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Interactional Architecture and Learning Opportunities in an ESL Classroom

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ABSTRACT

Interpersonal verbal communication in the language classroom is essential for acquiring target language features and improving spontaneous oral production. This paper, thus, reports on a study that attempted to contribute to our understanding of the nature and usefulness of classroom interaction as a major component of language learning. Transcribed audio-recordings and observation reports from three advanced speaking ESL classes comprised the data used in the study. Qualitative data analysis focused on the characteristics and structure of teacher-student and student-student interaction sequences and their potential contribution to the students' linguistic knowledge. The study attempted to address the following two questions: what is the nature and structure of teacher-student and student-student interaction and what learning opportunities do they create for language learners? The results indicated that teacher-student interactions followed a regular pattern and allowed limited student contribution. Student-student interactions, on the other hand, had longer turns and were more natural. Both types of interaction seemed to influence the learning process in different ways; the former provided explicit knowledge and comprehensible input while the latter allowed more opportunities for learners to test their communicative abilities and produce comprehensible output.

Keywords: *Classroom Interaction, ESL, Language Learning, Teacher-Student Interaction, IRF*

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1. Introduction

Naturally, language acquisition takes place through exposure to and taking part in human communication. As young children grow up within the context of the family, they interact with their parents, siblings and peers; through this interaction those children develop the ability to use the communication tool (i.e., language) they need for daily interaction (Vygotsky, 1978, 1986). Later, when they go to school, they learn more and at the same time they face more demands to acquire better communication skills through being in touch with educated peers and teachers. Through this journey, as they advance in school, those children improve their ability to interact and consolidate their proficiency. Being involved in these environments, children grow up acquiring the skills of using language and they enhance these skills through continuous involvement in interaction on a daily basis.

In adult language learning, however, the opportunity the learners have to engage in linguistic interaction is much less and absolutely incomparable to that available for young learners (Long, 2018). Adult language learners are disadvantaged in terms

of both the amount and quality of exposure to the target language (Long, 2018) as well as the timing of this exposure. They have less opportunity to use the language in comparison to a life-long engagement in L1 acquisition; furthermore, the effectiveness of language practice is not comparable to that of the L1 because those learners are challenged by age-related factors and established L1 parameters (Long, 2017; Patkowski, 1980). International English language learners are a good example of those adult language learners who try to utilize every opportunity available for them to practice the language. The opportunities are usually limited especially for those whose goal is to learn academic English because they aspire for an academic degree. Typically, those learners depend on classroom instruction in order to develop their communication skills with the bonus of acquiring the academic variety of the language needed to succeed at school.

Based on the discussion above, first language learners are exposed to the language very early in life and continue to be exposed to and engaged in linguistic interactions virtually incessantly.



Second/foreign language learners, on the other hand, are exposed to the target language for a few hours a day for a considerably short periods or intervals in their lives. This brief comparison of the two language acquisition processes underscores the importance of the language classroom in second language acquisition. The classroom setting is where second language learning typically takes place and success of the teaching/learning process is dependent on what actually transpires there. The events that happen in the classroom are important because they are meant to provide language learners with the language skills that they naturally acquire from a much more comprehensive experience. The language classroom is supposed to provide learners with a formula that relatively serves as a substitute for the more extensive experience people usually accumulate when they learn the first language. Classroom learning is not expected to yield results that are comparable to L1 acquisition but it is supposed to be effective.

Obviously, to yield the required results, the language teaching/learning process in the classroom should be planned and executed with deliberation, taking in consideration all the factors that influence it. Success in the language classroom is dependent on a number of factors, some of which are the material, teacher expertise, teaching methodology and learner motivation. However, since language is a tool for communication and it is normally learned through communication (Long, 2017; Vygotsky, 1978), classroom interaction is one of the most important elements in language learning. Given the importance of classroom interaction in language learning, it is the purpose of this study to examine the nature and architecture of teacher-student and student-student interaction and explain how they might contribute to improving the language learner's linguistic proficiency.

