

Classroom Investigation

—Teacher-learner Interactions in a 6-year-old EFL Classroom—

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Introduction

Firstly, a rough sketch of the class to be observed will be attempted, referring to the teacher, the pupils, and the teaching method. Secondly, the rationale and the aims of the classroom investigation will be described together with some problems encountered in the process of investigation. Finally, a detailed analysis of the classroom interaction will follow with its major focus on teacher feedback and repair work done both by the teacher and the pupils.

1. The context of the Class Observed

The class observed is a part-time course at a private institution for six-year-old children (the first graders at primary school). A qualified native speaker teacher teaches twice a week (Monday and Thursday), each session lasting 35–40 minutes. Since the course is designed for young learners of 6 years of age, reading and writing skills are not yet included in the course of study. Therefore, the focus of teaching is exclusively on listening and speaking. The instructor seems to be aiming at an action-based instruction of “listen-and-act” type, which tends to demand a ‘centre-stage’ role for the teacher (Richards and Rodgers 1986: 138).

2. The aim of this present classroom investigation

The aim of this small-scale investigation is to identify the features of teacher-learner interactions focusing on teacher feedback, both positive and negative, and also on the functions of repair work undertaken by both the teacher and the learners in an L2 classroom. The focus of this study is, first and foremost, on the interaction that the learners have with the teacher, which necessitates the observer to pay detailed attention to what occurs in the L2 classroom between teacher and learners.

3. A narrative account of the investigation: its method, problems encountered, and some ethical issues involved

One such way is an ethnographic approach to classroom studies. The term ‘ethnographic research’ refers to the observation and description of ‘naturally occurring language use (e. g. between mother

and child, between teacher and students, etc)’ (Richards, J., Platt, J., and Platt, H. 1992: 129). For this present study the observer stayed in the classroom as a ‘non-participant observer’, whose job is “not to judge, evaluate, or criticise the classroom teacher, or to offer suggestions, but simply to learn through observing” (Richards and Lockhart 1994: 22).

The teacher’s and the pupils’ utterances were transcribed from the video recording and typed in two vertical columns with each utterance numbered in their chronological order. For more exact transcription for the later analysis, van Lier’s method was adopted (van Lier 1988: 243–244). (Appendix 1)

A TV camera for recording the class was set behind the pupils so that it would not distract them. However, the pupils were so curious about the existence of the camera and the observer himself that it seemed they would not allow him to remain “just a fly on the wall”, for they, at least for the first ten minutes or so, often came up to the camera and peeped into its lens.

Another problem that had been anticipated prior to the observation was that there would be less spontaneous verbal responses on the part of the children to their teacher’s cues and questions, given the fact that they are still young and that English is a foreign language to them. However, a lot of opportunities were observed in which the children responded in chorus using short phrases such as “In”, “On” and “Under” to the question “Where is the chip?”, to cite an example.

Regarding ethical issues, one problem encountered was that in the process of the negotiation with the institution, they were extremely reluctant to let the observer in and to video the class. They were afraid that the know-how of teaching English to young learners might be “stolen” by their rival schools. The written statement was submitted to the principal to the effect that the study was academically oriented. In order to protect the privacy of the pupils, the TV camera was set behind the classroom so that it would not film their faces from the front. The transcription in the extracts adopts false names for the teacher and the pupils as well.

4. The rationale for choosing the focus area and the explanation of its framework

The rationale for this present study is the assumption that the two most important functions that teachers perform in language classrooms are “instructing students and providing feedback” (Nunan 2000: 195). The term ‘feedback’ refers to the responses given by the teacher to what learners produce in the classroom (Wajnryb 1992: 49). On the other hand, the term ‘repair’, as van Lier defines it, has a broader sense than merely correcting learners’ errors, referring to ‘the treatment of trouble occurring in interactive language use’ (van Lier 1988: 183). He argues that ‘repair in L2 classrooms includes a wide range of phenomena reflecting all the different kinds of things that teachers and learners do in the classroom’ (*ibid.*, 189).

