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COMMUNICATIVE CLASSROOMS: A REAL POSSIBILITY OR NOT?

AULAS COMUNICATIVAS: ¿UNA POSIBILIDAD REAL O NO?

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Investigaciones

ABSTRACT

The following investigation has the intention of determining the possibility for authentic or real communication to take place within the Bachelor in Secondary Education with English Specialty classes within the Benemerita y Centenaria Escuela Normal del Estado de San Luis Potosi. The work at hand is in the explorative practice line of research and has its data collection based on observations, questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. Inherent characteristics of authentic communication were considered as well as the communicative approach in order to verify if authentic communication took place in the classroom. An analysis of students' beliefs and class interactions were considered, and it was determined that contextualized pedagogical discourse was present, yet, there was a lack of authentic communication. The professors were able to carry out their roles as teachers and provide a simulated context for language practice to occur, but we must not mistake this for authentic communication.

Keywords: communication, interaction between pairs, linguistic competence, pedagogical discourse.

RESUMEN

La investigación persigue determinar la posibilidad de desarrollar una comunicación real en las clases de la Licenciatura de Secundaria con especialidad en inglés dentro de la Benemérita y Centenaria Escuela Normal del Estado de San Luis Potosí. Se denomina una práctica explorativa, que basa la colección de datos en observaciones, cuestionarios y entrevistas semiestructuradas. Se consideraron las características inherentes de la comunicación y el enfoque comunicativo para cotejar si las contribuciones de alumnos se pueden considerar como comunicación real. Se analizaron las interacciones y contribuciones de los alumnus, y se determinó que el salón de clases es un escenario en el que se ensaya la lengua extranjera en diversos discursos pedagógicos contextualizados, pero las características de la comunicación real están ausentes. Los profesores desempeñan la labor docente de practicar diferentes posibles encuentros comunicativos, pero la consolidación de competencias lingüísticas no se verifica hasta encontrarse en un entorno comunicativo auténtico.

Palabras clave: competencia lingüística, comunicación, discurso pedagógico, interacción entre pares.

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INTRODUCTION

Genuine or natural communication in an English as a Foreign Language (EFL) class has been given more attention recently in language education, thus becoming a focal point in the pedagogical development of future English teachers within the Normal Teacher Training College. Communication as such has always played a key role in English as a foreign language teaching but what actually happens within classroom interactions that can be considered as "natural" or "authentic", this has been an aspect that has not been looked at within this institution. Therefore, the need for a deeper analysis and study on such interactions was detected in order to better understand the dynamics presented within the classroom and the specific needs that our current alumni had.

Considering that English is not only the object of study but it should also be the tool of instruction, it seemed pertinent to question if our classroom interactions are truly communicative or not. This is an aspect that is clearly stated within specific lessons when we consider ourselves as agents within the teaching process but can be quickly lost sight of when engaging in natural classroom interactions when two languages are dominant and accessible in order to transmit ideas. This is the actual situation that our students-future English teachers have considering that the majority use English as a foreign language within our context, yet they are expected to communicate within the class as if it were the only language they have at their disposal. Such situation creates a conflicting dilemma when appropriating new pedagogical concepts and ideas verses having the English language be the topic of study.

Therefore, this situation was identified when entering to observe the development of classes that attended different topics of subjects within the major's curricula. There were different factors that had to be considered such as students' English level as well as the teachers' linguistic competence which directly influenced the interaction patterns and the general communication that took place within the classes. Another factor that was identified was the linguistic demands that were required to develop the class of specific subjects. There were also cases were specific agreements were previously made within the class procedure that influenced the linguistic preference that students as well as teachers reflected.

It was not our intention to cover all the specific factors but rather focus on what students were actually doing in the class and if their communicative interactions were authentic, conscious and deliberate.

The willingness to communicate (WTC) in a foreign language when the topic of study is of a different nature allows space for students to use all their linguistic abilities whether in their first language (L1) or in the foreign language (L2). Considering that one of our students' objective is to increase their competence in the use of L2 it would sound logical that they would try to optimize all the possible spaces were L2 could be used to help them improve. Yet, this was not always the case, leading to the interest in finding out what was happening at a conscious level of what students perceived to be the optimum linguistic learning environment.

The present investigation took place in a period of one semester considering the different semesters that were currently enrolled in the institution. This represented a total of four groups that were asked to share their ideas through questioners, surveys, and observations. The surveys and interviews were conducted to students as well as to teachers to allow us to identify the help beliefs that were commonly present within the population of this study. Once these ideas were determined they were contrasted with the actual actions observed in the different lessons through structured observations.

