3 Facilitating productive classroom talk

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In this chapter, we ask the following questions:

What is the importance of productive classroom talk for language learning?

How can Initiation-Response-Feedback (IRF) sequences contribute more meaningfully to learners' language learning?

How can effective questioning strategies develop learners' language and thinking skills?

Theoretical perspectives and the Austrian context

Geoff Petty (2014) writes that "[m]any experts on education, including many experienced and effective teachers, consider verbal questioning to be one of the teacher's most potent tools" (p. 178). Through his work in this area, Petty shows how the questioning strategies that we adopt as teachers can make a significant difference in the proportion of learners who participate, both mentally and verbally, in our lessons. His guidance on teacher questioning is based on research undertaken in education that has consistently shown the importance of 'productive classroom talk' – i.e., learners talking, thinking and reasoning together – for developing their thinking and language abilities (Alexander, 2008; Littleton & Mercer, 2007; Vygotsky, 1978). Productive classroom talk differs from what is considered to be traditional classroom talk, which tends to be strongly teacher-centered and often focuses on the mere reproduction of memorized factual knowledge (van der Veen et al., 2017).

In recognition of these educational insights, the Austrian curriculum for modern foreign languages was adapted in 2009 to include *an Gesprächen teilnehmen* (participating in conversations) to the initial four skills listed (reading, listening, writing, speaking). The curriculum for lower secondary requires teachers to dedicate an equal amount of time to each of the five skills, thus putting more emphasis on speaking skills than before (Wallner, 2014). The curriculum for upper secondary schools stipulates further that learners at level B2 are supposed to be able to express

their thoughts and opinions clearly, to keep a conversation going, to argue convincingly and to react to other learners' statements and arguments, as well as to make comparisons, to evaluate different suggestions and to know how to hypothesise. This reflects the division of skills in the CEFR, where speaking skills are divided into 'production' and 'interaction' (see chapter 5 in this volume).

The standards set out in the Austrian curriculum and the principles of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) (see Richards, 2006 and chapter 1 in this volume) expect teachers to engage learners in meaningful, personalized dialogue about authentic and relevant topics. Thus, group and pair work activities have already become an integral part of teachers' routines. However, classic CLT activities might not always be the most appropriate choice for supporting learners in practicing and acquiring communication skills such as learning how to speak up in a bigger group, how to respond to other classmates' opinions (by using specific discourse functions) or how to negotiate meaning in a whole-class setting. It could be argued that productive classroom talk is a more appropriate means of developing such skills.

Initiation-Response-Feedback (IRF) sequences in the language classroom

Engaging learners in productive classroom talk is a challenging task for all teachers, but perhaps especially so for language teachers, because they are teaching learners who are developing competence in a foreign language. Arguably, we learn to think *and* to speak *by* speaking. Thus, enabling productive classroom talk is a particularly important skill for language educators to master. There is, however, evidence to suggest that it is also a skill that teachers struggle to develop. Classroom research has revealed persistently restrictive patterns in the questions that teachers ask learners, and this can also be said of many ELT classrooms (Jäkel, 2014; Nikula, 2007; Sinclair & Coulthard, 1975). The most common pattern that has been identified is called IRF: the teacher initiates (I) an exchange by asking a question that is followed by a student's response (R) after which the teacher takes over again and gives some feedback (F) before the next question is asked. The following is an example of an IRF sequence:

Teacher:	What can you see in the picture? Yes, Luisa?	Initiation
Luisa:	I can see a mountain.	Response
Teacher:	Very good, Luisa.	Feedback
Teacher:	Now Clemens, what can you see in the picture?	Initiation
Clemens:	The sun.	Response
Teacher:	Please say the whole sentence.	Feedback
Clemens:	I can see the sun.	Response
Teacher:	Good!	Feedback

In this extract, the teacher asks a so-called 'display question' that she already knows the answer to. She calls on a learner who eagerly has her hand raised. She is expecting an already pre-determined response that is to come in a particular linguistic form. When she gets that response, she gives evaluative feedback by either praising the student or by asking them to correct their response and try again. There is not a lot of space within such interactions for learners to think, to express their own opinions and to use language creatively and meaningfully.

