

# How to Enhance Teacher Talk



Herschel Frey and Charles Grove, University of Pittsburgh

## 1.0 Introduction

Few would quarrel with the premise that foreign language teachers are an important classroom presence because of what they say and how they say it. Yet, despite the current professional interest in input and output, relatively little attention has centered on what features of foreign language most benefit students. Especially lacking are criteria and guidelines that might help teachers make decisions as to what language uses will ensure effective practice—which, in today's active give-and-take communicative classrooms, mostly involves turn-taking exchanges between teacher and student, and student and student. It is, in fact, the actual speech of the teacher—teacher talk—that controls and drives a good portion of these exchanges. While teacher talk would seem to be a less critical component of those classes that favor student participation through interactive work, we argue that even for these non teacher-fronted classes, the language used by the instructor is likely to have a considerable impact on learner outcome. Since the nature of the language exchanges can facilitate the learning process in important ways, we believe that this speech can and should be deliberate in purpose and structure, determined by the specific language choices made by the teacher, who often initiates an exchange. These teacher choices of language are particularly important for the earliest stages of FL instruction.

To provide effective speech modes in the classroom, teachers require an understanding of the applied linguistics of teacher talk.<sup>1</sup> In essence, this knowledge provides instructors the necessary guidance in selecting their individual elicitations from among the possible choices, based on what is needed for the most effective language practice.

### 1.1 The Explainer, The Drillmaster, The Conversation Partner

Adapting to shifting goals and pri-

orities, the role of the foreign language classroom teacher has changed through the years. Throughout successive pedagogical trends, however, the teacher has kept on talking. During the Grammar Translation years, FL teachers assumed the role of The Explainer, using their in-class language—often L1—to explain and exemplify the target language. As the post-war era ushered in the then radically new oral FL classroom, the new Direct Method teacher paved the way for the Audiolingualism of the 1960s with its heavy dialogue work and pattern drills. The teacher became the Driller, who kept the stimulus-response exchanges moving at a fast clip. This disappointment was followed by the “eclectic” 1970s, which searched for ways to retain the oral classroom while discarding the rote approach to practice. Moving into the 90s, the consensus was to insist on real communication, thus reinventing the teacher as Conversation Partner: one who talks with students, leads them through the syllabus (grammar/topic/communication) via a variety of oral activities that incorporate the individual student's likes, dislikes, life situation and experiences. The Natural Approach, developed by Tracy Terrell, and based on Stephen Krashen's theoretical model (Krashen and Terrell 1983), was first pedagogically developed for Spanish (the *Dos mundos* text, 1986); it calls on the teacher to assume the role of Conversation Partner, while students pair up with their classmates for practice as well. Often using the tried-and-true question technique, the updated teacher elicits responses that integrate personal and other information with the grammar and vocabulary determined by the syllabus. A typical Natural Approach class consists of about five activities that draw the practice language from situation set-ups, visuals, and short readings or dialogues, etc. Those teachers who incorporate pair or other interactive work rely somewhat more on the productivity of student

talk, since these interactive class segments are not teacher-driven.

Despite their changing roles, FL teachers have remained dominant figures in the classroom, establishing what happens in class. By and large, students go along with the indicated routine favored by the authority figure, for generally, students trust teachers to know what will make them successful learners. Characterizing the typical class setting, Ellis (1990) notes that teachers take up to 70% of the speaking time, controlling the turn-taking, the topic, the structure and content of most responses.

Regardless of its quantity or frequency, teacher talk, to be maximally effective, must be deliberate and purposeful. It should be carefully selected to achieve specific, often utterance-specific, goals. These goals, of course, can include any number of language features—grammar, lexicon, discourse, etc.

## 2.0 What is Teacher Talk?

Literally, teacher talk is anything and everything that the teacher says. Omaggio Hadley (1993), synthesizing the definition given by Krashen et al. (1984), claims that teacher talk “...tends to consist of a simplified code, characterized by slower, more careful articulation, the more frequent use of known vocabulary items, and attempts to ensure comprehension via restatements, paraphrases, and nonverbal aids to understanding” (175). She adds that this talk is not planned or scripted, and often represents a reaction to what is said in class, developing into an interactive exchange with students. Terrell (1982:123) advocates a kind of “foreigner talk” spoken at a relatively slow pace, with helpful explanations and simplifications intended to ensure that the message comes across.

