

Classroom Interaction in ELT Classes at Primary Level: A Case Study of Teachers' Perceptions and Practices



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Abstract: *The present case study aims to explore the patterns of classroom interaction at the primary level in a public sector school in Karachi. During the course of study it has been observed that the biggest problem in the context of classroom communication is that the teachers have quite a vague idea of the efficacy of their talk with the students in classroom situations. The basic reason of studying teacher- student interaction is its immense contribution to pedagogy in general and to ESL classes in particular. Employing the qualitative paradigm, seven sessions of each of the six primary level teachers of English have been observed and the data of all the 42 classes have been recorded on the standardized Flander's Interaction Analysis Matrix. Besides, post- class discussions and in- depth interviews have also been used as instruments of data collection. It has been found that there is a dire need to make the English Language teachers aware of the significance of classroom interaction and the role it plays in ELT classes.*

Keywords: Classroom Interaction; ELT Classes; Primary Level; Teachers' Perceptions And Practices

Introduction

'Communication' or 'interaction' is an integral aspect of human life. The concept of 'classroom interaction' entails the communication taking place in a classroom setting, especially between teacher and students. Coyle (1999) opines that in the learning process 'interaction' is "fundamental to learning." The way the act of interaction takes place in a classroom is bound to determine the quality of the teaching-learning process. In the context of language classes 'classroom interaction' becomes even more significant. Allwright (1976) aptly remarks, "Success or failure, in classroom language learning typically has something, if not everything, to do with the nature of the interaction that takes place during lessons."

The impact of classroom interaction on second language development has been a major concern in classroom studies. Ellis, 1980 cited in Chaudron, 1988, was of the view that students get more practice in the Target Language and are "more motivated...when they have greater opportunities to speak."

The phenomenon of interaction analysis is almost as old as the tradition of classroom research. In the mid 1960s it was the impact of sociological investigations which led to the development of classroom interaction analysis systems in terms of social meanings as well as an "inferred classroom climate" – 'direct' or 'indirect' (Flander, 1960 cited in Chaudron, 1988). This tradition considers interaction as "a chain of teacher and student behaviours, each one classifiable into one or another category." (Chaudron, 1988) Malamah- Thomas (1987) said, "The basis of 'interaction analysis' tradition, established with Flanders' categories of description for classroom verbal behaviour (1970), is to look at classroom language to see what it reveals about the teaching and learning processes." In this classroom interaction analysis tradition various observation instruments have been employed for decades. All of them, according to Malamah- Thomas (op. cit) "are essentially adaptations, extensions, or simplifications of Flanders' original categories.

These comprise two main categories, teacher

talk and pupil talk, with a third category to cover other types of verbal behaviour.”

Review of Related Studies and Literature

Developed in 1976, Moskowitz’s FLINT (Foreign Language Interaction) was among the first interaction analysis systems which were directly inspired by FIAC (Flanders Interaction Analysis Categories). FLINT uses the original categories of FIAC along with certain additions e.g. ‘Specific’, ‘Choral’, ‘Reads orally’, ‘Open-ended’ or ‘Student- initiated’, and ‘Off task’ are the added categories in Student talk. ‘Repeats student response verbatim’, ‘Asks cultural questions’, ‘Personalises’, and ‘Directs pattern drills’ are some of the extended categories in Teacher talk.

Another system to analyse classroom interaction was Bowers’ Categories of Verbal Behaviour in the Language Classroom, presented in 1980. Bowers basically identified seven categories of ‘move’ within a lesson; a ‘move’ being the smallest unit of description.

His list of categories comprised ‘Responding’, ‘Sociating’, ‘Organising’, ‘Directing’, ‘Presenting’, ‘Evaluating’, and ‘Eliciting.’

Hai & Bee (2006) also used a modified FIAC System to look into the “relative effectiveness of interaction analysis feedback on the verbal behaviour of teachers.” This experimental study showed that “the feedback groups accepted students’ feelings more, praised students more, used students’ ideas and initiated more student talk in the classroom.”

Another study carried out, using FIAC System was of Rubie- Davies (2007) in which the differences between the classroom exchanges of high- and low- expectation teachers were explored. It was found out that “there are important differences in the classroom environments for the students of high- expectation, average- progress and low- expectation teachers. (Rubie- Davies, op. cit)

Tan & Tan (2006) rightly opined, “Through detailed analyses of actual interactive events of how teachers and students in classrooms use talk and other resources to accomplish learning, the practices and phenomena that have usually been

taken for granted can be explicated and understood.”

Research suggests that “such children” (for whom English is not the first language) are at an advantage and “develop a greater social sensitivity, because they become very sensitive to facial expression and non- verbal communication generally.” (Dean, 2005).

Kanu (1996) and Khalid (1996) agreed that students’ learning in the classroom setting in Pakistan is characterized by a concept of learning that sees the teacher as the fountain of knowledge whose role it is to transmit this knowledge to the students. Jaworski (1996) further discussed the classroom situation in Pakistan, claiming, “It is the teacher’s task, as expert, to be familiar with the knowledge in the text book and to present it to pupils in the exact form it appears in the text. It is the responsibility of pupils to learn the knowledge and be able to reproduce it in examinations.”

