

The nature of interactional language

KEY IDEAS

- An interactive classroom requires attention to the nature and quality of language use
- Questioning is a central element in intercultural language teaching and learning and requires a thoughtful approach to the purpose of questions in learning

In the language classroom, language provides the starting point for learning and interactional language contributes directly to the nature and quality of the learning. This effectiveness is not simply a product of the amount of talk, but is influenced fundamentally by the quality of the talk. Talk needs to be *about* something and the substance of the talk needs to have value in its own right.

In planning for interaction, teachers plan the sorts of things that students will be able to say, whether in speaking or in writing. What sorts of ideas will they be able to explore? What sorts of ideas, interpretations and responses are likely to result from the experiences in which they participate? How will they be able to participate in these experiences? What roles are constructed for students in the interaction: initiator, respondent, critic, investigator, etc?

Explaining

Explanations are a typical element of teacher talk in which teachers introduce new concepts or information for students to assimilate into their own knowledge. In providing an explanation, a teacher is the sole source of the information being delivered and the teacher's authority is the sole validation of the information. Explanations are mostly monologues and may occupy an extensive period of class time. During an explanation, students are often expected to be passive receivers of the information being provided by the teachers, although they may be encouraged to seek clarification if they do not understand aspects of the explanation. As a part of any instructional approach, explanations need to be interactive to promote active forms of engagement with the material by students.

Concepts can be introduced in other ways which allow learners the possibility of constructing, exploring and expressing their own interpretations of the material to which they are exposed. Where learners are given experiences of meaningful communication in the target language in which ideas, attitudes or perspectives of others are present, these can be used as a starting point for exploration in which learners actively construct their own knowledge about the concept. The process is interactive in multiple senses. It involves interactions between students and the originator of the text in which they make interpretations of the language and its meaning for themselves. It needs to be guided interactively by teachers as they scaffold the processes of assembling and interpretation through questions, hints, reminders and modelling. Ideally, it should also involve opportunities for students to interact in developing and refining their interpretations, in communicating their interpretations to others and in commenting on and reflecting on the interpretations of others. While an explanation delivers information which needs to be remembered, the interactive investigation of information provides opportunities and processes for developing learners' understandings of the material.

Questioning

Questioning is a central part of developing interactive language in the classroom. Teachers allocate significant teaching time to asking questions and it is these questions which give shape to the lesson. Students' questions tend to be less frequent and are often restricted to clarification or confirmation functions. In an interactive classroom, questions need to be distributed across participants in a way which allows for collaborative exploration of ideas. It is not just who asks questions and how often that is important in the intercultural language classroom, but also what sorts of questions are asked. In studies of teachers' questioning, two main question types are described:

- *display questions* in which the answer is known by the teacher and used to elicit recall of information from students
- *referential questions* in which the answer is not known by the teacher and used to elicit a meaningful communication from the student.

Of these two types, display questions are specific to instructional contexts while referential questions are found in many types of social interaction. Display questions include, for example:

What did Marc lose on the train?

Does Paulo have a cat?

Why did Taroo not go to school today?

How did José get to work?

Referential questions can be closed or open. Closed questions are those which have only a single response, which is right or wrong, or true or false. For example:

How do you get to school in the morning?

When do you play sport?

These questions elicit facts, are relatively easy to answer, can be answered relatively quickly and keep control of the interaction with the questioner, almost always the teacher. They do not open up possibilities for going beyond the frame developed by the question.

Open questions are those which are designed to lead to a broad range of possible responses. For example:

What did you do during the holidays?

How do you spend your leisure time?

What do you think about nuclear power?

Open questions allow for the possibility of opening up discussion and of developing more questions on the basis of the initial response. They ask the respondent to think and reflect, to give opinions and feelings and they hand greater control of the interaction to the respondent.

Other types of questions include the following.

- Polar questions, to which the answer is either yes or no: *Do you like ice-cream?*
- Alternative questions, to which the answer is a choice between possibilities:
Do you prefer the red one or the blue one?
- *What, where* and *who* questions, which elicit facts: *What is your name?*
Who gave you the book? Where is the Eiffel Tower?
- *Why* and *how*, which elicit opinion or reasoning: *Why is Mari unhappy?*
How can Hans solve the problem?

The conventional distinctions between questions are not enough to provide a basis for developing interactional language in the classroom. They are all question types and do not consider the types of answers which come from the questions. The most important element for understanding the nature and role of questions is to consider the purpose of the question for it is the purpose which shapes the possibilities of the answers. For example:

- eliciting information
- exploring possibilities
- investigating connections
- eliciting interpretations
- eliciting assumptions
- promoting reflection.

These purposes can be elicited by a diverse range of question types. The focus of planning interaction here is not so much to ensure a diverse range of question types as to ensure that questions are used with a diverse range of purposes, appropriate to the learning focus. For example:

Why do you say that?

What is your interpretation based on?

What do you think about that?

Why do you think X thinks this way?

How do X's ideas differ from your own?

How could this be seen differently?

How does your interpretation relate to X's?

Quite often the purpose is not achieved by a single question. Rather, a question launches an interaction which is then elaborated through other questioning possibilities with multiple participants contributing questions and answers.

Questions for reflection

- 1 How would you characterise the kinds of questions you pose your students? The ones they pose to you? The ones they pose to each other?
- 2 Prior to your next class, consider the tasks/materials/ideas that you will be working with. Prepare two or three key questions that will extend your students' engagement. After the class, take note of additional questions you posed. What do you notice?
- 3 Describe how you might use questions to extend students' thinking.