The Case for an Interactive Classroom

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Abstract

Studies have demonstrated the positive impact of interactive elements in motivating and engaging EFL students. This workshop presents key characteristics of an interactive EFL classroom and offers specific suggestions for ways to make EFL classrooms conducive to improved outcomes by involving students more actively in learning.

Traditionally, teachers have been assigned the prominent position in the classroom. Often, they have been treated as "sages on the stage," and the flow of information in such classrooms has typically been unidirectional. For many years, this model was widely assumed to offer the most effective approach to classroom learning. In fact, in many cases it was the *only* method that teachers, schools, and districts employed.

More recently, however, research has convinced many educationists that the mere fact of *telling* information to students does not ensure that learning will take place, and that interactive, constructive, student-centered learning may be more effective both in ensuring the uptake of knowledge of curricular content and in developing learning and critical thinking skills (Brown, 2008; Mascolo, 2009; Sun & Chang, 2012; Türel, 2013; Woolf, 2010). Unfortunately, anecdotal evidence suggests that classroom practice lags behind the research literature in this regard in at least one pedagogical field: the teaching of "foreign" and/or "second" languages. Sadly, the teaching of English is no exception in this respect. Many teachers of English to language learners rely exclusively on classroom lectures and textbooks. Their students may have access to language laboratory facilities, and the classroom teachers may be aware of and incorporate the expectation of laboratory practice into their programs. Nonetheless, the classroom itself remains overwhelmingly teacher-centered. The result is that these classrooms continue to produce students who either experience little or no language learning or who at best attain only "passive" or otherwise limited skills.

In understanding the importance of supplementing or even moving beyond the teacher-centered model, it is important to be aware of the conditions that impact successful learning, in this case, successful classroom language learning. In his book *Language, Literacy and Learning*, Brian Cambourne (1984) identifies and describes seven conditions for success: *immersion, demonstration, expectations, responsibility, approximation, employment* and *feedback.*

First, students must be immersed in an environment in which exposure to proficient use of the language and to elements of the culture bathes them in the sounds, meanings, cadences, rhythms, and resonances of the target language. This requires exposure to language use that is meaningful, purposeful, and whole.

Second, students must receive thousands of demonstrations (modeling and examples) of the target language being used in functional and meaningful ways. Through such continual demonstration of the conventions of the language and its meanings, students are exposed to the data that enable them to adopt the conventions that they need to master in order to be proficient, culturally aware language users.

In addition, those who interact with students in the course of their language learning must expect students to learn the target language and to become familiar with its culture. Language learning is challenging, complex, and time-consuming, and successful learning is unlikely to occur unless the student expects this outcome to be the case. This self-expectation, moreover, will rarely occur unless teachers, administrators, and other students communicate to the learner that he or she can and will learn the language.

Also, students must be encouraged to take responsibility for what they learn about the target language. By and large, they should be expected to decide for themselves which sets of conventions to master and when. Students reach the same language destination by different routes, and if teachers try to take responsibility away by deciding to "teach" certain conventions at pre-set stages, few students will learn the language proficiently.

Furthermore, students should, initially at least, be expected to approximate rather than attain adult native speaker competence. To maintain motivation and learning momentum, teachers must reward

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students not just for being "right" but for being "close." This applies to oral as well as written language use.

Moreover, students must be provided with a wealth of opportunities to employ the language. These opportunities should neither be restricted to set times nor limited to specific conventions. Rather, use of the target language should be encouraged at all times.

Finally, students must be provided with targeted feedback that acknowledges receipt of their intended message and that includes provision of the conventional, adult, expanded form in a non-threatening, meaning-centered way. In this regard, students should be made to feel that their approximated form of the target utterance and their effort in providing this form are valued parts of the learning process.

Considering Cambourne's (1984) conditions for success, requires us to re-think the traditional, teacher-centered method as the dominant paradigm for language teaching. Indeed, implicit in the acceptance of these conditions as vital to successful learning is an argument in favor of what many researchers and practitioners refer to as the *interactive classroom* approach. In an interactive classroom, students participate as equal partners in an ongoing discovery process. That is, students actively *co-share* responsibility in their learning.

What does an interactive classroom look like? It is a busy and sometimes noisy place, where students interact, collaborate, communicate, and negotiate meaning with their teachers and with their peers. The value of all this activity lies in the fact that the more the language actually comes *from the students*—the more it is learned through experimentation and discovery—the more the students will be interested in it. Indeed, research strongly suggest that language learning takes on new life and becomes an achievable goal when the classroom becomes a speech community and when students are given plentiful opportunities to interact with the language, with their teachers, and with their classmates (Commander & de Guerrero, 2013; Huang, Liang, Su, & Chen, 2012; Hüseyin, 2014; Murugaiah & Thang, 2010; Ozkose-Biyik & Meskill, 2015; Razak, Saeed, & Ahmad, 2013; Shen & Suwanthep, 2011; Sun & Chang,, 2012; Yanguas, 2010).

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