

Study of the Student's Role in College English Classroom Interaction

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ABSTRACT

According to social constructivism, knowledge is not passively accumulated, but rather, is the result of active cognition by the individual, of social interaction and language usage. It emphasizes the co-construction of meaning within a social activity, and acknowledges the learner's active role in the personal creation of knowledge. Based on the social constructivist theory, the author tries to study and analyze what role the students are playing and how it affects classroom interaction. It is found that the students are playing a passive role instead of taking an active part. This passive role of the students in turn affects classroom interaction in three aspects. Finally suggestions are given to help the students get more involved in class.

Keywords: college English, classroom interaction, the student's role

I. INTRODUCTION

Interest in classroom interaction has always been a focus of classroom teaching, and many scholars maintain that almost the whole process of second language acquisition (SLA) takes place through interaction with other speakers (e.g., Pica, Young & Doughty 1987; Gass 1997; Liu 2000). Language, according to interactional linguists, shapes and is shaped by interaction. People learn a language through using the language to interact meaningfully with other people. Interaction in this study refers to the verbal interaction that happens between the teacher and the students inside classroom including interactions between individuals, small groups, or of the entire class. It can either be teacher-initiated or student-initiated.

It is believed that success, or failure, in classroom language learning typically has something, if not absolutely everything, to do with the nature of the interaction that takes place during lessons. Actually in many cases, classroom interaction is regarded as a key to evaluate classroom language teaching in China. To improve our second language teaching and learning, it makes good sense, therefore, to look closely at interaction and try to find ways to better interaction between second language learners and their interlocutors. A large quantity of publications under different headings explored this area in the past few decades (e.g., Doughty & Pica 1986; Hancock 1997).

The concern with interaction has been motivated by the recognition that whether it is a subject lesson or a language lesson, successful outcomes of language lesson may depend on the type of language used by the

teacher and the type of interactions occurring in the classroom (Ellis 1994:143).

Our brain is dynamic, constantly interrelating what we have learned with what we are learning, and the give-and-take of message exchanges enables students to retrieve and interrelate a great deal of what they have encountered. Wilga Rivers (1987: 4-5) argued that students can increase their language store through interaction and in interaction, students can use all they possess of the language: all they have learned or casually absorbed in real-life exchanges. The real process of teaching is classroom interaction (Allwright & Bailey 1991). Thus the teacher's main task is, to some extent, to foster an environment in which effective language learning may develop through various kinds of interaction.

II. CURRENT SITUATION

Teaching and learning are perceived as very much a double-sided interactive and dynamic process, in which the teacher and the students are both involved. It is now accepted that the student should be the center of a class. All teachers advocate the importance of classroom interaction and the student's output. Actually, different teaching methodologies have been advanced and actively practised in order to create more interactive classes and to promote efficiency. For example, student-centered class, task-based teaching, and flipped classroom. It should be acknowledged that with all these efforts, English classroom interaction has improved and the students have become more involved in class activities. However, Chinese culture has long ignored the role the learners play in class, emphasizing

the learners should pay respect to the teachers by completely obeying the teacher's orders and they are not supposed to challenge the teacher's ideas or it would be treated as rude and disrespectful. Though more and more attention are being paid and more and more importance are given to the learner's role they play in class, it is possible that it takes time to make both the teacher and the learner fully realize that and there may still be some misunderstanding on this point.

A. The student's role

Though both the teachers and the students attach great importance to classroom interaction and the teachers also endeavor to make the students come out with more output, the fact is teacher lecture dominates college English classroom. Very little interaction among the students themselves is generated. That is, nearly all the interaction is teacher-fronted, with learners sitting in rows facing the teacher. The students spend most of their time listening to their teacher lecturing. Teacher talk is dominant. Teacher lecture, explain grammar points, conduct drills, and lead whole-class discussions in which each student might get a few seconds of a class period to talk. Though group work and pair work is common, it is very limited and usually a one-way presentation. That is, they just present what they have prepared, like the way they are reciting a poem, totally different from real communication.

Second language classrooms are typically based on a rather high degree of teacher control. Learners rarely initiate discourse; they are seldom asked questions to which the teacher does not already have an answer. They are expected to produce specific language forms, and are not often given the opportunity to exchange information with an interlocutor in a natural manner. Clearly, this controlled approach to language teaching is very different from the way in which languages are used and acquired in a natural setting.

