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The Effect of the Teacher-Students Interaction: An Evaluation of an EFL Classroom

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Abstract

Effective interactions between teachers and students are essential for promoting success in EFL education pedagogy. The communicative approach in EFL education has generated a concern for the development of communication in the foreign language classroom within which the promotion of oral interaction is usually paramount. The study sought to assess the opportunities for learner involvement and negotiation of meaning that teachers provide in the unfolding interaction in an EFL setting. The data were collected from a Higher Secondary EFL classroom in Sylhet to assess how teachers deploy a number of interactional features when managing contingent learner turns to engage in oral communication. The study observed an EFL class and checked how classroom interaction took place between teacher and students. The findings revealed that the teachers exposed their identity in different ways for both different roles and local positioning. It is also observed that the students didn't respond willingly to the teacher's questions and did not participate in class discussions. Students never asked the teacher questions outside one-on-one situations. Some pedagogical implications were derived from these findings. The findings suggest that instances for negotiation of meaning can be nurtured and prompted by the teacher. It is suggested that teachers should be more aware of the socio-economic and context-sensitive aspects of their interaction with learners in order to make moment-by-moment decisions that would likely increase negotiation of meaning and opportunities for learning.

Keywords: Classroom interaction, EFL classroom, instructional features

1. Introduction

According to Powell**,** "He who has no inclination to learn more will be very apt to think that he knows enough." Classrooms are social settings; teaching and learning occur through social interaction between teachers and students. As teaching and learning take place, they are complicated processes and are affected by peer-group relationships. The interactions and relationships between teachers and students, and among students, as they work side by side, constitute the group processes of the classroom. Group processes are especially significant in twenty-first century schools. Group projects and cooperative teamwork are the foundations of effective teaching, creative curriculum, and positive classroom climate. Interpersonal skills, group work, and empathy are important ingredients of modern business, where employees must communicate well for their business to be productive and profitable. Group processes are also significant in modern global communities, where citizens must work together for a safe and secure world. Thus, along with teaching academic curriculum, teachers are expected to help students develop the attitudes, skills, and procedures of democratic community. Teacher-student

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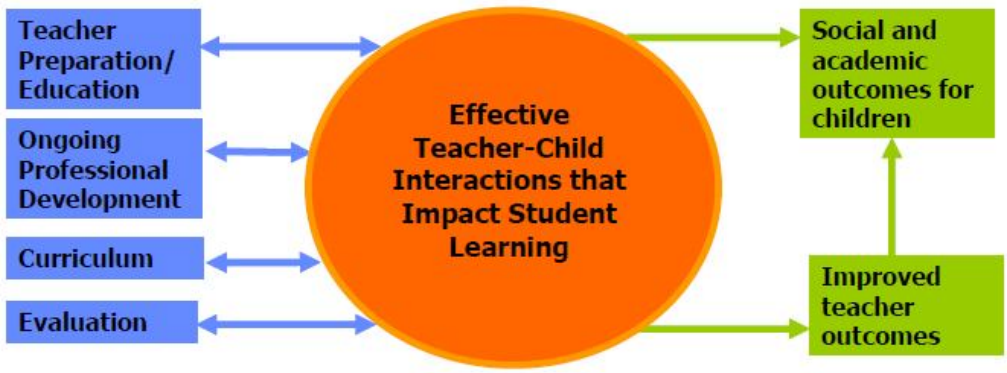
relationships provide an essential foundation for effective classroom management—and classroom management is a key to high student achievement. Teacher-student relationships should not be left to chance or dictated by the personalities of those involved. Instead, by using strategies supported by research, teachers can influence the dynamics of their classrooms and build strong teacher-student relationships that will support student learning. Smith (1990) said, "Teachers who love their students are of course by that very fact teaching their students the nature of love, although the course may in fact be chemistry or computer science." He thoroughly endorses out-of-class contacts between students and faculty, "because they reveal something to the student about reality that can, I suspect, be learned no other way. Such contracts demonstrate that ideas are 'embodied.' They do not exist apart from a person, remote or near at hand, who enunciates, who takes responsibility for them by declaring them, by speaking about them." Or in the words of Woodrow Wilson, "We shall never succeed in creating this organic passion, this great use of the mind until (we) have utterly destroyed the practice of merely formal contacts between teacher and pupil."

