**Teaching Interaction: Is It possible? Is It Useful?**
by Samuel Crofts


After teaching Brazilian students on exchange programs in the United Kingdom, I moved to Japan to take up a position at a university near the city of Kobe. To say this move prompted a rethink in my classroom approach would be a huge understatement, and the silence that greeted the interactive activities that I had used successfully in the United Kingdom was a real shock. In trying to recalibrate this classroom atmosphere, I became interested in the study of interaction. This led me to develop the ideas I would like to share in this article, namely that discrete interactional skills *can* be taught, and for students whose L1 communication style is markedly different to English, such skills can be useful in learning to deal with intercultural situations.

## What Are Interactional Skills?

Eavesdrop on a conversation in any language and, whether or not you understand the meaning of the sounds the speakers are making, there is a good chance that you will recognize some, if not all, of the following characteristics:

- Devices to show understanding on the part of the listener; these may be verbal or physical but will indicate the message has been heard and either understood or not.
- Clear differences in turn length as speakers' excitement, interest, and engagement in the conversation topic ebb and flow.
- Disagreements and interruptions as interlocutors challenge each other and seek to redirect the topic of the conversation to one that they favor.

However, the students I first encountered in Japan, when required to interact with others in English communicative activities, often failed to display any of these characteristics. Instead, strict adherence to agreement and equal turn lengths, and an almost complete absence of listener participation or eye contact led to uncomfortable and awkward interactions between students. There are a number of possible reasons for this, ranging from participants' personalities and moods to their overall language ability and the cultural and interactive norms embedded in their L1. Additional explanations in my context may highlight the language learning experience of Japanese school children, particularly the lack of focus on practicing spoken English.

In trying to isolate and teach interactional skills, my goal was to equip students with a toolbox of skills that they could use to create and maintain comfortable interactions both in the classroom and in intercultural situations they may encounter elsewhere in their lives.

## How Did I Teach It?

After consulting literature from the field of conversation analysis as well as more experienced colleagues, I selected three broad features of successful interactions and set myself the task of teaching my students to embed them in their own interactions. The features were listener participation and interruption, disagreement, and self-disclosure, and my pedagogic strategy was

divided into three strands: awareness raising, authentic input, and explicit instruction, each of which are outlined in the following sections.

## 1. Awareness Raising

Any person who can speak at least one language has an appreciation of interactional norms, and in fact must successfully use interactional skills daily to accomplish anything from buying goods to making friends. On the other hand, it seems that in certain educational cultures, a lack of emphasis on the interactive elements of the English language can lead to the separation of language as a subject of study and language as a tool for communication. Given this, the "awareness raising" part of this process was about unlocking students' knowledge of interaction and reconnecting the *study* of language with the *purpose* of language (i.e., to communicate your thoughts to others).

There were a number of activities I used to accomplish raising students' awareness of the importance of interactional skills alongside regular classroom explanations of what I was doing and why. Firstly, by showing videos of speakers using no eye contact and negative body language, and asking students to ascribe adjectives to them, I was able to demonstrate how people make judgments on others based on the way they interact, thereby encouraging students to think about the way they present themselves. Students were also asked to think about the unwritten interactive rules in their own culture to produce an advice sheet for second language speakers of Japanese to have successful Japanese interactions.

## 2. Authentic Input

Input is clearly a crucial element to any language program, but in terms of interaction, students in EFL environments may struggle to access a large enough volume of interactional input to really affect their performance. Reasons for this include a lack of access to proficient speakers of the target language, a tendency among textbook publishers to sacrifice interactional features of their listening activities to increase comprehensibility, and the fact that "authentic" resources such as online news or movies are at too high a level for students to understand.

To address these issues, I decided to produce bespoke listening resources for my own students. These included a series of Vodcasts (video podcasts) in which I recorded myself interacting with friends, colleagues, and international students at my university. I then released the videos over the course of the semester as YouTube clips and asked students to watch them and answer comprehension questions about them (see clips 1, 2, and 3). The point was not the comprehension, but for students to notice how English conversations are constructed and how listener participation such as interruptions and clarifications, self-disclosure, and disagreements are used by participants in real situations. Students were also asked to transcribe certain sections of each Vodcast and to use the interactional features they noticed to write authentic-sounding scripts.

## 3. Explicit Instruction

The purpose of the explicit instruction of interactional skills is to provide students with a safe and supportive environment in which to practice the skills they learn throughout the course. Before using such skills productively, it is important that students know how it feels to use them. To this end, I used an activity in which Student A had to recount everything he or she had done that day in as much detail as possible while Student B was responsible for preventing Student A from completing his or her explanation by using regular interruptions. The lighthearted nature of the game improved students' timing, and I used similar activities to practice disagreement structures.

## How Did It Go?

At the start of my attempt to foster a more natural and comfortable atmosphere among my students, their conversations displayed almost none of the features of interaction that typify communication in most languages. Instead, students' seemed excessively concerned with making sure each person spoke for the same amount of time and nobody disagreed with anybody, nor showed any sign of misunderstanding. I was pleasantly surprised by the improvements in students' interactive performance across the class, and video data taken from the experiment went on to form the core of a presentation I made at TESOL 2015 in Toronto, Ontario, Canada. Of course, this is an ongoing project and, next semester, I am aiming to see if these skills are likely to be transferred outside of the classroom. At that point, I hope that this piece of reflective practice will graduate to the point of fully blown action research.

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