

Managing Meaningful Interaction in the Elementary Language Classroom

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If you have ever taught an elementary language class, then you know what a challenge managing 'group' discussions can be. An elementary teacher can go from calm class to chaos in 3 seconds, just by asking a harmless question. A simple question, such as *"Who likes strawberry ice cream?"*, can elicit an explosion of simultaneous responses that grow louder and more intense with each second that ticks by without some type of acknowledgement for students' *meaningful* contributions to the discussion. The volume grows louder, and voices become more piercing as each student struggles to heard: *"I don't like strawberry ice cream; I like chocolate!...I LOVE strawberry ice cream!... I'm allergict to stwawbewwies!... After my friend's birthday party, my sister threw up strawberry ice cream in the car!...One time, my dog ate my ice cream cone!... My mom can't eat ice cream; she's lactose intolerant... One simple question ("Who likes strawberry ice cream?") can leave a teacher teetering on the brink of insanity and wondering why s/he hadn't just done a coloring activity.*

Now, some of you are probably asking, "What's wrong with coloring activities?" The answer is nothing, as long as you fill the activity with an abundance of contextualized, compelling,

For more information about these and other comprehension-based strategies for all ages, you may want to consider attending the Multi-cultural Language Conference in Ixtapa, Mexico, June 28-July 4, 2010. Visit <http://www.tprstorytelling.com>, for more information.

comprehensible input, and if you use the activity sparingly, so that you do not deprive students of meaningful interaction in the target language. Teachers can give commands, such as *"Color the ball blue. Color the boy's shirt red."*, but commands do not generally help students develop fluency. They help students develop *passive* language skills, but why would we settle for simple passive skills when young learners are capable of much more? Young learners **can** develop **active** language skills

that will lead to real fluency in the target language.

So how do teachers provide meaningful interaction in the target language without sacrificing sanity or a positive, productive learning environment? Think about how we engage babies, toddlers and young children in any activity or discussion. The answer is simple: **questions!** *More?– Do you want more?... Is the ball red or blue?... Which one is the pig? What does the cat say?... What’s your favorite color?... What’s your favorite TV show?... etc.* **Personalized** questions, such as these, provide meaningful interaction/ discussion that is age-appropriate and personally relevant, but only *manageable* with very few children. The key is to make personalized questions manageable and effective for a classroom full of children.

Managing productive classroom discussion in the target language relies on two crucial skills: how we **ask** questions and how we **elicit responses**. In terms of how we ask questions, there are several variables that should be controlled: **1) Questions should always be comprehensible.** Start by asking low-level questions (yes-no and either-or) , and use visuals and gestures to help provide meaning and context. **2) Keep questions concrete.** Young learners do best with questions that are grounded in everyday events, since previous life experiences provide the foundation for new understanding and learning. Young learners tend to be egocentric, and questions that pertain to their lives / life experiences will provide the most meaning. **3) Questions should be personalized and engaging.** Ask playful and fun questions that appeal to students’ interests. **4) Ask Questions that have an illusion of open-endedness.** Young learners generally lack both the language skills and the cognitive reasoning skills to answer a truly open-ended question. However, teachers can create the illusion of an open-ended question by offering a limited number of choices. (*ex.: What do you want to eat?– pizza or tacos?/ pizza, a taco or a hamburger?*)

Group discussion in the elementary language classroom takes patience and strategic planning. First, teachers need to carefully craft questions that meet the above-mentioned criteria, and then they need to manage how students provide

responses. Random, raucous responses will negate the effectiveness of personalized questions, no matter how well they are presented. If teachers strategically provide fun, natural and structured opportunities for all students to respond, young learners will be more apt to pay attention to questions **and** to the answers that are provided by classmates. Every student needs a viable outlet to provide meaningful, personalized answers that will be noticed and acknowledged.

Let’s face it, listening to twenty-five individual answers gets boring, and it leads to *contrived* questions that lack meaning. This begs the question: **HOW** do we notice and acknowledge all student responses without losing ‘control’ and without compromising engaging, interesting input? The answer is through variety and creativity! The following is a list of tactics for eliciting, managing and acknowledging responses from early language learners:

Post-it Charts:

On the board or on butcher paper, create a chart that pertains to students’ likes, interests or life experiences. (ie: favorite color, favorite ice cream flavors, pets, sports, etc.) Label three to five columns along the bottom. (ie: chocolate, vanilla, strawberry, other) Point to the chocolate column and ask students, “*Who likes chocolate ice cream?*” Students who like chocolate ice cream place their name on the chocolate column. Continue asking about each flavor until all students have placed their name on the chart. Compare and contrast student (dis)likes, asking basic questions interspersed with amusing questions. (*ie: Does Billy like vanilla ice cream or does Jenny like vanilla ice cream? What kind of ice cream does Billy like? Does Billy like vanilla or does Billy like JENNY!?* *Does Tyler like chocolate ice cream? Does Tyler like chocolate or spinach ice cream? What kind of ice cream does Sponge Bob like?*) Other charts could be based on other question, such as, *What sport do you play? What’s your favorite color? Do you have a pet?– a dog?, a cat?, a fish?, a mouse? Etc.*

TPR Responses:

In addition to the basic “*Raise your hand if...*” or “*Stand up if...*”, students can also respond to questions with a specific action or gesture. Questions and corresponding gestures might include: *Who has brown hair?– Jump twice, if you have brown hair.*

Who has a red car?– Put your hands on your head, if you have a red car. Who plays piano?– Pretend you are playing the piano. Who is wearing a red shirt?– Stand up, if you are wearing a red shirt. Who is wearing jeans?– Dance ballet, if you are wearing jeans. Who rides the school bus?– Bounce up and down in your seat, if you ride the bus. Who rides bike to school?– Lay on your back and ride bicycle with your feet in the air, if you ride bike to school. Who walks to school?– Walk in place, if you walk to school. Etc.



Hands-on Responses

Hands-on responses require students to have one to three visual representations of possible answers. Visuals can take a variety of forms: hand-made popsicle stick puppets, Clip Art images, images or line drawings from curricula, coloring activities, etc., colored yarn, props, toys, etc. Ask a variety of questions that can be answered by

simply holding up a visual representation of the answer. Students can verbalize answers as they hold up each item, and the teacher should vocalize each desired answer. *What color is your hair? / What color is Billy’s hair?– Hold up the appropriate color yarn. Do you live in a house or an apartment?– Hold up appropriate picture. Who lives in a Pineapple under the sea?/Who lives in the White House?– Hold up appropriate character. Etc.*

Lottery Responses

Write every student’s name on a popsicle stick, and place the popsicle sticks in a jar. After every third or fourth group question, prep the class for the “Special Question.” Pull a popsicle stick (student’s name) out of the jar and dramatically say, “It’s time for a “Special Question. The Special question is for... student’s name!” Direct the next question to that student, but MAKE SURE you guarantee success when you ask the question. For example, if you ask “*Who lives in the White House?*”, guarantee success by pointing to a picture of the White House as you ask. Then pause briefly to discern whether or not the student understands the questions and knows the answer. If

s/he needs more help (aka: scaffolding), simply follow up with an either-or option: “*Does Sponge Bob live in the White House or does Obama (the president) live in the White House?*”

Sustaining a positive learning environment is crucial for comprehensibility and for maintaining student engagement and focus, regardless of the age of the learner.