



Dialogue facilitation

learning to listen

Francesca Helm¹

Potential impact	medium
Timescale	short term
Keywords	intercultural dialogue, virtual exchange, facilitation, willingness to communicate, active listening

What is it?

When we think about dialogue in foreign language teaching then dyadic interactions, service encounters, or role plays that students might perform in a ‘communicative’ classroom come to mind. The kind of dialogue we are talking about here instead is a form of **intergroup dialogue**, that is dialogue as a method of communication that can be used to explore shared issues between groups from diverse backgrounds, dialogue that highlights the importance of people’s lived experiences. For language learners, this kind of dialogue is an opportunity to communicate about themselves and their local identities, interests, and values and learn about others’. Online dialogue can bring people together to address questions that transcend their own borders, to explore common subjects but from the starting point of their locality (Canagarajah, 2004).

Intergroup dialogue is led by trained facilitators who are multi-partial leaders of a group process. Their role is to create a safe and effective learning environment and model tools for effective cross-cultural, intergroup dialogue. Facilitation tools include awareness-raising and addressing group dynamics, as well as using active listening skills such as summarising, mirroring, and reframing. Facilitators can bring critical thinking to a conversation by asking good questions, exploring

1. Università degli Studi di Padova, Padova, Italy; francesca.helm@unipd.it; <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2197-7884>

How to cite: Helm, F. (2021). Dialogue facilitation: learning to listen. In T. Beaven & F. Rosell-Aguilar (Eds), *Innovative language pedagogy report* (pp. 11-15). Research-publishing.net. <https://doi.org/10.14705/rpnet.2021.50.1229>

terminology used, and addressing not only opinions but also actions and feelings.

Example

Language learners across Europe and Southern Mediterranean countries have been engaging in online facilitated dialogue projects through Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange. Every week for anything from 4-10 weeks (depending on the exchange) they meet with a group of 8-12 peers and engage in a two-hour dialogue session supported by trained facilitators. During these sessions, they talk about issues ranging from hate speech, gender and media, newcomers and nationalism, and technology and society – depending on the specific programme. Facilitated dialogues address topics on which participants may have diverse perspectives and experiences and which may be difficult for educators to address in the language classroom. Although participants may enter these exchanges as ‘language learners’, in the dialogue sessions they become language users and bring into play their multiple, intersectional identities as they position themselves in dialogues on a range of issues.

Benefits

Most language learners go into virtual exchange programmes with the aim of practising their foreign language, hoping to acquire skills and confidence in speaking. Many report initial anxiety as they enter a new space and are worried about actually having to use the foreign language; speaking to people they do not know. However, this anxiety is quickly overcome as they learn to listen to others, bring their experience or opinions to the table, and further understand the perspectives of others. The dialogue offers a genuine communicative context which can be meaningful and motivating for language learners and enhance their ‘willingness to communicate’.

Through their participation in a facilitated dialogue exchange, language students acquire not only rich vocabulary related to the specific themes addressed, but also much more nuanced understanding of the issues than a textbook would

offer as they are engaging with participants and perspectives from a wide range of socio-political contexts.

The most important thing participants report learning through facilitated dialogue is ‘active listening’ (Helm & van der Velden, 2020). This is not listening comprehension as a skill to master, a transaction where information is exchanged or transmitted and learners have to ‘understand’ what is being said. Rather, it is listening as a key to relationality, learning from and with others. This kind of active listening can bridge gaps between people but requires patience, attentiveness, and responsiveness (Schultz, 2003). Taking part in facilitated dialogue thus offers language learners opportunities for intercultural learning, engaging with difference, which can also lead to self-discovery.

Potential issues

To be successful, intergroup dialogue needs to be facilitated. Power imbalances, participants not feeling safe, or not feeling heard can affect the quality of dialogue, as can political correctness and orientation to consensus. Learning from dialogue is strongest when participants move out of their comfort zones and feel somewhat uncomfortable, but from a place where they feel safe.

Dialogue may not be suitable for those who have little familiarity with the language being used as the issues addressed are complex and nuanced. It is thus suited for those with intermediate or advanced levels of language rather than beginners.

A further issue is which languages are more commonly used. When bringing together groups of individuals from a wide range of countries in online facilitated dialogue, English is often the language that most participants will have in common as it has become the most commonly studied foreign language. In Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange, some exchanges have also been carried out in Arabic and some dialogue sessions in French, but much fewer than in English. For less commonly taught foreign languages it may be more difficult to find groups for facilitated dialogue from a wide range of sociocultural contexts who share knowledge of that language.

