

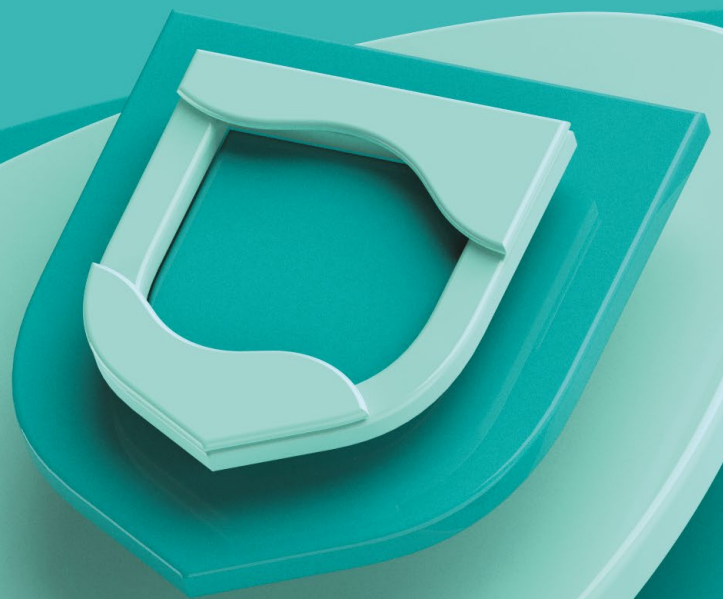
# Creating a safe speaking **environment**



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# Introduction

Language educators are often faced with a paradox: students tend to measure their own competence in English through their ability to speak it. Yet, creating environments that encourage students to speak is cited by practitioners around the world as one of the biggest challenges in this field. Reasons for this vary, from the insecurities that students have about speaking to the more general doubts of teachers, administrators, parents or the students themselves as to whether time dedicated to speaking is time well spent.

This paper offers a brief overview of current research into language learning and teaching and shows that, although these concerns are entirely legitimate and require close attention, many can be addressed by a judicious and skilful application of pedagogical principles for creating a 'safe speaking environment'. By that I mean

an environment in which time for speaking is valued not simply as time for extra practice of previously learned material but as time in which new learning opportunities come to life.

A safe speaking environment also means a space that treats the people who inhabit it as a cherished resource: it engages students' identities, future visions and hopes through the design of immersive tasks; it is responsive to students' agency by honouring topics that are close to their worlds; and it takes seriously the human relationships that are central to all communication. And finally, a safe speaking environment is one where feedback whether focused on specific linguistic features or on meaning is given in the service of students' communicative accomplishments.



# Time for speaking means time for language learning

Few language teachers would dispute the claim that speaking deserves time in the language curriculum. However, just how much time is sufficient, at which point in the language class or task sequence to include it, and where to include it in to an already busy curriculum has been a matter of much debate. For example, research indicates that to benefit from speaking tasks, it is important to include sufficient time not simply for speaking itself, but also for students' planning, rehearsals and repetition of the speaking tasks. Other research suggests that to free up time for speaking in a short lesson of 45–50 minutes, it may be advisable to reduce the amount of time devoted to non-speaking language-focused work (for more information on these debates, see elsewhere in this series 'How much time should we give to speaking practice?').

Yet it is clear too that finding time for speaking is more than a question of time management. Many language practitioners may be sceptical about some of the above advice, not because they are unable to manage their class time creatively, but because they may not be convinced that speaking deserves to be prioritized in this way.

Consider the example below of a language educator teaching English as a foreign language, following a coursebook-based curriculum. She has just taught a class during which students were asked to discuss the topic of friendship, first in groups, then in a whole-class conversation. In addition to this final task in the coursebook unit sequence, the teacher had planned to move on to a new unit in the same lesson. But because the speaking task took longer than anticipated, there

was no time for the new grammar and vocabulary exercises that she had planned as a way of introducing the new coursebook unit. This was the teacher's reaction after this class:

"Well, as such, it was not really my idea. This should have been the beginning. In this class, it was an end, the discussion. So it didn't have any particular rationale. And this is what would bother me in my classes. I always want to make sure that each class works as a unit . . . What we did was a sort of post-activity." (Kubanyiova, 2015, p. 575)

Data from this piece of research suggest that in this particular lesson the teacher created the time for speaking. This allowed students to plan (as a homework task prior to this class), rehearse (in the safe space of small groups) and, to some extent, even repeat the task (in the whole-class conversation). Yet, the teacher's reaction after the class shows two things: first, that she values the relevant language-focused work designed by coursebook writers as a build-up to speaking tasks; and second, that in the future she is likely to shorten significantly or skip altogether the time required for the actual speaking tasks.