Methodology

The researcher has selected Qualitative approach to conduct the present case study. Flanders Interaction Analysis Categories System was used to record the data; the information related to the interaction categories is then plotted on a matrix in order to be interpreted meaningfully. The interpretation of the matrices had helped in comparing and contrasting the different categories of teacher- student interaction in the ESL classes at the primary level. The classroom observations were audio- recorded and transcribed later. In- depth interviews were also conducted to have full knowledge of teachers’ perceptions. The data had been, then analysed through descriptive statistics. This array of data collection tools was employed to represent multiple perspectives and to facilitate validation and triangulation.

The study was conducted in a federal government co- educational school, located at Shahra-e-Faisal, Karachi. The standardised Classroom Interaction Matrix has been adopted, as developed by Flander (1970), to categorise the classroom interaction acts occurring in the classes. Smith & Hardman (2003) opined, “Flanders Interaction Analysis System has

continued to play a major role in the design of observation systems.” FIAC System is shown in

Table 1; whereas, the Observation Sheet, used to record data, is presented as Table 2:

Table 1

FLANDER’S INTERACTION ANALYSIS CATEGORIES SYSTEM

No		FIACs	EXPLANATION
1	TEACHER TALK	Accepts feelings	Accepts and clarifies an attitude or the feeling of the tone of a pupil in a non threatening manner.
2		Praises or Encourages	Praises or encourages pupil action or behaviour. Jokes that release tension, but not at the expense of another individual; nodding head, saying um, hmm or go on are included.
3		Accepts or uses ideas	Clarifying, building or developing ideas suggested by a pupil. Teachers’ extensions of pupil ideas are included but as teacher brings more of his own ideas into play, shift to category five.
4		Asks questions	Asking a question about content or procedures; based on teacher ideas, with the intent that pupil will answer.
5		Lectures	Giving facts or opinions about content or procedures; expressing his own ideas, giving his own explanation or citing an authority other than a pupil.
6		Gives Directions	Directions, commands or orders to which a student is expected to comply.
7		Criticises or Justifies Authority	Statements intended to change pupil behaviour from non acceptable to acceptable pattern; bawling someone out; stating why the teacher is doing what he is doing; extreme self- reference.
8		Responds	Talk by pupils in response to teacher. Teacher initiates the contact or solicits pupil statement or structures the situation. Freedom to express own ideas is limited.
9		Initiates	Talk by pupils that they initiate. Expressing own ideas; initiating a new topic; freedom to develop opinions and a line of thought, like asking thoughtful questions; going beyond the existing structure.
10		Silence or Confusion	Pauses, short periods of confusion in which communication can not be understood by the observer.

3		Accepts or uses ideas	204	155	148	195	237	164	1103	5.2
4		Asks questions	1102	1070	1009	1053	1083	1106	6423	30.5
5		Lectures	389	450	504	429	446	480	2698	12.8
6		Gives Directions	260	298	331	365	319	332	1905	9.0
7		Criticises or Justifies Authority	2	2	2	2	4	1	13	0.06
8	STUDENT	Responds	1069	1030	1006	1024	1036	1056	6221	29.6
9		Initiates	0	0	0	4	6	0	0	0
10		Silence or Confusion	13	12	216	133	129	118	621	2.9

T= Teacher Sn= Session Gr= Grade

It becomes quite evident from Table 3 that for the most prominent part of the classroom interaction either the teachers were asking questions (30.5%) or the students were responding (29.6%) to their (teachers') questions. 12.8% of the time the teachers were observed lecturing; whereas 9% of the time they were giving directions. The element of praise and encouragement was 8.2% of the classroom interaction. Accepting or using ideas (5.2%) by the teacher is also observed as a positive phenomenon in classroom interaction process. Another important observation was of silence or confusion (2.9%) in the class. The instance of silence or confusion generally occurred when the teachers wrote something on the board, or when some student was unable to respond to the teacher's question. Acceptance of students' feelings took 0.03% and criticism or justification of authority by teachers took 0.06% of the classroom communication. To the researcher's surprise, no classroom interaction has been observed in any of the seven sessions of T-2 in terms of student initiation (0%).

All the six teachers, whose classrooms were observed in the course of research, were interviewed in a semi-structured manner to get knowledge of their perceptions regarding different aspects of the classroom interaction process. Commenting on the classroom interaction process, all the six teachers (my key informants) indicated that 'classroom interaction' is important, the true essence of

the concept, especially as applicable in ESL classes was not known to them, although. T-1, T-4, and T-6 also highlighted the importance of "a classroom environment which promote the interaction opportunities" meaningful to both the teacher and her students. While giving their views on the role of teacher's acceptance of students' feelings in a primary ESL classroom, five out of six teachers showed their willingness to accept students' feelings. T-2 said, "When I enter in my class I say something that interests the children...you know to catch their attention...so they are happy to listen to me for the whole class." It is very evident that T-2 very much likes to be listened to by her students. In none of her seven sessions observed by the researcher was she found accepting students' feelings. When she was further asked, "How do you manage to keep them (students') interest throughout your lesson?" She, in a pleasant tone replied, "Yes, I also ask them many questions to keep them alert and attentive."

