

Barriers in Implementing Interactive Teaching Approach in Language Class for Non-English Majors

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Abstract: Communicative teaching approach is prevailing in most of the English classrooms in China, but to implement it is often found difficult in classrooms for non-English majors. Through an investigation into a group of technological college learners by interview and questionnaire, combined with observations, some barriers to implementing the interactive approach are found widely existent in learners' part. Further analyses are made into these barriers, the result of which would be meaningful to English classroom teaching.

Key words: communicative; interactive teaching approach; interaction; classroom teaching; barriers; classroom activities

1. Introduction

Hymes first introduced the term and the theory of communicative competence in 1972 on the basis of Chomsky's linguistic competence, which gave rise to many heated discussions and further illustrations about language teaching and learning, among which are the most influential illustrations from Widdowson (1978), Canale and Swain (1980), and Littlewood (1981). The core of the prevailing communicative teaching approach lies in its interactive nature in language classroom: interactions between teacher and learners, learners and texts as well as among learners themselves. In this regard, Rivers has detailed discussions in his *Interactive Language Teaching* (1987; also Carrel & D. Eskey, 1988). Under the influence of the international language research work, English teaching in China has also witnessed great changes and reforms in recent years. The traditional translation method in language (actually English) teaching has gradually given way to communicative teaching approach. Application of the new approach and further testing and experimental work in English teaching and learning classrooms have been done by language workers in China, though its effectiveness is still to be further observed and proved by more convincing evidences. Interactive tasks designing is discussed by Nunan (1989), and some Chinese language workers (GUO Zheng-feng, 2002; LI Xiu-ying & WAN Yi-jin, 2000; etc). However, their focuses are mainly on teacher part and tasks-designing aiming at generating the most possible interactions between teacher and students and among students. Due attention is certainly paid to learner's roles in communicative classroom (Breen & Candlin, 1980; Nunan, 1989), but up to now, few attention is paid to barriers or difficulties in implementing interactive approach in English as foreign language classrooms, especially classrooms for non-English majors in China while the author of the paper does encounter many problems and difficulties in her effort of carrying out interactive approach in teaching non-English majors. By investigation, this paper intends to get a full understanding of the problems and difficulties on learners' part which hinder or affect

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the smooth implementation of interactive approach in English class, or even result in complete failure.

2. Method

2.1 Problems

This paper intends to answer the following questions:

- (1) Do students welcome the interactive approach in English classrooms?
- (2) Do they have difficulties in participating interactive activities?
- (3) What difficulties and barriers do they have?
- (4) What are the reasons behind these difficulties and barriers?

2.2 Subjects

The subjects investigated are first-year students of a provincial key university of technology. Their total entrance marks are about 50 marks lower than other normally admitted students in this university. Two classes with 130 students answered questions in the questionnaire, among which there are 30 female students. Of them, 30 students were interviewed. The interviewees selected were more or less inactive in interactive activities. Questions designed are only learner-related.

2.3 Tools

Questionnaire and interview are employed in the survey. The questions designed are a combination of multiple-choice and open-ended questions according to different intentions of a particular question. For example, for questions on information of the students' preference of teaching approach, multiple choices are given for them to choose from. For questions intended to understand their difficulties in participating in interactive tasks, besides choices, the subjects are also invited to contribute more individual points of view and more detailed information. The questions to be asked in interview are also centered on gaining a deeper understanding of the reasons behind the students' difficulties and problems in communicating with others.

3. Result

120 valid questionnaires were collected. Strange enough, all the subjects (100%) expressed in the questionnaires or in interviews that they welcomed interactive activities in classroom teaching, showing their silence in class has nothing to do with the approach itself. 95% of the subjects expressed their willingness to participate in text-related interactive tasks assigned by the teacher but difficulties in expressing their ideas and views freely and clearly often make them feel frustrated. As a result, the interactive activities are often not so successful and effective. According to the survey, difficulties and barriers arising from these classroom activities can be summarized as follows (in the order of difficulty degree from high to low): difficulty in expressing themselves and understanding others; difficulty in organizing their ideas; worries and fears of making mistakes and being laughed at by others; lack of confidence and courage to speak out their ideas before others; tendency to give up their efforts easily. The problems reflected from the survey verify the observation by the author in the practice of classroom teaching. Qualitative analysis is employed in trying to answer the above four questions and analyzing the reasons behind the problems. Main reasons causing these difficulties and problems can be classified into the following areas: low language proficiency; ideological factors; learning environment and learners' prior proficiency, each of which will be discussed and analyzed in detail below.

