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David Rees

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Role change in interactive learning environments

Interaction

Interactive teaching has been very much in vogue over the last few years as part of the “new” communicative method in which attention is centred on the learner and taken away from the teacher. Learning takes place between students rather than between teacher and student, the teacher moving into a “facilitator” or “resource” role. There is considerable difference of opinion as to what interactive learning or interactive teaching actually is, and what it involves. In this paper I propose that interactive teaching styles produce a change in the learning environment in which the relationship between learner and teacher changes and that this change affects the ego-state mode of acquisition by the learner. It is not suggested that interactive teaching is better or worse than non-interactive teaching. The use of interactive methods depends upon the teaching goals. If the objective is to produce communicators, then there is an immediate quantitative advantage of having twelve simultaneous conversations between students, rather than a single dialogue between the teacher and one student.

Interaction is one of those words used widely with many meanings which can be used to describe almost any element of learning or teaching in the classroom, even to the point of the interaction between a reader and his book. Interactive methods, interactive materials and interactive learning programmes have become common words in teaching circles, and it is important to differentiate specific meanings. In this paper interaction is the process of communication (in English and/or French), both verbal and non-verbal, vocal and non-vocal, between non-native speakers (NNS) of English. It implies that there is a two-way dialogue. You will notice that I deliberately exclude the dialogue between teacher and student.

A “non-interactive” lesson follows the traditional model of the teacher speaking and the students listening. There can be dialogues between teacher and students, but in that only one student speaks at a time, this is considered a non-interactive lesson.

An interactive lesson, normally but not necessarily taking advantage of a language laboratory, is one in which students work in pairs negotiating a specific subject matter. Negotiation in this context is defined by Pica and Doughty (1985), Porter (1986), Rivers (1984) and Long (1981) as the negotiation of meaning in a foreign language. This negotiation of meaning involves the repeating, rephrasing and restructuring of phrases between two or more learners to enable them to understand the meaning of the messages they are communicating.

Transactional analysis

In order to discuss the role changes taking place between the players in a learning environment, I shall use the theory of Transactional analysis. This tool, originally used for psychotherapy, can provide a useful insight into classroom praxeology. A brief summary is given here. For those not familiar with TA, the bibliography provides several references.

Transactional analysis is a theory of personality and a systematic psychotherapy for personal growth and personal change [...]

As a theory of personality, TA gives us a picture of how people are structured psychologically. To do so it uses a three-part model known as the ego-state model. This same model helps us understand how people function – how they express their personality in terms of behaviour. TA also provides a theory of communication. This can be extended to give a method of analysing systems and organizations.

The ego-state model (PAC model)

An ego-state is a set of related behaviours, thoughts and feelings. It is a way in which we manifest a part of our personality at a given time.

The model portrays three distinct ego-states.

If I am behaving, thinking and feeling in response to what is going on around me here and now, using all the resources available to me as a grown-up person, I am said to be in my Adult ego-state.

At times, I may behave, think and feel in ways which are a copy of one of my parents, or of others who are parent-figures for me. When I do so, I am said to be in my Parent ego-state.

Sometimes I may return to ways of behaving, thinking and feeling which I used when I was a child. Then I am said to be in my Child ego-state.

Note the capital letters. They are always used when we want to indicate that we are referring to the ego-states (Parent, Adult, Child).

A small letter beginning the word shows we mean a real-life parent, adult or child [...]

Transactions

If I am communicating with you, I can choose to address you from any one of my three ego-states. You can reply in turn from any one of your ego-states. This exchange of communication is known as a transaction.

The use of the ego-state model to analyse sequences of transactions is referred to as transactional analysis proper. The word “proper” is added to show that we are talking about this branch of TA in particular, rather than TA as a whole. (Stewart & Jones 3)

In life, and in the classroom, we use all three ego-states to learn.

Parent learning is important for our safety, as in “never take a lift with a stranger” and “look before you cross the road”. These Parent messages are useful because there is not always the time or intellect to understand the problems in an Adult ego-state. Technically, in TA terms, one cannot learn one’s own Parent messages; they are recordings from parents and other adults. How should the learning of a vocabulary list by rote be considered in ego-state terms? It is not really Adult, in that thinking is not really involved. It is not Child in that it is a purely mental activity. In that it creates a type of automatic recording, ready for replay, I think it fits better into Parent, but TA would need to find another term. For lack of an alternative therefore, I shall consider learning the multiplication table, conjugating verbs, learning expressions by heart as learning in the Parent ego-state. When I use language material from my Parent ego-state, it is as if I switch on a recording.

