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Oral Interaction and Group Work

Introduction

My main research interest over the last few years has been to look at oral interaction in the classroom between learners working in small groups. These learners are all French speakers studying English for specific purposes as part of their courses in higher education establishments in France. They share a common linguistic background in that they have all been through the French system of education and, thus, have had several years of language teaching in secondary school before going on to higher education. This point is important when considering that the approach to language teaching which I propose here depends on a pre-existing knowledge of the language which has yet to be mobilised by the learner for efficient language production.

Analysis of recordings of learners speaking in group interactions has been invaluable in designing a plan of action for group work in the classroom. The activities themselves form the basis of this plan and so I will begin by describing their structure, how they can be presented to the class, how they can be classified and introduced into a syllabus, and some tips concerning classroom management for group work. I will also present the optimum conditions for group work and some of the problems encountered concerning learner attitudes before finally describing the nature of the input and the production of the output.

Design of activities

A close analysis of a communicative-type activity reveals a basic structure which includes two objectives: communicative and linguistic. The learner is motivated to complete the activity because of the existence of the communicative objective, but has to use certain language skills in order to do so. The mastery of these skills constitutes the linguistic objective.

To make this clear I would like to give you an example of a communicative activity called *Buyers and Sellers* based on an activity described by Dechet (1988: 96) in which learners play the roles of *buyers* and *sellers* of computers. The communicative objective of the *sellers* is to convince the *buyers* that their computers are the best so that they sell as many as possible. In order to do this the *sellers* have to use the linguistic skills (which constitute the linguistic objective) to give the *buyers* information about the computers and also to persuade them to buy. In the case of the *buyers* their objective is to choose the best computer. In order to do so they must master the skills required for obtaining information and discussing the merits of the computers with their peers in order to reach a consensus of opinion concerning the best product to buy.

These activities are accomplished in a series of four phases: presentation, practice, production and feedback.

Presentation phase

Phase one involves both the presentation of the communicative objective so that the learners know what they have to do and also the presentation of vocabulary, structures and expressions needed in order to achieve this objective so that they know how they are expected to do it.

Firstly, as much linguistic information as possible is elicited from the class and presented on the board in a brainstorming session. Learners are encouraged to search for and, thus, make more readily available the knowledge of the language which they already possess.

The presentation phase can also take the form of a written or audio text, a diagram or a simple worksheet. It is, however, essential that the learners are made to do work on the text by focusing on certain items of language. This can be achieved through gap-fill exercises or by listening out for certain words or structures in an audio text. Once spotted these items become more readily available for acquisition during the practice phase.

This presentation phase should be as short as possible, lasting from 5 to 10 minutes. The idea is to get away from “chalk and talk” as fast as possible and hand over the lesson entirely to the learners.

Preparation phase

During the preparation phase learners prepare for the interaction in groups. The teacher circulates between these groups in order to assist learners should this be necessary. It is also possible for this phase to take place in the target language if the learners are playing roles in, for example, a simulation.

Production phase

During the production phase learners interact in small groups in order to accomplish the activity. There should be no teacher intervention at this stage. Rather, the teacher becomes the “fly on the wall”. He or she moves silently between the groups and notes down any problems that arise to be discussed in the final feedback phase. This is the major part of the lesson and the part which is the most beneficial to the learner in terms of practising the language.

Feedback phase

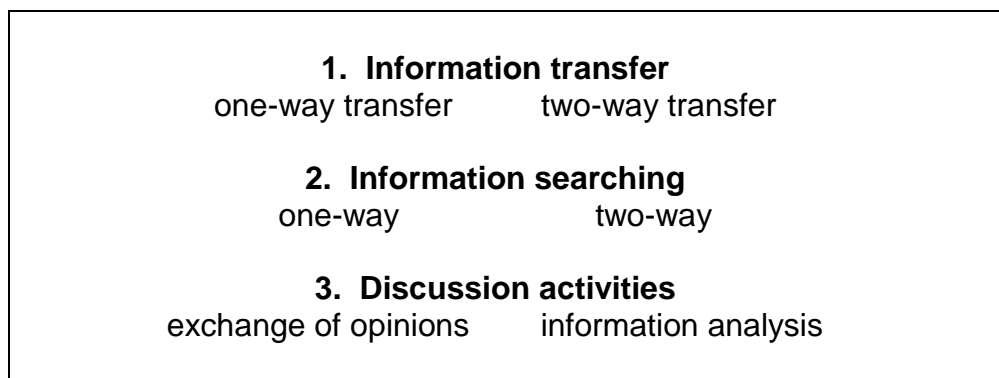
In the final feedback phase problems noted by the teacher are displayed on the board and learners correct their own errors and find better ways of expressing themselves. The communicative objective is re-examined and success or failure is discussed. This is a cyclic process so that the feedback stage of one activity leads into the presentation phase of the next activity. These subsequent activities should be designed to give learners further practice in the use of items of language which were found to cause problems in the preceding activities.

