SOME CONSIDERATIONS ON STRUCTURING STUDENT INTERACTION TO PROMOTE ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNING

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The problem of interactive approach to English Language teaching and learning is treated in terms of ARIAS (Accountability, Rewards, Interdependence, Assignments, and Social Skills). The emphasis is placed on the effective ways of promoting student interaction through structuring to the peers their activities and assigning different roles that require each student's specific speech behavior and result in more active peers' interaction.

Keywords: interaction, accountability, assignment, interdependence, rewords, structuring, summarizer, elaborator, facilitator

The shift in emphasis in language teaching from a teacher-directed approach to a learner-center one, along with the perceived need to promote learners' efforts at developing autonomy, has resulted in new challenges for a foreign language teacher. The extent to which an increasing awareness of self-directed learning will result in gains in the short or long term, or will simply motivate students to become more autonomous in their learning has not yet been demonstrated. However, encouraged language learners become more involved in managing their own learning in an appealing notion for several reasons. One of the reasons is that learning is more effective when learners are active in the learning process, assuming responsibility for their learning and participating in the decisions that affect it. Particularly for a mixed ability groups of students, the promotion of learner independence in language study can provide means to meet the differing needs, expectations, and proficiency levels of individual learners that may not be met in a group-oriented classroom setting. On the other hand, the need for developing a greater autonomy in language learning can be seen as one facet of lifelong learning, in which each individual effectively makes decisions about which learning path to take. Nonetheless, language teachers may feel uneasy about encouraging implementing practices aimed at developing learner independence in an academic setting, where student's attention is largely focused on completing other program requirements.

They may also perform their traditional roles as language experts, as providers and directors of knowledge. They may have misgivings about the ability of learners to organize themselves to work productively and independently.

With both the advantages and possible pitfalls of promoting learner independence in mind, we decided to introduce a self-directed element in the English course for the would be interpreters in the third year of study. The one-year program aimed at developing students' independent reading and speaking skills in the English language is very demanding on students' time and energies. That is why any initiative to foster learner autonomy has to be flexible enough to fit our course and program constraints, as well as provide for learner choice.

One solution we have found to be effective was the structuring of a student interaction for promoting learning.

It is a common knowledge that a classroom may not have a computer, teaching aides, or the latest sophisticated materials, but every classroom has students. However, the main goal of an English teacher is to find the ways to maximize student's learning through student-student interaction rather than direct teacher-student one. Compared to the traditional lecture approach, interactive methods have a number of advantages that have been reported in a number of research reviews on peer-interactive methods [1, p. 54–65]. In addition to higher levels of academic achievement, an increase in self-esteem, attendance, and a liking for school, an increase in mutual concern among students and the development of positive peer relationships have also been reported.

Merely putting students in groups isn't enough. Student interaction needs to be structured. In the ESL/EFL classroom, developing proficiency in reading, writing, listening, and speaking the target language, as well as acquiring knowledge of culture, are core instructional goals. Student interaction also needs to be structured so that many benefits of peer-interactive approaches can come about.

In order to provide harmonious student interaction, a teacher should successfully orchestrate a classroom interaction taking into account the issues of Accountability, Rewards, Interdependence, Assignments, and Social Skills (the acronym ARIAS).

Accountability means that students must make worthwhile individual contributions as well as benefit from contributions made by others. Group learning and performance depends

on both individual accountability and group interdependence; group members sink or swim together – i.e., for anyone in the group to succeed, everyone in the group must succeed.

Both individual accountability and interdependence among students can be structured through rewards (individual /team/ class). Winning a contest based on group competition is one type of reward. A group can also be rewarded without competition. Here, students work in groups to create a group product, and everybody receives the same reward: a grade or other feedback. Or reward may be a combination of an individual's and the team's score (the sum of the quiz scores for all team members). In all these examples, the team reward is designed to promote interdependence among team members. However, continually working in the same team may not contribute to a feeling of overall interdependence among all students in the class. In order to promote the development of a positive overall class spirit, teams can be reformed throughout the year and a class reward may be occasionally awarded. In this case the teams work together to earn a reward that is shared by the entire class.

