

## Initiating and Maintaining Learners' Talking Time through Problem Solving Situations

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### Abstract

Learners need practice in producing comprehensible output using the language resources at their disposal and already acquired. It has been also well cemented in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) practice that being pushed to produce output allows the production of more accurate and appropriate language. However, speaking courses are probably the most daunting. The major challenge persists with engaging learners into student-to-student interaction and maximizing the talking time. The current paper spots the light on the integration of problem solving situation, built upon the Facebook game "Criminal Case" framework as teacher own produced material to initiate and sustain learners' talking time during speaking courses in classes described as large. The paper pays close attention to learning opportunities generated by peer interaction compared to teacher-fronted classroom interaction. Using problem solving situations wherein learners are required to play the role of the famous detective Sherlock Holmes and get on the case to solve it proves to generate opportunities for learners to talk, maximize their talking time and build their confidence to use the target language in front of a jury (audience). Last but not least, interactional feedback from their interlocutors and negotiation for meaning push learners to further refine their output and adjust their grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation towards correct utterances.

**Key words:** peer interaction, problem solving situation, student talking time, teaching speaking

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## Introduction

A daily challenge of classroom teaching is to get students to do most of the talking in the speaking courses wherein teacher talk is minimized to its lowest rate and occupies most of the time instruction giving and corrective feedback provision needless to mention supplying vocabulary and language forms to use. The literature suggests that teacher talk should be 20% of the whole classroom student-teacher interaction. Therefore, the input; that is to say instructional material used throughout the speaking course, to which students are exposed is the ultimate stimulus to get learners to talk. However, the debate of recent years has been over the types of tasks and instructional material that could be used to get students to talk instinctively rather than being pushed to communicate. There is not unfortunately a ready-made recipe that could guarantee students' interaction to keep going and going with turn taking conventions. Teachers, thus, may find it helpful to devise their own material through integrating more than one item into a well-welded speaking task.

Three notions are so important to the success of speaking tasks: gaming, role playing and primarily problem-solving. Online games have won unprecedented popularity among youth since their first release. The advent of Facebook has also revolutionized social interaction throughout a bundle of proposed games wherein a group of users set themselves as a team and get started on a mission. Moreover, players get immersed in a virtual second life wherein they could choose a nickname and an avatar. Problem solving games such as Criminal Case remains one of the most preferred. Despite the fact that internet access remains out of reach in some Algerian public universities, the famous game Criminal Case could be replicated into the classroom with some minor changes.

## Literature Review

Since the 1970s and 1980s teachers got past the belief that learning happens much only when learners acquire pieces of language first then put them together to make conversations. In fact, first language acquisition research makes a breakthrough revelation when infants are found to acquire their first language through interaction with other people (Bailey & Nunan, 2005). Further compelling evidence comes from studies in Canadian French Immersion Schools. Despite their mastery of academic content, learners seem far less able to conduct interpersonal conversations. Swain (1985) (as cited in Markee, 2015) accounts for such deficiency for the lack of productive use of the language on the learners' part. Such a claim is later articulated in the Comprehensible Output Hypothesis. By way of explanation, compared to language comprehension process, learners are urged to use syntax during output. Swain (1995) claims that:

'output may stimulate learners to move from the semantic, open-ended, nondeterministic, strategic processing prevalent in comprehension to the complete grammatical processing needed for accurate production. Output thus would seem to have a potentially significant role in the development of syntax and morphology' (p. 128) (as cited in Markee, 2015).

More important, Swain (1995) further suggests more than one function for the output regarding language learning and development. First, output gives learners opportunity to test hypotheses in terms of grammar rules. If their message is not understood, then, learners need to recycle their current language competence through analyzing what goes wrong in their utterance. Interpersonal interaction also allows for peer feedback when producing language. Simply put,

learners refine their utterances in grammar and vocabulary in response to their interlocutors' feedback. Equally important, they could have the opportunity to pick up new input if they are involved in conversation with more proficient speakers. Third, output provides more time space for learners to practice their target language. Through repeated use of language, automatization occurs such that routine phrases and/or words come to learners without a great deal of effort or deliberation. Last but not least, learners are required to use their knowledge of syntax (Markee, 2015).