The aim of this overview, therefore, is to reflect on what the latest research suggests about the general value of speaking, interaction and language use in second language learning. We will ask, is time for speaking well spent? Can a discussion ever have any particular rationale beyond that of a post-activity that could easily be left out to make space for other language-related work? Or, even more daringly, can speaking ever be "an end" in its own right?

## Interaction as an engine for language learning

Within the field of second language acquisition (SLA) there are many research traditions that have studied links between classroom interaction and language learning (Ellis, 2000; Gass & Mackey, 2006; Hall, 2010; Markee & Kasper, 2004). For example, a synthesis of experimental task-based interaction studies published between 1980 and 2003 (Keck, Iberri-Shea, Tracy-Ventura, & Wa-Mbaleka, 2006) revealed that students who participated in tasks requiring spoken interaction significantly outperformed, in both grammar and vocabulary assessments, those whose language learning tasks did not demand it. Interestingly, this difference was apparent not only immediately after the tasks but also after some time had elapsed. Other studies have also found significant benefits to speaking even where students were sceptical regarding the role of these activities in their language learning (McDonough, 2004).

The general conclusion from this research strand is that time devoted to speaking is worthwhile as, if used purposefully, it can provide students with an opportunity to negotiate meaning. This, in turn, enables them to notice specific linguistic features in their peers' as well as their own language and pushes them to express themselves more accurately in order to complete the task successfully (Swain, 2005). In short, spoken interaction seems not to be simply an opportunity for practising what has already been learned; rather, according to this line of inquiry, it is itself an engine for language learning and thus a crucial element of a language class.

## Is it possible to 'see' learning in speaking?

The research findings presented above, however, may be hard to appreciate when on an intuitive level little language learning seems to occur during speaking. Put simply, it is not easy to 'see' learning taking place

during speaking in the way that it is for other aspects of language instruction. Yet there is a rich body of research that has looked very closely, indeed line by line, at precisely what happens when students are engaged in conversation in the classroom, be it in pairs (Mondada & Pekarek Doehler, 2004; Platt & Brooks, 2002), small groups (Bloome, 2015; Van Compernelle & Williams, 2013), or whole-class conversation (Seedhouse, 2004; Walsh, 2006; Waring, 2013). The findings are quite astounding for they show that through their use of language in well-constructed and genuinely engaging speaking tasks, students

- develop their conversational competence,
- become more proficient in the use of appropriate rather than just accurate language,
- deepen their understanding of difficult concepts,
- expand their analytic abilities,
- push each other beyond their current individual capacities,
- learn to play with language and take risks with it.

In short, research which has specialized in analysing actual conversations shows that, contrary to general perceptions, a lot of meaningful learning is happening as language learners participate in speaking. For not only does time and space for speaking allow them to become more sensitive to how their emerging language works for communicative purposes, they also begin to learn how to make it their own and use it creatively.

## Classroom conversation as a 'taster' of students' L2 future

Besides these language learning gains, time dedicated to speaking also presents significant motivational opportunities. Language learning motivation research has identified students' future visions of themselves as successful L2 users as key in motivating their present

efforts in language learning. Put differently, students are unlikely to take an active role in their language learning if they cannot imagine themselves as successful L2 speakers in the future (Dörnyei & Kubanyiova, 2014).

Benefiting from speaking may, first and foremost, require a significant shift in mindset (Kubanyiova, 2016a): from treating time for speaking as a mere post-activity to embracing it as a time when important new learning opportunities come to life.

Yet, the same research shows in turn that people are unlikely to desire their L2 future unless they have experienced a taster of that vision in their present experience. Creative ideas on how to orchestrate such 'tasters' in the language classroom are abundant (see also some examples in the next section, and in two papers in this series – 'Motivating learners with immersive speaking tasks' and 'Learner-centred content'). Particularly intriguing, however, are the research findings which indicate that it is through actual classroom talk that students start to experience what it might feel like to be able to live in and through their emerging language (Kubanyiova, 2017). Consider the following Japanese student in an EFL class where the teacher introduced speaking activities to enhance students' vision of themselves as L2 users. In her reflection on specific speaking tasks, the student noted:

"Well, as we practised together and I really got into it, and my partner was laughing. And I thought, 'This is good'.... First we were not close ..., but when we were paired up, and as we practised, she was laughing. And I thought, 'Wow, she is laughing'. We have become closer and we talk often now. That was a good experience." (Ogawa, 2017: 13)

The analysis of this student's experience in her EFL class reveals that speaking tasks of this type gave her a 'taster' of what knowing an L2 could mean in her life: that it might indeed be possible for her to use the L2 in the future for genuine meaning making. This is in line with more general debates on the role of L2 vision in students' willingness to speak using L2. These suggest that creating opportunities for students language use in the classroom can sow the seeds of their desired future selves; it can ignite their L2 visions and fuel their motivation to speak (Yue & Kubanyiova, in preparation).

