

## Teacher Talk and Learner Talk

Rod Bolitho

### **Abstract**

*This paper focuses on the purposes, nature, and quality of talk in the English language classroom. We are all in the business of communication, and yet there is reason to believe that much of the interaction that takes place in language classrooms has little or nothing to do with real communication and that some of it tends to infantilise learners. I suggest some possible reasons for this and look at some ways in which the problem can be addressed, with reference to questioning, thinking skills, language awareness work and cross-curricular links in teaching and materials.*

### **Some questions about classroom talk**

Before you start reading the rest of this article, you may like to address the following questions with reference to your own routines as a teacher or teacher educator. Thinking about the questions and making a few notes on them may help you to get more out of reading that follows.

*What kind of talk goes on in your classroom?*

*Who initiates the talk?*

*Who decides who should talk?*

*Who asks most of the questions?*

*What about the quality of listening in your classroom?*

### **Some issues related to classroom talk**

There is no doubt that plenty of talk goes on in modern, communicative language classroom. But what is the nature of this talk and on whose terms does it take place?

### ***Quality vs. quantity: the curse of the speaking skill***

Teachers of English in many countries are now being trained to give more attention to the development of speaking skills in their learners, in part to compensate for earlier excessive preoccupations with reading and writing and in part because the spoken language is seen as such a vital tool in modern communication. Teachers, supported by many recent and current textbooks, have been encouraged to foster speaking through techniques such as role play, project work and dialogue practice, and to vary practice and interaction patterns in the classroom by making extensive use of pair work and group work as well as whole class sessions. In my experience of observing classes in recent years, this has led to a great deal of what I can only describe as low quality and relatively meaningless talk. All too often, the topics chosen are banal and trivial, perhaps making

linguistic demands on learners, but certainly not stretching their capacity for critical thought. It may be (and this is just a thought!) that some coursebooks are going in for the kinds of trivial topic that crop up time and again in our media: teenage magazines, soap operas and reality TV shows. It may also be that some learners (and teachers) feel 'safe' when they speak about uncontroversial topics and there is no doubt that political correctness and good taste limit the range of topics which is acceptable as a vehicle for classroom talk. Equally, however, I have had secondary school intermediate-level learners in more than one context tell me that they would like to discuss 'real' issues and not just 'fill time' with talk at a superficial level which, to them, is neither interesting nor memorable. They also see that drilling and pronunciation exercises may contribute to the development of 'the speaking skill', but they don't see them as a substitute for real talk.

There appears to be potential for a 'trade-off' here: half an hour of *good quality* talk about a topic which genuinely interests learners may have far more impact than a couple of hours of 'jumping through the hoops' of role play and group work in order to fulfil the outward requirements of communicative teaching. On initial training courses, student teachers are often exhorted to find ways of cutting down on teacher talking time (TTT), as though it were a sin, and to ensure there is a proportional increase in learner talking time (LTT), as though this were a panacea. Nobody seems to mention the *quality* of the talk under scrutiny here. Here again we need to think of striking a balance: three minutes of good quality teacher talk can be of far greater lasting value to learners than twenty minutes of learner discussion about their favourite holiday pursuits.

#### ***The standard classroom exchange and the impact of 'routinisation'***

Research has shown that the most common classroom exchange has three 'turns': (1) teacher asks, (2) learner answers, (3) teacher evaluates the answer. This sequence is repeated thousands of times a day in classrooms all over the world. It is what passes for teaching and learning. Morgan and Saxton question this assumption:

*"The classic concept of learning is that it occurs when the teacher asks the questions and the students can answer them, but the reality is that learning does not occur until the learner needs to know and can formulate the question for himself." (1991:75)*

I shall return to the topic of questioning later in this article. In language classrooms, the three-stage exchange referred to above has an extra, and for many learners rather sinister purpose. The purpose of a teacher's question is all too often not to listen to *what* the learner says, but rather to *how* s/he says it. Consider the following exchange which I picked up from an unpublished classroom video:

*Teacher:* What did you do last weekend, Carla?

*Carla:* We went to the beach and then we drove to London again.

*Teacher:* 'Drove', Carla, 'drove'. It's an irregular verb, remember?

