

Facilitating English Conversation Development in Large Classrooms

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This paper presents a number of teaching techniques that address the problems EFL instructors face when teaching English conversation to a college class with a large number of students. Using Long's Interaction Hypothesis as a general theory for a conversation course design, I present both classroom management and pedagogical techniques that ultimately aim to develop the students' conversation skills under such imperfect classroom circumstances.

Introduction

Teaching English conversation to a large class of students is not considered ideal for teaching. The sheer number of students that teachers must manage in these conversation classes poses a daunting task in terms of designing a course that will serve to develop the students' conversation skills. In order to effectively plan for such English conversation courses it is vital for the teacher to have a grasp of how conversation skills can be developed in the classroom. Based on Long's Interaction Hypothesis, this article will introduce a variety of methods to help teachers overcome the belief that large classrooms, although far from the ideal setting, cannot be fertile ground for developing students' conversation skills.

The Interaction Hypothesis and Negotiated Interaction

When developing a conversation course regardless of the class size, taking the view of developing students' conversation skills through negotiated interaction is an advisable point of departure. That L2 students' can develop their Second Language Acquisition (SLA) through interaction in EFL classrooms began with research in the early 1980s by Long which eventually culminated in his Interaction Hypothesis (1983; 1996). Long found that interaction in L2 learning gave rise to SLA opportunities through what he termed interactional modification (1983). Now generally known as negotiated interaction or negotiation of meaning, this process has been defined by Pica (1994: 418), amongst others, as "the modification and restructuring of interaction that occurs when learners and their interlocutors anticipate, perceive, or experience difficulties in message comprehensibility". Likewise, Long (1996: 418) characterizes negotiated interaction for L2 learners in this way:

the process in which, in an effort to communicate, learners and competent speakers provide and interpret signals of their own and their interlocutor's perceived comprehension, thus provoking adjustments to linguistic form, conversational structure, message content, or all three, until an acceptable level of understanding is achieved.

Facilitating SLA Through Interaction

In terms of the conditions upon which SLA can be facilitated through interaction, Pica (1994: 501-502) presents three learner-oriented and three language-oriented conditions that can facilitate students' conversation development:

I. Learner-oriented conditions

- Message comprehension by the learner.
- Learner production of modified output.
- Attention to L2

form.

II. Language-oriented conditions

- Positive, grammatically systematic, L2 input.
- Enhanced L2 input saliency of subtle L2 features.
- Feedback and negative input.

In what follows, I will suggest methods of effectively facilitating SLA through interactive and conversation based activities, as well ways for teachers to manage such a course.

Group Work and Weekly Student Leaders

Arranging the students in groups of four or five at the beginning of each class is the first step towards developing students' conversation abilities and effectively managing large classes. The tone for this must be set during the first week of classes in a semester. Students need to understand that the first two or three minutes of each class will be used to set up groups.

Setting students up in groups will serve to make monitoring the class a more efficient process for the teacher. However, the dynamics of the group work must also be such that the type of quality interaction that is necessary to facilitate SLA exists within the groups. Assigning a weekly student leader to facilitate activities and overall group interaction dynamics is an effective measure for both managing the large class and for attempting to ensure groups stay on task throughout the duration of the class.

Student Leaders' Evaluation

In my conversation courses I allot a small percentage of the students' overall grade (5 to 10%) according to how well the student leaders perform. Performance features I take note of when assigning a student leader's grade are the following:

- The group stays on task and completes their activities.
- Active participation by all group members.
- Predominant use of the L2 within the group.
- Small talk if students finish an activity earlier than expected.

If a leader facilitates the group work effectively, they will be awarded full marks for that particular class. If the group fails to stay on task, if there is overuse of the L1, or if the group appears to be inactive then the leader will be held partly accountable for this by receiving a lower leaders grade. However, If I notice the leader making an effort to address any weak areas within the group work then I do not penalize him. Again, the significance of the leader's role is that it relieves the teacher from some of the burden of facilitating activities and interaction, and in effect allows the teacher more opportunity to address the actual interaction that occurs within the group. Ideally, each student should have the opportunity to lead a group twice a semester. Also, each student must be assured of the leader's duty at least once in order to make for fair grading.

