
Reflections from the EFL Classroom: Classroom Interaction and Reflective Teacher Development

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Abstract: Classroom interaction includes the face-to-face interaction between the teacher and students that occurs to ensure that learning takes place and plays a crucial role in shaping the language learning process. However, many teachers of English as a foreign language are not aware of the effects of their classroom interaction patterns. Reflective teacher development is an approach to professional development based on the belief that experienced teachers can improve their understandings of their own teaching practices by engaging in conscious and systematic reflection on their classroom experiences, including their classroom interaction patterns. In this paper, I will briefly introduce the concept of classroom interaction the English as a foreign language classroom, classroom interactional competence, and how these classroom phenomena constitute an important focus for reflection. I will conclude by describing a postgraduate course designed to raise participants' awareness of their classroom interaction skills.

Keywords: *ELT, Classroom Interaction, EFL, Reflection, Professional Development*

INTRODUCTION

Research on classroom interaction (henceforth, CI) in English language teaching (hereafter, ELT) is by no means a new area of interest. In the 1970s, with the development of audio-recording technology which allowed the recording and analysis of classroom events, researchers began to turn their attention away from studying the effectiveness of particular teaching methods to concentrate on CI and its effect on the learning process (Seedhouse & Jenks, 2015). For example, Moskowitz (1976) set out to describe the CI practices of 'good' foreign language teachers by using the Foreign Language Interaction Analysis (FLINT, Moskowitz, 1971) model she had developed. Also concerned with conceptualising the act of teaching, Fanselow (1977) designed the Foci for Observing Communication in Settings (FOCUS), a technical instrument which aimed to classify, create and evaluate communication in different contexts.

Later studies gave more attention to the role of CI in the construction of knowledge within the framework of social constructivist theories of learning. For example, Allwright (1984) emphasised that everything that happened in the ELT classroom did so via the face-to-face interaction between individuals, and that both teachers and learners needed to go beyond their traditional roles of knowledge imparters and knowledge receivers respectively, to become 'managers of learning' (p.156). More recently, there has been a renewed interest in CI research in the field of ELT, which is a phenomenon that Seedhouse and Jenks (2015) attribute to the global spread of English and the technological developments that have characterised the first decades of the 21st Century. This means that there is currently a great deal of data available on what happens in ELT classrooms in a variety of different settings.

Given the crucial role of the teacher as mediator in the foreign language learning process, the importance of a teacher's CI patterns cannot be overlooked. Moreover, given that many teachers are not aware of their espoused classroom interaction habits and the effects they may have on learners (e.g., Farrell, 2009), CI has become an important focus for reflective teacher development in the field of ELT (e.g., Sert, 2015; Walsh, 2003). In this paper, my aim is to introduce the concept of CI in ELT, and to show how reflecting on CI patterns can help teachers become more aware of their own teaching practices and the possible effects they may have on their students' learning.

Classroom Interaction

To fully understand the concept of CI in the EFL classroom, it is necessary to define the key concepts. First, I must emphasise that I have deliberately used the term 'classroom interaction' rather than 'classroom communication' or 'classroom discourse', which as Tuma (2014) pointed out, approach the



research of classroom talk from different theoretical and epistemological directions. My decision is in line with Allwright's (1984) emphasis on interaction as the "sine qua non of classroom pedagogy" (p.159), the only way that teaching and learning can be realised in the classroom setting, and something that is entirely different from the 'communication practice' that is desired in communicative approaches. That is, interaction is a vital element of learning in social constructivist theory, which purports that learning takes place through talk that is co-constructed by all participants (see, e.g. Bruner, 1978).

Indeed, Sert (2015) argues that CI is a type of social interaction in its own right, something that has been ignored in the field of ELT because of the preoccupation of replicating 'genuine communication' into the classroom (see, e.g. Seedhouse, 1996). Sert continues to state that:

Through interactions with others, we not only engage in socialisation, but we also talk institutions into being. Social institutions, including parliaments, courtrooms, and schools, have become the institutions they are and will be through social interactions. This also includes language classrooms. (2015, p.10)

CI is thus, unsurprisingly, influenced by the context of 'the classroom'. In its most straightforward definition, the classroom is a context which requires what Farrell (2009) refers to as ritualised and highly recognisable interaction patterns that are carried out with the specific aim of instructing and informing, with the teacher being attributed the relatively higher status, and the power to decide what will be taught and how. Specifically, CI in an ELT setting has been conceptualised in many diverse and complex ways: for example, the point at which different aspects of language are taught and learnt; an interface between theory and practice; the manifestation of teachers' pedagogical choices and beliefs; or a phenomenon influenced by both local and international policies, to name but a few (Jenks & Seedhouse, 2015).