4. Discussion

4.1 Language proficiency (linguistic competence) barrier

According to Bachman (1990), linguistic competence includes organizational competence and pragmatic competence. The former is composed of grammatical competence and textual competence while the latter actually refers to the knowledge of how the linguistic rules are used to communicate meanings. As the result of the survey shows, the major difficulties for English learners are their inability to express themselves freely and their inability to express their ideas and views lies in their poor language proficiency. Of the 120 subjects investigated, 95% of them admitted low language proficiency affected their involvement degree in interactive activities, resulting in few interactions or even interactive failures among students participating in group discussions even if the tasks themselves were well-designed. Further questions relating to the subjects' language proficiency are included in the questionnaire to know more about their failures in expressing their ideas. The following problems in language proficiency are found widely existent among the subjects.

4.1.1 Lack of vocabulary

Lack of vocabulary is a big problem for most of the subjects, although the degree varies from person to person. 90% of the subjects regarded vocabulary as their biggest barrier preventing them from speaking freely and participating actively in various interactive classroom activities, which is quite in accordance with PENG Qing-long's investigation made among 200 students about their difficulties in spoken English (1999) in which 87% of the subjects are reported to regard vocabulary as their biggest barrier in speaking. However, according to the national English teaching syllabus of 1995, the vocabulary of the present high school graduates are required to reach over 2000 (some places, newly stipulated in syllabus 3500 or above), and the nation-wide Band Four and Band Six English Proficiency Test requires candidates to have vocabulary of 4000 and 6000 or so respectively. If so, the freshmen of colleges should have vocabularies about 3000 or so. However, judging by their usual performance, the actual vocabularies of the subjects are far less than that, though no statistics are provided concerning their vocabulary after they enter the university. For instance, while they are performing various classroom tasks, many common words which are supposed to be within their vocabularies are often found beyond their vocabularies. Consequently, most of the students feel anxious and embarrassed when they are stuck for words in speaking English, and after several desperate attempts, they would often end up with giving up any try in later interactive activities.

4.1.2 Incapability of using words accurately and appropriately

Besides the limited vocabulary, there is another problem facing almost all the English learners: how to use English words accurately and appropriately. Because most of the learners' knowledge about words comes from dictionaries and books, and their readings are often confined to textbooks and exam-oriented complimentary reading materials, they are frequently disturbed and confused by different usage of English words, which gradually becomes a great discouragement and barrier to their various interactions. Misuse, mismatch and misplacement of words are English learners' frequent mistakes. For example, when asked about how to express their appreciation of dishes they enjoy, all of the 30 interviewees chose to use the word "delicious", while according to English native teachers, they use this word sparingly and words like "nice", "tasty" are more often used on such occasion. When told this usage of the above words, most of the subjects say "tasty" is beyond their knowledge and while "nice" is within their vocabulary, they do not know they could use it this way. From this example we can see that knowing the meaning of a word does not necessarily mean one can use it accurately and

properly. Learning how to use words correctly and properly and use them freely requires a great amount of work and long-term accumulation, but the reality is that few of the non-English majors realize it and even if they do realize, there is no guarantee that they would do accordingly.

4.1.3 Poor pronunciation

70% of the subjects admit having trouble pronouncing the words correctly. In middle school, their attention (and in fact also the teachers' attention) was mainly drawn to the written examinations. As a result, pronunciation was ignored and mispronunciations of words and sounds were not corrected in time. Confused by stressed syllables, letter combinations, and intonations, they gradually find it more and more difficult to open their mouth, and their weakness in this aspect not only affects their smooth expression of ideas but also disturbs their listening comprehension and causes misunderstandings, which consequently interrupts the smooth progress of the whole interaction. Furthermore, learners' confidence is also put at risk by the weakness in interactions. Therefore, pronunciation problems should also receive proper attention from teachers in classroom teaching.

