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## Impact of Learner Conversations in ESL / EFL Classrooms: An Exploration with Nigerian Students

Dele Ashade, M.A. (TESOL)

### Abstract

English language learning/teaching in Nigeria is based largely on an admixture of the moribund Grammar Translation Method and the Audiolingual method which hardly afford learners the opportunity to practise the language and skills they have learnt in the classroom. This has led to a situation where learners are unable to function in the language with the level of accuracy expected. This paper attempts to determine the factors that promise to encourage students from Nigeria who will be involved in learner conversations in the ESL classroom as well as present to the average ESL teacher elsewhere, tips on using conversations to achieve accuracy-learning goals. Thus, classroom activities, learners' attitudes and the role of teachers which ultimately cement the gains of the theoretical learning of the structures and skills of the language are enunciated in this paper.

**Key-words:** verbal communication, production, accuracy and fluency, classroom, ESL

### Introduction

One evidently missing aspect of ESL pedagogy in Nigeria is learner interpersonal verbal communication in the classroom. Cameron, (2001, p. 106) avouches that, "...being able to talk about language is very different from being able to talk in the language". Tarvin and Al-Arishi (1991:24) suggest that, it is true that, "... learning is seen as totally a personal and subjective matter" and that, "... language acquisition is totally dependent on interactional negotiation". Obanya (2002) believes that interaction, which should be multi-dimensional and multi-media exchanges (verbal and non-verbal) in the course of classroom language

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teaching and learning activities, is obviously absent in Nigerian schools. He concludes that teachers prefer frontal teaching which is characterised by:

- a high dependence on textbooks as the exclusive teaching learning materials;
- reading aloud by the teacher, followed by recitation and imitation-reading round the class by the learners;
- very little premium placed on the primacy of oracy and communicative practice in language teaching and learning;
- an undue rush to finish teaching lessons in the textbooks; a rush towards fulfilling the syllabus contents and, devotion of a considerable amount of time to practising exam-type skills.

These, he claims, might not help learners to grow in the language to fulfill their daily communicative functions.

In the TESOL community, several theories and methods of language learning have been propounded and championed by exponents. They were also experimented by the TESOL professional community. There had been a search in the last century for a single method of teaching learners of English. In his review, Stern (1985) sees this as a cycle without an end and Marckwardt (1972) thinks it has been an unstable process of reaching the goal of professional English language teaching which has kept going back and forth.

The search for one, single method of teaching learners saw the emergence of the Audio-lingual approach (Fries, 1945; Lado, 1964). This was about the first approach and response to English language teaching and by 1967, it had dominated language teaching in the United States for over two decades (Celce-Murcia, 1991). The Grammar Translation method principally used the principles of grammar learning as a means of language learning. According to an account by Brown, (2002), the Direct Method championed by Charles Berlitz was also influential. This account traces the emergence of the Audiolingual Method, to the 1940's. The Cognitive Code Learning method was followed by the Silent Way, Suggestopedia, Total Physical Response and other ones. This search reached a climax in the 1980s. At this time it had become almost completely clear that not a single method could take care of the learning needs of all language learners.

Traditionally, in Nigeria, classrooms used to be considered places where teachers imparted knowledge and students received knowledge while the teacher and books were considered the main authoritative sources of knowledge. The Grammar Translation method is used in both government schools and private continuing education centres in ways that relax the rigidity of robotic learning procedures. In schools, English is taught entirely in English to impart grammatical skills (as a major pedagogical focus), except for a negligible number of times when a teacher deliberately interpolates teaching with vernacular. A lot of vocabulary is practised in drills and less attention is given to pronunciation. Consequently students from Nigeria have a good memory of certain vocabulary items and fairly reliable knowledge about basic grammatical rules. However, since the teaching methodology is teacher-centered, attention is shifted from the learners to the teacher who is almost always in the centre of the speech act while the lesson lasts.

