



Key Findings

- 1. Interaction in small groups** - small group conversations give learners time to activate language and formulate utterances which sit at the cutting edge of their capabilities.
- 2. Communication breakdowns** - We found that in trying to repair breakdowns students use skilful teaching techniques. And because they are often pushing themselves to be understood in these situations, they can also use more ambitious language.
- 3. Time** - One of the main findings in our project was that most of what we are teaching in our syllabuses is not what our students are using - in conversation anyway.
- 4. Word patterns and Chunks** - If we can help our students to process language in patterns, beyond word level, we can not only improve the fluency and complexity of their speaking, but also their ability to process texts more efficiently.

Recommendations

Why is talking in small groups important for language learning? Our data suggests that the interaction patterns in small group conversations provide a scaffolding through which students can activate dormant words and build complexity in what they want to say.

Are the conversation styles that our students import from their cultures, beneficial for language learning? For example, it seems that some of our Somali and Bengali students show solidarity and agreement by speaking in overlapping turns, often interrupting and finishing each other's utterances.

Can we be modelling 'turn getting' and 'turn holding' strategies for our quieter or more hesitant students? For example, using fixed phrases to interrupt, pausing after (and not before) conjunctions and placing emphasis on these discourse markers.

Can we make our students more aware of the different ways of dealing with misunderstanding? 'Letting something go' is a strategy we all use when we don't understand and getting clarification is often a cooperative exercise, where the listener guides the speaker to where the misunderstanding lies.

Instead of ploughing on with lesson plans, can we draw the lesson out of informal conversations that are buzzing around in small groups at the beginning of a class? Students do not need big discussion topics to stretch themselves, and it is often during the incidental chat at break times or before the class begins, when the 'topics' most relevant to them can emerge.

Can we be working with and expanding the language that students are already using, rather than teaching words and grammar we think they ought to be using? The text book grammar syllabus, which we import from EFL, is not based on evidence of how languages are used and learned in the real world¹⁴. This is born out in the rarity of these grammar structures in our students' spoken repertoires

Can we adapt the vocabulary activities we already use for practicing lexical chunks?
¹⁵ Seeing words in patterns of fixed chunks and semi fixed chunks of frames and slots can help students to produce and process language more efficiently.

Can we focus on how some 'grammar sequences' can help learners construct longer speaking turns? For example, 'If' clauses are useful fluency builders, and frames such as 'not only ..but also' help our learners hold more expansive speaking turns.

When a student comes out with a short anecdote or story, what is good about it and how can we improve it? This does not mean focusing on verb forms. For example, our data shows that consistent and accurate use of past tense verbs is way down the list of what makes a good story.

