WE TALK TOO MUCH:

QUANTITATIVE AND QUALITATIVE ASPECTS OF TEACHER TALK

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BY

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ABSTRACT

This paper is one teacher's exploration of teacher talking time. As a language teacher the author understands that teacher talk is an essential tool of the trade and critical to the language slearning process. However, she recognized that talking too much could be a problem. This paper describes the journey the author took to understand how and when to talk in the classroom. The author provides reasons

and examples of why teacher silence can sometimes be more effective than talking. Throughout the paper, she focuses on the power of silence in the classroom when the teacher values it and when she uses it effectively. The author examines key areas of teacher responsibility: comprehensible input, clear and simple instructions, effective questions, observation and feedback. Within each area, the author raises issues around talk vs. silence, and she presents guidelines for quality instructional language. In another section self-assessment tools are discussed for this journey of self-awareness. The content of this paper has implications for all in the teaching profession.

ERIC Descriptions: Second Language Instruction, Classroom Techniques, Teacher Characteristics, Teacher Behavior, Nonverbal Communication, Language Teachers

CONTENTS

Chapter

> "Talking is urgent and calls forth an urge to get it all out. A good indication of an expert teacher is how this urge is controlled". Anonymous

CHAPTER 1

TEACHER TALK AND A PHILOSOPHY OF SILENCE

HOW I BECAME INVOLVED WITH THIS TOPIC

Whose voice do I hear in class? Can I hear the students? Am I listening to them? Is there time for all of us to think? It is disappointing to discover that too often it is my voice that stands out. I talk way too much in the classroom. Teacher Talking Time (TTT) seems to take precedence over listening to students working with the language. The implication of my excessive teacher talk carries beyond teaching for what hinders my effectiveness as a teacher has hindered my personal communication.

We live in a noisy world and I am a noisy person. I like to talk more than I like to listen. I have missed a lot of good communication and connections by talking over, under and between another's thoughts. I speak quickly and respond even faster. I have been great at silence when alone, but fear it when I am with others. Over the last several months I have begun to examine my behavior and ask what is effective and what is ineffective in my ways of communicating. It is

not so strange to find that what is an ineffective way of speaking with colleagues, family and friends is also ineffective with my students.

This paper then is about my journey as a learner to understand how and when to talk as a teacher and where and how silence could be more effective than talking. This journey will help determine the degree to which I have a teacher dominated or learner-centered classroom. I wish to gain more understanding of when and why there is effective interaction in my classroom or where and why effective communication remains a goal not met. I am not alone in this disparity between good teaching principles and actual practice. The literature in our field continues to describe a failure to achieve genuine communication in our second language classrooms. Knowing that many teachers unconsciously fill their classes with excessive talk, I propose that this paper might also be of assistance to them.

I approach this paper as an ESL teacher to adult learners. I have heard from some teachers that that the ideas expressed here might not be valuable to the same degree in their classrooms, e.g. that silence does not work as well with children. However, I believe that the key concepts we will be exploring do hold for all age and proficiency levels. In fact, I believe that much of what I explore in this paper

pertains not only to the language classroom but also to all teaching-learning environments. Having said that, even a novice teacher like myself recognizes there is not one method or one technique that is going to answer all needs. Teaching is an art not a science, and it must be explored as such. I also understand that teachers must find out what works for them. They must be true to their own selves.

> …understanding my identity is the first and crucial step in finding new ways to teach: nothing I do differently as a teacher will make any difference to anyone if it is not rooted in my nature….
> The point is not to "get fixed" but to gain deeper understanding of the paradox of gifts and limits, the paradox of our mixed selves, so that we can teach, and live, more gracefully within the whole of our nature. [Palmer 1998: 71- 72]

THE PHILOSOPHY

As I mentioned earlier, I have no fear of silence when I am alone. Over the years I have tried to use silence to enhance my spiritual life. As scripture says, " Be still and know that I am God." [Ps.46: 10] When I asked Marilyn, a teaching colleague, for her thoughts on silence she sent me a quote from her raja yoga leader:

> Silence is the best language for communication. It helps us understand and realize the eternal truths about the self, God, and the world. Silence is not the absence of thought, but it is a state in which the mind

> is engaged …and nurtured. The power of silence develops all mental and spiritual powers that are needed to tackle various situations successfully.
>
> Dadi Hirdaya Mobini

Spirituality is defined by some as WAKING UP. It is a matter of paying attention, and it requires that we be present where we are. It means slowing down, quieting down, and paying attention to one thing at a time. It has become a personal quest to learn to be an aware, focused, active listener in my personal life knowing that this effort will also have a positive effect on my teaching.

Good teaching has one goal: to help students learn. We all want to teach well, and we know that what we say can have a huge impact on our learners. What principles guide our classroom practice? The philosophy at the School for International Training (SIT) is rooted in Caleb Gattegno's guiding principles that teaching must be subordinate to learning, and silence gives us space to work on ourselves. When I am not engaged in talking, I have the space to focus, to use my mind, eyes, and ears to observe the learning going on and to make informed teaching decisions. When students are offered times of silence they are given space to work on their learning. They have time to focus on the course content, to process in the new language and to prepare their responses. The teaching web site at Ball State University worded it

this way: “Less teaching produces more learning…applying the less-is-more approach to the classroom requires changing teacher performance. It takes practice and self awareness to develop judicious uses of silence.” If I use silence as a technique what does it get me? Not much I think. It is What I do with silence and the Why I use silence that determines its value in my life and in my classroom.

Living in silence at home has not transformed me. It is when I use it with the purpose of thinking through a problem, reflecting on my next action, focusing myself, and becoming aware of my surroundings that it has been of benefit. It would seem then that the spirituality and the art of teaching is being aware and alive to my students. When I do this I can watch their progress and see their needs. It is taking the focus away from my needs and focuses my attention outward to my students. Therefore, each time I bring silence into the classroom I must be aware of the Why am I being silent and understand HOW silence educates along with words.

> Psychologists say that a typical group can abide about 15 seconds of silence before someone feels the need to break the tension by speaking. It is our

> old friend fear at work interpreting the silence as something gone wrong, certain that worthwhile things will not happen if we are not making noise. But in authentic education, silence is treated, as a trustworthy matrix for the inner work students must do, a medium for learning of the deepest sort.
>
> [Palmer 1998:77]

With this educational philosophy in mind, I strive to make a friend of silence; to find the inner stillness in my nature; the quiet that helps me focus. This silence can provide a work space for teacher and students alike. This space can help reduce my fears and allow me to enter into a relaxed state where I can think and create. So often, I try to carry too much: I feel responsible for everything in the classroom. A judicious use of silence can help a teacher step back some, leaving students with both the opportunity and the responsibility for their own learning.

Silence is one part of the equation. I also need to concentrate on the QUALITY of my teacher talk. What makes teacher talk an aid to learning? That is the other part of the equation. In the language classroom a teacher's input is both the medium and the message. We know that comprehensible input is essential to our students' learning. Providing language modeling without monopolizing classroom talk is the tricky part. How much is too much? What language enlightens and

what words muddy the waters of instruction must be continuously monitored both when I prepare lessons and when I am with students.

It is the position of this paper that my use of silence and the judicious choice of and timing of spoken teacher input are key skills needed in my classroom to support a learner-centered environment.

Spoken teacher input or teacher talk is instructional language. The things I must do every day include: giving students instructions on how to do the task; helping students express their thoughts in the new language, which includes questioning and probing them for answers; stimulating various levels of classroom conversation; evaluating through observation, listening and feedback on both content and form. Chapters in this paper will look at each of these teacher directed activities to see how I might simplify and clarify my language and use even more silent ways to activate these goals.

My overall long-term goal is to “clear the deck” of superfluous teacher talk. The specific objectives of this paper are threefold. First, to demonstrate the efficacy of silence so that I will develop a personal style which honors silence and promotes active listening. Second, to deepen my awareness of the kinds of teacher talk that can obstruct learning. By raising my awareness of the ritualized behaviors and

teacher idiosyncrasies that block genuine classroom interaction in my classes I hope to be able to change this behavior. Third, I want to look at ways of noticing my words in order to use teacher talk to support learner goals.

