The Complexity of Brokering Teacher Classroom-language

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Introduction
There have been numerous occasions during lessons where this teacher-researcher has been puzzled about why communication with learners has not been as smooth as he would have liked. Vygotsky (1978), one of most seminal researchers into pedagogy, proposes the notion of Zones of Proximal Development, where learning occurs through social interaction between a novice and a more knowledgeable other. However, in order to best help learners ‘learn through social interaction’, the following question must be asked. In what way is the information in a classroom (i.e. knowledge) given or sought? In an attempt to answer this question, these research notes consist of a literary review and an outline for a future study.

The starting point for these research notes is the gap between the way in which the teacher teaches and the learner learns in this context. This is because we must acknowledge that learners here are not novices. All learners here are at least eighteen years old and have at least six years of learning English behind them, so they come to the classroom with ideas of how their learning may, should, or must take place.

The main focus of these research notes is the acknowledgement that all learning contexts have certain givens (Graves, 2003), and that these and other givens explained below, make up a complex system of variables. These variables make up the context in which the teaching and learning takes place; one of these variables in particular, the communication between teacher and learners in the classroom, especially the notion of Teacher Classroom-language becomes the main focus for these research notes.

These research notes form the background for a discussion of results of a future analysis of actual teacher classroom-language and use the following premise as their starting point:

‘Discourse events … are seen as complex dynamic systems in action, with people as agents in social systems, using other complex systems – of language and other semiotic means – in interaction with each other.’ (Larsen-Freeman & Cameron, 2008: 161)
Literature Review

The complexity of brokered teacher classroom-language is greatly affected by the approach to teaching by which the lesson is organised because it can greatly change the classroom dynamic for a learner if the teaching and learning environment differs to the one which he/she has become familiar. For example, in this context the Communicative Approach utilising Content-based Instruction within a Communicative Curriculum is thought to be of best practice (Jennings, 2007b) and is the setting for the analysis of teacher classroom-talk in these research notes. A review of the communicative approach in the context of English as a Foreign Language (EFL), taking into account the socio-cultural perspective in this context, is outlined below.

1. A Contextualised Communicative Approach

The approach to the way in which learning takes place in this context is through the use of the Communicative Approach to teaching a second or foreign language. The main reason this approach to teaching is referred to as communicative is that it helps learners take more control over their learning because they are, ceteris paribus, actively taking part in the lesson activities. With the communicative approach, classroom activities are designed in such a way as to help learners communicate meaning, and is based on the theory that all language is socially driven (Halliday, 1978). Thus, it is thought that a second or foreign language classroom should contain activities that mimic real-life examples of language use.

However, although the Communicative Approach has been used more and more widely since its inception, there is still a debate about the way in which it is interpreted in the differing contexts of English as a Second Language (ESL) and EFL classrooms. In this context, as EFL classrooms tend to be mono-cultural and mono-lingual, the debate is about how the theories of socially driven communication can be of practical use in the context of tertiary level English teaching in Japan (Jennings, 2009). Thus, the classroom dynamic in this context would need to change from one of ‘[the long and deeply-rooted] Japanese tradition of content mastery in a teacher-fronted classroom’ (Kelly, 1998); to a move towards learners becoming active in analysis of the language content through involvement in lessons that contain activities whereby a communication of meaning between participants takes precedent.

2. The Socio-cultural Setting

The use of a Communicative Curriculum calls for many discourse events to take place within the classroom (Jennings, 2007a). These events are a part of the
complex system\textsuperscript{7} of this teaching and learning context. Some important variables affecting the socio-cultural setting in this context are outlined below.

\textbf{i. A Contextualised Communicative Curriculum}

Breen & Candlin (2003: 11) define a communicative curriculum as being informed by ‘individual participants bring[ing] with them prior knowledge of meaning and prior knowledge of how such meaning can be realised through the language form and behaviour’. Thus, learners in this context will bring with them knowledge of their prior learning contexts, which will as a consequence affect the way in which they realise meaning in communication.