Syllabus design

The syllabus is, therefore, dictated by learner needs. These needs are more clearly defined as the learner works through a series of activities and the teacher discovers what is lacking and what needs to be reinforced.

In order to do this I have developed a classification of activity types (figure 1) based on my own experience and pre-existing taxonomies (Hutchinson and Waters (1987: 139), Prabhu (1987: 46), Sinclair and Coulthard (1975: 116), Littlewood (1982: 22)). This taxonomy can be used to organise a stock of activities which the teacher can have on hand and from which a task-based syllabus can be designed as an ongoing process during the course.

Figure 1: Classification of activities



Information transfer involves the transferring of precise information from one learner to another or to each other (one-way and two-way transfer). Often this information can be presented in diagrammatic form so that the learner possessing the information has to decode the diagram into an oral form before the transfer. This is preferable to presenting the information in straight text form which often leads to the information provider simply reading out from the text. The receiver of the information may also be required to draw a diagram from the verbal information that he or she receives. Information transfer exercises can be more or less complex depending on the level of the learners.

The second type of activity involves **information searching**. For example, learners have to play a “twenty questions” game to identify the nature and the function of a gadget which has been designed by the information provider. During their search for information learners have to practise interrogative forms. The activity *Buyers and Sellers* is another example of this type of task. Groups of learners (*buyers*) have to visit other groups (*sellers*) to search for information about various products before choosing the best bargain.

The third type of activity takes the form of a **discussion**. In this classification discussions have been divided into categories. Firstly discussions involving a simple exchange of opinion. For example, learners discuss the suitability of certain types of publicity posters produced by the company Benetton and say what they think about these posters.

The second kind of discussion involves an interpretation analysis of the information provided by the teacher at the beginning of the activity. There maybe, for example, a conflict of interests between separate groups who have to come together in a meeting in order to resolve this conflict. They interpret and analyse this information in interest groups in order to prepare for the meeting where there will be an exchange of information and opinion leading, we hope, to a joint solution to the problem.

These discussions allow learners to practise acquired language in a spontaneous way which is more authentic than learning dialogue off by heart and reproducing it in a mechanical fashion.

This classification serves as a stock of activities from which a syllabus can be designed (figure 2). Information transfer activities are used to practise particular areas of language. For example micro-simulations of telephone conversations can be designed to form long running simulations involving many telephone conversation activities—all different, but all linked together and all practising the necessary linguistic skills needed to use the telephone in the target language. These telephone activities can also be linked to other activities such as discussion simulations.

Figure 2: Example of a syllabus based on oral group work

SYLLABUS FOR BUSINESS ENGLISH

Arrange an appointment by telephone (information transfer two-way).
Write a letter to confirm the appointment (information transfer one-way).
Meeting simulation about a joint business project (discussion exchange of opinion).
Read job ads written by other learners and choose one (information searching).
Write a letter of application for a job (information transfer one-way).
Telephone simulation to make an appointment for an interview (information transfer one-way).
Job interview simulation (information searching).
Write a letter to the candidates offering them the job (information transfer one-way).
Meeting by interest groups to discuss documents describing a problem (discussion information analysis).
Meeting of representatives of interest groups to reach a consensus (discussion exchange of opinion).
Write a report about the meeting (information exchange).

A strong link exists between oral activities and activities which are designed to practise other skills. For example learners read a text in order to gather information that they will need to discuss a problem at a meeting. They then will

be required to write a report after the meeting. Naturally they must listen to other participants in order to reply to their questions and defend their point of view thus practising listening skills. In this way oral activities can serve as a basis for a syllabus and encourage learners to listen write and read with an aim in mind.

