

Spontaneous interaction in language learning

Ideas for the development of fluency

Why is interaction important?

“The opportunity to interact in the additional language is central to developing additional language proficiency.”

Principle 8

Professor Rod Ellis

Instructed Second Language Acquisition: A Literature Review (MoE, 2005)

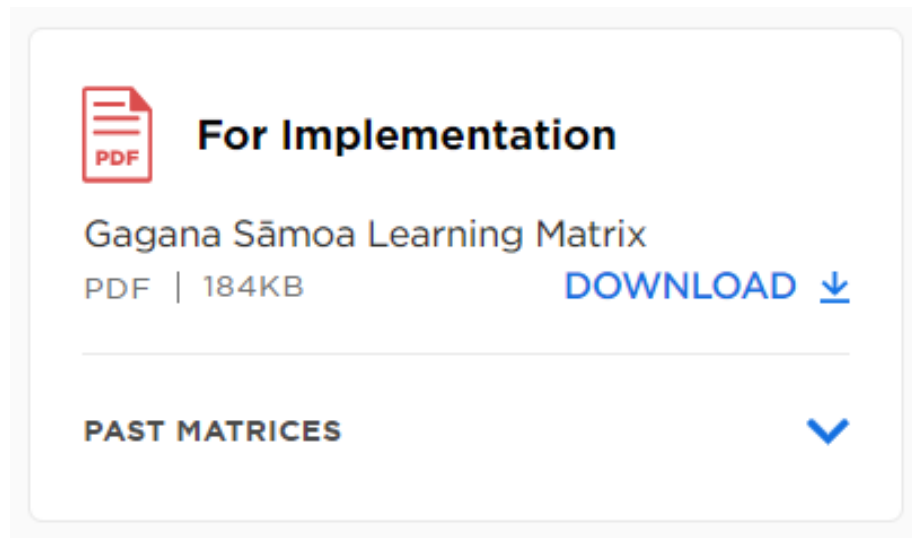
Why is interaction important?

There is evidence from studies combining cognitive neuroscience and language learning to indicate that “social interaction is crucial even when children learn an additional language”.

[Li, P., Jeong, H. The social brain of language: grounding second language learning in social interaction. npj Sci. Learn., 5, 8 \(2020\).](#)

Why is interaction important?

It is a key skill featured as a piece of significant learning across curriculum levels in the learning matrices of NCEA language subjects.



At NCEA Level 1, students will:

- **develop interactive skills and strategies to exchange simple information, ideas, and opinions in a range of predictable situations.**

Contents: Key ideas for developing interactive skills



Key Idea #1:

Lots of quality, comprehensible, spoken/signed target language input



Key Idea #2:

Opportunities for students to speak/sign, from the start



Key Idea #3:

Sequence speaking/signing activities from highly scaffolded to free



Key Idea #4:

Awareness of process and strategies involved in oral/signed language acquisition



Key Idea #5:

Fluency development; introduce “desirable difficulties”

Key Idea #1



Sufficient exposure to comprehensible spoken target language is vital to the development of speaking skills. Ensure the incorporation of lots of listening activities, at the right level of difficulty, that model the kind of speaking output you want from students.



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Activity example: Spot the nonsense listening

- Create a listening text which uses language you have introduced and models the kind of question-and-answer structures you eventually want students to produce independently.
- Tell the class to listen for absurd words or phrases that do not fit the context.
- In the first reading, students note down whether the phrase is Possible (P) or Impossible (I).

Source: [Gianfranco Conti / The Language Gym](#)

Activity example: Spot the nonsense listening

- In the second reading, students try to note down a possible alternative for the absurd word to make the sentence make sense.
- Listening for the “odd thing out” focusses attention and absurd inclusions potentially make the underlying language structures more memorable.

□ Examples:

What did you do last week? – On Saturday, I swam to the supermarket.

How was the movie? – It was boring. My little brother fell asleep on the ceiling.

Source: [Gianfranco Conti / The Language Gym](#)

Activity example: Special person interviews

- The ‘Special person interview’ or ‘Star of the week’ is a teaching technique which aims to provide lots of modelling of target language question-and-answer structures while simultaneously strengthening classroom relationships.
 - Model a 5 minute ‘special person interview’ at the beginning of the year. Consider the use of a prop or picture as the initial ‘special person’ to avoid any shyness. Model question and answer patterns in the target language while students listen, confirm answers in chorus, and make notes.