Only when you drink from the river of silence shall you indeed sing.
Kahil Gibran

CHAPTER 2

BEING A SILENT PARTNER

The silent language teacher. It sounds like such a paradox. I know comprehensible output is critical for second language learning. As a relatively new teacher I thought it my responsibility to explain everything, to be hands on in all things, to be active at all times. Being the verbal person that I am, I equated activity with talking! Now I am coming to realize that teacher-talk is most effective when it is reserved for content material while other classroom functions can often be facilitated through non-verbal methods and techniques.

As I worked on this paper I asked quite a few teachers about their teacher-talk. Ninety five percent of them agreed we talk too much in our classrooms. But very few of them could tell me when and how they could better utilize their Teacher Talking Time to enhance student learning of the language.

This chapter, then, focuses on the power of silence in the classroom, viewing it positively, and using it effectively. It calls attention to places where it is beneficial for a teacher to remain quiet, and where it is helpful to provide students with quiet time. This chapter also looks at some of the tools that allow us to teach with non-verbal language.

I must value silence for myself before I can use it as a teaching tool. Only then can I trust that it will benefit the student-teacher relationship. From meditative practice I understand the calming influence and focusing ability that silence provides. Yet often when I experience periods of classroom silence my calm and focus evaporate into nervous chatter. I am certainly not alone in this. Many teachers are afraid of silence. We ask ourselves: are the students bored, or confused, or not happy with us or with the activity? All kinds of negative thoughts can upset the balance needed in our classrooms. These negative thoughts and feelings are draining the power from us. Taking a few moments of silence before class to focus my energy and center myself can be a first step in developing my own comfort with silence and successfully transferring its benefits to the classroom.

The first time I was conscious of the richness in classroom silence was when I had the opportunity to watch Silent Way techniques being demonstrated by Shakti Gattegno. Shakti did not set up roadblocks by unnecessarily talking, directing, lecturing or being the sole knowledge source. She works with the principle that we don't do for students what they can do for themselves. The teacher's effort is to help students to focus on what is at hand and so there is no idle chatter to distract the learning. The teacher uses silence so that students can discover and practice and the teacher can listen and observe how students are progressing and what kind of help is still needed.

PAUSE TIME/THINK TIME/HALT TIME

What are the specific times when teacher silence or classroom silence can be most effective? Much research has been done on the subject, starting with Mary Budd Rowe's work on wait time, a period of silence after a teacher initiates a question, and again after a student responds to that question. Wait Time is gone into at some depth in Chapter 5 Good Teachers Ask Good Questions. In this chapter, the concentration will be on other significant classroom moments when a teacher pause can be of benefit. Robert Stahl likes the term think time

to refer to several different places where silent periods can be used in support of student learning. One that is of particular value for my teaching practice is referred to as Teacher Pause Time.

> Teacher pause time, which occurs at a variety of places during a class period, is characterized by a 3 or more second period of uninterrupted silence *that teachers deliberately take to consider what just took place, what the present situation is and what their next statements or behaviors could and should be.*(emphasis mine) One example of when the 3 seconds or longer of reflective thought would be beneficial for the teacher and eventually the students- is after a student has asked a question that requires more than an immediate, short recall answer. Other examples are when students have asked for further clarification, clearer explanations or better examples than those already provided.[Stahl 1994:4]

This pause time is a teacher giving herself the space to think in order to provide the student with a quality response. In the past, I would have responded immediately, without any pause, thinking it my obligation to have a ready answer, or just because my initial reaction is to speak.

Sarah, a teacher colleague, and I were discussing how easily we can lose our focus in class. Sarah said “When I lose my attention during teaching I used to freak out, now I pause, look my students in the eyes and realize they may need time to process too. It keeps me calm, and it doesn’t bore them or make them lose their attention like I

used to think it did. It actually does the opposite." Words of wisdom from Robert Stahl and from Sarah. How long it will take for pause time to become part of my classroom routine is of some concern to me, but when I need to refocus and bring my attention back to the class I will try to remember to take a deep breath and bite my tongue so I don't talk then and there!

Stahl talks about three plus seconds pause time within teacher presentations. This has also been referred to as Halting Time. It is the practice of pausing throughout a presentation to give learners time to process what they have just heard. It is giving pause time between chunks of information rather than assuming students can absorb a large chunk of input without reflective time. No questions or responses are expected of the students: it is their thinking time. [Stahl 1994, Moore 2001] It is also gives the teacher time to look around and observe whether students seem to be following the presentation. Body language will tell a great deal. Are the learners' faces alert, concentrated? Do their eyes reflect understanding? Does their posture indicate they are ready for the next step or chunk of information?

STUDENT SPACE/TEACHER SILENCE

It seems to be standard teaching practice to call for a silent classroom when learners are completing solo tasks that call for their undivided attention. It could be a reading, writing or grammar exercise. Teacher Trainers seem to agree that, whether it is a short period of a minute or a more lengthy time, student concentration will benefit if the teacher does not interrupt or allow others to break the silence. [Stahl 1994, Lewis and Hill 1992] While this might seem standard operating procedure for the experienced teacher, as a neophyte in the field I have needed explicit guidance in this direction. Prior to the experience of preparing this paper my students would work in silent concentration just until I arrived beside them. Then I engage them in conversation asking if they need any help or looking at their paper and pointing out if they seemed to be going in the wrong direction. There goes their concentration. Leaving students to work it out for themselves does take a great deal of discipline on my part.

As I continue to grow in recognizing the benefits of silence I hope my behavior will gradually change and my students will be the beneficiaries of this change. I need to carry-over this discipline of not talking into other student activities, for example when students are

preparing for group discussion or a role-play. My stepping back, remaining silent but observing, will give them time to prepare the language they need and to determine how they will go about the activity. My presence and attention will signal accessibility should they have questions or need for further support.

AT THE BEGINNING AND THE END

I would now like to take a look at using silence both at the start and at the end of class. It would seem these times offer multiple opportunities to enhance learning through use of brief periods of silence.

Consider a “silent start” to some classes. Aside from greeting students and making them feel comfortable, the teacher starts the day non-verbally either through instructions on the board or with materials on students’ desks. Once the habit of following up with these directions is formed, students can enter the room, and get started on their own all without a teacher’s voice directing the activity. The times I have tried beginning classes with this ‘silent teacher’ approach have met with limited success. The task on the desk has had more success than a task that uses blackboard directions, because I still find

students wait for the teacher to lead. But I do plan to continue these experiments as I learn ways that put students more in charge of their own learning.

The end of class is a good time for students to think through the day's lesson before they ask further questions, make comments. or provide feedback to the teacher. A few moments of reflective time can be offered before final homework or other instructions are presented. So often, my classes end in a rush of activity, a crunch of verbiage-trying to get it all said. As I grow in honoring silence and the value it offers I will do better planning to allow for this pause shortly before class ends so as to provide a reflective moment for all of us.

SILENCE AS A FOCUSING TOOL

I have been talking about the times we use teacher silence to clear the way for students to talk and to think. There are also times we use silence to focus students' attention. Several colleagues at the School for International Training (SIT) who work with teenagers, noted that they use silence "When I want them to notice me", and, "I'll deliberately extend the silence even after I have everyone's attention." It is the shutting down of classroom chatter with the intention of focusing everyone's attention. This technique really

works! Concert performers use it all the time to focus the audience before they start playing. It makes you want to hear what will be played. An article in HLT [Humanistic Language Teaching] Magazine also confirms this time-honored approach:

> To achieve focusing you may be inclined to use your voice. It is more recommendable to use visual cues, leaving your voice for subject content… The sequence can be summarized as follows:
> - Stand up in front, in balance
> - Greet in a tone higher than the classroom
> - noise, then
> - Stand still
> - Remain silent
> - Begin the class in a whisper

> You say little because you want silence; you keep still because you want stillness. You then begin to use your voice for content, but in a whisper to begin with to make sure students have to strain to hear you. [Galan and Maguire 2002:3]

We have talked about getting the attention of our students through a teacher's silent stance in the front of the room. SIT training has taught me that there are other visual cues that can focus students' attention just as effectively. Flipping the light switch or using a chime have both worked in my classroom. My students learn quickly that it is time to bring their attention back to the whole class. It took the purchase of several chimes before I found a pleasing sound that resonates well, calms us and brings silence to the room. This chime

has become my favorite focusing tool, both in my own meditation and in class.