Components of ELT Classroom Interaction

Given the diverse conceptualisations of CI in ELT presented in the previous section, it follows that there is a wide range of research possibilities that investigate constructs associated with ELT from the aspect of CI. Some studies have investigated the role of different CI resources on diverse aspects of the language learning process. For example, Nabei and Swain (2002) studied adult learners' awareness of recast feedback in Japan; and McNeil (2012) investigated how a 5th grade ESL teacher in the USA scaffolded referential questions through interaction techniques. Waring (2008) argued that, contrary to popular belief, explicit positive assessment may actually hinder opportunities for learning; and Yaqub and Rokni (2012) pointed out that EFL teachers in Iran do not allot sufficient wait time for their students to respond to questions. More recently, Sert (2017) showed how, through teacher talk, a high school EFL teacher in Turkey created opportunities for language learning by managing learner initiatives through CI resources. Non-verbal CI has also attracted researchers' attention. For example, Sert and Jacknick (2015) investigated the role of student smiles in negotiating interactional problems in Luxembourg.

Following Macaro's (2005) suggestion that a shared L1 could be used as both a learning and communication strategy, increasing interest has been shown in the role of L1 in the EFL classroom. For example, Lo (2015) researched the sensitivities of high school teachers in Hong Kong to their students' proficiency levels when choosing which language to use, and Sali (2014) described when and why high school teachers in Turkey preferred to use L1. Moreover, a large- scale study was carried out by Hall and Cook (2013) to explore global practices and attitudes to the use of L1 in the EFL classroom.

This list of studies is by no means exhaustive. Indeed, it would be beyond the scope of the current study to present such a list. However, it is hoped that those that have been outlined here reflect the diverse aspects of CI in ELT in a wide range of contexts.

Classroom Interactional Competence

The previous sections have outlined the nature of CI and its centrality in EFL classrooms. It would be pertinent at this point to turn our attention to the concept of classroom interactional competence (henceforth, CIC), which Walsh (2011) defines as "teachers' and learners' ability to use interaction as a tool for mediating and assisting learning" (cited in Walsh, 2012, p. 5). Issues that CIC is concerned with



include how meanings are co-constructed during interaction, what participants do to ensure that an understanding is reached, how repair and breakdown are dealt with, and how CIC can facilitate learning. Perhaps the most important concern is how CIC creates ‘space for learning’, what Walsh (2012) refers to as acknowledging “the need to adjust the linguistic and interactional patterns to the particular [pedagogic] goal of the moment” (p.6), differentiating it from providing students with more opportunities for interaction through group or pair work (see also Allwright, 1984, for an earlier distinction of the term).

Referring to data collected from EFL classrooms in different cultural contexts, Walsh (2012) reported that CIC manifests itself in three different ways. First, it is appropriate to specific pedagogical goals (e.g., oral fluency, and the agenda of the moment (e.g., clarifying meaning) (see, e.g. Sert & Walsh, 2013). Second, it facilitates interactional space by increasing wait-time, reducing teacher echo, allowing for planning time, and promoting extended learner turns (see, e.g. Walsh & Li, 2013). Third, it is used by the teacher to shape learner contributions by means of scaffolding, paraphrasing, and reiterating (see, e.g. Daşkın, 2015).

It follows that in order to maximise learning opportunities in the EFL classroom, teachers should first be aware of, and second develop their CIC skills. Reflective teacher development (henceforth, RTD) provides a suitable framework for EFL teachers to focus on their CIC skills.

Classroom Interaction as a Focus for Reflective Teacher Development

RTD is currently the favoured approach to teacher development. Rather than earlier transmission-of-knowledge models that assumed teachers were lacking in knowledge of and competency in teaching, RTD puts teachers at the centre of their own development as they analyse and evaluate their practice, and initiate and monitor change (see, e.g. Farrell, 2015). There are many definitions in the literature, but the following given by Jay and Johnson (2002) sums up concisely the key elements involved in the process:

Reflection is a process both individual and collaborative, involving experience and uncertainty. It is comprised of questions and key elements of a matter that has emerged as significant, then taking one’s thoughts into dialogues with oneself and with others (p.76).

That is, RTD is a practice that teachers can engage in alone or with their peers as they scrutinise the aspects of their practice they see as significant and work towards a commitment to change.

Early studies on RTD focused on types of reflective thought that were more conducive to professional development (e.g., Jay & Johnson, 2002). Later studies turned to the content of reflection, including CI. In the field of ELT, Walsh (2003) developed the Self-Evaluation of Teacher Talk matrix to help teachers reflect on their classroom language use and interactional decision making. More recently, Sert (2015) suggested ‘IMDAT’ (Introducing CIC, Microteaching, Dialogic reflection, Actual teaching, Teacher collaboration and critical reflection), which is a microscopic and reflective model of language teacher education/development that aims to develop CIC as part of a practicum course.