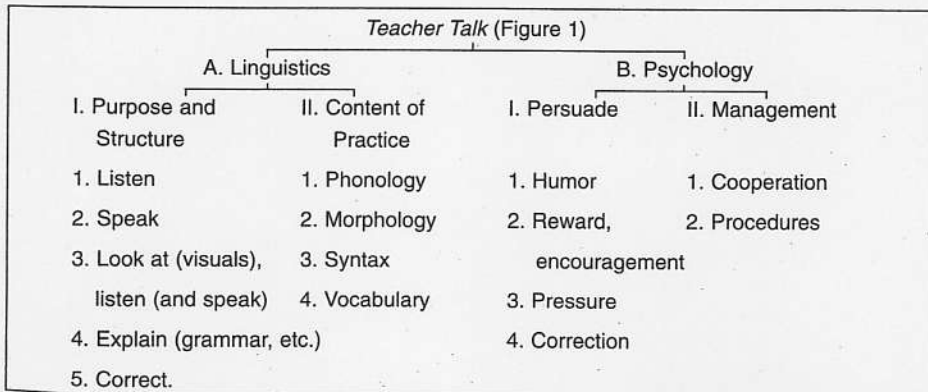
For our pedagogical purposes, we define teacher talk more narrowly: the deliberate and purposeful unscripted

teacher speech designed to carry out a specific function as effectively as possible. While teacher talk is, in fact, unscripted and unplanned, a trained teacher can learn to "plan" or fashion, often very specifically and spontaneously, an utterance to achieve the desired purpose.

Unfortunately, most research conducted to date on the nature of teacher talk has focused on such questions as amount and rate of speech (Henzl 1973, Steyaert 1977), modification of syntax (Gaies 1977, Long and Sato 1983, Pica and Long 1986), and other considerations of general comprehensibility, correctness, lexical mix and metalanguage used for explanations. All of these studies try to identify the modifications that teachers make to their speech mostly in order to be better understood. But this information is insufficient to improve our pedagogical situation, as it does not approximate the specific information teachers require to make informed speech decisions.

Though some studies address the functional distribution of teacher talk (cf. Chaudron 1988, 55f), more detailed information on the functional operation of this speech is needed: what kind of interactive language actually facilitates learning? What should teacher talk do to ensure, even force, the critical output?

Figure 1. The Makeup of Teacher Talk:



It is imperative that teachers realize their psychological impact on students. The instructor not only provides linguistic models but motivates students by any number of psychological signals of persuasion,

deliberate or not. As for the linguistic purpose and structure, specific and deliberately chosen language helps students achieve the course goals; it adheres at once to the assumptions held by the methodology being utilized, and—mainly—is structured according to sound principles of applied linguistics for teacher talk, as will be presently outlined and developed. Teachers can follow such guidelines, whether modelling, eliciting, explaining, correcting, etc.

There is inevitable concurrence of more than one feature of the linguistic code (phonological, morphological, syntactic, lexical) in the actual language content of the practice, even when there is a specific focus or learning goal. As students make use of (process) both the teacher's language and their own, more than one language element can be at work. Although language is often deliberately selected for a specific linguistic element, the teacher must be mindful of the level and content of all teacher talk.

Teachers use language to shape students' attitudes toward language courses to promote maximum learning. While we consciously encourage, suggest, praise, pressure, cajole, and admonish, some unintended signals also come through. Thus we need to "manage" our class in order to secure the students' cooperation in following the routine we want to establish. While not really incidental, this brainwashing language is something other than the

language meant for our linguistic agenda. Since teacher talk cannot be used, at least not in the earliest stages, to tell a thrilling story, the teacher must find a way of using language to hold the learner's attention. Further, stu-

dents will observe that the teacher's deliberate repeated language contains useful signals that are worth noticing. This attentiveness is likely to be particularly productive in those classes where practice predominates over explicit grammar instruction.