There has yet to be a comprehensive programme of research investigating patterns of interaction in English language classrooms in Austria, and whether or not there can be found a preponderance of similar IRF interactions. In the absence of this, an example from Germany might serve as a meaningful comparison. The DESI Study (Deutsch Englisch Schülerleistungen International), commissioned by the German Ministry of Education in 2001, investigated language learning outcomes and classroom practices in the subjects German and English. The study included analyses of videos of English language classrooms from a nationally representative sample of schools (DESI-Konsortium, 2008). The study found three insights relevant to classroom talk:

Firstly, teachers on average speak twice as much as all learners together. Secondly, teachers' questions are answered within three seconds 50% of the time. If they are not answered within this time, the teachers usually provide the answers themselves. Thirdly, there is a rather high presence of target language use in the classrooms: 84% of teacher talk and 76% of student talk is in English. However, only half of the examples of student talk in the target language were categorized as individually worded responses.

This data suggests that teachers do the majority of the talking in English language classrooms and that when they ask learners questions in order to engage them in the lessons, they often do not give them sufficient opportunity to think about these questions and formulate their responses. Instead, teachers answer their questions themselves and move on to the next topic. When learners talk in the English language classrooms, at least half of the time their talk is limited to closed responses to teachers' questions, which might be reading out answers to questions in the textbook or finishing a teachers' sentence stem with the correct answer. Such classroom exchanges do not contribute to productive classroom talk and make only a limited contribution to the development of learners' thinking and language skills.

Effective questioning

So, how can we as English language teachers better engage learners in productive classroom talk, even when they are at lower levels of language competence (e.g., A2 or B1)? Concerning learners of higher levels of language, how do we ensure that classroom talk is productive and facilitative of learning? Petty (2014) suggests that there are two ways that we can do this: one is by improving the questions that we ask our learners (the I's in the IRF patterns) and the other is by improving our feedback on learners' responses (the F's).

The first step is to start working on our I's by planning questions that move away from the above-mentioned traditional IRF pattern. The focus should be on open questions that require learners to use different (higher) levels of thinking rather than on fact-based questions that mainly encourage rote learning and the simple reproduction of knowledge. If we consider the six levels of Bloom's Taxonomy and apply them to the questions we ask, the lowest level of thinking referred to as 'knowledge' relates to questions that focus on the recall of information (e.g., Who?, What?, Where?, When?), in other words, to most questions we ask within the traditional IRF pattern. The sixth and highest level, on the other hand, known as 'evaluation' involves questions that expect learners to develop, justify and defend their opinions ('Why do you think so?'), to compare, evaluate and judge other learners' statements ('Do you agree with ... that ...?') and to take decisions ('Based on what we've just discussed what would you do?').

When planning our questions, teachers always have to keep in mind that the main purpose of questioning is to promote learning and support learners in developing their higher-order thinking skills. In order to do so we need to plan and prepare questions that become increasingly more challenging and gradually cover all levels of Bloom's Taxonomy (Gast, 2013). Effective questions that encourage learners to also draw on their experiences and their prior knowledge of the topic as well as to build on each other's contributions will steer learners towards making an effort to articulate their ideas and getting their messages across, ultimately helping them to become independent thinkers. According to Petty (2014), the knowledge thus gained is more likely to be transferable as learners do not only passively listen to their teacher's talk, but are also actively involved in constructing and co-constructing knowledge. As learners in productive classroom talk settings might be called upon anytime to build on a classmate's argument, they are also required to pay attention to each other's contributions and are hence more involved. Of course, learners may not always have all the language they need to discuss topics in the target language, but they might be motivated by intellectually challenging content to activate all of their linguistic resources in order to make a contribution.

Strategies for productive teacher feedback

Well-planned question sequences can certainly motivate learners of all levels to engage in productive classroom talk, but to ensure deep learning, good and instant teacher feedback (see chapter 8 in this volume) on learners' answers is also essential. Improving on the F in the aforementioned IRF pattern means moving away from solely evaluative feedback towards more comprehensive feedback that triggers additional learner contributions. Well-intentioned evaluative comments such as 'well done' or 'very good' can even have an adverse effect on learning because they serve a " 'finale' function that precludes further attempts by others to articulate their understanding and/or explore alternative answers" (Lyster, 2018, p. 10). In a well-planned feedback move a teacher may challenge learners' opinions. They may also require them to justify and explain their answers or to give an example (e.g., 'Yes, good idea. Can you elaborate on that a bit more, explaining why….'; 'Can you give another example?'; 'Good, and why do you think so?'). Thus, feedback allows both the learner being questioned and the rest of the group to correct errors or misconceptions they might have had and to further develop and deepen their understanding of the topic being discussed. It also encourages them to use language that goes beyond the short answers required in the typical IRF pattern. Such feedback takes on a more discoursal function as it focuses more on content than on form and helps promote a dialogue between the teacher and the learners (Cullen, 2002).

