

# **Interactive Language Teaching in the Intensive English Classroom**

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## **Abstract**

This is a reflection of the successful application of the basic principles of interactive language teaching to the intensive reading classroom. Communication is interaction between people who have something to share. If communication is the objective of foreign language teaching, then interaction must be present. If skillfully handled, interactive classroom techniques can promote learner initiative and autonomy, which in turn ensure successful language learning.

**Key Words:** interaction involvement engagement

## **I. Introduction**

In the past I often asked the senior students in my TESOL class their views about the courses they had taken during their four-year study at the university. One of the questions was “Which course did you enjoy most and which one did you enjoy least? Say why?” Many reflected very badly on the intensive reading course they had had saying that because they were not challenged and involved in class. Such reflections from the students dismayed teachers who teach intensive reading for they, generally, tend to believe that their job is more important than that of those who teach other basic courses. They have to prepare a lot before class and do a great deal of talking in class. For example, they need to find out and pass on to their student’s background information about authors of texts, about historical events and cultural differences. They need to explain the usage of new words, sentence structures and the writing style. They must dig-up writers’ intentions, implications and make exercises for learner practice. Yet, their work is not appreciated.

## **II. Research**

Then, I was asked to teach third-year intensive reading in the last few years. In order to get more detailed feedback from students I conducted a research, which contains two surveys. The first one was conducted on June 8, 2003 in two third-year intensive reading classes. 42 students were involved. The second one was made on December 23, 2003 in another two third-year classes. 45 students were involved. The surveys were in the form of a questionnaire with one close-ended question and an open-ended one. The students were expected to write in the way they felt comfortable, in sentences, in phrases, in Chinese or in English. They were also expected to reflect their views anonymously.

Questionnaire:

1. Show your general view of the intensive reading course by circling A, B, or C.
  - A. I like it and learn a lot.
  - B. I don't like it very much and I don't learn much.
  - C. I don't like it at all.
2. Please give your evaluations and suggestions for the improvement of the course.

The results of the two surveys were close. Nearly half of the students in the four classes (students who choose A account for 41% and 39% respectively) think highly of the intensive reading course. They like it very much and learn a lot. The rest (more than half of the students choose B, accounting for 57% and 60% respectively) are basically satisfied with this course.

Their main constructive suggestions were:

- 1) The textbook should be changed because the texts are old and boring.
- 2) More information about the culture and history of the target communities should be given.
- 3) More colorful teaching methods and techniques should be adopted.
- 4) Increase students' involvement in the classroom. Teaching should be more student-centered.
- 5) The five quizzes have taken students too much time to prepare and brought them much pressure. So it is better to abolish the quizzes in order to give students more free time after class.

Suggestions Number 1 and Number 5 concern the reform of textbooks and exams, which requires the joint effort and the approval of the school authority. So I started working on the teaching method and classroom techniques.

### **III. Interactive Language Teaching**

In my attempts to improve classroom work mainly seeking ways and ideas for students' involvement, I turned to interactive language teaching and tried out many of its

principles. My efforts in the past year seemed to have worked. The major characteristics of interactive language teaching can be found in the following.

If the cultivation of communicative skills in the target language is the goal of education, then interaction must be present in the classroom. Since real communication is interaction between people and linguistic interaction is a collaborative activity, classroom teaching and learning activities must be interactive in nature.

Interactive language teaching stresses the importance of providing learners with more activities to interact directly with the target language--to acquire it by using it rather than to learn it by studying it. It requires the teacher to step out of the limelight, to give a full role to the students in carrying out activities, to accept all kinds of opinions, and to tolerate errors. On the other hand, the students are expected to listen to others (the teacher and other students), to talk with others, and to negotiate meaning in a shared context.

The major roles of the interactive teacher include the roles of a facilitator, a manager, a resource, an independent participant, a researcher and a learner. As a facilitator he makes the process of learning an easier task, helps students to clear away roadblocks and to find shortcuts. As a manager he plans lessons, organizes learning activities, gives feedback and structures classroom time. As a resource he offers advice and counsel when students seek them. As a researcher and a learner he makes an effort to find out how well students learn and how much assistance is needed. He grows with each passing day professionally and intelligently. The interactive teacher always asks: How well do I balance teacher talk and student talk in the classroom? Am I accepting students' feelings in a non-threatening way? Am I offering sufficient praise? Am I lecturing too much? Do I give my students opportunities to initiate the target language on their own?

