

Interaction in the EFL Speaking Class

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Abstract. This paper is focused on classroom interaction related to the problems faced by EFL students in the Speaking class, highlighting the teacher's role to direct classroom interaction to promote cooperative and supportive learning environment. Varied kinds of interactive learning activities are presented to engage the students in active participation.

Introduction

Recent trend in language teaching is geared towards the goal for the learners to develop communicative competence, considered as “an appropriate term to capture current trends in SLA, in teaching and research” (Brown, 2000, p. 245). Communicative competence is defined as “that aspect of our competence that enables us to convey and interpret messages and to negotiate meanings interpersonally within specific context” (246). Communication, by nature, is interactive, which involves addresser and addressee in a reciprocal interaction. In the EFL class students are expected to master the skill to communicate using the target language through interaction with the teacher and among the students themselves.

In the EFL class, particularly focusing on the oral communication, students are usually faced with problems that hinder them from taking active participation in the learning process. Quite a lot of students keep quiet and are reluctant to get involved in giving responses or asking questions. This is a challenge for the classroom teacher to engage the students in active participation in the learning process, to develop their oral communication skills or communicative competence.

The teachers are expected to know the common problems faced by the students, some theoretical background knowledge to equip them with better understanding to design effective interactive learning activities. They need to have a better understanding about the role that they can play to create a more conducive learning environment for the students. This paper is focused on classroom interaction, and teachers' role in promoting interactive learning, highlighting some practical implementations and strategies to be carried out through interactive learning activities in the EFL Speaking Class in the English Department setting.

Theoretical Concepts Related to Classroom Interaction

Interaction as the “heart of communication” is defined as the “collaborative exchange of thoughts, feelings or ideas between two or more people, resulting in a reciprocal effect on each other” (Brown, 2000, p.165). People involving in a communication act influence each other through what they say or do towards each other. Michael Long proposed

the interaction hypothesis, suggesting that “learners learn new form in a language through the negotiation around meaning that occurs when they engage in communicative learning activities. In line with this, Rivers (1987, cited in Brown, 2000, p. 165) clarifies that in interaction students can use what they learned in “real life exchanges”

Interaction is basically related to constructivism, more specifically in the social interactionist perspective that “learning occurs through interaction with other people” (Williams & Burden, 2007, p.39). In the same way, a language is learned through interaction with others, which is emphasized by Harmer that “students learn better when they are engaged with what is happening” (2007, p.87). In this case, it is essential to have mediation, the part played by other significant people for the learner in the learning process. It is emphasized that “the role of the mediator plays a key factor in effective learning”. In the classroom setting, the role of mediator is played by the teacher, who selects and shapes the students’s learning experiences. In line with this, Brown suggested that “the most important key to creating an interactive language classroom is the initiation of interaction by the teacher”, indicating the key role played by the teacher in promoting the appropriate kind of interaction in the class (Brown, 2000, p.169).

Related to the roles of teachers, Brown presented a set of metaphors to describe a spectrum of possibilities: “The teacher as controller, the teacher as director, the teacher as manager, the teacher as facilitator and the teacher as resource”. The last two are less directive roles; acting as facilitator the teacher is to facilitate the learning process, while as resource, the teacher is supposed to be “available for advice and counsel whenever the students seek it”. Brown suggests that the key to interacting teaching is to strive towards less directive role that the students are guided to learn the target language “moving from the roles of total dependence to relatively total independence” (168).

The important role of classroom teacher is highlighted by Carl Roger (cited by Scrivener, 2009, 24) an American psychologist, who suggested that there are “three core teacher characteristics to help create an effective learning environment”. The first one is “respect”, that teachers should have “a positive and non-judgemental regard for another person”. The second is “empathy”, that teachers should be able to see things from the other person’s perspective, as if looking through their eyes”, and the last one is “authenticity” that teachers are supposed to be themselves “without hiding behind job titles, roles or masks” Out of the three teacher characteristics, Rogers and Freiberg (1994, cited by Scrivener, 2009, p.24) consider that the most important is authenticity. To create rapport with the students, “the foundation is to learn yourself enough that you know what style you have and when you are truthful to yourself” (Gaie Houston, 1990, cited by Scrivener).

