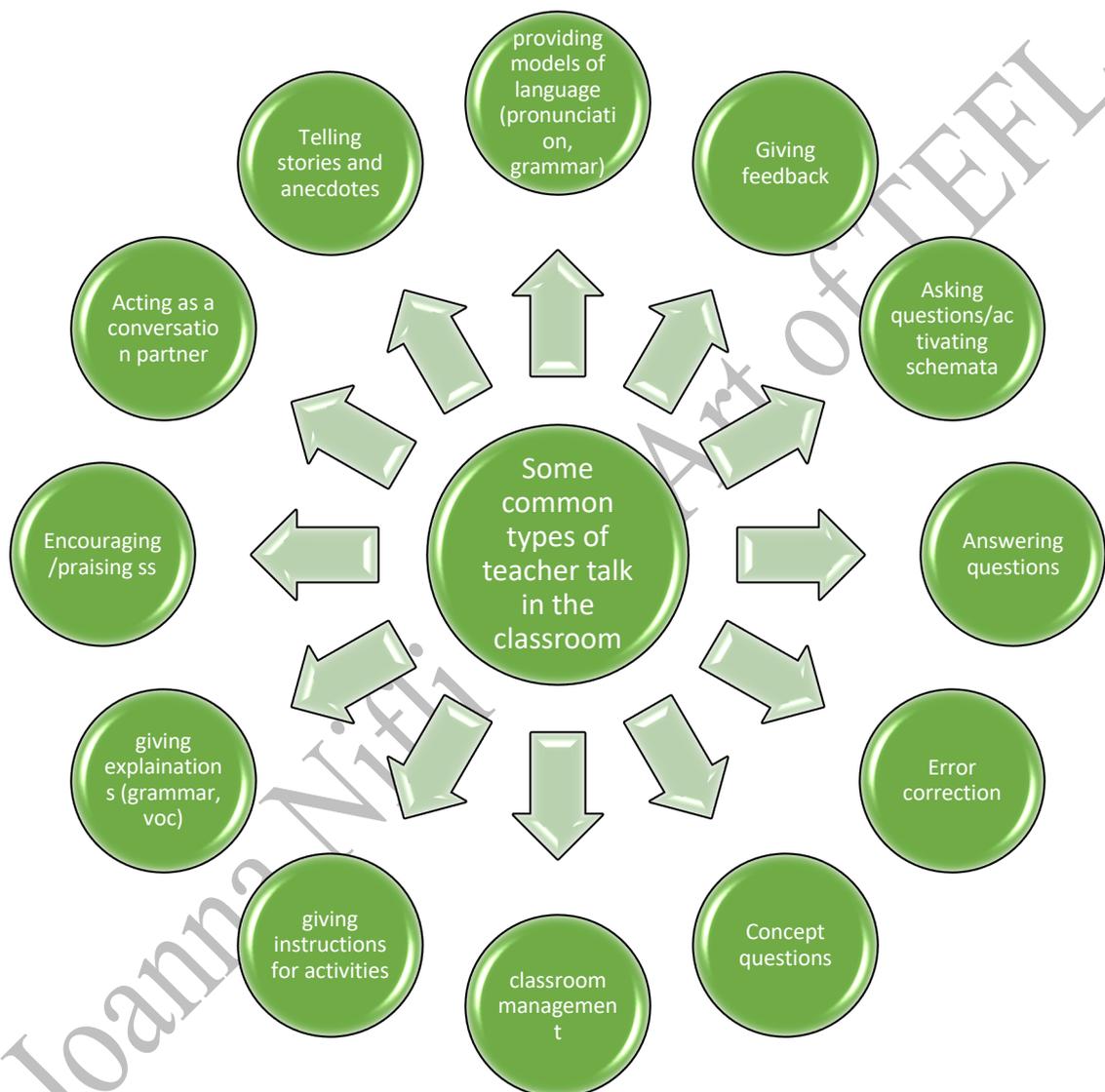


The role of teacher talk in the foreign language classroom

How effective can teacher talk be in promoting language learning?

Here are some points to consider on the input and feedback we give to our learners and on our level of involvement during the lesson

By Joanna Nifli (MA TEFL/CELTA certified EFL instructor) <http://joannanifli.com>



The role of teacher talk, our overall involvement in the language lesson and our interaction with our students can play an important role in the successful outcome of our lessons. To promote language learning and to make sure that we improve our students' performance during the lesson while at the same time we maintain their involvement and motivation levels up, we must always be very cautious as to what we say, how we say it and the degree of our feedback during the lesson. The following questions could be used as a reference point for teachers who are new to the profession on where to focus on during Teacher Talking Time (TTT) when planning a lesson as well as during the lesson stages:

How much should the teacher speak? How much info/guidance is enough for our learners?