\textbf{ii. Communication Context}

The suitability of the purpose of the communication in EFL classrooms is connected to the notion of Communication Context. Römer (in Aston, Bernadini and Stewart, 2004) discusses a comparison of real and ideal language input for the learners in the EFL setting. Römer argues that the language in many EFL textbooks often does not reflect the language used in real situations and, as a consequence, ‘there probably is not much use teaching pupils things about a language which we know are not typical of real language use.’ (161). Owing to the inauthentic materials used in many textbooks, this teacher-researcher believes that the language input from the teacher is of high value because the teacher will broker the language for the particular learner(s) or class he/she teaches.

These research notes describe the background for a further study of the analysis of segments of teacher language and teacher and learner dialogues as a way to draw tentative conclusions as to why this teacher-researcher uses particular classroom-language at certain points during a lesson. This is done in order to improve awareness of instances of miscommunication by way of analysis of texts\textsuperscript{8} and will be explained in a subsequent paper.

\textbf{iii. Contextualised Teacher Language Awareness}

Teacher Language Awareness is defined by Thornbury (cited in Andrews, 2008: ix) as ‘the knowledge that teachers have of the underlying systems of the language that enables them to teach effectively’, i.e. \textit{Knowledge of the systems of English}. What is paid attention to here is Teacher Classroom-language (phraseology which he wouldn’t use in situations outside of the classroom). This phraseology is thought of as the way in which a teacher brokers the language he uses in such a way as to allow communication
to be fit for purpose with learners in this context.

iv. Contextualised Face-to-Face Communication

Face-to-Face Communication in discourse is based upon the notion that people that are engaged in speech communication are seen as a coupled-system and are thus: ‘brought together by seeing discourse as action in complex dynamic systems nested around the microgenetic moment of language using.’ (Larsen-Freeman & Cameron, 2008: 162-3). However, taking a second language acquisition view of face-to-face communication, there needs to be an acknowledgement of the state of the learner’s interlanguage because a typical learner of English in this context is not able to respond ‘in the moment’ and therefore the communication cannot be, to all intents and purposes, ‘dialogic’ (nested around the microgenetic moment of language using).

In the ESL context, Kinsella (1997: 55) discusses the type of learner that would respond in a manner that would enable a move towards the ideal in a communicative approach within a communicative curriculum. She argues that what an ideal learner here should be able to do is:

> [A]sking for information, requesting clarification, requesting explanations and examples, interrupting, restating and making suggestions.

However Scollon and Scollon (2003: 151), in this context argue there is the important socio-cultural aspect of placing

> [a] very high value on the communication of subtle aspects of feeling and relationship and a much lower on the communication of information.

Therefore, a teacher in this context has to broker his/her classroom-language in order to attempt a facilitation of the required change in state. In this context, it is widely recognised that using a communicative approach within a communicative curriculum is of best practice. This ideal is thought most likely to achieve the goal of helping learners to improve both their interlanguage and their ability to communicate better in the socio-cultural group of the target language (Jennings, 2007a).

Facilitating the movement towards this goal; however, is not simple. It is not simple because analysis of discourse events in this context are best seen from the viewpoint of a complex dynamic system in action. Therefore, how much a learner will move towards this target-like behaviour depends upon many variables, we next focus on the variable of a learner’s Language Resources.

v. Language Resources

The notion of Language Resources is connected with the ability to form
accurate expressions in a timely manner. Ellis (2001) refers to these resources as comprising of two types of memory; Long Term Memory and Working Memory, both of which are limited. As a consequence of this limitation on resources, people like to ‘chunk’ together groups of words. Ellis (ibid) refers to this as the ‘Idiom Principle’ as these chunks of language are, as Widdowson (1996) describes, compounds of words which cannot be ‘grammaticalised’. It is this ability to group words into meaningful chunks which make foreign language learners sound more native-like in the target-language leading to a more effortless exchange of information between interlocutors (Jennings, 2007b).

Learners in this context can gain access to knowledge of these chunks from: appropriately brokered instructions; other teacher-initiated discourse; and during communicative lesson activities. Therefore, it is during communicative oriented lessons that learners may be able to start to notice and restructure their lexical knowledge. This teacher-researcher’s aim is to build a classroom dynamic where learners can follow Schmidt’s (1995: 43) advice, in which he encourages learners to:

1) Pay attention to input
2) Pay attention to aspects of input that you are concerned to learn
3) Look for clues as to why native speakers use language as they do. Contrast your language with native speakers’. Build and test hypotheses.
4) Look at context when clear principles are not apparent.