While any definition of Teacher Talk must, then, account for both the linguistic and the psychological, it is unlikely that we would ever be able to measure the relative effect of each.

### 2.1 A Rationale for Quality Teacher Talk

Researchers like McLaughlin (1978), Higgs and Clifford (1982), and White (1986), who early on expressed serious misgivings as to the adequacy of Krashen's theory of SLA, the Monitor Model (1981, and elsewhere), were correct in insisting that comprehensible input alone is not enough to provide adequate learning experience if the goal includes a reasonable level of speaking proficiency. Returns from those Natural Approach classes which did not call for considerable learner production clearly resulted in disappointing, underdeveloped oral proficiency. Krashen's naive proposition that promised a listen-and-learn-to-speak notion, coupled with a downplaying of grammar, guaranteed rather poor results. The simple recommendation to teachers that they merely provide the beginning learner with a class period full of low-level language ("i + 1"), along with some student responses (learners are told to interact with the teacher when they "feel free" to do so [*Dos mundos*, 2nd edition, 1986, p. xii]), was not good advice.

### 2.2 The Input/Output Process

McLaughlin's model, rooted in principles of cognitive psychology, is built on the distinction between controlled and automatic processes. The information processing model suggests that, in L2 acquisition, controlled processes precede the automatic. These initial controlled processes result in output characterized by slow speech, delayed reaction times to linguistic stimuli, and false starts. However,

...as the situation becomes more familiar, always requiring



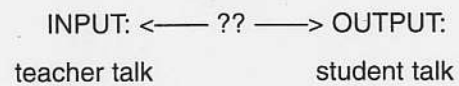
the same sequence of processing operations, automatic processes will develop, attention demands will be eased, and other controlled operations can be carried out in parallel with automatic processes as performance improves (1978:319).

Similar to learning any complex skill, second language acquisition requires the mastery of both high-order tasks and low-order sub-tasks, the former defined by McLaughlin as creative expression and topic choice by the student, and the latter as appropriate use of lexicon and syntax (1990).

Production-based theories agree that language learning is a skill like any other, asserting that learners must speak to master the skill of speaking, just as they must drive to perfect the skill of driving. Higgs and Clifford (1982) propose a kind of output hypothesis, akin to Krashen's input hypothesis, which suggests that encouraging students to engage in production tasks just beyond their current level of competence (perhaps "o+1") might enhance oral performance.

More recently, Swain (1985) posits a formalized version of the output hypothesis as an addendum (not alternative) to the input hypothesis. She suggests that in addition to exposure to comprehensible input, learners need to engage in the production of *comprehensible output* (CO) in order to attain native levels of accuracy. Swain points to three basic roles of CO: 1) CO provides the opportunity for meaningful (contextualized) use of one's linguistic resources in the process of negotiating meaning. Especially valuable is the *pushed language use* resulting from negative input in situations of communication breakdown. Pushed language use requires the learner to find alternative means of expressing the desired message; 2) CO provides the learner with opportunities to test linguistic hypotheses; 3) the production of CO "... may force the learner to move from semantic processing to syntactic processing." Learners can comprehend L2 messages without any syntactic analysis of the input they contain. Production acts as a trigger which forces attention on the linguistic means of expression (248-49).

By drawing attention to the elicitive value of teacher input, we advocate a unified view of classroom language, and a broadening of the current definition of teacher talk to include its symbiotic relationship with—and impact on—student-generated output. The field continues to analyze the language of the classroom largely in terms of isolated linguistic phenomena, most notably the distinction between input and output.



Neither research nor methods texts contain comprehensive discussion that synthesizes ideas, empirically-tested or otherwise, about the relation between these two key components of classroom language. Yet as a primary source of input in the FL classroom, it is mostly teacher talk that creates the contexts which require negotiation of meaning, placing students in situations which require the testing of linguistic hypotheses. Through teacher talk instructors elicit "pushed language" use, in effect forcing students to notice the structure of the language they use to express meaning. To disregard the impact of teacher talk on student output is to overlook valuable practice opportunities for students to acquire language.

