

Learning English through Scaffolded Assistance in Iraqi EFL Classroom

تعلم اللغة الانكليزية من خلال اسنخدام عملية التبسيط في الصفوف العراقية لتعليم
اللغة الانكليزية

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Abstract

Learning a foreign language is a highly interactive process, and a belief that communicative activities foster a great amount of linguistic production provides language practice and opportunities for negotiation of meaning during communicative exchanges. Thus, this study examines what benefits learner-centered classroom setting offers compared with that of teacher-centered classroom, and how less proficient learners accomplish their tasks and activities with scaffolded help during interaction with the help of proficient classmates and under the guidance of a skilful person, i.e., the teacher. The subjects participating in this study are 30 Iraqi 4th year college students in the Department of English, College of Arts , University of Baghdad for the academic year 2012-2013. The students were working with groups of two or three. Their task was to make up different conversations and after each conversation, the teacher asked some questions to the group.

Five teacher-student interactions were analysed. The results showed that learner-centeredness was beneficial for language learning in the following respects: 1-it triggered more scaffolding offered by the teacher and 2- interaction between learners actively occurred in learner – centered lessons. In addition when the teacher engaged in interaction with the students, he

basically used repetition, paraphrases and nonverbal devices such as varying the pace of his/her utterances, facial expressions and pauses as scaffolding.

Introduction

The contexts in which teachers work have an important influence on teaching since different teaching settings involve teachers in different kinds of roles. In situations where teachers have primary responsibility for how they teach, they may assume different roles within their own classrooms. Some teachers see their role primarily in managerial and organizational terms. They spend a considerable amount of time planning their lessons, monitoring their teaching and managing student learning and behaviour to ensure that their goals are accomplished. Others see their roles as a facilitator, and believe that the best kind of lesson is the one that arises out of the dynamics of the teaching–learning situation.

According to the current foreign and second language methodologies based on Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), there is a benefit in switching from the traditional teacher-centered class to a learner-centered classroom setting which reflects CLT. The communicative approach shifts the focus to the learner in several aspects of classroom instruction: 1-The curriculum reflects the needs of the learner, 2-the activities engage learners in communication (involving information sharing and negotiation of meaning) and 3- the teacher's role is that of facilitator in the communication process ,(Nunan , 1989 : 50) .From the CLT viewpoint , the teacher is responsible for establishing situations that promote communication , whereas the role of the

learner is that of a communicator , i.e., students interacting with others , are actively engaged in negotiation of meaning. By negotiation of meaning, Ellis (1994:101) means that students have an opportunity to express themselves by sharing ideas and opinions, and they are responsible for their own learning.

In contrast,in traditional approaches, classroom teaching is conceptualized as the transmission of knowledge from the teacher to the passive learner (Breen, 1991:230) .The teacher tends to be an authority figure in the classroom and students do as the teacher says .According to Larsen-Freeman (1986:105) , in this type of classroom , teacher- student interaction or interaction between students is minimal and is dominated by the teacher . Hence, much research on L2 learning (e.g. Gass, 1997 and Ellis, 1999) has indicated that student-teacher and student-student interaction facilitates language acquisition. But the traditional ways of teaching are expected to be less favourable to L2 Learning than communicative language teaching.

The two totally different views (communicative language teaching : learner-centered vs. traditional ways of teaching : teacher-centered) suggest that learner-centered classroom setting, where the students as active participants learn in an independent way, offers more effective learning environment where interaction , participation and negotiation create learning opportunities in the L2 classroom .Based on the assumption that learner-centered discourse provides opportunities for negotiation which creates an environment favourable to L2 learning , the researcher will examine what benefits learner-centered classroom setting offers compared with teacher-centered classroom. At the same time, the researcher will focus on the nature

of classroom interaction in which negotiation occurs. This issue will be explored through examining what devices the teacher uses to aid the student.

1-Sociocultural Theory: Scaffolding and the Zone of Proximal Development

Sociocultural theory provides an ideal framework to analyse classroom interaction because one of its main principles is cognitive development, that is, learning originates in a social context such as language classroom. According to Anton (1999:304), “through dialogue, teachers can provide learners with effective assistance that will enable them to perform at higher levels than they would otherwise.”

The process of supportive dialogue which prompts learners through successive steps of a problem has come to be known as ‘scaffolding’ (Wood et al., 1977:101). The domain where learning can productively take place is christened ‘the Zone of Proximal Development’ (henceforth ZPD), i.e., the domain of knowledge or skill where the learner is not yet capable of independent functioning, but can achieve the desired outcome relevant to the scaffolded help. The ZPD is defined by Vygotsky (1978:87) as “the difference between the child’s developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the higher level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers”

In the research on teacher-learner interaction in first-year university French classes, Anton(1999:310) states that when learners engage in negotiation with their teachers , the functions of scaffolded assistance are achieved by such communicative moves as directives, assisting questions, repetition and Nonverbal devices such as pauses and gesturing. In contrast, the

analysis of interaction from a traditional teacher-centered classroom shows the opportunities for negotiation and scaffolding within the ZPD, and thus, learners' engagement in classroom activities are dramatically reduced.

