LEARNING INTERACTION IN THE LANGUAGE CLASSROOM

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I. Introduction.

Over the past ten years, conversational analysis has had an important influence on second language acquisition and teaching. Following the work of Garfinkel, Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson (1974) described how individuals open and close conversations, take turns, choose a topic and achieve interactional synchrony. There has also been a new emphasis on the interaction and discourse processes underlying the acquisition of a second language (Alwright, 1980, 1984; Hatch, 1978; Larsen-Freeman, 1980; Kramsch, 1981). However, the application of this research to classroom practices is very slow and their implications for teachers and learners are even slower.

This paper analyses the nature of the language learning task, the interaction and the factors which determine it: the roles of the participants, the tasks accomplished and the type of knowledge they exchange (Kramsch, 1985).

After analyzing what actually happens in foreign and second language classrooms, we can say that, despite its own characteristics the discourse generated in the classroom have features in common with the natural discourse. Good intentions and emphasis on communication have only been the first attempt to learn how to use the natural discourse in the context of language classrooms.

So, we suggest learning natural discourse in the language classroom by modifing discourse management operations at the level of:

- turn talking

- topic management

- pragmatic adjustments

- learner-learner interaction// teacher-learner interaction.

II. Interaction in the language classroom.

Learning a language is a complex process in itself. It has a dual nature: on the one hand, you have to learn the forms of a certain language. On the other hand, you have to learn how to use them. It is by using a language that you learn it, but it is also a way of exchanging ideas and communicating with the members of the social group. It is thought that students learning a second language at the secondary and University level know how to interact with one another in their L1; so, all they need is to know structures and vocabulary. However, they don't realize the importance of managing their own and other's discourse, in order to be able to communicate fluently in the language being studied.

But let's see the interaction that takes place in the language classroom and the ꭎctors which determine it.

2.1 *Interaction Types*:

According to Van Lier, (1988), we can distinguish four types of interaction.

Type 1: less topic-oriented, less activity -orientation. In this type of interaction the student can talk about whatever they want to, observing the usual social rules.. Example: small talk, private conversation in pairs...

Type 2: more topic-orientation, less activity-orientation. This type of interaction is found when a topic or task is given by the teacher and the group attempts to solve it in any possible way. Example: instructions, explanations, lectures...

Type 3: more topic-orientation, more activity-orientation. Some information needs to be transmitted, according to certains rules. This interaction takes place when both the topic and the rules of its management are controlled by the teacher. Example: whole class discussions of a text conducted by the teacher, communicative grammar exercises interviews...

If the teacher controls the rules of the activity but the topic is irrelevant, we have what Van Lier, (1988), classifies as a type 4 interaction: less topic-orientation, more activity-orientation.

These four types of interaction actually take place in the classroom and are determined by the roles of the participants, the tasks accomplished and the type of knowledge they exchange (Kramsch, 1985)

2.2 *Factors affecting the Interaction types*:

The roles of the participants can change according to the type of interaction mentioned above . At the one end are the institutionalized roles of teacher and student. At the other end are a variety of roles negotiated by teacher and students, and similar to the ones found in natural conversation. Neither of these alternatives have been observed in the classroom. On the one hand, institutionalized roles are being phased out, and, on the other hand, the asymetric nature of classroom discourse allows only partial negotiation beween participants which can not be compared to natural conversation.

Tasks also vary acording to different types of interaction . On the one hand, we have activities where information is delivered and received; on the other hand, information is exchanged and meanings are negotiated. Both of them are necessary to improve the language. Individual tasks such as giving information, correcting errors and listening, should be used together whith group task, such as problem-solving exercises, discussions of texts..., to improve the students'ability to communicate with one another.

Together with different roles and task we can also find different *types of knowledge exchanged*. We can have the type of interaction usually based on the content of the lesson, that is to say, information is given by the teacher and received by the stu-

dent. But we can have the type of interaction based on the interactional process itself, where information is exchanged and understanding is negotiated by teacher and student. In this case learning how to deliver a message is as important as the message itself. Observing our own language classroom, we must admit that the above mentioned types of interactions are realized by the joint efforts of teachers and learners, that there is not "fixed statuses of participants" or "focus on the content" as Kramsh, (1985), suggested. However, it is true that, as a rule, the discourse found in the language classroom can not be described as natural discourse (Llobera, 1990).

So, if our aim is to learn a natural language, we wonder what features are not present in the classroom discourse which distinguish it from the one found in ordinary conversations. The answer is to be found in the dual nature of the language learning task. Learning a language means not only learning the forms, but also, lerning how to use them.

Then, Our suggestion is very simple: We should no longer worry about instructional discourse since, although important, it has its own place in the language classroom, and it is time for us to achieve a desired interactional climate by analysing and teaching the way we take, avoid, sustain...turns; by the way we initiate or build topics; and by considering pragmatic adjustment in conversation.

In short, only by modifing discourse management operations at certain levels: turn taking, topic Management, tasks, learner-learner interaction, rather than teacher-learner interaction, can we achieve an interactional climate and thus a possitive result for language adquisition.

III. Discourse modification and teachability.

If many of the difficulties in managing the natural discourse are interactional in nature, studying the interaction processes in the classroom should be the first step in learning to constuct discourse. This, in turn, should be followed by a metacommunicative reflexion about the processes and a systematic modification, if necessary, of any procedural mechanism.

Our adolescent students record themselves during peers interaction and analyse the interaction patterns with the aim of reflecting on discourse processes. Although the long term effects of the treatment are still unknown, let's consider the metacomunicative awareness and discourse modifications carried out by learners in peers interaction.