Here the teacher shows no interest in Carla's message, just in the language she uses to express it. The sad thing is that Carla is herself almost certainly a veteran of such routinised exchanges and she realises what the 'rules' are even before she speaks. By

now she would probably even get a shock if the teacher showed any interest in her weekend activities for their own sake. This kind of exchange is not communication. In the classroom it is simply a pretext for learners to put their language up for scrutiny and for teachers to correct it. Outside the classroom the teacher's response would very probably be seen as socially unacceptable. And yet many of us call our classrooms communicative.....

### ***Who really listens?***

You could argue that Carla's teacher is 'listening' to her in a way, but this is far from the kind of listening which is typical of the give and take of real life talk. A teacher who really listens to what her students have to tell her is far more likely to get a positive response from them. Everyone likes to be listened to attentively and there seems to me to be no reason why this should be any different in a language classroom. A listening teacher sets the tone for the development of a listening culture in the classroom. If the teacher values what the students say, and shows them that she does, they are far more likely to listen attentively to her and, importantly, to each other. There are other reasons why the quality of a teacher's listening may not be as good as it could be, apart from this tendency to focus on errors. All sorts of things may be going on in her mind while a student is speaking: planning the next 'move' in the lesson, keeping half an eye on a student in the far corner who is not paying attention, groping round desperately for a board marker or a piece of chalk – all of this is quite natural teacher behaviour, but it prevents us from giving proper attention to the student whose turn it is to speak. It takes a good deal of determination and self-discipline to learn to clear our head of all this 'clutter' and to listen actively to student contributions. But on the occasions when we achieve it, the rewards are quickly evident in terms of student motivation and participation.

We all know that 'You're not really listening to me' feeling. Why should we inflict it on learners in a classroom?

### ***Silence, dominance and the 'pecking order' in the classroom***

There may be many reasons why a student elects to keep silent in a classroom: fear of making mistakes ('lathophobia' from the Greek), a desire not to 'stand out', a dislike of how s/he *sounds* in English, a need to take time to think, or simply a bad day. Whatever the reason, language teachers seem to have been imbued with a collective fear of silence, as though it represents emptiness, or an unproductive use of time. Once again, this flies in the face of what generally happens during real communication outside the classroom. We choose when to speak and when to remain silent. Other than in other highly formal and ritualised situations such as meetings, courtrooms and so on, we don't expect someone else to determine when we should speak or remain silent. Accepting that the smooth running of a class requires that turn-taking conventions be observed and that no teacher, quite understandably, wants everyone to be shouting at once, or one student to be hogging all the talking time, there is still plenty of room for a more relaxed attitude to the classroom as a communicative social community.

There is plenty of evidence that good quality talk often includes thoughtful silences (as opposed to empty silences or embarrassed silences). If a teacher chooses to put a good question 'into the air', students are likely to need time to consider and formulate an

answer, rather than to rush out with something because the teacher shows signs of impatience and wanting to get on to the next question because she is behind with her lesson plan. The kind of silence that can grow after a good question is educationally valuable because it promotes thinking, and if it happens frequently students will come to understand it and make use of it as a time for them to order their thoughts and to find the right way of expressing them.

Dominant and overzealous students are often the first to ‘break’ this kind of silence and a teacher may need to hold them in check for a few moments to allow others the space they need to put their thoughts in order. Far from interrupting talk, this kind of silence is an integral part of it. Morgan and Saxton put it like this:

*“Quality thinking time is filled with the energy of curiosity which will be balanced by the energy of thinking and feeling. Active silence speaks as loudly as words. An interrupted silence is equal to interrupting a speaker; thought is part of verbal expression and exchange.” (1991:80)*

Surely this ought to be even more the case in a language classroom where learners will often need even more time to work towards articulating their ideas.

### ***The nature and purposes of ‘real’ talk***

Van Ments (1990:20) identifies four different kinds of verbal communication: *phatic*, referring to ‘light-hearted social discourse’ with ‘no agenda and no objective’; *cathartic*, denoting a ‘highly personal form of speech whose main purpose is to release emotional tension’; *informative*, which involves sharing ideas and knowledge and is ‘the basis of educational talking’; and *persuasive*, defined as ‘talk as an instrument to change attitudes and produce decisions and actions.’ These distinctions are useful at one level, but I prefer to take them a little further in order to forge a link with the key ideas in this article.