Source and further information: *Liam Printer*, [The Motivated Classroom podcast – Episode 15](#)

Activity example: Special person interviews

- ❑ Progress to conducting a 5 minute 'special person interview' in the target language once a week, focussed on a different member of your class. Circle over question-and-answer structures to support class question technique as well as the interviewee's answers. The rest of the class listens, confirms questions or answers in chorus and, after the interview, makes notes on the information shared.
- ❑ Students work up to suggesting their own questions for the interviewee in later iterations and, eventually, to conducting the full interview themselves.

Source and further information: *Liam Printer*, [The Motivated Classroom podcast – Episode 15](#)

Key Idea #2



We do best what we do most often:

Incorporate lots of non-threatening, low-stakes, highly supported, speaking opportunities from Day 1 in all language classes – from beginner to more advanced – to normalise the activity and reduce anxiety.



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Activity example: Reading aloud game

- Reading aloud in pairs or small groups is non-threatening, helps to improve decoding skills and trains students to produce target language sounds, thereby contributing to the development of oral fluency.
- **Steal the card game**
 - ☐ Step 1: Show a list of 12-15 target language model sentences that students have been practising and understand the meaning of
 - ☐ Step 2: Give each student 4 blank cards. Tell them to select any 4 sentences from the list they wish and have them write 1 sentence on each card.

Source: [The Language Gym / Gianfranco Conti](#)

Activity example: Reading aloud game

- **Steal the card game**

- ☐ Step 3: Begin play. Aim of the game is to “steal” as many cards as possible from other students in the allocated time (approx. 1 minute). To “steal”, student X needs to approach student Y and read any 4 sentences from the list on the board. If any of these sentences matches one of the 4 that student Y has written on their cards, student Y will need to give that card to student X.
- ☐ Step 4: Student with the most cards at the end of the time, wins.

Source: [The Language Gym / Gianfranco Conti](#)

Activity example: Total body question words

- Teach key question words combined with explanatory gestures very early on in a language teaching programme.
- Use these to model and then support the production of extremely simple, question and answer exchanges to show students they can communicate from the beginning.
- See an example of gestures for question words in Spanish by English language teacher, researcher and professional learning facilitator, *Rachel Hawkes*: [Gestures for questions](#)

Activity example: Total body question words

- Use picture cards linked to key question words to prompt very simple exchanges in pair practice.

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Key Idea #3



Carefully sequence speaking activities so that students have lots of chances to produce the target language successfully: begin with highly scaffolded spoken output and move progressively to opportunities for free expression.



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Activity example: Pyramid translation

- This activity provides support to build up sentences.
- Students work in threes – two players and a referee (with the answer sheet). The two players take turns translating each sentence orally from the top of the pyramid within a given time period. If they make a mistake, the other player has a turn, starting from the top of the pyramid. Whoever translates each sentence aloud in the target language, without mistakes, and within the given time, is the winner. Have a variety of pyramid cards available to extend the activity.

Source: [Gianfranco Conti / The Language Gym](#)

LAST WEEK

Last week I studied

Last week I studied with classmates

Last week I studied with classmates for a test

Last week I studied with classmates for an important test

Last week, on Monday evening, I studied with classmates for an important test

Last week, on Monday evening, I studied with classmates for an important maths test

Last week, on Monday evening, I studied with classmates in the library for an important maths test

