Study on Effectiveness of Classroom Interaction

Xiufeng Zhang[1,a,*] and Hui Gao[1]

[1]*Department of College English, Capital Normal University, Beijing, China*
[a]*zhangxiufengcnu@126.com*
*corresponding author

ABSTRACT

The classroom interaction is an efficient way to improve the efficiency of classroom learning. Besides the increase in the amount of classroom interaction, the quality of it also requires the attention, which will decide the effectiveness of classroom interaction. The improvement and insurance of classroom interaction are studied from the perspective of form, approach and the role of teacher and students.
Keywords: effectiveness, form of interaction, approach of interaction

1. INTRODUCTION

Research focusing on the social interactions of the classroom is generally thought to have begun in the 1950s and 1960s due to its importance in classroom teaching and learning. As Allwright has reviewed, interaction is the fundamental fact of classroom pedagogy because "everything that happens in the classroom through a process of live person-to-person interaction"[1]. The prominent role played by classroom interaction lies in the provision of more possible opportunities to encounter input or to practice L2. Moreover, it also creates in the learners a "state of receptivity", defined as "an active openness, a willingness to encounter the language and culture" [2]. With the development of the observation and study, it has been found that the amount of participation provided by classroom interaction does not necessarily result in the effective classroom teaching and learning, and the quality of classroom interaction has begun to attract the attention of the teachers and researchers. The present paper intends to review the latest understanding about the quality of classroom interaction mainly from three aspects: the form of interaction, the pattern of interaction and the roles of the teacher and students during the interaction.

2. FORMS OF INTERACTION

For a long time, the research into classroom interaction has focused mostly on whole-class interaction between the teacher and students, because it is believed that the support or scaffolding coming from the more knowledgeable other (such as the teacher) can lend learners to internalize what is being learned as long as it is appropriate to the learner's current and potential level of development, that is, the learner's zone of proximal development[3]. However, Ellis ever said that interaction involving participants of unequal status makes it difficult and even unnecessary for participants to restructure interaction, and interaction involving participants of equal status ensures that learners and their interlocutors share a need and desire to understand each other[2]. Coinciding with this, peer interaction has begun to draw a lot of attention, and nowadays it has become important for teachers and researchers to understand better how learning and knowledge are constructed between students while working in peer groups on various learning activities[4]. As a result, the collaborative interaction in peer groups has been born and has increased their pedagogical implication. Thus, the form of classroom interaction should be varied. Classroom interaction has at least two forms, the teacher-student interaction and the peer interaction, instead of only the teacher-student interaction. Both of them are important to carry out the classroom interaction.

3. APPROACHES OF INTERACTION

The form of interaction is only the first step and not the most important factor affecting the quality of interaction. In fact, some studies investigated the comparative effectiveness of methods such as the Grammar translation, the Audio-lingualism and the Cognitive code, and found that any one of them was not more successful than another. One possible explanation for this is that, despite the apparent differences in methodological principles, the various methods led to very similar pattern of classroom communication, with the result that the language learning outcomes were also similar [5] . From this explanation, it is obvious that the pattern of classroom interaction is a crucial factor to affect the quality of classroom interaction and then to affect the efficiency of learning. In teacher-student interaction, the typical classroom interaction pattern is the Initiation-Response-Feedback/Evaluation (IRF/E) sequence [4]. In this interaction sequence, the teacher often tightly controls the structure and content of classroom interaction, during which the teacher initiates the discussion by posing questions, and the students respond to those questions and then the teacher finishes the interaction sequence by giving feedback on the student's response. It is easy to notice that this kind of pattern has some drawbacks, such as lack of dynamic, lack of activity of students, too much control from the teacher. Fortunately, with the efforts of a lot of researchers, this situation has changed a lot. Take Gibbon's study as an example. Gibbons drew on the constructs of mediation from socio-cultural theory (Mediation can be understood as the interaction between the mind and outside world (or oneself) and through mediation, "generically endowed capacity are modified and reorganized into higher order forms".) and mode continuum (used to describe the different orders of discourse) from systemic functional linguistics to investigate how teacher-student talk in a content-based classroom contributes to learner's language development[5]. The illustrative study showed how the

