A comparison of classroom interaction patterns of native and non-native EFL teachers

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Abstract

Classroom interaction patterns and their significance and contribution to learners’ level of proficiency has been one of the most important issues in EFL settings with the increasing concern for socio-cultural theories of education, represented by Lev Vygotsky. It is believed that with the help of the teachers’ guidance and scaffolding, learners’ participation in language classes might be possible and this collaboration in the EFL classroom might lead to more positive results. The main aim of this study is to compare and contrast the classroom interaction patterns adopted by native and non-native teachers of English in EFL settings such as turn-taking, teacher feedback, teacher echo and different kinds of scaffolding strategies. Qualitative research, particularly conversation analysis was used to identify the basic similarities and differences between these two groups of teachers taking part in a Turkish and American EFL setting. The findings of this study suggest that the common interactional pattern in the classrooms is IRE (Initiate, Response and Evaluation), native speaker teachers of English are more tolerant than non-native speaker teachers of English in terms of error correction and alternative questions technique is the most common scaffolding technique used by both groups of teachers.

Keywords: Classroom interaction, feedback, EFL

1. Introduction

The nature of classroom interaction has been the topic of extensive research in education in general lately. When it comes to the application of this topic into L2 learning environments, the focus moves into the linguistic interactions between participants in the language classroom; that is, “negotiations of meaning” (Long,1983). Negotiation of meaning is generally thought to be the process that speakers in a given context go through so as to understand each other more clearly. Studies on classroom interactions (Long, 1983; 1996; Pica, 1994; Gass & Varonis; 1985a; 1985b) suggest that the interactional exchanges such as negotiation of meaning, feedback, and modification of output are significant components that might contribute to the process of second language acquisition.

2. Socio-cultural Theory in SLA Research

The role of input and interaction in L2 acquisition is an important issue and Allright(1984, p.156) points out that “interaction is the fundamental fact of classroom pedagogy because everything that happens in the classroom
happens through a process of live person-to-person interaction.” When the nature of classroom interaction is taken into consideration, the significance of the “socio-cultural theory” becomes apparent as the peer assistance and the teacher’s assistance take place repeatedly in student-student and student-teacher interactions in the classroom. Socio-cultural theory draws extensively on the work of Lev Vygotsky and the use of it in SLA (second language acquisition) contexts is related to the social approaches to SLA (Ellis, 2008). In the socio-cultural theory, Vygotsky views language as an important tool that is used to achieve the goals of social living; for this reason, it is believed that the dialogically-based nature of language learning might be considered in this social aspect. In such a classroom situation, students, novices in Vygotskyan terms, are in usual contact with the experts, which makes it possible for them to be exposed to a great amount of guidance in any kind of problem solving occurring in the classroom. In this perspective, it is possible to say that L2 acquisition is not a purely individual-based process but shared between the individual and other persons and with the help of dialogic interaction, experts such as teachers can create a context in which novices can participate actively in their own learning. In such a situation, the experts are there to supply the necessary support whenever it is needed (Ellis, 2008). This same process is called “scaffolding” by Wood, Bruner and Ross (1976). They identified it as “the dialogic process by which one speaker assists another in performing a function that he or she cannot perform alone”.

3. Classroom-based Research

Classroom-based research might include analysis of accuracy, complexity, fluency; interaction analysis focusing on negotiation of meaning (Ellis, 2005), error treatment by the teacher, identifying learner-learner and learner-teacher interaction; and conversation analysis which deals with turn-taking, sequence organization and repair; and some other important concepts such as scaffolding, corrective feedback and learner uptake, etc. What is more, Kasper (2009:2) states that “conversation analysis examines how co-participants accomplish coordinated actions and maintain order in social activities through their verbal and non-verbal conduct”. Where this conduct takes place has also significance in participants’ sense making processes.

When we think about language learning as a specific context where learners accomplish these coordinated actions and which requires a great amount of social interaction, what students and the teacher do in the classroom together so as to facilitate the process of learning becomes more important. As an important part of classroom learning process, classroom discourse should be dwelled upon in order to understand its contribution to the quality of student learning. Zhang (2008) states that the quality of student learning has important connections with the quality of classroom discourse.

