

Teach Students to Interact, Not Just Talk

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The following is a short article with practical tips for EFL teachers who want to get their students (L2s) talking in conversation class as they do when they are outside the classroom and with friends-that is, interacting.

Very often in EFL there are two major types of talk; the teacher's (usually in the form of a question, or a request to practise a structure) and the L2's (usually a straight answer to the question posed by the teacher or a drill-type operation which sees the L2 inserting his own information into the gaps provided). This, effectively, is evidence of verbal exchange, but surely at its very minimum, and driest. It certainly complies with a certain pedagogical, learning-driven concept of EFL conversation. But is it interacting as natives do? Do natives participating in a normal conversation have the benefit of a person (a teacher) who is constantly ready to keep the flow of talk going with questions and drill-practise? Is the latter interaction?

Interaction involves both social and personal input, and, forms the basis of the vast majority of everyday talking done by natives. Interaction involves the emotions; creativity; agreement; disagreement; people waiting patiently to get in a word; sighing, nodding, gesticulating and so on. Interaction is not waiting to be asked a question. Interaction is not giving a short, one-sentence answer to this question. In some ways, what goes on in a worst-case EFL conversation class is a series of monologues.

- Teacher: Do you think people who pollute should pay heavier fines?
- L2 Student: Yes.
- Teacher: Why?
- L2 Student: Because they are contaminating the Earth.

Real interaction would:

1. Relegate the teacher to a background, supportive role
2. Involve the spontaneous participation of the rest of the group of L2s

And this does not happen a lot because the teacher is constantly contributing, egging on and prodding the L2s into participating. Many L2s do not, for some reason, feel free to comment on what another student has said. They, instead, look towards the teacher for guidance and, perhaps, permission to talk. This situation has to change if we wish to use the word "interaction" for what goes on in a typical EFL conversation class.

How to Interact

First of all, we as teachers cannot "teach" L2s to talk. They already do so in their L1(native language). However, for some reason (perhaps the new situation, the unfamiliarity, the sense of linguistic incompetence, ridicule, etc ...), L2s seem to "forget" how to interact in the target language. For this reason, I propose that we "remind" them of the typical features of interaction. Interaction is, once again, when the whole class is engaged in a group conversation. Interaction can involve the teacher but it must involve the L2s.

Interaction happens when:

- The L2s direct the dialogue at one another and not at or through the teacher
- The L2s comment immediately on what another L2 has just said
- The L2s disagree with or challenge another L2's statement
- The L2s don't have to be invited (by the teacher) to speak
- The L2s speak when there is a short silence indicating the end of someone else's turn
- The L2s interrupt one another, diplomatically, to insert an opinion or question, etc
- The L2s use the personal pronouns "I" and "You"

- They use paralinguistics, such as exclamations, gestures, body language and so on
- The L2s are as relaxed as possible

Practical Session of Interaction

INTERACTION: A little word game.

Activity A

Write these two headings on separate pieces of paper:

1. Words and phrases that cannot be used for answers
2. Words that should be used in conversation class

Next, the headings should be explained to the L2s. The students and the teacher think up as many words as they can which could prove useful for prolonging (or closing) a conversation in general.

Some examples for 1:

Yes.
 No.
 I agree entirely.
 I don't know.
 Perhaps.
 I am not sure.
 He is right.
 He said what I wanted to say.
 I have no opinion on that.

Some examples for 2:

No, because ...
 I don't agree, because ...
 I know and furthermore ...
 Why? Who? When? How? Which? What?
 That is a terrible thing to say!
 It makes me angry when ...
 I hate it when ...
 You are wrong, because ...
 Oh, I am not so sure about that, because I ...

You will have noticed that the positive, interactive expressions have suspension points, which means the speaker will say more-he or she HAS to. In heading 1, I put a very symbolic full-stop after the expression: this indicates that the L2 tries to end their contribution-DON'T LET HIM!

Activity B

I tried out the "new-found" (remembered) expressions on the following topic: "The Advantages to being a Woman". (The actual topic mattered little; what I was looking for was interaction, or at least to sensitize the students to some of the features of interaction. I also took it for granted that second-language learners cannot "learn" to interact in one hour).

Of course, I did have to warm-up the students, giving them what I claimed were some advantages:

- Women live longer
- Women can have babies
- Women perform better in languages

I also had to ask a few questions, because most of my L2s are polite people; they will only speak when spoken to. However, after this initial warm-up, I was ruthless with the individual L2, demanding a decent contribution of him in order to comply with the terms of interaction. When a student contributed in the form of monosyllables or short, neutral assertions, I pulled him up and asked him to expand. There is nothing complex about the technique, the teacher simply has to be alert to attempts at evading compromise: the conversation class, remember, implies a willingness to cooperate verbally on the part of the students. If they are there, it is to interact.

The idea is to reinforce the technique in successive classes, until the students eventually get used to intervening at will, disagreeing, commenting, using body-language, and so on. The teacher must let nothing slip by, that is no student should be allowed to "pass" on a question or any other talk directed at him. If a student is even only mildly involved in an exchange, the teacher should let him know that he will be expected to contribute soon to the current exchange.

The teacher will probably have to remind students of the concept of interaction on a regular basis-people being people-but I still think the exercise has its advantages. And it does not have to take the form of a hunting expedition, where the lazy student is shown up in front of the assembled L2s. When an L2 tries to slip in a short, phrase-like contribution which tends to close a conversation, simply give him a gentle metaphorical rap on the knuckles. The latter, as well as being pedagogical, can actually create a humorous atmosphere.

The above idea is not a traditional lesson plan, but it can be presented to the students at the start of a class, and repeated, as said above, in subsequent ones. One additional way to introduce the technique is to get the students to think about how they speak to their friends, and to compare the conclusions with what goes on in a typical EFL conversation class. This serves, once again, to sensitize the pupils to the concept and features of interaction.

This technique does not seek to replace any existing ideas on the teaching of communicative-English, it merely wishes to be considered as an additional tool. The reason I have highlighted the concept of interaction is because that is what people do most in their daily lives, whether they be native speakers or second-language learners. My theory is that, if a person is accustomed to interacting for almost 16 hours a day in his native language, then surely we, as teachers, must try to get him to carry on interacting in conversation class, albeit it with less fluency. Anyway, the personal and social elements of life do not need 100%-accurate dialogue. So, while we the teachers cannot show students how to exercise their vocal cords, we CAN remind them to use normal, conversational tactics such as challenging, interrupting, querying each other and so on. It makes for a dynamic class, and the L2s do appreciate a teacher who makes them work-which here means "interact".