Interactive Language Teaching

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Interactive Language Teaching

Edited by

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A group of school children in Thailand responds to the stranger's question, "Do you like English?" with a firm, clear "Yes, we do." On the Bund in Shanghai, a two-year-old in his father's arms sees the fair-haired, round-eyed lady and immediately pipes up: "Hello! Hello! How are you? How are you? How do you do! How do you do!" In Japan, signs in English proliferate, both public and private. In London and Paris, business people rush off to proprietary schools for foreign-language lessons with their next assignment in mind. In the United States, interest in foreign languages is on the rise in the community and in colleges, and international students pour in to study English before undertaking advanced studies. The problems of second-language learners in India, Singapore, and Hong Kong are the subject of much research, as practical ways of improving the learners' use of the language are sought. Will we miss, through conservatism or inertia, this new wave of enthusiasm for what has always enthused us? In this atmosphere of opportunity, *what shall we do in class today*? This is the teacher's urgent question – a question that we, the authors of this book, have tried to answer.

Classroom teachers are close to students. As they watch their students learning languages, they note perennial problems of language learners – some specific to learners from particular language communities and others common to learners of a particular level of maturity or social experience. Hoping to find solutions, they turn to books or meetings for ideas on how to develop an environment and techniques conducive to confident and effective language use.

Over the last few years, however, teachers have been dragged "every which way," as competing notions about language learning have been hammered out in public debate. Sometimes ideas based on informal learning by immigrant children (in situations where the new language is used all about them, but nobody understands their first language) have been enthusiastically, and sometimes unreflectively, extrapolated to formal language learning by adolescents who feel no immediate need for another language (except perhaps to pass an imminent examination). At other times, what has been effective in developing early communication skills with an experimental group in a psychologist's office is promoted as the answer for language learners in classes of fifty with a teacher whose own knowledge of the language is very limited. Some of

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the ideas put forward have been based on well-documented research, some on experimental classes that could not be shown to have achieved significantly better results than a more traditional class (or whose poor progress has been explained away as resulting from faults in experimental design).

The goals of approaches that are proposed also change. This frequently parallels a normal shift as times change, reflecting community perceptions of the place of language in the education a certain society desires for its children. (Language-teaching goals are usually situation- and place-bound.[1]) Sometimes, however, these shifts result from arbitrary decisions of protagonists in intellectual debate and have little relationship to needs in particular countries, districts, or schools.

In recent years we have moved from the listening, speaking, reading, writing goals of audiolingualism, with its inductive approach and structured learning, to the deductive, rule-learning cognitive code approach, where listening, reading, and speaking come after learning grammar rules.[2] Then the stress moved to communicative competence (of the structured kind with discourse functions or the unstructured kind with an emphasis on pragmatic functions and much talking[3]), and for a while there was little reference to reading or writing. Next came the structured Silent Way, with attentive listening to a reduced input, the emphasis being on inductive thinking, problem solving, and production of utterances by the student in carefully circumscribed circumstances. In the unstructured, inductive Total Physical Response there was plenty of "comprehensible input," visually accompanied, but with deeds, not words, as response. In Counseling-Learning/Community Language Learning the input was the interlanguage of other students, not the authentic materials from native speakers and writers that were also being actively promoted at the same time.[4] With Suggestopaedia, the learning of much vocabulary was back, in long dialogues that are first studied and translated in printed form, then in lengthy sessions of listening preceding the communicative activities that provide opportunities for students to use what they have absorbed rather than memorized.[5] In the Natural Approach the mother tongue is banned (as previously in the

1 "Educational Goals: The Foreign Language Teacher's Response," in Rivers (1983b), reports language-teaching goals from fifty countries.
2 Audiolingualism is described fully in Rivers (1981: 38–48). For a brief description of cognitive code learning see Rivers (1981: 49–51) and Chastain (1976).
3 On communicative competence see Finocchiaro and Brumfit (1983); on pragmatic functions see Savignon (1983).
4 On Silent Way see Gattegno (1972); on Total Physical Response see Asher (1966). *Comprehensible input* is defined in Krashen and Terrell (1983: 36). On Counseling-Learning/Community Language Learning see Curran (1976); *interlanguage* is defined in Selinker (1972).
5 Lozanov (1978).