### ***Talk as a means of learning***

Everyone uses talk for this purpose but the sad reality is that this kind of talk is not always encouraged in classrooms, of all places. Listening in to any child-parent conversation will sooner or later reveal the way a child uses talk to gain knowledge and understanding. I noted down this exchange between a child of about four and her mother on the train from Liverpool Street to Stansted Airport:

*Girl:* Look Mum, the sea!

*Mother:* That’s not the sea, darling – it’s a lake.

*Girl:* Why isn’t it the sea?

*Mother:* Because it isn’t big enough. The sea is really big.

*Girl:* So a lake is like a little sea...

*Mother:* Yes, I suppose it is really

In the classroom, the favourable child: adult ratio illustrated in this short exchange no longer applies, and this kind of enquiring talk is less easy for a teacher to handle. However, it is far from impossible. One of the best primary school lessons I have ever seen was one in which the teacher sat on a low stool with the children cross-legged on the floor in a semicircle all around him. He produced a piece of quartz, held it up for everyone to see, said nothing and just waited for the children to make the first move. After a hesitant start, they began to bombard him with questions and remarks until they had found out everything they could about the glistening stone, which was in the meantime passed around for everyone to see and feel. The sense of wonder and fascination in the room was palpable and the children were eager to get on with the next stage of their project which was to go to a beach and collect different kinds of stones and fossils for close examination and classification. The lesson for me was that good quality classroom talk does not have to be highly structured but that it does need to be initiated in a thoughtful and imaginative way. In language classrooms we are often so much concerned with skills and language systems that we too easily forget about the potential of this kind of learning-oriented talk.

Another feature of ‘real’ talk that distinguishes it from the sometimes artificial exchanges that take place in the classroom is that when we ask a question we do so because we want to know the answer. That was what motivated the primary children in the example just quoted. Compare it with the exchange between the teacher and Carla, in which the teacher had no obvious interest in the learner’s answer, and with the (literally) hundreds of questions that teachers ask each week to which they already know the answer – *What’s the past tense of ‘drive’*; *What’s the capital of the USA?*; *What is the formula for common salt?* – behaviour which, if transferred to the world outside, would soon have people doubting their sanity. In my experience of observing in classrooms around the world, the proportion of this kind of ‘low-challenge’, knowledge-seeking question a child is confronted with on an average day at school is very high compared with the type of question which provokes deeper thinking and a more considered response. Bloom and Kratwohl’s (1965) work on the classification of thinking skills into lower order and higher order can help us here: they define ‘lower order’ thinking skills as oriented towards *knowledge, comprehension* and the *application of knowledge*, and ‘higher order’ thinking skills as being concerned with *analysis, synthesis* and *evaluation*. One of the most demotivating things about routine classroom exchanges for many learners is that these three higher order skills remain underdeveloped, particularly in the early years of education, leading to a gradual diminution of curiosity and interest. In language classes, reading lessons all too often stop once comprehension has been checked and a grammar class may be almost entirely knowledge and application-focussed. The opportunity to ask more challenging and interesting questions is all too often missed

### ***Talk as a means of transferring meaning***

We all need to ‘get a point across’ to others at one time or another whether this is at a family gathering, in a formal meeting or in a classroom. Equally, we know the feeling that comes when our interlocutor fails to ‘get’ the point we are trying to put across. In such cases, meaning has to be negotiated between speaker and listener, to make sure that unilateral understanding becomes shared understanding. Sadly, these kinds of