OUR BODY LANGUAGE

We use our bodies to convey messages. Some researchers estimate that up to eighty percent of our total communication is non-verbal. We communicate our support, feelings and needs by how we stand, look, move, make eye contact, etc. [Moore 2001:159] Our bodies, then, can be one of our most powerful teaching tools. In my short teaching career, mostly with beginning language learners, I have used lots of slapstick, exaggerated movements and pantomime to convey meaning. More recently, I have started to appreciate and further explore the multiple uses of eye contact and hand gestures.

Eye contact is the main channel of non-verbal communication available to us. Lewis and Hill said:

> … normal human contact frequently depends on, and is reinforced by, eye contact. If…your eyes are constantly moving over the class, everyone feels involved. Your eyes help your students' concentration! Your eyes can be used instead of your hands to indicate who should answer a question, whether *something is right or wrong, to encourage, etc. If you can use your eyes effectively, you will find it easier to avoid using unnecessary language. (emphasis mine*) It is particularly important to remember that the easiest way

> to check whether your students understand what you have said, or what they have read or heard, is for your eyes to look at theirs. Any incomprehension or confusion will show in their eyes long before they tell you that there is a problem. [Lewis & Hill 1992:11]

SIT has taught us that for a teacher to establish comfortable eye contact with each student as well as between students a seating arrangement that most closely approximates a circle is necessary. A circle enables a teacher to make a quick check of each student without engaging in unnecessary chatter. Additionally, within a circle where visual contact is possible with all members, intimacy can be established, group connections encouraged and comprehension made easier: again, without excessive teacher talk. But a circle is not the only viable option for a classroom. Some students may have a hard time seeing board work in this formation, so I often move chairs into the shape of a horseshoe. Additionally, students seated around a long table can also receive the benefit of eye contact with all class members.

Gestures

I have learned that many hand gestures can help reduce excessive teacher talk while focusing learners' attention. Gestures can convey meaning and serve as a memory tool. Even a new teacher can

quickly learn to eliminate words and substitute simple gestures for present, past and future tense. A gesture can indicate to a student you want more information or you want them to expand on a thought. A hand behind our ear can convey to a person to speak up, and a nod of the head might say I do or don't understand your point. Putting two fingers together can say you want a contraction. A movement of your hand or arm might serve a pronunciation and intonation purpose. You need to teach and practice these gestures until students learn them. The earlier a teacher establishes a set of gestures that can be routinely 'read' by students, the less that teacher will need to speak. Functional matters are dealt with economically and students stay focused on the task at hand.

Gestures for Self Correction

Hand gestures can offer students an opportunity to self-correct. It has been an amazing experience to watch students make their own correction with the simple aid of a teacher's fingers-- each finger representing a word in the sentence. Once I have guided students to focus on my hand and repeat their sentence, I can show the trouble spot, whether it is a missing word or an incorrect one, and they can work on making their own corrections. While the student is self-

correcting, usually the other students are also focused on my fingers and working the problem through. All of this occurs without a teacher needing to utter a word.

As SIT Instructors have demonstrated for me gestures can provide a powerful learning moment. Now my efforts must focus on developing facility with the technique and finding more ways to use gestures that efficiently convey meaning.

OTHER TEACHING TOOLS

Shakti Gattegno and my graduate advisor provided me with a wonderful teaching tool when they showed me the pointer. When a pointer is used learners focus on the work at hand and the teacher can move further into the background. A pointer extends the arm, takes the teacher out of the picture and focuses students' eyes and attention on the learning. I have found this especially effective when the learners are out of their seats and clustered around the board, chart or other point of attention. The pointer supports self-correction. The teacher does not need to speak: instead, she indicates with the pointer where an error is to be found and worked on. The other learners are always ready to assist.

Handing the pointer over to students can further remove a teacher from students' focus and center it on the task. On many a teaching occasion I brought students up to the board, modeled the work to be done, then handed the pointer over to a student, and I left the room. Returning in a few minutes, I found most of the students still focused on the learning at hand.

Other visual aids that can minimize teacher talk and enhance student talk include the blackboard, card games, charts, and graphics. The value of visuals cannot be emphasized enough.

Realia helps students negotiate the meaning of words. For example, if I say 'Hat' and point to what is on top of my head students more quickly grasp the meaning. If it is a particularly outrageous hat, it can stimulate conversation with minimal teacher prompting. This brings humor, drama or surprise into class, and stirs students to respond.

A FAVORITE SILENT TECHNIQUE

There is another "silent" technique that has proven successful in the adult classroom. It does not fit into the other categories. It is the teacher's physical absence from the classroom for a brief period. After a task has been set-up, and pair/group work has begun, the teacher

leaves the room for a short time. Stevick talks about his reasons for doing this and the effect he observed:

> My purpose was to dramatize to the learners what in fact was true: that as a group they were as infallible as I was on the *clearly limited matters* that I had left them to practice among themselves. I also intended it as a way of leading them to develop a feeling of responsibility for careful listening and for mutual support. I cannot remember it ever failing. In fact, it was a consistent crowd-pleaser. [Stevick 1980:56]

I started doing this some mornings out of a necessity. I had to make a quick trip next door to check on students who were without a teacher. I usually left my students in pairs or with group work going on such as a grammar card game or sentence corrections at the board. I can only echo Stevick as to the excitement my adult ESL learners have expressed at being in charge of their own learning and their pride in the knowledge they demonstrate upon my return to the classroom.

All of the silence and tools mentioned in this chapter have been for the same purpose. The goal is to have teachers speak only when it will be most effective, thus making us silent partners in our students' efforts to learn the new language.

Education is not the filling of a pail, but the lighting of a fire.
William Butler Yeats

CHAPTER 3

NOTICING MY WORDS

In the previous chapter I explored the power of silence in our teaching practice and ways to use silence effectively. In this chapter I examine the quality and quantity aspects of teacher talk; the paradox that less is more. The chapter is in two parts.

Part one looks at what types of teacher talk seem to assist student efforts and what types seems to hinder their learning. I will look at:

Initiates-Responds-Follow up (IRF) exchanges

- Echoing (sometimes known as the understanding response)
- Elaboration
- Confirmation and Clarification checks
- Commentating
- Filling-in-the-gaps or smoothing out discourse
- Teacher interruptions

Part two explores ways to raise awareness of our own habits and make behavioral changes in support of better teaching and learning. I look at self-monitoring, peer observation, video taping and the reflective practice.

I must say that while I am sure my teacher talk has all of the aspects I am about to discuss the labels for these behaviors are new to me as is the judgment of their worth in the classroom. As a novice teacher-learner I am exploring at the most basic level of inquiry. Ideas can be presented and discussed, but the value of these learnings might take many more years of teaching experience to have their full impact.

PART I: TYPES OF TEACHER TALK

I-R-F EXCHANGES

Let's start by taking a look at a very common practice in our language classrooms – the I-R-F (teacher Initiates – student Responds- teacher Follows up/gives feedback) exchange between teacher and student. I have chosen to begin here because the literature I explored had strongly divergent views on the benefits of I-R-F exchanges and the various teaching language used within such exchanges. Reviewing a transcript from one of these research articles

will help me to illustrate, and then expand on these opposing views of what constitutes effective teacher talk.

I have taken a portion of a transcript from “Supportive teacher talk: the importance of the F- move” by Richard Cullen. As the title indicates, Cullen uses his transcript as a positive example of teacher talk that supports student learning in the second language classroom. He freely acknowledges that the I-R-F exchange structure is associated with a heavily teacher-centered classroom methodology and is a target of criticism in the communicative language teaching movement. [Cullen 2002: 118] We know that in I-R-F exchanges the teacher controls turn talking and the formulation of meaning. Nevertheless, Cullen believes the technique continues to be used because teachers see it as a powerful technique for transmitting and constructing knowledge. [Ibid., 118]

Let us review the transcript, then compare and contrast opinions with most emphasis on the F-move (teacher follow up/feedback).

