



This page is located at: <http://www.ncsall.net/?id=739>

Teaching for Communicative Competence

Interaction in the ESOL Classroom

by Donna Moss

The 20 students in the intermediate-level English for speakers of other languages (ESOL) class were sitting at round tables in small groups. They had been studying English in the context of communicating on the telephone. In a pre-topic needs assessment, the students identified situations that are particularly difficult for them when they talk on the telephone. Talking to the obstetrician-gynecologist (two young women were pregnant), talking to the pharmacist, ordering take-out food, and calling a child's school to report absences were high on the list. The teacher began the lesson by saying that she had to call her auto mechanic to make an appointment to have him check out a problem with her car. The teacher asked the class to help her plan for the telephone conversation by suggesting what she should say and predicting possible responses and questions from the mechanic. After the class helped her plot a possible conversation scenario on a worksheet, the students worked in small groups according to their own topic interests and plotted scenarios for telephone conversations. Four students were in the "ordering take-out" group.

Juan: Okay, who writes?

Ahmed: Sana is good. Sana, you write.

Sana: Okay. I write the paper. You tink. [laughs]

Bun: Huh?

Sana: I write. You tink... [She points to her head]. Tink!

Ahmed: Oh! Think. Th...it's th. Think.

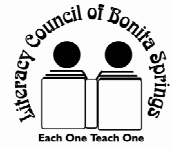
Sana: Yeah.

Juan: You need 'th.' Think.

Sana: Okay. I write. You Think!



Literacy Council of Bonita Springs



The two pregnant women worked together.

Monica: My doctor she...uh... doesn't speak Portuguese.

Dalia: Same my doctor, she don't speak Arabic.

Monica: I need say when I have ...um...um...the pain. The doctor...she told me the way. I forgot.

Dalia: The pain?

Monica: Yeah. The pain ... the pain before the baby.

Dalia: Eh! Pain. Teacher, can you help me? How do you say pain for the baby in English?

Teacher: Pain for the baby? The baby has pain?

Monica: No. No. When I have to call doctor and say the pain before the baby. It's special pain for the mother... for pregnant.

Teacher: Contractions?

Monica: Yes, contraction.

Teacher: Contractions.

Monica: Yes. Thank you. How you...do you spell it?

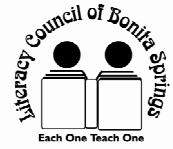
Perhaps you read the scenarios and realized that you have heard similar conversations between learners in your classes when they were working in groups. Group instruction is not new to many of us who teach ESOL. It makes sense to give language learners an opportunity to talk with others in the target language. Research also supports the idea that interaction aids in second language acquisition (SLA). This article discusses what research has to say about the role of interaction in SLA, ways to provide interaction opportunities, challenges in providing these opportunities, and types of activities that foster interaction.

Changing Views

Notions about how best to teach adult English language learners have changed over the years and have been influenced by research in how second languages are learned. Today, perhaps the most accepted instructional frame work in adult ESOL education is communicative language teaching (CLT). The goal of CLT is to increase communicative competence, which means being able to understand and interpret messages, understand the social contexts in which language is being used, apply the rules of grammar, and employ strategies to keep communication from breaking down (Savignon, 1997). With CLT, instructional emphasis shifted from grammar translation,



Literacy Council of Bonita Springs



memorization of dialogues, and drills and practice of structural patterns to using language in real-life contexts for meaningful purposes (Savignon, 2001). Grammar practice with drills can be appropriate at certain times, but CLT demands authentic use of language, which means people interacting with other people.

The primary principle underlying CLT is that language learners need opportunities to use the language in authentic conversations. After all, daily life requires people to communicate in a wide range of contexts for many diverse purposes. This interactive view of language teaching has its roots in SLA research studies that have examined how interactions contribute to SLA (Moss & Ross-Feldman, 2003). Studies report how negotiation of meaning — an exchange between a speaker and listener to solve a comprehension problem — affects what learners produce (Ellis, 1999; Pica, 2003). Researchers have studied interactions between native speakers and language learners as well as interactions exclusively between language learners. They have also examined social interaction between individuals and the interaction that occurs in our minds (e.g., the interaction among our knowledge of the first and second languages, the content and context of a message, and our background knowledge). (See Ellis, 1997, 1999; Gass & Selinker, 1994, for in-depth discussions of different theoretical perspectives.)

A growing body of research seems to show that interaction plays an important role in learning a second language (Ellis, 1999). Understanding the concept of interlanguage, which is language spoken by nonnative speakers, is key to understanding the research on interaction.

“The basic assumption in SLA research is that learners create a language system, known as an interlanguage (IL). This system is composed of numerous elements, not the least of which are elements of the NL (native language) and TL (target language). There are also elements of the IL that do not have their origins in either the NL or the TL. What is important is that the learners themselves impose a structure on the available linguistic data and formulate an internalized system” (Gass & Selinker, 1994, p. 11).

