

# Classroom Dynamics

## Finding a Consensus

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### **Abstract**

This paper explores interaction and class dynamics in a language learning setting, namely a Japanese institution of tertiary education. It claims that interaction is essential to maximize productivity and consequently aid in Second Language Acquisition (SLA). These assumptions are based on the combination of past research carried out by linguistic specialists such as Jeremy Harmer, Rod Ellis and Michael Swann among others, and recent research carried out by the author.

The research data is then collected from both the students and teachers alike in regard to the type and form of interaction. The results of the research are then compared and triangulated to discover if any consensus or glaring disparities exist. The issues raised from this data are then discussed with reference to past research and interviewee feedback so that well founded explanations may be presented.

Finally, I identify any disparities that may exist and present suggestions to rectify any potential problems so that our students can maximize their linguistic and communicative skills in order to successfully achieve their individual objectives.

### **Introduction**

“...everything that happens in the classroom happens through a process of live person-to-person interaction.” (All-Wright, 1984: 156) and it is this interaction which plays a vital role in Communicative Language Teaching (CLT). It is a major element within this teaching approach that sets it aside from its predecessors, and one which has contributed greatly to it being widely regarded as the best method of obtaining communicative competence, the maximization of productivity and ultimately increased proficiency.

There have also been many advocates of interaction, as well as the approach

to teaching that it exists within. One of whom was Vygotsky (1978) who said, "Interaction is essential to the development of individual thought." His support is of no surprise as he came up with the concept of the Sociocultural Theory which describes learning as a social process that takes place by firstly interacting with others, and then it is integrated into the individual's mental structure. His theory was heavily influenced by psychology, and therefore it is of no surprise that he should support CLT and the use of interaction because the foundations of the approach are heavily influenced by British functional linguistics, American sociolinguistics, and psychological and philosophical concepts.

Another advocate, Jeremy Harmer, explained the importance of communicating through interaction as follows:

A major strand of CLT centres around the essential belief that if students are involved in meaning-focused communication tasks language learning will take care of itself and that plentiful exposure to language in use and plenty of opportunities to use it are vitally important for a student's development of knowledge and skills. (2004: 69)

Of course, not all linguistic scholars lend support to CLT and its means of achieving the desired communicative competence. One of the harshest critics is Swann who in one scathing review stated,

Along with its virtues, the Communicative Approach unfortunately has most of the typical vices of an intellectual revolution: it overgeneralizes valid but limited insights until they become virtually meaningless; it makes exaggerated claims for the power and novelty of its doctrines; it misrepresents the currents of thought it has replaced; it is often characterized by serious intellectual confusion; it is choked with jargon. (2012: 2)

Swann and Widdowson, and advocates of CLT, strongly and passionately debated over these issues for some time with increasing vigor. Henry Widdowson defends

CLT by accusing Swann of misrepresenting the concept in a way that was both contradictory and lacking in evidence to support his attacks.

Nevertheless, it cannot be disputed that the interactional view exists within CLT and other communicative approaches to language teaching. This view describes language as, “a vehicle for the realization of interpersonal relations and for the performance of social transactions between individuals.” (Richards & Rodgers, 2001, 21) It goes on to explain that, “Interactional theories focus on patterns of moves, acts, negotiation, and interaction found in conversational exchanges.” (Richards & Rodgers, 2001: 21) He reiterates the importance of interaction by stating, ““Interaction” has been central to theories of second language learning and pedagogy since the 1980s’, and by quoting Rivers (1987) who said,

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 both speaker and listener in a situation of importance to both). This is interaction. (Richards & Rodgers, 2001: 21)

However, despite these beliefs and insights being eloquently conveyed in a persuasive and convincing fashion, and the incorporation of an interactional view in other communicative approaches such as Task-based Language Teaching and Cooperative Language Learning, not enough attention has been given as to constructing a model of ‘Language as Interaction’ so as to provide us, the teacher, with a theoretical framework to establish a method whereby interaction can be successfully implemented to meet the needs of our students. It is this lack of detail and explanation on which I intend to focus.

## **Data Collection**

The original idea for my research came about through needs analysis studies that were conducted in each of my classes at the beginning of term as standard procedure. The results of these made me question whether we, the teachers, were

fulfilling the needs of our students. Therefore, I decided to conduct some research in my college. (It is a college that specializes in foreign languages located in Tokyo.) My focus group consisted of 71 students and 15 teachers in total. I decided to use both questionnaires and interviews as my means of gathering data. I would like to clarify the reasons for my choices, and to explain the significance of choosing two (2) methods of research.