The most workable classroom interactive activities are presentations, pair work, discussions, debates and written exercises. All these activities need to be task-oriented so that they can help nurture students' problem-solving and creative abilities, and can give them experience in functioning in realistic discourse.

Well-organized interactions will make learners rack their brain, speak their mind, share their views with others naturally. Thus words slip out or pour out desirably.

#### **IV. Findings and Implications**

I would like to share with you some of my findings from the classroom experiment.

##### **1. The teacher's questioning strategies**

The most important key to creating an interactive classroom is the initiation of interaction by the teacher, for the teacher's appropriately framed questions will provide

necessary stepping-stones to communication. Besides, they give a) students the impetus and opportunities to produce comfortably language without having to risk initiating themselves; b) can serve to start a chain reaction of students interaction among themselves; c) can give the instructor immediate feedback about students' comprehension of the material under discussion; d) can provide students with opportunities to find out what they think by hearing what they say. There are basically two types of questions: display questions and referential questions. The former attempts to elicit information known by the teacher. While the later requests information not known by the questioner; often the responses involve judgment about facts that are not clear or a statement of value. Following are the seven categories of questions, ranging from the display questions to the referential ones, with typical classroom question words associated with each category (adapted from Kinsella, 1991, and Bloom, 1959).

- 1) Knowledge questions: Eliciting factual answers, testing recall and recognition of information.  
Common question words: Define. Tell. List. Identify. Describe. Select. Name. Point out. Label. Reproduce. Who? What? Where? Answer "yes" or "on."
- 2) Comprehension questions: Interpreting, extrapolating.  
Common question words: State in your own words. Explain. Define. Locate. Select. Indicate. Summarize. Outline. Match.
- 3) Application questions: Applying information heard or read to new situations.  
Common question words: Demonstrate how. Use the data to solve. Illustrate how. Show how. Apply. Construct. Explain. What is \_\_\_ used for? What would result? What would happen?
- 4) Inference questions: Forming conclusions that are not directly stated in instructional materials.  
Common question words: How? Why? What did \_\_\_ mean by? What does he believe? What conclusions can you draw from?
- 5) Analysis questions: Breaking down into parts, relating parts to the whole.  
Common questions words: Distinguish. Diagram. Chart. Plan. Deduce. Arrange. Separate. Outline. Classify. Contrast. Compare. Differentiate. Categorize. What is the relationship between? What is the function of? What motive? What conclusions? What is the main idea?
- 6) Synthesis questions: Combining elements into a new pattern.  
Common question words: Compose. Combine. Estimate. Invent. Choose. Hypothesize. Build. Solve. Design. Develop. What if? How would you test? What would you have done in this situation? What would happen if \_\_\_? How can you improve?
- 7) Evaluation questions: Making a judgment of good or bad, right or wrong, according to some set of criteria, and stating why.  
Common question words: Evaluate. Rate. Defend. Dispute. Decide which. Select. Judge. Grade. Verify. Choose why. Which is best? Which is more important? Which do you think is more appropriate?

This range begins with display questions and ends with highly referential questions. My practice proves that the referential questions are more challenging and provocative, which stimulate responses that are longer and more grammatically complex. The following are some of the provocative questions that I often use in my third-year classes.

- Can we take this word literally in this context?
- Why did the writer choose to use this word here?
- Try to guess the meaning of this word/phrase from the context?
- What is the synonym/antonym for \_\_\_ ?
- How do you understand this sentence?
- Can you find out the figure of speech used in this paragraph?
- Can you work out the metaphor used by the author?
- What is the main idea of \_\_\_?
- What conclusions can we/you draw from this paragraph/these sentences?
- What does the writer try to point out?
- What is the message/messages we can get from this?
- What is the implication of this \_\_\_?
- What would happen if \_\_\_?
- Which theory do you favor? Why?
- How do you prove that it is better than the other?
- How would you show that the contrary is true?
- How would you test?
- In what way are these statements paradoxical?
- How would you make him realize that he is wrong in the making of justice?