TRANSCRIPT

T	Where was the picture taken? Yes, please?	**I**
S1	In the aeroplane.	**R**
T	**In the aeroplane. Good, yes. In the aeroplane.**	**F**
……		
T	Now the second question. What do we call this man in the white shirt?	

	Yes please?	**I**
S2	The…	**R**
T	Just one word is enough.	**R/I**
S2	Pilot.	**R**
T	**Pilot. Yes. The Pilot.**	**F**

…….

T	Now what is this other man holding? Yes, please?	**I**
S3	A pistol.	**F**
T	**A pistol. Right**	**F**

……

T	Now what kind of a man is he? What do we call such Men who have pistols and point them at pilots? Yes, Please?	
	Indicates S4.	**I**
S4	We call a robber.	**R**
T	**A robber? Yes. A thief you mean? Yes, if this was happening on the ground, it could be a thief, but this man's in a plane.**	
	Pause	**F**

……

T	Anyhow let us move on. Maybe we will know the name of this man who is holding the pistol later. Can you tell me-- what is he telling the pilot? Suppose you are there, listening. What is he telling the pilot?	**I**
	Yes?	
S4	He is telling him 'Hands Up!'	
T	**Hands up!**	**R**

…….

T	Anything else? Yes?	**I**
S6	He is telling him now to be under his control.	**R**
T	**'Now you are under my command. You have to do whatever I want you to do.'**	**F**

…….

T	Anything else…? Now, if he shot the pilot, what do you think would happen to the plane, and all the passengers that are inside the plane? Now some people here-- it's very quiet here. What do you think would happen to the plane? Yes please?	**I**
S7	The plane would fall down.	**R**

T **The plane would fall down. It would crash, and**
All the passengers unfortunately would die. Maybe
Some would survive, but most likely they would die.
[Cullen 2002: 120-122]

There are three things I want to take notice of in this transcript: teacher repetition of student answers (echoing); the teacher speaks twice to every one student response, and it is solely teacher to student interaction to the exclusion of student to student exchanges.

Echoing

Cullen likes the idea of teachers echoing a student's words. He explains his support in this way:

> To begin with, it is used as a time-honoured way of acknowledging a student's response, and confirming it is acceptable…and in the process ensuring that all the students heard it….The repetition acts as a way of contrasting the dispreferred (the plane would fall down) with the preferred (it would crash) thus drawing the student's attention more directly to it.
> [Ibid.125].

Why Cullen believes student responses must be acknowledged is a view open to debate. The practice of acknowledging students by repeating their words is certainly not representative of normal conversation. But some teaching philosophies (CLL- Community Language Learning) would support Cullen's positive view and see

echoing as an understanding response. However, with the I-R-F example provided in this chapter I see echoing simply as a rather annoying, nonproductive practice. Would not repetition have more of a learning impact if the students were asked to repeat the words? Secondly, Cullen and Walsh [2001:19] both speak of echoing as a means of ensuring that all students hear the words (amplification), but unless the word has been pronounced incorrectly, again, would it not have more value if the students rather than the teacher repeated the word? The novice is questioning the experts. Cullen and Walsh propose another reason for using echoing and that is for error correction. I can see some worth in this position.

Whether a teacher supports the echo function for purposes of amplification, error correction or clarification Walsh stresses the need for us to be conscious when using it and know why we are doing it. Otherwise, it can become just a bad habit with no real function. [Ibid.]

The I-R-F- Excludes Student to Student Exchange.

Both the I-R-F exchange and the echoing within it seem to have a negative effect in keeping other students from joining in and expanding the communication to include student to student

interaction. I think these particular techniques fail to recognize that even at beginning levels second language learners can and often do support each other linguistically. It has been my experience that even in a first level class, if I am silent, students will step in with meaning, vocabulary, error correction and elaboration on the topic.

The I-R-F and Teacher Elaboration

Looking at the transcript from another perspective, I see that as the I-R-F exchange continues both the teacher's initial and follow up comments become more lengthy while student response remain minimal. In other words, there is more teacher talk than student talk, and this seems to me a contradiction of our pedagogic goals. But Cullen believes that teacher elaboration helps ensure understanding:

> In addition, by adding to and extending the students' original responses, the teacher elaborations provide a linguistically richer source of input for the class, while, at an affective level, they serve to show that she listens to what the students have to say with interest. [Cullen 2002: 124]

While Cullen's points might have validity in some situations, in this transcript example, the teacher's comments and embellishments seem to me to be excessive, even unnecessary, leaving no room for students to embellish and expand their own idea if given space to do

so. Also, far from showing that the teacher is really listening, it feels as if the teacher has monopolized the conversational content. When working on a form, whether grammatical structure or pronunciation, I think it helpful to elaborate and repeat, but again, sparingly.

When working with content in any discourse, I think our teacher efforts might be better spent helping our learners to comment and elaborate on the topic. The structure of I-R-F exchanges does not allow for this. What does help students build up the ability to contribute conversationally is the teacher's initial work to create schema and help students collect the needed vocabulary. Additionally it is the job of second language teachers to provide students with linguistic support (scaffolding) throughout the conversation.

> To prevent communication breakdown, it is the role of the teacher to intervene and feed in the missing language. Timing and sensitivity to learner needs are of utmost importance and many teachers intervene too often and too early. [Walsh 2002,13]

Walsh suggests supporting learners by modeling the language needed or providing alternate phrasing. In each of these cases the teacher provides the support only after the student has completed their thoughts as best they can. [ibid., 12] Is this a place for clarification and confirmation checks? I believe Clarification checks are an

important element in the negotiation of meaning, and is essential not only when the checks are teacher generated, but especially when second language learners are helped to develop their own ability to ask clarifying questions and reformulate their language.

> …you pose a question, usually providing more than one possible interpretation and ask for feedback. The goal of perception checking is to verify the accuracy of your interpretation, not to be right.
>
> [Larrivee 1999: 133]

For example, the teacher might ask "Did you mean…is that what you said?"When a teacher has listened carefully but still does not understand what a student means there is a need for clarification. The teacher asks for help in clarifying what the student has said. For example: "Can we stop here for a moment? I don't understand what you mean. Can you tell me more?" Perception checking and clarification are perhaps the most frequent responses a second language teacher can use to help students. In summary, I believe, the I-R-F pattern, particularly the F-move, while having a place in the classroom, is not a form to be used regularly in the communicative classroom. It can lead to habits of excessive teacher talk while minimizing learner involvement. [Thornbury 1996, Walsh 2001]

NON-STOP COMMENTATING

Moving beyond the transcript, and I-R-F's, there is other teacher language to notice as I continue the quest for economical and quality teacher talk. One is a teacher habit of non-stop commentating. Here is an example provided by Lewis and Hill.

> Good morning everybody. Please sit down. Now this morning we're going to look at sentences like…. I'll put that on the board…. Oh dear, someone hasn't cleaned the board…. Can anybody see the duster?….Ah, there it is…. just a moment now. I'll just clean the board and then I'll put the example on the board for you (cleans the board)…. Now, where was I? Ah, yes, now I'll just put the example on the board for you. Well, now we're going to read the text. I'll read it first and then I want you to read it after me and then there are some questions after the text and when we've read it I'm going to ask you the questions and you're going to answer them.

In such cases, students never know whether what you are saying is important or not. Any commentary given should be of help to the students, and not used by the teacher either to reassure herself or simply to fill up silence. [Lewis & Hill 1992: 44] Many teachers will recognize themselves here. We have all fallen into this trap. The question to ask ourselves is whether our commentating occurs infrequently or has become ritualistic behavior on our part. We can

get help answering the question through a periodic use of videotaping or audiotaping our class. These awareness resources are discussed later in the chapter.

FILLING IN THE GAPS/SMOOTHING OVER

There are other teacher behaviors that do not support students' development of oral fluency. They include filling in the gaps and smoothing over discourse. I have begun to see these as among my capital sins. When I fear silence, feel a gap in the conversation, I will fill in those gaps with my own voice or finish the sentence of a floundering student. When I don't understand what a student is saying, I often turn to smoothing out the discourse rather than asking clarification questions. I often fail to notice that my language use is at cross-purposes with learner centered goals. When I try to help learners by providing the language and conversational content they themselves could grasp with a little linguistic support from me or other students then I am controlling rather than assisting learning.