In addition, Long (1996) (as cited in Markee, 2015) throughout the interaction hypothesis reaffirms the learning opportunities supplied through interpersonal interaction. Much similar to Swain's view, learners receive interactional feedback from their interlocutors. As a result, learners may negotiate for meaning whenever they seek clarification, confirmation and repetition of second language (L2) utterances they do not understand. They are too pushed to modify their output in their way to make themselves understood.

The paramount aim of teaching a foreign language is to produce good speakers of that language. Despite the fact that a variety of teaching methods have proliferated through the 21 century wherein the position and primacy of the four language skills have witnessed remarkable fluctuation; building learners' communication competence has been always in the forefront as a pedagogical focus. This fact has been fully adhered to since Hymes' criticism of the prominent American linguist Noam Chomsky notion of linguistic competence. He sees the need to focus in language teaching on communicative proficiency rather than on mere mastery of structures (Richards & Rodgers, 1995). Thus, language learning is learning to communicate in its true essence. Moreover, the target linguistic system will be learned best through the process of struggling to communicate (Richards & Rodgers, 1995). However, debate over what should constitute "communicative competence" continues to fuel academic research and much more speculations in scholarly circles. Since Hymes earlier specification of what 'communicative competence' should embody, his work proves to be just the starting point. Key components of "communicative competence", as identified by a number of leading researchers such as Canale and Swain 1980, Faerch, Haastrup, and Phillipson 1984, Bachman 1990 can be listed as: linguistic competence, pragmatic competence, discourse competence, strategic competence and fluency (as cited in Hedge. 2000).

Although second language acquisition research has enhanced methods, techniques, and ways of teaching speaking, learners of a foreign language prove incapable of speaking it sufficiently. Commonsense observation clearly indicates learners' ineptitude to meet their day-to-day communication needs in English beyond the classroom contexts such as in airports, handle financial transactions, reply to phone conversation, or have a lovely chat with a random native speaker. Serious questions rise to the surface about the reliability, efficiency and usefulness of teaching techniques employed to build learners' communicative competence mainly in mainstream higher education contexts. First, due to the absence of organized corpus planning activities, lack of peer mutual collaboration among instructors and shortage of formal teacher training programs, most university teachers face insurmountable challenges in the design of communicative curricula and teaching material development. Adding to that, owing to the fact that most instruction in university is not textbook-based, attempt to base your instruction on a single commercial textbook is still inevitably a challenge due to the multitude of accessible

published material such as books, worksheets, computer based material all of which claim to be example of a communicative syllabus. Whether the teacher uses a textbook, institutionally prepared material, or make use of his or her own material; instructional material should primarily serve to initiate and maintain learners talking time throughout the speaking course. A critical criterion to bear in mind is the fact that students-to-students interaction pattern is the ultimate learning objective. Second, being placed in a non-target language context has been always the first obstacle for major foreign language teachers. Learners find little room to use and practise using the already learned language forms and functions beyond the classroom walls. The latter could dampen their enthusiasm and enormously change their attitudes towards the usefulness of the language being learned. Because most human behavior is profit-drive, it is only when learners find communication situations where they are called to use the target language; they do fully recognize the rewarding side of learning a foreign language. Adding to that, learners have the tendency to construct their utterances in compliance with the linguistic rules of the mother tongue a process often referred to as language transfer (Littlewood, 1998). Moreover, because most language domain use, here in Algeria, is dominated by Dialectal Arabic, learners resort to using their mother tongue during group work whenever the teacher's monitoring is absent. Another problem is affective barriers that could constitute a block to learning. By way of explanation, Krashen (1982) stresses the fact that learners' emotional responses to the speaking task could generate negative feelings such as anxiety, loss of confidence, stress and losing one's face whenever errors are committed. Speaking tasks; be it fluency or accuracy based, seem to build both a heavy intellectual and emotional load on learners' shoulder particularly for beginner and intermediate level. It is commonly observed that some learners feel anxious about making mistakes, while others claim that they have nothing to say. MacIntyre and Gardner (1991) (as cited in Richards & Renandya, 2002) conclude that the greatest anxiety seems to relate to negative experiences in speaking activities. Adding to that, a much felt insurmountable challenge is the chaos that could occur if teachers relinquish the floor to the students (Bailey & Nunan, 2005). Put simply, in speaking classes attended by 40 learners, teachers often experience genuine difficulty in setting into motion their learners to talk, maximize and sustain the talking time, vary interaction patterns such as pair and group work, monitor and provide feedback, and balance turns taking between passive and dominant interlocutors (Bailey & Nunan, 2005).