A common practice in the classroom discourse is the IRF sequence (teacher initiation, learner response and teacher feedback; Sinclair & Coulthard, 1975; cf. IRE (Initiation, Response, Evaluation) in Mehan, 1979). In this organization, teacher generally initiates the interaction by means of a question; students respond to it and finally, based on the students’ response, the teacher supplies feedback.

Teacher feedback might occur in different ways in the classroom. Lyster and Ranta (1997) introduce the following feedback types that might be confronted in a language classroom:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Feedback types</th>
<th>Example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Explicit correction</td>
<td>You mean…</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recast</td>
<td>Teacher reformulation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clarification</td>
<td>What do you mean?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Metalinguistic feedback</td>
<td>Explanation of error type</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elicitation</td>
<td>Ellipsis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Repetition</td>
<td>Intonation</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Adapted from Heift, 2004, p.418)
4. Native Speaker (NS)/Nonnative Speaker (NNS) Teacher Dichotomy

Whether English should be taught by NS or NNS teachers is a widely disputed issue (Arva & Medgyes, 2000; Merino, 1997; Sheorey, 1986). Medgyes (1994, p.76) characterizes NNS and NS teachers as “two different species” with different levels of proficiency and different language behaviour. Even though they differ in terms of these criteria, it does not mean that one group is better than the other. When it comes to the way they use the target language in the classroom and how they evaluate learner language, some studies focused on the way they treated learner errors (Mosbah, 2007; Sheorey, 1986; Hughes & Lascaratou, 1982). In most of these studies, NS teachers of English were characterized as more tolerant to learners’ structural errors” whereas NNS teachers of English are more concerned with accuracy and formal features of English (Merino, 1997).

5. Methodology

4.1. The study

The study was carried out at Kocaeli University, Faculty of Education, English Language Teaching Department in Turkey and University of Hawai’i at Manoa, Department of Second Language Studies in the USA in the academic years 2010-2011.

4.2. Participants

In Turkey, 40 students and 1 NS and 1 NNS teacher of English participated in the study. Likewise, 40 students and 1 NS and 1 NNS teacher of English participated in the study in the USA. In both contexts, NS and NNS teachers of English were experienced teachers with either a masters or a doctorate degree in TESOL. In both contexts students are intermediate level learners of English. Most of the students in the Turkish context are Turks whereas the students in the American context come from different countries such as China, Japan, Korea, etc.

4.3. Analysis of data

In these two settings, reading-based classes were audio-recorded for 4 weeks and then they were transcribed by the researcher. Reading-based classes were chosen because of their potential for classroom conversations and discussions. In the transcriptions, basic classroom interaction patterns of NS and NNS teachers of English, how they treated learner errors, teachers’ scaffolding techniques and how the teachers echoed learner utterances were identified.

6. Findings and discussion

The NS and NNS teachers’ classes were audio-recorded two times a week for 4 weeks in order to identify the basic classroom interaction and corrective feedback patterns, scaffolding and teachers’ echo techniques used by these 4 teachers. The following table shows the results of the comparisons and contrasts based on the corrective feedback patterns of teachers in a one-week period.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Teachers</th>
<th>Exchanges</th>
<th>Errors committed</th>
<th>Errors corrected</th>
<th>Errors ignored</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>NS in Turkey</td>
<td>324</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NNS in Turkey</td>
<td>305</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NS in the USA</td>
<td>428</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NNS in the USA</td>
<td>387</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As can be understood from the table above, in both of the contexts, NS teachers of English are more tolerant in their attitudes towards the errors students commit in the classroom. While NS teachers ignored most of the errors
committed in both contexts, NNS teachers corrected most of the errors. NS teachers ignored most of the grammatical mistakes but mainly focused on pronunciation mistakes as in the following examples:

**Episode 1**

T: OK guys, what did you talk about? Sorry, I’m still trying to figure out this and sorry it is not gonna work. It’s working, yeah. (trying to set up the projector) Could you decide? Where is he going?

S1: Actually he not interested his life.