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Gradually, the Grammar Translation Method and Audiolingual method are giving way to some measure of Communicative Language Teaching, even though this is done with, in most cases, learner verbal interaction or interpersonal oral communication, in the classroom. Since English is the National Official Language in Nigeria, learners have some measure of confidence to speak out but limitedly so in spontaneous practice. Since the first learning experience of students in Nigeria is teacher-centered, they are still accustomed to memorizing vocabulary, sentences, grammatical rules and they hesitate to interact much with teachers in the English language classroom. Consequent upon this, it is not uncommon for students from Nigeria to keep silent in the classroom unless they are called on by the teacher.

Although successive ESOL teaching methods above had been useful at some points, they had fallen short of the needs of teachers and learners. Since their failure, many professionals, for example, Prabhu (1990), Canagarajah (2005) and Clarke, (1994) have thought that the circumstances of the different learners of English should be considered before any further theories should be fashioned. As such, researchers tend to have bent to this position, or responded to this challenge by coming up with the Communicative Language Teaching option which emerged in the 1980's.

### **Conversation as a Means of 'Production'**

Conversing in the language classroom could be just a little less than Task Based Learning Ellis (1993). Task-based language learning, according to Ellis (2003, p. 243) involves "consideration of the stages or components of a lesson that has a task as its principal component". Task based learning is structured in a way that it has three principal phases that attempt a chronology of a task-based lesson. Many designs, for example, Willis, 1996; Lee 2000; Skehan 1996 and Prabhu, 1987, reflect this structure.

Usually, the first phase is a pre-task, the second, 'during task' and the third, 'post-task'.

This is somehow analogous to the PPP principle in the Communicative Language Teaching theory. A feature common to both is the aspect of the practical demonstration offered the learners under these teaching dispensations. In the case of learner conversation in the language classroom, learners offer one another practical demonstrations of the language skill just taught them. The facilitator-teacher also being a part of most occasions of the 'conversation' reserves custodial role, to observe, correct and ensure that learners practically benefit from the guidance offered by the teacher. On the other hand, CLT is an approach based on extensive learner participation in speaking and carrying out diverse communicative activities in the classroom. Whereas CLT is a potentially effective language learning method, it is necessary to establish its suitability to the learners in their unique circumstances (Kumaravadivelu, 1994; 2001).

Though learners may acquire some linguistic knowledge and skill mainly through listening, many scholars avouch that interpersonal communication plays a very important role in language learning. According to Mitchell and Myles (1998), from the perspective of the Interaction Hypothesis, collaborative efforts between more and less fluent speakers should be very useful for language learning. Their struggling to maximize comprehension and negotiate their way through trouble spots helps fine-tune L2 input and encourage learner development. Johnson (1995) states that students' participation has effects on the ways in which they use

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language for learning in the classroom. Learner interactive oral communication in the classroom enhances producing a much larger variety of speech acts and engaging in the negotiation of meaning (Carter and Nunan, 2001). Moreover, student interaction in classrooms not only affects their language acquisition chances but also contributes a lot to the dynamics of communication in language classrooms (Johnson 1995).

Generally, students are hesitant to participate in classroom conversation activities in many English learning classrooms. Interpersonal, verbal communication is important for students as it is a major way in which to express their knowledge in the classroom and practically use it outside it. Rivers (1994:7) states that students in so many classes know much but cannot use what they know to express their own meaning. That is one reason the teacher needs to encourage the students to communicate orally.

The Communicative Language Teaching approach looks not only at language forms, but also at what people do with these forms when they want to communicate with each other. Conversing with peers in the classroom opens up a wider perspective on language learning. As Littlewood (1981) points out, it makes us more strongly aware that it is not enough to teach learners how to manipulate the structures of the foreign language. They must also develop strategies for relating these structures to their communicative functions in real situation and real time. Therefore conversations provide learners with ample opportunities to use the language themselves for communicative purposes in ESL classrooms. In language classrooms, as Kramsch (1994:17) points out, students use the words and structures that they have learnt to communicate, and “this internal context of language brings about an interaction created by teachers and learners”.