Individual accountability and group interdependence can also be structured by the assignment. Completing an assignment requires students to be engaged in certain behaviors and complete various subtasks. For example, if three students work together as a group on a composition about the changes they would like to see in their University department, each person can have the task of writing about just one change. Then they would come back together to write an introduction or conclusion, as well as revise each person's paragraph and ensure that the entire composition flows smoothly.

Another way of promoting student interaction is to assign specific role behaviors to students. When first introducing this to the class, it is helpful to give an each student a copy of a responsibility description on each role. For example, students writing a composition may be given the roles of the composition writer, a composition commenter, or an observer of the interaction between these three peers. Students provide their own feedback on the composition according to the role requirements.

One of the effective ways that assignments can be used to structure interaction involves practicing reading, speaking, and listening. Here, students can be assigned to groups of three and instructed to cooperate with each other by performing one of three roles: Summarizer, Elaborator, or Facilitator – roles that represent cognitive tasks thought to be involved in learning. Each student of this triad is given a copy of a text that should be read silently or aloud. Upon completion reading the text, the Summarizer sums up the main points of the text to the other two members of the group in his / her own words without looking down at the page. This helps clarify the core ideas in the material. The Elaborator then explains the activity by relating to a similar situation; or otherwise discussing the issues involved in the problem. This helps relate the new information to prior knowledge, making it more meaningful and easier to remember. The Facilitator monitors accuracy, makes sure that the triad follows the task and uses the target language, and if there is some time left, asks for an elaboration from the Summarizer, or adds elaboration of his or her own. After students have finished discussing the text (5–10 minutes) and have chosen an answer, the teacher may wish to have a few minutes of general discussion, perhaps soliciting some personal elaborations from triads.

Another technique of using interactive approach is a jigsaw activity. The idea for jigsaw activities comes from jigsaw-puzzles. Just as in a jigsaw, pieces must be put back together to complete the picture. In a jigsaw activity, information is divided into different pieces, each group member is given a piece to learn, and then group members teach each other about their pieces so that everyone has a complete picture of the information. First, the teacher divides the material into enough pieces so that each group member has one part. Next, the parts are distributed and people from different groups who have the same part meet to study their parts. These new groups are called expert teams. After studying their pieces of information, students return to their original groups and teach their piece to the other group members. Finally, the entire group demonstrates the knowledge by using the information to complete a task or answer questions. An example of jigsaw activity can be illustrated by the following: a teacher puts students into groups of four, and, after introducing vocabulary used for describing people, gives a cartoon about family members to every person in a group. The students with the same cartoon then get together in expert teams to read and understand their pieces. Then, they return and describe the cartoon to the group mates without showing it. Afterwards, students are given a test covering the information in all four cartoons, with their scores being partly based on how well their group mates had performed.

As one can see, this jigsaw activity involves all five parts of ARIAS. One, there is an individual accountability, because group member are all responsible for learning and teaching their cartoon. Two, there are rewards for cooperation. Teaching the group mates about the cartoon they have read, students raise

everyone's score as well as their own. Three, there is an interdependence because students make their fellow group members describe them the cartoons they have not seen. Four, assignments are equally divided among all group members. Five, social skills are being developed as students must be both good speakers explaining their cartoons so that others could understand and be good listeners, being sure that they find out all necessary information.

Although the potential of properly structured peer interaction for improving learning is great, there are some concerns regarding the implementation of these activities in the ESL/EFL classes that need to be addressed.

These concerns fall broadly into two categories:

1) those related to the students' limited English ability;

2) those related to a classroom management.

The first category includes a lack of a correct model of the target form of English, inaccurate modeling, and insufficient or faulty feedback.

The second category includes group formation, maintaining order, learner's use of their native language at inappropriate times, evaluation, and suitability for varied cultural and learning styles.

The concerns based on students' proficiency level are important because students speak much more when peer interactive methods are applied rather than when the class is conducted in a teacher-fronted classroom. Even, if teachers' English is not that of a standard variety of English, it will almost always be close to a standard variety than students' English. With peer interactive methods, students hear each others' English, which may not be accurate phonologically, syntactically, lexically, or sociolinguistically. However, many linguists state that learners can discriminate between standard and non-standard English and can acquire more native-like English as their proficiency increases.