TEACHER INTERRUPTIONS

There is also the issue of teacher interruptions – behavior that can be quite disruptive to learner output. The interruption can be well intentioned: to supply information, clarify an instruction, provide some words you think the student needs, or expand on a grammar, pronunciation, or content point you think the whole class would benefit from. Especially when we observe students in group work heading into error, we can get this urge to interrupt and fix it right then and there. These are some good reasons for teachers to offer support, but ill timing can negate the teacher's input.

I must learn to resist this temptation to interrupt, thereby allowing the student to finish a thought or a group to finish an activity. It is easy enough to reserve the point I want to make by jotting it down and sharing it at a more appropriate time.

PART TWO: SELF ASSESSMENT

In part one of this chapter we looked at many speech habits that can cause problems in the classroom. Part two tries to answer the question how do I fix the weak links in my teacher-talk. To do this involves Observation, Reflection, Understanding, and Change. Continuous use of this experiential/reflective cycle is required. First I

must be able to observe my own teaching behavior objectives, clearly. Then through reflection, I can wake up to, that is become aware of, aspects of my teacher talk that do not support my pedagogic goals. With this understanding I can then choose discipline or change my instructional language. How can I see the reality of my teacher talk, not an imagined view? There are three resources available: self-monitoring, finding out through the eyes of others, and through the eyes of the camera.

THE TEACHER AS SELF-OBSERVER

The terms 1) self-monitoring, 2) teacher as self-observer and 3) reflection-in-practice are all in the literature on Observation, and they seem to have a similar meaning. So, I will use the language interchangeably. One of the ways to raise awareness is to reflect-in-practice, that is, to observe my teaching behavior while I am in the classroom. Teachers are continually observing students. Why not take some brief time in the lesson to observe our own teacher talk. Each day, or once a week, I can include in my lesson plan the objective to monitor one or two aspects of my teaching language. One week I might check for habits of being repetitive or filling in the gaps. Another week an objective might be to look at my use of silence. In

this first step the effort is to notice, not change behavior. I need to keep in mind that the teacher as self-observer complements but does not replace other forms of assessment.

PEER OBSERVATION

Observing ourselves through another's eyes in the most time-honored way to see the reality of our behavior. Asking a peer (or even our supervisor) to assist in the process can provide rich and rewarding insights. While these insights are invaluable, the process can also be, and very often is, uncomfortable and embarrassing.

> Many teachers…fear being revealed in front of a colleague as the imposter that they feel, deep in their bones, they really are. As we know from working with students, the fear of looking foolish in public is one of the strongest causes of resistance to learning". [Brookfield 1995: 82].

I cringe at the thought of having a colleague observe me. Yet I know I need support, and that means getting over the embarrassment. When I give up that absurd notion, the myth of perfection, and recognize that all of us have some bad classroom habits we would like changed, then I can more easily accept another's observation of my limits as well as my potential.

STUDENT INPUT

Observing my student's reactions to my teacher talk can also provide considerable insight. If I interrupt them and I observe annoyance, impatience or disappointment in their eyes I have been given insight into my behavior. If I complete a sentence for a student and see frustration in their eyes, I gain another insight. Student response to a teacher's behavior offers a mountain of information if one chooses to observe it.

VIDEOTAPING

There are several benefits in using videotape to observe behavior. Some of the embarrassment we feel when colleagues are observing can be relieved by using video. With a tripod and a good camera angle, a video can allow us to have our discomfort alone! Contrary to visitors/observers who can distract students, videotaping can be am unobtrusive tool for regular classroom use. My experience has been that within five minutes my students have become oblivious to the camera. With the eye of the camera observing us there can be no denying the truth.

> A video taped record allows us to make an accurate estimate of how much time is devoted to teacher talk and how much to student speech in our

> classes. It lets us see how much time we spend on giving information or directions and how much time we allow for students to analyze, reflect or practice. It also allows us to see how visual our teaching is.[Ibid., 80]

The camera captures it all. The things we do with our words and the things we convey with our second voice. The second voice is all the other parts of our message beyond our choice of words. It includes tone, volume, and speed of speech, body language and gestures. We need to check whether both voices are saying the same thing. [Arnold 2003:11] If they are not, which one is the one I mean to convey, and which one are the students listening to? Awareness of tonal quality is especially important for my teaching practice. I know a teacher's tone can indicate to students how much we respect their intelligence and their efforts. I have observed time and again how my tone can reflect impatience. This is damaging to students' confidence as well as the teacher-learner relationship.

Not all teachers have access to video equipment, and not all teachers want to set up videotaping on a regular basis. However, tape recorders are easily available in most language classrooms and they can be an unobtrusive means for collecting data.

When teachers initially use audiotape or videotape in the observation process many hear and see only the bad and none of the good. Therefore, as previously mentioned, when planning for teacher talk objectives in lesson plans, it is best to focus on only one or two teaching behaviors at a time. How do I ask questions? How do I give instructions? How do I handle silence? How well do I listen to students? Keeping our focus on our planned objectives when we review the tapes could prevent an overload of bad feelings.

REFLECTION AND CHANGE

The input we receive from these many observation sources needs to be recorded and digested. The writing process triggers critical reflection. Cunningham points out that there are many levels of journalling. First, I describe my teaching: what did I observe. Next, what were the reasons for what I did; were there beliefs or teaching principles that guided the behavior or am I looking at poor habits, automatic behavior? The third level requires asking the questions: why do I persist in this behavior? Who benefits? Who loses? At the fourth and final level I ask myself, how might I do it differently? [Cunnungham 2001:40]

Reshaping our teaching practices does not happen easily. The experts say, and my experience confirms, that even with determined consciousness and daily reflection change is usually subtle, slow, and takes a great deal of patience.

Teaching is tougher than learning because teaching requires the teacher to let others learn. William Ayers

CHAPTER 4

INSTRUCTIONS: KEEP THEM CLEAR, KEEP THEM SIMPLE

I once considered developing a workshop called “Please form a horseshoe: Instructions to confuse students even before they start.” The thought came to me after perusing a student workbook of grammar practice recommended for my classroom. I do not recall its official title, but I remember it as “A Stump Your Students Workbook.” I also vividly recall my first video taped lesson and being horrified at the quality of my instructions.

On the other side, I have the example of my Pilates teacher. Colleen is a superstar in giving directions. Each class starts with the essential points in Pilates practice. While she explains movements within each exercise she demonstrates them herself. Finally, as the class starts an exercise Colleen takes us step-by-step through each move. Her instructional language is compact and clear. I would even

call it flawless. But then again, the workout rarely changes. That is a far cry from our classrooms where each lesson might have multiple activities and each day brings a new lesson. While I never developed the instruction workshop, with this paper I do have the opportunity to explore the issues.

Actually, there is no debate about instructions. All the educational researchers and teacher trainers I read are of the same persuasion: teachers need to keep instructions clear, simple and concise, and then they need to become quiet and allow learners to proceed with the activity.

Whether a novice or an experienced teacher, from time to time, or frequently, all of us slip up when we give instructions. In our language classrooms, clear instructions are particularly critical. Without them we leave our students with two simultaneous tasks: first, to figure out what to do, and then try and do it. [Nunan 2001: 96] This is particularly hard on the first and second language learners that I often work with. To make improvements in instructional language I must give it a great deal of attention when I am with students, but also when I am planning lessons.

LESSON PLANNING

Pre-instructional planning is essential. The first phase involves developing a variety of instructional activities that are not dependent on a teacher's continuous input and will answer the primary question language teachers must address which is how to maximize student interaction. It includes establishing instructional groups to maximize student talking time. Pair and group work are well established techniques for reducing teacher talk and keeping classes student centered and providing opportunities for more students to practice in the targeted language.

The second phase involves planning and practicing the language to be used in the classroom. It is a three-step formula

1. Plan exactly what information the students will need.
2. Plan what you want to say.
3. Practice saying it in the clearest, simplest language.