4.1.4 Unfamiliarity with syntactic knowledge

Unfamiliarity with syntactic knowledge is also responsible for learners' inactiveness or failures in classroom interactions. According to the survey, 80% of the subjects have difficulty in generating grammatically correct sentences. Incomplete sentences, subject-predicate disagreement, confusing sentence structures appear frequently in their speaking. These problems are quite similar to those reported in another investigation by the author of this paper (2004) in which the problems are probed in terms of learners' Chinese-English translations. However, it should still be meaningful because the subjects of that time are the same group of students in the present investigation, and while both spoken and written forms of English are output of learners, problems presented by the latter should even be a truer reflection of learners' abilities in generating sentences in that they are produced under the circumstances with comparatively more ease and time, under which subjects are supposed to make fewer mistakes. Their mistakes show the subjects' inadequacy in syntax.

4.2 Ideological factors

4.2.1 Passive study habit

Long-developed and deep-rooted habit of studying passively accounts partly for learners' interactive failures in classroom activities. 78% of the subjects admitted that they rejected active involvement in interactions subconsciously. Since they started their schooling, they have been supposed and taught to be the passive recipients of knowledge, especially during the years of preparation for college entrance examination when the teachers arranged everything for them to learn and remember like feeding ducks. Now when they are required to study initiatively in the college, they find themselves very difficult to adjust to the new study mode. As known to all, learner autonomy is given great importance in college education, and what to study and how to study are what college students have to learn during their college years. In fact, activities and tasks for interactive classroom are based on the concept of promoting students' autonomy. However, according to the study, most of the subjects still have great trouble in studying English autonomously after a year in the college and when they do study outside the classroom, their study contents are often confined to exercise drills aiming at passing examinations. Even learners themselves feel they are too dependent on their teachers to tell them what to do and monitor their study. They have already been so used to be listeners and have enjoyed so that they are not ready to change their roles, because, after all, attending a class by listening passively is not so demanding as doing most of the talk by themselves in classrooms. They feel no desire to control their own study, find their own learning materials, and monitor their own learning progress, which are just the right things that define an autonomous learner. In the

meanwhile, it is worth noting that top students in each class are usually those who can well arrange their own studies and know what they need and how to reach their goals. These students are also active in taking part in various interactive activities and willing and eager to express themselves.

4.2.2 Lack of cooperative awareness and experience

Lack of cooperative awareness and experience also adds to their failures in interactive activities. In English classroom teaching, it can be observed that whenever an interactive activity is assigned to learners, most of them would immediately throw themselves into writing things on a piece of paper and looking up words in dictionaries instead of discussing and negotiating meanings of words with their assigned partners. In the survey, 75% of the subjects prefer to work out their ideas alone rather than get inspiration from their peers, which characterize most of the English learners in China. According to their claims, working alone would be more efficient than working together with many other students.

4.2.3 The tendency of underestimating the importance of the English course

The tendency of underestimating the importance of the English course when compared with their major subjects also accounts for some of the students' reluctance in participating interactive activities. Their only concern is to pass the exams required of them to get the degree (whether it applies to students in key universities is still to be verified, maybe students there are more motivated to learn the language well for various reasons). Most of their time is dedicated to their major courses and frequently only a small proportion is left for English exercises in textbooks or other exam-oriented materials. Only a few students read books to improve their comprehensive abilities in English for different reasons.

