutes). Students can take the floor if and when they wish; the teacher writes all contributions on the board in their correct form, without evaluating them. During the time allotted, the students are in total control of the discourse. After the brainstorming, the teacher suggests linking the separate items to make coherent “islands of understanding.” The students again take over and suggest which items can be linked in which way. The teacher draws the links on the board and recapitulates at the end the suggestions made.

TEACHING FACE-SAVING GAMBITS

The teacher explicitly sensitizes the students to the routine of group conversation and the mechanics of perceived fluency: appropriate ways of opening and closing conversation, and polite ways of interrupting, making a request, or making a negative comment. Three or four alternative gambits are written on the board, such as “I have a question.”, “May I ask a question?”, “May I interrupt for a second?”, “I would like to ask something.” The group repeats these to practice appropriate intonation. The students then practice them individually by addressing the teacher or a fellow student as opportunity arises within the limits of the lesson.

INTERPRETING A STORY

The teacher chooses one open-ended question that allows many possible answers, all of which illuminate various meanings of the story. For example, for James Thurber’s “The Catbird Seat,” the question might be: “Why does Mr. Martin want to 'rub out' Mrs. Barrows?” The teacher writes the question on the board and the group brainstorms different responses. The teacher neither prompts students by name, nor
monitors or evaluates the responses. The teacher merely records on the board in its correct form what the students say. Students' contributions are freely initiated, and one idea often prompts another, as in natural discourse, especially if the teacher does not intervene in any way. In less spontaneous classes, students can be given two minutes to write their answers; the papers are then collected and read aloud anonymously by a student. Since students focus their response according to their perception and personal experience, the list written on the board offers multiple perspectives on the subject, which can then be discussed as a group. As a result of this discussion, the teacher suggests grouping items, using such logical links as analogy, contrast, or inference. Interpretation is arrived at through common exploration and discovery by teacher and students.

**Small-group work**

**GATHERING INFORMATION**

Having been assigned a particular grammar unit to learn or review individually, students in groups of three or four then discuss in the foreign language "the three or four most important points to remember in this unit" or "some unresolved questions" (time limit: ten minutes). The teacher goes from group to group without intervening, but taking mental or written notes of confusions, errors, or interesting insights. One student per group takes notes and reports to the class as a whole. Groups with similar findings feel acknowledged; others are provoked into disagreeing. When the opportunity for using face-saving strategies presents itself during the small-group discussions, and when lexical and grammatical needs arise, the teacher makes comments and suggestions directly related to the observed needs of the learners.

The same format can be used to (1) gather lexical resources before the discussion of a topic (What words do we need to talk about X?: List as many words as you can in four minutes); (2) prepare three or four arguments for or against a topic to be debated with another small group; (3) solve a given problem that requires a group decision.

**GATEKEEPING**

Whenever discussions must be conducted according to culturally appropriate rules of turn-taking or certain forms of topic management, one student per group is assigned the role of gatekeeper. This student makes sure everyone has a say, helps others elaborate their turns, keeps track of time, and performs similar tasks.

**PEER OBSERVATION OF DISCOURSE**

Three or four students lead a five-minute debate on a topic of their choice in front of the class. One-third of the class observes the turn-taking routine, one-third the way the topic is steered from speaker to speaker, and the other third the way in which errors or misunderstandings are repaired and how. Instructor and students then conduct a fifteen-to twenty-minute debriefing.

**Pair work**

**FINDING KEY SENTENCE**

Pairs of students are assigned the same paragraph of a given text. They have to read it silently, check each other's understanding, and agree on and underline one key sentence that best conveys the intent of the passage. Comparison and justification of the underlined sentences among the groups serve as a basis for a whole-class interpretation of the paragraph.

**DISCURSIVE ROLE PLAY**

After the teacher has introduced a given discourse strategy to the whole group (by modeling it or by playing a recording of native speakers), pairs of students are given two minutes to act out a situation requiring the use of this strategy. One example is a fictitious telephone conversation, in which the connection is so bad that the two speakers repeatedly have to ask for clarification, check understanding, and request and offer rephrasings, repetitions, or paraphrases. Another example is giving listener's feedback to a fellow student who is recounting the most frightening experience he or she ever had ("My God!", "Really?", "How awful!", "At night?").

One peer observer notes how the pairs manage the conversation and the gambits they use. The observers then report to the class. This elicits a general discussion on the role of the listener and brings the interaction process into explicit focus.

**THE HELPING ENCOUNTER**

Each student has four minutes to get to know a fellow student well enough to be able to write a paragraph on that person. The interviewer may ask only four direct questions. The rest of the conversation must be steered through interpretive statements ("Oh, so you don't live in the United States."), paraphrases ("You mean, you don't like to travel?") or comments ("That's interesting.") that show empathy and understand-
ing. A peer observer notes the strategies used and makes a report to the class.

Conclusion

Despite their good intentions of increasing the amount of communication in the classroom, students and teachers often fall short of their goal because their style of interaction remains at the instructional end of the continuum. Furthermore, by maintaining patterns of institutionalized interaction and, in monocultural classrooms, a social reality typical of the native culture, teachers of a new language reinforce ethnocentric attitudes rather than help to dispel them. On the other hand, pretending that the classroom is similar to the natural environment of the other culture and relinquishing the control of the interaction entirely to the students is both deceiving and threatening to all parties involved.

Traditional forms of classroom interaction need to be reassessed in the light of the new language to help learners move from “institutional productivity” to “productive conviviality” (Illich 1973: 26). Only by broadening their discourse options in the classroom can learners stop being foreign-language consumers and become the active architects of interpersonal and intercultural understanding.

Let’s act on it

1. You would like to have a student peer observer note the way students interact in a small-group discussion. What features would you want him or her to observe? Make a list of three features of turn-taking, topic management, and repair work.
2. As soon as you approach students engaged in small-group work, they stop talking to one another and turn to you for help and advice. What can you do to prevent this?
3. Record yourself in the classroom and note your responses to your students’ utterances. How predictable are your responses? How varied? When you say “good,” do you mean to (a) judge the quality of the form of the utterance, (b) judge the quality of the content of the utterance, (c) congratulate the student for having responded, (d) frame the exchange and mark a pause before your next question? How could you diversify your responses so as to make them more reflective of your meaning?
4. Watch the way you use the foreign language to control what goes on in the classroom: use of hedges when you don’t have a ready answer; gambits to secure the attention of a student; starters to introduce a new idea; rhetorical devices to go back to a previous point; expressions to summarize, to announce several points, or to gain time to think and formulate your thought. Observe these for yourself or assign a student to note them down while you conduct your class. Which strategies could you teach your students? How could you structure classroom interaction so that the students would have the opportunity to use these interactional strategies?
5. Goffman (1967: 116) wrote: “These two tendencies, that of the speaker to scale down his expressions and that of the listeners to scale up their interests, each in the light of the other’s capacities and demands, form the bridge that people build to one another, allowing them to meet for a moment of talk in a communion of reciprocally sustained involvement. It is this spark, not the more obvious kinds of love, that lights up the world.” Do you agree with this statement? Develop your view with reference to interaction in the foreign-language classroom.

Annotated reading list


Breen, Michael, and Candlin, Christopher N. 1980. “The Essentials of a Communicative Curriculum in Language Teaching.” AL: 1: 89–112. This seminal article defines communicative competence as the interpretation, expression, and negotiation of intended meanings between speakers. Emphasis is less on the product than on the teaching-learning process – that is, on the way learners interact with each other and with the material.


ourselves by our responses to and our readings of other people in social encounters.