Interaction Based Quizzes

Rather than giving written class quizzes based on material taken from a class textbook, students are given a quiz on their ability to interact with one another. Set students up in pairs and have them complete some type of information gap activity (object placement activities, half-a-crossword, half-a-script, etc.,) where both students are forced to communicate in order to discover missing information and complete an activity. Although the students feel the pressure of having to take a quiz, they enjoy the interactive nature of the quiz. More importantly, it serves as an evaluation of the students' communicative abilities.

Communicative and Interaction Based Homework Assignment

Another important facet of the course design for English conversation classes is coming up with homework activities that address and develop the students' English conversation skills. This can be accomplished by putting together a list of tasks that the students must complete on a weekly basis, and that for the most part include some type of interaction. Also, teachers should try to include a variety of interaction methods, including telephone conversations with the teacher, face-to-face meetings with the teacher, three-way discussions between a pair of students and the teacher, and e-mail correspondence with the teacher.

In the first class of a semester I hand out a homework activity sheet that includes a variety of tasks that need to be completed on a weekly basis. Here is an example of what the weekly activities sheet might look like and a few ideas that I have used in the past:

Weekly Participation Homework Topics

First Week

Visit your teacher's office and give him some useful advice about how to live in Korea, or advice on understanding Korean culture. You must speak for at least two minutes.

Second Week

Send an e-mail to your teacher that describes your favorite entertainer. The e-mail must be between 8-10 lines.

Third Week

Call your teacher on his cellular phone and ask him how he is feeling. He will ask you for some advice on something. You will have to give him advice that will help to solve his problem. You must speak for at least two minutes.

Clearly, assigning such homework activities to a large group of students is a great deal of work for the teacher. You will want to organize the homework submissions around how many total students you have. If you have too many students to assign weekly interaction homework to each student, then you should consider bi-weekly assignments for each student with one group starting in week one and the second group starting in week two and alternating from there. Here are some of the ways that I have managed facilitate interaction and keep on top of the weekly homework assignments in.

How to Manage the Activities with a Large Class of Students

- Enforce strict weekly deadlines for activities. Each weekly activity begins after class and ends the night before the next class. I set a time deadline of 10:00pm the night before their next class.
- Students don't have second opportunities to complete missed weeks. I do this for the simple reason of time management. If the students know they can delay doing their activities until the end of the semester they will, and this will result in a nightmare for the teacher who attempts to handle all the visits, phone calls, and e-mails at the end of the semester.
- Instruct students to always include their name, grade, class number, and any other information on e-mail and telephone homework activities. For phone calls, at the end of each conversation I always tell the student to send a text message in English with the relevant student information so that I can input their grades easily when I return to my office.
- Input student task completions immediately. If you do not do this you will quickly lose track of who did what and when.
- Do not spend too much time with any one particular student. Keep a time limit of two or three minutes of speaking time per student.
- Do not wait too long to reply to student e-mails. You need to dedicate a certain amount of time each day or week to doing this.

How to Facilitate Interaction During Activities

- During speaking activities be wary of students who have memorized or are reading from notes (over the phone). Legitimate questions concerning the message they are attempting to communicate should be asked. Probing for further information from the student is advisable, particularly if you feel that the content has been memorized or is being read.

- Treat the conversation as an interaction with the student. If you are not sure of the message the student is trying to communicate then negotiate meaning with the student.
- Do not allow students who visit your office to use notes. They may refer to their notes before beginning the task, but once the task has begun do not allow students to use their notes. Instruct the students to prepare well before engaging in the activity.
- Always encourage the students regardless of their communicative abilities.
- Respond to all e-mails with a couple of lines that indicate that you read their e-mail and that you are aware of the content of their message.

Conclusion

For EFL instructors teaching English conversation we need to continuously remind ourselves that our goal is to develop the conversation skills of our students. Large classroom settings are clearly not ideal for the teacher to facilitate such development. Yet, it is important for teachers not to get discouraged by this. A well planned course design that allows students plenty of interaction in groups and pairs, homework activities that address the development of conversation skills, classroom activities and tests that are relevant to conversation development, and the discipline to be able keep to this course design week in and week out will result in an English conversation course that lives up to its billing.

References

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