Creating Interactional Opportunities in the Indian ESL Classroom

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ABSTRACT

The aim of the present study is to examine the nature of interaction in the Indian ESL context in the light of 'Interaction Approach' (Gass and Mackey, 2015:180). Interaction approach subsumes some aspects of input, interaction hypothesis, and output hypothesis. Therefore, in order to gain an understanding of these factors, an effort has been made to explore classroom interaction in Indian CBSE schools in terms of negotiation of meaning, the functions of output and collaborative dialogue, and their importance in SLA. The present study adopted a descriptive classroom-based approach. This investigation required observation to gain an insight into interactions in the ESL classroom. In addition, the perspectives of learners and teachers were felt to be important to understand the issue under study.

Keywords: ESL Classroom; Interactions in the classroom.

Introduction

The present work is based on the belief that classroom interaction can be a good pedagogical strategy to facilitate language learning. Many interaction theories argue that interaction in the classroom is necessary to facilitate language learning. In the light of the emphasis on interaction in recent studies, it has been widely accepted that to equip learners with appropriate skills for communication, the ESL classrooms should maximise interaction.

Rationale for the Study

Under these circumstances, teachers are required to exploit teacher–student and student–student interaction in the language classroom. Since the introduction of communicative syllabus in the CBSE, it has become vitally important to make ESL classrooms interactive to facilitate SLA. The syllabus, therefore, advises teachers to encourage classroom interaction among students, reduce teacher talk time, and take up questions for discussion to encourage students to participate, express, and defend their views. In this context, an attempt has been made in this study to examine the relevance and practicality of interaction approach in the teaching–learning situation in India.

Interaction Approach

Allwright (1984:156) regards interaction as the "fundamental fact of classroom pedagogy because everything happening in the classroom happens through a process of live person-to-person interaction."

"Krashen's influential input hypothesis has suggested that SLA was primarily driven by exposure to sufficient amounts of comprehensible input, and in particular, that the comprehension of language at a slightly more advanced level than one's own would lead automatically to acquisition" (Gass and Mackey, 2012:5).

Many researchers agreed that input is necessary, but it is not assumed to be sufficient for SLA. Long's interaction hypothesis (1983, 1985, and 1996) argues that interaction facilitates acquisition because of the conversational modifications that occur in a discourse, which provide learners with the input they need. Swain argued for the importance of comprehensible output in the SLA process. Swain (1985) studied Canadian-French immersion schools where students had access to large quantities of comprehensible input. However, they were not able to produce native-like L2 utterances. Based on these findings, Swain proposed output hypothesis. According to Swain, output pushes learners to process language more deeply than does input. Output promotes 'noticing', 'hypothesis testing', and 'metalinguistic/reflective function'. Later, Swain (2005:112) extended the concept of output "to include its operation as a socially-constructed cognitive tool" and proposed collaborative dialogue. Studies, such as those of Swain and Lapkin (1998) and Swain (1998, 2000, 2006), suggest that conversations where learners collaborate in solving linguistic problems encountered while performing a communicative task denote that second-language learning is in progress. *Collaborative dialogue* is the

language occurring, as the learners work collaboratively to express their intended meaning and carry out the task at hand.

Therefore, this research sought to explore ***how teachers create interactional opportunities in the ESL classroom.*** It is broadly accepted within the field of SLA that opportunities for interaction facilitate L2 learning. Researchers (Pica 1992; Gass and Varonis 1994; Long1996; Mackey 1999; Mackey and Philip 1988; Swain 1985, 1995, 2005; Swain and Lapkin 1995, 1998; Mackey and McDonough 2006) have provided empirical evidence of how interaction facilitates language learning.

Findings from the Study

Teachers mainly engaged students in teacher-led question-and-answer sessions. In addition to this, teachers used pair work and group work to complete language tasks in the workbook to provide interactional opportunities to the students. The discussions following the instructions and explanation offered students opportunities to communicate with their classmates and teachers. Furthermore, students involved themselves in project work and skits, which gave them plenty of opportunities to interact with their classmates and teachers.