Adult learning is essential in that we need to analyse the world for ourselves, and test some of the Parent messages we have received. Remembering your Parent message “don’t take a lift with a stranger” will need to be dealt with in Adult if you are going on a hitch-hiking holiday. You might *memorise* Mendel’s theory of genetic dominance by heart (Parent), but you need your Adult to *understand* the theory so that you can apply it to more than pea seeds. In language learning, your Adult can transfer your Parent rote learning of conjugating a verb and apply it to a different verb.

We learn to speak as children, and it is our Child ego state that helps us learn as we play. Learning in this ego-state can be adventurous and fun. Negative Child ego-state reactions (Adapted Child), as responses to, for example, a teacher one dislikes due to a highly critical Parent, can also provide powerful invisible barriers to language-learning that have to be unblocked.

Learning experiences themselves are most likely to be effective if they appeal to all three ego-states. It is especially important to recognise that the Free Child is the source of creativity and energy in the personality and needs to be included in the learning process.

The educator herself needs to have free access to all her ego-states. For much of the time she will be demonstrating Adult problem-solving. Often she will need to set firm boundaries from positive Controlling Parent, or to show caring from positive Nurturing Parent. She can get into Child to model spontaneity, intuitive ability and the enjoyment of learning [...]

If the institutional setting makes it possible, tutorial groups and classes may be set up to provide a reactive environment where teachers and students take mutual responsibility to promote clear thinking and active problem-solving. (Stewart & Jones, 281)

Let us now take a generalised look at the non-interactive and the interactive classroom. The non-interactive teacher is the knowledge transmitter and is hence in a position of power. He can use this power to maintain a Critical Parent role, pushing student response into a Child ego-state. Clues to the Parent role are found in words such as “Now always remember”, “Never forget”, “If I were you”, etc.

Many evaluative words, whether critical or supportive, may identify Parent inasmuch as they make a judgement about another, based not on Adult evaluation, but on automatic, archaic responses. Examples of these kinds of words are: stupid, naughty, ridiculous, disgusting, shocking, lazy, nonsense, absurd, how dare you!, Now what?, Not again! [...] (T. Harris, 62)

This Parent vocabulary includes the words: because, therefore, good, bad, right, wrong, have to, supposed to, must, ought to, should and more. (Ernst, p16)

The teacher might also (preferably) not impose his position, and maintain an Adult-Adult transaction.

Adult clues – verbal: [...] the basic vocabulary of the Adult consists of: why, what, where, when, who and how. Other words are: how much, in what way, comparative, true, false, probable, possible, unknown, objective, I think, I see [...] (T. Harris, 65)

A Child ego-state can also be identified through the vocabulary used. (All three ego-states can also be detected by physical, non-verbal behaviour).

Many words, in addition to baby talk identify the Child: I wish, I want, I dunno, I gonna, I don't care, I guess, bigger, biggest, best [...] (T. Harris, 65)

In the classroom, students can be passive or active. In a non-interactive lesson, the possibility for passive listening is all too evident. Interactive lessons force the student into a dialogue because each student forms half of a pair. Each NNS-NNS dialogue can take one of many forms of transaction. These transactions can be *complementary*, as in nurturing Parent to nurtured Child: “You’re getting on very well with that exercise” “Thank you. I’m trying really hard”, or Adult to Adult: “What was your test score?” “16 out of 20”, or Parent to Parent: “English is so hard!” “Yes, I know. It is, isn’t it!” Transactions can also be *non-complementary* or crossed. “You’re getting on very well with that exercise” “It’s no thanks to you!” (Nurturing Parent gets an adapted Child response instead of the expected nurtured [Free] Child response.) “What was your test score?” “Lousy! I’m never going to learn!” (Adult to Adult gets an Adapted Child response.)

It is not because a transaction is complementary that it is good. Critical Parent-Adapted Child transactions are complementary, but do not usually make good learning environments.

When I started teaching at the Institut National d'Horticulture a few years ago, and watched Robert Tuffigo teaching with his interactive method, two things impressed me; firstly, the rapid progress made by the students with only two hours of English a week, and secondly, the fun and laughter during lessons. I tested the interactive effect on memory (Rees, 1998) and found significant differences between interactive and non-interactive lessons on student short-term and long-term lexical memory. But what still fascinated me was the classroom atmosphere. All I have to offer at present are my subjective opinions about what is going on in terms of role and ego-state; I hope at a later date to analyse recordings of lessons to see whether or not the discourse can be analysed in terms of PAC transactions.