Plan in detail what you want to say. Writing the explicit instructions out in full seems the best way to fine tune our directions and assure that we will make the point in the least amount of time. I would imagine that as a teacher becomes more experienced with giving instructions, and starts recycling activities, there would not be

the same need to work in such detail. But for now, and the distant future, it seems wise for me to write it all down, and then follow the plan! Many times I have written out my instructions, only to fail to use these written instructions when I am in the class. Sometimes, in this situation, I am able to successfully get my point across. More often, I find myself fumbling words and repeating myself while my students stare in confusion.

Use Affirmative Language

During lesson planning it is wise to word the instructions positively. The brain seems to understand positive language better than negative instructions. The research indicates that negative sentences can only be comprehended by first putting them into the affirmative. [Arnold 2004: 4] an illustration of this is to watch what your mind does when I say “Don’t put adjectives after the noun.” My immediate thought was “put the adjective before the noun.” Another simple example is if you say “don’t forget”, one thinks “remember”.

Use The Imperative, Gestures, Visual Cues

A lot of unnecessary language can be avoided when we prepare instructions by using the imperative. As I noted in Chapter 2, combining gestures, especially those of our hands and eyes, with

verbal instructions provides more comprehension cues to learners, and reduces the need for continuing teacher talk. Additionally, by joining the imperative with gestures, we can provide clear instructions and maintain a good pace. [Lewis & Hill 1992: 44] One further combination that helps learners focus is the use of written instructions along with the verbal. We plan clear verbal directions as well as a short and simple outline to be put on the board. We reinforce students focus and understanding by offering both auditory and visual support.

IN THE CLASSROOM

I have laid out some rather simple and common sense guidelines for preparing instructions and explanations. Some are so obvious that I wonder why I don't implement them more successfully. I think the essential ingredient is being conscious of my words and how they are helping or hindering language learning. There needs to be awareness when planning, and awareness when I am in the classroom.

First Find out What They Know

Teachers can save a lot of talking time if we first assess what students know. One of my very early teaching efforts involved medical terminology. I wasted a great deal of time trying to explain

the meaning of each word in preparation for the activity. Finally, the restless students were able to stop me and say that they understood all the meanings. It was the pronunciation they needed help with! If I had checked with the students first, a great deal of teacher talk time and student frustration would have been avoided. Additionally, direct instruction on such language features as vocabulary, pronunciation, and grammar structures is not necessarily the most effective method of teaching. Modeling, eliciting, demonstrating and exemplifying might be the better modes of instruction. [Nunan 2000: 64]

Check for Understanding One Instruction at a Time

Nothing is more frustrating for students and teachers alike than to discover in the midst of an activity that students are confused with the directions and are unable to complete the work. Throughout the instruction phase it is essential that I do frequent testing for understanding. This does not involve additional teaching talking time made up of repetition and rephrasing. Rather, frequent checking means asking students for feedback on what they are going to do and how they are going to do it.

Avoid chain instructions! For example, “Open your books to page 62. Read the first paragraph. Answer the first three questions.

Then read the next paragraph… etc." Work one step at a time, pause, and then check for understanding.

Once we have introduced an activity and made sure all students understand what they are to do, it is the teacher's job to be quiet. The experts all stress the importance of non-intervention once a communicative activity starts. A teacher might need to prompt a student or group if they are not interacting or if confusion is evident, but overall it is for us to remain silent when students are doing the work. [Harmer 1991, Lewis & Hill 1992]

As a summary to this chapter I have prepared a short list of questions that serves as a check list when planning lessons and to focus me when I am in class.

- Are my instructions simple, explicit, and concise?
- Have I listed the steps to the activity?
- Have I practiced what I planned to say?
- Do I use students for confirmation or clarification check instead of using my voice?
- Do I give students think time to review instructions and ask questions?
- Do I use visual cues to enhance my verbal instructions?
- Do I provide information students would do better to look up for themselves or ask others in the room?

- Do I add or digress thus distracting students from the task at hand.

Research indicates that in most classrooms someone is talking most of the time. Generally, it is the teacher who talks and the students who listen. One way to switch from teacher-centered instruction to student-centered is through the use of questions.

Kenneth D. Moore

CHAPTER 5

GOOD TEACHERS ASK GOOD QUESTIONS

Questioning, a basic instructional tool, is a key ingredient of successful teaching and learning. Some even say questioning is the single most influential teaching strategy. With so much riding on the art of questioning I feel like an entry-level learner trying to grasp the most basic principles. So in this chapter I choose to concentrate on these basics. What are the characteristics of a good question? What types of questions are most important? What are the key strategies in asking questions? How do questions help me speak less, teach more and keep the learning process moving forward? While much of the material researched was generic to all teaching situations, I have selected the most relevant material for the second language classroom.

THE CHARACTERISTICS OF GOOD QUESTIONS

Every time I prepare a question for a lesson I need to ask myself two things: does the question support my instructional objectives and does the question lead to student participation? If the answer to both is yes, then I have a good question. But to get to this affirmative answer there are specific elements or characteristics that need to be present in each question. First, a good question is to the point; meaning it contains just one strong idea and is clear, simple, and without extra words. The question uses vocabulary familiar to students and question forms that fit their level. The question is short enough for students to understand and remember.

A good question takes preparation. As much as possible questions should be planned in advance. Planning can help us avoid rambling, convoluted questions. Additionally, it usually improves the quality of our questions by allowing us to prepare a good mix of the what and who vs. the how and why questions, and make some questions more personal and connected to students' life experiences. [Moore 2001: 201, Ornstein 1990: 158]

TYPES OF QUESTIONS

In the science of questioning there is a great deal of terminology bantered about. Convergent vs. divergent, open vs. closed, display vs. referential, yes/no vs. wh- questions, elicitation vs. direct, high level vs. low level are all terms widely used in the field. There is a lot of evaluative research on each structure, but I am staying with my basic issue: what question forms will most engage learners and allow for maximum student talk? If many yes/no questions are used, who is doing most of the talking in class? The teacher! With the following types of questions who gets the talking time?

CLOSED	OPEN
Do you like to dance?	What kind of dance do you like?
Is this sentence correct?	What makes this a good sentence?
Are you happy in New York?	What do you enjoy about New York?

It certainly seems clear that a teacher using closed questions get a lot more time to talk, whereas open questions allow more opportunities for students. I find it preferable to use open-ended questions in as many situations as arise.

When our purpose is to find out what a student knows we use display questions e.g. “What is the verb in this sentence?” or “What color is my blouse?” Display questions are a common and necessary

form in our language classrooms, but as both Thornbury and Nunan point out display questions are rarely asked in conversation outside of a classroom; e.g., what color is my blouse? In real life most questions are referential; i.e., the teacher does not know the answer to the question. For example: “What do you think of this story?” Display questions provide little incentive or opportunity for students talking. If I want to provide maximum speaking opportunities then I will ask genuine questions. Preparing these questions requires more time and creativity, but they usually result in learners speaking more and using more complex language. [Thornbury 1996, Nunan 2000]

STRATEGIES FOR ASKING QUESTIONS

I have been exposed to the key questioning strategies offered by experts like Nunan, Lamb, and Ornstein. They have all contributed to my understanding, but it is Moore’s book on *Classroom Teaching Skills 2001* that gave me a foundation for using questions in my classroom.

One Question/No Repetition

One key strategy offered is to present one question at a time and to not repeat it. If we ask several questions at one time, students lack

the time to think and there can be confusion as to which question to answer first, e.g. “Do you like this room? What about the color and the furniture? How would you change it?” It is better to listen to a student’s answer before formulating the next question. We also want students to learn to listen well in the new language, and we help this process by not repeating questions. Students learn attentiveness and teachers avoid excess teacher talk when we control repetition and rephrasing.

Distribute Questions Fairly

When we ask a question it is best to address the whole class, not an individual. By stating the question first before calling on a student I can get everyone’s attention. By being unpredictable that is, without a set order of calling on students, I can maintain that attention. If I use a pattern, such as going around the circle in a set order, I can lose students’ attention as soon as their turn is over. Of course, if I need to/want to use a pattern I can dilute the possibility of losing their attention by periodic check-ins; asking students to repeat what another student has said. This teaches listening and provides additional language practice.