The results obtained were very revealing to what type of interactions took place within the short observations and how many of the communicative actions were not congruent with the stated beliefs. This allowed us to consider three rules that students used in order to establish communicative interactions, which were: 1) hierarchical rule, 2) sequencing rule, 3) criteria rule. These rules will be elaborated and explained in order to understand the communicative interactions that were presented within the observation periods. Thus, it must be clarified that the observations were short samples of what occurred within the lesson yet it cannot be stated that these were all the interactions that took place, rather they were short samples.

Seedhouse has not been shy in expressing his opinion on the replication of genuine or natural communication in the EFL classroom and establishes that it is "both paradoxical and unattainable, and that there are serious flaws in the assumptions underlying the communicative orthodoxy concerning ELT classroom interactions" (Seedhouse, 1996, p. 16). The key point here being if the English interactions that were taking place within the class were genuine or authentic, or if the communication that involved the use of L2 was just to develop a specific task.

In the following research I intend to consider the points that are mentioned in the article "Classroom interactions: possibilities and impossibilities" (Seedhouse, 1996), supported by further research carried out within the WFL class as to identify and understand the communicative interactions that take place within the Benemerita y Centenaria Escuela Normal del Estado de San Luis Potosi (BECENE).

TOPIC DEVELOPMENT

Purpose of the study and research questions

The following questions allowed a better understanding of what might be occurring within the learners and the communicative process as to insure benefits from the in class activities so that they can participate in natural settings: What factors are influencing the use of L2 for authentic situations? How do these factors influence the use L2 for authentic communication? Why are adult language learners reluctant to use the L2 in free communication within the class?

> If there is one predictable consequence of a language becoming a global language, it is that nobody owns it any more. Or rather, everyone who has learned it now owns it – 'has a share in it' might be more accurate - and has the right to use it in the way they want. This fact alone makes many people feel uncomfortable, even vaguely resentful (Crystal, 2003, pp. 2-3).

METHOD/ DATA DESCRIPTION

Student Questionnaire I

Exploring learners' beliefs and "different expectations concerning not only the learning process in general... but also what and how it will be learned" (Brindley, 1984, p. 95). The information provided a perspective on students´ learning expectations, how they saw learning, the best ways to learn a language, what facilitates language learning, and the assumed student role. The information helped understand the actions that are taking place within the class and their WTC in L2. The following is what students reported to be true: You should not say anything in English until you can say it correctly; I enjoy practicing English with native speakers; it's ok to guess when you don't know a word in English; repetition and practice are fundamental for learning.

Considering these ideas that are currently present in the BECENE students, it can be said that there is a teacher dependence for language learning and traditional rote learning is fundamental. Although they also enjoy authentic practice and taking risks, which is fundamental for authentic use of the language.

Student interview II

This aspect attended the main research question based on the reluctance to use L2 in spontaneous interactions. It was conducted in the second week of research so that students could start reflecting on their communicative interactions and the reasons behind them. The students interviewed expressed that they rather use Spanish in their everyday interactions because it is faster, simpler and as a whole more practical. They identify more with L1 in this case Spanish.

This information in combination with theoretical support provided the teacher with evidence to sustain the incorporation of different strategies that may facilitate the ownership of the language and consequently help the learner to use the language more naturally. By doing this the language learning process could be favored and Communicative Behavior established.

Teacher interview

The interview focused on the methodology used in the class and was carried out in the first week of the investigation. This in turn explained if the activities in class are teacher or student centered reflecting the theory of teaching followed. This interview was based on how the teacher sees his role in the classroom, the teaching method implemented, the resources used, and the definition of effective teaching, classroom management and qualities of a good teacher.

A total of five teachers were interviewed and they expressed the following information: the teacher need to be a model of the language; the role of the teacher is more traditional and there is not enough time for communicative activities in class; the method that is used is up to the teacher but the number of students must be considered; the resources are limited to the ones provided by the school, and students should be given the freedom to be creative and explore with the language.

Student-student interview

The student-student interview was based on "The Heuristic Model of Variables Influencing WTC", proposed by Macintyre (1998, p. 547) to identify the factors that could be influencing the use of L2 and were conducted in the third week of the investigation and in the last week, to see if the learners' ideas and actions have suffered change after some key questions guided for reflection had been proposed. Aspects such as social and individual context, affective-cognitive context, motivational propensities, situated antecedents, behavioral intention, and communication behavior were addressed. This interview provided concrete reasons for the use of L2 in the class and allowed understanding of the aspects that may inhibit students from using L2 for authentic communication in the class.
— Group climate is divided and therefore participation was limited to Teacher-student interactions.
— Most of them considered that they are talkative, but in L1.
— They know that they are here to learn yet are intimidated and limited in the expression of their ideas.
— They know they need to improve.
— The use of l1 is recurred to because it is more practical.

