

# CLASSROOM INTERACTION PATTERNS OF FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHERS

6047-1

Leo van Lier, Monterey Institute of International Studies

During in-service teacher education and practicum courses, foreign language teachers are often asked to reflect on their classroom practices and to indicate what they think their major strengths and weaknesses are (e.g., Nunan, 1988). The following questions are frequently asked in such awareness-raising exercises:

- Do I dominate too much?
- Do I provide good feedback and error correction?
- Am I patient enough?
- Do I talk too much?
- Do I use the target language sufficiently?
- Do I plan too much, or too little?

Questions such as these point to an area of major concern to many teachers: the relationship between control and direction by the teacher, and initiative and creativity by the learner (see Stevick, 1980; van Lier, 1988). Different language teaching methods attempt in different ways to strike a balance between teacher control and learner initiative. In most foreign language classrooms it is assumed that a measure of control is necessary to promote meaningful and efficient interaction. How much control is necessary, the kinds of control required, and the rules governing delegation of control are major issues in the study of foreign language classroom interaction.

## Language and Control

Flanders (1970) noted the famous "two-thirds" rule: two-thirds of classroom time consists of talk, and two-thirds of that talk is teacher talk. This rule is often quoted to show how, in most classrooms, the time available for every individual learner to talk is extremely limited. A further problem for foreign language classrooms is, of course, that part of the talk may well be in the native language (L1) rather than the target language (L2). It is not surprising, therefore, that many practitioners and classroom researchers have focused on ways to increase learners' talking time in the L2. This is especially important if, as is currently the case, interaction by learners is regarded as a major vehicle for foreign language learning.

A number of researchers have explored the different functions of teacher talk both in terms of their relative distribution and their pedagogical utility. In many cases, the categories used are based on the pioneering work of Bellack, Kliebard, Hyman, and Smith (1966), who identified four types of pedagogical moves: *structuring*, *soliciting*, *responding*, and *reacting*. They found that, in an average class of 30 pupils, an individual pupil might make one move for every 100 teacher moves. Most of the pupil moves were responding moves, and the teacher did almost all of the soliciting (e.g., asking questions), structuring (e.g., organizing and directing the interaction), and reacting (e.g., evaluating).

The work of Bellack, Kliebard, Hyman, and Smith (1966) can be called comprehensive classroom analysis. Other comprehensive studies include those by Gaies (1980) and Mehan (1979). These studies show the frequent occurrence in classrooms of a basic three-part structure that consists of an elicitation by the teacher, a response by a learner, and an evaluation by the teacher. At the end of such a *cycle* or *exchange*, the teacher typically continues with the next elicitation. In this way the

pedagogical moves of the teacher can rigidly control the learners' contributions, although detailed description reveals that learners can still find ways to influence the rate and manner of teacher talk.

Findings concerning the quantity and functions of teacher talk in classrooms paint a picture that is far from ideal, especially as far as the foreign language classroom is concerned. After all, for language learning to be successful, *practice* in speaking the L2 in *meaningful interaction* is essential. To address this problem, several recent books propose a more creative and cost-effective use of classroom language (Fanselow, 1987; Malamah-Thomas, 1987; Richard-Amato, 1988; Willis, 1981). It is encouraging that the authors of such books have not drawn the conclusions that classrooms are simply inefficient places to learn language, but rather build on the interaction potential productively as input in L2. As Allwright (1984) put it, "interaction is the process whereby everything that happens in the classroom gets to happen the way it does. Let us make the most of it" (p. 169).

## Process-Product Studies

Comprehensive studies of classroom interaction are useful because they reveal a good deal about what actually goes on in classrooms. However, they do not show which aspects of teacher talk or learner interaction are most likely to promote progress in language learning. One way to approach this issue is to bring specific aspects of classroom interaction under the control of experimental studies, as independent variables, and to relate these aspects to measures of learner performance on tests. In this way, it is hoped, different classroom *processes* can be shown to have a greater or lesser effect on the *product*, that is, the learner's relative success.

Such process-product research is currently investigating a range of issues of great interest to practicing teachers. Familiarity with the results of these studies can help teachers find answers to their own questions, or at least refine questions such as those posed earlier. Space prohibits a detailed discussion of all these studies, but some of the major topics are briefly summarized here.