It seems, therefore, that making time for speaking in the classroom can trigger a virtuous circle of students' engagement: it allows them to 'taste' their L2 future through meaningful speaking experiences and this, in turn, fuels their motivational engine to keep up their language learning efforts not only in speaking tasks, but also more generally.

## Changing our minds about speaking

Reaping all the language learning and motivational rewards of speaking requires more than simply allocating a little more time and space for interaction. The following sections will consider briefly several key issues that play a role in achieving them. In the meantime, this overview has shown that benefiting from speaking may, first and foremost, require a significant shift in mindset (Kubanyiova, 2016a): from treating time for speaking as a mere post-activity to embracing it as a time when important new learning opportunities come to life.



# Immersive tasks generate immersive conversations

There is widespread agreement among students, language educators and researchers about the importance of interesting and motivating tasks in the language curriculum (Lamb, 2017). Flow theory, first introduced by Csikszentmihályi (1990) and later adopted for language education contexts (e.g. Egbert, 2003), has often been used as a guiding framework for understanding what makes tasks motivating. Flow refers to the kinds of immersive experiences where people are so absorbed in whatever they are doing that they become unaware of what is going on around them. It is when people are in the 'flow' that they are thought to perform at their best, which is why researchers and language educators have become interested in the application of flow theory to the design of immersive language learning tasks. The task features that have been identified as supporting such experiences include:

- optimal challenge, achieved by balancing the level of difficulty and the students' current language skills,
- a focus on performing and accomplishing the task rather than on practising language,
- relevance to students' interests,
- students' sense of control over the task processes and outcomes (see a more detailed discussion in 'Motivating learners with immersive speaking tasks').

While these remain vital ingredients of motivating tasks, quite what language teachers can do to facilitate such immersive experiences can be tricky to get right in the classrooms. This is because what may sound 'interesting' and even 'fun' to language educators or materials writers, for instance, may not necessarily match the interests of specific learners. For example, as a recent study found, contrary to teachers' expectations, language learners may crave "more challenging stuff" or may even breathe a sigh of relief when they "don't have to sing cheesy songs" (Chambers, 2018: 6).

## Immersive conversation as a key ingredient of immersive tasks

To appreciate more fully the role that immersive speaking tasks play in the design of a 'safe speaking environment', therefore, it may be helpful to think of them less in terms of their features and types and more in terms of their capacity to generate immersive conversations. By that I mean conversations which students will want to join – not simply because they need to practise the language but because they feel they have something important to say. More specifically, these are conversations that enable students to use language to relate to one another through shared challenge, laughter, wonder, creativity, but also in discussing injustices and misconceptions that affect them in their worlds outside the classroom.

The following quote comes from a Slovak learner of EFL who participated in a discussion task involving a poignant poem describing experiences of a person displaced from their homeland by the horrors of war. This is the student's reaction:

“

I could feel it more deeply when expressing myself in English than when speaking in Slovak ... and also since ... the poem was in English, it made me think about every word ...”

Habinakova, 2017: 81

The finding from this piece of research shows that the poem-centred speaking task engaged students with language at a deep experiential level. It immersed them in the discussion and this was no doubt thanks to the teacher's skilful application of the principles of the above-mentioned flow theory. It was clearly the task's capacity to draw students into an immersive conversation that transformed those principles into the flow experience.

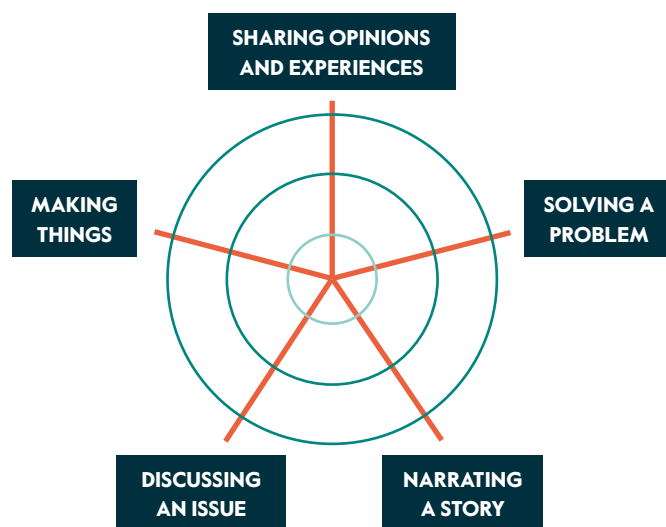
## How can tasks generate immersive conversations?

