IMPROVING TEACHER-STUDENT INTERACTION IN THE EFL CLASSROOM: AN ACTION RESEARCH REPORT

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Abstract: The research report reveals the challenges that a native language teacher faced in another country which has a culture different from his own. The research report identifies and discusses the issue with less-responsive classroom. The problem is identified; preliminary investigation is held; action plan is introduced to ease the situation; potential hypothesis is worked out with reflectors and the native teacher, besides, reflections are provided from both sides: students and teachers.

Key words: interaction, action research, class description, problem identification, preliminary investigation, plan intervention, hypothesis, reflection.

I. INTRODUCTION

A common problem for EFL teachers is dealing with a passive class, where students are unresponsive and avoid interaction with the teacher. This is especially true when a teacher seeks interaction in a teacher-class dialog, such as asking questions to the class as a whole, expecting at least one student to respond. This can be a frustrating experience for both parties. Obviously, there will be times when no student can answer a teacher's question, but often students do not answer even if they understand the question, know the answer, and are able to produce the answer. Furthermore, students can often be very reluctant to give feedback or ask the teacher a question in front of the class. This action research project attempted to explore this problem and sought to create a more interactive teacher-class interchange in one class of Uzbek adult English learners.

II. MAIN PART

Action Research Defined

Action research is concerned with trying to improving one specific point in a teacher's technique in a particular classroom using empirical measurement. Richards, Platt & Platt (1992) have defined it as:

Teacher-initiated classroom research which seeks to increase the teacher's understanding of classroom teaching and learning and to bring about improvements in classroom practices. Action research typically involves small-scale investigate projects in the teacher's own classroom.

These usually includes having an observer collect data, and together with the teacher develop a plan to

bring about the desired change, act on the plan, and then observe the effects of the plan in the classroom.

Class Description

The class observed was a group of twenty-three sophomores majoring in management at the institute in Namangan. The teacher was an American male with several years teaching experience at universities around the world. The goal of this required class is to teach the students basic English conversation, reading, listening and writing skills. Their English ability level ranged from upper beginner to intermediate. During the observation period, the students appeared motivated and attentive, and they seemed to be enjoying the class.

Problem Identification

The students, as a class, didn't respond voluntarily to the instructor's questions and did not participate in class discussions. Students also never asked the teacher questions outside one-on-one situations. Thus the teacher received little oral feedback. According to the teacher:

Most of the class members sit looking straight ahead using minimal facial expressions, gestures and verbal utterances. What I want is for the students to be more demonstrative and more overtly communicative in their feedback. I want these behaviors: I want the students to ask questions, make comments and to respond with nods and shakes of the head, with sounds of agreement or sounds of understanding. Also, I want them to be both reactive and proactive.

Preliminary Investigation

I observed the teacher's class in the fourth week of the semester. In the first 45 minutes, the class went through an intermediate level taped dialogue. The students first listened to the tape with their books closed, then again with the books opened. Next, they did a dictation exercise consisting of 25 short sentences based on the dialogue. The teacher then talked about the sociolinguistic and grammar points of the exercise and went on to probe for comprehension:

- T: Any questions? Do you understand everything?
- Ss: … (no one responds)
- T: Okay, how many people were speaking?
- Ss: … (no response)
- T: How many people were speaking?
- Ss: … (no response)
- T: There were two. Two people. Were they friends or strangers?
- Ss: … (no response) …

The teacher asked a few other questions which also drew no response or reaction from the students. The students then had to answer some questions about the conversation in their book. Most of the students seemed to have little trouble doing this, and if there were any questions, they readily asked the student sitting next to them.

The second half of the class was devoted to pair work using the phrases and vocabulary from the taped dialogue in role play. The students seemed to enjoy this, and most tried to create their own dialogues. The teacher circulated the room checking on the progress of each pair. The class atmosphere was markedly different from the first half of the class, with chatter and occasional laughter filling the air. The students answered most of the teacher's questions with alacrity, and some even asked their own questions.

Hypothesis

Because the students seemed to generally understand the teacher's questions, it was felt that there was something else that kept the students from responding voluntarily in the class-teacher dialogues. Since most Uzbek students are taught to listen and not to question a teacher in class, Japanese students have little or no experience in in-class interaction with the teacher, such as questioning or commenting

or giving feedback. Students are usually taught to be quiet and respectfully listen to the teacher.