## Teacher Talk: Modification and Simplification

A number of studies have looked at the ways in which teachers in L2 classes structure their language (Chaudron, 1983; Milk, 1985), perhaps simplifying it in ways similar to those parents and care-givers use with small children to ensure comprehension. Such adjustment, which may be largely intuitive and unpremeditated, leads to comprehensible input and is thus conducive to language acquisition in Krashen's (e.g., 1985) sense. This "teacherese" or "foreigner talk" contains shorter utterances and less complex vocabulary than speech between native speakers. In a review, Long (1983) suggests that, although modified, the teacher's talk is not ungrammatical or inappropriate. While such modified speech would therefore seem to be ideal as input, it may nevertheless be detrimental in another sense, which has been insufficiently investigated. According to Brown (1977), teachers often use a "slow colloquial" form of speech that does not use the elisions, fusions, and rhythmical combinations and contractions of sounds

See CLASSROOM INTERACTION, p. 4

and words that are natural in fast spoken language, and therefore this classroom language does not encourage the learners to process and produce casual conversational speech. Rather, they are exposed only to a carefully edited and idealized version of the target language.

### Wait Time

It is reasonable to suppose that when the teacher asks a question, the learner is given a fair chance to reply, since this will enhance the quality of the answer. It has been observed on numerous occasions that teachers tend not to wait, but expect an answer instantaneously. If they do not get the answer at once, they routinely rephrase the question (scale it down, perhaps), give the answer themselves, make various come-on noises or signals, or let some other learner answer it. Rowe (1974) and Long, Brock, Crookes, Deicke, Potter, and Zhang (1984), among others, have investigated what happens when more time is given to the responder. Their research suggests that an increased wait time produces qualitatively and quantitatively superior responses. It is therefore reasonable to train teachers to increase their wait time. It seems that teachers can indeed be trained to do so, and that this produces higher-quality interaction. It is, however, not known how lasting the effect of such training is (see Erickson, 1985). Furthermore, different activities may require different amounts of wait time. Casual conversation, for example, typically does not allow for lengthy pauses between utterances.

### Questions

Questions are very common in language teachers' classroom talk. Many of these questions are peculiar to the classroom setting and would never occur in the real world. A prime example of such classroom questions is *display* questions, or questions to which the asker already knows the answer (e.g., "Is this a book?"). More realistic are *referential* questions, or questions to which the asker does not have the answer (e.g., "What is your favorite soap opera?").

A number of studies have investigated the effects of asking display questions versus asking referential questions. Brock (1986) trained some teachers to ask more referential questions, and compared these teachers' lessons with lessons in which teachers asked more display questions. She found that referential questions obtained responses of higher quality as well as increased complexity (see also Long & Sato, 1983).

A problem with the distinction between referential and display questions is that both types may be asked for the same purpose: to elicit language from the learner. As a result, any beneficial effect of asking referential questions may be neutralized, as the following (invented) example illustrates:

T Raul, what did you do last weekend?

L I go- I goed skiing at Colorado.

T I went skiing in Colorado. Tako, and you?

In such cases, of course, the third move, the evaluation, indicates that the information is only a pretext to elicit language, and the referential value of the question is minimal.

### Error Treatment

The treatment of errors made by learners is perhaps the most enduring and controversial issue in classroom work. In the audiolingual days, errors were to be avoided at all cost (so as to avoid negative reinforcement). Currently, L2 educators range from those who say all

errors must be consistently corrected right from the start, in order to avoid fossilization (Higgs & Clifford, 1982), to those who say that correction of linguistic errors interrupts the learner's attempts at creative speech, focuses the learner on form rather than meaning, intimidates and discourages the learner, and disrupts interaction (Terrell, 1987).

There are numerous studies of error treatment (for an excellent overview, see Chaudron, 1987), but none has yet managed to resolve the controversy. All researchers agree, however, that learners, if asked, indicate their desire to be corrected whenever they make mistakes (Cathcart & Olsen, 1976). It is also agreed that the treatment of errors by most teachers is both highly varied and highly inconsistent (Chaudron, 1977; Fanselow, 1977).

