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CLASSROOM INTERACTION

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Abstract. For a young English teacher, figuring out classroom interaction may not be an easy matter, especially because in language-learning classrooms teaching runs differently from lecture-style classrooms. This article addresses teacher trainees who prepare themselves for ESP teaching, aiming to raise their awareness of a series of class management skills and techniques that are necessary for ensuring effective communication among learners. The paper will focus on teacher talk vs. student talk, the way students may sit during various types of activities, and certain aspects related to the process of decision-making in class. As a method, we will underline the advantages and disadvantages of each technique, and provide useful advice for teachers. At the end there are two tasks designed for trainees, which can be solved individually or in pairs/groups.

Keywords: *classroom arrangement, communication, decision, groupwork, pairwork, teacher talk, student talk.*

Introduction

The way in which the teacher interacts with the learners largely depends on the methods and approaches that he/she uses. Starting from the assumption that the aim of the ESP course is to prepare learners for the real life situations in which they are likely to need the language, communication plays a key role in the classroom. This implies an interaction between teacher and students, as well as communication between students. In order to give everybody the chance to speak, the students are often divided into groups or pairs. In what follows, we shall consider various aspects related to teacher talk and student talk, then examine the advantages and disadvantages of different types of students grouping, and finally address the issue of decision-making during a class.

Teacher talk and student talk

The level of the students and the type of lesson and classroom activities will determine the balance between teacher talking time and student talking time. Teachers will generally talk more when they want to:

- introduce new language, clarify, model or check newly acquired language items;
- set up activities, group students, and give instructions;
- provide feedback;
- chat with the students.

Teacher talk has clear advantages. First of all, the teacher is the main provider of language input in the class. He/she knows the language better and, by listening to him/her, students get a correct picture of the language. Furthermore, they are constantly exposed to the target language in the class, and they can pick up new words and phrases used by the teacher. Another advantage

refers to the teacher-student interaction. By interacting with the teacher, a student is learning to communicate with a competent language user, much like in real life situations.

But how much time does a teacher have to interact with each and every student? Maybe two, three minutes? Thus, when teachers talk too much, there is little time left for students to talk. Similarly, there will not be enough time for teachers to listen to what students have to say. Students will therefore lose motivation, thinking that their opinions, ideas and efforts are neither noticed, nor appreciated. On the other hand, students learn more efficiently not from long explanations, but from solving tasks, experimenting with language, and taking risks. What they need is a challenge rather than a long lecture.

Teachers should therefore minimise their talking time and leave space for students to talk. Here are some hints on how to reduce unnecessary teacher talking time:

- Don't use too many words. For instance, a new language item can be presented in a context, and this is more efficient than a long explanation. A request such as "I wonder if you could say that again, please" may seem very polite, but "Repeat", uttered in a friendly way, is more efficient and less confusing to learners.
- Don't use any word if you can convey meaning through gestures, mime, a picture or an object.
- Don't use too much echoing as this may be annoying in time.
- Don't repeat yourself unless it is really necessary. If students do not react to an instruction, the teacher should not repeat it, but try to reformulate or demonstrate it.
- Don't explain your intentions. For instance, when you give students a task because you want to check if they have understood a particular language item, simply tell them "Work in pairs and do this gap-filling exercise" rather than "I'm going to check your comprehension".
- Avoid commentaries on your lesson. A statement like "This explanation wasn't very good, was it?" may confuse learners and also may show that the teacher is more interested in his/her performance than in the students' performance.

In conclusion, teacher talking time is actually time when students are not very involved and are not doing much. Teacher trainees should become aware of unnecessary teacher talking time and work on reducing it.

In order to maximise student-student interaction in the class, teachers should:

- create a relaxed learning atmosphere. If there is a good relationship among learners and between teacher and learners, then student interaction will take place effortlessly.
- give students time to think before they answer. Allow silence.
- listen to the students, paying attention to both form and content.
- create opportunities for student talking time. Students should be encouraged to work in pairs or groups.
- if possible, rearrange the seats in the classroom so that learners can see each other.
- encourage students to ask each other questions, rather than addressing only the teacher.
- walk further away from the students who are speaking too quietly for the others to understand.
- not be at the front of the class all the time. The focus should be on the students not the teacher.

Grouping students

The most common ways in which teachers can group students in a classroom are:

- whole class working together with the teacher;
- students working on their own;

- pairs;
- small groups.

Teachers should choose the most appropriate way to group students depending on the type of activity, although the choice is sometimes restricted by other factors, such as the large number of students, small room, fixed furniture or even students' reluctance to work in teams.

Whole class teaching

This is the traditional way of teaching: students sit in rows and listen to the teacher who stands in front of the classroom. It is the most common type of teacher-student interaction, which has its **advantages**:

- It is suitable when the teacher gives explanations or instructions, when he/she shows texts, pictures, uses audio materials or videos. It is especially good for the activities where the teacher's role is that of a controller.
- When the whole class is working together (in lockstep) under the direct authority of the teacher, both students and teacher feel secure.
- Students work together and this gives them a sense of belonging, and creates a bond among the members of the group.
- Teachers can evaluate the overall progress of the class.