## Method

The current paper draws upon the experimental use of problem solving situations, particularly an adaptation of the Facebook detective game "Criminal Case", as teaching material to initiate student-to-student interaction patterns and maximize the learners' talking time. It also aims to measure the language learning and development opportunities generated due to peer interaction. Since the classroom is not equipped with computers or tablets and Wi-Fi; a prerequisite to play the game into the classroom, the teacher alternatively relies on a textbook-based material that resembles to a larger extent the Criminal Case game framework. The material is adapted from the book *Crime and Puzzlement: 24 Solve-them-yourself Picture Mysteries*. The book includes mysterious pictures of crime scenes. Readers are required to solve the crime throughout step by step question and answer procedure. Readers have to use all their available detective genius to come forward with compelling evidence so as to choose the right answer from a suggested multiple choice answers list. However, for the purpose of maximizing learners' talking time, the multiple choice answers list is dropped out. All questions are kept open-ended. First, learners are asked to consider the classroom as a crime scene where an intentional murder

has just occurred. Learners play the role of the famous detective Sherlock Holmes. They are summoned by the police department to attend to the crime scene and solve the case. Learners are then handed a photo which illustrates a murder scene. The learners have to respond to a case entitled "Boudoir" on page two.

Three interaction patterns are set forward with varied time span: pair work (20 minutes), four members group discussion (30 minutes), and teacher-led class discussion (20 minutes). Initially, learners are instructed to choose a peer to respond to the first question. Learners have to respond to 10 successive questions. It is worth to mention that questions are handed in a vacuum. After the pair work, learners are instructed to form groups of four members and respond to the same questions. Using the cocktail party technique, each group has to report their answers to a different group as if they were in a social gathering as the teacher says the word "swap the group" (Bailey & Nunan, 2005). During the last interaction pattern, teacher-led interaction, the teacher acts as a judge in a court of law and listens to each group, who in return acts as a claimant on behalf of the victim's family. The provided answers act as evidence to charge the possible murderer. Last, each group chooses a person to act out the crime again as most police investigation regulations stipulate.

For time management purposes, a software named PC Chrono is used to adjust the allotted time for each interaction pattern. The software functions as an alarm clock. The alarm clock is displayed using an Epson projector. The whole experiment is conducted throughout three successive speaking courses. Each course has one hour and half teaching time period. The population constitutes 120 second year undergraduate university students who represent three different groups: group one, two, and three. It is worth to mention that learners could be described as multi-level regarding their communicative competence. They range in a continuum of passive speaker, prompted to speak, and dominant interlocutors.

For data collection purposes in relation to peer interaction and leaning opportunities, the teacher gets involved in pair work and group discussion as participant observer. The teacher constantly changes the group with which he interacts. The teacher keeps his involvement and his input to a minimum rate. Moreover, much of the input represents a stimulus such as wh-questions to sustain the interaction. Participant observation also allows more adequate space for teacher monitoring mainly to discourage mother tongue use, provide vocabulary, and solve communication breakdowns.

