The Impact of Classroom Interaction Strategies on Malay ESL Students’ Speaking Performance

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Abstract: Based on Interaction-Based Instruction, the strategies of classroom interaction are means to achieve the samples of the target language. Therefore, preparing learners to make use of the English language and communicating with each other in the classroom context is vital. The problem is rooted in this matter that learners are not aware instinctively how to communicate with each other in the classroom context. This study presents some instructional techniques tackling the difficulties that ESL instructors encounter to cater for a communicative classroom environment. These techniques are the strategies of classroom interaction including the questioning techniques and modification by means of cooperative method of learning. The participants included 50 Malay ESL students at a private university in Malaysia. The design of the study is an experimental design, including a pre-test, post-test. 25 students were randomly chosen as an experimental group and 25 students as a control group. The results of the study showed that the experimental group outperformed the control group on their speaking performance. The implications of this research would be for language instructors, language learners and language syllabus designers. In this regard, instructors can utilize the techniques of classroom interaction to improve the learners’ speaking performance and develop their interest in English language learning.

Key words: Classroom interaction strategies, Interaction-Based Instruction, Malay ESL students, Speaking performance

1. Introduction

It is believed that the ultimate target of acquiring a foreign or second language is mastering speaking abilities and the other skills are overshadowed by its significance (McCarthy, 1998; Nunan, 2001a). Bygate (1987) declared that learners are judged by this skill. It is the means of social solidarity, social ranking, and business. In addition, much language is learnt through this medium. Accordingly, speaking is considered as one of the essential elements of communication in this era of globalization, transculturalism, ESL teaching and learning. "It is an aspect that needs special attention and instruction" (Shumin, 1997, p.56). In some ways, spoken language has differences from written language. Since it encompasses some features different from written one, therefore it is more complicated and demanding than written.
language. For instance, when a person is speaking, she/he does not have time looking over what s/he has expressed. Additionally, the speaker is characteristically under pressure whereas it is not the case with the writer (Brown and Yule, 2003). More importantly, the speaker may be affected negatively by the feedback and feelings despatched to her/him. Ur (1996) points out that speaking seems instinctively the most important skill among the four language skills. The reason behind it is that speakers of a language refer to people who know a language since speaking contains all necessary knowledge for a language. However, it was overlooked in traditional approaches such as Grammar Translation Method (GTM) due to mastering target language structure, its vocabulary, and studying literature (see for example, Richards and Rodgers, 1986; Larsen-Freeman, 2000; Chastain, 1988).

Later on, oral skills were paid more attention by successive alternative methods such as Direct Method (DM), Audiolingual Method (ALM), and Situational Approach. Yet, second and foreign language learners did not have the ability to make use of the language efficiently in order to meet their needs. In this regard, knowing how to use a language to interact in conversation is what that has largely been neglected (Dörnyei & Thurrel, 1994). For example, Nunan (2001a) argues for the ineffectiveness of traditional approaches since students had the ability to parrot responses in predictable situation of use, but had problem to interact effectively in the relatively unpredictable world beyond the classroom. Therefore, the abovementioned approaches to language teaching encountered sever criticism and a need for a novel approach was felt. This new paradigm should make an authentic or real situation so that students would be able to act in the same way out of the class. Accordingly, Hadley (2003) proposed that there has to be a shift from grammatical competence to communicative competence.

Considering the afore-mentioned discussions, it seemed that a new shift was necessitated to meet such requirements. To respond to such demands, i.e. providing optimal circumstances for learners to improve their speaking ability in accordance with what 'communicating effectively' or 'meaningful communication' is, (Luchini, 2004) the classroom interaction has been widely adopted since approximately twenty years ago (see for example, Long and Crooks, 1992; Skehan, 1996, 1998; Ellis, 2000, 2003; Carter and Nunan, 2001; Nunan, 2001a, 2001b, 2001c).

The concept of classroom interaction refers to the interaction between instructor and learners in the classroom context. The studies of L2 classroom interaction began in late 1990s. The purpose of these studies was to assess the effect of interaction in language learning. According to Brown (2008), interaction is the main part of communicative competence. In the act of interaction, a learner communicates with another learner, and then he/she receives input and produces output. Nunan (1991) stated that as learners actively engage and interact with each other to communicate in target language, language is acquired. Social–interactionists see language as rule-governed, cultural activity learned in interaction with others. According to Vygotsky (1978, as cited in Shannon, 2005), social-interaction plays an important role in the learning process. Ellis (2004, p.78) stated that "interactionists view language learning as an outcome of participating in discourse, in particular face-to-face interaction".

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Since interaction is an important component of teaching and learning process in the classroom, students do not know instinctively how to interact with each other in the classroom context. Moreover, much training time is devoted to assist teachers arrange appropriate interactions between students and materials. Therefore, how students should interact with one another is relatively ignored and is a neglected aspect of instruction. In this research, three basic ways are introduced to help L2 learners to interact with each other appropriately.

