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Classroom Interaction and Communication Strategies in Learning English as a Foreign Language

Summary

The article focuses on the development of interaction in a foreign language classroom. Teachers can help students to develop their interaction skills and students themselves can apply various strategies to become effective communicators in a foreign language. Firstly, different teacher and student roles are presented. Secondly, different classroom organisation types for encouraging interaction among different participants in the classroom are described. Next, Flander's Interaction Analysis Categories (FIAC) and Byrne's model for classroom interaction are given as two models upon which to analyse classroom interaction and plan activities for developing it. In the final part some communication strategies are described and exemplified in detail. If all the techniques and strategies are put into practice, one can expect an improvement in classroom interaction and furthermore in everyday-life situations when students communicate with foreign speakers.

Razredna interakcija in komunikacijske strategije pri učenju angleščine kot tujega jezika

Povzetek

Prispevek se osredotoči na razvijanje razredne interakcije pri učenju angleščine kot tujega jezika. Na razvoj interakcijskih spretnosti lahko vplivajo učitelji, prav tako pa lahko učenci sami uporabijo različne strategije, ki so jim v pomoč pri govoru v tujem jeziku. Na začetku prispevka predstavim raznolike vloge učitelja in učencev v tujejezikovnem razredu. Nato opišem učne oblike, ki spodbujajo interakcijo med udeleženci v učnem procesu. Kasneje predstavim dva modela za analiziranje razredne interakcije in za ustvarjanje dejavnosti, ki spodbujajo sporazumevanje v razredu; model Flandersovih kategorij interakcijske analize in Byrnov model razredne interakcije. V zaključnem delu so prikazane nekatere komunikacijske strategije, s katerimi si učenci pomagajo pri sporazumevanju v tujem jeziku. Če pri poučevanju uporabljamo omenjene tehnike in strategije, lahko pričakujemo učinkovitejšo komunikacijo v razredu in v življenjskih situacijah, v katerih se bodo učenci sporazumevali v tujem jeziku.

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'Language learning evolves out of learning how to carry on conversations.'

(Hatch)

1. Introduction

Effective classroom interaction has two implications. The first one concerns a pleasant atmosphere in the classroom with friendly relationships among the participants of the learning process. The second one, which is mostly described in the article, encourages students to become effective communicators in a foreign language. This can be achieved through various ways: by implementing different student and teacher roles, by exposing students to a varied classroom organisation, by employing a variety of activities, by helping students to express themselves and by encouraging their use of communication strategies. If the two implications are joined, we get a pleasant classroom atmosphere in which students are trying to communicate in the foreign language.

2. Classroom Interaction

The Cambridge International Dictionary of English defines the verb 'to interact' as *'to communicate with or react to (each other)'*. The New Oxford Dictionary of English defines the noun 'interaction' as a *'reciprocal action or influence'*. Therefore interaction is more than action followed by reaction. It includes acting reciprocally, acting upon each other. Rivers (1987, 57) describes the word through its Latin roots: *'agere'* meaning *'to do'* and *'inter'* meaning *'among'*. It shows us the active and social part of a human being that affects other people through interaction. Brown (2001, 165) relates interaction to communication, saying, *"…interaction is, in fact, the heart of communication: it is what communication is all about"*.

Interaction has a similar meaning in the classroom. We might define classroom interaction as a two-way process between the participants in the learning process. The teacher influences the learners and vice versa.

<div align="center">

Teacher   Students

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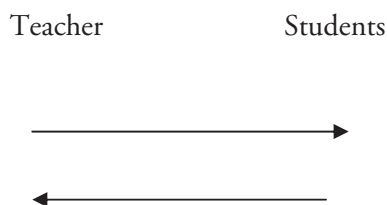
Interaction can proceed harmoniously or it can be fraught with tension. Malamah-Thomas (1987, 8) states that every interaction situation has the potential for co-operation or conflict. How the situation actually develops depends on the attitudes and intentions of the people

involved, and on their interpretations of each other's attitudes and intentions. Needless to say, only when there is co-operation between both sides can communication effectively take place and learning occur.

Communication is usually undertaken for a purpose. A person has a reason for transmitting a message to someone else. Nolasco and Arthur (1987, 5) explain some other purposes of conversation, i.e. *'the creation and maintenance of social relationships, the negotiation of status and social roles, as well as deciding on and carrying out joint actions'.* The same happens in a classroom situation; people are gathered there for the purpose of learning. Besides that, people have other reasons for communicating in the classroom. Since the classroom is a community of some kind, there is the need to establish and maintain personal relationships. The teacher has to establish a rapport with the class, with its individuals, and individual students form different sorts of relationships with the group and with the teacher.