2. Literature Review

Success in the language classroom depends largely on the interactions between the teacher and students as well as between the students. Interaction could be simply defined as the exchange of thoughts, ideas, etc. between two or more people. Interaction in language classroom could be verbal or nonverbal; the focus of this study is on the verbal variety of interaction because it is the one that is mostly relevant to language learning.

Examining classroom interaction can provide an in-depth understanding of the teaching/learning process and the factors that might influence it; and this is why this area is the center of interest to many researchers. Researchers have approached language classroom interaction in a number of ways. Some researchers (e.g., Fagan, 2015; Gibbons, 2003; Panova & Lyster, 2002; Ulichny, 1996) focused on the teacher as being the main provider of knowledge in the classroom. Others (e.g., August, 1987; Bahram, Harun & Othman, 2018; Foster & Ohta, 2005; Mackey, 2002) focused mainly on student-student interaction. A third group (e.g., Anton, 1999; Chismar, 1985; Guk & Kellogg, 2007; Shi, 1998) targeted both teacher-student and student-student interaction in their investigations. The present review reports on relevant literature following these three lines of research.

2.1 Teacher-student Interaction

Among those studies that focused on teacher-student interaction in ESL classroom is Ulichny (1996)'s study. In this study, the researcher micro-analyzed a segment of classroom interaction in order to investigate how the teacher combined the goals of communication and instruction. The discourse examined in this study came from an intermediate adult ESL classroom with learners from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds. The analysis of classroom interaction in this study revealed that in spite of teacher's efforts to provide both opportunities for authentic language use as well as explicit instruction (on pronunciation, grammar, and vocabulary), he was not completely successful in this dual mission. Teacher's role as serving both conversational and instructional purposes in a single session created confusion and hindered smooth progress in the teaching/learning process. It is worth noting that this study is based on the assumption that the language teacher can simultaneously engage learners in natural oral communication and provide explicit instruction about the target language. This, however, is not usually the case since language teachers (as indicated by many studies on classroom interaction) focus on one of these two ends with limited coverage of the other; thus, they may not be able to satisfy learner needs for authentic language use and explicit instruction at the same time.

A similar study on teacher talk in an EFL classroom was conducted by Yanfen & Yuqin (2010). This study examined teacher talk patterns and the types of teacher talk

that are preferred by both teachers and students. The researchers employed two data collection techniques; namely, classroom observation and questionnaire. Observation and audio recording were employed to collect data in order to describe teacher talk. Twenty-nine EFL teachers of first year students at university level were the subjects of observation. A questionnaire was administered to collect teachers (29) and students (350)'s responses about their preferences to ways of teacher talk. One significant result in this study is that teachers usually used the questioning techniques in class discussions which is the least preferred by the students. The analysis also revealed discrepancies between the moves preferred by teachers and students which were causing the students to feel less comfortable to participate in classroom interaction. One issue that we cannot overlook when interpreting the results of this study is that it did not account for other important contextual factors-like class size, curriculum requirements and proficiency levels-which may influence teacher management and questioning practices.

Yanfen & Yuqin's study did not directly focus on the direct effects of teacher-student interaction on language learning, but it was more descriptive in nature. Panova & Lyster's (2002) study, however, focused on this area through investigating teacher's corrective feedback and examining how it affected ESL student learning. This study mainly focused on the relationship between the types of feedback and error treatment the teacher used and learner comprehension. The data consisted of ten hours of transcribed oral communication (1,716 student turns and 1,641 teacher turns). The results revealed teacher preference of implicit types of feedback; namely, repetition and translation. Other types of feedback, like clues and clarification requests, which give the students the opportunity to self-repair their production were not common. The researchers concluded that the positive effect of teacher feedback on student learning was low.