The figure below illustrates, when to identify and measure effective interactions, teachers can then create opportunities to promote them through teacher education, professional development, monitoring, and evaluation. This will, in turn, lead to enhanced outcomes for students and teachers—students will learn more and teachers will become more effective.



Effective teacher-student interactions create: *Emotional Support* which means the positive relationships among teachers and peers; *Classroom Organization* which suggests well- managed classrooms that provide students with frequent, engaging learning activities; and Instructional Support which focuses the *Interactions* that teach students to think, provide ongoing feedback and support, and facilitate language and vocabulary. Moreover, effective interactions are highly variable from year to year. In a study by Hoque (2011) that followed 300 students through secondary school, less than 10% of students had access to classrooms that consistently scored in the mid to upper range for effective interactions. Importantly, students from families with low income and mothers with less education are less likely to experience effective teacher-student interactions, relative to middle income peers.

2. Literature Review

Teachers make countless real-time decisions and facilitate dozens of interactions between themselves and their students. Although they share this commonality, educators all over the country often talk about these decisions and interactions in different ways. The teachers' utterances represented their identity representation, which was primarily triggered by the different contexts in classroom interactions. Wubbels and his colleagues (Wubbels, Brekelmans, van Tartwijk, & Admiral, 1999; Wubbels & Levy, 1993) identify appropriate dominance as an important characteristic of effective teacher-student relationships. In contrast to the more negative

connotation of the term dominance as forceful control or command over others, they define dominance as the teacher's ability to provide clear purpose and strong guidance regarding both academics and student behavior. Studies indicate that when asked about their preferences for teacher behavior, students typically express a desire for this type of teacher-student interaction. For example, in a study that involved interviews with more than 700 students in grades 4–7, students articulated a clear preference for strong teacher guidance and control rather than more permissive types of teacher behavior (Chiu & Tulley, 1997). Teachers can exhibit appropriate dominance by establishing clear behavior expectations and learning goals and by exhibiting assertive behaviour.

3. Research Design

The present study observed a class of thirty students of Sylhet Women's College. The teacher was a Bangladeshi male with several years teaching experience at Bangladeshi government colleges. The goal of this class is to teach the students' conversation, reading, listening and writing skills. The study observed 30 students in a section. Their English ability level is intermediate. During the observation period, the students appeared motivated and attentive, and they seemed to be enjoying the class. The researcher observed class being out of the notice of the students.

4. Findings and Discussion

It is observed that the students didn't respond willingly to the teacher's questions and did not participate in class discussions. Students also never asked the teacher questions outside one-on-one situations. Thus the teacher received little oral feedback. Most of the learners sat looking straight ahead using minimal facial expressions, gestures and verbal utterances. The teacher said:

> I want the students to be more demonstrative and more overtly communicative in their feedback. I want these behaviours: I want the students to ask me questions, make comments and to respond with nods and shakes of the head, with sounds of agreement or sounds of understanding. Also, I want them to be both reactive and proactive.

The present researcher observed the 2nd year of Higher Secondary Class. In the first 30 minutes, the class went through an intermediate level oral dialogue. The students first listened to the dialogue read out by the teacher with their books closed, then again with the books opened. Next, they did a dictation exercise consisting of 15 short sentences based on the dialogue. The teacher then talked about the sociolinguistic and grammar points of the exercise and went on to probe for comprehension:

- Teacher: Do you have any questions? Do you understand everything?
- Students: (no response from the students)
- Teacher: Okay, how many people were speaking?
- Students: (no response)
- Teacher: How many people were speaking?
- Students: (no response)
- Teacher: There were two. Two people. Were they friends or strangers?
- Students: (no response)
- Teacher: Should I read out the dialogue again?
- Students: (no response from anybody)
- Teacher: Should I translate the dialogue into mother tongue?
- Students: (looking at one another)

The teacher asked a few other questions which also drew no response or reaction from the students. The students then had to answer some questions about the conversation in their book. Most of the students seemed to have little trouble doing this, and if there were any questions, they readily asked the student sitting next to them. The second half of the class was devoted to pair work using the phrases and vocabulary from the taped dialogue in role play. The students seemed

to enjoy this, and most tried to create their own dialogues. The teacher circulated the room checking on the progress of each pair. The class atmosphere was markedly different from the first half of the class, with chatter and occasional laughter filling the air. The students answered most of the teacher's questions with alacrity, and some even asked their own questions.