Interaction is mainly achieved by two means of resources: language and non-verbal means of expression. Non-verbal resources play just as important a part as language does. This holds true for a classroom as well as for other social situations. The one thing that makes the classroom different from any other social situation is that it has a primary pedagogic purpose. Teachers spend a lot of time talking, lecturing, asking questions, giving instructions, and so on. The teacher does not only use language for these functions, but he or she demonstrates and uses mime a lot.

3. Participants In Classroom Interaction

These are the most frequent ways of organising classroom interaction, depending on who communicates with whom:

a)   Teacher – learners
b)   Teacher – learner/a group of learners
c)   Learner – learner
d)   Learners – learners

The first form of interaction (teacher – learners) is established when a teacher talks to the whole class at the same time. He takes the role of a leader or controller and decides about the type and process of the activity. The primary function of such interaction is controlled practising of certain language structures or vocabulary. Mostly, they are in the form of repeating structures after the teacher (the model). This type of practice is also referred to as 'a drill'.

The second arrangement is conducted when the teacher refers to the whole class, but expects only one student or a group of students to answer. It is often used for evaluation of individual students. This arrangement can also be used for an informal conversation at the beginning of the lesson or for leading students into a less guided activity.

The third type of interaction is called 'pair work'. Students get an assignment, which they have to finish in pairs. The teacher holds the role of a consultant or adviser, helping when necessary. After the activity, he puts the pairs into a whole group and each pair reports on their work. The last type of classroom interaction is called 'group work'. As with pair work, the teacher's function here is that of a consultant and individual groups report on their work as a follow-up activity.

The last two ways of organisation are particularly useful for encouraging interaction among students. In large classes, they present the only possibility for as many students as possible to use the foreign language. The research has shown (Long et al. 1976 in Nunan 1991, 51) that students use more language functions in pair- and group-work than in other forms of interaction. It has also been proven that students perceive them as the most pleasant ways of learning, because they feel relaxed and subsequently communicate better (Phillips 1983 in Hatch 1992, 93). Such work encourages independent learning and gives some responsibility for learning to students. It approaches real-life communication where students talk to their peers in small groups or pairs. Nevertheless, whole-class organisation should not be completely neglected since it is still more appropriate for guided and controlled activities.

4. The Role Of The Teacher In Classroom Interaction

In a traditional classroom the teacher had the dominant role of an all-knowing leader who 'filled' students' empty heads with knowledge. This role has changed and the teacher has now got many roles depending on different classroom situations. In a broad sense, he is a **facilitator of learning**, which includes the following (Littlewood 1981, 92):

- A general **overseer** of learning, who coordinates the activities so that they form a coherent progression from lesser to greater communicative ability.
- A classroom **manager**, who is responsible for grouping activities into lessons and for their overall organisation.
- A language **instructor**, who presents new language, controls, evaluates and corrects learners' performance.
- In free communicative activities he will act as a **consultant** or **adviser**, helping where necessary. He may move around the classroom and monitor student's progress, strengths and weaknesses.
- Sometimes he will participate in an activity as a **'co-communicator'** with the learners. He may encourage learners without taking their main role.

These roles are frequently interrelated and some others (e.g. **assessor**, **observer** as explained in Harmer 2001) could be added. The roles of a consultant or co-communicator encourage classroom interaction most, but they need the support of other roles (e.g. for organising and controlling activities).

5. Interaction Analysis

Interaction analysis shares characteristics both with discourse and conversation analysis. Some authors (e.g. Hatch 1992) classify interaction and conversation analysis under the term of discourse analysis, whereas others define them separately. Nunan (1992, 161) designed a scheme with their major differences:

	Discourse analysis	Conversation analysis	Interaction analysis
Method of generating data	Invented Elicited Naturalistic	Naturalistic	Elicited Naturalistic
Mode	Spoken Written	Spoken	Spoken
Type of analysis	Categorical	Interpretive	Interpretive
Units of analysis	Linguistic	Non-linguistic	Both linguistic and non-linguistic

Table 1: Characteristics of discourse, conversation and interaction analysis (Nunan 1992, 161).

Interaction analysis deals with elicited and natural samples of language, but not with the invented ones. Unlike discourse analysis, interaction analysis is concerned exclusively with spoken language. Furthermore, a discourse analyst brings to the analytical task a predetermined set of categories, whereas interaction analysts prefer a discursive, interpretive type of analysis. The final distinction among categories is the focus of analysis. In interaction analysis it is carried out in linguistic and non-linguistic terms. Thus the interaction analysts examine rhetorical and social routines realised in speech.