Dialogues and other forms of conversations require “speech acts” (Malamah-Thomas 1991:146, 38). This emphasises the symbiotic and reciprocal nature of verbal communication. In this regard, learner conversation may not even be limited to student-student interaction but may extend to student-teacher oral communication. Only when an oral response is given by an interlocutor can it be considered a conversation.

### **Factors Influencing Learner Interpersonal Oral Communication in the Classroom**

Interpersonal, oral communication plays an important part in the language learning classroom as it gives students the opportunity to produce “the language they have learnt or casually absorbed” (Rivers 1994:4). The underlying factors which shape interaction in the classroom are teacher and learner beliefs, social and cultural background of the teacher and learners, and the psychological aspects of second and foreign language learning. This provides further insights into the complexities of classroom interaction. Tsui, cited in Carter and Nunan (2001) enunciates observable tasks: teacher talk, student talk and unobservables --- teachers’ and learners’ psychological states, which include beliefs, attitudes, motivations, self-perception and anxiety; learning styles and cultural norms. This paper focuses on both, above. Below are some factors that influence learners’ participation in interpersonal, oral communication in the classroom.

#### **Teachers’ Knowledge and Beliefs**

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It is important to consider what teachers of ESOL (should) know about teaching learners in general and in particular, about teaching skills. This includes what they believe about language learning and their classroom practices in regard to teaching their learners ESOL literacy. As Faerch (1985) points out, “the interaction between the personal realities of attitudes, behaviour and environment is a vital factor in determining success or otherwise on a given task”. In the strict context of language learning, Tschannen-Moran and Woolfolk (2001) say that teachers’ beliefs greatly determine the extent of their students’ achievement.

As Borg (2003) points out, teacher attitude encompasses a range of psycho-social constructs including what language teachers think, know and believe and its relationship to instructional decisions and practices. ESOL literacy teaching as an important aspect of a teacher’s belief requires good knowledge about the various methods of teaching learners. Wray (1993) thinks that every teacher-in-training should be taken through training methodology and approach to teaching.

An important influence on teacher’s attitude is Knowledge About Language, (KAL) Chandler (1988:23), after a study described the attitude of teachers of language in the United Kingdom as of “confident ignorance”. Teachers’ beliefs about language teaching include how they believe foreign languages are learnt. Borg (2003) suggests the need for language-teacher preparation programmes to dedicate substantial time to the development of trainees’ declarative knowledge in language teaching. Teacher’s beliefs can create motivation, interest, and positive attitude for learners in language learning. Richards and Lockhart (1994) describe teachers’ belief systems in terms of the goals, values, and beliefs which teachers hold in relation to the content and process of teaching, and their understanding of the systems in which they work and their roles within it. These beliefs and values can create a background to teachers’ decision making and action which play an important role in classroom behaviour.

Kindsvatter, Willen and Ishler (1988 cited in Richards and Lockhart 1994) suggest belief systems are derived from a number of different sources:

1. The teacher’s own experience as language learner. All teachers were once students, and their beliefs about teaching are often a reflection of how they themselves were taught. For example, a teacher who experienced communicative language learning with much interaction would appreciate it and like to apply that kind of pedagogical approach to his teaching classroom.
2. Experience of what works best. For many teachers, experience is the primary source of beliefs about teaching. A teacher may have found that some teaching strategies work well and some do not. For example, letting the student individually answer teacher’s questions makes them tense, but group work and pair work lessens their anxiety and encourage them to participate enthusiastically.
3. Established practice. Within a classroom certain teaching styles and practice may be preferred, for instance, learner-centered learning, which promotes learner autonomy.
4. Personality factors. Some teachers have a personal preference for a particular teaching pattern, arrangement, or activity as it matches their personality. An

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extroverted teacher, for example, might like to do a lot of drama in his conversation classes because he is an out-going kind of person and it suits the way he teaches.

5. Educationally based or research-based principles. Teachers may draw on their understanding of a learning principle in psychology, second language acquisition, or education and try to apply it in their classrooms.