Many studies have employed the sociocultural framework to investigate L2 acquisition such as Schinke-Llano (1993), Lantolf(1994) and Lantolf and Appel(1994). The main aim of this study is the analysis of classroom discourse in order to investigate the following two research questions: 1- to characterize what benefits learner-centered classroom setting offers compared with that of teacher-centered classroom and 2- to examine how less proficient learners accomplish their tasks and activities with scaffolded help during interaction with the help of proficient classmates and under the guidance of a skilful person (i.e. the teacher).

2-Methodology

2.1 Procedures

The subjects participating in this study were 30 Iraqi 4th year college students in the Department of English, College of Arts, University of Baghdad for the academic year 2012-2013. The students were working with groups of two or three. They were randomly grouped by the teacher. Their task was to make up different conversations and after each conversation, the teacher asked some questions to the group. Answering the questions was the responsibility of all the group members. Therefore in-group members were encouraged to cooperate to solve the problems, which led to active interaction between students. According to the researcher's observation, students prefer cooperating with classmates to solve problems raised in class rather than

interacting with the teacher. Moreover, there is a slight gap among students in terms of English proficiency level.

Analysing five teacher-student interactions, the researcher will define if it is teacher-centered setting or learner-centered one (i.e. when the lesson shows great involvement of students who are actively engaged in negotiation of meaning providing scaffolding for each other and evaluating others). The researcher will also focus on the devices used by the teacher in the classroom to achieve the functions of scaffolding and thus to construct effective scaffolded assistance within the ZPD.

Interactional sociolinguistics views discourse as a social interaction in which negotiation of meaning is facilitated by the use of language. According to Gumperz(1982:16)"language and context co-constitute one another, language contextualizes and is contextualized, such that language does not just function in context, language also forms and provides context" Moreover Gumperz(ibid) uses the term 'contextualization cues' to refer to aspects of language and behaviour (i.e. verbal and nonverbal signs) that relate what is said to the contextual knowledge, and can finally affect the basic meaning of a message. When listeners share speakers' contextualization cues, subsequent interactions proceed smoothly. Therefore, contextualization cues are considered to be important features in analysing classroom discourse as well as casual conversation.

2-2 Data Analysis

The followings are 5 episodes excerpted from the class the researcher observed. Each episode is preceded by S'1 presentation. Each group consists of 3 students (S1, S2 and S3). Only S1 makes a presentation to the class, and the other two (S2 and S3) are supposed to help S1 answer the teacher's questions which follow the presentation. (T) Stands for the teacher and (Ss) for students.

Episode 1 Negotiating Meanings in the Teacher-Centered Lesson.

In the following episode, the researcher observes how the teacher (T) helps his students (S1, S2 and S3) to understand the meaning of a word in a teacher-centered lesson.

1. T: Who is your exemplar (pause) who is your exemplar.
2. S1: Exemplar is (pause) Ali.
3. T: Exemplar cannot be a classmate
4. S1: Um (pause) our classmate cannot be our exemplar?
5. S2: (pause+ surprise) (to S1) choose anybody else.
6. S1: (looks around her classmates and choose another person) our exemplar is Suha.
7. Ss: (laugh).
8. T: Ok. You need to specify the group's exemplar.
9. S1: Yes.
10. T: Ok. You did good. But your exemplar should have features that distinguish him/her from other persons.
11. S1: (silent).
12. T: So the exemplar of your group cannot be Suha.

13. S1: Yes.
14. T: Now choose another person.
15. S2: (tell him you understand although you don't).
16. S2: (laugh).
17. S1: Ok. I see .thank you.
18. T: Ok. Very good,

Here in this episode, the teacher asks a question in turn 1. By repeating the same question twice, the teacher tries to get the students' attention at the beginning of the teacher-student interaction. From the above turns, it can be noticed that the teacher uses a lot of repetition (turns 1,3,6) and paraphrases (turns 8,10,12) to let the students know the meaning of the word exemplar and the students use many contextualized cues like laugh, surprise, pause, change of intonation, etc. in order to negotiate meaning.

Episode 2 Teacher-Student Interaction in the Learner-Centered Lesson

In episode 2, the teacher and the student are engaged in a communicative activity of question-answer format. This episode shows how the students negotiate the meaning with the scaffolded help provided by the teacher.