Another study that investigated teacher led interaction with a special focus on feedback in interaction was conducted by Fagan (2015). Specifically, this study examined the ways the teacher addressed student errors while at the same time maintaining the flow of interaction. The participants included 11 advanced adult ESL learners and their teacher. Transcribed data

based on 26 hours of classroom video-recording was qualitatively analyzed in order to reveal teacher's real-time management of student errors. The results indicated that the teacher managed errors creatively by highlighting students' achievement and providing personal appreciation prior to addressing the target errors. Such managerial practices reduced the negative impact from error correction and kept the conversation alive.

2.2. Student-student Interaction

Researchers have also studied peer-peer interaction in ESL classrooms. Mackey (2002), for example, examined ESL student-student interaction in attempt to show how it provided opportunities for language learners to obtain comprehensible input, receive feedback, make modifications in their output and test linguistic hypotheses. The participants in this study were 46 ESL learners from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds. The participants were videotaped while interacting with peers, a teacher, and native speakers. The analysis revealed some overlap among the constructs (i.e., input, feedback, output and hypothesis testing). The researcher concluded that peer interaction helps language learners improve; however, he did not provide clear findings regarding the issues he focused on due to the challenges to disentangle those aspects with the presence of overlap among them.

Another study that focused on student-student interaction was conducted by Pica, Porter and Linnell (1996) to investigate whether L2 learners' interaction with peers can address their needs for L2 input, feedback, and modification of output. This study investigated whether or not peer-peer interaction can address those aspects in the way that interaction with native speakers was shown to do. Mainly, the study involved comparing interaction of ESL learners when they engaged with similar learners and native speakers of English. This study was a small-scale investigation that used two communication tasks to collect the data. The analysis revealed similarities in the types of input and feedback offered by both learners and native speakers. However, the learners received less modified input from other learners than from native speakers. The researchers concluded that student-student interaction can address some of the learners' input, feedback and output needs; however, it does not provide as much modified input and feedback as there is in interactions with native speakers.



Bahram, Harun and Othman (2018) studied oral interaction with a special focus on negotiation of meaning. This study aimed to reveal negotiation strategies occurring in peer interaction elicited by three communicative tasks (i.e., information gap, jigsaw and decision-making). The participants were nine university level EFL learners who were divided into three groups of three at the time of the study. Each of the three groups attempted the three tasks and their interactions were audio-recorded and transcribed. Qualitative analysis of the interactions indicated that all three tasks led to episodes of negotiation of meaning; yet, the decision-making task encouraged more complex extended meaning-focused negotiation than the other two. While not directly investigated in this study, samples of the data indicated that student-student communication provides ample freedom for oral production compared to other contexts where an instructor is present.

2.3 Teacher-student and Student-student Interaction

In addition to these studies that focused on either teacher-learner interaction or learner-learner interaction, Anton (1999)'s study examined how both learner-centered discourse and teacher-centered discourse differed in terms of the learning opportunities each one provided for language learners. The data used in this study came from one semester observation of first-year university students studying French and Italian. The researcher chose these two classes because the two approaches (i.e., learner-centered and teacher-centered) could be easily distinguished in these two contexts. The results of this investigation revealed that when the learners were actively involved in class, which took place in the learner-fronted communication, there were more opportunities for the learners to negotiate form and content which promoted language learning. On the other hand, when the language teacher is dominant in class, in the teacher-centered approach, opportunities for negotiation become infrequent, thus, creating an environment less favorable for L2 learning. Although this study seems to underestimate teacher-led explicit learning, other scholars believe that it can sometimes be more effective than incidental learning. For example, Saito (2018) argues that learners do not always identify implicit feedback when the target errors do not hinder communication, which indicates that

form-focused instruction is sometimes necessary.