One of the significant strategies in forming classroom interaction is questioning technique. Since language learners do not have so many tools for initiating and maintaining language, encouraging them to make or answer questions can cater for stepping stones for continued interaction (Aliponga, 2012). The utilization of questioning strategy is anchored in the Long’s interaction hypothesis, which emphasizes the role of input in second language development. In addition, the classroom interaction is affected by the types of questions. For instance, Suter (2001)’s research showed that referential questions make more interaction between learners than display questions.

The modification is the second strategy which is broadly utilized as negotiation of meaning. Pica (20044) defined the negotiation of meaning as restructuring of interaction that occurs when a communication problem arises. In this regard, modification assists the learners to maintain the interaction without intercepting it, and resolve the miscommunication problem without making use of their mother language.

In addition, cooperative learning is the third technique that can promote interaction. Cooperative learning is in opposition to individualistic and competitive learning, which has been proclaimed as an efficient instructional approach since it entails the specifications of learner-centered approaches. In order to attain a common aim, cooperative learning involves learners to work in pairs or groups (Chafe, 2008). Working in pairs or groups augments opportunities for student-student interaction with meaningful input and output in a supportive environment. Considering the above discussions, the present study is designed to promote interaction by using three mentioned strategies in a Malaysian ESL context. Therefore, the aim of this study is to examine whether the classroom interaction through the strategies of questioning and modification in a group work improves the Malaysian ESL students’ conversation performance.

2. Method

2.1 Participants

The participants of this study were 50 female freshman students, studying communication major at a private university in Malaysia. Most of them were at the low-intermediate level of English proficiency. Twelve of them were students whose English proficiency level was relatively higher than other students since their scores were compared on the basis of pre-test. These students were selected as the leaders. The students’ ages ranged from 18 to 22 years. In order to have control and experimental groups, a pre-test was given to the participants. The experimental group who was exposed to the treatment of Interaction Strategies was labeled as (IS) and the control group who did not receive Interaction Strategies
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treatment was labeled as Non-Strategy Interaction (NSI) group. Each group consisted of 25 students.

2.2 Instrumentation

The participants’ ability on English conversation performance, both at the pre-test and post-test stage, was measured by an oral (speaking) test. The test lasted about 15 minutes for every student and included four parts; interview, individual task, joint task, and three-way discussion. Each part consisted of different questions. The participants answered these questions orally. The performance of students’ conversation was recorded, and then their conversation performance was graded through Conversational English Proficiency Ratings Checklist for accent, grammar, vocabulary, fluency, and comprehension.

The textbook for the instruction of both groups was Interaction Reading, intermediate level, written by Kirn and Hartmann (2002). For this purpose, fifteen texts of the book were chosen. The reason for the choice of this book was that it was based on Interaction-Based Instruction. In addition, it was feasible to segregate the texts of this book into sections in order for the students to work on jigsaw tasks.

2.3 Data Collection Procedure

The five phases were utilized in the instructional treatment to apply interaction strategies in experimental group.

Based on the principles of cooperative learning, the first phase concerned with forming small groups among the experimental group. According to Anderson (1989), each small group consisted of one weak student, two average students, and one strong student. The strong or competent students were selected as the leaders for groups. The leaders’ English proficiency level was relatively higher than the others which were based on the comparison of their scores to others on pre-test scores. Therefore, the experimental group was divided into six groups, each with four members working together in jigsaw task for the purpose of this research.

The second phase, dealt with making the students familiar with the strategies of classroom interaction. Therefore, the instructor explained clearly the strategies of classroom interaction to the students. They were explained how to utilize the questioning technique and ask and answer the questions. In addition, the strategies of negotiation of meaning were explained to the students. The students were told how they can ask for clarification, check the comprehension, and confirm and rephrase the utterance. The five necessary components of cooperation and the advantages of cooperation were explained to the students. They were encouraged to interact with their groupmates, discuss, and negotiate the learning material together. In the third phase, 15 texts were selected from Interaction Reading intermediate level by Kirn and Hartmann (2002). Each text was divided into three parts.

In the fourth phase, in every session, the leaders were responsible to read all parts of a text, on the basis of jigsaw tasks, and prepare some comprehension questions. The groupmates were responsible to read only their own segment. According to jigsaw task, the students worked in groups, and each student was given information that others did not know. The students interacted with each other and discussed; finally, they could synthesize their information and comprehend the whole text.

In the fifth phase, the leaders provided some comprehension questions on the basis of the text
and asked their groupmates. The students sat close to each other and worked together in groups on jigsaw task. They negotiated the meaning of texts through jigsaw task and answered the questions. The leaders asked their groupmates questions and they answered the questions. When there was communication misunderstanding, the students could modify each others’ utterance and ask questions that led finally to their understanding of the whole text.

3. Results

3.1 Results of pre–test Scores

After the students’ conversation performance was graded, their pre–tests were scored, the means of both groups were calculated, and the following results were observed.