Engaging students in speaking tasks means treating students as language users rather than merely as language learners (Erlam, 2016). As research investigating the use of L2 in various communication settings around the world has shown, it is when students are enabled to bring their personal identities, histories, future visions and pains into the classroom that a space for immersion in authentic conversations emerges (Baynham, 2006; Dörnyei & Kubanyiova, 2014; Ennsner-Kananen, 2016; Liddicoat & Scarino, 2013; Norton, 2000;

Ushioda, 2011; Yue, 2014). Creating such spaces in the classroom requires a conscious effort on the part of language educators to re-envision well-known types of language tasks that already exist in their repertoires can be harnessed to generate immersive conversations – that is, to engage with students as language users and meaning makers.

So what does this mean for the design and planning of immersive speaking tasks in the language classroom? Many authors have concluded that the types of tasks which have the potential to become immersive include, among others:

- solving a problem,
- discussing an issue,
- narrating a story,
- sharing opinions and experiences,
- making things.



Planning such tasks requires a careful consideration of topics, task types, and linguistic goals (for more information on the type of tasks and planning considerations, see 'Motivating learners with immersive speaking tasks'). But in order to turn these tasks' potential into an immersive reality for the students, something else is also needed: the teacher's reflection on the broader educational purposes of engaging students as persons. Below, three themes are offered as a guiding framework.



## Tasks that engage students' personal identities

In order for tasks to engage language learners in authentic conversations, they need to reflect students' current identities as people and not just language learners (cf. Dörnyei & Kubanyiova, 2014). These, however, are often difficult to guess at beyond a superficial level without the teacher's deeper understanding of who the people in the classroom are and what they genuinely care about. One of the overarching purposes that an immersive language task can serve, therefore, is to facilitate such an understanding.

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Most language learning tasks that satisfy the flow criteria mentioned above have the potential to shed light on the students' real lives if we choose to exploit it. Some can be as simple as asking students to share stories with each other so as to generate rich immersive conversations. Others have the potential to be expanded into bigger questions (see also 'Tasks that engage students with the world around them' in this section). One possible task is to ask students to think of an interesting proverb in other languages they know, teach it to their peers, translate it collaboratively into English, find equivalents in English as well as in students' other home languages and notice how history and culture can shape how we speak, how we see and how we live. Other tasks will encourage students' engagement over a longer period of time. These include creating various types of

individual or group narrative, such as autobiographies told in 'chapters' where each chapter represents a significant milestone in the student's life (Nikoleitou, 2017). Or students may be asked to document their experiences of using L2 through written reflections, audio diaries, or visual narratives (Coffey, 2015; Norton, 2000; Roberts et al., 2000; Yue, 2014) and share these in various discussion tasks in the classroom. All these tasks require careful planning (see more details in 'Motivating learners with immersive speaking tasks'). However, treating them as opportunities to engage students' identities as people and not just language learners can enhance their potential to generate immersive conversations.

## Tasks that engage students' L2 futures

The second method which can be adopted to transform a language task into an immersive one is placing emphasis on engaging students' visions as future L2 speakers. As discussed earlier in this paper, students' vision of themselves as competent L2 users is closely connected to their motivation to learn (Dörnyei & Kubanyiova, 2014) and speaking in the classroom can help access such visions (Kubanyiova, 2017). Tasks designed with this in mind therefore stand a good chance of generating immersive conversations. All immersive task types discussed previously, such as sharing experiences, problem solving or making things, lend themselves to this educational purpose. More specific templates which link these types with the future vision idea include:

- Creating vision boards of future L2 selves. Students are asked to think about their future vision and how their competence as L2 speakers features in it. Using relevant resources, such as materials related to their jobs, images in travel/lifestyle magazines, newspapers or brochures, they design and then discuss with others a visual display of their vision.
- Sharing 'future histories'. Students are asked to share with others their future plans involving an L2 as if they have already experienced the outcomes (i.e. they have to use the present/past tense to describe their projected experiences).

- Making role models of successful L2 learners a central feature of tasks. Students are asked to gather stories of successful L2 speakers because these can often inspire students' own future vision. The findings can be used as part of a more specific task aim (e.g. come up with advice on how to overcome speaking anxiety, how to practise speaking if opportunities are rare, etc.).

Speaking tasks designed with this purpose will allow students to experience the kinds of worlds and relationships that knowledge of language can open up in their lives and in this way fuel their desire to continue to learn it.

