

Developing Awareness and Noticing Skills for Interaction

by [Anna Filipi](#)

Over the last four decades, an impressive array of research has been conducted on interaction, which started with the seminal work of Sacks, Schegloff, and Jefferson (1974). Initially, studies were on English, but increasingly, and over the last decade in particular, studies have been conducted in other languages as well, shedding light on turn-taking and the organisation of sequences in conversation.

Turn Taking

As a result of this research, we know that speakers adhere to a set of rules about turn-taking that operate at a subconscious level. This is evident in the simple observation that conversations are orderly and highly organized. That is, speakers do not speak over each other unless they are in conflict and arguing. When listening, speakers

- attend to what is being said so that they can predict when a turn will end or when it might be appropriate for them to take the floor so that overlap is avoided,
- initiate repair if there is a problem of hearing or understanding, and
- attend to speakers in order to design a turn that is an appropriate fit (e.g., a question requires an appropriate answer; a greeting a return greeting; an invitation an acceptance, rejection, or a noncommittal response).

Utterance pairs such as questions and answers are referred to as adjacency pairs and the organisation of turns as sequence organisation. As part of the organisation of turn-taking, interactions also have particular openings and closings (Wong & Waring, 2010).

Explicit focus through teaching of these rules is important. We cannot assume that learners will be able to observe, and then absorb interactional practices automatically. Indeed, studies on speaking examinations (Filipi, 1994; Seedhouse & Egbert, 2006) as well as studies on TESOL classrooms (Barraja-Rohan, 2011) have shown that students often present with poor skills, such as the inability to repair or extend their turns. This has implications for pedagogy because there is still a tendency to present models of what we think spoken language is (as is evident from textbooks). By developing a pedagogy based on authentic interactions, we are helping our English language learners to interact in appropriate ways in English, and we are also providing them with opportunities to develop intercultural understanding.

Awareness and Noticing Skills

An important first phase in a pedagogy that aims to develop students' skills in interaction are the awareness and noticing phases:

- *Developing awareness*: What do students know based on their experience and observations as speakers of their first language(s) and English?
- *Noticing*: What do students notice when presented with examples?
- *Reacting*: How might students react to what they notice?

There are many speaking text-types that can be chosen for this exercise. One text-type that has received a lot of research across languages is the telephone call—specifically the opening and closing phases (Palotti & Varcasia, 2008). Below is a suggested set of exercises to exploit students' awareness, noticings, and reactions to telephone openings.

Activity

Step 1: Brainstorming

As a way of introducing the topic, the activity begins with a brainstorming exercise involving the whole class. This is based on students' own experience with the telephone call in their first language(s) and of their experience with it in English. Students are asked to jot down, in a note-taking table, what they believe to be the conventions of opening a telephone call in the following situations on a note-taking table and then share with the class. Here is an example of the table:

What might you expect to hear or say in the following situations? Jot down your thoughts.

	My L1	English
a) making a call to close friend or family member		
b) making a call to a business or organization		
c) making a call to a business or organization, asking for a specific unknown person and being put through to that person		
d) receiving a call from a close friend or family member		
e) receiving a call from an acquaintance		

Step 2: Listening, Observing, and Comparing

Once they complete the note-taking table and share their notes with the class, students listen to a series of authentic telephone openings in English that the teacher can easily record in which each of the situations is featured. They take notes and compare their notes with what they predicted would be the features. Ask students to do the same for their L1s at home and ask them to report the next day.

Step 3: Drawing Conclusions

As part of the ensuing discussion, ask students to report on

- how similar or different their reported observations were from what actually happens
- what they learned,
- what might be possible reasons for any differences they noticed between the conventions of the two languages,
- what might be possible reasons for any differences they noticed between the different situations, and
- any reactions they had to what they observed.

Similar procedures can be applied to working on openings and/or closings of other spoken text types such as everyday conversation in a range of social contexts, interviews, anecdotes, and announcements, or to fitted paired utterances that are so common in interaction, such as questions and answers.

Variations

This exercise can be done in small groups with each group being given one or more spoken text-type to work with. A class chart is displayed for groups to complete with notes taken. Students in groups then take turns reporting their findings. This way, a wide range of text openings or closings is worked on in a fairly quick and efficient manner. Whole class discussion could focus on the importance of openings and closings and what might explain the variations according to audience and purpose.

References

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