Another concern is that students' lack of ability may cause them to give the peers inaccurate feedback; for example, telling them that something they said was wrong when, in reality, it was correct. In addition, students' awareness about their poor English language proficiency level may lead then to shy away from providing any feedback at all.

In contrast, as they say, in a teacher-fronted classroom, the students have the teacher as their model and, at least theoretically, can get an immediate and accurate feedback. However, in reality, few students in such classes are lucky enough to receive much individual feedback.

Long and Parter (1985) report the striking fact that each EFL student has only 30 seconds per a lesson to practice their English in a teacher-fronted classroom of 30 EFL students. This means, each student has only one hour of practice per year. Even though, the students receive an accurate feedback, during such time, which is just not enough. Therefore, when teachers dominate the instructional time, students may have a good model and receive correct feedback, but students have few opportunities to produce any language of their own in the class, and consequently receive little individualized feedback.

As for the accuracy of a feedback, some English teachers found that their students never miscorrected each other during unsupervised group work.

In summary, then, even though students are not as good as teachers in providing a correct language model and feedback, during peer-interacting activities, students can participate more actively and provide each other with an authentic communication practice. In this case, the lack of target-level modeling and feedback may be considered to be an acceptable trade-off for an increased student participation and productivity. Further, by carefully structuring the activity, teachers can reduce the possible effects of students' English deficiencies. For example, by linking a cooperative activity with a reading passage, teachers can provide students with the vocabulary they can use while talking in their classroom.

Classroom management is the second area of concern when peer-interactive methods are used. Teachers may at times be reluctant to try implementing group activities because they fear chaos will result. It should be in mind that putting students in groups does not mean that it is a teatime for teachers. In fact, teachers can and should remain an integral part of cooperative learning in the classroom.

Teachers should control the classroom in three ways:

1) by structuring the group activities;

2) by teaching students the skills necessary to work efficiently in groups;

3) by walking from group to group coordinating and supporting when groups face challenges, giving feedback, and making sure that students follow their task.

Another problem for a teacher is to decide how many students to put into a group and what students to put together. Some experts (Rogers, Dansereau) on cooperative learning suggest that pairs or groups of three or four are best when students are fist learning to work together. Also, the smaller the group, the more each person gets to talk. However, larger groups mean more people to share ideas.

Answering the question how to divide students into groups, some researchers note that

groups should be mixed in terms of ability and other characteristics, e.g. forming heterogeneous groups; others consider homogeneous groups are more appropriate for the students of peer interactive cooperation.

Another aspect of classroom management that some teachers may be concerned about is that students may use their native language during peer interacting learning. To tell the truth, the use of a native language is not always regarded as inappropriate. For example, if students are trying to understand the activity procedure better, it might be helpful if they were allowed to use their native language to some extent. If, however, students prefer speaking their native language rather than expressing their thoughts in English, they should be discouraged from doing so. One way to deal with this is to give one student in each group the role of monitoring the group members' target-language use.

Teachers might further be puzzled about how they can evaluate individual students during peer-interaction learning. They may wonder how to determine what each student actually did and learned during cooperative learning activities. There are two answers to this concern. First, individual assessment is often a part of peer-interactive methods. Students can be tested individually or called on randomly to answer questions on material student in a group. Second, group methods are only one part of teachers' repertoire of methods. Their, teachers have opportunities to evaluate their students during other activities.

A final consideration that must be taken into account is the students' cultural and social values, their expectations about classroom learning, and their personal learning styles because values and expectations vary from country to country, place to place, and person to person. Therefore, this context cooperative group work will need more practice for some students due to different cultural values, past experience and cognitive styles. This should be considered not so much as an objection to cooperative learning but as a reminder that caution must be exercised before introducing any new curricular approach. As it has been already mentioned, peer-interactive methods are proposed as one type of classroom activity; how the methods are implemented and integrated into the existing curriculum are best judged by teachers who know their students best.

However, the social significance of cooperative learning methods cannot be understated because by creating conditions that encourage students to cooperate in a team or a group, we not only motivate students to become more autonomous, active and responsible for their learning of course material, but, perhaps more importantly, help students turn into better citizens of their world.

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