### **Questionnaires**

Firstly, I used questionnaires to collect data from both students and teachers. I have chosen this form of research over surveys in order to avoid an (unconscious) intrusive and manipulative approach. By this I mean, it is all too easy to try to alter the participants' response by adjusting the question or 'leading' them in a certain direction due to its face-to-face approach; whereas a questionnaire is distributed and completed without intrusion or unnecessary interaction. This is reiterated by Jaeger (1988) who believed that, "The more intrusive a survey, the lower the chances that it will accurately reflect real conditions." (Nunan, 1992: 141) Of course, questionnaires can also be presented in a way that would constitute leading questions, and therefore it is fundamental that careful consideration is paid to the exact wording of the questions so that they avoid bias or any indication of the researcher's personal attitudes or opinions.

Although I have used as large a sample of students as possible to make my findings representative of the institution as a whole, I was not satisfied with collating data from the students alone. The key purpose of this research project is to discover if there is any consensus between teachers and students in regard to interaction and the form it should take. That being said, I believed it was vital to collect the opinions and thoughts of the teachers as well.

Obviously, the questionnaire was worded slightly differently, and I added a 'personal information' section at the beginning, but apart from this it was basically unaltered. I distributed the copies by putting them in the teachers' pigeon holes with a small note explaining the purpose of the questionnaire. I asked for the completed copies to be returned within the week, if possible. From the twenty-eight (28)

distributed copies, I initially received eleven (11), but after a couple more weeks that number increased to fifteen (15).

By taking this off-hands approach the outcome was not influenced in anyway by me, and no interaction or correspondence took place between the chosen respondents and I. Also, to avoid inaccurate and ultimately misleading data, I also piloted the teachers' questionnaire with a couple of my colleagues in another institution so that they could help me pinpoint any potential pitfalls.

### **Interviews**

Although majority of my data collection takes the form of questionnaires, I will also be including interviews in order to triangulate my results. This was a clear limitation in my previous research project, which only focused on one form of data in the form of teacher observations, as it only focused on the teachers. Furthermore, I used classroom observations as my only form of data collection which was limited further by my interpretation of the results due to not having sufficient time or opportunity to receive individual feedback and self-evaluation from the teachers in question. One-to-one interviews were conducted with a selection of the participants, but not to a satisfactory degree. In light of these limitations I have decided to use both questionnaires and interviews to address the issue of triangulation.

David Nunan believes, "Interviews can be characterized in terms of their degree of formality, and most can be placed on a continuum ranging from unstructured through semi-structured to structured." (1992) The type of interview technique I chose is most similar to the unstructured approach and is referred to by Treece (1977) as a 'nondirective interview' in which, "the interviewee or subject is allowed or even encouraged to express his feelings without fear of disapproval. The subject can express his feelings or views on certain topics even without waiting to be questioned or even without pressure from the interviewer." (Calderon, 1993: 132) As with the questionnaires, I wanted to employ a non-intrusive or manipulating approach that would allow the interviewee to feel at ease and speak freely. Quite often the use of interviews as a tool for research and data collection is non-representative of the true thoughts and opinions of the subject because of the undue pressure forced upon them

to give the desired answer. The objective of my unstructured interview was to avoid such pitfalls, which I hope will result in valid and truly representative data that can be used to strengthen my findings. When conducted correctly, interviews should be able to do just this. If this is the case in my research project, the use of triangulation will have proved to have been a successful one.

## Data Analysis

### **Question 1: Which form of classroom interaction do you implement/enjoy the most?**

For this question the 2 focus groups had to select just one of the four choices: ‘whole-class work’, ‘group work’, ‘pair work’, and ‘individual study’. The results from this question are represented as bar charts in Figure 1.

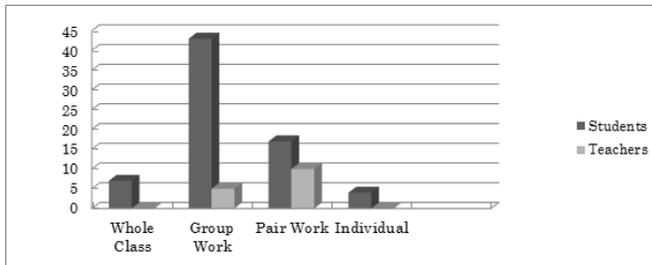


Figure 1: Most Favoured Forms of Interaction.

Out of the 15 teachers who kindly completed the questionnaire 5 of them selected ‘group work’ and the rest (10) choice ‘pair work’. In the case of the students the results were spread amongst the four options with ‘group work’ proving to be the overwhelming favourite with 43 votes. The other choices shared the remaining 28 votes with ‘group work’ receiving 17 votes, ‘whole-class work’ got 7, and ‘individual study’ was only selected by 4 students.