Looking to the future

At the time of writing, Covid-19 has led to unprecedented levels of physical distancing, with more and more of our interactions and learning experiences taking place online. There is an increased demand for quality online learning experiences. The pandemic has also highlighted the interconnectedness of the world and the need for a greater understanding and social and political engagement with this world. There is thus an increased relevance of online dialogue which can involve language learners in meaningful social interactions.

Looking to the future, facilitated dialogue could become a more common pedagogic approach in language education and be introduced in a wider range of contexts and with a greater variety of languages. A more explicit trans-languaging stance could be adopted in online facilitated dialogue to make it a more inclusive practice, as the multilateral and collaborative nature of dialogue lends itself to the use of multiple languages with participants supporting one another in meaning-making through translation, rephrasing, and a collaborative ethos.

Language students, but also language teachers, can follow courses in online dialogue facilitation, thus developing facilitation skills which can be transferred both to the classroom and to many other online and offline contexts.

References

- Canagarajah, S. (2004). Reconstructing local knowledge, reconfiguring language studies. In S. Canagarajah (Ed), *Reclaiming the local in language policy and practice* (pp. 3-25). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781410611840>

- Helm, F., & van der Velden, B. (2020). *Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange: 2019 impact report*. Publications Office of the European Union <https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/0ee233d5-cbc6-11ea-adf7-01aa75ed71a1/language-en>
- Schultz, K. (2003). *Listening: a framework for teaching across differences*. Teachers College Press.

Resources

- Helm, F. (2018). *Emerging identities in virtual exchange*. Research-publishing.net. <https://doi.org/10.14705/rpnet.2018.25.9782490057191>
- Helm, F. (2016). Facilitated dialogue in online intercultural exchange. In R. O'Dowd & T. Lewis (Eds), *Online intercultural exchange: policy, pedagogy, practice*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315678931>
- Read about facilitated dialogue in this article: taking dialogue online by Rafael Tyszblat (pp.178-187). <https://www.daghammarskjold.se/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/dd64-dialogue-web1.pdf>
- Watch and listen to students talking about their experience of dialogue: <https://vimeo.com/80598254>
- What is dialogue? Watch this Erasmus+ Video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZsCbxPdEihM>
- Explore facilitated dialogue programmes: <http://www.soliya.net> and <https://sharingperspectivesfoundation.com/>
- Learn about training for dialogue facilitators: <https://www.soliya.net/programs/facilitation-training>



Published by Research-publishing.net, a not-for-profit association
Contact: info@research-publishing.net

© 2021 by Editors (collective work)
© 2021 by Authors (individual work)

Innovative language pedagogy report
Edited by Tita Beaven and Fernando Rosell-Aguilar

Publication date: 2021/03/22

Rights: the whole volume is published under the Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives International (CC BY-NC-ND) licence; **individual articles may have a different licence.** Under the CC BY-NC-ND licence, the volume is freely available online (<https://doi.org/10.14705/rpnet.2021.50.9782490057863>) for anybody to read, download, copy, and redistribute provided that the author(s), editorial team, and publisher are properly cited. Commercial use and derivative works are, however, not permitted.

Disclaimer: Research-publishing.net does not take any responsibility for the content of the pages written by the authors of this book. The authors have recognised that the work described was not published before, or that it was not under consideration for publication elsewhere. While the information in this book is believed to be true and accurate on the date of its going to press, neither the editorial team nor the publisher can accept any legal responsibility for any errors or omissions. The publisher makes no warranty, expressed or implied, with respect to the material contained herein. While Research-publishing.net is committed to publishing works of integrity, the words are the authors' alone.

Trademark notice: product or corporate names may be trademarks or registered trademarks, and are used only for identification and explanation without intent to infringe.

Copyrighted material: every effort has been made by the editorial team to trace copyright holders and to obtain their permission for the use of copyrighted material in this book. In the event of errors or omissions, please notify the publisher of any corrections that will need to be incorporated in future editions of this book.

Typeset by Research-publishing.net
Cover layout by © 2021 Raphaël Savina (raphael@savina.net)
Photo by Digital Buggu from [Pexels](https://www.pexels.com/) (CC0)

ISBN13: 978-2-490057-86-3 (Ebook, PDF, colour)
ISBN13: 978-2-490057-87-0 (Ebook, EPUB, colour)
ISBN13: 978-2-490057-85-6 (Paperback - Print on demand, black and white)
Print on demand technology is a high-quality, innovative and ecological printing method; with which the book is never 'out of stock' or 'out of print'.

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data.
A cataloguing record for this book is available from the British Library.

Legal deposit, France: Bibliothèque Nationale de France - Dépôt légal: mars 2021.