1. T: Who is your enemy?(pause) Who is your enemy?
2. S1: My enemy?
3. T: Yes.
4. S1: What do you mean? Here?
5. T: The enemy of your country.
6. S1: I See
7. S2: (tell him Terrorism)

8. S1: Terrorism.
9. T: That is right , your enemy is Terrorism . Very good

In the first turn, the teacher repeats the same question twice to get his Ss' attention. In turns 2 and 4 S1 does not negotiate the meaning of this word. The teacher helps S1 by using paraphrasing as a scaffolded assistance in turn 5. In turn 9, the teacher does not make further questions, since he realizes that by scaffolding help Ss negotiate meaning.

Episode 3 The Effect of Language Anxiety

This episode shows that language anxiety causes problems and thus makes the learning environment difficult.

1. T: Suppose you have a Jewelry shop. What will you sell?
2. S1: Ear rings and finger rings and (pause).
3. T: Ok. So, you will sell jewelry
4. S1: Yes
5. T: Ok. What type of jewelry?
6. S1: Um (pause)
7. T: (2second wait-time) Gold? Or silver?
8. S1: Only gold.
9. T: Only gold? So, your shop is making money or losing money?
10. S1: Making money.
11. T: Your shop is making money?
12. S1: (looks confused) Off course.

S1 shows a strong anxiety during presentation. In turn 3, the teacher suggests the word 'jewelry' which is a comprehensive term. When S1 does not understand what the teacher means (turn 6), the teacher gives

examples to help the student to negotiate the meaning. Localization (i.e. giving examples) is a typical scaffolding strategy provided by the teacher in the classroom. In turn 7, the teacher provides a short wait-time, about 2 seconds, after asking 'gold or silver'. Wait time, here, means the length of time the teacher waits after asking the question before getting the answer from the students. According to (Long et al., 1984:420), wait-time is an important dimension of a teacher's questioning skills, since providing appropriate wait-time seems to reduce language anxiety. When wait-time is increased from three to five seconds, the amount of student participation as well as the quality of that participation often increase. In turn 9, the teacher puts an emphasis on the contrasting words 'making vs. losing' to deliver his message more efficiently. In turn 11, the teacher gives feedback on the content by repeating S1's answer and emphasizes the word 'making' to imply that S1 is not sure of her answer.

Episode 4 The Teacher's Feedback in the Teacher-Centered Lesson.

In this episode, the researcher observes that feedback is direct and it invariably comes from the teacher.

1. T: Ok. Suppose you have a company. What is your company's product (pause) what does it sell?
2. S1: Um... furniture
3. T: FURNITURE
4. S1: Yes, especially kitchen furniture
5. T: Kitchen furniture
6. S1: Yes
7. T: Ok. Then what does the catering manager do?

8. S1: (to the student next to her) what is the catering manager's responsibility?
9. S2: The catering manager?
10. T: CATERING! You said the catering manager, Right?
11. S2: Cooking? Those who cook for the customers
12. S1: I don't think so. The catering manager does something else
13. T: What does the carting manager do?
14. S1: I don't know what it is. What should I say?
15. T: What is the catering manager (with his eyes wide open)
16. S1: (to the in-group classmates) The catering manager? How can I explain it? Something productive? (to the teacher) sorry.
17. T: Ok. The catering manager is something productive.

In turn 1, the teacher paraphrases his question with a simpler sentence to aid the student's understanding. In turn 3, the teacher's feedback, i.e. repeating S1's answer and emphasizing it, might function as 'a contextualization cue' which relates what is said to the contextual knowledge, (Goffman, 1967:121). Such an emphasis implies that the teacher wants more specific answer. Therefore, S1, in turn 4, gives more specific information about the company's product. In turn 7, the teacher gets into a new question which triggers a problem. He wants the group to tell him that 'the catering manager' has nothing to do with a company making furniture. While S1 and S2 are interacting to negotiate the meaning in turns 8 and 9, the teacher interrupts in turn 10 to let them know that the word 'catering' is not appropriate in this context. He puts an emphasis on the word 'CATERING' and says it twice in order to give the students an attention on the word. Nevertheless, in turns 11, 12 and 14, S1 and S2 are still in trouble. Their opinions are conflicting. Even though the teacher tries to provide scaffolded assistance by repeating and paraphrasing

the question using almost the similar words in turns 13, 15, and 17, it does not help the students to negotiate the meaning. That is because the scaffolding provided by the teacher (i.e. just repeating the same question) is too general in this difficult situation.

Episode 5 Teacher's Role as a Facilitator in the Learner-centered Lesson

The following episode provides an example of learner-centered interaction in the language classroom. It shows good involvement of students providing scaffolding for each other and evaluating others. In this episode, the teacher asks some questions about abbreviations which are used in the group's composition.

