INTERACTION IN SECOND LANGUAGE CLASSROOMS

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ABSTRACT

Dealing with reticent students in a second language classroom is one the major issues a language teacher is faced with, and it becomes an exasperating experience when the students are from multicultural background who do not know how to respond to a teacher's queries. Language teachers are confronted with the challenge of student-student and teacher-student interaction. In my paper I have explored the problem of active participation in an L2 classroom and sought to resolve how interaction takes place in formal instructional settings by incorporating the views of researchers and my own teaching experience.

Key words: L2 learners (second language learners) communicative language, language acquisition, cultural difference, interactive discourse, pair/group work, error correction

I. INTRODUCTION

Interaction is an important word for language teachers. "In the era of communicative language teaching, interaction is, in fact, the heart of communication; it is what communication is all about (Brown, H.D. 1994)". After several decades of research on teaching and learning languages, it has been discovered that the best way to learn to interact is through interaction itself. Theories of communicative competence emphasize the importance of interaction as human beings use language in various contexts to negotiate meaning. Rivers (1987) states that through interaction, students can increase their language store as they listen to read 'authentic linguistic material', or even the output of their fellow students in discussions, joint problem-solving tasks, or dialogue journals. In interaction, students can use all they possess of the language - all they have learned or absorbed in real life exchanges, where expressing their real meaning is important to them.

Since interaction is thought to be important in naturalistic language acquisition, how is it accomplished in formal instructional settings? I am interested in examining the findings of some classroom research to see how interaction takes place in second language acquisition classroom settings and the significance of active participation by learners toward the enhancement of learning. In

this report I have attempted to integrate reviews of relevant literature with some of my teaching experience and classroom observations in the U.S.A.

II. CULTURAL DIFFERENCES IN CLASSROOM NORMS

Many second language students come from countries where the patterns of classroom communication are quite different. Johnson (1996) points out that, the patterns of communication in most classrooms are not explicitly taught, but they are implicitly enforced through teachers' use of language; second language students may find it difficult to infer the norms for participation in classroom events. Thus, the ways in which these students talk and act in second language classrooms may seem strange or inappropriate in different cultural settings.

Students bring with them the values and attitudes of their own cultures. They cannot anticipate the cultural differences they will come upon when they go abroad to countries like the U.S.A. The education system of various cultures differs from this country. In some places, teachers are the ultimate authority and students do not participate in class discussions, and it becomes very difficult to make a class an interactive one. Students from such cultures may find it difficult to speak up in

the relaxed environment of most U.S. classrooms. Sato (1982) was curious about the familiar stereotype of Asian learners as being more passive and quiet than other ESL learners. Through the use of videotapes and observations, she determined that her Asian learners, compared to others, did not actively participate in the class.

In his article ' Interactive discourse in small and large groups", Kramsch (1987) conveys that the closeness or distance learners wish to establish with one another has to do with how well they know each other, how it will affect their self-image. For example, the socially expected behavior of males and females. The concept of social distance is, moreover, culturally determined. In multicultural classes, difference in the value attached to verbal versus nonverbal communication can affect the distance learners wish to maintain in the foreign language. Kramsch further point out to Hall's (1976) findings, which conveys that "…..students from cultures in which behaviors are highly predictable because of the 'homogeneous normative structure' of their society (e.g., Asian) tend to underestimate in English the importance of the communicative dimensions of discourse. By contrast, these are essential in a society such as the North America, where, individuality is highly valued and where social relationships have to be negotiated in every communicative situation." Asian students' lack of verbal involvement in class interaction may be perceived by North American ESL teachers as the maintenance of an inappropriate social distance toward the group and thus lead to misunderstanding.

Based on the reviews of the research and from my experience, I have perceived that learners participate verbally in language classrooms to very different extents. Some are verbally reticent, while others tend to dominate the interaction. All these behaviors seem to be related to cultural origin. While teaching an ESL class, I noticed my Japanese students to be painfully aware of their limitations and constantly worried about their ability to use the language and less willing to partake in class interaction. I realized they felt somehow intimidated by other proficient speakers in the class and also by the presence of male students. Japan is a male dominated country and for a female to speak in front of a male is impolite, specifically if he is a senior citizen. Shyness and inhibition stood in their way of progress in

speaking the foreign language, which prevented them from taking risks and seizing opportunities to practice and learn. Johnson (1996) states that teachers must recognize that differences in second language students' linguistic and interactional competencies exist and, more importantly, that these competencies do not represent cognitive or social deficiencies. Hence, teachers should create classroom events that allow for greater variability in both the academic task structures and social participation.

During my teaching experience with students of different cultural backgrounds, I assisted them in their efforts to communicate in a new language. In the process, I taught and learned a new culture as well. As a facilitator I had to take into consideration some of the cross-cultural issues, since I had students from multicultural backgrounds. One vital aspect I learned was, my understanding of cultural differences, and my sensitivity to them, was as important to my students as the second language that I taught. My interest in their cultures encouraged them to use English as they shared with me experiences from their own lives.