A repair which is made by the speaker (i. e. which is self-initiated) is known as a self repair, whereas one made by another person (i. e. which is other-initiated) is known as other repair. In L2 classrooms, the hearer may initiate repair, and the speaker carries out repair. An initiation can be done in the form of prompting, clueing, or helping. It can also be done by means of questioning, repeats of the trouble-source items. (*ibid.*, 197)

On other occasions, ‘other repair’ in the form of ‘helping’ occurs. ‘Helping’ can be distinguished from ‘prompting’ or ‘clueing’ in that it offers a candidate replacement (*ibid.*, 199).

van Lier also classifies the functions of repair in L2 classrooms. Firstly, the variety of repair activities are grouped into the following three broad categories of the participants’ purposes:

- (1) Medium-oriented goals: the focus on the forms and/or functions of the target language.
- (2) Message-oriented goals: the focus on the transmission of thoughts, information, or feelings.
- (3) Activity-oriented goals: the focus on the organization and structures of the classroom environment, rules for the conduct of activities. (*ibid.*, 187)

In the following section several extracts from the teacher-pupil discourse in the classroom will be analyzed in terms of repair, positive/negative feedback, elicitation, and also in the light of the way the young learners expand their knowledge of the world through interacting with the teacher.

5. Analysis and critical discussion of the data

Extract 1: Positive feedback

- 1 T: where is the chip
- 2 LL: //in.//
- 3 T: in. ok. very good.

Nunan states that instructing and providing feedback on performance are considered to be most commonly conceived classroom functions of teachers (Nunan 2000: 195; Richards and Lockhart 1994: 188). In 3T, the teacher is giving a positive feedback to the pupils, saying “OK. Very good”. The positive feedback usually consists of short interjections of “Good”, “OK” and “All right” (Nunan 2000: 197), and the teacher repeats (echoes) the pupil’s answer to acknowledge his/her correctness in an assertive falling intonation (3T).

Extract 2: Negative feedback, self-repair, and other-initiation

- 1 T: where is the chip=
- 2 T =where’s Betty’s chip
- 3 T =where is *my* chip
- 4 L: e::r yellow
- 5 T *where*
- 6 LL //on.//
- 7 T: on! Yes. very good.

The negative feedback consists of teacher repeating the student’s response with a rising intonation (*loc. cit.*, 197), and as he indicates, the teacher utters “Where” in an emphatic rising tone (5T). This utterance also functions as other-initiation (questioning repeats of trouble-source item) (5T) (van Lier 1988: 198), to which the learner responds with self-repair.

The teacher also tries to rephrase her question for the purpose of making it easier. This is an

example of ‘the same-turn self-repair’ (2T, 3T) (*ibid.*, 194). The teacher, who appeared to get irritated to find that the learner did not respond correctly, gives another initiation to ‘prompt’ him (5T) by stressing “Where”.

Extract 3: Elicitation, other repair, and message-oriented goal

- 1 T: where is the chip
- 2 L3: yellow
- 3 T: *where* is it=
- 4 T: =in? on?
- 5 LL: //under//
- 6 T: under very good

Elicitation refers to an attempt to extract from students information that might otherwise have been provided by the teacher (Nunan 2000: 195). Since the pupil gave a wrong answer, the teacher modified her question and repeated it again (3T) (Recasts). And then she tried to give a hint to the pupil, giving two alternatives out of the three choices. The teacher’s offering of an alternative choice is ‘other repair’ (helping) (4T), which is distinguished from ‘prompting’ or ‘cueing’ (van Lier 1988: 199) In terms of the functions of repair work, this sequence has a message-oriented goal in that the focus is on the transmission of correct information (not ‘yellow’ but ‘under’).

Extract 4: Other-initiation, self repair, and medium-oriented goal

- 1 T: ((Showing a gesture of handing a bag to each one of the kids)) may I=
- 2 L3: may I have a bag
- =
- 3 T: may I have a bag please
- 4 L3: may I have a bag please

Recasts involve the teacher’s reformulation of all or part of a student’s utterance (Lightbown and Spada 1999: 104). In the above example the teacher, who wants to teach how to use “please”, reformulates the pupil’s initial reply (3T). In this sense, the teacher’s utterance seems to be medium-oriented, because she supposedly intended to teach the polite form of request. This sequence is another example of ‘other-initiation’ (3T) and ‘self repair’ (4L).