Activity example: Sentence frames

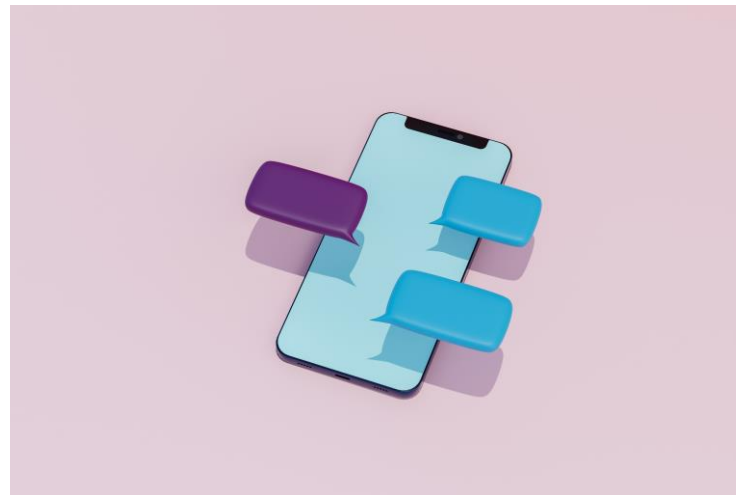
- Provide students with question-and-answer sentence builder frameworks and have them use these to construct scaffolded conversations in pairs or small groups.
- Different versions of the frameworks, featuring progressively less support and more opportunity for free language use, can be provided as student proficiency improves.

What	shall we do	this afternoon? tonight? tomorrow? next week?
	do you want	to do? to see? to buy?
Where	shall we	go? meet up?
	is	the beach? the theatre? the shopping mall?

Let's	go to meet at	the beach. the movies. your house. the shopping mall.
	have	an icecream. some popcorn. a party. a shopping trip.
The beach	is	in town.
The movie theatre		20 minutes north of here.
The shopping mall		in the outskirts.

Activity example: Written interactions

- Take advantage of new technologies and have students practise spontaneous interaction with each other in written modes before progressing to spoken interaction on similar topics. Written interaction, through text messaging or shared online documents and the like, share certain characteristics with spoken exchanges but still provide support for more free production by allowing for a little more thinking time, giving opportunities to erase and start again and tending to create less performance anxiety.
- Low tech versions of the same activity can be achieved through the use of pen and paper or mini-whiteboards.

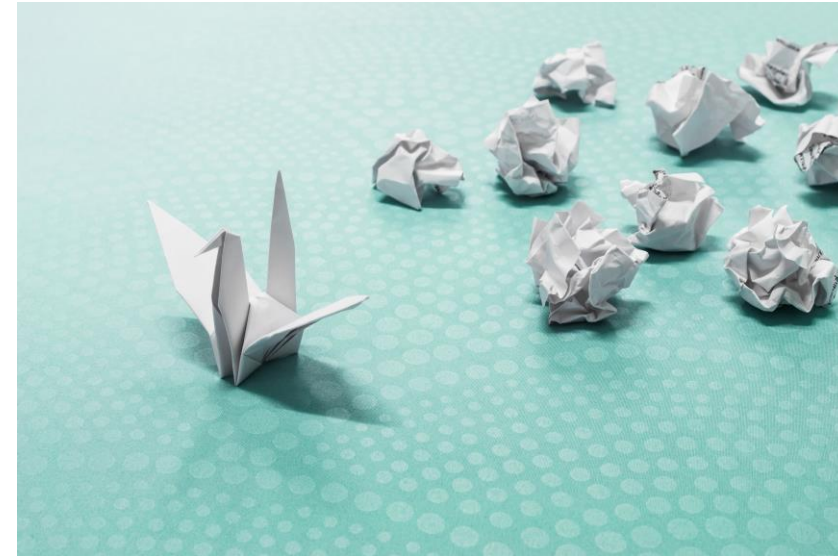


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Key Idea #4



Let students in on the “how to” of spontaneous speech acquisition so that they understand the process involved. Explicitly show them helpful tips, tricks and strategies and make them aware of the time, mistake-making and practice required.



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Activity example: Inquiry Chart reading

- Use an 'I-Chart' reading activity to provide insights into the language learning process.

TOPIC: Learning to speak a language	Question 1: How do babies learn their first language and why is this useful for us to know?	Question 2: What are the most important things to do to learn a new language?	Question 3: Can you learn to be a fluent speaker of a new language using only online tools? Why or why not?	Other interesting facts from the text or new questions the information raises
Text 1: <u>FAQ: Language Acquisition</u>				
Text 2: <u>How do we learn language?</u>				
Text 3: <u>Learning Languages: Key Principles of language learning</u> (‘Key Principles’ section only)				

Activity example: Compensatory strategy placemats

- Make, draw attention to, and have students regularly practise the use of compensatory strategy placemats when engaged in interactive speaking tasks. This will help them to remember ways to continue to communicate even if they don't have all the words.