Class observations

The observations were programmed every other week until four observations were made. They were based on the methodology used in class, on TTT VS. STT and on the moments of interaction between one task and the next. The observations gave clear indications that the class is more teacher centered and students are more comfortable in taking a passive role in their learning which includes the use of L2 to communicate.

In the 1970 a shift towards linguistic competence started to take place within language learning, placing communication at the center of the EFL syllabus. This gave authenticity a great height in classroom activities leading us to the development of lessons centered on genuine or natural communication. This sounds theoretically accurate yet Seedhouse challenged this idea by stating it is impossible for conversation (a non-institutional form of discourse) to be produced within the classroom lesson. To explore this idea further we will take a look at what genuine or natural communication is and how it can or cannot be developed in the classroom. It will be followed by the exploration of actual communicative actions that occurred within different levels of the Bachelor´s degree in Secondary education with English Specialty.

Nunan (1987, p. 137) suggests that "genuine communication is characterized by the uneven distribution of information, the negotiation of meaning […] decisions about who says what to whom and when are up for grabs". Contemplating this definition and placing this standard to class interactions it was observed that it was quite difficult to consider classroom linguistic exchanges as authentic since most of these interactions were proposed by the teacher and it was the teacher that called on specific students for participation.

Considering sociolinguistic terms, conversation is seen as natural communication and if seen as such, a greater distance seems to be established between what happens in the class and what is considered natural communication. Ellis (1992, p. 38) denotes a difference between pedagogic and naturalistic discourse and brings turn taking into account; these two concepts were considered in order to understand if authentic communication could be a reachable objective in the classroom.

As we analyzed the actions that took place within the classroom, Bernstein's three pedagogical rules become relevant. I will proceed to discuss each one and its validity in the eyes of authentic communication.

Hierarchical rule: "in any pedagogic relationship the transmitter has to learn to be a transmitter and the acquirer has to learn to be an acquirer" (Bernstein, 2003, p. 198). In Language learning one of the roles of the teacher is a transmitter. In language teaching the teacher is a model of the language and a guide for the learners to reach their communicative goals. In this view it is difficult to consider natural communication to take place since there is a hierarchy and the communication that takes place and that it was not between equals.

Sequencing rule: "if there is a transmission it cannot always happen at once. Something must come before and something must come after" (Bernstein, 2003, p. 198). By this we cannot deny the sequencing of content depending on specific syllabus of each particular institution. The teacher is responsible of guiding the class content and following specific class plans which limit spontaneous outburst of genuine communication to occur.

Criteria rule: "Enables the acquirer to understand what counts as a legitimate or illegitimate communication, social relation, or position" (Bernstein, 2003, p. 198). This permits us to see why the communication that took place within the classroom was under constant assessment and evaluation. This is an aspect that does not typically occur in genuine communication, and thus providing a contradicting view on the communication in the classroom. By considering these three aspects I have come to confirm Seedhouse's second assumption "it is therefore impossible, in theory, for teachers to produce conversation in the classroom as part of the lesson" (1996, p. 18).

Taking part in a conversation can be a challenging task for a language learner due to the cultural and language knowledge needed. The level of difficulty depends on the number of people participating in the conversation. "In order for this construction to be successful, participants need to know how to take turns, and what discourse markers they can use to facilitate the smooth progression from one

speaker to the next" (Harmer, 2007, p. 276). Brown (2007) gives two options for addressing this aspect in a class; an indirect approach and a direct approach. In the first students are allowed to go about a conversation freely, acquiring conversation competence. In the later the teacher has to "plan a conversation program around the specific macro skills, strategies, and processes that are involved in fluent conversation" (Richards, 1990, pp. 76-77).

As indicated there are different approaches a teacher can take to address the skills needed for a conversation to take place. This does not confirm that genuine communication took place but rather that simulations of conversations were practiced in the classroom in order to prepare students for the real thing. As Seedhouse paraphrases Warren by saying "for classroom interaction to be equivalent to free conversation [...] turn-taking and participation rights in a conversation must be unrestricted [...] responsibility for managing the progress of the discourse must be shared [...] conversations are open-ended and participants jointly negotiate the topic". If we accept this statement then we can see that this is another point indicating that what took place was improbably genuine communication.

Classroom interactions

As we took a closer look at what actually happened in the classroom we took into account Nunan (1987, p. 136) when he states "recent works tend to typify non-communicative language practices in terms of grammatical focus, error correction, the extensive use of drill and controlled practice, and interactions which are pseudo-communicative, rather than genuinely communicative." This has come to light in several classroom-based studies. I will now explore two types of interactions and see if they are compatible with classroom activities.