The **disadvantages** of whole-class grouping are:

- The interaction tends to go from student to teacher and from teacher to student, leaving no space for student-student interaction. Consequently, it is not suitable for communicative language teaching.
- Individual students do not get the chance to talk.
- The focus is on the group, not on the individual, since everybody has to do the same thing at the same pace.
- The students are not encouraged to discover things since the teacher is the one who provides knowledge.
- Some students may be reluctant to "perform" in front of the whole class for fear of making mistakes.

As far as the classroom arrangement is concerned, activities directed from the front do not normally require a change in the position of the seats. Alternatively, a horseshoe arrangement enables easy interaction among the students and between the teacher and the students.

Students on their own

The opposite of whole-class grouping is the idea of students working individually. In this case, students solve tasks on their own. For instance, they can read a text privately and then solve text related tasks individually; they can write by themselves, or even research on their own. This individualised learning has the following **advantages**:

- It helps to develop learner autonomy.
- Students can be given different worksheets, depending on their interests and the skills they each need working on.
- It is likely that students find individual work less stressful than talking in pairs or groups, or performing in front of everybody.
- Students are bound to feel more confident in their own actions and decisions, without having to look to others for approval.

The **disadvantages** of individual work are:

- Students are not encouraged to develop a team spirit. They do not have a sense of belonging, and are not motivated by the other members of the group.
- Since the focus is on the individual and there is no student-student interaction, communicative skills are not developed. Therefore, when teaching Business English, this type of work does not suit the overall aim of the course - that of enabling learners to become better communicators in the target language.
- It is time consuming for the teacher who has to act as a resource and tutor for each individual. If students are given different tasks, this means more work and materials preparation than in the case of whole-class teaching.
- In terms of classroom arrangement, in order to work individually, learners should be given space to concentrate. They can get this kind of isolation in a language laboratory.

Pairwork

Working in pairs, students can do a wide range of activities: study a text, exchange opinions on a text, compare notes on what they have listened to, write a dialogue, practise language, take part in information-gap activities, etc. Information-gap activities are “favourite” because most real-life communication occurs when there are such gaps of information, ideas, and opinions between two speakers. Pairwork has many **advantages** because:

- It develops team spirit and learners’ ability to cooperate, to share ideas, to reach an agreement and to make decisions. These are skills that will be useful to them in their future jobs.
- It is a great opportunity for students to speak.
- It enables peer learning.
- It promotes learner independence because students work and interact without the direct guidance of the teacher.
- Students generally enjoy this type of grouping for the freedom that it entails.
- It is not difficult to organise.

The **disadvantages** of pairwork are:

- This type of student grouping can get rather noisy and teachers can easily lose control of the class.
- Students may get distracted from the task and talk about other things, usually in their first language.
- Some students may not like their paired partner and consequently lose interest in the task. The teacher should observe the friendships in the class and choose the partners accordingly. Another way of solving this issue is to leave it to the students to choose who they want to work with.

As far as seating is concerned, students should be able to look at each other. Thus, they have to move their chairs slightly towards each other. If there is fixed furniture in the classroom, students can simply turn towards their colleagues, or they can work with the colleague who is behind or in front of them. For some activities, such as information gaps, where students are not supposed to see what their paired partners are doing, the teacher should ask the students to work back to back. If there is moveable furniture in the classroom, students can be asked to lift their chairs and to work with someone other than their neighbour.

Groupwork

Students are usually put in larger groups when they have to do certain activities, such as: role-plays, debates, solving dilemmas, presentations, meetings, negotiations, etc. Teachers can organise “buzz groups”. The number of students in a group varies from three to eight, but there are activities for which the class is divided into two teams, which means two very large groups. Harmer believes that groups of five students are enough to enable interpersonal interaction; besides, five is an odd number that gives the possibility of having a majority view in the group (2011: 117). Smaller groups are also easier to manage. However, the size of a group depends on the type of activity and the number of students in the class.

The **advantages** of groupwork are:

- It gives students more speaking time.
- It changes the usual pace of a lesson and diversifies teaching and learning.
- It encourages students to develop their skills of working in teams, negotiating and reaching a consensus. For these skills, groupwork is more efficient than pairwork.
- Students express their opinions and make decisions without being directly guided by the teacher. At the same time, reaching a team goal gives them a sense of achievement. This helps students become autonomous learners.
- As a group is larger than a pair, personal relationships are less likely to be problematic.
- It allows teachers to monitor the students by moving around the classroom and listening to the language that they are producing.

Working in groups has also some **disadvantages**:

- Teachers could lose control of the class. Groups can be noisy and members can switch to their mother tongue. In order to make sure that the language used is English, the teacher can propose a game: each team has a monitor, and whenever the teacher hears a word in L1, the monitor has to stand up and remain standing. If all monitors are standing, the activity stops.
- Individuals are assigned roles that they may not like.
- It is time consuming. It takes longer to organise groupwork than pairwork.

In terms of seating, if possible, students should gather around a desk, or desks can be removed altogether. In case the class is split in two, the corners of the room can be used, or students can be grouped in two facing lines (Scrivener, 2005: 89).