4.2.4 Lack of motivations

For 90% of the subjects, they do know the importance of learning English well and what language proficiency would mean to their future career, but the distant benefits are not tempting enough to make them invest a lot now. They do study after class, too, but mainly focus their attention on the exercises aiming at examinations, paying little attention to improving their communicative competence. 90% of the subjects learn English for exams: achievement tests, proficiency tests required of them to get degrees and so on. 2% learn English enthusiastically for their coming arrangements to go abroad for further study. Only a few can be found to be learning for interest and long-term benefits. Researches on learner motivation are available in the works of many linguists (Crookes et al, 1991; Dornyei, 1994; Noels, 2001; Oxford et al, 1994; Schmidt et al, 1996; Williams et al, 1997). Generally speaking, several major motivational factors identified by researchers in the field of psycholinguistics and applied linguistics include cognitive needs and affective needs (Ausubel, 1968; Maslow, 1970), expectation value and efficacy (Bandura, 1993; Schunk, 1991; Vroom, 1964), goal orientation (Ames, 1992; Pintrich, 2000), causal attribution (Weiner, 1979; Platt, 1988), learning purpose (Deci, 1992; Gardner, 1985; Wen et al, 1997), self-confidence (Clement et al, 1994; Horwitz, 1991), and efforts (Gardner, 1985). However, detailed descriptions and analysis in this regard are beyond the intention of this paper, and therefore only learner interest, goal orientation, and learning purpose are concerned in this study.

4.3 Lack of real interaction atmosphere and environment

4.3.1 The layout of classrooms

Sitting in a conventional classroom, learners are not fully stimulated to talk, to say nothing of talking freely. Chinese classrooms are often laid out in such a way that teacher power and control are emphasized with the platform placed in a higher position in the classroom and when the teacher stands before the blackboard, he/she has to look down to have eye contact with learners, creating tension between teacher and learners as well as

exerting absolute power and control over and invisible pressure on learners. In such atmosphere, learners naturally feel uneasy to talk and exchange ideas and their thoughts are also more or less restrained under the condition of not being able to think freely. Of course, besides the layout of classrooms, there are other things affecting the real interaction. For example, in order to create a more favorable environment for language learners, language teachers have to design the communicative tasks very carefully trying to make them closer to real communications. On the other hand, alternative classroom teaching modes can be tried for this purpose. Montgomery and Eisenstein (1982) found that the community-based learning experiences were highly successful, not only in terms of student interest but also in terms of language gain.

4.3.2 Big language classroom

Big English classroom is another factor affecting the effect of interactive teaching approach. In school where the author of this paper works, almost all the English classrooms have students of over 80. Classes of 45 are regarded to be standard language classroom in the involved university and as a matter of fact very difficult to find. There are many disadvantages and inconveniences in teaching English with more than 80 students. First of all, many interactive tasks are difficult to carry out in big classrooms. Tasks based on texts like debates, drama performances, speeches and so on would be difficult to involve as many students as possible because of the large number of students but limited amount of class time, and the effect would not be good even if it is tried. Secondly, the amount of interactions between teacher and learners would also be restricted, which is really what teachers would not like to see in interactive classrooms. Insufficient interaction would often affect the effect of the classroom teaching and result in dissatisfaction among learners. Moreover, a big classroom is always difficult to manipulate, whatever is considered.

4.4 Learners' prior proficiency

Learners' English proficiency prior to university should also not be ignored when their performance in the classroom teaching is concerned. According to the school records of the subjects, their entrance exam marks are not so satisfactory, or to be exactly, not satisfactory at all. Learners with entrance marks under 60 account for 37.9% of the total enrollments while the percentage of those above 70 is only 2.8%. The figures here explain to a certain extent the learners' failures in their learning practices, not only in terms of speaking but also in other aspects of language learning. Over 80% of the learners admit having difficulty learning English. Facing such group of learners, teachers need to plan carefully before implementing interactive approach in their classrooms.

5. Conclusion

Certainly, factors affecting interactive activities in communicative classrooms are not restricted to the above-mentioned areas, but they are by no means minor problems which could afford to be neglected at all in English teaching in China. Though reflected only from a small sample, and the study is limited to technological university learners, the problems presented still apply to a large proportion of learners holding more or less the same positions in similar universities and therefore would still be meaningful to English classroom teaching as well as researchers who are interested in interactive teaching approach.

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