Sourced from: [LANGUAGE LEARNING STRATEGIES CLASSIFICATION \[Rebecca L. Oxford\]](#) Chart prepared by Iván Potier H

Oxford, Rebecca L. (1990). Language Learning Strategies: What Every Teacher Should Know, Heinle & Heinle, Boston, USA, p. 17



Key Idea #5



It is important to spend sufficient time on the 'fluency strand' of a course in order for learners to automatise the language they are taught. Automatic recognition and retrieval of relevant language is foundational to the development of spontaneous speaking skills.



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Paul Nation: A well-designed listening and speaking course

	Percentage of time across proficiency levels		
Strands	Beginners	Intermediate	Advanced
Meaning focused target language listening	40%	20%	20%
Form focused instruction	25%	20%	10%
Meaning focused speaking	20%	30%	40%
Fluency development	15%	30%	30%

Of note:

- Time dedicated to developing fluency is roughly equal to that devoted to the other strands.
- The proportion of time dedicated to fluency development is recommended to increase as students progress.

[Nation, P \(1994\)*](#)

*Reference taken from Chart 3: “Listening and Speaking: Vital parts of any second language programme”

What is fluency development?

- Communication activities which “enable the learner to integrate previously encountered language items into an easily accessed, largely unconscious, language system as a result of focussing on the communication of messages”*.
- Essentially, spending enough time on using and reinforcing the familiar in meaning-focussed speaking tasks so that this language can eventually be called upon without undue effort.

This involves:

- ☐ Intentional, frequent and distributed opportunities for students to use, consolidate and automatise the spoken language skills they have been taught.
- ☐ Listening and speaking activities which require students to practise the comprehension and production of language they are already familiar with under certain communicative pressures or “desirable difficulties”.

[Nation, P \(1989\)*](#)

*Improving speaking fluency”

What might this look like in the classroom?

- Using repeated tasks which involve communicative pressures such as:
 - ☐ Progressively reduced time to complete the same task
 - ☐ Use of familiar vocabulary and grammar in new or different communicative contexts
 - ☐ Communicating with a changing number of participants
 - ☐ Carrying out the same speaking task with a variety of partners
 - ☐ Calling on previously learnt language to complete a task after moving to a new context or unit of work – spaced rather than massed practice.

[*Conti, G \(2020\)](#)

“En route to spontaneity (Part 1): The curve of skill acquisition and its implications for the language classroom”

Examples of tasks which involve desirable communicative pressures

4, 3, 2, 1 Technique

Preparation: Students are given a few minutes to think about and plan the language and content they would use for a 4 minute presentation on an appropriate topic they are already familiar with

e.g. *Talk about....*

- *a past holiday*
- *a holiday you are planning to go on in the future*
- *your ideal holiday*
- *what you usually do during the holidays when you don't travel anywhere*

[Source for activity:](#) Paul Nation

4, 3, 2, 1 Technique

4: Students are put into pairs or groups of 3 and have 4 minutes to present their talk to each other

3, 2, 1: Students are put with new partners or small groups and have to repeat their presentation with a 3, then 2, then 1 minute time limit.

[Source for activity](#): Paul Nation

Find someone who...

- **Preparation:** Introduction and practice of vocab, reading and listening tasks
- **Pre-Task**
 - ☐ Each student is given a card with some made up personal details
Example:
Name – Mei
Birthday – 3rd August
Siblings – One sister
Pet hates – Cricket and Facebook
 - ☐ Each student is also given a grid to fill out identifying someone who fits a series of descriptors
e.g. *Find someone who...*
 1. ... hates Facebook
 - 2... has two brothers

Source: [Gianfranco Conti / The Language Gym](#)

Find someone who...

Activity

- ☐ Students circulate around the room trying to find the person who fits each descriptor by asking questions in the target language.
- ☐ Prepare two or three sets of cards in order to play more rounds.

Source: [Gianfranco Conti / The Language Gym](#)

Pyramid Discussion

- A speaking activity where learners form progressively larger groups as they carry out a speaking task and must reach agreement before joining the next sized group. The activity finishes at a whole class level.
- Example:
 - ❑ Task: Decide which is the best leisure time activity.



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