

Encouraging Students to Interact with the Teacher

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Conversational analysts place great emphasis on the fact that conversation is a participant-managed system in which there is a constant process of adjustment between participants to ensure that real communication takes place. This is particularly true when communication is between members of different cultures, between, for example, my Japanese students and myself, a British teacher. Of particular relevance to this discussion is the notion of self-selection. Self-selection is a term used in the analysis of turn-taking to indicate that a speaker was not nominated to speak by another participant, but selected him or herself (Sacks et al. (1978:12/13)). In the case of teacher-fronted classroom interaction, it is difficult to persuade students that they may self-select when the teacher is speaking. The formal setting of the classroom and large class sizes exacerbate this difficulty. This lesson plan aims at initiating a system which encourages students to self-select whenever they haven't understood.

Target Language - Asking for Clarification

It is advisable to isolate a few expressions for the students to focus on. Five seemed to be the maximum in one lesson for a post-elementary class. (Based on Geddes and Sturtridge 1992)

- Excuse me, I didn't quite catch that.
- I'm sorry, could you repeat that more slowly, please.
- I still haven't quite got that. Would you mind repeating it again, please?
- I'm sorry, I don't understand. What does X mean?
- Could you spell that, please?

Lesson Steps

These steps all have the ultimate goal of getting students to use the function of asking for clarification in whole-class conversation with the teacher. The measure of success of the lesson will be the extent to which the students actively ask for clarification in the last stage of the lesson.

Step 1. Listening

Present a conversation that illustrates the use of the target language in context rather than drilling it out of context.

- Customer: I'd like a stamp for Afghanistan, please.
- Assistant: Excuse me, I didn't quite catch that.
- Customer: I'd like a stamp for this airmail letter to Afghanistan.
- Assistant: I still haven't quite got that. Would you mind repeating the name of the country again, please?
- Customer: Afghanistan.
- Assistant: Afghanistan, sure. That's 110 yen.
- Customer: And I've got another airmail letter for Qatar.
- Assistant: I'm sorry. Could you repeat that more slowly please?
- Customer: Yes, sure. I need another stamp for Qatar.
- Assistant: Could you spell that, please?
- Customer: Sure. Qatar is spelt Q-A-T-A-R.
- Assistant: Q-U-A
- Customer: No. There isn't a U. Q-A-T-A-R.
- Assistant: Q-A-T-A-R. Oh, I've got it. Near Saudi Arabia. That's 110 yen too.
- Customer: My father is a philatelist. Do you have any special stamps?

- Assistant: I'm sorry. I don't understand philatelist.
- Customer: My father collects stamps.
- Assistant: Oh! I understand. Yes, We have some very nice collection stamps this week.

It is helpful to ignore the target function at this stage, and to set questions only on the content of the conversation. In this way, students become very familiar with the conversation before the main point of the lesson is taught. After this stage, a gap-filling exercise is used to focus only on the target phrases. Checking the students' answers around the class provides an informal opportunity for modelling the pronunciation of the phrases, practising making key words prominent and imitating intonation patterns. In this way, the selected examples of the target language of the function of asking for clarification have been practised just before they have to be used in the next exercise.

2. Pair and Small-Group Practice - Information Gap

Information gap activities are frequently designed for pairs. The exercise below could also be used in pairs. However, pairwork is not the best means of practising turn-taking and doesn't really practise self-selection at all as it is always clear whose turn it is next. My suggestion is to encourage practice in larger groups before moving to a teacher-whole-class situation. In the exercise below, each student in the group has different information and some of the words are selected to be both difficult to pronounce and to understand, so that adjustment between students is certain to be necessary. It is vital to establish an "English-only" rule for this type of exercise for real adjustment to take place. Students must first exchange information before going on to discuss it. Note that students must successfully exchange the information because they will need it for the second stage of the activity.

Common Instructions on Each Student Worksheet You have to choose someone to organize a club for Japanese and foreign students to meet together. The club organizer has to organize social events and other activities such as trips, sport, etc.

Each student in your group has information about one candidate for the job.