III. ROLES OF THE INTERACTIVE TEACHER

Being sensitive toward the students' cultural norms paves the way for the teacher in turning a class into an interactive one. For interaction to take place, "…the teacher must create a climate in which spontaneity can thrive, in which unrehearsed language can be performed, and in which the freedom of expression given over to students makes it impossible to predict everything that they will say and do (Brown, 1994)." Some control on a teacher's part is actually an important element of successfully carrying out interactive techniques. Teacher-directed and dominated classrooms cannot, by their nature, be interactive. It is mandatory for a teacher to take the role of a controller and a facilitator rather than of an authoritarian.

Rivers (1983) has claimed that "Real interaction in a classroom requires the teacher to step out of the limelight, to cede a full role to the student in developing and carrying through activities, to accept all kinds of opinions, and be tolerant of errors the student makes while attempting to communicate." The teacher as a facilitator focuses

on the principle of intrinsic motivation by allowing students to discover language through using it in context rather than telling them about language. At times teacher has to take the least directive role. The teacher has to be there to advice and counsel when the student seeks it. This technique in invariably practiced by experienced teachers in language classes. One of the classes that I observed at the University of Pennsylvania's Language Center, comprised of 18 students from different nationalities. The teacher was an American female with several years of experience. I noticed the teacher sitting with her students in a row, rather than being in front of the class. She was very congenial and her students were at ease. Soon they started to respond to the teacher's dialogue and exchange ideas. I could recognize that by conferring with students by sitting with them lowered their anxiety level. When they saw the teacher as their peer, not one in front of the classroom giving direction, they felt more relaxed, and natural interaction took place. The students further got motivated to try things for themselves.

IV. QUESTIONING STRATEGIES FOR INTERACTIVE LEARNING

Observation of many language classes repeatedly show that teachers typically do between one half and three quarters of the talking done in classrooms. "Talk is one of the major ways that teachers convey information to learners, and it is also one of the primary means of controlling learner behavior (Allwright & Bailey 1999)." According to Nunan (1991), teacher talk is of crucial importance, not only for the organization of the classroom but also for the processes of acquisition. It is important for the organization and management of the classroom because it is through language that teachers either succeed or fail to implement their teaching plans. In terms of acquisition, teacher talk is important because it is probably the major source of comprehensible target language input the learner is likely to receive.

In second language classrooms, where learners often do not have a great number of tools for initiation and maintaining language, the teacher's questions provide necessary stepping-stones to communication. Appropriate questioning in an interactive classroom can fulfill a number of different functions. Teacher questions give students the opportunity to produce comfortably language without having to risk initiating language themselves. Students become afraid when they have to initiate conversation or topics for discussion. Teacher questions can serve to initiate a chain reaction of student interaction among themselves. Asking a lot of questions in a classroom will not by any means guarantee stimulation of interaction. Certain types of questions may actually discourage interactive learning. For example, too much time spent on 'display questions' (question for which the answer is already known to the teacher) -students can easily grow weary of artificial contexts that don't involve genuine seeking of information.

One of the most important keys to create an interactive language classroom is the initiation of interaction by the teacher. However non-directive the teaching style is, the teacher should provide the stimuli for continued interaction. These stimuli are important in the initial stage of a classroom lesson as well as throughout the lesson. Without such guidance, classroom interaction may indeed be communicative, but students can easily get distracted and move away from the class objectives.

Two major factors that has been considered in an interactive class room is 'wait time', or "…the amount of time the teacher pauses after a question and before pursuing the answer with further questions or nomination of another student" (Chaudron, 1988)", and different questioning strategy. Research have indicated that additional wait-time of about 5 seconds should especially allow second language learners a better chance to give their response, and it may fit better with their cultural norms of interaction. My experience has not always been positive enough to question the validity of the arguments.

It has also been revealed that teacher's different questioning strategies may be either helpful for or inhibiting of communication in classroom. Allwright, (1988) points out that at times teachers become too keen on getting the students to interact verbally, which can be counter-productive. During one of my teaching sessions, I had posed a question to one of my beginning level ESL students for which she was not prepared. Not realizing, how much 'wait time' to allocate her, I waited patiently. She groped hard for the appropriate response but failed. It took me sometime to get back to the normal trend of the

lesson. In the process, the student felt humiliated and I felt rather inept. Too much wait-time can be counter-productive just like asking questions to the student who is not prepared. From research, it has been revealed that on an average 'one second' wait time should be allocated to a student as classroom management becomes difficult if too much wait time is provided. However, a teacher should also rely on his/her judgment in assessing a student's ability to answer certain questions, and accordingly allocate the wait time.

V. INTERACTION THROUGH PAIR WORK/GROUP WORK

Other strategies, besides questioning, that promote communication in a language class are pair work and group work that obviously give rise to interaction. Encouraging students to develop their own strategies is an excellent means of stimulating the learner to develop tools of interaction. Even lecturing and other forms of oral communication and also involving students to read from texts contribute toward the process of creating and maintaining an interactive classroom.