In class, almost all the questions and interaction were initiated by the teacher. Students just acted as respondents. The students seldom initiate questions even if they have problems in understanding the teacher and the other students. This passive role of the student partly results in the unequal status of the two parts. The students just treat themselves and are often treated as inferior in knowledge and experience to the teacher. Classroom interaction is different from social interaction outside classroom. Teachers and students are of unequal status as classroom participants for teachers are always asking display questions whose answers have already been determined by the teacher. These questions are not aimed to seek exchange of ideas with the students, but, rather, at eliciting and evaluating them. The students are not working toward mutual understanding with their teachers, but at

meeting their teachers' expectations, meditating what is an appropriate response to their questions.

By asking display questions to check the student's certain knowledge, the students feel nervous as they worry whether they will be evaluated as adequate or not, and they have no courage to initiate any conversation. Thus classroom interaction doesn't move towards a two-way flow of information aimed at mutual comprehension, but towards a one-way display from student to teacher. Communication is not shared equally among all classroom interlocutors. The typical form of exchanges between teachers and the students is the IRF form, namely, initiation — response — feedback.

B. Phony communication

As the students seldom initiate any conversation, ask any question or challenge the teacher's ideas, they just answer questions most of which are display ones. This kind of communication is by no means real communication. First of all, the students are not very interested in the topics the teachers initiate as they are either unfamiliar with the topics or the topics are not related to their real life. Second, the teachers prefer to ask lots of display questions about textbook knowledge while the students say that they prefer referential questions. It is found that about 52.8% of all the questions raised by the teacher in college English classroom are closed questions. Still, lots of the questions just demand a very simple answers like "Yes" or "No" or one word answer which is very obvious and this can hardly arouse their desire, challenge their minds to answer them. Though students may give lots of responses, their responses are often "yes" or "no" or only one-word answering. For example:

- T: Can you tell me what the passage is about?
S: Culture.
- T: How many parts are there in this passage?
S: Five.
- T: What are the symbols of Chinese culture?
S: Dragon.
- T: You know the location of the statue?
S: New York Bay.
- T: Is his mother happy with his love for a woman?
S: No.

We can see that teachers don't generally ask genuine questions--that is, questions to which they don't have the answer. Most questions the teachers raise in class do not aim to getting new information from the students, but to check and evaluate the students' performance. Even if students are asked open

questions, they usually have the exclusive role of responding to questions which are generally pseudo-requests and that students rarely interact with each other in teacher-centered classrooms.

C. Ineffective classroom interaction

It seems the students always expect the teachers to have plans about what to teach and how they are going to teach. Relevant decision making is typically left to the teacher. Most students just make no attempt to steer the flow of the classroom process to the directions that they desire, either because they are reluctant to or because they are not used to or even because they don't know how to do it. The fact is teacher lecturing dominates the class and the students have few chances to use English in class. It can be clearly observed that the student's talk occupies a very limited period of time in class and tends to be restricted to initiation only by the teacher in an artificial setting while the whole class becomes a "group interlocutor", getting only a few minutes of class period to talk.

The students often keep silent even when they know the answer and this often makes the teacher misunderstand that they are unwilling to participate in interaction. When the teacher raises a question to the whole class without calling a particular student, actually expecting any volunteer to respond, many students may assume that it is none of his business and always rely on others to answer. And even if there are volunteers from the audience to give an answer, it most probably would be a short one-word/phrase structure. This may be attributed to some extent to our culture which believes in modesty and criticizes those who show off in public. As a result, there may appear to be a lot of interaction between the teacher and the students, but when time itself is considered, it seems that the teacher is just lecturing or doing what like a monologue. All these result in a low production of the target language on the part of the students.

III. SUGGESTIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

As to how to make the students better play their role, the author attempts to put forward the following four suggestions.

A. Implementing group/pair work in the classroom

According to Nunan (2001), students in teacher-centered classrooms do not learn how to express their own ideas or to share these ideas by communicating in small groups. Role-plays and group work may result in the negotiation of meaning, something that is largely absent in teacher-fronted tasks. This helps to solve the problem of classes that are too large to offer many opportunities to speak. On the other hand, small groups provide opportunities for student initiation, for face-to-face give and take, for practice in negotiation of

meaning, and for extended conversational exchanges that would otherwise be impossible.