### **Tasks that engage students with the world around them**

And finally, it can be useful to think of immersive tasks as real-world tasks with real-world consequences. Learning a new language does not mean that students should leave behind their multilingual competences and multicultural identities (Ortega, 2017). Immersive speaking tasks can create genuine opportunities for students to appreciate and try out the rich meaning-making possibilities that their existing multilingual competences can bring to their communication in English. All the previously mentioned sample tasks can be designed and used with this rationale in mind, emphasizing the value that students' existing languages, cultures and viewpoints bring to L2 encounters. Moreover, immersive

tasks can also help students engage more deeply with – and, if necessary, encourage them to challenge – the preconceptions, stereotypes and myths that they hold about people living in other cultures. And lastly, immersive tasks will help students not only to reap the personal benefits which knowing English can bring, but also to experience in their own 'skin' the real difference that their ability to use L2 can make to the world around them, in their local as well as global communities.

Such tasks can include a variety of activities that engage students with issues of social justice (Crookes, 2013; Glynn, Wesely, & Wassell, 2014; Habinakova, 2017; Hawkins, 2014) and can have very real practical value for specific communities in the students' environment. For example, Navarrete's (2017) task involved language learners working collaboratively to produce audio description of actions, facial expressions and scenery for short clips of popular movies, such as *The Hunger Games* or *The Minions*, in order to make these clips accessible to blind and visually impaired viewers. Tin (2014) has described language learners in Myanmar who cited as one of the major reasons that they wanted to learn English their desire to contribute to the common good and help those in need, such as refugees in their own country. Tapping into this desire and using it to develop real-world tasks with real-world consequences is one way to rethink the power of immersive tasks in the language classroom.

# Selecting engaging topics

As will be clear to experienced language educators, there is no magic list of topics that is guaranteed to transform a classroom full of learners reluctant to participate in a speaking task into a 'safe speaking environment' in which everyone is keen to participate. Yet the principles for designing immersive speaking tasks discussed in the previous section can usefully inform language teachers' selection of engaging topics. As summarized in the paper 'Learner-centred content', engaging topics:

- use learners' lives and experiences as input,
- centre around a topic that students are passionate about,
- link content to a real-world context, outcome or application.

The previously discussed sample tasks can therefore serve as a source for identifying topics that are likely to engage students in immersive conversations and as a template to be populated with specific topics that teachers already know are close to students' worlds.

## The importance of learner agency

It is also worth considering the extent to which students should be actively involved in influencing the choice of topics. In other words, in addition to learner-centred content, is it worth including content that is learner-generated? (For more information on these debates, see the paper 'Learner-centred content'.) Particularly relevant to this question is a substantial body of research into learner agency or students' active investment in their

own learning that is in tune with who they are as persons and what they strive to achieve in their language learning and in their lives. Key findings from diverse theoretical perspectives have confirmed that students enjoy more meaningful learning experiences when:

- they are in charge of their own language learning (Cohen & Macaro, 2007; Murray, Gao, & Lamb, 2011),
- their motivation is generated from within rather than through external rewards (Noels, 2009; Ushioda, 2008),
- they are given opportunities to make the learning material their own (Norton, 2000),
- their actions are self-initiated rather than commanded by the teacher or the system (van Lier, 2007).

Translating these findings into specific pedagogical action is never straightforward. There are many examples from research about and with language learners, however, which attest to the rich motivational benefits when learner agency is specifically nurtured through the pedagogical design of language learning activities. Accordingly, when educators create an environment in which it is safe for students to make genuine decisions and act on them (Hanks, 2017; Kubanyiova, 2004; Pinter, 2014; Pinter, Mathew, & Smith, 2016; Pinter & Zandian, 2014), they either "don't ever want to leave this room" (Pinter & Zandian, 2014: 64) or can't wait for the next class, as putting them in charge "makes English fun. You never know what to expect when you come through the door" (Kubanyiova, 2004: 14).

The extensive work of Annamaria Pinter and her colleagues (Pinter et al., 2016) has illustrated tangible language learning engagement outcomes for students attending government schools in India catering mainly for under-privileged communities, with class sizes of 50 or more. When these children were included into the teachers' and researchers' inquiry in what would make their language learning experience meaningful, they suggested more meaning-focused activities, such as stories and all sorts of communicative tasks. The latter included interviewing their peers, parents and other members of their local communities about concerns that affected them, such as child poverty, school uniforms, the environment and the like.

Although this particular research study related to younger learners, it is easy to see a more general lesson emerging: Giving students real power over specific aspects of the learning process, including task topics, and involving them in pedagogical decision-making is likely to yield topics of intrinsic value to them and so with genuine potential to generate immersive conversations. Including learner-generated in addition to learner-centred topics is therefore an important step towards creating safe speaking environments.