Classroom management

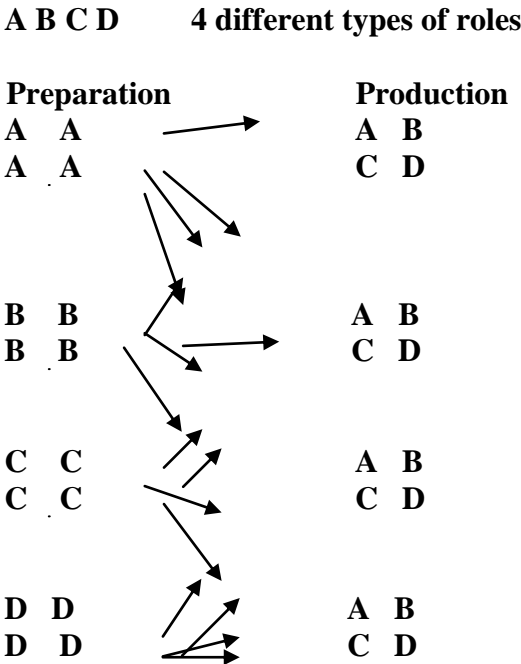
Teachers are sometimes discouraged by group work because classroom management is too difficult to accomplish. In an effort to overcome this problem there are several techniques which can be used to organise the class into groups as quickly and as efficiently as possible.

One major organisational tool is a simple white card. These can be used effectively to place learners in dyads, triads or larger groups. Learners are, for example, provided with separate cards on which are written words or definitions of words which have to be matched thus bringing the learners together. Similarly parts of sentences are written on cards which have to be put together by learners. For larger groupings learners can be given cards with their role title or numbers.

For activities which require groups to move around the classroom two methods seem to work efficiently. Firstly for meeting simulations representatives of the interest groups get together and prepare the meeting. In the second phase one representative from each group participates in the meeting simulations.

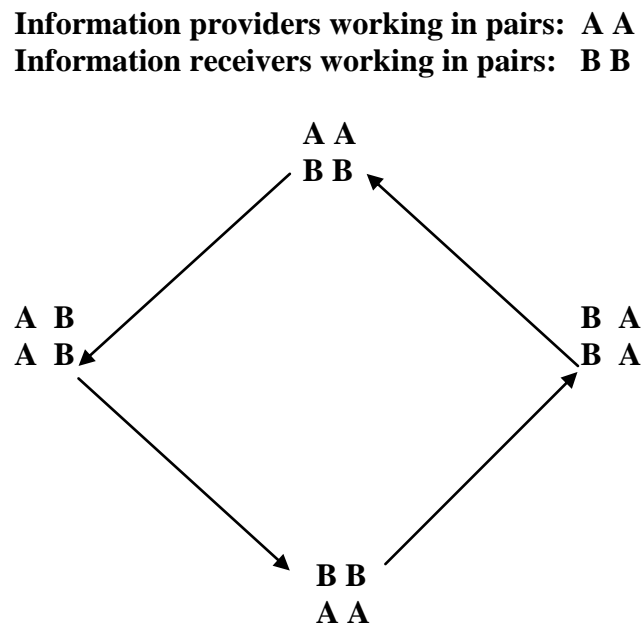
Figure 3 represents this type of organisation.

Figure 3: Two phase meeting simulations



In the second method, used for information exchange activities, half the learners are paired off in an outer circle while the other half rotate in an anti-clockwise direction in an inner circle so that each inner circle group visits each outer circle group once. Figure 4 represents this kind of organisation.

Figure 4: Organisation of information transfer exercises



In this way organisation of groups can take place in an orderly and efficient way, especially after learners have got used to the idea of moving around the classroom, which they do very quickly.

Optimum conditions for group work

Over ten hours of recordings of more than eighty groups of learners interacting were collected, transcribed and analysed in order to determine the optimum conditions for group work. Some of the conclusions from this analysis are given below (Hindley: 1997).

Group sizes and sex ratios

Firstly, my research has shown that group size should be kept to a maximum of four participants and preferably between two or three. The fifth person will participate very little and the sixth even less. In terms of sex ratios men generally have higher participation rates than women in mixed groups. For example in a group of four people the ideal participation rate would be 25% for all members of the groups. However, women tend to participate less than 25% if men are present in the group. This could be taken into account while organising groups to ensure that, for example, male participants do not outnumber female participants in any one group.