### 2.3 Enhanced Teacher Talk

FL practitioners realize that their classroom activities involve decision making: choices include materials/activity types, questions to ask, when to provide explanation and when to shift gears pedagogically to keep students on task, among others. Many choices, though complex, are made on the spot. For instance, in deciding to correct a student error, an instructor might consider who the student is (personality, aptitude and learning style), the type of error (competence or performance), and the pedagogical context of the error (e.g., form-focused or open-ended activity). The instructor reviews evidence, considers research and/or personal experience, and decides to respond to the error (or not) within seconds. The shape such corrective feedback

takes also constitutes an informed, deliberate choice, with options ranging from subtle facial expression, to overtly stating that an error has been made, to focusing the student's attention on the error with metalanguage, and so on. Error correction, used here to illustrate how teacher talk can be deliberate without being scripted, is only one of the numerous functions of teacher talk. The quality of teacher talk should be a primary consideration for the instructor throughout the FL class.

### 2.3.1. Nature, Content, Structure

For foreign language teachers to provide quality teacher talk, they must make correct decisions about:

1. How much target language to use.
2. The pace, denseness, level, content, and variety of the teacher language (L2).
3. The purpose of (almost) every utterance chosen by the teacher, and how deliberate the language should be.

Considering today's communicative conversational classes, the answer to the first question is that teachers use as much L2 as possible, which, in Spanish courses for speakers of English, can and often does approach 100%. Students can be prompted from the start to try to communicate everything—including requests for information—in the target language; the teacher can provide formula-type utterances early on to aid students. Though research evidence does not reveal what amount of L1 is too much, there are advantages to conducting our classes in the target language—not the least of which is the boost this gives students' feelings of accomplishment in a foreign language. Surely the added input can only be beneficial.

The answer(s) to the second question, regarding the content and structure of model teacher talk is more complicated: more considerations are involved, and they can be interdependent. For example, pacing can determine level, which in turn is determined by language content, denseness and variety.

Convinced that the content and structure of input-output interchanges are a key determinant in the overall effectiveness of language practice (indeed, the main component of proficiency classes), we stress a consideration of the third question. The applied linguistics of this process requires consistently deliberate, thoughtfully crafted teacher utterances that lead the learner to respond in rather predictable and desired ways, especially in the earlier stages of the learning experience. Even for stimulus-only utterances, intended solely for comprehension with no expectation of learner response, teachers are mindful that some language is processed as students decode the message. Thus, teachers must choose this language with equal care. We hold that for most classroom learners, student output will be no better than teacher input and is in fact determined by it in a number of ways. Teachers, knowing what they want, structure the elicitation carefully. Students know that the teacher expects a full response and deliver a response that completes the cycle. In this way the item or items under the focus of the practice are bound.<sup>2</sup> Whether this routine involves a mere mechanical exchange of language or is truly communicative in nature, the operational criteria are basically the same.

Teachers should consistently know what they want students to say, to work through. We advocate complete sentence responses, requiring conjugated verbs and at least elementary syntax, whenever possible. This process compels the student to monitor and to hypothesis-test the rules of grammar. The learner repeatedly hears certain signals and reacts to them. The list of first-year L2 morphological and other constructs for the languages commonly taught in this country are easy to draw up: concordance; gender and number; verbs (time, person/number, mode, aspect); prepositions; certain stubborn conceptual areas (Spanish *gustar*, "to be pleasing to"; *ser*, "to be"; and *estar*, "to be"; for example); question words; and so on. While it is true that complete sentence utterances are not always present in natural language (communication), we feel that the benefits of

requiring full answers outweigh the disadvantages of calling for artificial complete sentence responses.

**2.3.2 Questions and Answers in the FL Classroom**

According to Ellis (1990), questioning is "... a more or less universal characteristic of teacher talk" (78). Throughout the years the question form has been and is still a favorite language format of most methodologies, including today's communicative approaches. Q-A discourse is vital in helping students progress to the intermediate level of proficiency as defined by the ACTFL guidelines: "Intermediate-level learners can create with the language, ask and answer questions, participate in short conversations" (Omaggio Hadley 1993:502). Indeed, the question/answer routine is highly commendable, pedagogically speaking. It helps teachers maintain excellent control of classroom procedure, while also controlling form and semantic content. With so many types of and purposes for questions, questioning can cover a wide lexical and grammatical range. It forces the learner to grapple with all the interrogatives, and with the consequent grammatical and lexical adjustments.