The strategy of distributing questions fairly means all students should have an opportunity to respond. A classic trap that we fall into is calling on the first students ready to answer. By recognizing immediate answers we leave out many students who have different processing times. Jerry, a teacher of younger students, told me that from day one in his classroom students are taught not to call out answers or raise their hands immediately. Patti, another colleague, who teaches in Japan, sometimes asks her EFL learners to write down their thoughts instead of asking them to respond immediately. She tries to get them to use writing as a way of collecting their thoughts before speaking. Then when she does ask for the response more students are ready to answer.

Present Clear Questions

To provide learners with the maximum opportunity to generate a response, we need to present questions clearly, so everyone can hear and understand them. This means we avoid ambiguous language, confusing constructions and excessive word use. It means we are careful not to introduce new words or material within the question. We also limit the number of yes/no or short answer questions since these forms will not generate much language use.

Redirect Questions

When a student is unable to answer a question or answers incompletely, we have two choices. We can redirect the question to the same student by restating the question in a simpler form or with different words or we can redirect the question to another student. Intuition and experience will help us decide which is the best course in any given situation. What we do not want to do is answer our own questions! It is a rather common occurrence to hear a teacher raise a question and, within a short period of time give the answer. I might do it because I think it helps a struggling student, because of time constraints, or simply because I maintain the habit of being the central speaker in the classroom. Whatever the reason, answering my own question does not serve any pedagogic goal. Even when a student asks a question of the teacher, it is often better not to answer it. We can redirect the question to other students. “Who can answer that question?”

We also want to reinforce students’ answers sparingly. Limit or do not use the I-R-F pattern that we discussed in Chapter 3: (Teacher Initiates, Student Responds, Teacher Follows up). Rather than making

a comment, have other students respond by asking them “What do you think?” “And what do you think?” etc.

USE WAIT TIME/THINK TIME

The final strategy I want to discuss is the concept of Wait-Time. The first time I heard the term was when I began research for this paper. I have since learned that wait-time is discussed in many teacher education texts. In 1972 Mary Budd Rowe developed the idea that increasing pause time after a teacher’s question (wait-time one) and after a student’s response (wait-time two) by three or more seconds would help learners think better and possibly respond with more depth and complexity of language. [Rowe 1987:38].

Rowe found that teachers on average wait only about one second for students to answer questions before we repeat, rephrase, or ask another student to answer the question. It was found that average wait times in second language classes are even shorter than in first language classrooms. Research with wait-time two (that period after a student responds to a question) showed an average pause of .73 seconds in second language classes verses the .9 seconds in a first language classroom. These pause times, it is agreed, are much too short for students working with high level questions. [Ibid.] Indeed

Stahl, like Rowe, asserts that three seconds is a minimum pause. More benefit will come from four or five second pauses or even longer periods of uninterrupted silence. Its seem to me that our second language learners need increased wait times even more than other students as they must first process the question in the second language, before they can think about it, and then articulate a response. Stahl advises that the technique will only be effective if we gain everyone's participation in this disturbance free think time. In other words, the teacher as well as the students must respect the silence. [Stahl 1994: 3]

The specific benefits of wait-time, asserted by researchers and educators alike, [Rowe 1981, Walsh 2002, Stahl 1994, Moore 2001] are as follows. Students' responses become longer: they have time to think and formulate a more lengthy response. The research further indicates that answers are even more elaborate after wait-time two. Another finding is that students tend to ask more questions when wait-time is used. Prior to that, students tend to ask questions infrequently and usually these questions are of a clarification nature. An additional benefit is the building of student confidence and participation. Where there is little or no wait-time only a few quick students tend to

respond. The longer think time allows other students the opportunity to voice their ideas.

Recently, I spoke about these benefits with a friend who is a trainer of speech therapists. We compared notes on wait-time use. He has always encouraged his therapists to ask a question, then pause for a few seconds. But he had not considered the value in a period of uninterrupted silence after the person responds. He felt a shift in his ideas and will explore the technique of wait-time in his practice. All of the researchers cited on this subject encourage us to do the same thing. Their work indicates that the strongest benefits seem to come from a conscious and consistent use of wait-time two.

Allan Ornstein states, “There are no known negative side effects of teachers increasing the wait-time interval” [Ornstein 1990:159], but Nunan and Lamb, in their book *The Self-Directed Teacher [2000]*, disagree. They feel that sometimes silence can break up a lesson, and they believe the researchers on wait-time have been simplistic in suggesting that less wait-time is bad. [Nunan and Lamb 2000:87]

> We believe that it is particularly important for second language students to have sufficient time to think about questions before being required to answer them. However, we also acknowledge the

> fact that, from the perspective of managing the learning process, silence tends to break up the flow of the lesson; students' attention gets distracted and it is hard to pick up the pace again once it is lost. Maintaining interest through appropriate pacing is a Real problem, which is rarely acknowledged by commentators on wait-time. In low-level interactions, pacing should have priority. W hen the answers deserve real consideration, students should be given the time to answer them. [Ibid., 84]

How do I weigh in on this issue? Well, as I mentioned earlier, I am quite excited about implementing wait-time as a key teaching strategy. I know it will take quite a while before I can personally confirm the positive effects of wait-time in my teaching practice. First and foremost, it will take time for me to get comfortable with these silent periods. A sense of apprehension takes over when all is silent in my class, and my tendency is to plow ahead with teacher talk to fill the vacuum. Secondly, Rowe warns that this simple technique is not so simple to obtain. She says that it is a long slow process of retraining and requires self-awareness and observation tools to be employed on a continuous basis. [Rowe, 1987:41] Thirdly, I think Nunan and Lamb have made a good point about lesson pacing and I will probably be careful about using wait-time with low level questions.

There is another cautionary point. Robert Stahl states that silence will only be helpful to students if the teacher provides clear, well-structured questions. He warns that if we ask vague questions followed with wait-time, this will tend to increase students' confusion and frustration and possibly will lead to no response from them at all. [Stahl 1994:3]

It has been said that good questions and good questioning techniques can make a fair teacher good and a good teacher great. According to Ornstein, the skill of asking the right questions will come with experience, and the experience will come through education and practice, observation and feedback. As he says "Good questioning is like learning to drive a car; eventually the process becomes second nature, a habit." [Ornstein 1990:159]

A person's listening ability is limited by his ability to listen to himself.
Carl Rodgers

CHAPTER 6

STOP TALKING AND START LISTENING

> Marriages fall apart, children and parents are alienated, friendships fail, and business deals do not come off simply because people do not understand others, although they think they do. They fail to listen.[Bell 2004:1]

So says Bryan Bell as he introduces Chapter Two in *Lessons in Lifemanship.* In our second language classroom a failure to listen will not bring about such dramatic results, but it will have a negative impact on a teachers' performance and students' progress.

Good listening skills, on the other hand, yield enormous benefits. My goals for this chapter are (1) to build awareness of poor listening habits and look at how to break such habits, (2) to discuss the characteristics and development of good listening skills, and (3) to recognize listening as the art and active process that it is.

BENEFITS OF GOOD LISTENING

Listening provides a teacher with more information than any other activity. By listening well I can assess the level of my students' language development and effectively respond to them. By listening carefully I can determine if a lesson needs an immediate adjustment or if there are re-teaching requirements.

Listening is the core of any good relationship. When I feel someone is listening to me, it sends the message that they care about me, and what I think. I appreciate that support and I become less tentative and more comfortable with this person.

Second language learners suffer a great deal of frustration when attempting to verbalize thoughts, feelings, and attitudes. They need to know the teacher is interested in their ideas, supports their efforts, is attentive and encouraging, and patient as they go through the process of making their meaning clear. The more a teacher provides this attentive listening, the more students will trust the teacher-learner relationship. It will build their confidence to continue the work.

Furthermore, when our own teaching practice reflects good listening behavior, it models for our learners how to listen effectively. As Carl Rogers would say: "Listening behavior is contagious." [Rogers 3]

POOR LISTENING HABITS

A pre-requisite to developing good listening skills is self-knowledge. We have to become aware of any poor listening habits we have acquired. Tell tale signs of poor listening include interrupting, drifting off, preoccupation with our own thoughts, faking attention, and insertion of our own emotions.