conventions of negotiation apply all too seldom in teacher-learner interactions. In many educational contexts, knowledge and meaning are ‘transmitted’ without any obvious attempt to ascertain that the ‘message’ has been ‘received and understood’. Learners are expected to digest a teacher’s ‘meanings’ without question, and many are reluctant to ‘swim against the tide’ by asking for clarification when they need it. In some cases, this kind of behaviour by learners is even actively discouraged or seen as disrespectful; they either accept a message on the teacher’s terms or not at all. The resultant half-understandings and misunderstandings only become evident when a learner hands in a piece of work or takes a test, and the teacher sees underperformance or error as the fault of the learner and not of any earlier, failed classroom communication. In the language classroom, our preoccupation with teaching techniques and methods has until recently led to a neglect of the learner’s perspective, thereby causing an opportunity for rich and meaningful classroom talk to be missed. And while we seem to be very good at developing learners’ fluency in social and everyday situations in terms of the initial level of communication (‘*Can you tell me the way to ...?*’; ‘*How much is ....?*’; ‘*I’d like a cup of black coffee, please*’), we seem to be less good at helping them with the language needed to explore meaning or clear up misunderstandings which is ultimately equally or even more important to successful interpersonal communication beyond the confines of the classroom.

### ***Talk as a tool for reflection and making sense***

This kind of talk takes place in many ‘real-world’ situations - when we have watched a film with someone and talk it through afterwards, after a meeting or a discussion in which interesting ideas were bandied around, when a child has ‘learned a lesson the hard way’ and is asked by a parent to think about it – there are so many everyday instances. Some people seem to thrive on this kind of talk while others get impatient with it (I have a colleague who falls into that category) and are anxious to get on to the next task or a new challenge. In educational settings, this is the kind of talk which is most associated with experiential learning, where learners ‘talk down’ the experience of a shared activity, often ‘deconstructing’ it and then recreating it through talk. In language classrooms, there is usually plenty of ‘shared activity’ through group work, role play etc, but too often (the curse of the speaking skill again!) the activity is seen as a vehicle for activating language, and therefore an end in itself, rather than as a point of departure for reflective talk or lively discussion where opinions might differ and there might be a reason for learners to listen to each other and an opportunity to take part in talk that develops organically rather than being orchestrated within strictly defined parameters by a teacher whose objectives are stated solely in terms of language skills without an educational dimension. As a reader your response to this point may well depend on the extent to which you see yourself as an educator as well as someone who imparts useful skills and knowledge; to me, it certainly seems like another opportunity missed. With curricula all around the world now laying particular emphasis on critical thinking, isn’t it time for us as language teachers to make a more effective contribution?

### ***Talk for social purposes***

I will always remember a student in my *English for Graduate Chemists* class at a German University saying to me (in German, over a post-class beer!) that he found it strange that

he was able to put together and deliver a conference paper in his own special field, but that he couldn't understand a joke in English, or keep up his part in a conversation with English speakers at a party. The curse of ESP, at work this time, perhaps! Social talk, the type identified as 'phatic' by van Ments, can be every bit as difficult to master as other types of talk for language learners, and it is also the area in which talk-related cultural conventions are perhaps at their most prominent. Speaking skills classes usually take care of the purely functional side of social talk, but all too rarely attend fully to these cultural dimensions. Despite all the current focus on social constructivism in learning (cf Williams and Burden 1997), implying a view of the classroom as a social as well as a functional community, finding time, space and motivation for social talk is not easy. In classes with a common L1 this is especially difficult as phatic communication seems unnatural in anything other than the mother tongue. Yet the experience of my German graduate chemist is a reminder of its importance for future if not present communicative purposes.

### ***Self-talk and inner talk***

'Talking to yourself again?' – how often do we hear this apparent reproach from our friends and families? There is no doubt that talking to oneself within earshot of other people is viewed as socially unacceptable and even deviant in many cultures, and yet we all do it quite happily when there is no-one around. It is so common that it must have a positive function, and while this certainly differs from one individual to another, it probably serves purposes such as issuing reminders and injunctions to oneself, arranging one's thoughts after exposure to new ideas or before expressing oneself in a more public way, or rehearsing what one wants to say in a 'set piece' of some kind, in order to listen to oneself and see what it sounds like. These are all, equally, functions of 'inner talk', which may remain unuttered but is nonetheless a talk 'genre' which is extremely valuable to most of us. In many ways, it is the bridge between thinking and speaking. Speaking is for many people an outcome of thinking, but the converse can also be true: articulating ideas also gives rise to further thought. Vygotsky (originally in 1934) put it succinctly: "Thought is not just expressed in words; it comes into being because of words". Drawing on his experience of being brought up by a German mother and an Irish father, Hugo Hamilton saw the relationship between talk and thinking and meaning with a strong cultural overlay:

