

ELT



Ireland bulletin

IN THIS EDITION

Do Pronunciation Models Matter? Reflections from Irish and Scottish Classrooms

By Gemma Archer (page 4)

Mini Projects Online

By Chris Richards (page 8)

Why and How to Use Short Fiction in the ESL Classroom

By Amanda McGreer (page 10)

The Full Value of Learner - Learner Interaction

By Sam Quinn (page 13)

TAPs: Text Analysis Presentations

By Tracy Bhoola (page 15)

Possible Solutions to Rise to the Pronunciation Challenge, Come On Board!

By Carol Gonçalves (page 18)

Developing Strong Group Dynamics in the ESL classroom

By Claire Ryan (page 20)

Supporting Students with Learning Difficulties

By Marianne Jordan (page 23)

ELT Ireland Good Practice Project

By Rob McComish and Anne-Marie Connolly
(page 27)

No. 7

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ELT Ireland features (Pages 2-3)

Welcome to our Seventh Bulletin

by Laura O'Grady

ELT Events by Gabriela Pozza

Keeping you up to date by Dimitra Gkotosopoulou

Letter from the Editor by Laura O'Grady

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The Full Value of Learner - Learner Interaction

By Sam Quinn (EAP and ESL Teacher)

Introduction

Communicative language teaching promotes the use of pair work and group work in the adult ESL classroom. This approach to teaching is embedded in initial teacher training courses and is usually promoted by language schools; therefore, it is familiar to teachers. However, it is possible to be teaching English for years, using the usual textbooks and websites as the basis of lessons, and never understand the true benefits of learner – learner interaction. Initial teacher training courses provide what could be considered an external view of learning. The focus is on pedagogy and this is understandable as time is limited on such courses and trainees need to be classroom ready by the end of the course. There is however another view of language learning: the internal view. This view looks inward, rather than outward, to what is happening in the mind of the language learner. Some might argue that teachers don't need to know this to be able to teach, but there are a number of benefits to understanding the effects of learner-learner interaction on acquisition. Probably the most important one being that it allows teachers to be better informed about their classroom practice.

It could be said that teachers don't get to see a tangible outcome of their efforts but Second Language Acquisition can provide us with a framework for how to bring about those outcomes and allow a teacher to discern whether a particular activity will result in the desired learning outcome. Also, it is motivating for teachers and students alike to understand what is happening in the mind of the learner during a lesson. Learner-learner interaction can be said to be effective because it draws together the prerequisites for second language acquisition to take place: input (the language the learner is exposed to), output (what the learner produces) and noticing (attention to form).

Before becoming a teacher, I remember meeting a student of a language school in Dublin and when I inquired about her course, she told me she found it enjoyable but that she and her classmates spend too much time talking to one another. Her dissatisfaction with peer work in the classroom could have derived from any number of causes but it might have been that the learner didn't see the full value of such interactions. Since then, in my own classroom in Dublin, I've encountered objections to pair and group work such as, "but I want to speak with Irish people", which suggests a similar lack of appreciation.

This attitude is most common in classes where speakers of the same native language predominate. I noticed something similar during my experience teaching in Japan where students found it difficult to speak English to one another. Of course, this will be due to the strangeness of communicating in a second language with people with whom you share a native tongue, or cultural issues, personality types etc. Yet, I suspect that a lack of appreciation for how learning takes place during peer interaction has something to do with it. I believe it's worth looking at the wealth of literature within Second Language Acquisition studies which sheds light on the true value of learner-learner interaction.

Theory and studies

According to the interactionist approach, within learner- learner interaction, the scene is set for learning via what's known as negotiation for meaning. This negotiation refers to a temporary communication breakdown in conversation and the resulting speech modifications.

A misunderstood phrase results in the speaker modifying their output and thus reinforcing a previously partially acquired phrase. The listener, by having a word explained to them, receives input at their level. Negotiation might take the form of a clarification request, such as from learner B in this example:

In a study from a group of English learners at a Thai University, McDonough (2004) found that those students who had used more negotiation moves during pair and small group tasks, showed greater production of real and unreal conditionals than those students who didn't. She also pointed to the need for further research into learner motivation regarding pair and group work.

She conducted a questionnaire which showed that her students believed such interaction to be beneficial for practice but not so beneficial for learning, which aligns with what I've gleaned from my own teaching practice, as mentioned earlier.