direct method) and there is much comprehensible input, in the form of simplified teacher talk, again with much vocabulary; speaking is delayed but the reading of what one is hearing is advanced; and affective, humanistic activities eventually encourage the productive use of inductively acquired language.[6]

In the past, students have memorized dialogues and spent long hours substituting items in pattern drills, in accordance with audiolingual edicts. They have tried to express their own meaning from the beginning without studying forms, as in Counseling-Learning/Community Language Learning. They have studied rules and paradigms and endeavored to construct grammatically well-formed utterances at the teacher's behest. They have jumped up and down, carried books on their heads, and hidden the chalk behind the door. But have they learned to communicate their own meaning with each other? we may ask.

And so we dance around the act of communication that is still our central goal, whether we mean communication between speakers or through the written text, as in many Language for Specific Purposes and Language through Literature classes. Should we listen a great deal? Should we read a great deal? Should we write? (Some people point out that knowledge of the culture of the other parties is an important feature of communication.) Is it not possible that language use is such a multifaceted process that there are many ways to approach its acquisition (or the learning of it)? Yet it is a process, and we need experience in the process.

Controversies that arise in the language-teaching profession are interesting, even exciting, as ideas and proposals are thrashed out in journals and workshops. Language teachers need these new ideas to refresh their minds and revitalize their teaching. Frequently, however, they come back from their search confused and befuddled by a plethora of conflicting assertions and recommendations. The next day they must go straight back into the classroom to teach. Their students, with their lives before them, cannot wait until conclusive answers have been found for the problems of language learning and teaching. Teachers must make the most of what they have learned from others, sift it, sort it, and select from it according to their own experiences in a particular situation.

What can we sift from these conflicting claims, assertions, and proposals from leaders in the profession? As we have seen, *communication, whether in speech or writing, remains our central goal* as language teachers. Communication derives essentially from *interaction*. Someone has something to share with someone else, who is interested and attentive while the interest (and therewith the interaction) lasts. If communication of message (spoken or written) in another language is our objective,

6 Krashen and Terrell (1983).

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then interaction must be present from the first encounter with the language. (Interaction implies both reception and expression of messages.[7]) But, note, interaction takes place when interest (attention to the communicative act) is present. Where there is no interest, there may be a perfunctory exchange of words, but communication of personal messages does not take place. To promote interaction in another language, we must maintain a lively attention and active participation among our students. Interest and desire to participate have deeper roots than mere surface reactions would indicate. Emotions, the impulse to guard oneself from hurt, fear of peers or authority figures, desire to excel, to please, to be successful, anxieties based on factors of which the teacher is ignorant – all of these militate for or against a comfortable participation.

For interaction, then, more is necessary than a set of techniques or devotion to a particular approach. There must be cultivated relationships that encourage initiation of interactive activities from either side, because interaction is not just a matter of words. Words express or camouflage the interactive intent. Students need to participate in activities that engage their interest and attention, so that the interaction becomes natural[8] and desirable and words slip out, or pour out, to accompany it. Establishing such a situation requires of the teacher the greatest pedagogical skill and keeps his or her own interest high as well. Dynamic, exciting classes are within the grasp of all teachers if they learn to involve the imagination and activity of all. (This approach, *interactive language teaching*, is discussed more fully in chap. 1, this volume.) Interactive techniques are available to all because they are invented by all, as the writers of the various chapters in this book demonstrate. Consequently, each teacher becomes the architect of his or her own success in the classroom.

Fortunately, there are many excellent classes all over the world. As language teachers we are a group with mutual interests and concerns. We need to share experiences and experimentation. Researchers and scholars can explain many facts of language to us; they can open our eyes to many facets of how languages are learned and used; they can explain to us the dynamics of groups – but what are we to do about all this? It is for us as teachers to decide. We know *our* students; we know *their* needs; we know what *we* can do confidently. What is appropriate for an adult immigrant learning a second language in order to live and work in a new land, or for a college student studying abroad, is not necessarily going to help a young boy or girl learning a foreign language in an isolated village. In fact, we must recognize that *foreign-language learning* (that is, in situations where the language is rarely heard, except

7 See skill-getting and skill-using model in Rivers (1983a: 43).
8 See "The Natural and the Normal in Language Learning" in Rivers (1983a: 104–13).

