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Teaching and Learning

Classroom interactions

KEY IDEAS

- Interaction is a social process of meaning-making and interpreting
- Interaction has an important place in education as it allows active engagement with ideas and interpretation
- Interaction must be purposeful and meaningful for participants

Interaction as structural

Languages classrooms are fundamentally interactive. However, the nature and quality of the interaction varies according to the ways in which it is understood and constructed.

Studies of classroom interaction have tended to focus on the organisation of talk in the classroom and on identifying structures, such as the Initiation-Response-Feedback structure of teacher-student talk (eg Cazden, 1988; Stubbs, 1986). They have also examined patterns of teacher talk directed to students (eg the use of questions, feedback, recasts) or of student talk in small group interaction (eg the use of learners' clarification requests, comprehension and confirmation checks, how students interpret instructions). Much work in Communicative Language Teaching has also focused on the idea that classroom interactions should be 'natural', by which it is assumed that they will resemble conversations in a number of ways: unequal participation, the negotiation of meaning, topic nomination and negotiation by more than one speaker, and the right of interlocutors to decide whether to contribute to an interaction or not (Krashen & Terrell, 1983). Such studies assume that language instruction is enhanced by certain ways of talking designed to provide students with opportunities for original utterances in the target language, clarifying the meaning of units of language, and modelling grammatically correct versions of learners' talk. These studies portray interaction as any and every opportunity to use the target language and see interaction as successful if meanings are understood.

What is missing from such a view of interaction is an appreciation of the fact that interaction is *purposeful*. People do not talk in order to use language: they use language in order to talk. Therefore people need to have something to talk about and someone they wish to talk about these things with. By removing communicative purpose as a relevant consideration in classroom action, language teaching has tended to construct interaction as a sterile and pointless activity. Moreover, by removing communicative purpose from interaction, such views make it difficult to determine the educational purpose of interaction: what learning is being developed, supported or enhanced by interaction? If the purpose of interaction is solely to use the target language, and any target language use is unproblematically seen as 'learning', then the sorts of learning through which interaction can be developed are necessarily limited and superficial.

Interaction as social

More recent understandings of interaction, and its roles and purpose in teaching and learning, see it as more than just the exchange of target language talk. Interaction is fundamentally a social process of meaning-making and interpreting, and the educational value of interaction grows out of developing and elaborating interaction as a social process. It is through interaction that learners engage with ideas and concepts and the diverse interpretations and understandings of these held by their interlocutors. In interaction, the participant is both performer and analyser of what is happening. Educationally purposeful interaction must engage the learner in both roles.

Understanding communication as a social process does not simply mean that language is used for 'socialising', it means that there is a social purpose for the interaction. In classrooms, the social purpose of interaction is related to learning, through the discussion of ideas, insights and interpretations. Classroom interaction is more than a simulation of everyday interaction: it is interaction with learning as its central concern.

A social view of interaction also means considering the participants in interaction in different ways. It involves interactions between teachers and students and between students and teachers, between students, between students and others (including the voices of others as they are encountered through texts, video, digital technologies, etc). Interactions need to bring opportunities to students to explore their ideas, interpretations and reactions as they encounter the ideas, interpretations and reactions of others. Such learning involves:

- using language as a starting point for interaction to generate ideas, interpretations and responses
- seeking opinions and the reasoning behind these
- probing responses to elaborate deeper and more complex understandings
- drawing out, analysing and building on personal experiences
- eliciting variability in contributions, and engaging with the diversity found as a resource for further interaction
- engaging in open dialogues between participants in which all have opportunities to explore their own perceptions and understandings
- developing language abilities to meet interactional needs rather than limiting interactional opportunities to current language capabilities.

In planning for interactions, it is important to consider the tasks with which students are to engage. As each task constructs an experience of language and culture, there needs to be variation in the types of tasks to which students are exposed over the course of the program. If too much class time is devoted to a particular type of activity – for example language practice, small group discussion, text analysis, projects – the range of experiences of language, culture and learning available to the students will be reduced and skewed towards certain capabilities rather than others.

In considering tasks, it is important to take into account not only what students will do but also what they will learn. If tasks are understood as activities, then it is the carrying out of the activity itself that becomes the goal and learning is only understood in relation to whether and how well the task could be done (that is, knowing the procedure). This form of learning leaves out the deeper conceptual, reflective elements which are central to the process. To move deeper, it is important to consider what students will gain from doing the task, what they will take away from the learning experience and be able to draw on in other contexts and at other times. In considering what learners will take from a learning experience, it is also important to consider what learners bring to that experience that can be drawn upon, developed and/or challenged. It is important to consider what the students will engage with in the task, the central ideas or concepts which will be the basis of their deeper learning, and how the task will bring them to such engagement. Moving to this view of task design strengthens the purposefulness of the interactions in which students engage and possibilities that they offer.

Questions for reflection

- 1 What kinds of interactions are evident in your classroom teaching and learning?
How would you characterise them?
- 2 Using a task from your current program or textbook, describe how you could modify it to strengthen interaction as discussed above.
- 3 Imagine interaction in your language classroom from the point of view of one of your students. How do you think they might be experiencing the interactions you create? Ask them and compare their responses with yours.
- 4 Audio-record an interaction from one of your classes. Analyse it using the distinction between doing and learning made above. What do you notice?