How can we effectively decrease TTT (Teacher Talking Time) and increase STT (Student Talking Time?)

How can we activate learner schemata through the effective use of questions?

How can our words/stories/descriptions/attitude help in promoting learner motivation?

When should we give feedback and to what extent?

How can we promote our learners' active involvement in the lesson?

Can we encourage learner interaction in a constructive way?

To gain a better understanding on teacher talk and the effects our reactions and responses can have on the outcomes of our lessons, it is also useful to examine and keep in mind the most common question types in a language classroom

QUESTION TYPES

Yes/no questions e.g. 'Here is a picture of a woman. Have you seen her face before?'

Short answer/retrieval-style questions e.g. 'What did she say about the film?'

Open-ended questions e.g. 'Whom could he have telephoned?'

Display questions (questions requesting information already known to the questioner) e.g. 'What colour is his pen?'

Referential questions (questions requesting new information) e.g. 'What did you study at university?'

Non-retrieval, imaginative questions (questions that do not require the learner to retrieve given information but instead call on inferred information in which an opinion or judgement is called for) e.g. 'What do you think the writer was suggesting by making the central character an animal?'

We need to carefully select the type of questions we will be addressing to the classroom based on our learners' level and specific needs as well as on the lesson stage and what we want to achieve. Referential questions, for example, could be used at the beginning of a lesson whereas display questions can be used in the lead-in stage of an activity when activating learner schemata and we want to get some answers based on our students' previous knowledge on the subject. Some question types (like the open ended, the referential and the non-retrieval questions) are more useful for language practice and for encouraging communication in the classroom as learners have to produce more language.

Scaffolding and teacher talk

Aljaafreh and Lantolf (1994:469) refer to the notion of *scaffolding* as “the idea of offering just enough assistance to encourage and guide the learner to participate in the activities” and to “assume increased responsibility for arriving at the appropriate performance”. As long as it is done by keeping in mind our lessons' primary aims and does not contradict with our classroom's communicative goals, commenting on our learners' written or oral production can prove to be very beneficial for their interlanguage development. The teacher's comments and *scaffolding*, i.e. the extra help given to the students to direct their attention towards specific language structures and patterns in the TL, can be either explicit or implicit depending on what the teacher wants to achieve and on the learners' level and linguistic development.

The importance of noticing

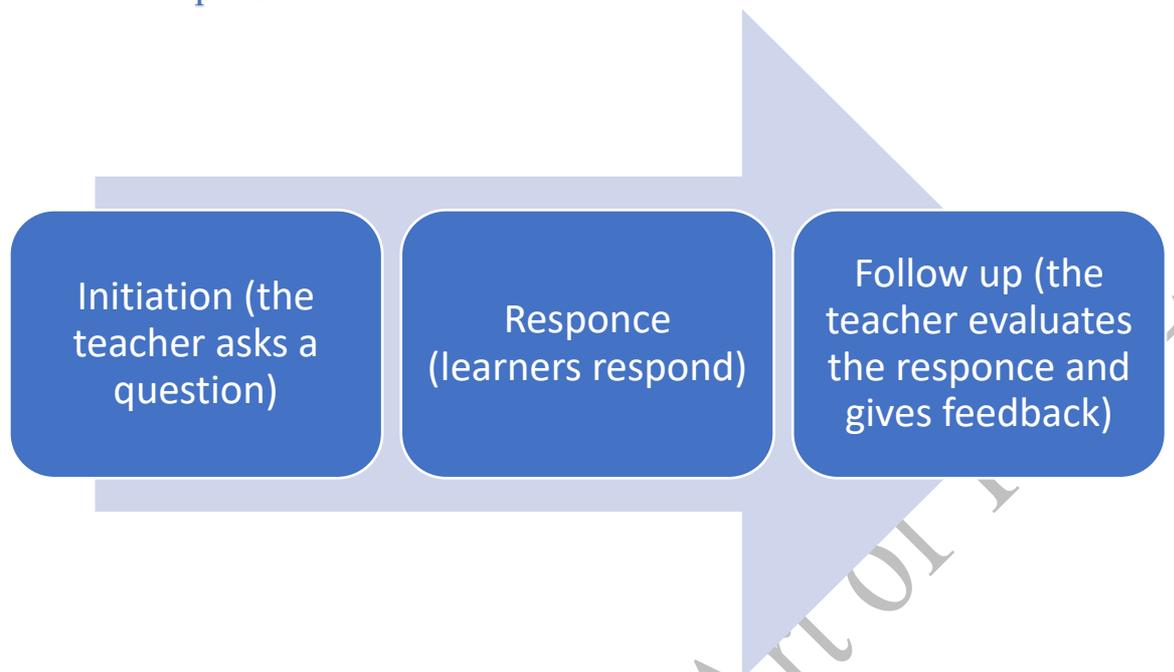
The concept of *noticing* as key to successful language learning has been highlighted by many linguists and SLA researchers (Skehan, Long, Harmer, Thornbury). There seems to be a general consensus among them that some form of attention to input is necessary for effective learning to take place. Noticing is considered to be successful when it leads to language acquisition, when our learners' attention is shifted towards a TL structure, which is then acquired, internalized and eventually becomes part of their TL output.