# Fostering positive peer interactions

To help students feel safe to speak in L2, classrooms need to become judgment-free zones. Peer interaction has been widely acknowledged as an opportunity for learners to try out new language without the fear of making mistakes, to take risks and to challenge and push one another in ways that facilitate language development (Ohta, 2001; Philp, Adams, & Iwashita, 2014; Swain, Brooks, & Tocalli-Beller, 2002; Swain, Kinnear, & Steinman, 2011). However, the supporting research also makes it clear that merely placing students in pairs or groups does not automatically produce these kinds of positive outcomes. In this section I briefly consider two dimensions of peer interactions that deserve close attention: appropriate speaker roles for various types of tasks; and positive group dynamics.

## What makes pairs and groups successful?

Yule and Macdonald (1990) examined the relationship between learners of different proficiency levels engaging in two-way communication tasks in which they had to negotiate a route on a map based on partial information each of them possessed. One learner in the pair assumed the role of a 'sender' – that is, the speaker responsible for communicating the route on the map which was only available to him/her. The other learner was the 'receiver', who drew the map based on the instructions received from the sender. The study found that peer interactions were considerably longer, more complex and more varied when the role of 'sender' was assumed by less proficient

speakers. This suggests, perhaps counter-intuitively, that putting stronger students in less dominant roles or, more generally, giving careful consideration to the make-up of groups and pairs could significantly enhance language learning outcomes of peer interaction.

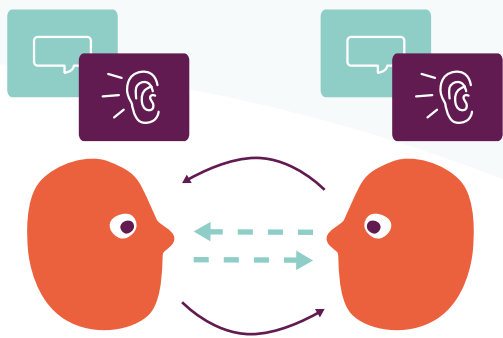
A similarly intriguing study of the impact of different patterns of interaction on language learning outcomes was carried out by Storch (2002). She observed four different pairings of learners, which she termed and defined as follows: collaborative, in which learners shared ideas equally; dominant–dominant, in which both partners showed reluctance to engage with each other's contributions; dominant–passive in which one partner imposed ideas which the other was willing to accept; and expert–novice, characterized by uneven competence but at the same time a willingness of the expert to support the novice. When these pairs were tested on the new language that they encountered during their pair work, those working in the collaborative and expert–novice pairs retained more than the pairs in the other two pairing arrangements. On one level, these findings speak to the importance of paying close attention to the internal dynamics of pairs and groups. On another level, however, a question arises about how such collaborative relationships based on peers' willingness to support each other in the completion of the task can be cultivated in the language classroom. This has been the subject of research under the umbrella of group dynamics, which is considered next.

## Building positive group dynamics

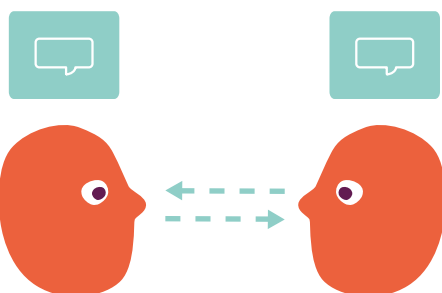
Talking about group work more generally, Galton and Hargreaves (2009) have concluded that in order for peer interaction to have meaningful learning outcomes, students have to develop trust and respect for one another. This is the key premise behind a sub-discipline of social psychology called group dynamics, which has been developed extensively for language education and language teacher development purposes (Dörnyei & Malderez, 1997; Dörnyei & Murphey, 2003; Hadfield, 1992; Kubanyiova, 2006, 2007; Senior, 2002, 2006). Common to these debates is an acknowledgment that class groups are much more than a collection of individuals pursuing their own language learning goals over a specified time, typically dictated by the length of the course. Instead, it is helpful to think of class groups as having a life of their own, which evolves as the group members spend time together and is governed by unique norms, values, goals and emotional bonds. A conscious effort on the part of the teacher to create a positive classroom culture based on productive classroom norms, such as acceptance, and on the shared language learning vision (Dörnyei & Kubanyiova, 2014) can prepare fertile ground for students' meaningful engagement in speaking tasks. The pedagogical tools that have proven successful in building a positive group vision include:

- generating a collective group narrative of their language learning vision by pooling individual stories through techniques such as newslettering, story-sharing sessions, or creating a 'group chronicle',
- modelling the vision through the teacher's own values, passions and actions,
- communicating the group vision using creative channels of communication such as vision boards (i.e. visual displays of the group's future goals) or social media as well as those readily available through feedback in classroom talk.