## Results and Discussion

One of the first requirements of good teaching is a reduced teacher talking time. In a typical speaking course, teachers aim for 80% of students talking time compared to only 20% teacher talking time. In other words, in a speaking language classroom, teacher talk includes only explaining language points, giving instruction, providing corrective feedback, and asking questions. Much of the stage is allotted to student-to-student interaction (Scrivener, 2011). However, whether using accuracy based practice or fluency centered tasks, many teachers find it hard to give a kick start to engage learners in interaction and maximize the talking time in large classes of forty students in one single room. However, the current experiment reveals some startling findings if ever compared to previous speaking courses held with the same concerned groups.

To start with, learners overcome their reticence and get involved into interaction instantly. More surprising, passive learners get out of their shell and have their voice heard. Despite being offered no reward, the Criminal Case game, as it involves resolving a murder crime, provides enough intrinsic motivation for learner to talk owing to the fact that they are required to piece parts together so as to point fingers of murder allegation towards the most suspected perpetrator. More important, there is usually some communicative need that moves people to talk. As Pennington (1995) (as cited in Bailey & Nunan, 2005) puts it, teachers should attend to the communicative needs and purposes of language learners. Sometimes in language classrooms, teachers seem to forget the natural joy and enthusiasm of talking about something interesting, or accomplishing a genuine purpose for communicating with others. By implication, to redress learners' reticence, instructional material should be well-engineered to embody interesting topics or ideas to stimulate conversations and discussions. Teachers could set needs analysis surveys to pick up learners' preferred topics that could generate considerable fuss and buzz. In a similar vein, day to day communication also functions to get things done such as booking a hotel room or ordering a main course in a restaurant. Thus, interaction is much boosted providing that learners are set into teams to accomplish a challenging task collectively. In the terminology of cooperative learning, such student-team learning is called group investigation (Cruickshank, Jenkins, & Metcalf, 2011).

In terms of interaction patterns, pair work and mixed groups yield enormous opportunity for interaction for fluency purposes. Out of the blue, group-to-group interaction pattern requires more of the allotted time. Some interlocutors do not respond to the teacher's instruction when asked to swap the group. They request some additional time to finish their arguments. Unexpectedly, less interaction is generated in teacher-led interaction when learners have to report their answers to the judge. By way of explanation, teacher-led conversation often results in negative feelings such as anxiety and loss of confidence that could constitute a barrier and dampen enthusiasm to talk. More important, due to the intellectual, authority and language proficiency advantage position of the teacher, learners cannot compete in the interaction to argue against the teacher's perspective. They much backtrack to a listener position and conform to what their teacher says even at some deliberate attempts to falsify their arguments and twist around their claims. However, only few dominant speakers do have counter-claims and take turn to debate. In addition, because teachers happen to provide corrective feedback to sustain interaction; different forms of this feedback such as reformulations, prompts, repetition of learner's error, metalinguistic clues or explanation and paralinguistic signals breaks the flow of the interaction needless to mention the distraction damage it inflicts on the interlocutor. In a nutshell, corrective feedback further turns learners much more hesitant for their need to reformulate their utterances and make it more understood before they spit it out. The latter could shift the main focus of the interaction from fluency based to accuracy oriented purposes. As a consequence, learners may take more time to process their utterance and elaborate them. They even may shut down some utterances and never attempt to express themselves. Equally important, teachers could also provide incomprehensible input mainly by novice teachers who cannot tune their language to their learners' stage of development.

In contrast, peer interaction; be it in pairs or groups, generates more uninterrupted talking time due to the type of the task in the first place in the sense that learners have to resolve the murder crime and find the assassin. *To put it in another way*, each question, in its true essence,

requires arguing and supplying solid arguments. It is also important to mention that peer interaction sets the mood of casual outside conversation wherein feeling of stress and anxiety is almost absent. Furthermore, swapping groups proves to be a very effective classroom management technique. In contrast, setting learners into fixed groups could generate confrontational competitive attitudes which affects primarily turn taking allocation. Another key thing to remember, team-versus-team competition interaction pattern produces more unproductive noise in this context. Less proficient speakers are also already at a disadvantage position and can lose easily not having enough vocabulary to express themselves at their disposal on the right time. Thus competition always occurs among matched or somewhat like-achieving students (Cruickshank, Jenkins, & Metcalf, 2011).