Descriptive classroom studies have begun to look at error treatment in terms of the more general concept of *repair*, that is, the various ways in which "trouble" is dealt with in interaction (Kasper, 1985; van Lier, 1988). Such studies make it clear that different types of interaction lead to different ways of treating problems of speaking, and that questions of which errors to treat, how to treat them, and who should treat them underlie more global issues of classroom interaction. Descriptions of repair strategies also suggest that learners should use them primarily to correct their own errors (i.e., *self-repair*; see van Lier, 1988). One way to promote such self-repair may be through increased wait time (discussed earlier). When a learner makes an error, or hesitates, the teacher may pause briefly rather than immediately pouncing on the learner to correct. This gives the learner a chance to self-monitor and self-correct.

### Other Issues

Many of the problems of teacher-controlled classroom interaction mentioned earlier point to the need for more group work in language classrooms. In addition to the general pedagogical advantages of cooperative learning and problem solving, it has been found that in group work learners have more opportunities to speak, do more self-repair (van Lier, 1988), provide comprehensible input by negotiating meanings with peers (Pica & Doughty, 1985), and produce more varied, higher-quality talk (Long & Porter, 1985). It may be prudent, however, not to dismiss teacher-fronted work as inferior to group work, as too little is known about the benefits of different whole-class activities. Butzkamm (1980), Ellis (1984), and van Lier (1988) all suggest that in a balanced classroom both teacher-fronted work and group work are necessary.

In all classroom activities, it is important to pay close attention to patterns of participation. Studies have shown that opportunities to speak and the choices of topic can be very strictly controlled in the classroom. However, this control varies a great deal from one activity to another, and from one classroom to another.

Allwright (1980), Seliger (1983), and van Lier (1988), among others, have explored ways to study learners' initiative or level of participation. Of particular interest in classrooms that include minority children is the distribution of turns. Schinke-Llano (1983) found that teachers in such classrooms may unwittingly provide differential treatment to nonnative speakers.

A further issue of much concern is the use of L1 in foreign language classrooms (and, of course, in bilingual classrooms). After reviewing a number of studies on L1 use, Chaudron (1987) concludes that it is too early to condemn the use of L1. Much research is needed that looks not only at the quantity of L1 versus L2 use, but



particularly at the functional distribution of the two languages, that is, the reasons why any one or the other language is used at different times (see Milk, in press).

Finally, it is important to mention that teachers can benefit enormously from monitoring their own interaction and doing their own classroom research. Studies of teacher training and curriculum development (Nunan, 1988) suggest that this may be the best way to improve the quality of classroom work. To do such studies, keen observation and meticulous note-taking (if possible, coupled with recording and transcription of lessons) are essential. Bailey (1988) shows that the keeping of

journals and diaries can also be very beneficial, and allows for the study of factors that are not open to direct observation (e.g., Bailey's [1983] study of competitiveness and anxiety). Research on classroom interaction can thus help teachers sharpen their questions about and awareness of their own teaching practices, and provide practical suggestions for improvement.

## REFERENCES

Allwright, R.L. (1980). Turns, topics and tasks: Patterns of participation in language learning and teaching. In

See CLASSROOM INTERACTION, p. 8

## ERIC NEWS & NOTES

The Center for Applied Linguistics (CAL) has been awarded a new five-year contract to continue the operation of the ERIC Clearinghouse on Languages and Linguistics (ERIC/CLL) from Jan. 1, 1988, through Dec. 31, 1992. The contract was awarded by the Department of Education's Office of Educational Research and Improvement (OERI). ERIC/CLL at CAL looks forward to continuing and expanding the services it has provided to the language education community since 1974.

As part of its new contract, ERIC/CLL has named the following organizations as official ERIC Partners in recognition of their many contributions to the work of the clearinghouse:

American Association of Teachers of German (AATG)  
American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL)  
National Clearinghouse for Bilingual Education (NCBE)  
National Council on Foreign Language and International Studies (NCFLIS)  
Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL)

ERIC Partners work closely with the ERIC system to increase the information available through ERIC, and to disseminate it to as broad an audience as possible. The types of cooperation provided to ERIC/CLL by its partners include the following: 1. submitting materials for inclusion in the ERIC database; 2. exchanging newsletters and other publications with ERIC/CLL on a complimentary basis; 3. sending the *News Bulletin* to their members; 4. distributing ERIC Digests, Q&A fact sheets, Minibibs, and other ERIC/CLL products to their members and other clients; 5. announcing ERIC products and services in their newsletters; 6. providing complimentary or reduced-rate exhibit space to ERIC/CLL at annual meetings; and 7. collaborating with ERIC/CLL to produce monographs and other joint publications.