T: OK.

S1: He is a perfect. He go to ……………… (unintelligible)

T: So you are happy in the present? No? Unhappy in the present? That means you don’t wanna time travel?

S1: No, he want to dinosaurs. …………………

S1: I asked him “are you really curious of past?” He is saying no. He will go to see his life.

T: Yes, Sherry, your partner’s story? What does she want? (with a slower speed)

S2: She say if had this machine, she want to come back. She want to see past.

T: Go into past?

S2: Yeah. She want to see her parents before marrying.

T: So you wanna hang out with parents?

S3: No.

T: No? Go and drink with your dad. Yeah. Actually I have the same idea. I’d love to go back and see. My dad has a really crazy past. He always tells me stories about, you know, drugs, police, alcohol, you know. All kinds of crazy stuff. My dad is also so straight now. And everything is like no problems, very responsible. It is different form e to imagine him being young, crazy and wild, so I wanna go back and hang out with my dad. OK. ………………………

S4: Teacher, I want to go future and get the some important number, lottery (lotre, wrong pronunciation).

T: Ahh, lottery, good idea, good idea. Have you guys watched the movie “Back to the Future”? It was 2 or 3? The guy went to the future and....

In this episode, the NS teacher ignored all of the errors committed by the students in the classroom as it is a conversation-based activity related to a passage that students read. In a similar activity, the following episode displays the attitude of the NNS towards the learners’ errors. The basic technique that the NS teacher used is “recasting” or reformulation of the student utterances by the teacher.

**Episode 2**

T: OK, let’s have a look at the title and the photographs together.

S1: They are looking at the radio.

T: Yes, they are looking at the radio. What a nice machine! Huh.

Ss: Laugh.

T: A very good invention for the people. OK, what do they do with the radio?

S2: They listen music.

T: They listen to music, thank you. This is one of the very few things you can do with a radio. What is the purpose here? Why do they listen to it? You know in the past, people did not have TVs, internet.

S3: They learnt the news.

T: Very good. They learnt the news through radio. And they listened to the songs and there were some short plays or theatre performances. What about the second one? It’s about the bird flu from CNN. When you compare it with the first picture, what happened with the help of the technology?

Ss: (silence)

T: something has changed, what is it?

S4: Television invented.

T: Yes, television was invented and with the help of the invention of TV, what happened?

S4: They learnt the news.

T: Yes, they learnt about the news immediately.
As can be seen in this Episode 2, NNS teacher of English is not so tolerant as NS teacher of English in the previous episode. In this episode, it is possible to see that NNS teacher of English corrected all the mistakes students committed while they are answering her questions related to the text.

When we have a look at the interactional patterns in both contexts, it is mainly compatible with the traditional interactional pattern in the ELT classes, which is IRE. In both of the contexts, the teachers initiate the conversation with the help of questions based on the texts, students try to respond to her/his questions and based on the students’ answers, the teachers supply feedback. Only if students cannot answer the teachers’ questions does the teacher ask extra questions to make it more understandable for students. This is the most common scaffolding technique that both of the teachers use. This technique of scaffolding is called “alternative questions” by Diaz (2009, p.64). In both contexts, both teachers benefit from learners’ background knowledge to clarify certain points in the text and to direct them towards the correct answers, e.g. the example related to “Back to the Future” in the first episode. Moreover, both NS and NNS teachers of English try to slow down while speaking and they use simpler vocabulary items.

However, in the IRE sequence is broken when the teachers echo learners’ utterances. Teacher’s echo might have important contributions to the second or foreign language learning contexts. It breaks the dullness of IRE sequence of a discourse (O’Connor & Michaels, 1993; 1996) and it “may increase student engagement and elaborated student talk” (Boyd & Rubin, 2006, p.4). When we have a look at the last part of Episode 2 of the NNS teacher’s classroom in the Turkish context, it is possible to see these effects of teacher echo. When the teacher asks a question, one of the students answers this question and the following part of the conversation is shaped after the teacher echoes the student’s answer to her question. On the other hand, the NNS teacher of English does not echo student utterances as much as the NNS teacher of English.

References