Levels

Generally and not surprisingly weaker learners participate less than stronger learners when working together in the same group. However, the nature of the activity also plays a role in determining the extent to which weaker learners will participate or not. For example, in information transfer exercises and discussions weaker learners can be given important roles to play which force them to participate. A learner can, for example, be the chairperson in a discussion or the information provider in an information transfer exercise.

Learner attitudes

Learners have many different attitudes to language learning activities. Unfortunately, some of these attitudes have a negative effect on group dynamics. Three distinct types of behaviour patterns seem to occur with regular frequency. I have termed these attitudes: *dominant speakers*, *French poison* and *clowns*.

Dominant speakers

Dominant speakers can be divided into two categories using the terminology of Krashen (1981: 4): “monitor overusers” who are much more careful about their production than “monitor underusers” who tend to be fluent speakers, but who pay very little attention to accuracy.

In the case of the “monitor underuser” the learner must be placed with other dominant speakers to ensure that everybody gets a chance to speak and the subsequent output is not completely erroneous. In the case of “monitor overusers” they can be given the role of looking after the group interaction ensuring that everybody speaks in the target language and possibly helping to correct the output through negotiation and peer correction. There is some evidence of this behaviour arising spontaneously in interactions and it would be interesting to explore more thoroughly the possibility of integrating this learner behaviour into a plan of action for group work, using learners to act as teachers to control the interaction internally.

French poison

I have given the title of French poison to those learners who insist on speaking French. The unfortunate effect is that the “poison” spreads and little by little other learners in the group stop making the effort to speak in the target language and revert back to their maternal language.

The solution seems to be to identify this type of learner as soon as possible and always ensure that he or she works in groups with dominant speakers who will eventually force the reluctant participant to speak in the target language.

Generally, however, very little French is spoken during these kinds of activities. One factor which seems important is the giving of a role to the learner within a simulation. The learner can use this role as a mask behind which he or

she can hide. Thus, the learner feels less inhibited and speaks through the mask without feeling ridiculous since he or she is in fact playing the part of another person.

Clowns

The third type of learner behaviour is the clown. This learner will systematically try to destroy the activity, not by speaking in French, but by refusing to complete the activity. The learner usually makes jokes or talks about other topics until the other participants inevitably abandon the activity.

Here the only possible solution is to take the learner aside and discuss the problem in order to find its source. This may simply be that the learner feels uneasy in this kind of learning environment and would prefer more traditional teaching methods.

Once a teacher has got to know a class it is, therefore, possible to compose groups taking into consideration factors such as group number, sex ratio, individual behaviour patterns and learner levels. Optimum conditions can then be achieved by changing group composition and activity types to suit the learners.

Oral interaction

My work on communicative language learning activities has been closely concerned with how to motivate the learner by choosing the right kind of activity. I believe that there is a close link between motivation and learning: if the learner is motivated he or she should be more open to learning.

In order to examine the learning process during the completion of an activity I have examined in detail recordings and transcriptions of learners during the realisation of these activities to spot the kinds of behaviour patterns which suggest that learners are indeed learning.

In order to do so I examined the transcriptions in terms of *turns*. A *turn* is defined by Chaudron (1993: 45) as “any speaker’s sequence of utterances bounded by another speaker’s speech”. An interaction progresses in *turns* as each participant takes a turn at speaking.

Using the *turn* as a basic unit of measurement I examined learner discourse in terms of the input they received for acquisition and the output they produced, the production of which would help them to become more automatic when using language that they have acquired.

Input

One of the major criticisms of allowing learners to speak together is that they will be exposed to an input which is incorrect. My first task was, therefore, to determine how erroneous the input is. In order to do this I counted the number of “turns” which contained at least one error and then calculated the percentage

of erroneous “turns”. My results show that 37% of *turns* were erroneous which means that 63% were not (Hindley, 1997: 225).

In addition an utterance was considered erroneous if it included at least one error however small. Thus, one can consider that in many cases language chunks within the *turn* could constitute input, which was correct despite the fact that the *turn* itself was categorised as erroneous.

It seems that the input is much more correct than teachers imagine. This may well be due to problems of pronunciation which create a false image of the real nature of the structure of the language produced by learners.

