

Interactional Skills for EFL Learners

by [Samuel Crofts](#)

Two years ago at the TESOL 2015 convention, at my first ever TESOL presentation, I discussed my move from teaching international students in the United Kingdom to teaching Japanese students in Japan and how the lack of willingness to communicate among my students had impacted my classroom approach. I went on to suggest that paying specific attention to teaching discrete interactional skills, such as the use of interruptions, tag questions, and discourse markers, could have benefits both in terms of classroom atmosphere and student confidence. (You can read about my approach [here](#).) An end-of-semester survey had suggested that my students had never come across interactional skills in their pretertiary learning experience and that they had both enjoyed learning about them and found them useful in their in-class discussions.

What this first project failed to expand upon, and what one of the more insightful questions posed in the Q&A session in Toronto asked, was whether students were likely to employ the skills I had taught them in *real life* intercultural situations or if they were simply doing what they were told to please their teacher. Well, 2 years have passed since that time, and my quest to help my students improve their interactional performance continues unabated. In the following paragraphs, I will expand a little on why I have persisted with this approach, why I think it matters, and how it may have helped my students outside of the classroom.

What Are Interactional Skills?

A quick Google search of the phrase “interactional competence” yields many hundreds of pages of research on how individuals acquire the ability (both in their first language and additional languages) to use various communicative resources in interactional settings, to accomplish certain goals and produce meaningful communication. These resources include devices to

- begin and end interactions,
- show understanding,
- manage and change topic,
- indicate disagreement or agreement, and so on.

Of course, these elements of interaction do not operate in isolation, and there is a complex interplay between the interactional and linguistic features of any communicative event. However, to present the topic in a manageable way, I decided upon a set of separate and discrete interactional skills. Students are exposed to these parts of speech, asked to notice them in other people’s speech acts, and invited to incorporate them into their own. Four of these skills are summarized here:

- **Discourse Markers:** Discourse markers in English such as *you know*, *like*, and *I mean* are often used in spoken English, in a similar way to *eto* and *ano* in Japanese.
- **Tag Questions:** English speakers often use rhetorical tag questions to show they have finished talking and invite a response. Tag questions often have rising intonation, and include *right?*, *you know?*, and *you know what I mean?*

- **Listener Participation:** Interactions are not one-way activities, and back channeling devices such as eye contact and simple sounds and words like *ahh*, *mmm*, and *really?* are often used show interest and engagement.
- **Disagreement:** Clearly, there is no one way to disagree with another person, but rules for disagreement are highly culture specific and, therefore, presenting one or two methods for disagreement can be useful. One such method is for speakers to hide their disagreement in an agreement so there is a softer effect. Consider the below extract:

A: London is an amazing place

B: Yeh, the nightlife is great, but the city's a bit dirty, you know?

Why Teach Interactional Skills?

In my own teaching context in Japan, I became convinced that one of the things inhibiting my students' willingness to communicate with each other in English was a lack of knowledge of such communicative resources and a lack of experience of using them. Their preuniversity language training had been so focused on vocabulary expansion and grammar knowledge that English had effectively become stripped of its function as a communicative tool and students were at a loss when asked to engage in interactive activities.

I therefore set about trying to equip students with a toolbox of discrete interactional skills for them to learn and practice. My goal was to help them to create and maintain comfortable interactions both in and out of the classroom and allow them to use the vocabulary and grammar knowledge they had already acquired in their language learning before university.

Activities for in the Classroom

All students have knowledge of at least one set of interactional skills, namely those common to their first language. Therefore, as opposed to complex meta language and theories of interaction, I typically introduce this topic with an exploration of important interactional skills of students' own first language before moving on to English language examples. Activities can be adapted for use with multilingual groups or students at varying levels and can include the following:

- **Odd one out:** Present students (ideally in video format) with three or four excerpts of their own language with one excerpt flouting the rules of interaction for that language. Students must identify and fix the problem excerpt.
- **Five features:** Ask learners to come up with five features of everyday interaction in their first language and explain one of them to the class using examples.
- **Skill spotting:** Show students authentic English language videos (see YouTube clips [Podcast 1](#), [Podcast 2](#), and [Podcast 3](#)) and ask them to spot discrete interactional skills and total them up (e.g., the number of interruptions or the types of discourse markers used).
- **Script writing:** Give students a set of social situations (first date, job interview, school reunion) and ask them to consider the typical features of interaction in such

situations and write comprehensive scripts including pretaught interaction features (false starts, interruptions, etc.)

Outside the Classroom

As with all language teaching, the goal is for learners to be able to use the skills they acquire through study and practice to communicate with others. That said, departing from one's native language interactional style can be a face-threatening activity and, as a result, plenty of controlled practice in the classroom is a necessary step in equipping students with the experience and confidence they need to use these skills in natural interactions that occur outside of the classroom.

Reflecting the question posed to me back in Toronto—are students likely to employ the skills I had taught them in real life intercultural situations?—the final element of my interaction project is an assignment for students to video record themselves interviewing international students at the university. This gives students not only some “real life” practice but also creates a useful resource for reflection and, if repeated at the beginning and end of a course, an excellent yardstick to measure progress.

Samuel Crofts has taught English at universities in China, the United Kingdom, and Japan. His main interests are the teaching of interactional skills as well as the creation of resources and activities to encourage students to engage with English outside of the classroom.