When the teachers were asked if the students should initiate some talk in a classroom T-1, T-3 and T-5 indicated that it is very important for the students that they

initiate some talk in the classroom. T-6 commented, "...You see... children are coming from different backgrounds. They also don't speak English at their homes so it's very hard to make them initiate any talk, especially in

English."

During the course of interviews the teachers seemed to be aware of the fact that students are sometimes confused and that the teachers' instructions or talk may not be clear. Conclusion and Recommendations

Results of the study reveal that classroom interaction is a joint effort of both the teacher and the students. However, unlike other conversations, where speakers negotiate turns and topics, in classroom discourse the turns are allocated by one speaker, the teacher who designates the next speaker as well as the next topic. While designating the next speaker, teachers may call upon a particular student to answer i.e. 'direct nomination' or they may throw the turn open to the whole class i.e. 'general solicit.' During classroom observations it became obvious that even in making a 'general solicit' teachers markedly show their expectations towards some students more than that of others.

It has been noticed that most of the teachers do not have a full understanding of the significance of classroom interaction. They do not have a very good idea of how to exploit the classroom situation so as to develop English Language Skills to the maximum. Most of the time the primary level students are either listening passively to the teachers reading the textbook or reading the textbook when asked by the teachers.

Another worth noting thing is that the teachers mainly interact with the students who quickly respond to their questions and who sit on the front desks. Not much effort was done to involve the non- volunteers who were hesitant to answer but might have the required answers.

The para verbal and non- verbal features of teachers' interaction with students were also observed to be contributing in making an impact of classroom interaction process taking place between teacher and students. Being a major figure in directing the interaction process, a teacher conveys a great deal to the students through her tone of voice, pace, pitch, stress, intonation, eye- contact, gestures and facial expressions.

It was observed during the course of data collection that the teachers of the primary classes usually ask questions which do not play any role in developing the cognitive abilities of the students. The involvement of the students in the classroom interaction was found restricted to answering the teacher's low order thinking questions. "Such narrowly focused teachers' questions constrain the range of possible answers." (Doyle, 1986 cited in Wittrock, 1986). Teachers were also seen emphasising on one and only right answer in response to their questions. Long & Sato: 1983 cited in Shomoossi : 2004 aptly suggested that "learner responses would differ not only quantitatively but also qualitatively, depending on the type of questions."

The primary classroom teaching and learning was found to be following the transmission mode in which the teacher has the knowledge to be transmitted to the students without any distortion. However, if we consider children as active constructors of knowledge and are engaged in what Gordon Wells (1987) calls "the guided reinvention of knowledge" then there is a likelihood of children not memorising knowledge that has been constructed and formulated by other people. "Learners have to make sense of knowledge and for themselves, and to do this they need the opportunity to explore, interpret and come to terms with new information." (Wray and Medwell, 1993) Obviously, transmission teaching does not provide these opportunities; resultantly, the classroom environment can not be conducive to language learning.

Moreover, teachers' thinking, their decisions, the consequent actions are influenced by the knowledge they possess as a result of their own learning and teaching experiences. Borko and Putnam (1995) aptly suggest that "in order to change their (teachers') practice, we must help them to expand and elaborate their knowledge systems."

The recommendations, derived from the study, are listed below:

1. The teachers should have complete awareness of the ways and means to make

the classroom interaction process meaningful. In this context, the schools should arrange training courses in the field of pedagogy in general and classroom interaction in particular.

2. The primary level teachers should develop such English language tasks which provide students with ample opportunities to use their language skills.
3. The teachers should make an effort to create a healthy atmosphere in their classrooms so that the children do not feel shy or hesitant to initiate any talk in the class. Contexts which do not encourage children to think critically or communicate freely are not conducive to learning and language development. Research reveals that such treatment is wasteful in time and inefficient in its results. (Kanu, op cit)
4. Teachers should ask questions involving high order thinking skills along with the ones that involve low order thinking skills. Questions that involve high order thinking skills play a vital role in the cognitive development processes. "Directive, teacher-dominated discourse is not an effective way to promote higher- order thinking among pupils." (Smith & Hardman, op cit)
5. Primary ESL Teachers, after raising the questions, must give sufficient wait- time to the students so that they can process the answers and are able to respond.
6. The Primary level English Language Teachers must give an effective feedback to students' answers as "effective interactive learning" takes place when teachers effectively use feedback "to stimulate classroom talk." (Smith & Higgins, n.d.)
7. Teachers must make an effort to make those students talk and respond who either sit at the back or are hesitant to say anything in the class.

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