Extract 5: Activity-oriented goal

- 1 T: please get me your bag
- 2 L1: ((tries to give her his coin))
- 3 T: no, you can keep it. it’s your coin.

The teacher’s second utterance (3T) is an example of activity-oriented goal, in that the focus is on getting the learners to know of the rules for the conduct of activities (van Lier 1988: 187).

Extract 6: Assimilation

- 1 T: ((to Gentaro))
Gentaro, can you introduce yourself=
2 T: =tell him your name
3 T: =what is your name=
4 L2: ((Gentaro to the observer, imitating the teacher's intonation)) what's your name
5 T: ((the teacher, smiling))
6 T =my name is...
7 L2: e::r my name is....
((silence)) =
→ 8 T: are you Betty=
9 T: =what's your name
10 L2: Gentaro

Gentaro, an alias, appears puzzled why the teacher asks his name, when she should already know it. The truth is that Gentaro was not aware that the teacher's initial question, "What's your name?" (5T) was asked not from the teacher's standpoint, but from the observer's (i. e., the third party's) standpoint.

Probably because Gentaro was too young to have the knowledge of the world as to how to introduce himself to others, he was for an instant at a loss and failed to 'make sense' of the situation in which he found himself (7L). It was not until the teacher asked him half-jokingly if he was Betty (other initiation), with an intention of negotiating meaning with Gentaro, that he finally came to grasp the whole meaning (10L) (self repair).

At this moment, Gentaro was possibly forced to modify what he already knew about the question form "What is your name?" so that he could take in new information concerning the social function of the same question. Through the negotiation of meaning, Gentaro seems to have assimilated the new information to expand his existing schemata. Schema theory suggests that "one's knowledge is constructed from the previous experience of the experiential world and guides one as one makes sense of new experiences" (Nunan 2000: 68). 'Assimilation' refers to "the process by which we modify what we already know to take into account new information" (Williams and Burden 1997: 22).

6. Some findings from the analysis

Through this study it has been found that the teacher's utterances could be laden with a variety of purposes and functions: correcting the learners' errors (Extract 4: medium-oriented goals), transmitting information (Extract 3: message-oriented goals), and organizing and structuring the classroom environment and rules for the conduct of activities (Extract 5: activity-oriented goals) (van Lier 1988: 187–188). In other cases, repair work seems to function as a means of encouraging and helping the learners (Extracts 1, 3, 4) or as a means of evaluating and challenging the learners (Extract 2, 6).

Conclusion

The first section of this assignment attempted to draw a sketch of the class to be studied, which included a description of the school, the learners, and the teaching method. In the second section the rationale of classroom research and its methodology was discussed, in particular, concerning the feasibility of an ethnographic approach to classroom studies. Following the description of research methods, a small-scale analysis was attempted about the micro-context, or the “context second-language speakers create for themselves and the context created for them by interlocutors” (van Lier 1988: 7).

These contextual features were analyzed in terms of teacher feedback to the pupils’ responses and also of repair work done between the teacher and the learners. This small-scale investigation has highlighted a variety of purposes and functions of teacher talk and repair work in the lesson observed, as well as the importance of observing and transcribing ‘what is done’ in the classroom. They in turn may lead to a greater understanding of the process of second-language learning in the classroom.

References

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Appendix 1

The conventions used by van Lier are as follows:

- | | |
|----------------|--|
| T | : teacher |
| L1, L2, etc | : identified learner |
| LL | : several or all learners simultaneously |
| /yes/yah//ok// | : overlapping or simultaneous listening |
| = | : a) turn continues below, at the next identical symbol
b) if inserted at the end of one speaker’s turn and the beginning of the next speaker’s adjacent turn, it indicates that there is no gap at all between the two turns |

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...	: Three periods approximate one second. Three periods are separated from the preceding word by a space.
?	: rising intonation, not necessarily a question
!	: strong emphasis with falling intonation
→	: other initiation
OK. Now. well., etc	: a period unseparated from the preceding word indicates falling intonation.
E:r, the:::, etc	: one or more colons indicate lengthening of the preceding sound.
yesterday Peter went	: capitals are only used for proper names, not to indicate beginning of sentences. (van Lier 1988: 243–244)

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