Another study that investigated teacher-led whole-class and peer group discussions in an ESL program was conducted by Shi (1998). This investigation was guided by three questions: Does teacher-fronted talk differ from peer group talk in the frequency of participants' utterances of negotiation? What differences occur in the initiation of negotiation in teacher-led and peer group situations? What differences occur in the way utterances are modified in teacher-led and peer group situations? The participants in this study were 47 ESL students enrolled in three intermediate classes in a summer program at a Canadian university. The learners had different L1 backgrounds and they were taught by two experienced English teachers. The researcher observed and audio-recorded the teacher-led and group discussions in order to collect the necessary data. Data analysis revealed that although peer discussions had higher frequencies of negotiation, these negotiations were restricted in comparison to the extended negotiations in teacher-led interactions. Moreover, peer group discussions, where learners showed more tendency to modify linguistic structures, lexis and meaning, were limited compared to teacher-led error corrections.

Researchers working from a sociocultural perspective have approached classroom interaction in a relatively unique way. They usually argue that interaction itself could be a rich venue for language learning. An example study was conducted by Guk and Kellogg (2007) in which the researchers compared teacher-student and student-student interactional mediation in the language classroom. The participants in this investigation were Korean-speaking foreign language learners of English in fifth grade and their language teacher. The researcher analyzed a lesson in which the teacher demonstrated a task to one learner and then the learner went to a group of children and showed them how to carry out the task. The most significant finding the analysis indicated is that learner mediation (i.e., assistance through interaction) differs from teacher mediation, and that learner-to-learner mediation is closer to learner internalization (i.e., uptake).

Based on this review, we can conclude that there is not ample research comparing the structural make-up of teacher-student and student-student interactions.

Furthermore, some studies reported conflicting findings on the way the two interaction varieties provide learning opportunities. This study, therefore, is an attempt to further understand classroom interaction and describe the way it contributes to L2 learners' language development. This investigation is guided by the following questions:

1. What is the nature and structure of teacher-student and student-student interaction?
2. How does each one contribute to target language learning?

3. Method

3.1 Participants

The participants in this study were 13 English as a second language learners and their teacher. These learners were all international students who were enrolled in an ESL program in an English language institute in a major American university. The students were at the advanced level (according to the standards of the institutions) when they participated in the study. Those English learners constituted a heterogeneous class in terms of their linguistic and cultural backgrounds. The English program in which the participants enrolled prepares learners for academic purposes; and most of them were actually learning English to pursue a graduate degree in the United States. The teacher was a certified long-time English teacher and a bilingual speaker of English and Spanish. He was a native speaker of English, and he spoke Spanish very fluently.

3.2 Data Collection

The participants studied writing, speaking, listening and reading. Since the focus of the present study is on classroom interaction, data collection took place exclusively in the speaking classes in which oral interaction is the dominant classroom activity. This class was particularly suitable for the purpose of this study because the teacher usually shifted classroom interaction between regular instruction and paired or group activities. Classroom observation as well as audio-recording took place during three full speaking classes. Audio-recorded data were transcribed and synthesized with the observation notes. Pseudonyms were used to protect the identities of the participants. In order to minimize the effect of the researcher's presence as an outsider, he participated in classroom activities when that was feasible. This procedure was effective since the students tended to forget about the original purpose behind the researcher's presence as soon as he engaged

in classroom activities with them. However, the researcher's participation was intermittent only for the sake of putting the class at ease and getting the students and teacher to behave naturally. This participation usually lasted from five to fifteen minutes and it was limited so that it did not influence the regular progression of events in the classroom.

4. Analysis and Discussion

This study focused on the nature and organization of teacher-student and student-student interaction and how they possibly addressed the students' language learning. So being the case, qualitative data analysis focused on the nature and structure of both types of classroom interaction and the ways they possibly promote language development. After breaking down the data into sequences (i.e., mini conversations), a number of codes were used for analysis. These codes included the interlocutors and number of turns (in each sequence), the state of being on- or off-task, group or class discussion, dominance, likely implicit learning and explicit learning. The data were further coded for types of utterances (i.e., questions, answers and statements), the function of each type in both teacher and student productions as well as type of teacher feedback. This coding procedure revealed a number of recurrent patterns like the stages and properties of teacher-student and student-student interactions, ways of providing feedback, and potential learning outcomes.

