

Classroom Interaction as a Strategy in ESL Teaching

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Abstract

Extensive researches on classroom language learning processes have identified activities that make students communicative are the most sought after. Of late the research focus is on the teacher-student interaction pattern, the question and answer exchange, integrating technology to stimulate the exchange of ideas and more particularly on the instructional conversations which can exploit insignificant topics into interesting ones to drag the motivated young adult learners of undergraduate courses into disseminating and gathering information. This article deliberates on teacher questioning practices which not only require students to recall factual information, but expect students employ more sophisticated cognitive skills and the necessity of instructional conversations for higher level thinking and understanding to make students cognitively receptive and productive in a language class. Furthermore, the classroom interaction and its pedagogical implications in the content integrated second language classrooms is its orbit of discussion.

Keywords: Classroom interaction, instructional conversations, cognitive skills, pedagogical implications

1. INTRODUCTION

It is only during the latter half of the last century (i.e.) the post method era in language teaching, that educators have concerned themselves with what actually happens between teachers and students in classrooms. In particular, extensive research has been conducted concerning the most common type of teacher-student interaction pattern, the question and answer exchange. Much of the research on teacher questioning practices indicates that teachers rely predominantly on low-level questions which simply require students to recall factual information, as opposed to questions which require more sophisticated cognitive skills. Furthermore, Wintergerst (1994) notes that very little research has been conducted on the types of questions used in English as a Second Language (ESL) classrooms, a knowledge of which can provide ESL teachers with insights into the pedagogical nature of second language acquisition. This article examines the role of questions in ESL classrooms, aligning with an insight into both content area and second language classrooms.

2. CLASSROOM INTERACTION

Ferris and Tagg (1996a, 1996b) feel extensive authentic practice i.e in-class-participation - such as taking part in discussions, interacting with peers and professors, and asking and answering

questions, is what the academic learners need to excel in academic communication. As such, the two-way dialogue between a teacher and learners as a classroom pedagogy, ‘discourse socialisation’ (Morita, 2000) and ‘extension of conversation’ (Bruner, 1990) is essential for ‘academic learning’ (Cummins, 1984). In the absence of ‘zone of proximal development’ (ZPD) - in a non-native environment, such practices help students to function from ‘inter-mental’ to an ‘intra-mental’ plain, i.e. as the students interact, they share knowledge among themselves to get it converted into individual knowledge (Vygotski, 1978; Wertsch and Kanner, 1992).

3. GROUP INTERACTION

ESL teachers are continually searching for approaches and techniques which will lead from large-scale drill-oriented lessons, which have long been associated with the audio-lingual behaviourists, to more individualized learning. The search for alternatives has brought ESL teachers to look for ways in which self-directed learning and individualization can be more effectively introduced in the ESL classroom. The small-group interaction is one way in which students can benefit more positively from their experiences in ESL classes. Peer-mediation, an approach whereby students take the responsibility for “learning from” and “teaching” one another, is presented as a realistic and practical innovation. The rationale for this approach which is based on actual classroom situations in which small-group, peer- mediated instruction is utilised.

As the heterogeneous student populations differ from each other in their linguistic and social backgrounds, the needs and motivations of the students have changed accordingly. The result is that increasing numbers of students and teachers seek learning situations in which students can proceed at their own pace, thus allowing the teacher to allot time to students who have the greatest need for formal instruction. The ironical situations in the language classrooms are when students perform well as a result of the guided and semi-guided stimuli but seem to waver when they are on their own without any direct stimuli. Some teachers underestimate the problem of wavering in non-guided situations, presuming that performance in guided situations adequately reflects students’ progress. Basically, it is not true. The quality of responses to controlled stimuli is assumed more important than the quality of responses in situations where students must make decisions and manipulate language for themselves. The unguided responses should take precedence over guided responses if students are to become effective communicators. Since the classroom cannot be separated from reality, students should start from the very beginning to initiate, develop and manipulate language, a task which they are forced to do in their own community and vocational environments. One of the most effective and efficient ways to give students opportunities to communicate in free and open situations in ESL classes is through the use of paired or small group (3 persons for Kohn and Vaida (1975) and five for Willis and Willis (2007) activities.

More than a decade, after their suggestion for realistic system of teaching, which combines inductive teaching, progression from controlled to decontrolled activities and individualized instruction, the many facets of the system are not unknown to ESL teachers who have kept pace with recent developments in ESL teaching. ‘Peer-mediated instruction’ or ‘group interaction’, as we use in any classroom activity turns students as respondents, informed sources or monitors for each

other. Peer-mediated activities typically are those in which students work together in pairs or in small groups on controlled or decontrolled activities. In some activities, one of the students has the correct answers and checks the accuracy of his or her partner(s). In others, the group works as a unit to produce responses: an utterance, a sentence or a paragraph.

