The interaction between the teacher and students as well as students and their peers is an important part of the language learning experience. There are various patterns of communication that many ESL teachers observe to change the dynamics of their classes. Varying these different patterns helps change and improve the language learning process. It is also important to recognize that some of these patterns are teacher-centered while others are student-centered. When patterns are teacher-centered, they are easily controlled by the teacher. Conversely, when the patterns are student-centered, it gives students freer practice with the language. Depending on the class, teachers vary the usage of these interaction patterns, not only to teach the materials effectively but also to create a suitable learning environment for acquiring the target language. Teachers who recognize the effects of these interaction patterns understand that each respective pattern plays a pivotal role in classroom dynamics and their student's engagement with the material or activities. In this article, we will explore the classroom interaction patterns that are normally found in the ESL classroom and highlight when each one is best suited, as well as their pedagogical advantages.

Individual work

Individual work is when the teacher assigns a task that learners work on by themselves. It is an opportunity for students to explore the language on their own. Some examples of activities that are best conducted individually are reading and writing tasks, or comprehension exercises. Many studies have shown that independent learning affects the development of learner autonomy, which is the goal of many teachers for their learners. During an independent work session, students are given the opportunity to rely on their own resources, and it is also during this time that teachers can gauge the level and progress of their students. Individual work periods also serve as a useful classroom management tool to calm down a noisy class or even to control a challenging group. Implementing individual work is also a useful transition activity between a lecture and group or pair work. As an example, after a lesson on grammar, students can complete a short comprehension exercise before diving into an activity where they have to produce or apply what they have learned.

Group work or pair work

Activities that require collaboration and two-way communication are best implemented through group work and pair work. This interaction pattern is student-centered as the students get to play with the language. Pair work and group work give the teacher an ample amount of time to monitor the students understanding of the lesson content. This type of student-to-student interaction provides students with more speaking time and is a great way of getting the student to use and actively produce the target language. Group work or pair work is especially helpful in creating engaging classrooms and can help to change the pace of a lesson. Activities that lend themselves to this type of interaction include role-plays or dialogues, reading circles, matching games, etc.

Due to possible factors such as the flexibility of the seating arrangements, the tasks given, the clarity of your instructions, or even the class size, improper execution of this interaction pattern can lead to a situation where students veer off task and result in an unsuccessful completion of the activity. To prevent this situation, consider implementing the following three strategies:

- Actively monitor your students by moving around the class to make observations of the language being produced.

- Set up the activity so that students take it in turns speaking or assign each group member a specific role such as leader or secretary.

- Set a time limit to keep students focused on the assigned task.

More importantly, pay close attention to the dynamics of your classroom as this is also a significant feature to consider before grouping students together. Be observant or aware of how your students interact with one another. If there are situations where students do not get along, or if you notice a student who is uncomfortable consider switching up the groups to avoid any confrontational issues during activities.

Despite some potential shortcomings, facilitating these kinds of activities is rewarding for both students and teachers alike.

Close-ended teacher questioning

Many teachers gravitate toward close-ended questioning especially in contexts where classrooms are more traditional or teacher-centered. Close-ended questions are questions in which the answer can only come from a limited number of options. For example, questions that require an answer to who, what, where, or when. As a result, teachers can control the language that students use. Some examples of close-ended questions are yes/no questions or questions used for concept checking such as after giving instructions or explaining a key language point. This type of questioning is helpful when it comes to checking if students are paying attention. It is also useful for classroom management, especially when it comes to reorienting students' attention or having to deal with challenging students.

With this type of question, the interaction pattern is mostly top down between the teacher and the students. Studies have also shown that with this type of questioning, students take a more passive role. Thus, it is the teacher's responsibility to be wary of how often this type of questioning is implemented. Consider, for example, noting which students are always answering the questions, encouraging shyer students to participate, and increasing the wait time after each question to ensure all students have an opportunity to answer.