6. Principles derived from an approach or method. Teachers may believe in the effectiveness of a particular approach or method of teaching and consistently try to implement it in the classroom. For example, a teacher's beliefs are different in communicative approach or belief in grammar translation method. The teacher tries to implement his belief in the classroom.

As mentioned above, teachers' beliefs, goals, attitudes, and decisions influence how they approach their teaching. On the other hand, learners also bring their own beliefs, goals, attitudes and decisions which in turn influence how they approach their learning (Richards and Lockhart 1994:52). That is why it may be reasonable to balance teachers' beliefs against learners' beliefs in the classroom and also focus on learners in order to fulfill their needs effectively.

According to Tumposky 1991 (cited in Richards and Lockhart 1994:52), "learners' beliefs are influenced by the social context of learning and can influence both their attitude toward the language itself as well as toward language learning in general". They cover a wide range of issues and can also influence learners' motivation to learn. Their attitudes towards participating orally in classroom can affect their contribution. Some students would not participate voluntarily but wait for the teacher's nomination, 'some consider asking questions as showing off', 'some may be afraid that their questions might be meaningless for the teacher and their classmates', and 'some students may think asking questions violates the unity of the class' (Johnson 1995). Having negative attitudes towards oral interpersonal communication may also be due to lack of confidence to speak out, their background learning experiences of not having to talk so much (teacher-centered learning experience), grammar translation method); their cultural background of not asking questions, being self-conscious about their pronunciation, and not having enough vocabulary or appropriate syntax. Thus, both teachers and students are responsible for promoting students' oral participation in the language learning classroom.

### **Learner Motivation in Interpersonal, Oral Communication in the Classroom**

Motivation is an essential factor for language learning and by extension, for learner interpersonal oral communication in the classroom. It enhances learners' interest in learning a language. A student not motivated, makes less progress in his or her learning and is not very interested in communicating orally with peers or teacher, in the target language. Ryan and Deci (2000) propound a "self-determination" theory. According to them, intrinsically motivated people explore and experiment because they enjoy the activity itself and feel free to direct their attention towards these activities.

It goes without saying that the motivated individual is one who wants to achieve a particular goal, devotes considerable effort to achieving this goal, and experiences satisfaction in the Language in India [www.languageinindia.com](http://www.languageinindia.com)

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activities associated with achieving the goal. Skill in motivating students to learn is basic to teachers' effectiveness. Thus, teachers need to create motivational conditions for the learners. Dornyei (2001:121) suggests three basic motivational conditions as follow:

- appropriate teacher behaviours and a good relationship with the students;
- a pleasant and supportive classroom atmosphere;
- a cohesive learner group with appropriate group norms;

Dornyei and Csizer's (1998 cited in Dornyei 2001) argue that teachers play a significant role in socialising and shaping the motivation of their students through their personal characteristics, verbal and non-verbal 'immediate' behaviour, active motivational socializing behavior, and classroom management practices. A study of Hungarian teachers of English confirms that almost everything a teacher does in the classroom has a motivational influence on students, which makes teacher behavior a powerful 'motivational tool'. In that study, the participants rated the teacher's own behavior as the most important and, at the same time, extremely underutilized motivational factor in the classroom. Alison 1993 (cited in Dornyei 2001) believes that when a teacher has a good rapport with the students, his attitudes 'persuade' or 'attract' students to engage in on-task behaviours. It is important for him to establish relationships of mutual trust and respect with the learners.

Creating a pleasant and supportive atmosphere in the classroom will reduce learners' anxiety and promote learning effectiveness and L2 motivation (MacIntyr, Young 1999 cited in Dornyei 2001). In a psychologically safe classroom climate, learner involvement will be the highest as they are encouraged to express their opinions and they feel as they are protected from ridicule and embarrassment.