It is also found that the students of the reviewing class generally understand the teacher's questions; it was felt that there was something else that kept the students from responding voluntarily in the class-teacher dialogues. Since most Bangladeshi students are taught to listen and not to question a teacher in class, Bangladeshi students have little or no experience in in-class interaction with the teacher, such as questioning or commenting or giving feedback. Students are usually taught to be quiet and respectfully listen to the teacher. By teaching the students that class interaction with the English teacher is not only acceptable, but normal, useful and beneficial, it was believed that the students would become more interactive with the teacher in teacher-class interaction.

The teachers should demonstrate and talk about their own enthusiasm for the course material, and how it helps them personally. Teachers should look for ways to connect the material to the lives of their students; may use current event articles, editorials from local newspapers, or examples from life experience that illustrate some points. Teachers should try to build a personal relationship with their students, and take an interest in them to find out what is at the bottom of the "perceived apathy." Learning students' names and using names in class can help students understand that the teachers are interested in them and in their success of course. Teachers may consider e-mailing a student who seems disinterested or unresponsive and let him/her know that teachers would like to help them in any way that a teacher can. Oftentimes their apparent apathy has nothing to do with the course. There may be personal matters that are dominating their attention. Some students are going through a period of depression which disconnects them from their studies. Showing a little concern can be very helpful. In order to recognize different learning abilities, teachers must observe their students carefully and make written records to help them see any patterns that may be occurring in the learners' learning.

Teachers may notice different ability levels in the way they think, the product they produce, and the way they interact with others. These are all differences which affect students' learning. Teachers need to be sure that they offer a variety of different learning experiences in their class. It is also important to provide some creative/artistic activities, book work, skits, real-world scenarios, music, discussions, etc. that will both challenge some students and make others feel a higher level of success. It is hard to find time to work one-on-one with students. However, teachers may be able to find parent or community volunteers who are willing to work one-on-one with different students. Another way is to spend some extra time with those students while monitoring during individual work time. Pairing a higher ability student with one who needs extra help is an excellent way to provide peer tutoring.

5. Suggestions for the Teachers

Based on the finding and discussion, the study put forwarded the following recommendations. This should not be done every single day, but on an as-needed basis. Lastly, before and after-school tutoring is an excellent time to work one-on-one with those students who need extra help.

1. Find out about your students' interests, experiences, hobbies, career goals... As often as you can, relate the content to students' interests.
2. Use lots of examples, illustrations, anecdotes, stories.
3. Use humor, and make fun.

4. Admit mistakes, lack of knowledge. Don't try to be THE authority. Instead, model where students can find the information. Knowing where to find the answers is just as important as knowing the answers.
5. Talk less than your students do.
6. Encourage interaction among students. Use group work, encourage discussion, try brainstorming, role playing, whatever you feel comfortable with. Try something
7. Give positive feedback, verbally (praise) and non-verbally (make eye-contact, smile, nod).
8. Make sure that the level of teaching matches students' background, ability, and experience.
9. Check that the relevance of what you're doing is clear to the students.
10. Use as much VARIETY in your methods and materials as possible.
11. Encourage students to make decisions about their own Learning -- give them CHOICES, act on their suggestions.
12. If possible, encourage students to have input into how they will be evaluated.
13. Engage students in their learning. Activity is much more motivating than passive listening or passive responses. The more students DO, the more they will learn.

6. Conclusion

Classroom interactional patterns depend on some contextual, cultural and local factors in addition to the methodologies employed in the classroom. In order to delineate such factors, the focus of classroom interaction research needs to shift from the observables to the unobservable like teachers' and learners' psychological states and cultural backgrounds. There were some areas where the results of this action research were not as successful as hoped. For instance, the students needed to be prompted with eye contact and a repeated question from the teacher to answer a question, and when they did not understand something, they still did not interrupt the teacher with a question. And yet some progress was definitely made, especially when the brief span between observations is considered. The students did interact with the teacher by nodding, some did answer the instructor's questions, and two, on their own initiation, even asked questions before the class. The unanticipated side effect of the teacher becoming more concerned with the interaction was a welcome surprise and contributed to the improvement. There seems to have been some success in instructing and reminding and then expecting the students to become more interactive with the teacher.

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