

Section I *What is interactive
language teaching?*

1 Interaction as the key to teaching language for communication

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I remember my first language class. I was eleven at the time, living in a country where the language was never heard, except in a small expatriate club lost in a big city. We were many thousands of miles from any place where the language was spoken and our teacher had certainly never been there. Along with some thirty-five other eager almost-teens I had the time of my life. We all remember our young teacher with great affection.

We performed actions; we handled objects; we drew large pictures and labeled them; we sang; we danced; we learned poems; we read little stories, which we acted out and improvised upon. I rushed home after the first lesson, on a scorching February day, sat on the step of a wooden washhouse, and read aloud in French to my monolingual mother as she stirred our clothes in a wood-fired copper. The French was probably execrable, but I couldn't wait to share with her the exciting information that our flag was red, white, and blue, whereas the French flag was blue, white, and red. Of course, that night I diligently drew, colored, and labeled the flags in my new language.

How did this young teacher arouse such enthusiasm for her esoteric subject? First of all, she loved young people and she loved teaching. She used her imagination as she shared with us the knowledge, perhaps imperfect, she possessed. She had us doing things and living them in a vicarious way. She wove us into a group who worked together, talked together, played together, and were interdependent in our progress. Her methodology was some form of modified direct method, probably best labeled as eclectic (Rivers 1981: 35, 54–5). It was active, imaginative, and innovative, and clearly reflected our teacher's individual personality – all ingredients for effective language teaching (or for any teaching, for that matter). She developed a rapport with us that made us want to communicate with her and with each other in situations that stimulated our interest and involvement.¹

¹ The author pays tribute to Kathleen Meldrum of Essendon High School in Victoria, Australia.

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The centrality of interaction

Students achieve facility in *using* a language when their attention is focused on conveying and receiving authentic messages (that is, messages that contain information of interest to speaker and listener in a situation of importance to both). This is *interaction*. As Wells has expressed it: “Exchange is the basic unit of discourse . . . Linguistic interaction is a collaborative activity” involving “the establishment of a triangular relationship between the sender, the receiver and the context of situation” (Wells 1981: 29, 46–7), whether the communication be in speech or writing. (For Wells the content of the message is part of the “situation.”)

Interaction involves not just expression of one’s own ideas but comprehension of those of others. One listens to others; one responds (directly or indirectly); others listen and respond. The participants work out interpretations of meaning through this interaction, which is always understood in a context, physical or experiential, with nonverbal cues adding aspects of meaning beyond the verbal. All of these factors should be present as students learn to communicate: listening to others, talking with others, negotiating meaning in a shared context. A structured sequence or structured activities we may or may not have; we may promote inductive or deductive learning,² or a mixture of the two; but communication there must be – interaction between people who have something to share.

Collaborative activity of this type should be the norm *from the beginning of language study*. Part of the teacher’s art is to create, or stimulate student creation of, the types of situations in which interaction naturally blossoms and in which students can use for actual communication what they have been learning in a more formal fashion. In this way, they are already engaging in the central activity for which language is used in human relations.

Why is interaction so important in language-learning situations? Through interaction, students can increase their language store as they listen to or read authentic linguistic material, or even the output of their fellow students in discussions, skits, joint problem-solving tasks, or dialogue journals. (As teachers, we frequently overlook how much students learn from their peers.) In interaction, students can use all they possess of the language – all they have learned or casually absorbed – in real-life exchanges where expressing their real meaning is important to them. They thus have experience in creating messages from what they hear, since comprehension is a process of creation (Rivers 1981: 160–2), and

2 In this chapter, and throughout this book, the words *acquisition* and *learning* are used interchangeably, not as Krashen (1981: 1–3) uses them to distinguish between “sub-conscious *acquisition*” and “conscious *learning*,” except when specific reference is being made to Krashen’s Monitor model.

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in creating discourse that conveys their intentions. Even at an elementary stage they learn, in this way, to exploit the elasticity of language, to make the little they know go a long way. The brain is *dynamic*, constantly interrelating what we have learned with what we are learning, and the give-and-take of message exchanges enables students to retrieve and interrelate a great deal of what they have encountered – material that, in a foreign-language situation, might otherwise lie dormant until the teacher thought to reintroduce it. In a second-language situation, interaction becomes essential to survival in the new language and culture, and students need help with styles of interaction (as discussed by Robinson, this volume, chap. 11).

Student needs; course design; classroom procedures

How interaction is achieved in formal situations is a matter of technique or of classroom approach; in less formal situations it involves imaginative planning with student input. In either case, the teacher has a number of options drawn from the experiences of predecessors and contemporaries. (For some, see Rivers 1981: 28–90.) How can teachers select judiciously from this great variety of proposed approaches and techniques? What kinds of guidelines can they follow?