Fossilisation

Another criticism of oral interaction is the phenomenon of fossilisation. Motivating learners is all very well, but in their drive to communicate they may well develop a telegraph type of language, a kind of classroom “pidgin” mutually understood, but far removed from the target language. Learners would not learn by each other’s mistakes, but indeed learn each other’s mistakes.

In order to examine the extent of fossilisation in the interactions, I attempted to find out, firstly, if learners corrected errors and secondly if errors were propagated. My results show that out of the 37% of erroneous *turns* a total of 10% were dealt with either by peer correction or self-correction (Hindley, 1997: 261).

I then examined the transcriptions for evidence of propagation by counting the number of errors repeated by other learners. The results show there was only clear evidence of 63 cases of propagation out of 1651 erroneous *turns*. In other words, during more than 10 hours of interaction only 63 errors were shown to have been propagated once. This does not allow, however, for propagation which is not expressed orally, but involves mental restructuring of the interlanguage.

In order to limit the possible damage due to fossilisation I put into practice, as part of a programme of learning strategies, the idea of “fossil hunting”. This consists of making the learner aware of two distinct types of error. The first type forms part of the learning process and is often unavoidable. The learner is introduced to new linguistic items and attempts to use them for the first time, often unsuccessfully. The second type, however, is avoidable because self-correction is possible and if *not* undertaken may well lead to fossilisation.

On completion of an activity erroneous utterances are written on the board and learners go “fossil hunting”. They examine each error and classify it into one of the two possible error types by trying to correct it. In this way learners become more aware of the nature of their errors and the dangers of fossilisation. This is, of course, a highly simplified form of error classification, but one that can function successfully amongst learners in the classroom.

Output

The final stage in my analysis was to examine the process of producing output. From listening to the recordings and reading the transcriptions it seemed very obvious to me that learners were working on producing a comprehensible output during the interactions. The Socratic idea of maïeutics sprang to mind while listening to the learners who were obviously involved in a search for words and structures in order to express themselves. They were activating knowledge that they possessed, but which they had not often used. Another image is one of “muscle flexing”. Putting them in situations where they were forced to communicate meant that they had to undertake this search and that they were doing work on the language.

Auto and peer-correction

Another phenomenon observed was that of auto and peer correction. 4% of *turns* contained an incidence of auto-correction and out of this percentage 74% of the attempts at auto-corrections were successful (Hindley, 1997: 277). Peer correction, however, was rare as only 62 incidents were spotted in the transcriptions, of which 73% were correct (Hindley, 1997: 289). Learners were also sometimes involved in coproduction of the output. They would help each other to construct a string of utterances in much the same way that a parent will help a child who is learning to talk.

Negotiation

The final part of my research involved examining the process of negotiation. Negotiation is the means by which learners jointly adjust their utterances so that they can be mutually understood. Negotiation seems to be an important factor in language acquisition since if lack of understanding is signalled by the listener, the speaker is then obliged to adjust his or her output in order to render it comprehensible.

There were many examples of negotiation in the transcriptions and here it seemed that the degree of negotiation depended on the type of activity. For example, information transfer activities gave rise to more negotiation than information searching and discussion activities. Table 1 shows the percentage of turns involved in negotiation for each type of activity.

Table 1: Percentage of turns involved in negotiation (Hindley, 1997: 316)

Type of activity	Percentage of negotiation turns
Information transfer	58%
Information searching	14%
Discussion	10%

Negotiation rates seemed to be influenced by differences in level between learners and also the kinds of roles played within the activity. For example, as I mentioned earlier, if weaker learners are given important roles to play within activities they are forced into participating more. This gives rise to more negotiation with other members of the group. Similarly, if they were given the job of *information providers* in information exchange activities negotiation rates increased considerably from when they were *information receivers*.

Conclusion

The aim of this article was to demonstrate the value of group work in the language learning classroom, to show how it can be managed and to attempt to answer some of the criticisms levelled against this kind of approach. Contrary to popular belief if learners are left to interact they do not necessarily speak in French, but speak in the target language. They certainly make errors, but they do try to correct them. They also put a lot of effort into producing language in order to communicate and, therefore, activate knowledge they already possess. I feel that this approach enables learners to practise their oral skills and, as a result, develop fluency and accuracy (through self-correction) as well as learning from each other.

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Fossilation