Open-ended teacher questioning

This type of questioning occurs when the teacher asks a series of questions that have a variety of answers, depending on the students' own views and knowledge of the topic. Open-ended questions are a useful tool for concept checking. For instance, in evaluating how much their students know about a particular topic or in checking their level of comprehension concerning a lesson or text they have read. Compared to close-ended questions, open-ended questions encourage critical thinking since there is a wider range of acceptable answers. It is a great way to explore a topic more freely as the answers expected require more thought and the broadness of the question can allow for some creative freedom. In addition, these questions can be expanded to discuss the 'why' and 'how' and as a result, create more opportunities to produce the target language. Look at the difference between these two questions.

Close-ended: "Do you like summer?" (Answer: Yes/No)

Open-ended: "What do you enjoy about summer? Why?" (Answer: I enjoy X, Y, and Z… because…)

In general, open-ended questions are best suited for activities where students have to brainstorm such as creating mind maps or word maps, for exploring broad topics such as culture, or for learning how to develop ideas and express opinions.

TEACHING IDEAS, TIPS AND ADVICE
Classroom Interaction Patterns

Full-class interaction

Activities such as class debates, discussions, or review games, are examples of full-class interactions. These activities are a great way to end a lesson or unit, and also serve as an alternative formative assessment method. Full-class interaction allows for different communication patterns, not only between the teacher and student, but also between students and their teacher, and among students and their peers. Similar to group work or pair work, this type of interaction pattern promotes the production of the target language. It is also a way of drawing students' attention to useful language items or for doing error correction. Some teachers do this by doing mini-lessons on a particular mistake or by reviewing a specific language concept.

Implementing activities that involve the entire class helps to build teacher and student rapport. Creating a points system to encourage healthy competition is also another means of sustaining motivation in the classroom when it comes to getting students to participate in activities.

Choral response

Choral response is a common practice, especially in drills or pronunciation lessons. This is another teacher-centered interaction pattern in which the students simply repeat what the teacher says. In most ESL classrooms, teachers use it as a way to introduce new concepts such as verb conjugation or to introduce the pronunciation of a sound. While this method is common, it is more suitable for the beginning of a lesson or as a review to quickly check comprehension. However, various studies have concluded that it is not a reliable way to assess student understanding. While choral responses may give some teachers a sense of assurance, it is not safe to assume that all your students understand solely through repetition.

Monologues

Every teacher is familiar with giving monologues as it is a widely used teacher-centered technique. Monologues are often used to give instructions when setting up an activity or to explain a more complex language point or concept. When teachers implement monologues in the classroom, the students do not need to interact, and the focus is on listening. Similar to choral responses, monologues are also best suited at the beginning of a lesson to introduce a topic or grammar concept. Monologues are a great tool in this regard, but it is easy for students to lose interest or become distracted. Try using visuals like realia or pictures to keep students' attention. Asking a variety of questions, open-ended and close-ended, also helps to check in on students' attentiveness and understanding. To encourage active listening, try to incorporate a cloze-activity, where students need to follow along to fill in the missing information.

Homework

Students' progress in the target language also depends on what they do to practice at home. Assigning homework allows students to work alone outside of the classroom and this is particularly helpful in contexts where English is not the main language. These days, teachers assign worksheets in person or over the Internet to supplement or reinforce what their students learn in class. Like individual learning, homework assignments fall under the category of asynchronous learning where students can learn at a more convenient time of their own choosing. Homework encourages students to be aware of their own abilities as they becomeaware of what they can or cannot do. It also gives students the opportunity to ask their teachers specific language-related questions for the following day, which the teachers can then use to determine their students' language learning needs.

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Final thoughts

As we have discussed, certain activities lend themselves to particular interaction patterns. Teacher-centered interaction patterns such as lectures, close-ended questioning, and choral responses may seem outdated. However, they still have a place in the classroom, especially in maintaining order and structure. Student-centered interaction patterns such as group work and pair work, open-ended questioning, and full-class interactions, provide opportune moments for meaningful production. While individual work periods and homework assignments create opportunities for students to develop learner autonomy. The interaction patterns that we have discussed should complement one another. As a result, there is no best interaction pattern as their success in the classroom is determined by a variety of factors. Every class is different and has its own set of needs and challenges. Take time to evaluate and reflect on the interaction patterns you observe and implement them accordingly to create the most suitable learning environment for your particular classroom.