*"(My mother) says German people say what they think and Irish people keep it to themselves, and maybe the Irish way is sometimes better. In Germany, she says, people think before they speak, so that they mean what they say, while in Ireland, people think after they speak, so as to find out what they mean. In Ireland, the words never touch the ground." (2003: )*

Years ago, I had a Russian teacher in Düsseldorf who used to tell us to mutter to ourselves for 60 seconds before trying to respond to a question in our very basic Russian. It made for a short period of what seemed like comical chaos at the time, but I now finally understand why she did it – it loosened our tongues, helped us to overcome our inhibitions and encouraged us to find a 'Russian voice' in ourselves, something which I still have, 40 years later.

### ***Institutional culture and learners' experiences***

There is no doubt that children as learners are to a large extent conditioned by their environments at school and at home. In this section I look briefly at some of the factors which influence learners' (and teachers') attitudes to talk.

#### ***School Culture***

Schools and other educational institutions can be characterised by a talking culture, a culture of silence or shades in between. I have worked in institutions at both ends of the spectrum – one which was all talk and no action, and another in which a lot was done in isolation without any obvious sign that talk played a significant part, and where people actually struggled to give each other the time of day. The happiest place I ever worked in was one where there was talk between colleagues at many levels – social, informative, negotiative and even self talk, as well as a commitment to listening, all in a spirit of mutual learning and respect. It was, I'm sure, what Hargreaves (1994) described as a 'collaborative culture'. All of this very visibly 'washed down' to classroom level, where students of English were regularly engaged in meaningful talk activities of one sort or another.

#### ***Peer Culture***

Teachers of teenagers will need no introduction to the notion of peer pressure and its influence, for better or worse, on learners' classroom performance and on levels of involvement. If the consensus in a particular group is that it's 'cool' to talk, the teacher will have little difficulty in getting a lively discussion off the ground. This was the prevalent class culture in many of the secondary schools I have visited in Romania, for example, and I believe it is one of the reasons for the high standards of proficiency in English achieved by many Romanian state school students. If, however, the accepted culture is to be 'strong and silent', the teacher will have a tough time trying to squeeze contributions out of adolescents whose image with their peers is more important to them than the teacher's view of them. This kind of culture is frequently all too evident in British secondary schools, and along with our traditional disdain for foreign languages, is almost certainly a reason for the massive underachievement by British school pupils in foreign languages.

#### ***Home Culture***

Many kids in our modern 'push-button' age are deprived of opportunities for talk in the family circle. Mealtimes are often rushed to enable kids or parents to catch the latest episode of a soap opera or a reality TV show, and significant chunks of free time are spent in front of a screen of one sort or another. Family discussions, along with other oral traditions like storytelling, bedtime stories and 'parlour' games, seem to be dying out, though magazines and Sunday supplements exhort their middle-class parent-readers to regard the TV, the Internet and computer games as stimuli for talk. By contrast, some primary school teachers complain that children in reception classes arrive with little or no idea of how to engage in talk or other social activity, and school may have to compensate for this.

### Creating opportunities for talk

Against the background I have outlined up to this point, I believe that we as language teachers need to look at our practices and to find ways of promoting talk almost as an educational imperative in our classrooms. If we, in the 'front line' of the business of communication, don't do it, who will? In general terms, we need to:

- ☞ show that we value talk and that we listen to *what* our students have to say as well as how they say it
- ☞ promote a 'listening culture' in our classrooms
- ☞ ask more challenging questions to engage higher order thinking skills and be ready to accept unexpected answers
- ☞ allow silences and time for thought
- ☞ challenge and change stultifying routines such as the three-stage classroom exchange
- ☞ plan and build in meaningful tasks to encourage productive talk
- ☞ encourage students to ask questions, initiate talk and to seek for meanings
- ☞ involve students in decision-making
- ☞ help learners to 'find a voice' in English

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