By teaching the students that class interaction with the English teacher is not only acceptable, but normal, useful and beneficial, it was believed that the students would become more interactive with the teacher in teacher-class interaction.

Plan Intervention

Following the hypothesis, two steps were taken to implement a plan:

- First, on the following class, the teacher distributed an explanatory paragraph about "rules" for asking questions in class in English speaking countries. The teacher made an exercise out of it and had students read the paragraph out loud to the class and explained a few difficult words and spent additional time expanding on the text. The "rules" were extrapolated from a culture point in Helgesen & Brown (1994) and were as follows:

  Each culture has different "rules" about how students should act in the classroom. In some countries, students are expected to listen and only the teacher should lecture or talk in class. But in English-speaking countries (and in English class), it is good-and important-to answer the teacher's questions and interrupt with questions of your own. It means that you are interested and paying attention. In English, it is your job to ask questions if you don't understand. (p. 3)

  The teacher went on to say that if they still felt uncomfortable asking and answering questions, they had to at least nod or shake their head as a response to the teacher's questions.

- Secondly, the teacher reminded the students of the "rules" at the beginning of each subsequent class and further encouraged them to become more active in the class when the instructor was talking.

Outcome

In the eighth week of the semester, the class was observed again. A lesson similar to the one in the fourth week was presented. At the beginning, the instructor reminded the class of the "rules." After playing the taped dialogue twice, the teacher began talking about the dialogue, making grammar, usage and sociolinguistic points, interspersed with questions about the passage and the instructor's explanations. This went on for about twenty minutes and included general comprehension check questions such as 'do you understand?' and 'are you okay?' as well as specific questions about the dialogue.

Regarding general comprehension questions, most of the students did nod in response and a few answered 'yes' to these questions. And it was believed that they did, in fact, understand.

With the specific questions, however, something unexpected happened. When the teacher asked a question, he was usually greeted with poker-faced stares, as before. But when he moved closer, looked specifically at a student, or pair of students, and repeated the question, the students usually tried to answer. In general, I noted, the instructor was paying much more attention to the students, moving closer to them, and looking at specific students and trying to make a better connection with them. Instead of asking questions with the feeling that they really weren't going to be answered anyway, as before, the teacher made a greater effort to communicate the questions, and acted as if he expected to get responses.

Also, toward the end of the instructor's talk on the dialogue, two students, without prompting from the teacher, asked questions before the class. Although the questions were not related directly to the dialogue, the fact that the questions were asked

before the entire class was considered a breakthrough.

CONCLUSION

There were some areas where the results of this action research were not as successful as hoped. For instance, the students needed to be prompted with eye contact and a repeated question from the teacher to answer a question, and when they did not understand something, they still did not interrupt the teacher with a question.

And yet some progress was definitely made, especially when the brief span between observations is considered. The students did interact with the teacher by nodding, some did answer the instructor's questions, and two, on their own initiation, even asked questions before the class. The unanticipated side effect of the teacher becoming more concerned with the interaction was a welcome surprise and contributed to the improvement. There seems to have been some success in instructing and reminding and then expecting the students to become more interactive with the teacher.

Reflection

This action research project forced both the teacher and the observer to remember that ESL teachers in Uzbekistan are not just teaching a language, but also a culture, and this includes instructing the sociolinguistics appropriate for the native English speaking classroom. Perhaps more importantly, they had to think about why the cultures are different, in this respect, and how to try and bridge that difference. This lead to questioning the conventional notion that Japanese students simply do not like the native English speaking classroom culture.

An additional reason for interest in the problem addressed here was the belief that this was a common problem in Japan. Teachers, especially native English speaking ones, often become frustrated with a lack of initial success in obtaining an interactive dialogue with the class. This often leads them to mistake a lack of familiarity with a lack of interest, and to teach within the students' culturally conditioned classroom expectations, instead of introducing the expectations commonly found in classrooms in English speaking counties. While intending to be more accommodating to students, they are failing to give students a useful sociolinguistic skill, which students would likely want and derive benefit. Some may think encouraging the use of this student-teacher interaction common in native English speaking counties is culturally arrogant. But if it is introduced in a sensitive and reasonable manner, it actually contributes to a more fulfilling English class. After all, most students don't study English just for linguistic competence. They will also want to develop sociolinguistic competence for communicating in different situations in English speaking countries, and this includes the classroom.

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