Flanders (1970 in Malamah-Thomas 1987, 20–1) established ten **Interaction Analysis Categories** (FIAC) to describe the teaching and learning processes according to the classroom language. These are as follows (ibid.):

Teacher talk
a) **Accepts feeling:** Feelings may be positive or negative and their prediction and recalling are included.
b) **Praises or encourages:** This includes telling jokes, nodding head or using phrases like 'Go on'.
c) **Accepts or uses ideas of pupils:** The teacher clarifies or develops students' ideas.
d) **Asks questions:** Questions may be about content or procedure.
e) **Lectures:** Gives facts or opinions about content or procedure.
f) **Gives directions,** commands or orders.
g) **Criticizes or justifies authority:** E.g. statements intended to change pupils' behaviour.

Pupil talk
h) **Response**: Teacher initiates interaction. Freedom to express own ideas is limited.
i) **Initiation**: Students express their own ideas, initiate a topic, etc.

Silence
j) **Silence or confusion**: Pauses, short periods of silence, confusion and incomprehension.

An observer may define the share and type of each participant's talk in a classroom interaction through the categories mentioned above. Conscious use of a variety of categories for pedagogic or social reasons is one of the aims of the communicative classroom.

6.1. A Model for Classroom Interaction

TEACHER CONTROLLED			
	WHOLE CLASS ACTIVITIES		
A C C U R A C Y	*A* Drills Games Controlled conversation Listening Writing	*C* Conversation Discussion Simulation Games Story-telling Listening Writing	F L U E N C Y
	B Exercises Controlled conversation Role play Games Questionnaires Listening Writing	*D* Discussion Games Role play Project work Listening Reading Writing	
	PAIR WORK ⟷ GROUP WORK		
	LEARNER DIRECTED		

Table 2: A model for classroom interaction (Byrne 1987, 106).

Type A activities are focused on accuracy. They are controlled by the teacher and done with the whole class. Drills and traditional language games are most present here.

Type B activities are focused on correct use of language too, but they are directed by learners and done in pairs or groups (e.g. mini-dialogues).

Type C activities focus on fluency. However, they are controlled by the teacher and done with the whole-class. Whole-class discussions and storytelling are some of them.

Type D activities are fluency activities directed by learners and done in pairs or groups. They present the least controlled type of classroom interaction.

The role of the teacher varies in each type from an instructor (type A) to a consultant (type D). Byrne's model offers a comprehensive description for classroom interaction, according to which teachers can plan activities alternately focusing on accuracy/fluency or whole-class/group-work organisation.

7. Strategies For Helping Students In Classroom Interaction

7.1 Teacher's Help

Teachers can help students to develop their interaction skills in a foreign language. Some of the ways of teacher's help are the following:

a) Asking questions

It is easier for students to answer questions than to initiate a conversation or make up an independent statement. The teacher indicates with questions some of the words and language structures which will appear in the answer. He can ask additional questions to bring the student to the right answer. The strategy can be used in retelling stories or descriptions. Nevertheless, this form of help is still very guided and does not really lead to freedom of expression. Therefore, it is especially appropriate for beginners. The example below is taken from a recorded lesson of ten-year-old children.

> T[1]: *What colour is the crocodile?*
> Ss: *Green, black and grey.*
> T: *Is it dangerous?*
> S1: *Yes.*
> T: *How long is it?*
> S2: *Six metres.*
> T: *How many legs has it got?*
> S3: *Four.*
> T: *Can it fly?*
> S4: *No.*
> ….
> (Dagarin 2002)

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[1] T – a teacher, Ss – students, S1 – the first student, S2 – the second student, S3 – the third student, and so on.

b) Body language

Students can obtain a lot of information from teacher's gestures and mime. The teacher can help students to express themselves with body language. The example below is taken from a lesson in which we described an ostrich. Sometimes students did not know how to continue speaking and I prompted them by exaggeratedly acting out body movements of animals:

> *T* (I point to my legs and show emphatically their length): *It's got …*
> *Ss: … long legs*
> S1: *It a long neck.*
> Ss: *And a long …*
> S2: *He lives in Africa.*
> S1: *It can hard kick.*
> S3: *It can run.*
> S4: *It's got eggs.*
> *S5: Big eggs.*
> *T: It can't …* (I mime the action of flying with my arms)
> *Ss: … fly.*
> (Ibid.)

c) A topic

Teachers can stimulate students' interaction by choosing appropriate topics. Young students prefer talking about sport, computers, music, dinosaurs, spaceships etc. Students can say a lot more about a topic of their interest than something they don't really know well.