The interactive lesson

In interactive lessons, most of the teacher's work is completed well before the lesson begins.

The class is always divided into two equal groups. The whole class receives the specialised theme vocabulary ("difficult" or new words they will encounter in their video extracts). Each group watches a different video extract (from two to four minutes) on a given theme (seed dispersal, animal pollination, etc.) which is recorded onto their tape-recorders or computers. The students then work in *same-group pairs* and, replaying the extract, write out the text. The students are then given their extract text so that they can check what they have written for mistakes and make sure they fully understand their text. They are then put into *mixed pairs* in which they are asked to explain their extract to their new partner. Once they have each explained their text they look at the questions list which they discuss together.

The teacher's role

During the lesson, the students are constantly working and negotiating in NNS-NNS pairs. It is this negotiation that is fruitful in terms of language learning. So what is the teacher doing? He times and co-ordinates the work, and occasionally intervenes in the negotiation to provide some help, modify a word or phrase or correct pronunciation. He is, in a sense, a behind-the-scene manager, sensing at which moment he should hand out the texts, reshoot the film extracts, make or disconnect the NNS pairs. He is in control covertly, but not overtly. He is not under pressure to provide, to give, to teach. He is watching and regulating the learning that is going on without him. It is not an easy role to play at first. Teachers are used to "teaching" and are not used to stepping back and managing learning. Once the teacher feels technically confident with the language laboratory, he is in a pretty stress-free and enjoyable situation,

enjoyable, because the enjoyment of the students permeates the whole room. But why should the students be enjoying themselves?

The student's role

The students enjoy themselves because they are not in the traditional “be quiet and listen” mode as the “teacher” dispenses his wisdom. They are relaxed in NNS pairs, working on a (hopefully) interesting video topic. They are not asked to speak a foreign language in front of all their colleagues but, with headphones on, are confident to experiment in the security of the knowledge that their dialogue is with one other student and that the teacher, who can be listening in at any time, is not a threat but a resource.

Teacher's and students' roles in TA terms

The teacher uses all three ego-states during the lesson. The Parent is there as controller and nurturer. In that the lesson has been prepared and planned, he is, in effect, in charge over the non-negotiable elements of the lessons. Although what he says, such as: “We are going to be studying...”, “Group one will watch a video on...”, “When you've finished your texts, don't forget to...” could be considered Adult, in that he is declaring the objectives and procedures (and no alternative is realistically available to the students), I consider this to be Parent mode.

When he intervenes in pair discussions, he will be in any one of the three PAC ego-states:

- as Adult with comments such as: “Do you understand the term ‘organic’ as it's used here?”, “ ‘between plants’ is okay, but what changes if we use ‘between organisms’?”;
- as Critical Parent with: “Can you get back to work now, please?”;
- as Nurturing Parent with “Yes, that's right. Do you want any help with the next sentence?”;
- as Free Child with laughter (of which there is usually an abundance!) and “I know, it's just so beautiful!” and “‘allo, ‘ow do you say ‘opefully?’”.

Some teachers find it threatening to leave the security of their controlling role and let students learn amongst themselves. It is a role change that does not suit everyone. It can be difficult as “teacher” not to intervene and take over all the time. But in fact he does control the lesson, but via the preparation of the lesson beforehand which has foreseen all the timing and changes necessary during the lesson. Some teachers have complained of feeling guilty of not having something to do (or perhaps control) all the time. They have to learn to listen and to feel their way into this new environment. But when it works (and it normally does from the very first lesson) the teacher often feels a real sense of excitement and motivation as he is caught up in the flow of learning that seems to be going on in spite of the fact that he has let go of the reins.

Students spend most of their time in Adult. In the first pairing situation, they have to listen together to the recording and write out the text, using their list of specialist vocabulary. This is an intellectual exercise, and, unless the subject matter is boring, too easy or too difficult, the students will need their Adult ego-state to get the work done.

When the students are put into crossed pairs, they normally all go straight into Child (and into French). This is because they do not know with whom they are paired, and they have to speak and watch the other group to find their partner. This “game” element always stimulates Child responses. One can hear, amongst the laughter, cries of mock distaste such as:

- “Oh no! Not you again!” which could, on paper, be considered critical Parent, except that the laughter that goes with it means the transaction is actually saying “Great, it’s you again!”
- “Mathilde, great! Now I can relax as you do all the work!” where the hidden message, from a student who is good at English is “I recognise you’re good at English, I won’t threaten you with playing ‘I’m better than you’ games.”