Brown (1994) states that a group work "…is a generic term covering a multiplicity of techniques in which two or more students are assigned a 'task' that classes involves collaboration and self-initiated language." A considerable amount of research has been conducted in recent years into learner interaction, particularly interaction which takes place through group work. Nunan (1991) suggests that learning to speak in a foreign language will be facilitated when learners are actively engaged in attempting to communicate in groups. According to Harmer (1991) "…. group work is more dynamic than pair work: there are more people to react with and against in a group and, therefore, there is a greater possibility of discussion."

I have found group work to be extremely helpful with L2 (second language) earners, as it provides increased interaction in language classes. Group discussions are not limited to the students who are usually articulate. The learners, who feel inhibited to say something in front of the class or the teacher, often find it much easier to express themselves in front of a small group of their peers. When learners work in groups, there is greater chance that at least one member of the group will be able to solve a problem when it arises. It is more relaxing than working in pairs, particularly in case of my passive students who become active and vocal participants in the process.

While observing one of the conversational classes, I noticed the teacher making the students participate with their partners across a large table around which they sat. He wanted to ensure that the students strive hard to communicate with each other while working in pairs. The teacher later on explained that at times it becomes difficult to make the class an interactive one, since some of the students are extremely withdrawn and speak in inaudible voices. Soon I found the validity of his statement. The method was apparently effective, as I could hear the voices of the most reluctant ones. When pair work was in progress, at one point, I observed that the teacher assumed the role of a partner for one of the students. He felt that the student needed individual attention, as he was one of the weak ones. It is commendable to give individual attention to students who are in need of it, but then it is only possible when one has a limited number of students in class.

One of the major advantages of group work or pair work according to my observation is that "…. it frees the teacher from the usual role of instructor-corrector-controller, and allows him or her to wander freely around the class…. (Ur, Penny. 1981)." I can give help where needed, assess the performance of individual students by noting language mistakes for future remedial work and devote more time to my slower learners.

VI. MONITORING/CORRECTING STUDENT WORK

The effective teacher should circulate among the groups, listen to students, offer suggestions and criticisms, but it is not necessary to be a party to all linguistic intercourse in the classroom. Neither is it necessary to correct their errors. Krashen and Terrell (1988) state, "…error correction of speech even in the best of circumstances is likely to have a negative effect on the students' willingness to try to express themselves." Again, there has been enough research done on error correction to tell us that when teachers explicitly attempt to correct speech errors in the classroom, it hardly has any positive effect on students' performance. Errors are a necessary manifestation of interlanguage development and we should not become obsessed with their constant correction. It has been observed

that "…. teacher correction of learner errors is helpful to many students, it may not necessarily be an effective instructional strategy for every student or in all language classrooms. Peer correction or self-correction with teacher guidance may be more worthwhile investment of time and effort for some teachers and learners (Hendrickson, (1987)." However, no empirical research was found to substantiate these hypotheses. Moreover, well-managed group work can encourage spontaneous peer feedback on errors within the small group itself.

I have often observed L2 classes where the teacher moved around the class taking notes, while the students were engaged in small group interaction. Error correction was delayed till the communication came to an end. Only when the students finished the task at hand, some of the errors were pointed out, with some additional controlled practice by the whole class to correct the error. I thought the method to be quite valuable, as it was not necessary to identify the student who made the error.

VII. LEARNERS' EQUAL PARTICIPATION

The major question for the researchers is, whether or not active observable participation is a contributing factor in a successful interactive class. Whether teachers should encourage all their learners to be active contributors to classroom language lessons? Researchers do not yet know how or to what extent learners' discernible participation is related to their success in mastering the target language. There are theoretical and practical reasons for expecting learner participation to be productive, but no really compelling evidence that it actually is.

It is important to remember, that while teachers have a certain amount of power in the classroom, learners also clearly influence the pace and direction of the interaction. One thing for teachers to keep in mind is that students' learning strategies may not always parallel teachers' teaching strategies. Some learners may wish to be quiet and listen in order to learn, while their teachers believe they will learn by speaking.

One feature of Krashen's (1982) philosophy is that learners should not be forced to speak in the target language – that they would speak when they are ready and that learners, rather than teachers,

should make the decision. Some learners' level of verbal interaction in classrooms may be related to their own opinions about how they learn best. In some cases, learners may wish to speak out but feel inhibited in doing so. There may be times when teachers' desires to get students to interact verbally can be counter-productive as I have experienced in my teaching, but students do need to be constantly reminded and motivated to speak in the target language they are striving to acquire.

VIII. CONCLUSION

In my paper I have summarized some of the views of the researchers in order to see how interaction takes place in a second language classroom and its importance, because it determines what learning opportunities the learners get. Teachers and learners together are the contributing source in managing the classroom interaction and at the same time managing these learning opportunities. From the research findings, it is evident that making learners actively participate as much as possible cannot be universally right, as not all learners learn best in the same way. What all learners do need, unanimously, is an environment in which they can settle down to productive work, each in their various subtle ways.

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