Concerning group norms, group characteristics have important motivational bearings, and central to these characteristics is the level of cohesiveness among the class members. Dornyei and Malderez 1997 (cited in Dornyei 2001:123) state that it is beneficial to include an explicit norm building procedure early in the group's life by formulating potential norms, justifying their purpose in order to enlist support for them, having them discussed by the whole group, and finally agreeing on mutually accepted set of 'class rules', with the consequences for violating them also specified.

Promoting cooperation among the learners is also one the factors that encourage student motivation towards interpersonal oral communication. Dornyei has studied copiously and found them to be unanimous in claiming that students in cooperative environments have more positive attitudes towards learning and develop higher self-esteem and self-confidence than in other classroom structures. According to Slavin (1994:43 cited in Dornyei 2001) cooperative learning entirely built on the concept of peer collaboration has been "one of the greatest success stories in the history of educational research". There are several reasons for the very favourable impact of cooperation on motivation: when students work together they tend to like each other regardless of ethnic, cultural, class or ability difference, they are dependent on each other and share common goals. This creates a feeling of solidarity and comradely supportiveness. As counting on their peers, learners' expectation of success is likely to be higher than working individually and decreases anxiety and stress than in individual work. Moreover, cooperative teams promote learner autonomy because students have to work a lot

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without the immediate supervision of the teacher and autonomy is a powerful contributor to motivation (Dornyei 2001).

### **Functions of Learner, Interpersonal Oral Communication in the Classroom**

Research has shown that interpersonal verbal communication in the classroom is capable of providing learners the opportunity to learn from each other and acquire comprehensible input (Tsui 1995:72). In line with the Communicative Language Teaching approach, pair work and group work can create opportunities for students to acquire the language incidentally as they communicate freely, while engaging in a dialogue, role-play, mock interview, debates or taking part in some other forms of communicative, oral activities. In whole class interaction, input can be acquired from students' participation such as answering the teacher's questions, initiating questions, giving opinions, supporting opinions, answering in chorus, and seeking clarification from the teacher (Johnson 1995; Van Lier 1994; Tsui 1995). Dornyei (2001) avers that small group activities in the spirit of Communicative Language Teaching create peer interaction and build learners' communicative competence.

Learners are believed to access the opportunity to produce comprehensible output when they are encouraged to communicate freely in the classroom (Tsui 1995:72). In doing so, they can practise using what they have learnt or acquired implicitly either from the teacher and their classmates or from exposure outside the classroom. However, it remains a cause for alarm that, "...rather than make CLT an activity-oriented engagement for learners, teachers have made theoretical, paper-work exercises of it" (Ashade, 2011: 84). CLT activities are expected to be essentially practical. Students are compelled to consider making adjustment when they try to be understood while communicating either with the teacher or with their classmates, and this gives them the opportunity for language acquisition (Johnson 2001:95).

In this case, teachers need to be aware that not all learners respond in the same way to classroom interpersonal oral communication. In describing different kinds of learners, Cook (2001) distinguishes between two types: extroverts and introverts. Extroverted learners may have little difficulty producing output in whole-class interaction or initiating questions or topics whereas introverts will find it easier to practise using the patterns they have learnt or acquired while working in pair or in groups. Introverts are reluctant to take part in whole-class oral communication. Whichever pattern is used, the benefit is that learners have the opportunity to produce output.

Learners' oral interaction also brings benefits to the teaching-learning situation in a language classroom. According to Chaudron (1995), through interpersonal oral communication, teachers can help students incorporate the language structures taught in the classroom to use them in meaningful ways. In whole-class interaction, students contribute when they ask questions or initiate topics, and the teacher can make use of the initiation for further explanation. When students answer questions that require their own opinions, the teacher could reconstruct their answers to start a discussion (Johnson 1995). Even students' mistakes in answering the teacher's questions can be considered as contributions because they will help the teacher know the students' need and provide the teacher with opportunities to give linguistic explanation to the class in later lessons even if they would not be corrected instantly (Gower, Philips and Walters, 1995). Interpersonal, verbal communication has potentials for creating a lively atmosphere in the classroom, as students do not just regurgitate

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what they have learnt or passively listen to the teacher's monologue even when language learning takes place in these situations.