Conversation

As we considered the characteristics of a conversation we needed to consider the constraints of the classroom and the institutional core goal, which was to teach the learner L2, in this case English. In order for a conversation to take place the participants needed to be considered as equals this is "learners do not regard the teacher as a fellow-conversationalist of identical status [...] for the teacher not to direct the discourse [...] and for the setting to be non-institutional" (Seedhouse, 1996, p. 18). On the other hand, Schegloff (1987, p. 219) emphasizes the possibility of conversation to take place within the classroom if social identities are re-established. In the classes observed, in order for this to happen there needed to be very specific characteristics present in the group, such as age of learners, teacher-student hierarchy ignored, level of English proficiency and contextual factors.

Therefore, the results of this investigation point to an agreement with Seedhouse's statement and although we should be By open to the possibility for genuine communication to happen the data point to the lack of such events. We cannot disregard that conversations take place within the classroom yet they are usually not part of the pedagogical agenda because of the nature itself of a conversation and therefore becoming difficult to measure accurately. In the cases observed these factors were considered and it was seen that authentic communication did not take place.

Initiation-Response-Feedback (IRF)

Initiation-Response-Follow-up or feed-back (1979) has been an interaction pattern present for pedagogical purposes throughout time. The classroom is not the only place where this pattern has been used it can also be seen in any type of interaction where learning or instruction giving can take place. Due to its teacher-centeredness "it is widely recognized as representing a serious challenge to teachers and teacher educators in the context of communicative language teaching" because "language learners need to be exposed to a variety of interactional types and the IRF pattern can seem unforgiving" (Richards, 2006, p. 52).

Although this pattern seems to be criticized its use has been detected in parent-child interactions. If we consider that learning a foreign language is facilitated and followed the naturalistic acquisition process then it stands to reason to implement this interaction as one of the patterns used in the classroom. The key is in how the teacher implements the follow-up stage of the pattern as pointed out by Nassaji and Wells (2000, p. 400) ,"in the follow-up move, the teacher avoids evaluation and instead requests justifications, connections or counter-arguments and allows students to self-select in making their contributions" the interaction potential highly increases and it can allow a less controlled interaction pattern to take place. As this was considered it was seen that the interaction patterns that teachers as well as students were accustom to were clearly IRF patterns initiated primarily by the teacher and thus establishing that interactions that Richards deems as unforgivable deeds within the class are still alive and well within this institution.

Genuine or natural communication in the classroom

The two interaction patterns previously discussed seem to be the two extremes yet what needs to be highlighted is that there must be an intermediate position and that the actions that happened in the classroom did not always follow specific guidelines. When we considered the classroom as a non-genuine setting anything that occurred within it consequently fell short of natural communication.

It is a language teacher's job to facilitate the process for language learners and to provide different interactional experiences for them. The classroom is a practice arena for the actual game. Therefore, natural communication does not happen until the learner is exposed to an authentic situation in an actual life setting. The teacher can do his best to prepare a student for this linguistic challenge but I cannot dare say that what happened in the classroom was genuine or natural communication but rather practiced experiences and agreeing once again with Seedhouse, when he states that "the paradoxical institutional aim of communicative language teaching is to produce non-institutional discourse in an institutional setting" (1996, p. 22).

An institutional discourse perspective

It is important to try to understand what was happening in the classroom and not place idealistic standards on what should be happening. This is what an institutional discourse perspective provides. "From an institutional discourse perspective, one would try to understand how noticeable procedures and interactional features, such as the IRF cycle and display questions, relate to the core institutional goal, rather than dismissing them as undesirable or not genuine" (Seedhouse, 1996, p. 22).

As I examined this perspective three underlining characteristics were pointed out (paraphrasing Seedhouse): 1) the teacher should evaluate the forms and patterns of interaction; 2) We use the language as a vehicle and object of instruction, and 3) the purpose of the class is linked to the forms and patterns of interaction.

The discourse produced in the classroom needed to be directly linked to these three aspects and by doing so the interaction patterns selected were justified with the purpose of attaining the institutional core goal whether they be genuine or not.

CONCLUSIONS

This study has allowed me to analyze Dr. Paul Seedhouse's perspective on genuine or natural communication within the classroom and the different interaction patterns that can occurred in the different semesters in the bachelor of Secondary Education with English Specialty. I tried to incorporate theoretical perspectives with actual classroom practices observed to arrive to a personal view on the matter. With every point seen it became clearer that the classroom is the training area but not the actual game. We as teachers can prepare learners and help them develop linguistic competence but the real test is when these competencies are put to practice in authentic settings.

Seedhouse holds a strong point of view on the type of communication that actually takes place in the classroom and provides a way to understand it in order for there to be improvement in reaching the linguistic goal instead of placing unrealistic standards that ultimately can lead guilt driven teachers to think they are not performing to standard. Other authors were analyzed and I can conclude that there is one underlining core goal; to reach communication, if it is genuine or natural in the classroom only individual occurrences can determine that, but one thing is certain we need to guide our students to reach their communicative goal.

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