First, in all teaching, comes the *student* – the *raison d'être* of teaching. The teacher needs to consider the age of the students, their scholastic background, their culturally absorbed ways of learning, and their objectives in studying the language (to communicate orally, for instance; to read specialized texts; to learn about other peoples and cultures; or to prepare for study abroad) without ignoring the political and social pressures (including career opportunities) that are largely determining their motivation. Only after such matters have been taken into account and decisions made about *the kind of course* that will meet the students' needs in their particular situation will teachers begin to reflect on appropriate ways of *selecting and presenting material*, so that the objectives of the students may be achieved. At this point, approach, design, and procedure become of interest (Richards and Rodgers 1986: 16–28).

Furthermore, each teacher has *a personality to express*. Teachers are individuals who teach and interact most effectively when what they are doing conforms to what they feel most comfortable doing. Some teachers love play-acting and leading students out into expressive performance; others are indirect leaders, providing almost imperceptible encouragement for self-expression; still others can orchestrate assured and vigorous activity. We have all seen extremely successful language classes taught by teachers favoring most diverse approaches, where very different ac-

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tivities were taking place; yet interaction was stimulated, even if in quite unexpected ways.

Teachers should not be looking for the one best method for teaching languages (or helping students learn languages), but rather *the most appropriate approach, design of materials, or set of procedures in a particular case*. Teachers need to be flexible, with a repertoire of techniques they can employ as circumstances dictate, while *keeping interaction central* – interaction between teacher and student, student and teacher, student and student, student and authors of texts, and student and the community that speaks the language (and, in the future, student and computer program, as Ariew and Frommer show in chap. 14, this volume). Many ideas for focusing on interaction are elaborated in successive chapters of this book, both for oral and written language. Teachers of very different personalities will find much from which to choose.

Comprehension and expression as an interactive duo

Whether in oral or graphic form, comprehension and expression of meaning are in constant interaction in real-life communication. Some scholars maintain that all that is needed for students to acquire language is plenty of comprehensible input, and “the ability to speak (or write) fluently in a second language will come on its own with time” (Krashen and Terrell 1983: 32); in other words, after a great deal of listening, speech will emerge spontaneously in a natural order.³ In fact, Straight goes so far as to say that “communicative proficiency is most effectively and efficiently achieved by means of instruction that emphasizes the development of comprehension skills (listening and reading) to the virtual exclusion of training in production The best way to acquire a language,” he continues, “is to acquire the skills needed to comprehend it fluently, and . . . everything else will follow, if not automatically, at least far more easily and effectively” (Straight 1985: 19, 27). This approach to language learning is called “natural” because it endeavors to replicate the situation of the child learning a first language or a second language in informal situations.

However, first-language acquisition studies do not reveal the listening, noncommunicating child this theory assumes to exist. First-language studies are identifying earlier and earlier attempts to communicate in the infant’s babbling, as well as in its kinesics and physical behavior.

3 The “natural order” refers to the acquisition of a small number of grammatical morphemes by first- and second-language acquirers of English, which Krashen refers to as a “difficulty order” (1981: 52). He has interpreted the presence of a “natural order” in the adult performer “as a manifestation of the acquired system without substantial interruption or contribution from the conscious grammar, or Monitor” (p. 52).

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Trevarthen observed, for instance, that two-month-old babies were already using their lips and tongue and waving their hands as people do in conversation. He considers that “the foundation for interpersonal communication between humans is ‘there’ at birth, and is remarkably useful by eight weeks when cognitive and memory processes are beginning” (1974: 230–5). At twelve months babies are uttering single words and at fifteen months are putting two words together, although at this stage they have clearly not yet developed the “*very* advanced comprehension skills” Straight considers necessary “before one starts producing output” (Straight 1985: 34). Some of these very early utterances are imitative (memorized) prefabricated utterances or formulaic speech, as Hakuta and Wong Fillmore have demonstrated, with analyzed productive speech, where material they have heard is put together in new ways, developing later (Hakuta 1986: 126–30).

Moreover, research by such scholars as Carroll, Tanenhaus, and Bever (1978) and Schlesinger (1977) brings out differences between listening and speaking that make it unlikely that intensive listening alone will lead to fluent and effective production of utterances (although much is, of course, learned from listening, as from reading). Listening draws on *knowledge of the world and expectations* aroused by the situation and by the persons involved in it. Listeners have little control over the elaboration of speech to which they are listening, although they may signal their need for more simplified input by facial expression, gesture, or oral request. In interpreting what they are hearing, listeners are guided primarily by the rhythmic segmentation of the speech by the speaker and the sequence of *semantic elements* that permits them to construct a plausible message from what they are hearing. *Inference* plays a large part in this process. Listeners resort to surface-structure cues, such as salient morphology for plurals and tensed endings to verbs, only when meaning needs to be clarified or disambiguated (Carroll et al. 1978: 187–218). What is extracted in listening as semantic meaning is not stored in memory in its original syntactic form and, past the echoic interval of several seconds, cannot usually be restated in that original form (Rivers 1983b: 78–90). If we are cultivating effective listening skills, we teach students to *rely on semantic cues and NOT to focus on the syntax*. (What is said here about listening can be applied equally to reading. Fluent readers draw on semantic cues and by inference create meanings. Concentration on analysis of the syntax impedes the extraction of meaning, except at points of special difficulty.)