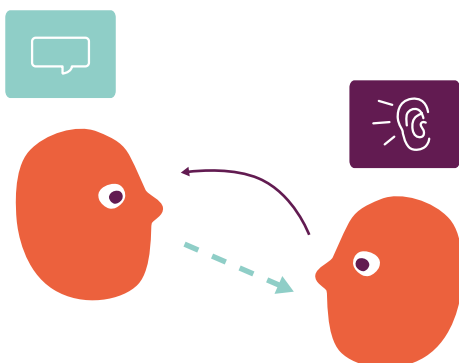
**Collaborative**



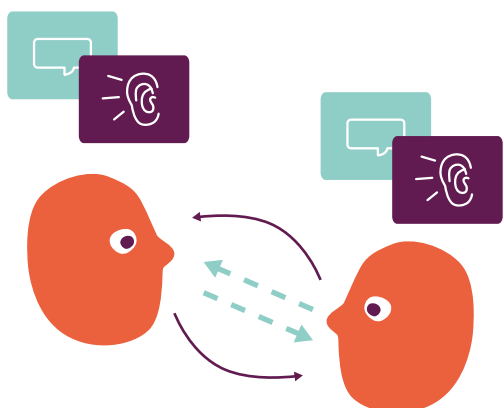
**Dominant–dominant**



**Dominant–passive**



**Expert–novice**



# Giving feedback that supports students' communicative successes

Feedback is a way of signalling to the learners how they are doing in their language learning efforts and a basis on which they draw conclusions about their emerging language competence. Because such judgments can have significant consequences for the learners' future investment in speaking (cf. Kubanyiova, 2006), consideration of the types of feedback that teachers ought to provide, when to do so, and under what circumstances it may be best to withhold feedback, has always been high on language educators' agenda.

As the paper in this series titled 'Feedback on speaking in ELT' summarizes, there seems to be little research consensus regarding the role of feedback in creating safe speaking environments. The purpose of this section, therefore, is to take a closer look at research on how feedback works in interaction itself and what impact it may have on students' communicative accomplishments in specific speaking tasks and creating a safe speaking environment in the classroom in general. Accordingly, I consider instances when the teacher provides feedback as she/he engages in classroom interaction. This can happen either as she/he monitors and temporarily becomes involved in the conversation of one of the small groups or pairs before moving on to the next one, or by navigating a whole class teacher–student discussion, opinion-sharing or problem-solving.

## The role of feedback in the Initiation–Response–Feedback (IRF) pattern of classroom talk

One of the most frequent patterns of teacher–student interaction is the so-called Initiation–Response–Feedback (IRF; Sinclair & Coulthard, 1975), in which the teacher initiates an exchange (I), the student responds (R), and the teacher gives feedback (F), which, as the example below shows, is often followed by a new IRF sequence.

Teacher: Who's this? [I]

Student: The alien. But she don't know yet. [R]

Teacher: Don't? She doesn't know yet. Third person singular. Don't forget. DOESN'T. Okay? [F] Try again? [I]

The IRF interaction, such as the one shown in the example above, is sometimes dismissed as not especially helpful in creating a safe speaking environment as it tends to limit natural conversation (Seedhouse, 1996). But the research examining what happens within this interactional pattern has found that teacher's feedback can in fact facilitate students' meaningful participation in speaking (Batstone & Philp, 2013; Duff, 2000; Hall & Walsh, 2002; Richards, 2006). Its usefulness, however, depends on how well in tune the feedback is with the pedagogical goals of the interaction (Walsh, 2011; Wells, 1993).

This implies that the effectiveness of the feedback given in the above interaction cannot be determined without closer inspection of the actual pedagogical purposes of the teacher–student exchange. If, for example, the feedback was given as part of a grammar-focused task, the teacher's feedback strategy may have been very effective in helping students to notice and practise a specific linguistic structure. Although we do not see how the interaction developed as a result of the feedback, the chances are that the skilful combination of elicitation, direct reformulation, and metalinguistic feedback (for more details of these types of corrective feedback, see 'Feedback on speaking in ELT', another paper in this series) resulted in the student's accurate language production at the end of a subsequent IRF round.

But let's imagine that the sample interaction was part of an immersive task in which students were asked to create and share with others interesting storylines for an online video game. Feedback on linguistic structures would still have been relevant if it helped students to communicate their stories more effectively. However, a less complex corrective feedback strategy along with feedback on the actual content of the students' narratives might have been more effective in supporting their meaning making in the above example.

## Feedback must be aligned sensitively with the goal of creating a safe speaking environment

Feedback is a complex and context-sensitive matter and does not lend itself to universally right and wrong principles to facilitate meaningful language learning opportunities in the classroom. But if creating a safe speaking environment is the primary aim, then it is useful to think of appropriate feedback as that which is aligned sensitively with this pedagogical goal.