In return for the assistance provided by these organizations, ERIC/CLL offers special services, such as free computer searches of the ERIC database; complimentary copies of all ERIC/CLL products and publications; and space in the *ERIC/CLL News Bulletin* for "News and Notes" from their organizations. Additional types of mutual assistance and cooperation between ERIC/CLL and its partners may be identified throughout the period of the new contract. ERIC/CLL is pleased to welcome AATG, ACTFL, NCBE, NCFLIS, and TESOL to the ERIC network. We look forward to working closely with all of them to provide the best possible service to the language education community and the general public.

By the time you receive this issue of the *News Bulletin*, many of you will have seen us in person at the annual TESOL convention in Chicago. If you missed us there,

look for us in the exhibit area at the Central States Conference in Denver, April 14-16, and at the NABE Convention in Houston, April 27-May 1. We will distribute free brochures, Minibibs, and ERIC Digests and Q&As, and display recent monographs from the Language in Education series. As usual, we will also conduct free searches of the ERIC database on topics of your choice. We enjoy these opportunities to meet our public, and hope you will take a moment to visit the ERIC booth.

## NEW AND UPDATED PRODUCTS

The following products are available free from ERIC/CLL. Send a self-addressed, stamped (39¢) business-size envelope for every five products you order.

### New Minibibs

FLES Materials  
Involving Parents in Foreign Language Education  
Content-Based Language Instruction  
Computer-Assisted Language Learning

### Updated Minibibs

Cognitive Learning Styles in Foreign Languages  
Teaching Composition in Second Languages

### New ERIC Digests

Different Types of ESL Programs  
ESL Teacher Education  
Foreign Language Teacher Education  
How Foreign Language Study Can Enhance Career Possibilities  
The Older Language Learner  
Vernacular Dialects in U.S. Schools

### New Q&As

Academic Alliances in Foreign Languages and Literatures  
Cooperative Learning with Limited-English-Proficient Students  
Foreign Language Immersion Programs  
Foreign Language Learning and Children: The Parental Role  
Teaching Foreign Languages with Realia and Other Authentic Materials  
Working with Limited-English-Proficient Students in the Regular Classroom

### New Ready-Made Searches

ERIC database searches, listed on p. 2, are updated twice a year. The following searches are new and cost \$10.00 each:

Content-Based Language Instruction (420)  
Parent Involvement in Foreign Language Learning (425)