Questions can be graded and sequenced, requiring at first short, simple responses, and later more involved ones, complex and compound in structure. Students, of course, need to learn to ask questions, as well as provide answers. Pair or group work is an excellent setting for the necessary practice, and teachers can direct students to ask each other questions as well.

Research on questioning has concentrated on observing and identifying questions in teacher speech. In its most obvious and traditional form, the question elicits from the student factual information. The teacher asks "Where is Bogotá?", and the student replies "Colombia". Mehan (1979) calls these 'known' information questions *display questions*. The instructor knows the answer to the question before asking it, thus placing the respondent "...in the position of trying to match the questioner's pre-determined knowledge" (286). In contrast,

*referential questions* are a means of eliciting contextual information about an event, action, or entity: "Where is the party?", or "How was the party?" are examples. No research has yet attempted to analyze elicitations and the follow-up responses in a way that would account for the main features of sentence-building, of learner choices and adjustments as required by context and grammar. Undoubtedly, some intuitive teachers already store such information.

The right question/stimulus can aid students in making linguistic choices that lead to the internalization of a concept, or broaden students' notions of how an already internalized system functions in the L2. Whether a yes/no or an information question, it can guide and limit the response with some predictability and control. The instructor may focus attention on the question word or insist on a particular syntactic adjustment. There is nothing wrong with spoon-feeding basic language with questions in the early stages. Direct questions, containing the language of the expected response, are excellent for introducing and providing opportunities for the binding of new vocabulary and/or grammar. And the learner's ability to exploit such questions to formulate coherent responses in conversation is an important skill.

For several reasons teachers should not always question students directly or with too much information in the question. Direct and full questions become less appropriate and less functional if they are overused, or are used beyond low-level language practice. We strongly favor what we call Indirect Elicitors, which are, actually, less indirect than they are less full, e.g.:

1. Why?/ Why not?
2. How?/ How so?
3. When?
4. Where?
5. (How) What do we know?
6. And...?
7. What if...?
8. Your reaction?



- 9. Suppose that...
- 10. What do you mean?
- 11. What do you think?
- 12. Do you agree? Why (not)?
- 13. How do you explain?
- 14. When (how, why) would you?
- 15. What is X trying to say?
- 16. Why do you say (think) so?
- 17. In what situation...?
- 18. I don't understand.
- 19. What are you saying?
- 20. Be more specific.
- 21. What's the problem here?
- 22. What else?
- 23. And then?
- 24. And in that case?
- 25. What would happen?
- 26. Tell us about...

Es mexicana. (She's Mexican.)

A comparison of these examples reveals how direct questions essentially spoon-feed pertinent linguistic information (i.e., "use in your response") to the student. But the indirect elicitor "¿.. y María?" consists of very little language: it deliberately withholds, rather than supplies, comprehensible input, and thus avoids spoon-feeding. But teachers must always be careful to move logically, otherwise students will not be able to respond. The logic can be so tight, in fact, that the lexical and grammatical content of the forthcoming response can be quite predictable. For example, when summarizing the events of a story to verify a past verb form with a perfect aspect marker (the Spanish preterit), the teacher can ask the student what a character did next, using the indirect elicitor: "And then?" or "And next?". If the character in the story fell asleep, the student has little choice but to say "He fell asleep," or "He went to sleep," using the preterit. Though "innocent," at first blush, these cues can in fact provide testing, reentry or just good hypothesis testing, since the learner cannot extrapolate the obvious from the language content of the elicitation. Indirect elicitors activate structures, vocabulary and/or information that the student should be ready to supply to classroom discourse. These stimuli are elliptical but require, as per the pre-established expectations of the instructor, linguistically complete responses, conjugated verb and all, thus providing full syntactic practice. This sentence-forming encourages the learner to engage in hypothesis testing, to make important decisions about the form of the target language.