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in recorded or broadcast form) is quite different from *second-language learning* (where the learner is surrounded by a community that uses the language for its daily purposes). The former is limited to what the teacher can give or arrange for the student to receive; in the latter case, the class contribution can be immediately supplemented at the will of the student who enters a shop, talks to a fellow-passenger on a bus, turns a switch on a radio or television, or picks up a newspaper or magazine. (The exception, of course, is the group of "second-language" learners who are restricted in their access to association with the majority-language community, through prejudice, hostility, or governmental decree – an unfortunate situation that still exists in some areas.)

Nor are these the only differences in our situations. Some are teaching students who wish to know how to use the language as fast as possible in a specific work situation. Others are preparing students to read particular kinds of material in the new language. Yet others are providing students with a mind-expanding experience of the way another people thinks, feels, and expresses itself, as an element of the students' general education. Still others, perhaps reluctantly, are overtly preparing students for some particular proficiency hurdle that will determine their career options. We hope that all, no matter what their type of course, will find some ideas in what we have written to enrich and enliven their teaching and that our ideas will stimulate theirs.

All the authors in this book are experienced practicing teachers, as well as writers of books, articles, and teaching materials. They are well aware of the latest trends and specific needs. They themselves have been incorporating into their own teaching, in an imaginative fashion, insights into the ways in which languages are learned, while experimenting with teaching approaches that promote communication in speech and writing. They are sharing with you here what they themselves do, in the hope that this will stimulate you in your individual thinking and planning. Write to us; share with us. We, in our turn, will be happy to share further with you. We enjoy interaction too.

This book, for the most part, is geared toward the practical, everyday concerns of our professional life. The first two articles set out more theoretical ideas that have shaped our thinking: the first deals with cognitive psychology and what we can learn about the interaction of perception and expression in oral or graphic communication; the second discusses the dynamics of interaction in the classroom. These may be read and discussed at the beginning or at the end of the course, depending on the sophistication and previous experience of the group. In fact, all the articles are self-contained and may be approached in any order that suits the purposes of the course or the individual reader. The suggested activities appended to each chapter are designed to help you incorporate into your own teaching adaptations of the ideas expressed, in ways that

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are appropriate to the objectives of your students in the particular situation in which you find yourself. We have personally selected what we consider to be the most immediately useful readings, should you wish to explore any area in greater depth, and we have annotated these. We have chosen only books and articles that you should be able to find without undue difficulty; full bibliographical references to sources from which we have drawn may be found in the bibliography. For teacher-training programs, the references in the annotated reading lists will supply a shelf of basic readings as the nucleus for a more fully developed library.

To all who have influenced us and helped shape our thinking we are grateful, especially to the many teachers who have asked questions and shared their experiences with us at meetings, in workshops, and in teacher-training seminars. We are still learning; so too, we hope, are you.

A special thank you is due to Claire Riley, Thérèse Chevallier-Stril-Rever, and Deanne Lundin-Manson, whose energetic endeavors kept us all in touch and enabled us to put a joint manuscript together, despite long distances and busy schedules.

Wilga M. Rivers,
for all the
co-authors of this book

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Abbreviations

used in annotated readings lists, footnotes, and bibliography

ACTFL	American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (Hastings-on-Hudson, New York)
AL	*Applied Linguistics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press)
CMLR	*Canadian Modern Language Review* (Welland, Ontario)
EFL	English as a foreign language
ELA	*Etudes de Linguistique Appliquée* (Paris: Didier Erudition)
ESL	English as a second language
ETS	Educational Testing Services (Princeton, New Jersey)
FL	Foreign language
FLA	*Foreign Language Annals* (ACTFL)
FR	*French Review* (American Association of Teachers of French)
IRAL	*International Review of Applied Linguistics in Language Teaching* (Heidelberg: Julius Gross Verlag)
LL	*Language Learning* (Ann Arbor, Michigan)
MLJ	*Modern Language Journal* (Madison, Wisconsin)
NEC	Northeast Conference on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (Middlebury, Vermont)
TESOL	Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages (Washington, D.C.)
TQ	*TESOL Quarterly* (TESOL, Washington, D.C.)