However, paying attention to input received is difficult for learners in this context due to the lack of experience of the use of active deduction skills in a typical learner’s English learning experience. It has been mooted that learners in this context should rate highly on certain variables in order to have a ‘willingness to communicate’ thus a higher level of communication confidence, and subsequently greater chance to notice and restructure their internal lexicon.

vi. Willingness to Communicate

Yashima (2004: 63) refers to four indicator variables that were used when researching Willingness to Communicate in the Japanese tertiary EFL context: a) intercultural friendship orientation; b) interest in foreign affairs; c) intercultural approach avoidance tendency; d) interest in international occupation or activities. This study concludes that ‘international posture’ influences motivation, which in turn, predicts proficiency and L2 communication confidence.

Regarding second language acquisition in this context then, it is the complexity of combining the language resources that learners possess; the socio-cultural
context they are in; and their ‘internationality quotient’ that need to be considered if teacher-researchers are to be able to get the best practical use from the research related to willingness to communicate. These three points combine in a communicative lesson environment in face-to-face communication.

vii. Face-to-Face Communication

While discussing discourse in face-to-face communication from a complexity standpoint, Larsen-Freeman & Cameron (2008: 174-5) contend that there is always a ‘latent potential to use language … each occasion of language-using behaviour is dependent on the specific discourse environment…’. They continue that conversations that “run out of steam” have reverted to a ‘fixed point attractor’ (i.e. in this context, stayed in the usual discourse style of: limited language resources; the socio-cultural pattern of placing high regard to the subtle aspects of feeling and relationship than of communication; and being at the lower end of the ‘internationality quotient’).

With reference to Larsen-Freeman & Cameron’s work (ibid), in order for learners to shift out of a fixed-point attractor, it is thought necessary for them to attain ‘self-organised criticality’, in other words, to attempt to move closer along the interlanguage continuum to a more native-like target language patterning of language use (MacWhinney, 2001). This state is referred to as ‘the edge of chaos’ by Kauffman (1995). During the “chaos” of imperfect communication the language system is highly likely to contain more grammatical and other errors or miscommunications (Takahashi and Beebe, 1987). As a result, the crux of the future analysis planned by this teacher-researcher rests on the ability to analyse imperfect discourse patterns resulting from lessons that try to facilitate the tipping point (when the learner is trying to attain self-organised criticality) where learners feel the need or the ability to accustom their usual learning style to that of the target language and socio-cultural group.

As stated above, there are a great many variables to bear in mind when attempting to facilitate ideal conditions for learners to accomplish this phase-shift. This teacher-researcher will concentrate research into how best to broker teacher classroom-language.

3. Action Research

The purpose of these research notes is to put the theories of the Communicative Approach and the socio-cultural setting of this context into a meaningful reflection and to form the prelude to further research. Action Research forms the basis for the method used in future analysis of teacher classroom-language used by this teacher-researcher.
Nunan (2003), describes Action Research as the self-reflection teachers undertake that aims to bridge the gap between theory, research and practice.

These research notes contain the theory necessary for the next step, which is a practical analysis of one teachers’ teacher classroom-language. This analysis will attempt to improve the efficacy of classroom interaction and thereby improve chances for the teacher to facilitate 1) smooth transfer of information; 2) the carrying out of communicative classroom activities 3) a movement by learners, over time, on the interlanguage continuum in the direction of more target-language-like chunking of language (commensurate with the Idiom Principle) 4) An atmosphere where learners feel comfortable in being able to place more value on communication rather than subtle nuances of feeling and relationship. A following paper will provide both the research and recommendations for practice.

4. Summary to Literature Review

It can be seen that the communicative context of this setting is complex. For a teacher to facilitate learning here: he must have an appreciation of the systems of English; a very good awareness of the socio-cultural setting; and a willingness to further his ability to improve learners’ communicative competence by research undertaken outside the classroom.