1. Ask and answer questions about the candidates until you know as much as possible about all of them.
2. Discuss the positive and negative points of each candidate.
3. Try to choose just ONE of them as club organizer.

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- Culture Club Student A
 - Name: Hilary
 - Age: 21
 - Hobbies: philately (stamp-collecting) astronomy (study of the sun, moon, planets and stars)
 - Qualities: very optimistic (always hopeful) quite industrious (hardworking)
 - Faults: a little aggressive at times and sometimes a little impatient
 - Culture Club Student B
 - Name: Philip
 - Age: 20
 - Hobbies: whale-watching martial arts (karate, judo, etc)
 - Qualities: very conscientious (reliable and hardworking) outspoken (never hides what he thinks)
 - Faults: a little stubborn and can appear unfriendly
 - Culture Club - Student C
 - Name: Michael
 - Age: 21
 - Hobbies: acting, public speaking and debating
 - Qualities: extrovert (very sociable, cheerful, perhaps rather loud) ambitious (wants to be the best or most successful)
 - Faults: a little insincere and not always very reliable

This activity will take about 15-20 minutes. During the activity the teacher should circulate and deal with any problems, but should not participate with any group. The exercise can be usefully followed up by getting a spokesperson from several groups to report their

solution back to the class.

3. Informal Whole-Class Narration

The final stage is to return to teacher-fronted interaction to try to encourage students to self-select when they don't understand while the teacher tries to tell a ridiculous story to the whole class. It is better to know this story by memory so that you can improvise, adjusting to the class reaction and you can keep your eye on the class and encourage students who seem ready to interrupt until they start to volunteer spontaneously. At first, eye-contact may be the only sign of "self-selection". To be successful, the "narrative" must in fact become a conversation with the students. By choosing a ridiculous story, the level of formality drops and students are more willing to interrupt. Two examples, one short and one long one are provided below (adapted from "The Book of British Humour:43/44).

Example 1

Mr. Tall telephoned the doctor in the middle of the night .

"Come quickly, doctor. You know my wife sleeps with her mouth open. Well, a mouse ran down inside her!"

"I will be with you in about ten minutes," replied the doctor. "Until I arrive, try holding a piece of cheese in front of her mouth. This may bring the mouse out."

When the doctor arrived, Mr Tall was not holding a piece of cheese. He was holding a fish in front of his wife's mouth. "What are you doing?" asked the doctor. "Mice don't like fish."

"I know," said Mr Tall, "but we have to get the cat out first".

Example 2

My grandmother is 97 years old but she is still a very tough old lady. She lives in the top flat of a very tall building. One day, when she was playing football at the old-age pensioners' club, she tried to kick the goalkeeper, a young man of 75, missed him and kicked the goal-post instead. She broke the goal-post but she also broke her leg. The doctor was called. He came and put her leg in plaster.

"How long do I have to carry this burden around with me doctor?" complained my grandmother.

"About two months," replied the doctor. "Then I'll come and see you and take the plaster off, but till then you must not climb up or down stairs. Remember, no stairs either up or down."

Two months later the doctor came and took the plaster off. "You've made an excellent recovery for someone of your age," he said.

"When can I play football again?" asked my grandmother.

"Today if you like," said the doctor. "Your leg is as good as new now."

"So I can use the stairs again now, too, Doctor?" asked my grandmother.

"Of course. If you can play football, you can manage a few stairs too." "Well I'm relieved to hear that." said my grandmother. "I was beginning to feel rather tired. You told me not to climb up or down the stairs. The only other way into my flat was by the drainpipe. And that was really hard work for a woman of my age, you know. You ought to think a bit more before giving advice like that to an old lady."

Underlined words in the second story, which is more difficult, are used to attract interruption.

Conclusion

This function can be reviewed in further lessons with different stories. Some students may also be able to tell one. Once the function has been taught, it can be institutionalized and other related functions can be introduced. (Geddes and Sturtridge (1992) provide a useful source for introducing and practising the language of adjustment.) In this way, in addition to the language and topic content of the course, students become familiar with basic skills of conversational adjustment that can be built into almost every conversation they are involved in.

References

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