In other words, interlanguage periods are transitional and systematic. They follow rules and change over time as learners learn more about the new language.

Language learners make changes in their interlanguage when they recognize that changes need to be made. SLA research (Swain, 1995) seems to support the argument that language learners’ interactions with native speakers and more proficient nonnative speakers positively affect the process of interlanguage development. During interaction, learners may notice things about their language use that do not match a native speaker’s or more proficient nonnative speaker’s use. During interactions, communication may break down and the listener may let the speaker know of the confusion by asking for clarification, confirmation, repetition, or by correcting the speaker. The speaker may respond by changing the message in some way in order to make it understandable. Both the listener and the speaker are actively involved in the negotiation of meaning (Long, 1996). One of the participants in the interaction may be a native speaker or a nonnative speaker at a higher proficiency level than the other participant(s) and may provide assistance during the interaction. In other interactions, participants may all be language learners



who construct knowledge of the language through both their successful and unsuccessful attempts at communication.

Consider the conversation samples at the beginning of this article. In the first sample, Bun does not understand what Sana means when she says “tink,” so Sana modifies her messages by adding a gesture. Ahmed points out to Sana that she has mispronounced the word, so she modifies her pronunciation. In the second sample, Monica is searching for the word “contractions” and she elicits Dalia’s aid by attempting to define the word. Dalia cannot supply the word, so she asks the teacher for help. Dalia tries to define the word, but the teacher doesn’t understand. Monica revises her earlier definition and the teacher is able to supply the word. Monica immediately recognizes it as the one she heard from her doctor. These samples illustrate exchanges that can help build knowledge of the new language.

Although researchers continue to research and debate the effects of interaction on SLA, they generally agree that it plays an important role in promoting acquisition. For teachers, the question becomes how to incorporate interaction into instruction effectively. [See a list of interactive classroom activities.](#)

Creating an Interactive Classroom

Interactive language instruction involves the teacher and learners engaging in activities that create conditions that foster language use, which lead to further language development.

First and foremost, the teacher is the initiator of interaction. That does not mean that the teacher is always in control of the discourse, such as in models where the teacher initiates, the students respond, and the teacher provides feedback. It means that the teacher is responsible for providing opportunities for interaction in which learners control the topics and discourse (Brown, 2001; Ellis, 1999). Research seems to suggest that language acquisition is aided when learners have control of the discourse topics and the discourse (Brown, 2001; Ellis, 1999). This supports what teachers believe to be good ESOL practice: selecting content and classroom activities, based on learners’ needs and interests, that are suitably challenging and promote language development (Florez & Burt, 2001). To create conditions for effective interactions in the classroom, teachers ideally do the following:

- Plan lessons that are logically sequenced and that provide proper scaffolding — the instructional support that enables learners to make a leap in knowledge or skill — so that learners can be successful in their interactions (Florez & Burt, 2001).
- Release control and step out of the role of class leader. Teachers let learners take the initiative for interactions, experiment freely, and take risks with the language.
- Facilitate learner-to-learner interactions by monitoring and providing assistance when students request it or when students are unable to repair communication breakdowns on their own.



Literacy Council of Bonita Springs



- Initiate and sustain interaction by using a variety of questions ranging from knowledge questions (e.g., yes/no; choice; or who, what, where, and why questions) to evaluation questions (e.g., opinion questions).
- Understand that interaction does not necessarily mean that student participation is always verbal. Sometimes students learn by listening to others interact.
- Recognize that regular use of pair and small group work promotes interaction.
- Effectively implement group work.
- Teach learners strategies to negotiate meaning (e.g., ask for clarification, paraphrase, and use circumlocution).

To create effective interactions, teachers ideally also know when it is appropriate to talk about language and when it is appropriate to let learners use language, and how to balance fluency and accuracy work. Research suggests that there is an appropriate time and place for form-focused instruction and that direct grammar instruction can help acquisition for some learners (Larsen-Freeman, 1997). Research seems to suggest that grammar instruction is most effective when it is focused on raising learners' awareness of how a structure is formed, what it means, and how it is used rather than on practicing drills for accuracy (Ellis, 1999; Long, 2000). Learners gain more understanding by processing what they hear and read into their interlanguage than learning an isolated grammar rule followed by pattern practice (Larsen-Freeman, 1997).

Challenges

Interactive language instruction may be new for some learners. Learners may have expectations of how instruction should proceed based on their experience with school-based education and previous language instruction. For these reasons, discussing with learners the benefits of and the rationale for having them interact with each other during class time, in meaningful discourse, is difficult but important. Teachers can begin the discussion by brainstorming with learners the things they do that help them learn English. Teachers can introduce the phrase "use it or lose it!" and learners can be asked to talk about what it means. What are ways for learners to use language in the classroom?