Thus, in this context, building on the premise of complexity in the foreign language classroom and the need for learners to better approximate a more target-language-like fluency and socio-cultural communication style, we can add the further variable of learners having to change their learning-style to accommodate a teaching approach. For learning in settings where the learning and teaching style are at odds, it is a must that teachers have accurate knowledge of as much of the complexity that comprises the classroom dynamic as possible.

5. Future Analysis

i. Method

A future paper seeks to analyse the phraseology of one teacher’s classroom-language and any subsequent learner responses in the context of tertiary level EFL lessons in Japan. The author-researcher will record 10 different lessons of 90 minutes duration of audio communications between teacher and learners.
ii. Recording

Firstly, a general questionnaire will be undertaken on the teacher-researcher’s day-to-day teacher classroom-language. Secondly, a voice activated recording device will be used to record instances of teacher-language and any subsequent responses from learners.

iii. Analysis

Further analysis will comprise:

1. Specific occasions of particular Teacher Classroom-language

The teacher-researcher will analyse specific occasions of Teacher Classroom-language and any subsequent learner response, with the hope of highlighting any usage of non-standard English, or other phrasing that may show a use of a particular genre of teacher-language associated with teaching in this context.

2. Specific occasions of communication breakdown

The teacher-researcher will firstly analyse specific instances of communication breakdown with a subsequent follow-up with the learner(s) as to the reasons for the breakdown. The teacher-researcher will then make notes on instances of teacher-language and make assumptions about associated reasons for using particular phrasing with reference to the three meta-functions of Halliday’s Systemic Functional Grammar (see Jennings, 2009). Thirdly, tentative conclusions will be drawn on results of teacher-language used and how the results may be interpreted for a larger scale research project.

Notes

1. This essay takes the setting of the EFL tertiary level environment of Japan, specifically lessons which use the Communicative Approach. In this context, by and large, learners were born and raised in Japan and have had their schooling solely in the Japanese education system. Jennings (2007a) writes that:

   [Being] Members of a mixed social identity in the Japanese tertiary EFL context, these learners [should] have the aim of becoming more familiar with the target social and language environment. This would [not only] facilitate the ability to function in Japanese society after graduation but, simultaneously, [create] learners who have the ability to be members of a wider international community. (pp. 178, 179)

2. The learner may be thought of as the main player in the teaching and learning outcomes of a communicative curriculum, however, there are others who have input in
the learning process referred to as “givens” by Graves (2003, 193): The students; the teachers; the institution; moreover, to a greater or lesser degree, the students’ parents or guardians.

3. Nunan and Lamb (1995) write that a teacher’s language is paramount in the learning process and is complex because it contains many ‘dimensions’: Direct instruction; error correction and feedback; teacher questions; instructions; the use of the first language.

4. These notions are thought to be of best practice because they take into account the socio-cultural factors affecting communication:

   The sharing and negotiating of potential meanings in a new language implies the use and refinement of perceptions, concepts and affect. Furthermore learning the conventions governing communication within a new social group involves the refinement and the use of social roles and the social identity expected by the group of its members (Breen and Candlin 2003: 11).

5. How much the language classroom should mimic real-life in this context has been discussed in Jennings (2007a).

6. Learners who wish to attain a good grasp of how to communicate competently in the target language (in this context) should hope to move towards the social identity expected of them, but ‘the expected social roles and identity of the target language group will [be] difficult to attain’ (Jennings, 2007a).

7. Larsen-Freeman & Cameron (2008: 36) define complex systems as systems that are ‘heterogeneous, dynamic, non-linear, adaptive and open’.

8. ‘Where ‘text’ means any instance of language in use’ (Thompson, 2004: 10).

9. The term Interlanguage was coined by Selinker (1972); Interlanguage is defined as “the interim grammars constructed by the second-language learners on their way to the target language” (McLaughlin, 1987: 60).

10. A phase-shift happens as ‘a system changes from one behaviour to another’ (Larsen-Freeman & Cameron, 2008: 230).

References


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要旨

教師と学生間における対話 ——社会制度反映という観点から—

ジェニングズ・スティーブン

本研究ノートでは、教師と学生間のコミュニケーションを、多様な社会制度を反映する複雑な対話であるという見方をする。このような複雑な対話は、将来、教師と学生間のコミュニケーションに関する事例を分析する上での基礎となりうると考える。