## Question 2: Which form of classroom interaction do you implement / enjoy the least?

In this question the four choices are the same as those offered to the participants in Question 2, namely ‘whole-class work’, ‘group work’, ‘pair work’, and ‘individual study’. The results of which are represented in Figure 2 of Appendix C. Naturally, as the teachers had opted for only ‘group work’ and ‘pair work’ for Question 4, they opted for ‘whole-class work’ (5) and ‘individual study’ (10). In comparison, the students’ least favoured choice was ‘individual study’ (38), secondly ‘whole-class work’ (15), ‘pair work’ followed with 10 votes, and ‘group work’ completed the votes with 8.

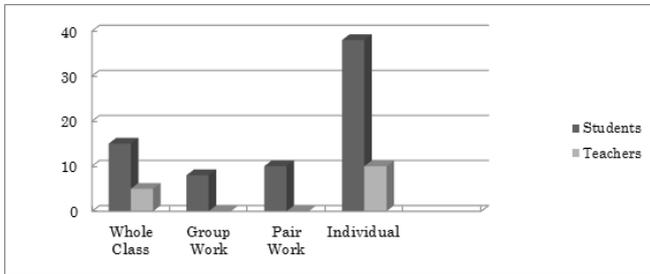


Figure 2: Least Favoured Forms of Interaction.

## Discussion

### Forms of Interaction

When talking about the ‘form’ of the interaction, I am referring to the different groupings the teacher can make in order to stimulate and encourage verbal interaction, and a natural setup for the students to work together and achieve their linguistic and communicative objective. Neilson (1989) takes this one step further by saying he believes different forms of interaction provide the students with the opportunity to communicate with each other to share “suggestions, hypothesis, insights, feedback, successes, and failures.”

Although there is no doubt that different forms of interaction are beneficial

to developing communication skills, the real question is the form this interaction should take. The main issue is finding an agreement between the two main parties concerned, namely teachers and students. The results of my research clearly show the obvious disparity that exists between the two groups. If you refer to Figures 1&2 you can see that group work was favoured by the students but pair work was favoured by the teachers. My student interviews support this with majority interviewed choosing group work and going on to explain that they preferred conversing within a group framework and could learn from one another's strengths and weaknesses. "It has been widely observed that students are much more ready to interact with each other than with their teachers. The responses they produce when interacting with peers also tend to be more complex than when they are interacting with teachers." (Tsui, 1995: 91) I witnessed exactly this point in my initial research project during classroom observations whereby students seemed far more at ease when put into small groups without any interference by the teacher. They spoke more freely and if they chose not to participate orally they had the possibility of opting out and focusing on receptive rather than productive skills as emphasized here by Harmer who states, "... students can choose their level of participation more readily than in a whole-class or pair work situation." (2004: 166) Several of my students reiterated this in their student interviews by stating that they had the option to participate as much or little as they desired without feeling the need to interact. Of course, there is a counter argument that some students don't get the opportunity to speak in group work, or further still "not all students enjoy it (group work) as they would prefer to be the focus of the teacher's attention rather than working with their peers." (Harmer, 2004: 166) However, as already explained in the last section, this does not refer to interacting with the teacher in front of their peers, but rather in a private one-to-one situation.

Another reason majority of the students selected group work over pair work, as expressed in the student interviews, was due to the ability to learn communication techniques such as turn taking, which can enable learners to become self-aware, and teach them how to include other members of the group and keep the conversation flowing and on track. "In small groups students have to take on the responsibility of managing talk and determining the direction of the discussion themselves." (Tsui,

1995: 93) She continues to explain that, “Removing the figure of authority and putting students in small groups not only creates a more permissive atmosphere and increases the quantity of talk, it fundamentally changes the nature of the interaction...” (1995: 93)

My data illustrated the above point whether they favoured group or pair work, but those who favoured the latter would argue that pair work gives them more opportunity to talk and they feel far more relaxed and undaunted by the fear of making mistakes when interacting with a friend, as stated by 3 of the students interviewed. (See Appendix C)

As for the teachers, they favoured pair work over group work based on their understanding of the perceived requirements of Japanese students from a cultural perspective. To put it simply, Asian students are “unwilling to speak in English for fear that they may make silly mistakes in front of the brighter students.” (Tsui, 1995: 83) The assumptions of ESL teachers is further reinforced by the findings of Smith & Swann who reiterated the views of Tsui but more towards a Japanese context by explaining that, “The Japanese do not care to be ‘put on the spot’ in public; getting it wrong can be a cause of real shame.....” (2001: 310) Most teachers are well aware of the cultural differences and consequently the varying approaches to language learning, and thus they plan and structure their classes accordingly. These cultural differences have led the majority of the participating teachers to conclude that pair work is more conducive to the Japanese learning style. We will delve deeper into these cultural influences in the next section.