In addition to that, appropriate feedback can be an important motivating factor for learners to show their success in learning by having successfully contributed to class discussions. Productive classroom talk, far more than group or pair activities, facilitates the immediate assessment of learners' (language) output. As only one learner is supposed to be talking at a time, the teacher can more easily monitor their answers and immediately help them clarify their thinking. Hence, effective questions do not only make learners aware of what they do and do not know, but also enable teachers to gain a good insight into what learners know and have understood (Lyster, 2018; Petty, 2014).

Implementation of productive feedback procedures

There are various ways that we can integrate challenging topics into the classroom (see, for example, Gast, 2013; Keith, 2016; Petty, 2014) by pre-teaching concepts and vocabulary as well as required structures or phrases. Using visuals, pictures or gestures will help learners, especially beginners, to visualize and understand more demanding concepts. It can be a good idea to allow learners to use their L1s to work out responses to questions that require higher order thinking. They can then work together to find ways to convert these responses into English. Allowing learners to

use their entire linguistic repertoire and co-create responses, i.e., to think, talk and plan their responses together, will further promote language learning at different levels. Thinking should take precedence over language use. Once the understanding is there, teachers and peers can support the expression of this understanding in the foreign language.

When planning to discuss a challenging topic, it is important for teachers to develop their questions beforehand. The questions should be open, easy to understand and involve different levels of thinking. Often questions starting with 'Why' or 'How' are more likely to lead to learner responses that require higher order thinking. After each question, it is important to wait long enough so that learners are given enough time to think about their responses. One way to ensure that all learners are engaged in the thinking process is to tell them not to call out or raise their hands, but wait to be asked (e.g., ask younger leaners to sit on their hands). In addition, strategies such as moving closer to learners or establishing and keeping eye contact are good ways to also engage learners who are at the back of the classroom, who tend to be unresponsive or who try to avoid the teacher's questions. If a wrong answer is given, teachers should simply say that it was wrong and ask another question to help the learner back on track. If the learner does not know the answer, the teacher should ask another learner if they can help out, but it is important that the teacher then goes back to the first learner and has them try again.

If a question still does not generate any answers, the teacher might need to rephrase it and wait for a response. Sometimes strategies such as 'Shout it out loud' or 'Think-Pair-Share' that allow learners to first try out their thoughts/opinions in a safe environment are useful to get the ball rolling. 'Think-Pair-Share', for instance, allows learners to get some feedback from a classmate first before they share their ideas with the whole class. When using 'Shout it out loud', the teacher should ask the learners to answer the question all at the same time and encourage them to shout the answer out loud by giving them a clue such as 'Go!' or 'Class!'. There are also variations such as giving the answer in a whisper, in a hoarse/deep or high-pitched voice. This strategy is intended to encourage even shy or reluctant learners to take part. The pressure of giving a correct answer is taken off them, as individual answers are not under scrutiny. The teacher can then ask for responses again in the whole-class setting and praise any meaningful contributions.

Effective questioning can be a very powerful and efficient strategy that can yield good results if used appropriately, but as with any other method there are some challenges that need to be met. It is a technique that is not easy to master as it may not come naturally to teachers and therefore has to be practised and developed.

Teachers are sometimes reluctant to initiate productive classroom talk in whole-class settings, as it might seem difficult at first to ensure that all learners in the group are involved in the talk. Some preparatory work will therefore have to go into establishing an atmosphere in which learners feel safe and their answers are not ridiculed; in other words, teachers need to create an atmosphere in which mistakes and incorrect answers are not only tolerated but also seen as an opportunity to deepen learning.

Practical Applications

Example 1

Goal: learners will read different argumentative texts on a pre-selected topic; learners will find arguments in the texts supporting their own opinion; learners will justify their reasoning to their classmates; learners will react to other learners' expressions of opinion (see curriculum for upper secondary, 6th-8th grade)

Activity: whole group discussion

Rationale: to build on each other's opinions

Pre-knowledge: language to express opinions, agreement/disagreement; discussion ground rules

Level: CEFR B1+ and above

Procedure:

1. Agree on a topic that learners are personally interested in. Collect 5-10 topics on the board and have groups of four agree on three topics and rank them according to their importance.

2. Collect the results from each group and display them on the board. Choose the topic that has been selected by most of the groups.