Johnstone (1989, 9) described some other strategies taken by teachers that might help students understand the teacher's utterance and interact appropriately:

- *"Regular checking of understanding,*
- *Using familiar words,*
- *Applying lower cognitive level,*
- *Immediate repetition,*
- *Recycling of information,*
- *Paraphrase,*
- *Other aspects of redundancy,*
- *Slower, clearer talk,*
- *Exaggerated intonation, emphasis,*
- *Structurally simplified language,*
- *Clarity of discourse markers,*
- *Key vocabulary and structures, notified in advance,*
- *Simple tasks, notified in advance,*

- *Routinisation,*
- *Translation into L1."*

Moon (2000, 71) described some of such strategies as well:

- *"Showing genuine interest in and responding positively to pupil's answers so as to motivate them to want to speak, e.g.* Yes? *with an encouraging smile.*
- *Encouraging attention to language accuracy but in a constructive way.*
- *Using English at a level pupils can understand so that pupils are getting more input.*
- *Helping pupils to express their messages by prompting or cueing pupils to say more (so they are 'pushed' to use the language to communicate).*
- *Relating talk to familiar contexts which are meaningful for pupils, thus encouraging them and making them want to talk, e.g. pupils' own news.*
- *Working in partnership with pupils to achieve a common goal."*

These are some of the strategies a teacher might employ to encourage students' communication. General classroom atmosphere is also important. At every attempt to speak, students are exposed to the criticism of their listeners and they need high self-esteem to take risks. The atmosphere should be supportive and it should prompt students to be creative with the language.

7.2 Communication Strategies

'To say something is often just as important as to say what you would actually like to say'
(Corder 1983, 17).

In addition to teachers helping students when interacting in a foreign language, students can apply a number of strategies to overcome communication difficulties. Tarone et al. (1983, 5) define communication strategy as *'a systematic attempt by the learner to express or decode meaning in the target language, in situations where the appropriate systematic target language rules have not been formed'.* Therefore, communication strategies are particularly helpful to beginners, who do not have many rules formed yet.

Tarone (1983, 65) suggests the following criteria for characterising communication strategies:

a) 'A speaker desires to communicate a meaning X to a listener.
b) The speaker believes the linguistic or sociolinguistic structure desired to communicate meaning X is unavailable, or is not shared with the listener.
c) The speaker chooses to:
- *Avoid – not attempt to communicate meaning X; or,*
- *Attempt alternate means to communicate meaning X.'*

The second choice is more effective than the first one and it encourages risk taking in learning and using a foreign language.

Bygate (1987, 42) divides communication strategies into two main parts:

a) Achievement strategies
1.   Guessing strategies
2.   Paraphrase strategies
3.   Co-operative strategies

b) Reduction strategies
4.   Avoidance strategies

Both achievement strategies and reduction strategies compensate for a problem of expression. The former compensate for a language gap by improvising a substitute and the latter are used when a part or a complete message is abandoned. The speaker adapts his utterance to his language competence by reducing his speaking to what he can express. However, he is still able to keep the fluency of an interaction even though he shortens his speaking turn.

A speaker who deploys **guessing strategies** probes for a word which he does not know or is not sure what it means. If the listener recognizes and understands the expression then his strategy was successful. There are various types of guessing strategies:

a)   The speaker can foreignize a mother-tongue word, pronouncing it as though it belonged to the target language. One of the students in my classroom[2] used this strategy when discussing students' pets. He asked another one: *"What pasma [peɪsmə] is your dog?"*, because he did not know the English word 'breed'. The strategy was successful because students shared the same mother tongue. However, it would be ineffective in a foreign language environment.
b)   The speaker can borrow a word from his mother tongue, without changing it in any way. Similarly to the first one, this strategy is very often effective only in a monolingual environment. Some of the examples are: *"Can I have edigs, please?"*, or *"It's a pig. Its home is svinjak."*
c)   Another guessing strategy occurs when a speaker provides a literal translation of his mother-tongue word. Examples: *"Big Britain"* instead of *"Great Britain"*, *"Ostrich no fly"* instead of *"Ostrich doesn't fly"*, *"Driving a bike"* instead of *"Riding a bike"*, *"What's the clock?"* instead of *"What's the time?"*. Such examples show students' creativity, which is an important step in language learning.
d)   A fourth guessing strategy is developed when a student coins a word. He can invent a target-language word or expression creatively on the basis of his knowledge of the language. Sometimes he might even produce a correct expression which he did not realise existed in the target language. Young learners can manipulate language in this way to a great extent. To provide an example, a nine-year-old student used the expression *"zero tail"*, when she wanted to say that a gorilla does not have a tail.