## **2. Engaging the students**

This is the point in a teaching sequence where the teacher tries to arouse students' interest, thus involving their emotions. If the teacher talks all the time and if lessons are uninvolving learners tend to become impatient and "switch off". On the other hand, when they are engaged they learn better than when they are partly or wholly disengaged. My practice is, generally, a combination of the interaction followed by input strategy and the input followed by interaction strategy. Input is used only when I am certain that what I present is important and is beyond students.

Interactive activities, which frequently interest and engage my students, are presentations, discussions, debates, pair work and group work. Such activities provide learners with chances for independence. Evidence shows that learner presentations are welcome and often successful. Each time one or two students get individualized assignments. They have to spend time in the library or on the Internet looking for information relating to their tasks. For example, they may need to look for the life story about the author of a text, or information about people, places, historical events, cultural facts or other related materials that may be helpful to their fellow classmates' comprehension of an instructional material. They may also be asked to talk about the

etymology, usage, and collocations of certain words and idioms or even to teach a paragraph. They usually prepare very well in order to impress their audience. When they present in class they exhibit their pride and confidence. The class are often attentive and carried away at such times. Feedback can be given individually afterwards.

Classroom discussions and debates are also effective, for they provide genuine communication and interaction in which learners illustrate individual ideas and attitude using the target language to flex their linguistic muscles and creativity.

Pair work and group work are also popular in the advanced classroom. In these cooperative activities learners discuss topics or solve problems. They usually participate equally and are more able to experiment and use the target language than they are in a whole-class arrangement, where only one person speaks at a time. When they are working together without the teacher controlling every move, they take some of their own learning decisions; decide what language to use to complete a certain task. They work without pressure of the whole class listening to what they are doing. Decisions are cooperatively arrived at and responsibilities are shared.

Team-teaching is another experiment I have made. Each time I invite two of my students, who sit alongside me, to discuss issues of the day and to deal with language points of the learning material. They have to prepare ahead of time just like what I do. In class we explain things jointly. I still play the leading role and they work as my assistants. There are a lot of conversations, questions and answers between us. They can nominate their peers to answer or to collect views and understandings if they feel there is the need. There is the cordial atmosphere in the classroom as students engage more in the use of the target language and as they struggle to meet the challenge I pose to them. Both learning and teaching become an enjoyable experience.

### **3. Promote learning strategies**

When confronted with a classroom-learning task, such as reading a passage or prepare a written assignment, the learner can choose several different ways to complete the task. Each of these choices or strategies offers particular advantages or disadvantages, and the use of an appropriate one can enhance success with the learning task. An important aspect of teaching is to promote learner's awareness and control of effective learning strategies. There are six general types of learning strategies suggested by Oxford.

- 1) Memory strategies, which help learners to store and retrieve information by placing new language points into familiar contexts, or by using physical response, for instance.
- 2) Cognitive strategies, which enable students to understand and produce language through practice, reasoning or analysis.
- 3) Compensation strategies, which allow learners to communicate despite deficiencies in their knowledge by guessing intelligently, or by using a circumlocution or synonym, for example.

- 4) Metacognitive strategies, which allow learners to control their own learning through organizing, planning and evaluating.
- 5) Social strategies, which help learners to interact with other people by asking them questions or by cooperating with proficient users of the target language.
- 6) Affective strategies, which help learners to gain control over their emotions, attitudes, motivations, and values by lowering their anxiety, by encouraging themselves, or by taking their emotional temperature through discussing their feelings with others.

All these strategies can be directly suggested to learners or implied to them through the teacher's classroom management. They have proved to be workable and beneficial if appropriately selected.

## **V. Conclusion**

The major principles of interactive language teaching have worked in my classrooms. My students have benefited a lot although I, their teacher found it a bit demanding. The teacher talk is reduced, but the students' talking time is increased. What is significant is that the students are encouraged to think in the target language, to discover, to research, and to be creative individuals. Apart from the three findings and suggestions presented above, I propose that language teachers take a humanistic approach and trust their learners genuinely. They should be able to enhance learning and to stimulate learners into meaningful, communicative use of the target language. Their own maintenance of a lively attention and active participation among learners in the classroom is also of vital importance.

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