On the other hand, speaking begins with the intention of the speaker. Unlike the listener, the speaker controls by his or her selection of lexical and syntactic items the level of language and the elaborated or simplified form that will be used. Consequently language learners, when speaking, can keep within a simplified syntax and reduced vocabulary to express

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their meaning, and this is what they should be learning to do: paraphrasing, circumlocuting, and simplifying when they are unsure of the exact words or structures to express their meaning.

Speakers need grammar to express their meaning with any precision and to retain the listener's respect and attention. Listeners, on the other hand, may bypass much of the grammar by resorting to semantic strategies, since many formal features concern them only when the interpretation becomes complex. This is the *fundamental difference between listening and speaking*. Because of this difference, neither alone can lead to the other in some incidental, subconscious, unfocused way. Even with attentive, focused listening, the listener is paying close attention to details of the content and the development of thought rather than to specific elements of syntax, except where there is ambiguity or unclear meaning. (The same thing happens with attentive reading, which is why proof-reading is so difficult.) Moreover, the grammar we draw on for effective, real-time comprehension is different from the grammar we need to express our ideas explicitly. Unless the listener is focusing very attentively on the syntax with the intent of inductive analysis, it is not clear how listening can lead automatically to the internalization of a grammar that will be useful for expressing one's own ideas. In other words, by teaching learners to concentrate on elements of production grammar while listening (or reading), we are teaching them to be inefficient listeners (and readers); yet, unless they do so, it is not plausible that they will acquire the elements they will need for speech (or writing). Both comprehension and production are demanding processes that require time and increasing knowledge of the language to develop, and much practice in real communication to perfect.

Unfortunately, despite all we know about the differences between listening (and reading) for comprehension and speaking (and writing) to be comprehended, few materials teach the type of *recognition grammar* and *recognition vocabulary* that listening and reading require, and even fewer initiate students into the different strategies we employ in receiving and communicating messages. Students are not even made aware of the need for developing different strategies for these two aspects of communication. They do not learn how to piece together meaning from semantic elements and draw on context and previous knowledge for listening and reading, and how to develop inferencing skills through intelligent, fact-based guessing and supplementing where the signal is not clear (see Papalia, this volume, chap. 6). Nor do they learn that for speaking (and writing) we make the most of what we have, making infinite use of finite means (to use Humboldt's phrase), daring to create new utterances and, in oral communication, judging by the reaction whether we need to paraphrase, expand, or use visual prompts to fill out our meaning. In listening, the syntax may be beyond our previous

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experience, but this does not faze us because we draw on inference and, in normal conversation, we can ask for clarification when problems arise. In speaking, we are in control, and with practice in the right strategies we can make a little go a long way. But we must possess that little! Let us not deceive our students into thinking control of a new language will come easily and effortlessly. There is, however, pleasure in meeting the challenge, and the rewards of being able to interact confidently in another language make the effort worthwhile.

Promoting interaction

In interactive language teaching, comprehension and production retrieve their normal relationship as an interactive duo. To achieve this, we need an ambiance and relations among individuals that promote a desire for interaction. Individual strategies, temperaments, and preferred modes of operation on the part of students and teacher make each class session a unique experience and each succession of classes a variation on the basic chemistry. Theory can suggest ideas to teachers and to learners, but not impose them. Students continue to learn second and third languages, in all kinds of ways – with teachers, without teachers, and despite teachers or theoreticians.

For the genuine interaction language learning requires, however, individuals (teachers as well as students) must appreciate the uniqueness of other individuals with their special needs – not manipulating or directing them or deciding *how* they can or will learn, but encouraging them and drawing them out (educating), and building up their confidence and enjoyment in what they are doing. Teacher-directed and -dominated classrooms cannot, by their nature, be interactive classrooms, and this is what language teachers need to learn. Interaction can be two-way, three-way, or four-way, but never one-way.

