Dialogue facilitation
learning to listen

Francesca Helm

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