The key is not just to make our students notice linguistic patterns in the TL. Something that has 'grasped' our attention could easily be forgotten after a while. Our goal as teachers is to create the appropriate circumstances (with our input and guidance) in order to raise our learners' consciousness, to help them successfully acquire this new knowledge and to begin to actively use it by turning input into intake and then into successful TL output.

Noticing mainly has to do with our learners being able to understand and grasp the meaning from the input they receive in terms of a newly introduced structure or grammar point. Successful learning will take place when they notice this 'gap' between the target language and their interlanguage and will actively try to incorporate the new structures in their TL output.

Apart from the main question types, another pattern that is extremely common in language classroom interactions is Sinclair and Coulthard's IRF pattern (Initiation-Response-Follow up).

THE IRF pattern



Using concept questions

Concept questions can play a vital role in helping learners grasp the meaning that underlies a grammatical structure in the TL or even a tricky vocabulary item. They raise our learners' consciousness as they help to clarify certain key points for them. Our learners become more aware of the grammar structures and the rules that underlie them.

Keeping this pattern in mind, it is also useful to always think about the degree of oral feedback we give to the class and the effects this can have on language learning. Below are some points to consider when giving feedback:

The role of feedback

Below is another useful table found in Penny Ur's book *A course in English language teaching* on the most common types of feedback given by the teachers in a language classroom ranging from 'metalinguistic feedback' (i.e. commenting on the linguistic structure, talking about the language) to 'elicitation techniques' where teachers try to make learners discover the usage of the TL structure or the correct form by themselves, using their previous knowledge or contextual clues.

FEEDBACK IN THE CLASSROOM

Metalinguistic feedback	= comments, information or questions related to the student's utterance without explicitly providing the correct form
Clarification requests	=indicating to the students that their utterance has been misunderstood or is ill-formed in some way and that a repetition/reformulation is required
Repetition	=the teacher repeats the student's erroneous utterance (teachers usually adjust their intonation to highlight the error)
Explicit correction	=the explicit provision of the correct form
Recasts	=the teacher's implicit reformulation of all or part of the student's utterance
Elicitation	= the techniques the teacher uses to

Source: Ur, P. (2012). *A course in English language teaching*. Cambridge University Press

The importance of positive feedback to increase learner motivation

Everybody loves being praised for the work they've done. Our students need encouragement, they need to be told when they are doing something well. When we offer feedback it is best for them to first hear what we feel they have done well. Acknowledging our students' efforts and good work gives them an enormous psychological boost and

increases their intrinsic motivation. They are more willing to participate, to be actively involved in the learning process and to improve their language skills even further.

Being clear and specific

Apart from general comments such as “*I loved your work/essay*” or “*You were brilliant*”, it is extremely helpful to our students if we analyze our comments and pinpoint what they did which led us to use such labels. Rather than merely evaluating something as ‘good’ or ‘bad’, we should be more descriptive and explain what it was that we heard or noticed that had this effect on us.

Making feedback personalized and consistent

Oral or written feedback should not necessarily mean correcting our learners’ errors. It is important to view it as a **commentary** on our student’s work. These comments play an important role on the learning process. It is important to remember to focus on all aspects of our learners’ output. Sometimes we pay too much attention on fluency/accuracy and the proper use of lexis and grammar that we forget to comment on how our students approached a specific topic, on their viewpoints and on the overall content of their work. Monitoring our learners individually and providing a consistent and personalized feedback to each and every one of them is extremely valuable and crucial for their language development.

Giving hints – promoting active involvement

In order for our feedback to be constructive and to boost the learning process, we must first of all make sure that our learners notice our comments, understand them and work in order to fix their errors or adjust their spoken and written output in the TL. To do this, we could first of all give them **hints** instead of directly providing them with corrections. For example, when evaluating a writing task, we could just write down ‘*check the verb tense*’ instead of correcting the verb form for them. Our learners need to be **actively involved** in this process and to learn to **notice and discover for themselves** what they need to change and adapt in their TL output.

Peer feedback

Encouraging peer to peer feedback can also prove to be very beneficial for our EFL learners. It is an extremely useful consciousness raising task that will boost active involvement and help them learn from each other.

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