From my teaching experience, ESP learners are often reluctant to work in pairs or groups, for various reasons. Since they are mature students, some of them perceive this type of activity as more of a game, than serious work. There are also students who are not used to working in pairs or groups, and consequently do not see the point of it, or do not feel comfortable working with their colleagues. Others may not like group activities because they need the teacher’s attention at all times.

The reluctant students need to be persuaded that pairwork and groupwork are efficient ways to learn and improve communicative skills. It is necessary for the teacher to discuss different groupings with the students before starting a group activity. This could be done by asking students to complete sentences such as:

- *I like/don’t like working on my own because;*
- *I like/don’t like working in pairs because;*
- *I like/don’t like working in groups because* (Harmer, 2001: 119)

They can discuss their sentences with their colleagues and see to what extent they agree. Alternatively, the teacher can ask students to make a list with their favourite activities. He/she can also do a group activity, and then ask the students to say or write how they felt about it.

Once the teacher finds out which are the reasons of students' reluctance to work in groups, he/she will decide the next course of events. Thus, the teacher might consider explaining the advantages of group activities in detail, changing the method, or even using pairwork and groupwork only occasionally if students continue to object to them. In other words, he/she should take a decision based on the way students react to his/her instructions.

Taking decisions

In their careers, teachers permanently face challenging situations that demand decision-making. Classroom management depends to a great extent on the decisions that teachers take and the actions which derive from these decisions. As Scrivener points out, at any moment during a lesson, several options may occur: to say one thing or to say another, to answer a difficult question immediately or to deal with it later, to welcome latecomers or to tell them off, to correct an error on the spot or to ignore it for the sake of fluency, to stop a group discussion or to let it continue for a few more minutes, etc. (2005: 80) The decisions that teachers take will shape the whole lesson. Nobody can tell which the best options are; it all depends on the situation and the people involved.

For instance, the students are working in groups and there are seven groups. Two groups have finished the task and the students are now chatting to each other. The other groups do not seem to be finishing quickly. In this situation there are several possible options (Scrivener, 2005: 81):

- You could "hurry" the groups which have not finished by setting a time limit.
- You could let the groups which have finished chat or do something else until the others finish.
- You could give an extra task to those who have finished, in order to keep them busy.
- You could ask the groups which have finished to come together and to compare their answers.
- You could ask the students who have finished to join other groups and help them.

Since there is no "golden rule", the teacher should observe classroom events, consider the possible options available, choose the most appropriate one and make a decision that leads to effective actions. All these are basic classroom management skills that will improve in time, as teachers grow in experience. In order to acquire these skills, teacher trainees need to carefully observe other teachers at work, get feedback from observers of their lessons, read books and articles on classroom management, etc. After a lesson that they teach, the trainees should recall the decisions they took and analyse what options were available and why they took those decisions. It may be useful to think about how things would have been, if other options had been chosen. They can discuss their decisions with their colleagues or other teachers. In this way, trainees will become more aware of the options they have in class and will improve their skills at deciding and efficiently acting on decisions.

Teacher decisions between different options are influenced by a wide range of factors, such as:

- the aim of the lesson ;
- the aim of the activity;
- the time available for changes;
- the initial lesson plan;
- the feelings of both students and teachers;

- the possible outcomes of teacher's actions;
- students' response to the type of activity, task, groupwork;
- availability of instructional materials, etc.

Classroom decisions are also influenced by teachers' dispositions. Dispositions refer to the necessary commitments, values, and professional ethics that determine teachers' behaviour. They are guided by certain beliefs related to the teaching and learning process. Dispositions greatly show up in teachers' attitudes in the classroom.

Conclusion

Starting from the assumption that the way in which the teacher creates and manages a class is essential for a successful learning environment, teacher trainees should be aware of the importance of mastering different class management techniques and skills. Once they have chosen an activity for their students, they should then think of the most appropriate way of organising that activity. Preparation is the key, yet much of what happens during a lesson depends on the decisions that teachers take on the spot, and this is a matter of teaching experience. In conclusion, it is important for young teachers to study things, to observe classes, to go to training courses and seminars, but in the end neither books nor trainers will teach them how to teach. They will only learn to teach by teaching.

Activities

1. Prepare the following activities to try in class with your students: a job interview, an informal meeting to prepare the launch of a new product, and writing a business letter. Work with a colleague and discuss the following points:
 - Which activities are suitable for pairwork and which would be appropriate for larger groups.
 - Establish the number of students for the groups. What will you do if there are an odd number of students for the activity?
 - Write down the roles that could be assigned to each group member.
2. Think of your options in the following situations and discuss them with a partner:
 - You designed a pairwork activity and expected it to last for ten minutes, but it has been going on for twenty minutes. The lesson ends in fifteen minutes and there is something else that you planned to do.
 - You planned a role-play activity which involves groups of four students, knowing that there are twenty students in the class. Today there are only eighteen.
3. As a teacher trainee, how do you feel when your way of working does not comply with the training course or with the advice that you have received from your trainer?

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