This study focused on teacher–student and student–student interaction. Interaction means negotiation of meaning, where the students receive feedback from their interlocutors. Negotiation of meaning occurs when the speakers seek to prevent breakdown in communication. The students in the classroom then adjust and modify their output

to make it more comprehensible for the teacher and other students in the class. Different strategies, like confirmation check, comprehension check, and clarification request can be adopted to repair the interaction. Thus, output in the form of response, reaction, clarification, and so on, serves three functions—the noticing function, the hypothesis-testing function, and the metalinguistic function (Swain 1995, 2004). Further, studies by researchers (Swain and Lapkin 1995, 1998; Swain 2000) suggest that the conversation that results when learners collaborate in solving linguistic problems encountered at the time of performing a communicative task denotes second language learning in progress. Collaborative dialogue is language learning occurring as the learners work collaboratively to express their intended meaning and carry out the task at hand.

However, classroom data for the current study indicated that clarification checks and reformulations were not extensively employed during student–student and teacher–student interaction to overcome communication breakdowns and achieve mutual understanding. It was noticed that most of the linguistic problems went unnoticed, and errors were left undiagnosed and untreated. Across 130 classes that were observed, very few incidents of negotiation were noted.

In teacher–student interaction during teacher-led question-answer sessions, there was high potential for meaning negotiation that facilitates language learning, but most such opportunities were left unexploited. The main focus of teacher questions seemed to help learners remember the text and check their understanding of the content of the text. Teachers extensively employed *display questions* to check student understanding. A large number of teachers believe that *referential questions* encourage learners to think hard, but this requires more time. Students reacted positively to referential questions. They think that referential questions are though-provoking. Referential questions require more cognitive processing; it involves longer responses and use of language, which is natural and life-like. Thus, students get to test L2.

During error treatment, there were plenty of opportunities to engage students in reflective (metalinguistic) thinking, but such opportunities were not explored. All teachers employed recasts to correct students' errors. Some of the teachers did not correct student errors, while many immediately nominated the next student to answer a question or improve upon the response produced by the previous student. A large number of students expect teachers to correct errors. They also believe that explaining their errors helps them understand and improve their responses. It was evident from the classroom data that recasts were not always effective. Students too conveyed that when teachers use recasts, they always do not understand their errors. Reflective thinking motivates a student to think about the language, understand what went wrong, and helps them provide a better response.

When teachers check student understanding during explanations and while giving instructions, there were ample opportunities for interaction. Students believe that it is disrespectful to approach teachers for

clarification or seek help in understanding. Students hold the view that teachers ought to initiate discussions for clarification check. Teachers themselves were not involved in many discussions with the students to check understanding during explanation and instructions. In addition, students observed that teachers always nominated the enthusiastic students. They held that teachers only nominate clever, good, and intelligent students. Therefore, many interactional opportunities were not put to good use by teachers and students.

It was evident from the data that in group and pair work the amount of classroom talk increased. The students, who normally hesitate to speak in front of the class or the teacher, spoke easily in front of a small group of their classmates. Clarification questions and reformulations were not extensively employed during pair and group work to achieve mutual understanding. Most of the linguistic problems went unnoticed and errors were neglected many times. Group members accepted the suggestions from the classmates, whom they believe to be more proficient, without any further discussions or questions. Most of the silent students simply copied the information shared in the group. The discussion did not translate into input and intake. This may be because the students were not involved in the negotiation processes. Most of the time, active students finished the task. The focus, most often, was on task completion and not on building knowledge. Some of the silent participants are proficient in target language, but preferred not to participate actively. They feel that their involvement would slow down task completion. They feel that more discussion results in more time for task completion.

It was evident, therefore, that there is a rich environment in the ESL classroom for interaction and for creating interactional opportunities. These have to be utilised in more effective ways to facilitate language learning.

Conclusion: Promoting Language Learning in Classroom Interaction

Most students strongly believe that it is disrespectful to ask a question or initiate interaction in the classroom. So, a large number of students only respond to what the teachers ask/say. Therefore, training students to ask questions to seek clarification, initiate interaction, and engage in negotiation of meaning might enhance the language learning potential of the interactional opportunities in the classroom.

There are many interactional opportunities in the language classroom. However, a majority of these opportunities are left unexplored. It is apparent from the data that teachers have very little understanding of how interaction facilitates language learning. Therefore, teachers need to be aware of conversational moves involved in negotiation of meaning when students and teachers work collaboratively to facilitate learning at the time of interaction. Teachers use their intuition to guide students and create learning opportunities during classroom interaction. Awareness in facilitating negotiated interaction in language classrooms will allow teachers to take decisions based on conscious reasoning.

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