- 1. Enter (present)
- 2. Practice (and vary)
- 3. Reenter
- 4. Reenter again and vary
- 5. Reenter, vary and combine

This sequence is both logical and natural. Indeed, materials writers acknowledge that students rarely bind a language item after but one practice, so they sometimes provide some kind of review. If American students have a difficulty mastering Spanish *gustarle a uno* ("to be pleasing to someone"), teachers will want to limit the initial presentation and practice to the simplest, most useful form, then later reenter and expand (vary) the possibilities: the subject and indirect object, singular or plural, setting the action in present, past, or future, indicative or subjunctive. After sufficient reentered and varied practice (step 3 and 4), the troublesome structure can be combined (step 5) with others, for example, *ir a: me va a gustar*.

These cues are suggestive words and phrases intended to fish out a response, often as a follow-up comment on a point just made. Almost formulaic, they flood ordinary conversation and are quite natural in their economic use of language. An indirect elicitor is appropriate immediately following a direct one, and this sequencing is especially successful if the second, follow-up response requires a different syntax and lexicon, particularly another verb. Consider these examples in Spanish:

- A. Direct Question (display):  
¿De dónde es Juan? (Where is Juan from?)  
Response: Es de España.
- B. Indirect Elicitor:  
¿Y María?  
Possible responses:  
Es de México. (She's from Mexico.)  
Vivía en México. (She lived in Mexico.)  
Viene de México. (She comes from Mexico.)

Direct questions and questions with full, overt language content, as noted earlier, serve many needs and so should not be eliminated or restricted. But if overused, or used beyond low-level activities, they fail to challenge students and ensure needed language processing. Instructors must decide on the best mix of these two elicitation strategies.

### 3.0 The Practice Routine

We propose the following routine for sequencing and practice:

Teachers should appreciate and remember to exploit this kind of spiraled sequencing, for all structures and most of the lexicon. Yes, binding will happen on its own, but too infrequently.

### 4.0 Conclusion

Teachers can apply the guidelines of sound teacher talk to any and all the functions and activities found in today's classes: warm-up, activities of all kinds, drills and exercises, visuals, explanations (grammar, etc.), correcting, managing, "filler" language, and so on. These different classroom components provide an array of pedagogical opportunities for a varied instructional practice. The teacher can select a range of formats (language routines) that lend themselves in a natural way to each kind of classroom activity, while utilizing successful teacher talk. Students, too, are to be encouraged to engage in some of this more spontaneous, less deliberate talk, especially in higher level courses.

Developing good teacher talk is largely about learning to make the best language choices possible according to the specifics of a given

classroom situation. In effect, nearly everything an instructor says in the target language during a class session should be *deliberate* for class time to be exploited for maximum instructional economy and benefit of the students. The classroom situation requires that instructors think fast on their feet, guided by a sense both of what students need to be exposed to by teacher input, and what they need to produce in their own output.

**Notes**

<sup>1</sup>In an article assessing the role that teacher talk plays in foreign language instruction, Herschel Frey asserts that this language input is all too often faulty and inadequate, and calls for teachers to pay more attention to the structure and quality of the linguistic choices they make: "The Applied Linguistics of Teacher Talk," *Hispania*, 71 (1988), pp. 681-86.

<sup>2</sup>For a discussion of the binding process (unrelated to Chomsky's use of the term in syntactic theory), applied here to the acquisition of language forms, see the article by Tracy Terrell, "Acquisition in the Natural Approach: The Binding/Access Framework," *The Modern Language Journal*, 70 (1986), pp. 213-27.

<sup>3</sup>In a broad discussion of consciousness raising, M. Sharwood Smith points out the potential usefulness to learners that making language features salient can have. Such forced focus by the teacher, be it in the practice or when correcting the student, is normally on some language form, in fact, commonly a morphological feature. See his article, "Speaking to Many Minds: On the Relevance of Different Types of Language Information for the L2 Learner," *Second Language Research*, 7 (1991), pp. 118-32.

<sup>4</sup>For a discussion of metalanguage (or metatalk)—talk about language and grammar—see Craig Chaudron, *Second Language Classrooms: Research on Teaching and Learning*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988, pp. 86-87 and 164-65.


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