0047-4

From CLASSROOM INTERACTION, p. 5

- D. Larsen-Freeman (Ed.), *Discourse analysis in second language research*. Rowley, MA: Newbury House.
- Allwright, R.L. (1984). The importance of interaction in classroom language learning. *Applied Linguistics*, 5, 156-171.
- Bailey, K.M. (1983). Competitiveness and anxiety in adult second language learning: Looking at and through the diary studies. In H.W. Seliger & M.H. Long (Eds.), *Classroom oriented research in second language acquisition*. Rowley, MA: Newbury House.
- Bailey, K.M. (1988). *The use of language teaching diaries in teacher education programs*. Unpublished manuscript, Monterey Institute of International Studies.
- Bellack, A.A., Kliebard, H.M., Hyman, R.T., & Smith, F.L. (1966). *The language of the classroom*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Brock, F. (1986). The effects of referential questions on ESL classroom discourse. *TESOL Quarterly*, 20(1), 47-59.
- Brown, G. (1977). *Listening to spoken English*. London: Longman.
- Butzkamm, W. (1980). Verbal play and pattern practice: The comparison of a L1 learning strategy and a L2 teaching technique. In S. Felix (Ed.), *Second language development: Trends and issues*. Tübingen, West Germany: Narr.
- Cathcart, R., & Olsen, J.W. (1976). Teachers' and students' preferences for correction of classroom errors. In J. Fanselow & R. Crymes (Eds.), *On TESOL '76*. Washington, DC: Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages.
- Chaudron, C. (1977). A descriptive model of discourse in the corrective treatment of learners' errors. *Language Learning*, 27, 29-46.
- Ellis, R. (1984). *Classroom second language development*. Oxford: Pergamon Press.
- Erickson, F. (1985). Qualitative methods in research on teaching. In M.C. Wittrock (Ed.), *Handbook of research on teaching*. New York: MacMillan.
- Fanselow, J. (1977). The treatment of error in oral work. *Foreign Language Annals*, 10, 583-93.
- Fanselow, J. (1987). *Breaking rules*. London: Longman.
- Flanders, N. (1970). *Analysing teaching behavior*. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley.
- Gates, S. (1980). Learner feedback: A taxonomy of intake control. In J.C. Fisher, M.A. Clarke, & J. Schachter (Eds.), *On TESOL '80: Building bridges*. Washington, DC: Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages.
- Higgs, T., & Clifford, R. (1982). The push toward communication. In T. Higgs (Ed.), *Curriculum, competence, and the foreign language teacher*. Lincolnwood, IL: National Textbook Co.
- Kasper, G. (1985). Repair in foreign language teaching. *Studies in Second Language Acquisition*, 7, 200-215.
- Krashen, S.D. (1985). *The input hypothesis*. London: Longman.
- Long, M.H. (1983). Linguistic and conversational adjustments to non-native speakers. *Studies in Second Language Acquisition*, 6, 177-193.
- Long, M.H., Brock, C.A., Crookes, G., Deicke, C., Potter, L., & Zhang, S. (1984). *The effects of teachers' questioning patterns and wait-time on pupil participation in public high school classes in Hawaii for students of limited English proficiency* (Technical Report No. 1). Honolulu, HI: University of Hawaii.
- Long, M.H., & Porter, P.A. (1985). Group work, interlanguage talk, and second language acquisition. *TESOL Quarterly*, 19, 207-228.
- Long, M.H., & Sato, C. (1983). Classroom foreigner talk discourse: Forms and functions of teacher questions. In H.W. Seliger & M.H. Long (Eds.), *Classroom oriented research in second language acquisition*. Rowley, MA: Newbury House.
- Malamah-Thomas, A. (1987). *Classroom interaction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Mehan, H. (1979). *Learning lessons*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Milk, R. (1985, March). *Can foreigners do "foreigner talk"?* A study of the linguistic input provided by non-native teachers of EFL. Paper presented at the meeting of Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages, New York.
- Milk, R. (in press). The issue of language separation in bilingual methodology. In E. Garcia & B. Flores (Eds.), *Language and literacy research in bilingual education*. Tempe, AZ: Arizona State University.
- Nunan, D. (1988, March). *Observation and action research in in-service training*. Paper presented at the meeting of Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages, Chicago.
- Pica, T., & Doughty, C. (1985). Input and interaction in the communicative classroom: Teacher-fronted vs. group activities. In S. Gass & C. Madden (Eds.), *Input in second language acquisition*. Rowley, MA: Newbury House.
- Richard-Amato, P. (1988). *Making it work: Interaction in the second language classroom*. London: Longman.
- Rowe, M.B. (1974). Wait-time and rewards as instructional variables. *Journal of Research in Science Teaching*, 11, 81-94.
- Schinke-Llano, L. (1983). Foreigner talk in content classrooms. In H.W. Seliger & M.H. Long (Eds.), *Classroom oriented research in second language acquisition*. Rowley, MA: Newbury House.
- Seliger, H.W. (1983). Learner interaction in the classroom and its effects on language acquisition. In H.W. Seliger & M.H. Long (Eds.), *Classroom oriented research in second language acquisition*. Rowley, MA: Newbury House.
- Stevick, E. (1980). *Teaching languages: A way and ways*. Rowley, MA: Newbury House.
- Terrell, T. (1987). Avoiding fossilization in communicative approaches. *Dialog on Language Instruction*, 4(2), 1-22.
- van Lier, L. (1988). *The classroom and the language learner: Ethnography and second-language classroom research*. London: Longman.
- Willis, J. (1981). *Teaching English through English*. London: Longman.

## ERIC Clearinghouse on Languages and Linguistics

1118 22nd St. NW  
Washington, DC 20037

WILLIAM B FISCHER  
PORTLAND STATE UNIVERSITY  
PO 751-FL  
PORTLAND OR 97207

080220E

nonprofit organization  
U.S. POSTAGE  
PAID  
Washington, DC  
Permit No. 9429