Table 1. Descriptive Analysis of the Pre–test for both experimental (IS) and control groups (NIS)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Groups</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>SD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Experimental</td>
<td>41.7</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>13.67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Control</td>
<td>42.5</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>13.33</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As table 1 indicates, the means of two groups, experimental and control groups, are almost the same. It proved the homogeneity of two groups. In order to check the difference between the two means and to ensure more reliable result, T-Test analysis was used and the following results were observed.

Table 2. T-Test Analysis of Pre–test for both experimental (IS) and control (NIS) groups

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Groups</th>
<th>(Difference)</th>
<th>(Difference)</th>
<th>t</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>Sig. (one-tailed)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Experimental</td>
<td>-0.8</td>
<td>-0.34</td>
<td>-0.20</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>1.69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Control group</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Another point, which needed careful attention, was the value of degree of freedom. Each group had 25 students; one of the scores was predictable given the other 24. So each group had 24 degree of freedom. Since there were two groups, the total df (25-1+25-1) is 48. Because df = 48 is not listed in the table including critical values of t but falls between 40 and 60, so 40 was chosen as being the closest to 46. The critical value of t at 0.05 level of significance of one–tailed test was 1.69.

$t_{observed} = -0.20 < t_{critical}$

Fortunately, our $t_{observed}$ was enough below $t_{critical}$. So, the results showed that the difference is statistically non-significant. It means that the experimental and control group were homogenous.

Figure 1 shows the homogeneity of two groups. It means that two groups, experimental and control
groups were at the same level and there was no main difference between two groups.

3.2 Results of Post-test Scores

After 15 sessions, the same oral test as a post–test was administered to both groups, and their conversation performance were graded again. Two groups’ post–test scores were gathered and their means and standard deviations were calculated. The control group did not receive treatment, but the experimental group received treatment; they were taught by the strategies of interaction through jigsaw tasks. After collecting the data, the following results were obtained.

| Table 3. Descriptive Analysis of the Post–test both experimental and control groups |
|-----------------|---|---|---|
|                | M  | N  | SD |
| Experimental group | 52.2 | 25 | 14.71 |
| Control group     | 44.2 | 25 | 13.67 |

Having compared means of two groups, it was observed that the mean of the experimental group was more than the control group mean. As was shown in the Table 3, the standard deviation of experimental group was more than the control group. According to Hatch and Farhady (1981), the larger the standard deviation, the more variability from the central point in the distribution is. According to an analysis of T-Test, the following results were observed:

| Table 4. T-Test Analysis of Post–test both for experimental (IS) and control (NIS) groups |
|-------------------------------|----------------|-----|-----|---|---|
|                               | (Difference) | (Difference) | t   | df | Sig. (one tailed) |
| Experimental                  |               |               |     |    |                 |
| Control                       | -8            | -0.94         | 1.86| 48 | 1.69             |

Table 4 illustrates the difference between the results of post-test of experimental and control groups. Since the researcher expected a positive directional hypothesis, the test was used as one-tailed test at 0.05 level of significance. The critical value of t at 0.05 levels was 1.69.

\[ t_{observed} = 1.86 > t_{critical} (\alpha df = 46 p < 0.05 = 1.69) \]

These results show a significant difference between two means in the post-test. It means that the difference between two means was significant enough to reject the null hypothesis and accept the proposed directional hypothesis. We can confidently claim that classroom interaction through the strategies of questioning and modification in a group work improves the Malay
ESL students’ conversation performance.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

The findings of this study confirm the previous findings (Chillon, 2012; Ellis, 2004; Ling, 2003; Garcia, 2013; Mackey, 1998) and show some evidence to suggest that ESL students’ speaking ability improves through the use of the interaction strategies. It is disappointing and discouraging for instructors to witness incomplete students’ performances despite their high efforts to enable them to communicate in English in language classrooms. To increase students’ language proficiency, some researchers and teachers have provided instruction that help students to learn how to use more relevant and more powerful learning strategies. In ES studies, some positive effects of strategy instruction emerged for proficiency in speaking. In this research, three strategies were used to find the effects of these strategies on conversation performance of Malay ESL students. The finding of this research showed that the use of the strategies of classroom interaction could improve the students’ conversation performance.

For example, the utilization of questioning strategies can assist students to initiate the language. When students do not have so many tools for inchoating speaking, patronizing them to make and answer the questions furnishes a constant interaction that aids students to improve their language development. Negotiation of meaning can cater for a lot of input and output for students to improve their interlanguage. In addition, working in cooperative groups caters for students to work in groups to attain common aims. It can augment opportunities for the students to interact with each other that provide meaningful input for them.

In traditional methods, the interaction is between teacher and students i.e., the interaction is from teacher to students. But in interaction-based instruction, the interaction is among students or learners. That is to say, the interaction is from student to student. The teacher monitors the learners and makes efforts to encourage them to monitor themselves without the assistance of the teacher. Therefore, making use of the strategies of classroom interaction aids students to work in relaxed environment of learning without anxiety and stress. This study was conducted on Malay ESL students. Other studies can be done in other settings. In addition, other strategies of the interaction can be used.

5. References


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http://www.cooperation.org/chafe-cooprative.html


