

2 Researching interaction

Lessons are sometimes so busy that, at the end, I have no real idea how much an individual spoke or even if someone managed to avoid speaking at all.

Aim

To research interaction in your own class and to plan for improved interaction in future lessons.

Introduction

An important way of improving the interaction in your lessons is to first realise what kind of interaction you already have, but this is surprisingly hard to know. So much goes on in a lesson that, by the end of class, it can all blur in the teacher's mind, making it hard to be sure how many people talked, or how much. The teacher may have a general impression that 'students didn't talk very much' or that 'some students dominated'. However, the exact details and statistics of what really went on in the classroom might be very surprising if actually researched and revealed. Once the data starts to reveal what really happened, it becomes more possible to plan for things to go differently.

Technique: Mapping interaction

Prepare a simple sketch plan of your class, clearly showing seating and student names. Mark a T (for teacher), where you are most likely to stand, and a large W (for 'whole class'), somewhere amongst the students. Make a number of copies. Invite a colleague (or one of your students) to observe part or all of a lesson. Explain that this would not be a general all-purpose observation, but you just want them to notice one aspect of what happens: the interaction, especially in whole-class phases of work. Your colleague should choose two or three different parts of the lesson. During each of these, she should watch carefully for about three to five minutes and note interaction in one of these ways:

1 Quantitative

Each time someone speaks (student or teacher), mark a tally mark next to their seat on your seating plan, e.g.:

1		4	
2		5	
3		6	

This will reveal who has spoken most and least over particular sections of the lesson.

2 Directional

Each time someone speaks (student or teacher), draw an arrow from them to the person they are talking to. If they speak to the same person again later, add tally marks to the arrow. If the teacher or student speaks to the whole class, draw the arrow to the W.

3 Qualitative

Each time someone speaks, write a number next to them, and on a separate page, make a note of the number, together with a short comment on what they said (e.g. 'Just said a mumbled "yes"' or 'Gave a long, useful answer to the question' or 'Spoke very slowly and wasn't easy to understand').

Technique: In-class research

If it isn't possible to get a tame colleague to undertake the data-collecting observation suggested in the technique above, one possible alternative is to collect your own data, keeping a tally of who speaks in whole-class question and answer sessions. Make a sheet with each student's name on it down the left side. Every time a student gives a substantial answer (i.e. something more than a basic 'yes' or 'no'), make a tally mark next to their name. After a few lessons, you should have a revealing picture of who does the talking – and who doesn't. Is there a dramatic imbalance? Do some students never or hardly ever say anything? Did you find that the act of doing the research already started to make you think and, for example, change how much you asked some students to speak? (The act of observing often subtly changes the thing being observed, even while that observation is still happening!)

Once you have collected some data about the interaction patterns in your class, you need to ask yourself some questions about them, such as:

- Who talked most: teacher or students?
- Did some students take a significantly greater role than others?
- How many students managed to hide, saying little or nothing?
- How well did you manage the interaction? Did you use effective techniques to get some to speak or to say less?
- Did you get in the way of student interaction at any point, e.g. talking too much, talking over students, interrupting, etc.?

Having thought about these, the next question is simply, 'How can I improve on that?'

Questions for reflection

- How do you imagine a map of interactions would look for a typical lesson of yours? Would it reveal that lots of different people spoke, and that the teacher did not dominate speaking time? Or would it be mostly you?