3. Find argumentative texts online (in any language) and send the links to learners.

4. Have them read the texts at home and select three statements they agree/disagree with strongly. If the statements are not in English, have learners explain them in English.

5. Prepare any language which learners might need to fulfill the task (e.g., opinion phrases, vocabulary).

6. Select a learner to introduce the topic in class and start with a statement justifying their opinion.

7. Ask the class to either agree or disagree with this response by showing differently coloured cards (green = fully agree, yellow = not sure; neither agree/disagree, red = strongly disagree).

8. Select another learner to defend their position/opinion by building on what their classmate has said before. They can agree or disagree with their classmate. Always give feedback on the quality/accuracy of learners' answers before moving on to the next contribution.

9. Learners can then, either voluntarily or prompted by the teacher, add their opinions as well, always ensuring that they consider the statements that have been made before.

10. Call upon another learner to introduce a new statement. Ask learners again to agree/disagree (show of cards) and select a learner to continue the discussion by giving their opinion.

11. Continue the activity as described above.

12. Towards the end of the discussion (after a certain number of statements have been made) seek consensus from the group. Consensus requires learners to consider all the statements (pros and cons) which have been made and to relate them to their own opinion.

As a follow-up activity, learners could be asked to convey the ideas discussed using visuals, to write them up in an executive summary or to display them in a list of pros and cons that can then be used as the basis for an opinion essay.

Example 2

This idea is based on Edward de Bono's Six Thinking Hats Model developed in 1985 (Gast, 2013; Kivunja, 2015) in which parallel thinking processes are used to reflect critically on an issue/problem. Learners are asked to consider a problem by putting on one of the five differently coloured thinking hats. The whole process is guided by the teacher who wears the sixth (blue) hat and is responsible for leading the discussion and planning the next steps.

The six hats represent the following modes of thinking:

BLUE HAT: The teacher has to manage the thinking process of learners. They have to lead the discussion and stimulate it by asking the right questions and deciding which thinking hat is to be put on next.

WHITE HAT: When learners wear this hat, they are interested in obtaining all the information and data needed to solve the problem. They have to be neutral and objective without making suggestions or being emotional. They just state the facts.

YELLOW HAT: When learners wear this hat, they look on the bright side of things. They look out for the benefits and the reasons why an idea/suggestion will work. They are optimistic and positive.

BLACK HAT: When learners wear this hat, they slip into the role of 'the devil's advocate'. They should identify what is wrong with the ideas suggested, evaluate and question them, be reasonable, critical and logical.

GREEN HAT: When learners wear this hat, they are as creative as possible and try to think of new and innovative ideas and alternatives that have not been used yet. They are provocative and think outside the box.

RED HAT: When learners wear this hat, they express their personal feelings and emotions on the subject/problem without having to justify them in any way. They can have different feelings about the issue.

When using this model with younger learners it might be helpful to provide them with paper hats which they wear and/or a summary of the role they are expected to take on. Even older learners might need a reminder (brief description and colour of the respective hat).

Possible discussion questions based on (real-life) problems:

'What can we do about homework assignments not being done on time or at all?'

'Shall we buy a fish tank for our classroom?'

'Should official graffiti walls be installed in Graz?'

Goal: learners will explore different viewpoints; learners will make decisions; learners will solve problems

Activity: 6 Thinking Hats – whole group discussion activity

Rationale: focus on creative and constructive higher-order thinking skills

Pre-knowledge: language to express opinions, agreement/disagreement; discussion ground rules

Level: A2 and above

Procedure:

1. The teacher introduces the topic/problem/scenario to be discussed. This requires some preparatory work with learners so that they can easily talk about the topic (e.g., reading articles, doing some research on the internet, linking the problem to a topic covered in the coursebook).

2. The teacher decides which thinking hat should be worn first. This depends on the topic and might differ each time this method is used. The most important thing is that the group only wears one thinking hat at a time.

3. The teacher asks the first question and gives learners some wait time to think about it. To get the ball rolling, the teacher then addresses one of the learners. The teacher should be prepared to manage the discussion by inviting other learners to expand and comment on the statements and ideas put forward by their classmates. It might be helpful to keep track of the ideas mentioned by noting them down on the blackboard for further reference.

4. The teacher should go through some or all of the thinking hats until they feel that a sound and well-informed decision can be made or a solution to the problem has been found.

As a follow-up activity, learners could be asked to write a report based on the findings of the meeting or to write the minutes of the meeting.