Teachers frequently overlook how much students learn from their peers. According to researches, though the students produce a large number of ungrammatical utterances either working in a teacher-fronted situation or engaged in a group interaction (Doughty & Pica 1986), and interaction between L2 learners does not provide as much modified input and feedback as interaction with native speakers does (Pica, Porter, Paninos & Linnel 1996), learners appear to be quite effective in segmenting portions of each other's utterances as signals for message comprehensibility and as models of L2 morphosyntax.

B. Enhancing the student's self-esteem

The findings of this study suggest that students should be given an active role in shaping their English learning. The problem is that many students are not confident to speak the language and are shy to participate in classroom interaction in case they would make a fool of themselves and be laughed at. Therefore, it can be concluded that the students have low self-esteem. On the other hand, many teachers seem to find it difficult to accept their learners as people with a positive contribution to the instructional process, and thus are very happy to avoid asking learners to articulate their learning needs, on the grounds that learners never know what they want anyway.

If learners do acquire enhanced self-respect, we can expect this to be related to improved learning. It seems that students who are more confident are indeed very willing to take part in classroom interaction. This maybe is because students with more self-respect take learning as something over which they can exercise some control, and for which they have the ultimate responsibility.

C. Creating a positive classroom climate

In a classroom climate that is open and democratic, students are treated fairly and are free to express their opinions during discussion. The distinguishing and crucial factor is that in open, democratic classrooms thinking is encouraged and nurtured. In a classroom operated in a fundamentally democratic manner, students develop a trust in the teacher. It increases emotional comfort for participation and decreases anxiety which prevents acquisition. It hence makes the classroom interactive.

In order to establish positive classroom climate, it needs, first of all, to reduce language anxiety. Language anxiety influences language learning as it hinders students from actively participating in the classroom activities. The teacher is also stressful in such classroom. It is often the case with Chinese students

that they do not speak in the class until they are called on. This is partly because Chinese students are not used to speaking their opinion in the class but keeping silent. It is assumed that Chinese learners of foreign language tend to have the anxiety about speaking in front of other learners and learning a new language. Reducing classroom anxiety helps create an interactive classroom. Furthermore, the rapport between the teacher and students is an essential issue in creating a positive classroom climate. Knowledge of students should be a prerequisite for teachers because teaching starts from loving and understanding students. A harmonious classroom climate based on good rapport among the teacher and the students enables all the participants to feel free to talk to each other and engage the students in cooperative learning.

D. Student and teacher training

It is maintained in this study that the students play a very important role in class and they can make positive contributions to the flow of classroom interaction. However, the students in Chinese context generally choose not to play their role to manage their own studies. This reluctance is partly due to their prior learning experiences where speaking was simply not encouraged. So chances are that students do not know how to take advantage of the space the teachers leave them. They need first of all made to fully realize their important role in class process and enhance their self-esteem to better manage their own studies by actively participating in classroom interaction.

Most English teachers in China are natives of Chinese and many are doing what they were being taught under traditional teaching methods which attaches exclusively importance to the teachers and teaching rather than learning and the learners. Culturally, due to the pervasive influence of Confucian ideas, teachers are viewed as knowledge holders. If teachers do not display their knowledge in lectures, or if they play games with students or ask students to role-play in class, then they are not doing their job. (Yu Liming 2001). In addition, students can only participate in classroom interaction with the assistance and guidance of the teacher. The role of the teacher is therefore enhanced in a learner-centered system, and the skills demanded of the teacher are also greater. So teacher training seems even more important.

IV. CONCLUSION

It is found in this study that the students are still playing a passive role in classroom interaction and that is a major reason that hinders the effectiveness of classroom interaction. It can be safely concluded that greater importance should be attached to the role students play in classroom interaction as it decides whether classroom interaction is successful or not.

Everything has two sides. As for the fact that students aren't playing their parts, it may be discouraging and disappointing. On the other hand, by taking an optimistic view, we can see that there are great potentials for us to explore and discover. And it is very reasonable for us to expect that if the learner's role is perfectly performed, it will be great contribution to language learning and teaching. And we have every reason to believe that it is very possible as most students in fact do welcome interactive learning and they are ready to try new and more interactive ways of learning provided they are helped to realize its importance and are properly encouraged.

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