Why is it that students in so many classes do not seem to pass a certain point in achievement: They know much but they cannot use it to express their own meaning. In many such classes, the teacher teeters on the brink of interactive practice and students withdraw, hesitant and cautious. For both teacher and students, this is an experience new to them and they are not sure how to handle it. Real interaction in the classroom requires the teacher to step out of the limelight, to cede a full role to the student in developing and carrying through activities, to accept all kinds of opinions, and be tolerant of errors the student makes while attempting to communicate. This many teachers are reluctant to do. Never having experienced an interactive classroom, they are afraid it will be chaotic and hesitate to try. Some students, too, because of rigid formal training, have no experience in exercising initiative and participating imagina-

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tively in task-oriented, purposeful learning, or cooperative learning. Cooperative learning means sharing, encouraging, and accepting responsibility for one's own learning and that of others (Rivers 1983a: 77–8), not leaving all responsibility to the teacher. Interaction is also an affective, temperamental matter, not merely a question of someone saying something to someone. Without mutual respect, the building of confidence, and the creating of many opportunities for experimentation in communication without undue direction, classrooms will remain quiet places with inhibited students who dare not try to express what really matters to them. Once teachers have tried to carry through a well-prepared interactive class session and find it can be done, they lose their hesitancy.

Because interactive language teaching means elicitation of willing student participation and initiative, it requires a high degree of indirect leadership, along with emotional maturity, perceptiveness, and sensitivity to the feelings of others. When a teacher demonstrates these qualities, students lose their fear of embarrassment and are willing to try to express themselves. Kramersch speaks of “saving one's own and other's face” (this volume, p. 20). Once students feel appreciated and valued, they are anxious to show what they can do, to propose and participate in activities.

Whatever promotes student participation in a relaxed and enthusiastic atmosphere stimulates the interaction that is essential to successful language learning. The interaction may be quiet; it may be noisy; it may be alert and dynamic; it may take place in large groups, small groups, or pairs (see Kramersch, this volume, chap. 2); but it will be there, with students deeply involved in tasks and activities that draw on their creativity and stimulate that of the teacher.

What happens in an interactive classroom?

1. In an interactive classroom there will be, first of all, *much listening to authentic materials*, with no prohibition or discouragement of spoken response or student-initiated contribution. The listening will be purposeful as students prepare to use what they have heard in some way. “Authentic materials” include teacher talk when the teacher is fluent in the language. When teachers cannot provide this kind of input, they will rely heavily on audio- and videotapes or, for reading, on newspapers, magazines, cartoon books, letters, instructions for products, menus, maps, and so on (see Melvin and Stout, chap. 4; and Price, chap. 12; this volume). Where available, native speakers will be brought into the classroom to interact informally with the students, even at an early stage. They can often be persuaded to allow videotaping or audiotaping of

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their discussion for use with other classes. Authentic materials need not be difficult materials. With careful selection and preparation they can be fine-tuned to a level accessible to particular groups of students. These materials will always be used in some productive activity: as background for a research project to be discussed with others; for reenactment in a role-playing situation with a problem-solving component; as a dramatization or skit; or as input for a small-group discussion or debate about controversial or unexpected elements, perhaps cultural, that need study in order to be understood and accepted in their context.

2. Students from the beginning *listen and speak* in reacting to pictures and objects, in role plays, through acting out, and in discussion; they create radio talk shows; they conduct class flea markets with personally selected artifacts (buying, selling, negotiating, explaining, persuading, retracting). Students simulate cocktail parties or job interviews. They report on newscasts, providing their personal commentary from their own cultural and national viewpoint; they argue about events and positions taken and share points of view. (Many useful activities are proposed by Sadow, this volume, chap. 3).

3. Students are involved in *joint tasks: purposeful activity* where they work together doing or making things, making arrangements, entertaining others, preparing materials for cross-cultural presentations and discussions, arranging international festivals or open days for parents – all the time using the language as they concentrate on the task.

4. Students watch *films and videotapes of native speakers interacting*. They observe nonverbal behavior and the types of exclamations and fill-in expressions that are used, how people initiate and sustain a conversational exchange, how they negotiate meaning, and how they terminate an interactive episode (Keller and Warner 1979). Useful for this type of observation are soap operas or television serials, which students can use as starter material for developing their own episodes, taking on roles of characters in the original series and interacting as they do. If these episodes are developed in groups, the members of each group must listen carefully to the presentations of other groups in order to be prepared for their own. Videotaping is useful. Peer critiques are often sufficient to draw attention to problems of comprehension due to weaknesses in pronunciation or syntax. Varieties of language, stress, and intonation can also be acquired and practiced in this type of activity.

5. Pronunciation may be improved interactively not only while listening and speaking conversationally, but also in *poetry reading and creation* (see Maley, this volume, chap. 8) or while preparing dialogues, *plays*, or skits where reading the material over and over with each other is the learning procedure (see Via, this volume, chap. 9). In identifying with a role, students approximate the pronunciation one would expect