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[2] All examples in the article are taken from a written transcription of audio-recordings of my lessons. Students were

Bygate (1987, 44) divides **paraphrase strategies** into two main types:

a) Lexical substitution strategy, which involves searching one's knowledge for a synonym or a more general word (i.e. a superordinate) to express meaning;
b) Circumlocution is applied, when a speaker uses more than one word to express his meaning (e.g. *"you clean your teeth with it"* instead of saying "*a tooth brush"*).

Paraphrase strategies are one of the most effective communication strategies, because they can be applied in a monolingual as well as in a multilingual environment.

A third type of achievement strategies is **co-operative strategies**. The speaker searches for help in different ways: He may ask for a translation of his mother-tongue word, he may point to the object he wants to name or by miming. Young learners very often use these strategies. In the middle of their utterance they ask for a translation, e.g. "*Crocodile is …kako se reče 'živi'…"* or *"We go to…kako se reče 'maša*?" (Dagarin 2002).

Avoidance strategies prompt speakers to alter the message in order to avoid communication trouble. They may want to avoid phonemic, grammatical or lexical problems. Nevertheless, speakers have to be aware that in this case the original intention of their message is partly or wholly lost.

A speaker may thus (Johnstone 1989, 67):

- Take over the role of a listener and respond only in short sentences;
- Settle for mainly non-verbal communication;
- Avoid or deflect topic;
- Use minimal expression and risk leaving ambiguous messages;
- Include many fixed phrases;
- Distort reality – sometimes it is easier to speak about untrue things;
- Avoid interaction by giving a false excuse (e.g. say that he has to leave).

> T: *Nadja, how was your holiday?*
> S: *Fine.*
> T: *Did you go anywhere?*
> S: *Yes.*
> T: *Did you go to the seaside?*
> S: *No. Paris.*
> (Dagarin 2002)

The example above shows how a ten-year-old student avoided taking the lead role in the interaction and how she responded by answering mainly in short sentences.

The next example shows a nine-year-old student using only nouns and taking a risk of being misunderstood.

> T: *Where were you? Were you at the seaside?*
> S: *No. Grandad.*
> (Ibid.)

Szulc-Kurpaska (2000, 345) tried out communication strategies of thirty-five eleven-year olds, who had been learning English as a foreign language for four years. She found out that most of the students do not have comprehension problems when listening to a native speaker. Communication strategies they mainly used when interacting were the use of the mother tongue and body language. Some of them repeated words after the speaker or were creative with language by coining new words. Children, compared to adults use miming more often, because they do not have abstract strategies developed (e.g. contrasting two or more languages).

Students have to be encouraged to use a variety of communication strategies, especially those that are effective in multilingual environment as well (e.g. paraphrase strategies). Through their use, skills for fluency and successful interaction are developed.

8. Conclusion

Successful interaction is the basis of positive human relationships among people. Similarly to everyday-life interaction, students have to be trained to be effective communicators in a foreign language. We can do this through different ways of encouraging classroom interaction.

Firstly, teachers can take on a variety of roles, not always performing the role of an instructor, but also that of a consultant or a co-communicator. Classroom organisation can also be adapted more often for one-to-one or group-work arrangement to encourage peer interaction.

Secondly, teachers can observe classroom interaction more consciously (e.g. by action research) and analyse the gathered data in an interpretive way. They may put some of the results of the research in action and see how different strategies can improve students' interaction.

Thirdly, classroom interaction can be more effective if a variety of teacher and student talk is applied in the classroom. Teachers may accept feelings, praise and accept students' ideas instead of merely lecturing, and similarly, students may be encouraged to initiate conversation more, instead of only responding to teachers.

Fourthly, classroom interaction can be improved through a variety of activities for developing accuracy or fluency and controlled alternately by a teacher and students.

And finally, classroom interaction can be developed by applying different strategies for helping students to communicate. Teachers help students by asking questions, choosing appropriate topics and providing them with comprehensible input. Students can improve their interaction skills by deploying a variety of communication strategies.

These are some of the ways of encouraging successful classroom interaction. They can help students to become better communicators of a foreign language in and out of the classroom.

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