4. TASK-BASED INTERACTION

Seedhouse (1999) advocates ‘task-based interaction’ as a learner centred communicative activity in a language classroom; during which “as a rule, the teacher withdraws after allocating tasks to learners, to allow them manage the interaction themselves. It permits teachers to move around the class, monitoring the interaction and sometimes intervening, if the students have difficulty with the task. Puleo and Hird (2004:36) as cited by Hosseini and Rabbar (2012) suggest familiar topics and a wider range of choices can make students get engaged in conversation. Additionally, they inform the choice of task is immensely crucial to bring out the students from their reluctant mood, to participate productively in a quality classroom interaction.

Pedagogically, Task-Based Language Teaching has strengthened certain principles and practices in language teaching (Nunan 2006). They are a need-based approach to content selection, learning to communicate through interaction in the target language, introduction of textual content into the learning situation, focusing on language and its learning process; and all these should prepare the learner for real world experiences outside the class. Further, in the context of academic language learning, for Nunan, “a task is a piece of classroom work that involves learners in comprehending, manipulating, producing or interacting in the target language while their attention is focused on mobilizing their grammatical knowledge in order to express meaning and in which the intention is to convey meaning rather than to manipulate form. The task should also have a sense of completeness, being able to stand alone as a communicative act in its own right with a beginning, a middle and an end” (p.17)

For Willis and Willis (2007) ‘doing task-based teaching’ involves a sequence of tasks in which both teacher and students get engaged. The teacher led instruction is a task in itself. It involves a genuine exchange of meaning, in which learners are required to process language for meaning... It helps learners to focus on the topic and engage their own knowledge and opinion on the subject” (p.21). According to Krashen’s (1983) comprehensible input hypothesis, understanding enhances the learners’ current level of language competence. The content embedded language learning through pedagogical tasks – academic tasks provide students with repeated, natural exposure to the language which is ‘content obligatory’ and ‘content compatible’ (Snow, et al 1989).

The teacher’s role in these activities is essentially that of a counsellor, monitor and prescriber. The teacher points out errors, throws questions, conducts short drills for individuals or suggests additional activities, ultimately looking for students to participate in communication. Language learning is not a passive activity; the texts, materials, methods, approaches and techniques that we use in a language class must allow for maximum student participation, making sure the instructional programs will lead to a more communicative and communicating class. Group activities in peer-

mediated classes provide students with numerous opportunities for oral, aural, written and reading language development through relying on and receiving information and assistance from their peers and make the students realise the importance of their participation in the classroom work. Structured cooperative learning tasks, which are student centred, provide for positive interdependence and individual accountability, will increase the chances of every student getting a chance to speak (Kagan and McGroarty, 1993) by encouraging students to learn from each other, not just from the teacher.

5. INSTRUCTIONAL CONVERSATION

Tharp and Galimore (1988) as cited by Wells and Haneda, (2005: p.151) coined the paradoxical term ‘instructional conversation: ‘instruction’ implying authority, (the act of teaching); ‘conversation’ implying making meaning and responding. Using instructional conversation as support to a pedagogical task, teachers and learners become active participants in the conversational discourse, the process of which includes teacher and learner elicited questions and responses. The learners use background knowledge and the gathered information through teacher given explanations and discussions to assimilate the multiple interactive elements of a difficult subject, which is cognitively challenging. As such instructional conversation aims at improving understanding rather than the one-way transmission of teacher-directed instructional talk. The target language becomes the vehicle for communicating ideas rather than an instructional tool (Pinkevičienė, 2011) to accomplish the task.

Reveles (2004) says Instructional Conversation (IC) as a teaching strategy, revolves around the premise that academically goal oriented conversation takes place among small groups of students in classrooms as the teacher monitors and facilitates the process. IC is most often enacted in a small group through employment of familiar forms of conversation to improve learners’ language production and understanding. Teachers who employ IC take the advantage of ordinary conversation about an interesting stimulus or activity to tempt their students to employ social and academic language and to share prior knowledge.

By providing models that demonstrate communicative procedures, in the form of audios and videos the teacher gives an opportunity to learners to identify the strategies used by the native speakers or other more knowledgeable L2 speakers. Such example-based learning will induce oral performance of the reluctant and passive learners who have watched and stored the language behaviour in their brain. The teacher elicited questions will require students to try to answer them. Integrating technology to stimulate the exchange of ideas and more particularly the use of instructional conversations centred on the audios and videos heard and watched make even the reluctant and reticent learners to speak.

6. CONCLUSION

Creating conversation groups and motivating the students to take part in classroom interaction through pair and group tasks will throw opportunities for the students to speak. Classroom Interaction involves two main aspects, which are negotiation of meaning and feedback. If

these two elements are not available in the classroom, then we cannot speak of a successful learning through interaction. Interaction contributes to acquisition through the provision of negative evidence and through opportunities for modified output (Ellis and Fotos, 1999). So Interaction is important for meaning negotiation in a classroom where the learners can receive feedback from their teachers. It is needless to say the conditions for second language acquisition are improved when learners negotiate meaning with other speakers. Interaction being a tested teaching learning strategy, teacher education programs should include training in questioning strategies. Such training would help teachers see themselves as researchers in their own classrooms.

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