In order to create rapport with the students, the teacher needs to know what problems are commonly faced by Second Language learners,

which can be viewed from the Affective Principles, proposed by Brown, particularly those related to “Language Ego, Self Confidence and Risk Taking” (2000, pp.61-64). Learning a second language, learners have to develop a new mode of thinking, and acting, which can easily create within the learners “a sense of fragility, defensiveness, and a raising of inhibition”. Accordingly, based on the Language Ego Principle, “all second language learners need to be treated with affective tender loving care”. Teachers need to provide affective support, such as “displaying a supportive attitude to the students”. Particularly, this is important to help the students develop self-confidence; learners need to have the belief that they are fully capable of accomplishing a task, which is considered a “partial factor in their eventual success”, as stated in the Self-Confidence Principle. Finally, the third effective principle, Risk Taking, interrelated with the first two principles, is the importance of getting the learners to “take calculated risks” in trying to use the target language.

These affective principles have given a better understanding about EFL learners, as second language learners. The following discussion will be focused on the practical implementation in the EFL Speaking class to create a cooperative and supportive environment for interactive learning and activities to occur. Following Hadfield (1995), the learning processes will be divided into three phases: initiating, sustaining and ending.

Getting to Know One Another

Students coming to a Speaking class have some kind of anxiety as they are not sure who and what kind of teacher they are going to have, and what kind of learning experience they have to go through. The first meeting is the crucial moment for the teacher to initiate interactive learning. It is the time for the teacher to get to know each of the students and to show that he/she is interested in each without any exception. to build rapport with the students and to help build rapport among the students themselves. This can be carried out through a pre prepared ice breaking activity to know more about each other, including family, hobbies, likes and dislikes. Following this pair or group sharing activities, the students are given the explanation concerning the Speaking class, the objectives, the weekly basic course outline and kinds of learning activities and what the students are expected to do in the class. The students are given the assurance that every one of them plays equally important role, and is expected to participate and to approach the teacher whenever any of them has problems in the learning process. In return, the students are encouraged to share what they expect from the teacher and from the Speaking class. It is also essential for the students to be aware that, as a group, they are supposed to cooperate and support each other to learn together to develop in their oral proficiency. In this way, this first meeting is expected to lay the basic foundation on which good relationship is expected to be developing through out the semester. The subsequent meetings will be for sustaining positive interaction along the process.

Empathizing with Each Other

Following the first strategy to promote positive interaction in the class, the students are guided to develop understanding and empathy related to the learning activities in the class. The students are guided to share what they experience in trying to express themselves in English, about their nervousness or negative feelings they have to face in using English for oral communication. They need to be assured that it is common to have such kind of feelings but they need to develop affective strategy to have eye contact with the other interlocutor(s) and focus on the message that they want to get through, rather than think about their own personal feelings. On the other hand, when they are acting as listeners they are supposed to be good listeners by giving full attention on the speaker.

They are guided to empathize with each other by being attentive towards anybody speaking that will contribute to the speaker's good feeling. This is the least they can do to show respect towards people speaking, which at the same time gives some kind of support to the speaker. The teacher is to be the role model to show understanding towards the students' learning difficulties, to listen attentively to students' responses or speech performance, to appreciate any responses or questions given. Corrections may be given whenever needed, which is done cautiously without exaggerating or directly pointing out who has made basic mistakes. As being afraid of making mistakes is usually what hinders the students from participating. The students need to be made aware, that making mistakes is a necessary part of learning process and that they can learn to improve through their mistakes.

Support can also be given by giving positive regards pointing out the good side of their responses or performance through compliments or praises. Besides showing attentiveness when listening, gesture, smile or head nodding, can be used to show approval or positive regards that what is said is good. Directly, Verbal compliments can be used whenever appropriate. If giving and receiving positive regards are what the students often experience in their interaction, either from the teacher or their peers, it will contribute to their well-being and their self-confidence. If the teacher also shows appreciation towards students' participation in spite of their weaknesses, it will make the students feel more at home in the class and get the encouragement to express themselves in the target language

Varied Interactive Learning Activities

As students learn through interacting with the teacher as well as with their peers, different kinds of interactive learning activities have to be provided for through pair work, group work or class work. These can be given in the form of interview, talk show, role play, and group project, which are employed to sustain the interaction throughout the learning process.