Interrupting

It is an established fact that a listener can process incoming information rapidly, sometimes even four times faster than someone can talk. [Moore 2001:171, Bell 2004:3] For the weak or impatient listener this provides an excuse to interrupt since I feel I already have the message. The second language teacher in particular might be prone to interrupt because we are dealing with the often slow and halting speech of a second language learner.

Yet we know interruptions are destructive to communication. Interruptions result in students losing their train of thought, of not having an opportunity to complete what they were saying. Interruptions frustrate speakers. A continuous habit of interrupting can build resentments and lead to a shut down of real dialogue.

Drifting Off/Yielding to Distractions/Faking Attention

It is easy to lose our attention when listening to a student. Even the most sensitive teachers find themselves not listening at some point. The fact is we have many students and classroom management issues that compete for our attention.

In our second language classroom we can lose track of what a student is saying because we are distracted by their grammar, pronunciation, or delivery issues. I then start planning how to address those issues, and so, my attention drifts even further away from the student. The habit of planning what we want to say, even as the person is still speaking, is common non-listening behavior.

We need to be aware that loss of attention is easily recognized by others. If you are not concentrating on the speaker, it is conveyed in non-verbal ways and even if you fake attention by murmuring polite words and pretend to be interested, students will know and they could give up trying to express themselves. You cannot pretend. [Rogers, Bell 2001, Moore 2001]

Insertion of Our Own Emotions

We need to put our own emotions on hold if we really want to listen to our students. It is essential to focus on the external, the input

we are receiving, rather than the internal reactions we are having. [Maguire 2003:1] Defensiveness, resentment of a student's opinion, a clash of beliefs, dislike of a student's appearance, any of these can block a teacher's ability to listen. We need to stop those internal dialogues that distract us, color our view of reality, and provoke inappropriate responses. Active listening requires concentrated focus on the speaker rather than on ourselves.

DEVELOPING GOOD LISTENING SKILLS

How do I break away from poor listening habits and develop good listening skills? There are several critical ingredients. First, it is essential that we recognize the importance of developing active listening skills. I have addressed the value of good listening earlier in this chapter. Next, we need to be conscious of our own listening behavior. This self-knowledge will take us far along the road towards obtaining these skills. Finally, we need to understand that listening is a learned behavior that takes a great deal of practice.

Self Knowledge

Self-knowledge requires a conscious awareness of my own self, my words, facial expressions, body language, attention span, and emotional reactions. I need to be aware of my communication

strengths and weaknesses. To be good listeners we need to develop this self-knowledge. Therefore, so much of what we hear we don't hear with our ears. We need to develop an understanding of non-verbal communication coming from and to us.

Do I recognize that the development of good listening skills may require a change in my attitudes? Can I become aware of attitudes such as the following:

- I believe I need to defend my views
- I believe making rapid judgments is a sign of a good mind
- I think why waste classroom time when I know what they want to say
- I don't know what they are trying to say, and I don't have the time to find out.

Listening takes practice. Good listening does not come naturally to most of us and it is not an easy skill to acquire. When I recognize that there is no magic pill and the skills will not develop quickly, then I may have the patience and discipline to practice being an attentive listener.

THE LISTENING PROCESS

Listening is an active process that involves three steps: attention, understanding, and evaluation. Attention is the key to the whole process. [Moore 2001:168]

Attention

Attention involves an attitude of openness – a willingness to discover something new. It requires controlling our impulse to talk. It involves focusing on the speaker and their message, and minimizing internal and external distractions. It requires us to adjust to the pace of our speaker especially in the language classroom. Attention involves our whole body as well as our mind.

Passive listening is almost entirely non-verbal behavior. The non-verbal responses might be a nod of the head, a smile, an expression in the eyes, an alert posture or a leaning forward as a signal that you are attending to the speaker. Sometimes, though, short verbal responses are included. “I see”, “oh”, “interesting”, “mmmm” tell the speaker that you are present to them. [Larrivee 1999; Bell 2004] When we listen attentively students respond positively to us. They

sense our personal interest in them, our respect for their intelligence and capacity to learn. [HLTMag. and Rogers]

It is a fact that personal connections are much improved when we give special attention to eye contact. But I do have questions on whether it is always good to make eye contact with students. (Language teachers need to be sensitive to students' cultural traditions of eye contact, as well as be prepared to teach appropriate body language for this country. From a cultural perspective there is a great deal of complexity in eye contact. However, I will not be exploring this issue in the paper.) When I am having a one-on-one conversation with a student in the classroom I can easily understand how eye contact will express my interest in them. But when the student is supposed to be speaking to the whole class, how do I get them to focus their attention on all their classmates rather than locking eyes with me the teacher? My experience has been that when I do make eye contact the student will stay focused only on me, and fail to connect with the rest of the class. I, therefore, try not to look directly at the student, but in other ways, such as through body posture and some slight nodding, try to convey that they have my attention. Sometimes I do make eye contact and then move my hand to indicate

to the student that the whole class is interested in what they have to say and should receive some of their attention. Whenever a classes language comprehension level is high enough, I try to help them understand the importance of engaging with everyone in the room. I explain that they need to make eye contact and direct their attention as well as their words to all their classmates not just to the teacher. Often I worry that my decision not to make eye contact leaves some students disappointed and under the illusion that I am not paying attention.

Understanding

Attentiveness is a posture of quiet listening: we keep our own silence and encourage and support our speaker through our non-verbal behavior. [Larrivee 1999:130] Understanding, as part of the listening process, often requires an active listening style. If I do not understand what a student is saying, I need to ask questions. Pretending to understand is not an option. The teacher helps students negotiate and communicate meaning through listening and responding with skills of exploring, paraphrasing, checking, and clarifying. We become active participants only to reach an understanding of what the student wants to convey. Otherwise, we remain silent and attentive.

Evaluation

For the language teacher this third step in the listening process calls for evaluating both the medium and the message. In this phase we are weighing the message, challenging ideas, evaluating how the message and its form could be improved. While we listen we work to evaluate the content on its own merit without the prejudice of our beliefs or feelings. [Friedman in Moore 2001:170]

In summary, effective listening is more than being silent. It is an art. It is hard work, harder than talking and it takes concentration and discipline. [Ibid., 168] Its major tools are silence, attention, and, when appropriate, active participation. Developing this skill is essential to our teaching, and a precious gift to our family, friends and all those we encounter in our daily living.

We don't receive wisdom. We must discover it ourselves after a journey that no one can take us or spare us. Marcel Proust

CHAPTER 7

TAKE THE JOURNEY

Working on this paper has been a time of confusion, loving attention, and effort toward continuing to make a rather large shift in my behavior. Having the luxury of investigating, in depth, aspects of teacher talk that have most concerned and interested me, has been a blessing for my personal and my professional life.

I have obtained insight into teacher's talk and my particular teacher talk. I recognize that it is the essential tool of our trade and critical to the learning process. [Nunan 2000: 60] At the same time, I have come to recognize that an excess of teacher talk reduces a teacher's opportunity to listen to students working with the language, to hear their voices and respond to them in helpful ways. I have become more conscious of the inherent value in classroom silence.

That often, this think time can benefit students as much as classroom talking time. I believe that I become a better person and a better teacher as I become more conscious of and comfortable with the gift of silence, and as I develop sensitivity for quality teacher talk.

> Fears remain. As Cunningham, in her book, *Building Connections*, states:
>
> Teachers would do well to avoid falling for the myth of perfection…Be aware. Avoid confusing this tendency with the essential mission of teaching…to teach the spirit of students and to walk with them towards self-fulfillment. This mission is a human one that invites sharing at its deepest level, connecting with others humanly and spiritually. Don't be perfect, be human.
>
> [Cunningham 2001:118]

Teaching takes an act of faith as does living. We have to stay on the journey as I have in writing this paper, and we have to seek fellow travelers.

> "If I only had a home…a heart…a brain… the nerve…"
>
> The four seekers lurching towards Oz remind us that the obstacles to our fullness as teachers will change as we develop, that there will always be more to know, always more to become, and that in our quest we must reach out for allies and friends to give us strength, and power and courage to move on.
>
> [Ayers 2001:134-135]

While my writing of this paper ends, my journey continues.

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