1. T: Ok. What are R and D standing for?
2. S1: Yes?
3. T: What do R and D stand for? (Slowly)
4. S1: Research and Development
5. T: Ok. What about Q and A?
6. S1: Quality and Affect
7. T: Oh? (1- second pause)
8. S1: Yes
9. T: What do they stand for, Q and A?
10. S1: (in a soft voice) Quality and Affect.
11. T: Quality and Affect?(raising her eyebrows)
12. S1: (losing self-confidence) yes?
13. T: I (long I) don't think so.
14. S1: Silent
15. T: You are talking about developing students' abilities in using language, right?

16. S1: Yes
17. T: and you give them test to examine their abilities, right?
18. S1: Yes
19. T: So what does this test include?
20. S1: questions and answers
21. T: good, what about Q and A?
22. S1: (Silent) Q (long Q) question and Answer

In this episode the teacher uses a lot of scaffolding to aid the students. In turn 3, the teacher speaks slowly repeating the question of turn 1 and also uses a paraphrase 'what do' instead of 'what are' he used in turn 1. In turn 5, he makes the second question. Let's compare the questions in turns 5, 7 and 9. First of all he uses a reduced form (turn 5) and he gives a contextualization cue to imply that the answer is wrong (turn 7) and then provides a full verbal sentence to make the question clear (turn 9). S1's responses in turns 2, 8 and 12 (yes) reflect his losing of self-confidence due to misunderstanding. When incorrect responses occur in turns 6 and 10, the teacher gives a contextualization cue (raising her eyebrows) to let S1 know that his answer is wrong, instead of immediately providing the correct answer (turn 11). Next he provides a verbal cue in turn 13. These kinds of verbal and non-verbal feedback provided by the teacher in turns 7, 9, 11 and 13 induce the students to self-correction. In spite of the teacher's effort, S1 does not provide the correct answer. In turn 14, S1 is embarrassed by having unexpected feedback from the teacher and as a result he becomes silent. Everybody in the classroom has thought that Q and A must be Quality and Affect. Therefore, the teacher, in turns 15, 17 and 19 provides scaffolded assistance step by step to aid S1. This leads S1 to give the right answer in turns 20 and 22.

Conclusion

This study has focused on the teacher's role in the classroom, and what scaffolded assistance the teacher uses to make an effective learning environment by examining both learner-centered and teacher-centered discourse in interactive exchanges between the teacher and students in the EFL classroom. It is concluded that 1-in learner-centered classroom, the teacher's role is seen as a facilitator of language2-learner-centeredness triggers more scaffolding offered by the teacher. In other words, the teacher provides the students with more scaffolded help in learner-centered lessons than in teacher-centered lessons and 3- interaction between students actively occurs in learner-centered lessons while in teacher-centered lessons such an interaction is reduced; therefore, it results in decreasing the quantity of students' linguistic production and the opportunity of using scaffolding.

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تعلم اللغة الانكليزية من خلال اسخدام عملية التبسيط في الصفوف العراقية لتعليم اللغة الانكليزية

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الملخص

يعتبر تعلم اي لغة اجنبية الى حد كبير عملية تفاعلية. تقوي وتدعم النشاطات التواصلية الناتج اللغوي لدى الطلاب وبالتالي تزودهم بالقدرة على ممارسة اللغة وتحقيق الفرص المناسبة لمعرفة وتمييز المعاني من خلال المحاورات. تتناول هذه الدراسة الصفوف التي يكون للطلاب فيها دور اكبر من الاستاذ، وتتناول هذه الدراسة الصفوف التي يكون للطلاب فيها دور اكبر من الاستاذ وتتناول ايضا دور الاستاذ في تبسيط العملية التفاعلية لدى الطلاب (Scaffolding).

الطلاب المشاركون في هذا البحث هم طلبة جامعة بغداد /كلية الاداب /قسم اللغة الانكليزية/المرحلة الرابعة لسنة 2012-2013. نُظِم الطلاب على هيئة مجاميع من ثلاث افراد، مهمتهم كتابة مواضيع انشائية مختلفة وبعد ذلك يسأل الاستاذ كل مجموعة اسئلة مختلفة. قام الباحث بتحليل خمس محاورات مختلفة استنتج فيها بأن الصف الذي يكون للطلاب فيه الدور الاكبر في معرفة وتمييز المعاني افضل واكثر افادة في عملية تعلم اللغة الاجنبية من الصف الذي يوصف بسيادة الاستاذ. اضافة الى ذلك يحتاج الطالب بين حين واخر الى عملية التبسيط (Scaffolding) من الاستاذ وهذا يؤدي الى زيادة التفاعلات التواصلية والمشاركات بين الطلاب. تشمل عملية التبسيط (Scaffolding) على استخدام الاعداد والتكرار والتنوع بنغمة الصوت وتعابير الوجه مما يؤدي الى سهولة فهم الطالب للمعاني والتراكيب المختلفة.