teacher, through their interaction with students, mediated between the students' current linguistic levels in English and their common understanding of science on one hand, and the educational discourse and specialist understandings of the subject on the other hand. Through mediation, students' contributions to the discourse are progressively transformed across a mode continuum into the specialist discourse of school curriculum. In this study, four ways of mediation were identified: mode shifting through recasting (generally used to refer to reformulation of child or L2 speaker's utterance at the level of morphology or syntax.), signaling to learner how to reformulate, indicating the need for reformulation, and recontextualising personal knowledge. This study threw some light on the pattern of teacher-student interaction.

As for the peer interaction, it seems that studies on this kind of interaction have tended to focus on the linguistic interactions that take place between the participants, that is "negotiation of meaning" and factors that may affect the quantity of these negotiations[6]. This line of research seems to assume that all small groups /pairs behave in the same way or that nature of pair relation does not affect learning outcomes. However, a growing number of more recent studies have begun to examine more closely the dynamics of group and pair behavior in L2 context and these studies have shown not only that there are differences in the pattern of pair behavior, but more importantly, they suggest that some patterns are more conductive to learning then others. As is found, learners who interacted in a cooperative manner were more likely to use peer suggestions to revise their writing than those who interacted in a defensive manner[7]. Indeed, a number of researches have shown that simply assigning students to work in groups or pairs will not necessarily create conditions conductive to learning, because not all students work collaboratively when assigned to work on language tasks in pairs. According to the study conducted by Storch, there were four patterns of peer interaction between interlocutors in term of equality and mutuality: collaborative, dominant/dominant, dominant/passive, and expert/novice[7]. Among the four patterns, collaborative and expert/novice patterns were more likely to produce the scaffolding between participants. Furthermore, the analysis in this study revealed that those patterns of dyadic interaction, once established, were found to be fairly stable over time and across tasks. This finding suggested the need to allow or encourage learners to change partners under the monitoring of the teacher to avoid the dominant/ dominant or dominant/ passive patterns of interaction.

4. ROLES OF TEACHERS AND STUDENTS IN CLASSROOM INTERACTION

No matter the form of interaction or the pattern of interaction, they both entail the appropriate roles played by teachers and students. Generally speaking, in the current education research, descriptions of scaffolding in the interaction always focus on what the more knowledgeable other (like the teacher) does, and virtually ignore the role of the learner in seeking, responding to and directing the scaffolding from others during the interaction. Luckily, the focus has changed a lot with the orientation of progressive learner-centered proposition, and the crucial parts played by the learners are

realized. In a study conducted by Ko, he investigated what differentiated higher quality from lower quality negotiation-of-meaning interactions as well as the consequence of these interactions in a story-telling task[3]. A question-and-answer session to get more information between the storyteller and his audience immediately followed the storyteller's first telling, after which the storyteller moved to a new audience and retold the story. Data analysis focused on relating what happened during the negotiation sessions to the presence or absence of improvement in second telling. Results indicated that several factors seemed to contribute to the improved storytelling. Beyond the teacher's contribution, however, improved storytelling, to most extent, seemed influenced as much by the storyteller' response to the audience in answering questions during the negotiation session, and by the storyteller's willingness or unwillingness to alter the telling and by the story's its own characteristics. From the findings of the story, it indicated that storytellers themselves played a crucial role in improving their stories for their second telling. In order to improve the telling, the storyteller must actively respond to the negotiation and allowed what has been revealed through negotiation-of –meaning to affect his or her current version of the story. Without the ability or willingness to engage with the more knowledgeable other or a readiness to incorporate what has been revealed in interaction with the teacher and the peers, the learner could not make any progress – "at least not immediately". What is more, Vygotsky's description of learning as a process of internalization implying that scaffolding is technically always guided by the learner[3]. Thus, the support of more knowledgeable others can act as scaffolding and lead to internalization only when the L2 learner is ready and able to benefit from that support. Therefore, the learner's activity and consciousness should be taken into account when concerning to the interaction.