This initial dialogue is virtually a ritual and continues in much the same form throughout the year, even though the group get to know each other better and better. Although usually in French, there is often “mock English”, in which the accent is either very “BBC British”, or very French. This seems to play a negotiating role by saying “Let’s enjoy ourselves and not be too self-conscious about our English”. This initial “fun time” lasts from about half to one minute and then the learning contract is negotiated. At this point, the students negotiate a switch from Child to Adult as they negotiate who is going to start and basically agree that they are going to work seriously. But the students do not remain in Adult, because they have to overcome the problem of peer correction. In that they have realised since their arrival at INH how language lessons work, they know that they need to learn from each other. This includes correcting each other during the negotiation of meaning. Since the students have mostly experienced correction at school as Parent-Child correction, and since this transaction would be unacceptable amongst peers, efforts must be made to not only avoid P-C transactions, but also to avoid transactions as being incorrectly interpreted as P-C transactions.

Sometimes this correction passes simply in an Adult-Adult transaction such as “I think you’re meant to use ‘dispersal’ rather than ‘dissemination’”. The student is actually quite sure of herself, but adds the “I think” so as to confirm an Adult message and avoid the message being understood as a P-C transaction, which could be possible if she said “you should say ‘dispersal’ ”.

Often, the correction switches to Child-Child, again to avoid the unpleasantness that could occur if the correction was considered Parent-Child. Child-Child corrections are nearly always accompanied by laughter. You might hear (to correct non-aspirated *h*'s): “ho dear, ‘ow hawful to be a ’ermaphrodite!”; or, (to correct “estomac”) “No, no, my dear. I think you mean

STO-mach” (exaggerated). In this case the student “plays” the role of “teacher” but, by using an exaggerated English accent, and quaint phrases such as “my dear”, removes any idea of a Parent correction as she confirms the Child by turning the correction into a role-play, which is a game-territory for the Child.

How do we learn?

The question that intrigues me is: which part of language learning is best accomplished in each ego-state? Having experienced hundreds of hours of interactive lessons with a great deal of play and use of Free Child, I am sure that this ego-state is an important element in language learning. It was the principal ego-state we used when we started to learn language and other skills. Learning through play, is learning through Child. Perhaps in this mode the memory can function clearly because there is no disturbance from other sources. If I am receiving Parent messages at the same time as learning, saying “you must learn to get on in life”, “you have to speak English if you’re going to get a job”, and “you can do it if you want to”, then maybe I cannot memorise easily the actual subject matter, because I am subconsciously stressed by these background messages. In Free Child, life is fun; there is no stress, and therefore, perhaps, no blockage.

Parent, as mentioned before, can be useful for rote learning. “*i* before *e*, except after *c*”; “Richard Of York Gained Battles In Vain” (to remember the order and colours of the rainbow – Red, Orange, Yellow, Green, Blue, Indigo, Violet). How much early language instruction is useful as Parent commands (where the teacher becomes the provider of Parent messages)? In childhood is it better to receive recorded messages rather than use our Adult? I do not know, but I guess there has to be a mixture.

Adult is obviously indispensable for learning. University students should need neither nurturing nor controlling. One should expect their learning to be almost purely in their Adult. Is the success (where it has been a success) of the communicative approach due to releasing students from Parent-Child relationships (which should not exist in university education) into an Adult-Adult relationship, or is it due to the inclusion of Child-Child relationships in the language laboratory which “releases” students to learn more easily? I do not think we can do any more than hypothesise at present. What is sure, to my mind, is that TA analysis of the relationships within the learning environment can be of great benefit. The “blocked” student, for example, who says that he simply “can’t” learn. In that his reaction is from Child, there has probably been some highly Critical Parent in the past that has created the impasse. Any Parent-Child teaching method will simply bring back the Child memory and consequent blockage. A shift of roles is perhaps one of the ways to bypass this barrier. Either Adult-Adult or Child-Child should avoid the blockage reaction, and if the teacher becomes virtually secondary and not primary in the learning environment, then the chance of progress is perhaps even greater.

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David Rees

Institut National d'Horticulture d'Angers

David Rees is the head of languages at the National Institute of Horticulture in Angers, France. He is currently engaged in research in language laboratory discourse analysis.