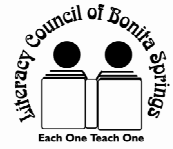
The classroom setup can hinder or enhance interaction opportunities. If the desks are in neat rows with every one facing the chalk board and the teacher, learner-to-learner interactions are more difficult to initiate. Round tables, desks arranged in small groups, or even a semicircle of desks help make interactive tasks easier.

Interactive activities need to be managed well and the teacher needs to stay engaged throughout, even when learners are working in pairs and small groups. Teachers need to be ready to facilitate and provide resources for learners. It is important to spend time listening to learners talking. Teachers may hear something that the whole group would be interested in talking about when the class debriefs, or they may discover vocabulary problems or problems with learners' use of a grammar form that is causing communication breakdowns. These problems can be addressed later during a time in class, when it is more appropriate to focus on accuracy.

To make interaction meaningful and effective, teachers need to know their students well. Which students work well with which other students? Are there individuals who would not be



Literacy Council of Bonita Springs



comfortable working with each other? What are the learners' goals, interests, and expectations? What do they want to get from the class? Interactive opportunities will flourish in classrooms where there is a sense of trust and community. This begins with the teacher and the teacher's interactions with learners. Brown (2001) suggests that teachers can create positive relationships by showing interest in students, encouraging learners to voice their ideas and feelings, valuing what learners think and say, having a sense of humor, providing feedback on progress, and praising good work.

In Conclusion

For many learners, the ESOL classroom is the one place they get to think about language, practice it, take risks with it, and reflect on their use of it. Providing learners with activities that nurture this exploration and that allow for interaction is important for language development and for preparing learners to use the language successfully when they leave the class environment. Not long ago, I was giving the BEST Plus, a standardized English language assessment, to a learner in my program. I asked her to tell me about something new she recently learned. I don't remember her exact words, but she started her answer by saying that every day she learned something new in her English class. She said that every time she talked to other learners in the class she learned new English words or she learned something new about American culture. Then she added that she learned new things every day because her teacher could explain things well. She said now she uses English every day after class. "Not much, but step by step and every day."

When you prepare for your next class, think about interaction. Look at your lesson plans. What kinds of interactive activities did you choose to use? Why did you choose those activities? How will they help in language acquisition? Have you given learners enough preparation and support? What are they learning? By establishing interactive language instruction, ESOL teachers are setting up language learners for success.

References

- Brown, H.D. (2001). *Teaching by Principles: An Interactive Approach to Language Pedagogy* (2nd ed.). White Plains, NY: Longman.
- Ellis, R. (1997). *SLA Research and Language Teaching*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.
- Ellis, R. (1999). *Learning a Second Language Through Interaction*. Philadelphia, PA: John Benjamins.
- Florez, M., & Burt, M. (2001). *Beginning to Work with Adult English Language Learners: Some Considerations*. ERIC Q&A. Washington, DC: National Center for ESOL Literacy Education. Retrieved January 23, 2005, from <http://www.cal.org/caela/digests/>
- Gass S., & Selinker L. (1994). *Second Language Acquisition: An Introductory Course*. Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.



Literacy Council of Bonita Springs



- Larsen-Freeman, D. (1997). *Grammar and Its Teaching: Challenging Its Myths*. ERIC Digest. Washington, DC: Center for Applied Linguistics. Retrieved January 23, 2005, from <http://www.cal.org/resources/digest/larsen01.html>
- Long, M. (2000). "Focus on form in task-based language teaching." In R.D. Lambert & E. Shohamy (eds.), *Language Policy and Pedagogy: Essays in Honor of A. Ronald Walton*. Philadelphia: John Benjamins.
- Long, M. (1996). "The role of the linguistic environment in second language acquisition." In W. Ritchie & T. Bhatia (eds.), *Handbook of Research on Language Acquisition: Vol. 2. Second language acquisition* (pp 413-468). New York: Academic Press.
- Moss, D., & Ross-Feldman, L. (2003). *Second Language Acquisition in Adults: From Research to Practice*. ERIC Q&A. Washington, DC: National Center for ESL Literacy Education. Retrieved January 23, 2005, from <http://www.cal.org/caela/digests/>
- Pica, T. (2003). "Second language acquisition research and applied linguistics." *Working Papers in Educational Linguistics*, 18(2).
- Savignon, S. (1997). *Communicative Competence: Theory and Classroom Practice*. New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Savignon, S. (2001). "Communicative language teaching in the twenty-first century." In M. Celce-Murcia (ed.), *Teaching English as a Second or Foreign Language*. Boston: Heinle & Heinle.
- Singleton, K. (2002). "ESOL teachers: Helpers in health care." *Focus on Basics*, 5C, 26-30.
- Siteki, M. (2004). Talking to Kids about Drugs and Alcohol. Retrieved December 6, 2004, from http://www.arlington.k12.va.us/instruct/ctae/adult_ed/REEP/family.htm
- Swain, M. (1995). "Three functions of output in second language learning." In G. Cook & B. Seidhofer (eds.), *Principle and Practice in Applied Linguistics: Studies in Honor of H.G. Widdowson*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.
- Willis, J. (1996). *A Framework for Task-Based Learning*. Essex, UK: Addison Wesley Longman.
- Other Useful Resources**
- Lightbrown, P. (2000). "Classroom SLA research and second language teaching." *Applied Linguistics*, 21(4), 431-462.
- Parrish, B. (2004). *Teaching Adult ESL*. New York: McGraw Hill.