In terms of the least favoured forms of interaction both the teachers and students were emphatically against the use of individual interaction closely followed by whole-class work. Some students expressed their reluctance to speak out in front of the class which is reiterated here by Jeremy Harmer who explains that, “Many students are disinclined to participate in front of the whole class since to do so brings with it the risk of public failure.” (Harmer, 2004: 162) Therefore, teachers put less emphasis on these forms of interaction because to do so could often result in unresponsive or even silent students, as illustrated earlier through the experiences of Jonathan Snell.

## Conclusion

The idea behind this paper was to discover if there is any consensus between teachers and students regarding certain elements of classroom interaction. The questions covered in my questionnaire, and elaborated upon in my informal interviews, show that there is more disparity than consensus, but this is not necessarily negative as we can use this information to understand the disparities and bridge the gap.

They differed in their approach to the 'form' the interaction should take. The students strongly supported group work as they felt more comfortable in a group environment in which they did not feel compelled to speak out. They also felt they could learn from each other both linguistically and culturally. In contrast, the teachers believed that although group work has merits, pair work maximized output and avoided any cultural restrictions by taking them out of a potentially embarrassing group situation and pairing them with a friend.

By triangulating my research and gathering data from both parties concerned I have managed to rectify some of the limitations of my initial research, but in so doing I have raised a few new issues that need to be addressed. From the information gathered I intend to present my results to the academic board for further consideration. If regarded worthy of further action, workshops will be set up to present and, if deemed necessary, rectify any areas of classroom instruction that are not meeting the needs of the students, and thereby not maximising their potential.

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## Appendix A

### Questionnaire: Classroom Interaction.

(Student's copy)

- 1) Interaction in the classroom is essential to developing oral/verbal skills.
  - A. Strongly agree
  - B. Agree
  - C. Neutral
  - D. Disagree
  - E. Strongly disagree
  
- 2) Which form of classroom interaction do you enjoy the most?
  - A. Whole-class work
  - B. Group work
  - C. Pair work
  - D. Individual study
  
- 3) Which form of classroom interaction do you enjoy least?
  - A. Whole-class work
  - B. Group work
  - C. Pair work
  - D. Individual study

## Appendix B

### Questionnaire: Classroom Interaction.

(Teacher's copy)

**I, Mark Brady, am currently undergoing research for my MA TESOL dissertation. I would appreciate it if you could take a few moments to complete this questionnaire.**

**Please start by providing some personal information.**

- i) Nationality \_\_\_\_\_
  - ii) Age a. 20-29 b. 30-39 c. 40-49 d. 50+
  - iii) Qualifications a. CELTA b. DELTA c. MA d. Phd e. BA
  - iv) Years of experience a. 1-5 b. 6-10 c. 11-15 d. 16-20 e. 20+
  - v) First language a. English b. Japanese c. Other
- 1) Interaction in the classroom is essential to developing oral skills.  
(Circle one)
- A. Strongly agree
  - B. Agree
  - C. Neutral
  - D. Disagree
  - E. Strongly disagree
- 2) Which form of classroom interaction do you implement the most?
- A. Whole-class work
  - B. Group work
  - C. Pair work
  - D. Individual study
- 3) Which form of classroom interaction do you implement least?
- A. Whole-class work
  - B. Group work
  - C. Pair work
  - D. Individual study

**Appendix C: Student Interviews.**

	Chie	Sho	Maya	Moeko
Importance of interaction	Agreed	Strongly agreed	Strongly agreed	Agreed
Types of interaction	T-S – To learn from the teacher.	T-S – To learn good pronunciation.	S-T – to practice natural English with the teacher.	S-T – Likes conversing with foreigners
Forms of interaction	G.W. – learn from other students.	GW – learn from others and gain other opinions.	GW but most Japanese too shy.	GW good, but PW better for her personally.
Prevention of interaction	Confidence due to cultural factors.	Aptitude affected by lack of confidence	Confidence	Lack of motivation and ability

	Juria	Hikaru	Momo	
Importance of interaction	Agreed	Strongly agreed	Strongly agreed	
Types of interaction	T-S – Learn good pronunciation and natural English.	T-S	S-T – To avoid bad habits & be corrected by teacher.	
Forms of interaction	GW – Learn from others mistakes.	PW – More comfortable speaking with friends.	PW – More conducive to Japanese style (Cultural)	
Prevention of interaction	Confidence due to cultural barriers.	Psychological (Lack of confidence & self- belief)	Aptitude influenced by lack of confidence.	