The ‘Classroom Interaction in Foreign Language Teaching’ Course

Adapted from Sert’s (2015) IMDAT model, the ‘Classroom Interaction in Foreign Language Teaching’ course is a 14-week long two-hours-a-week elective course offered in the second semester on the MA in ELT programme at Uludağ University, Bursa, Turkey. Its aim is twofold: first, to raise the awareness of the students registered on the course of what CI is, and how it can have positive and negative effects on their students’ language learning; second, through a reflective approach it strives to encourage the teachers to investigate their own CI patterns by collecting and analysing data from their actual teaching. Unlike IMDAT, however, there is no microteaching stage due to the fact that the students registered on the course are in-service teachers.

The first four weeks of the course cover introductory issues, such as defining CI in EFL classrooms, clarifying the different roles of the EFL teacher, beliefs about language teaching/learning and CI patterns, and different approaches to collecting, analysing and interpreting data about CI. During these weeks, the students audio-record two or more of their own classes to use as data in the following weeks.



The purpose of collecting data early on in the course is to avoid priming the students to the different CI patterns that will be investigated in the ensuing weeks.

As from week five, the course is arranged as follows: one week of theoretical input about a particular aspect of CI (e.g., questioning strategies) is given; then during the week before the next lesson, the students listen to their audio-recorded lesson to isolate examples of the focus CI pattern and transcribe those parts of the lesson. The transcription process helps them to reflect on the effects of their CI patterns on the students. As they transcribe, they compare and contrast their findings with those in the literature, and reflect on whether or not their CI patterns facilitate or hinder learning.

In order to make the reflective process a collaborative endeavour and to overcome the limitations of self-writing (see, e.g. Mann & Walsh, 2015), the students bring their preliminary written reflections to the following lesson, in which they discuss their findings with their peers in order to arrive at possible interpretations of their data. The lesson ends with a whole class discussion on the findings of the week and how they fit into the current literature. The students then write a report that covers the self-reflection and collaborative reflection process to be submitted the following week.

For purpose of illustration, I will present two extracts taken from the reports written after the lessons on “Concept Checking and Elicitation” (Weeks 7 and 8) given in the 2016-2017 academic year. Instructor 1 is a male with 17 years of experience, and Instructor 2 is a female with less than one year of experience.

Extract 1

For the next vocabulary item, “turn out” I asked for an alternative word by saying: Alternative word? The reason was that they gave the Turkish definition again. Since there were no correct answers from the class, I myself gave the correct answer, and asked for the next answer. The students again gave the correct answer, but merely gave the Turkish definition. The session ended in this way. (Instructor 1)

In this extract, Instructor 1 is describing the interaction patterns regarding checking understanding of vocabulary that usually take place during his lessons. From the audio recording, he realised that the automatic response of students when asked about the meaning of a vocabulary item was to give the Turkish translation. Not satisfied with the response, he asked again for an alternative word, meaning another English word rather than Turkish. The students were not able to supply an answer, so Instructor 1 did so. As a result he realised that this particular pattern was not helping his students to learn.

Extract 2

The first thing I noticed while reading my transcriptions was that I used direct translation method too much. I don't like seeing my students translating everything into Turkish but when I wrote example sentences of the tenses above on the board, for example ‘I watch films every Sunday’ and asked ‘What does it mean?’, my students got this question as ‘What does it mean in Turkish literally?’ Since I have been teaching them for a short time, I think I didn't have any time to practice on what I really want when I ask this question. Also, when you are pointing a sentence on the board, it is very natural for the students to think that you want the exact translation by asking the question ‘what does it mean?’; with a verb such as ‘mean.’ I didn't like my students' tendency to translate the sentences while I was practicing too I guess and I asked a question like ‘Is it a habit?’ and my students were petrified. Then I got that they do not know the meaning of the word ‘habit’ and asked a follow up question; ‘Do I do it every Sunday?’ Finally, I got my answer. ‘Yes.’ (Instructor 2)

In Extract 2 we see a similar situation to Extract 1, in which the students respond in Turkish to the question “What does...mean?” Instructor 2 felt uncomfortable about the students' habit of using Turkish translation, so she experimented with alternative questions aimed at the meaning of the language point and finally arrived at the answer she was expecting.



CONCLUSION

In this paper, I have presented the concept and different components of classroom interaction in EFL classrooms, classroom interactional competence, and how reflection on classroom interaction patterns can help EFL teachers become more aware of how they are facilitating their students' learning or otherwise. The studies presented and discussed in this paper shows that the area of CI in the EFL classroom is a diverse and crucial aspect of the language learning/teaching process and merits further research.

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