Example 3

Goal: Learners will activate prior knowledge on a topic; they will review previous learning (correcting misconceptions)

Activity: Buzz Groups, small group discussions (groups of 3 or 4)

Rationale: to listen to each other's responses and agree on a group answer that is reported back to the whole group

Pre-knowledge: language to express opinions, agreement/disagreement; discussion ground rules

Level: A2 and above

Procedure

1. The teacher prepares a set of thought-provoking questions on one topic (e.g., grammar: *What is the difference in meaning between the following two sentences: I have lived in Graz for five years. vs. I lived in Graz for five years.*).

2. Learners get together in buzz groups of 3 or 4. All learners discuss the question in their groups and check on each other's thinking and understanding of the questions. They then need to agree on one answer that is put forward by a speaker of the group. The group members are usually interested in making sure that the speaker does not misrepresent their group's answer to the class. This leads to a high level of participation, as the correct wording of the answer needs to be negotiated between all the group members.

3. The teacher then asks the speakers to give their group's answer and explores learners' thinking process by asking them, for instance: 'Why did your group think that?', 'Did any other group get the same answer?', 'Has anyone got a different answer?'. The speakers should be selected by the teacher and be changed after each buzz group round. The teacher does not yet evaluate the answers or give the correct answer.

4. After having listened to each other, the whole class discusses the groups' answers and needs to agree on a 'class answer' that has to be explained and justified. The aim of this activity is to achieve consensus. Once learners have agreed on their answer, the teacher either confirms or corrects it by giving feedback on the learners' thinking.

5. An advantage of this activity is that it gives learners a lot of thinking time. Learners may also feel more comfortable putting forward their answers to the whole class because it is not their individual idea that is under scrutiny but the group's answer. In addition, the teacher receives constructive and representative feedback on how well the class has processed a new topic, grammar item, etc.

Activities and questions for reflection

1. Look through some of your past lesson plans, check how many classroom speaking activities you planned and which of those followed the IRF sequence. In hindsight, what would you do differently, and what types of questions would you prepare for these discussion activities?

2. When preparing a new lesson plan, reflect on the talk formats you will use to achieve your teaching goals.

3. Plan for a productive speaking task in which you do not follow a closed IRF sequence:

- What questions will you ask to support the development of learners' learning and language?
- Write out at least three questions. Check whether they start with 'why' or 'how'.

4. Reflect on your role as the teacher in a particular discussion activity. Are there any learners that you want to pay particular attention to? How are you going to achieve that? What kind of feedback might be most productive?

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Suggestions for further reading

Petty, G. (2014). *Teaching Today: A Practical Guide* (5th ed.). Oxford University Press.

This classic book covers not only questioning strategies, but also other essential aspects of teaching.

Mercer, N. (2019). *Language and the Joint Creation of Knowledge: The selected works of Neil Mercer*. Routledge.

This book gives an insight into Neil Mercer's work on the role of talk in education and on the relationship between spoken language and cognition. It relates theoretical ideas to research evidence and to practical educational situations.

Gaunt, A., & Stott, A. (2019). *Transform Teaching and Learning through Talk: The Oracy Imperative*. Rowman and Littlefield.

This book draws on academic research in the area of talk in the classroom and outlines practical applications. The authors share personal insights and anecdotes as well as tried-and-tested approaches.

There are several resources for improving questioning strategies based on Bloom's Taxonomy.

For examples, see these Question Stems: https://www.teachthought.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/09/blooms-question-stems.jpg

Geoff Petty's website contains useful resources for enhancing your questioning style in the classroom. While his work is not specific to ELT, you could easily adapt it for your classroom needs: http://geoffpetty.com/training-materials/questioning/

The Thinking Together website contains resources to support the development of learners' thinking and learning in the classroom. It is based on the findings of research from scholars such as Neil Mercer and Karen Littleton: http://thinkingtogether.educ.cam.ac.uk

For more information on promoting talk across the curriculum, and building a classroom culture which values talk in ELT and beyond, see the website of Voice 21: https://voice21.org/, an educational organization that promotes oracy education as means to develop and deepen learners' subject knowledge and understanding through talk in the classroom. You can hear Alice Stott talk about their initiative here: https://www.wested.org/resources/oracy-in-the-uk-for-all-students-current-research/.

Commentary on reflection questions

1. to **4.** Your answers to the reflection questions will depend on your personal teaching experience. The point of these questions is to encourage reflection on your use of teacher talk.