A- "Where is the cat"

B- "What?"

A- " Eh, the cat, you know the animal, a pet cat. People have at home."

B- "Oh cat, OK".

Or it might be a confirmation check, again from learner B;

A- "My favourite hobby is reading"

B- "hobby?"

A- "Yes, I like to read books in my free time"

B- "Oh yeah, hobby. My hobby is gym".

Learner Responses from: The Full Value of Learner - Learner Interaction By Sam Quinn

Pic by ELT Ireland

Yet, negotiation for meaning doesn't tell the whole story: from the sociocultural perspective, communication breakdown is not the only site of learning within group collaboration. For example, learners also carry out what's termed 'scaffolding'. Think of a group of three or four learners trying to produce a word during a task. Maybe neither one alone has knowledge of the word but through collaboration they arrive at the answer. Four learners achieve what one learner couldn't. Fernandez – Dobao (2014) found a positive effect of group work on vocabulary acquisition in a Spanish language class where the learners were trying to come up with a word. Learner 1 wonders how to say 'to meet someone' in Spanish. Learner 2 provides the incorrect verb 'encontrar', meaning, to find. He immediately recognises his error and in turn three, learner 3 offers 'saber' which is incorrect but triggers the correct response from learner 1, who provides 'conocer'. 'Saber' and 'conocer' both mean 'to meet' but are used differently depending on context. It's a simple example of how rather than simply practicing previously learned language, learning is co-created through scaffolding and collaboration.

These studies only provide a snapshot of what is a considerable collection of empirical research on this area. Of course, research isn't always directly translatable to all contexts, but the many classroom studies carried out suggest that learner-learner interaction is beneficial for the acquisition of new grammar and vocabulary. Of course, the next thing is to look at what activities work best to foster these benefits.

Task based language teaching

The history of English language teaching charts a move from a focus on explicit grammar learning to a communicative, meaning based approach. However, there was a subsequent dissatisfaction with predominantly meaning based approaches because it seemed to leave learners short on grammatical accuracy. This is where Task Based Language Teaching (TBLT) comes in. TBLT appears to marry both a predominant focus on meaning with grammatical accuracy. The grammar focus, or focus on form, occurs on task when a learner attends to a form during a meaning-based activity.

Typically, tasks can be created to require either a one-way or a two-way exchange of information. In the former, one person has all of the information needed to complete the task while in the latter, each participant holds some of the information needed for task completion. Two-way tasks are generally believed to promote more negotiation. A second aspect of task conditions relates to whether they are convergent or divergent. A convergent task requires that participants reach a consensus and provide one answer to a problem. A divergent task allows for multiple opinions with no required agreement. Again, convergent tasks are deemed to promote more negotiation (Ellis, 2009). A favourite task of mine, which could be considered a two-way convergent task, is the "murder in paradise" activity from "Roleplays for Today", a familiar book to many adult ESL teachers. In this role play, the detectives must interview all four suspects before they collaborate in reaching a conclusion as to the identity of the murderer. An example of a divergent task would be when students are engaged in a discussion, providing opinions on a topic. None of this is to say that there isn't a place for traditional modes of teaching: there are always periods of a lesson which will be more teacher focused and traditional explicit teaching of grammar has its time and place. There is also a role for the teacher in monitoring a task and providing on the spot correction or scaffolding when needed, as well as taking note of errors or emerging language for post task activities.

“None of this is to say that there isn't a place for traditional modes of teaching:...has it's time and place.”

However, TBLT does appear to be well suited to learner-learner interaction and its significance in SLA. It is an approach which seems more sensitive to the internal syllabus of the learner, allowing them to learn what they are ready to learn, as opposed to the typical itemised syllabus of course books, which imposes a linear programme of grammatical forms on the learner, seemingly ambivalent towards what SLA says about the learner internal syllabus.

Conclusion

We already know learner-learner interaction is motivating, often less boring than listening to the teacher and helps learners gain confidence and practice in speaking. Yet these external pros overlook the internal ones. For the teacher, the internal view can provide motivation, as SLA is an intrinsically interesting topic, and importantly, it can lead teachers to better understand how learners learn and how best to support this learning in the classroom. I really think teachers might want to think about explaining this to students, perhaps as part of a discussion lesson on how and why they are learning English. Our learners might become more engaged by knowing a little bit about how interacting with their peers in the classroom is not only a matter of practicing English but also learning the language.



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