Richards and Lockhart (1994) believe that learners can have different personalities and cognitive learning styles and for this reason, they can have their own preference of subjects of oral communication that they like to discuss. In the same way, Ohta (2001) assumes that a person can learn by means of private speech, dialogue with oneself in imitation and repetition of what others say.

### **Teacher Options for Learner Oral Communication Lessons**

Since learners have different styles and preferences for learning due to affect and nonlinguistic factors such as their cultural background, past learning experiences, and personalities, teachers may not be able to force them to participate orally when they are not ready for it (Johnson 1995:56-57; Tsui 1996:146). In order to provide conditions for students to communicate in pairs or in other considered group types, teachers need sufficient knowledge of the nature of classroom interaction and its patterns.

In carrying out learner conversations in the classroom, Ur (1997:228) provides some patterns:

1. Teacher-talk, to which students respond silently without any initiative on their part
2. Choral responses – the class repeats the teacher's model or cue in the choruses
3. Close-ended teacher questioning, which requires only one right response, and is also known as Initiation-Response-Feedback (IRF)
4. Open-ended teacher questioning, for which a number of possible right answers can be given
5. Students initiate questions according to the teacher's nomination and the teacher answers their questions
6. Full-class interaction, in which students debate a topic or do a language task as a class, and the teacher intervenes occasionally to stimulate participation, or to monitor
7. Individual work: students working independently to perform a task or a set of tasks, and assisted by the teacher where necessary
8. Collaboration: students working together usually in pairs to perform a task or a set of tasks, and the teacher may or may not intervene
9. Group work: students working in small groups on tasks that entail interaction, and the teacher walks around listening
10. Self-assess. Students select their own learning tasks, and work autonomously.

It has been established that learners' participation in classroom verbal communication can bring benefits not only to individuals who take part in interaction but also to the teaching-learning situation in the classroom.

### **Strategies for Successful Classroom Conversation Sessions**

In the teaching ESOL classroom, teachers' beliefs play a great role, as it greatly determines the extent of their students' achievement as Borg (2003) suggests that teachers' attitude encompasses a range of psycho-social constructs including what language teachers think, know and believe and its relationship to instructional decisions and practices.

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From personal experience, I have discovered some means of preparing the minds of learners for successful sessions of conversation in the classroom. Creating background music while students do group work could psychologically speaking, reduce learner's tension and anxiety and spur them to greater output. Another means of achieving or creating an atmosphere for conversation is, saying funny things and cracking jokes while asking questions from the students. Also, examples could be given in learners' native language before a role-play activity, for example.

This could ensure perfect understanding of the idea, and this could lead to a fluid use of language. Calling for volunteer discussants before a mock interview, role-play, dialogue or other forms of conversation may prove productive. This is different from spotlighting----singling out a student and asking this student to perform or answer correctly before others) which is common in the United States (Mohatt and Erikson, 1981). Calling on an unprepared or unwilling member of class for action may have negative implications for the learner's composure.

Another way of achieving successful conversation sessions is by acknowledging students who take part in some form of conversation activities with claps, award of points and verbally eulogising them. This is in line with MacIntyr and Young's conviction (cited in Dornyei 2001) that, creating a pleasant and supportive atmosphere in the classroom reduces learners' anxiety and promotes learning effectiveness and L2 motivation.

Another dimension to facilitating conversations in the language classroom is the creation of an atmosphere of freedom for the learners. In a situation like this, learners are afforded the freedom to choose whatever subject to discuss between themselves while the teacher feels free to discuss his or her personal second-language learning experiences with the learners with a view to gaining their confidence. They may also be better off with only occasional corrections as correcting them frequently might erode their confidence and composure.

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Dele Ashade, M.A. (TESOL)  
ESL Department, Educare Continental Institute  
P.O. Box 238, Ile-Ife  
Osun State  
Nigeria  
[ashdelle@gmail.com](mailto:ashdelle@gmail.com)