First of all, we suggest *peers interaction* instead of teacher-student interaction as a more natural way to interact verbally. This is not an easy task. As Bassamo and Christison say:

"Teachers often put students in a circle, give them a topic for discussion that they think is particularly stimulating and then watch the students just sit and look at one another in an embarrassing silence, constrained, nervous and tense. Then the teachers end up doing all the talking" (1987:201)

Many teachers also fear the chaos within groups and the systematic use of the mother tongue. They also feel that less skillful learners are unable to control the topic of conversation and do not benefit from it.

However, there are several works (Doughty and Pica, 1986; Varonis and Gass, 1983) which have emphasized the importance of conversing with one another in the language classrooms. In all these works it is argued that conversational modification occurring during interaction has a positive effect on second language acquisition. It is also suggested that group interaction patterns produce more modification than do teacher-fronted situations and thus participation as well as type task have an effect on the conversational modification of interaction.

On the other hand, learners are also much more active in negotiating meaning (Doughty and Pica, 1986) and in repairing their errors (Porter, 1983) when talking to peers, even the most passive ones (Cameron and Epling, 1989), than when talking to the teacher. As well as, through peers conversation, learners receive more comprehensible input (Seliger, 1983) and are forced to produce more comprehensible output as Swain, (1986) suggests,

... simply getting one's message across can and does occur with grammatically deviant forms and socially inappropiate language. Negotiating meaning needs to incorporate the notion of being pushed toward the delivery of a message that is not only conveyed, but that is conveyed precisely, coherently and appropriately (1986:248-249)

Secondly, *the behavior of the teacher* is crucial at this point. It is useless to practice the mechanism of natural discourse in group work if students have not been taught explicitly the mechanisms that enable speakers and hearers to communicate successfully. Following Coulmas' categories, (1981), students are taught to:

- evaluate: it is true that, the important thing is,...

- maintain a conversation: I see, What I mean...

- express metacomunicative functions to monitor the communication flow: do you understand?, can you hear me?...

- express relief by using conversational formulas: could you possibly..., hesitations...

- react at certain points in the discourse: My God!

All these routines are an essential part of our language course and in the same way as the formal conscious learning are indispensable for the acquisition process (Long, 1983). We believe that the metacommunicative awareness could have a positive effect to achieve a natural interactional climate.

And Finally, more specific treatment is necessary at the level of *turn taking and topics* in the classroom.

It is obvious that in teacher-oriented interaction, the teacher selects the next speaker and automatically he becames the person controlling the turns in the classroom. As a result, there is little motivation for the student to listen, the only alternative for them is to be able to answer when they are asked.

In natural discourse, speakers listen to the utterance of speakers, interpret it and respond to it at the appropriate moment. This, which seems very easy, requires a combination of skills that need to be practiced both in ther native and second language.

Teachers systematically follow the rules of natural turn-talking in their classrooms:

- don't initiate turns or worry about silences. Somebody else will initiate a turn

- teach the students to gain the floor

- don't assume they are the only addresser and addressee

- take shorter turns and encourage the student to take longer turns

- negotiation of meanings is more important than forms

These changes in the turn-talking mechanism will undoubedtly change the topic management in the classroom.

The control of the turn taking by the teacher is found together with the control of the topic. It is normally the teacher who initiates, changes or avoids a topic. A good example of this is the use of teacher's questions. Questions elicit answers which are already known. But in natural discourse something different happens: questions are asked because there is an information gap in the discourse; answers are unknown and introduce something new to the topic.

If students have to create a natural discourse they must know how to participate in the way topics are established, changed or sustained. This can also be achieved by systematically following the rules of natural discourse:

- Use the language to be studied not only to deal with the content of the lesson but also to regulate the interaction.

- Build the topic together with the students. Everything is relevant in the classroom as it happens in natural conversation.

- Ask questions which are relevant to the topic at hand.

By changing the turn and topic mechanism we are very close to natural discourse but we still have to consider a whole range of tasks dealing with breakdown in conversations, elapses, errors...which we will call *pragmatic adjustments*.

Procedural problems of any kind are indicated by the teacher. It is only the teacher who points out a linguistic error, ignores an answer, changes addressee and even considers misundertanding as an error on ther part of the student.

However, errors should be treated as natural processes. Van Lier (1988) considers them as interactional features, mostly self-initiated and self-repaired. We think they are pragmatic adjustments in the sense that they are, as in natural discourse, procedural problems and are considered to be the responsability of both the teacher and learner. As in natural discourse, they are repaired by any of the participants and teachers follow the natural rules of repair:

- The errors are no longer considered as such, but as linguistic adjustments.

- Don't evaluate students' utterances but rather comment on them

The experience suggests that adolescent students, after being taught explicitly the rules of natural conversation, are able to evaluate their interaction. The different points of view on the same event create discussion, motivation to listen and express their

point of view. In addition, the observation and reflection of a variety of discourse behaviours adopted by their peers can offer them an oportunity to deal, as Ellis (1990) suggests, with one of the most difficult aim of learning a language: acquiring new linguistic forms, and at the same time, learning how to use them.

Conclusion

In a language classroom the teacher-student-teacher sequence, although typical, is not the only option. The natural discourse can also be present in the classroom. By modifing certain rules of natural discourse and modifing certain patterns, we can achieve an interactional climate which may benefit the process of language acquisition.

We suggest that these modifications can be achieved by explicitly teaching the rules of natural discourse, together with a metacommunicative awareness of learners in the context of peer interaction.

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