Regarding leaning and development opportunities, pair work and group discussion has generated much negotiation of meaning process between interlocutors. Pica (1994) describes it as occurring when 'learners seek clarification, confirmation, and repetition of L2 utterances they do not understand' (p. 56) (as cited in Markee, 2015). Their negotiation of meaning attempts is attributed to two main reasons: the nature of the teaching material and the dynamics of group argument and debate. First, the teaching material, The Criminal Case in this context, pushes interlocutors to formulate solid arguments that should sound much plausible and deduced from the given crime scene. This makes them attend to more accurate language structure. More important, they have to dig for the right vocabulary and language structure to make their message understood. However, as learners present their findings to their mates, their arguments can be refuted. As a consequence, they take a defensive position to claim what they are saying is right. The latter fuels the conversation and maintains the talking time. Adding to that, there are instances when conversations turn into a clash of two different narratives. Moreover, there are also breakdown instances in interaction because the utterance has not been well understood. In doing so, learners may "notice the gap" (Schmidt and Frota, 1986) (as cited in Bailey & Nunan, 2005) between what they want to say and what they can say, or between what they say and what other people say. That is, learners work to make themselves understood, they must attend to accuracy. They must select the right vocabulary, apply grammar rules, and pronounce words carefully (Bailey & Nunan, 2005). In a nutshell, peer interaction affords learners greater conscious raising about accuracy and intelligibility.

## Conclusion

Teaching speaking in higher education contexts can be a potential crisis for teachers as they are entrusted with creating opportunities for learners to get engaged into interpersonal conversations and maximize the talking time for the fact that the speaking course could be the only chance where the target language is used. The essential ingredient of a communicative classroom is the availability of opportunities for learners to produce comprehensible output on a massive scale. Because much of the focus is to get learners talk using some newly taught language forms and functions, the success of any teacher attempt relies to some extent on the instructional material brought into use. Communicative activities that mingle key notions of gaming, role playing and problem solving prove to be of value in helping students overcome the emotional and intellectual burden often associated with using the target language in a classroom. Equally important, rather than being pushed to talk as part of their response to the teacher instruction, the components of gaming and problem solving set learners on their toes in their pursuit of the most suspected profiles before any allegation could be made. Adding to that,

depicting the famous Sherlock Holmes personality serve to intrigue learners to employ much higher-reasoning skills. It is so critical to highlight the fact that learners may fall out of the wagon and resort to use their mother tongue since the task set before hands involves much debating, arguing and disseminating arguments. Learners may come across some linguistic barriers such as the lack of adequate vocabulary or language forms; consequently, they find it challenging to put their ideas into words. Teachers' role then involves constant monitoring wherein they discourage any attempt to use learners' mother tongue during the interaction time. About the Author:

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### Appendix A

Amy LaTour's body was found in her bedroom last night, as shown, with her pet canary strangled in its cage. Henry Willy and Joe Wonty, her boyfriends; Louis Spanker, a burglar known to have been in the vicinity; and Celeste, her maid, were questioned by the police.



**As a police detector, you need to gather enough evidence from the crime scene to answer the following questions:**

- ① *How was Amy apparently killed?*
- ② *Is there evidence of a violent struggle?*
- ③ *Was her murderer strong?*
- ④ *Was Amy fond of jewelry?*
- ⑤ *Was she robbed?*
- ⑥ *Do you think she had been on friendly terms with the killer?*
- ⑦ *Was the canary strangled before the Am's death?*
- ⑧ *Who is/are the most suspicious of Amy murderer?*
- ⑨ *Who killed Amy?*