In the interview learning activity, students are working in pairs, one acting as the interviewer and the other as the interviewee. Each interviewer is assigned the role of a famous person or celebrity. The students are given about fifteen to twenty minutes to carry out the interview, during which the students are free to stand or go outside nearby. When the interview is over, the whole class will be sitting in circle or half circle to listen to each interviewer reporting the result. The class may ask questions for further information. The interviewee may also correct or clarify the report when it is not in accordance to the information given

For talk shows, students can be given several topics to choose from, to prepare a talk show in groups. Each group will be engaged in discussion concerning the focus of discussion based on the topic. While the students are discussing, the teacher moves around to check whether the students have difficulty in their preparation, taking the role of facilitating, the teacher will give assistance whenever necessary. When the students are ready with the substance of the talk show, they have to decide on the roles and who to take each role of the host, the moderator, guest speakers, acting as experts in the field, and some other guests, who will be asking questions. Then each group presents the talk show within a certain limited time, twenty to twenty five minutes. The rest of the class will be acting as the audience, who will be involved in asking questions during the talk show when they are invited. They will also be asked to evaluate and give comments after each performance. In this activity, the students are given meaningful task to work on together, carried out in English

Role playing is an interactive activity involving group work. Students are divided into groups to work together, from choosing a one act play, discussing, rehearsing and performing. If they prefer to write their own script, they have to consult and work with the teacher until a reasonably good piece of script is finished. Having got the script they have to agree on the role for each of the group members and start rehearsing. This will usually take about one month for practicing the dialog and acting. On the performing meeting, each group shows their performance, followed by questions and answers, evaluation or comments on the performance. The students are encouraged to use English in the group work that the target language is practiced in real and authentic situations. Carefully planned and carried out, this play performance gives the students the chance to act, exercising their creativity and enhance their self-confidence.

Another group activity can be assigned as a final group project to be discussed and agreed on at the early stage of the semester. So, practically it will engage the students in active participation until the last meeting when they present their group achievement in the last meeting. The following is the procedure carried out when it was implemented in

the writer's Speaking III class, for the third semester in the English Department.

The idea of the final project was inspired by the current lifestyles of the young people nowadays, who spend much of their leisure time in the malls or shopping centers. The final project is to provide the students with the experience to explore and learn more about the unique places they can find in the local city, Surabaya. When it was communicated at the early stage of the semester, the students gave positive responses and agreed to design a one day city tour for a group of young people from a foreign country. First of all, they had to discuss in groups the theme of the city tour, looked for information from the campus travel agency, and decided places of interest and activities to be carried out. The second step was to visit those places and explore what to be done in those places.

At the same time an organizing committee was set up to organize a Tea Party in the last meeting when the students had to present the designed tours in. A committee was then set up, who were working with the teacher to prepare and organize the programs and refreshment to be enjoyed together, including choosing a host to be the master of the program. In the Tea Party, each group presented what they had prepared showing their pictures visiting those points of interest for young people. It was a fun, enriching as well as rewarding experience. They had fun and at the same time used English in the real life situation and also learned to understand more about their local city. What is more, there developed cohesive learning groups, whose members are cooperating and supporting each other towards the goal. This was shown in the self evaluation essay written by the students.

The self evaluation essay which had been assigned to the students included the learning process that the students had experienced, their academic as well as personal achievement from the class, proposing a grade that they thought they deserved to have. In addition to the academic achievement showing their fluency and accuracy in their presentation, they appeared confident of themselves presenting their tour, feeling comfortable standing in front of the class as they were among the supportive peers.

The whole activities were closed by the teacher thanking the committee and everybody involved in the program. Positive regards concerning their performance were also expressed to encourage the students to keep improving and developing in the future.

The Wrapping Up

As the class is started with the initiation for interactive learning through introductory ice breaking activities, reaching towards the end of the semester, students need to be guided to reflect on the learning process they have experienced the whole semester and to write a self-evaluation writing. Students need to have some positive feedback from the teacher and encouragement that they have the potential to be actualized. It will be

good that the students can have some activities that they can do together to end the whole learning process. The Tea Party is just an example to wrap up the whole learning process giving the students some good memory to remember.

Conclusion

The teacher in the EFL Speaking class has the essential role to direct the classroom interaction to promote conducive learning environment. In a cooperative and supportive environment students can be assisted to handle their negative feelings that inhibit them from participating. Carefully designed interactive learning activities can give the students the chance to use the target language in authentic communication.

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