In his study of classroom talk, Walsh (2002) looked at ways in which teachers, through their use of language, have created or obstructed opportunities for students' participation in speaking in the classroom. The most significant (and perhaps the least expected) for the

purposes of this paper is the following finding: contrary to general perceptions, direct error correction – as opposed to less direct forms of corrective feedback often called for in fluency-focused tasks – was effective in helping the students to maintain the flow of their conversation.

Similarly counter-intuitive may be the research finding which shows that explicit positive assessment, such as 'very good', 'well done' or 'okay', often has negative consequences for students' participation in classroom conversations (Waring, 2008). Instead of expanding and deepening them, such feedback tends to close them down, as the short example from classroom data below illustrates.

The students are given a series of pictures depicting various types of houses. They are asked to offer an educated guess as to who might live in 'their' house. They first discuss this in pairs or small groups and are then invited to offer their theories in a plenary. The teacher listens and reacts by adding her own suggestions. As one particular exchange progresses and the students and the teacher develop a specific line of reasoning ('someone who is really sad, neglected and lonely might live in this house because it's in the middle of nowhere'), a student from the back of the classroom interrupts the exchange rather unexpectedly and abruptly, obviously disagreeing with the direction of their reasoning. He says in a loud voice: "It depends. It depends. Because there are people who are searching for loneliness!" To which the teacher replies: "Very good. Some people might appreciate loneliness. Could it be so? Yes, it could. And the last picture..." (Kubanyiova, unpublished EFL classroom data).

Although the teacher clearly facilitated an interesting discussion by offering content feedback through her own suggestions and theories, the final positive assessment of a student contribution effectively stopped what had all the features of this student's genuine investment in the conversation. Feedback in the form of an invitation to elaborate or explain might have transformed the potential of a truly immersive conversation into reality.



A final example illustrates a similarly missed opportunity. Although there may be multiple reasons for this, this exchange confirms that an interactional structure of IRF offers a useful framework for creating safe speaking environments, so long as teachers are prepared to use it's the 'feedback' element as an opportunity to marvel at what the students are actually saying.

Teacher: Imagine someone you would like to meet and talk to. (Students write down their answers – about 30 seconds). Who did you imagine?

Student: A horseback rider in a circus!

Teacher: OK. What else? (Pause for 2 seconds) OK? So let's now read this text.

(Kubanyiova, unpublished data from a microteaching class led by a student-teacher)

To conclude, immersive conversations are, by definition, communicative events in which students' lived experiences, emotions and imaginations are invested. Being committed to creating spaces for such conversations in the language classroom means being willing and able to use feedback to support students' communicative successes. In addition to feedback on form (such as relevant linguistic structures necessary to pursue the meaningful task) or meaning (such as commenting on specific content), creating a safe speaking environment also entails approaching the conversation with a sense of wonder and signalling that through the feedback. In short, the task of language teachers in a safe speaking environment is to use the feedback in support of genuine meaning making and thus give students a compelling taster of who they can become as L2 users in the future.

Contrary to general perceptions, direct error correction – as opposed to less direct forms of corrective feedback often called for in fluency-focused tasks – was effective in helping the students to maintain the flow of their conversation.

# Conclusion

This paper has shown that an environment in which students will feel safe to speak is vital for supporting students' language learning. Creating such an environment, however, appears to be a rather complex task, requiring constant juggling of multiple elements, including time, tasks, topics, peer relationships and feedback. In many ways, however, the task is also a most joyful one, for it goes far beyond creating conditions for a mere exchange of information in order to rehearse specific language features. Creating a safe speaking environment allows teachers to forge spaces – no

matter how limited these may be within the countless constraints that most language educators face – which open up opportunities for students to lose themselves in the conversations that matter to them and that are consequential to their relationships with others and with the world around them. It takes time, endless patience and careful observation to transform possibilities that classroom talk offers into the actual benefits for students' language learning. But just like with speaking, this, too, is time well spent.



# Recommendations for further reading

The book by Dörnyei & Kubanyiova is a comprehensive and practical overview of the role of L2 motivation and vision in the language classroom.

Dörnyei, Z., & Kubanyiova, M. (2014). *Motivating learners, motivating teachers: Building vision in the language classroom*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Glynn, Wesely, & Wassell's book provides practical advice on designing engaging tasks with real-world consequences, while Hadfield's is a recipe book of group dynamics activities.

Glynn, C., Wesely, P., & Wassell, B. (2014). *Words and actions: Teaching languages through the lens of social justice*. Alexandria, VA: ACTFL

Hadfield, J. (1992). *Classroom dynamics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

The book by Walsh offers a detailed account of how language teachers can support students' involvement in classroom interaction.

Walsh, S. (2006). *Investigating classroom discourse*. London: Routledge.

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