Emphasis on the learner's activity and consciousness does not intend to demean the roles of teachers. In his study, Ko thought that for high-proficiency-level students, the teacher might not need to intervene directly the interaction because the audience students could ask questions easily and actively, and the storytellers themselves, on the same level as the audience, could offer new information in response to their questions. However, the teacher' role might likely become particularly important for those lower level students. Lower level students were often reluctant to ask questions because of low comprehension of the story, lack of interaction skills and sometimes students may ask off-the-point questions. Here, the teacher's role might be crucial. For instance, for low level students, a comprehension check by the teacher was likely a good strategy to use in eliciting students' understanding of the story and in involving students into interaction. Some studies have illuminated the modes of teacher participation during whole-class discussion. As their studies demonstrated, the teacher's discursive modes in a community of inquiry did not concentrate only on providing cognitive support for the students but also on social and socio-emotional processes. Kumpulaien identified four modes of teacher participation in collective inquiry and these were defined as evocative, facilitative, collective and appreciative[4]. The evocative mode of participation was found to reflect one main principle of the community of inquiry, in which the students were invited and encouraged

to ask questions and propose initiations as well as to share and negotiate their opinions, and approached in the classroom community. By evoking the students' views and perspectives, the teacher appeared to make the classroom community co-responsible for their learning, in which there was space for free expression and its communal elaboration. The facilitative mode of participation was found to illuminate the nature of teacher's scaffolding of the students' reasoning processes in communal inquiry. Among the situated strategies the teacher was observed to use when facilitating classroom interaction were re-voicing questions and interpretations, drawing together perspectives and initiations, modeling and monitoring reasoning processes, and passing on culturally established knowledge and practices. The collective mode of teacher participation was found to reflect the teacher's support of equal participation in joint inquiry as well as tolerance toward different opinions and perspectives. Among the strategies the teacher was found to use for strengthening collectiveness in the classroom were orchestrating turns to speak, promoting collective responsibility and active participation, as well as recalling the rules of participation in the community of inquiry. The last means that seemed to play an important role in community building and in scaffolding the students' reasoning processes was the teacher's appreciative mode of participation. The teacher's appreciativeness of the students' initiations, ideas and approaches was reflected in his participation in communal inquiry throughout study. Moreover, in his or her participation, the teacher signaled to the classroom community that he or she also felt he or she could learn from the ongoing discourse. By doing so, the teacher made it explicit that he or she enjoyed and found reward in being a member of the classroom community.

5. CONCLUSION

Both the quantity and quality of interaction should arouse enough attention from teachers and researchers. On one hand, the quantity of classroom interaction should be ensured because practice makes perfect, otherwise students would not internalize efficiently what he or she has learned due to the lack of opportunities to practice and to get scaffolding from others. On the other hand, the quality of classroom interaction cannot be paid little attention because the quantity does not necessarily result in the high efficiency of learning. To ensure the high quality of classroom interaction, the form of classroom interaction, the pattern of classroom interaction and the appropriate roles played respectively by the teacher and students should be put in proper place and receive deserved attention.

REFERENCES

[1] Allwright, D. 1988. *Observation in the language classroom*. London. Longman.

[2] Ellis, Rod. 1999. *The Study of Second Language Acquisition*. Shanghai: Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press.

[3] Ko, J. S., Diane, L. & Waltes, K. 2003. Rethinking Scaffolding: Examining Negotiation of Meaning in an ESL Storytelling Task. *TESOL QUARTERLY*, (3): 303-323.

[4] Kumpulaien, K. & Wray, D. 2002. *Classroom Interaction and Social Learning*. London: RoutledgeFalmer.

[5] Gibbons, Pauline. 2003. "Mediating Language Learning: Teacher Interaction with ESL Students in a Content- Based Classroom". *TESOL QUARTERLY*, (2): 247-269.

[6] Long, M. Native speaker and non-native speaker conversation and negotiation of comprehensible input. Applied linguistics, (4): 126-141.

[7] Storch, N. 2002. "Patterns of Interaction in ESL Pair Work". *Language Learning*, (1):119-158.