Literacy Council of Bonita Springs



About the Author

Donna Moss is the family literacy specialist at the Arlington Education and Employment Program (REEP) in Arlington, Virginia. She has been in adult ESOL education for more than 20 years as a teacher, curriculum developer, teacher trainer, and researcher. She was a contributing author of the *Collaborations: English in Our Lives* series from Heinle and Heinle.

Interactive Classroom Activities

A number of activities for pairs and small groups foster interaction and focus on meaningful communication (Ellis, 1999). Some activities have very specific guidelines and parameters; others are more loosely constructed. In interactive classroom instruction, a variety of activities is used depending on the lesson goals and objectives. These activities include, but are not limited to, information gap, ordering and sorting, jigsaws, conversation grid, problem solving, and discussions.

Information Gap activities are widely used in ESOL instruction. At the most basic level, two people share information to complete a task. In one-way information gap activities, one person has all the information (e.g., one learner gives directions to a location and the other plots the route out on a map). In two-way gap activities, both learners have information to share to complete the activity. Two-way information gap activities have been shown to facilitate more interaction than one-way information gap tasks (Ellis, 1999).

Jigsaws are highly interactive activities that require learners to pool their information to complete a task. For example, in a jigsaw reading activity, learners work together in small groups to unscramble a text. A text is cut into logical chunks and the group works together to put the text back into the proper sequence. Learners use their background knowledge and their knowledge of the language to put the text back together. The interaction among learners often includes questions, explanations, and requests for clarification.

Conversation grid activities work well for beginning-level learners. They provide learners with an opportunity to practice gathering and giving the same information over and over again, thus helping to build automaticity. They also provide learners with a chance to negotiate meaning. For example, to review asking and answering personal identification questions in a family literacy class, learners can speak to classmates to gather information and complete a table such as the one below.

First name	Last name	Child's grade	Child's teacher's name



Literacy Council of Bonita Springs



The number of rows can vary depending on how many interviews you want students to conduct.

A conversation may ensue such as:

Ana: What's your first name?

Marta: Marta

Ana: Spell, please

Marta: M-A-R-T-A

Ana: M-A (student writes the letter E)

Marta: M-A...A...no E

And so on.

Ordering and sorting activities include classification, ranking, and sequencing (Willis, 1996). For example, in a discussion about talking to children about drugs and alcohol, parents are given cards with statements such as, "beer is not alcohol," or "the legal drinking age is 21." Learners work in pairs or small groups and must put the cards in either the "True," "False," or "I'm not sure" pile. To complete the task, learners have to discuss their choices, provide explanations for them, and achieve consensus (Siteki, 2004).

Problem-solving activities work at all levels. Learners work in small groups and discuss issues that are relevant to their lives, such as finding ways to use English outside the class, or how to plan a budget for a family of five. Problem-solving groups work well when each member of the group has a specific role and the tasks are clearly set out for them. Learners use language to communicate for real reasons: to explain their ideas, make suggestions, and, finally, reach a consensus.

For beginning-level learners, problem-solving activities can be created using picture prompts or picture stories that deal with everyday problems that adults commonly confront. Using the language experience approach, learners tell the teacher what is happening in each picture and the teacher writes what they say (Singleton, 2002). After the story is established, learners can make suggestions about how characters in the story can solve their problems. (See <http://www.cal.org/caela/health/> for examples of problem-solving picture stories related to health issues.)

Discussions, which are an obvious way to promote interactions, can be about almost anything, from cultural issues, education, learning English, to current events and "hot" topics. Discussions seem deceptively easy to set up, but they require preparation and thought so that they run smoothly and learners get the most out of the exchange of ideas. The purpose of the discussion should be made very clear to the learners. The benefits of small-group discussions on language development should also be made clear to them: they are an opportunity to practice listening for main ideas and details, build vocabulary, use English to explain and elaborate, and use strategies to keep the conversation from breaking down. It is also helpful to set time limits, assign roles and responsibilities, and debrief with the whole group after the discussion.



Literacy Council of Bonita Springs