It is worth noting that not all the data fit perfectly in the coding procedure. In some situations, for instance, one mini conversation was coded both as group and class talk because it contained a shift in the discussion. Additionally, responses that did not perfectly fit in any coding category were included under the most appropriate code or coded as other. In the discussion below, the focus will be on the two primary themes; namely, teacher-student interaction and student-student interaction. Other issues, like the subtopics of learning and feedback will be discussed under the two main topics as a product of each one.

4.1 Teacher-student Interaction

First of all, it is imperative to distinguish teacher-student interaction from student-student interaction within the context of this study. This is important because there is a possibility to confuse one with the other when judging some conversations. Teacher-student interaction was either led by the teacher or the teacher



was a primary participant although it could be dominated by the students in case they talked more than the teacher. In student-student interaction, the students were the main leaders and the primary speakers although the teacher might get involved in this interaction through an interrupting comment, for instance.

Table 1: Stages of Teacher-student Interaction

Teacher-student interaction			
Initiation	Response	Feedback	
		Positive	Negative
Questions	Answer	-Commend	-Direct
Directions	Restatement	-Comment	-
Other prompts	Question		Restatement
	Silence		-Request of repetition
			-Indirect prompt

As indicated in table 1 above, the most recurrent pattern of teacher-student interaction consisted of three salient parts; namely, initiation or prompt (by the teacher), response (by the student), and feedback (by the teacher). Such a pattern was also identified by other scholars (e.g., Lemke, 1990; Waring, 2009) who investigated classroom interaction. The initiation part was usually a question or another kind of prompt that was meant to tell the students to provide some kind of information. When the message was not clear, the teacher either repeated or rephrased the prompt. The prompt could ask about something very specific like “what’s this called?”, or something more general like “do you like the weather?” In general, the main purpose of the prompt was to get the students to give responses that allow the teacher to assess students’ performance and provide feedback.

The prompts the teacher made usually focused on different areas of students’ linguistic knowledge. Pronunciation questions were among the prompts the teacher made; examples of these were: “Say *vote*”, “You can say it, try it”. In these examples, the teacher was focusing exclusively on the student’s pronunciation. Another area that the teacher targeted in his prompts was vocabulary use. Examples of these prompts were: “Give me a sentence using *adapting to*”; “[use] *recover* [in a sentence]”. Through these prompts, the teacher was actually looking for correct use of the words as well as appropriate sentence structure; this means that the teacher was targeting both vocabulary use and grammatical accuracy. This could be realized from the feedback that modified both areas. Meaning of words was another area that the teacher focused on in his questions. “What’s *crucial*?”, “What’s *based*

on Jane?”, and “What’s *irregular*?” were a few examples of this type of prompts.

Although teacher’s questions and prompts were usually straightforward in terms of what they asked for, this was not always the case. The teacher, for example, frequently asked a general (i.e. indirect) question that was actually meant to test the students’ knowledge of a specific word. For example, in the question “What inspired you to come to [this institution]?” the teacher was focusing on whether or not the students understood the meaning of the word “inspire” through the answers they would provide. Similarly, the following question was meant to reveal what the students knew about the word “aesthetics”: “What aesthetics do we have in this room?”

A considerable deal of teacher’s initiations was in the form of directions and explanations on how to do some task, like peer-to-peer discussions or class assignments. In these situations, however, the main purpose was usually to prepare the students for whole-class discussion but not to ask about linguistic knowledge as in the examples above. Peer-to-peer discussions could be followed by comments from the teacher on how the students were generally doing with a certain task, but the students did not usually receive content-specific feedback because the teacher was not a partner in these activities. In such occasions, the pattern of teacher-student interaction (initiation, response, feedback) lacked the third element (i.e., feedback).

Other situations in which the pattern cycle of teacher-student interaction was inapplicable, took place when the teacher was just giving information to the students. These instances were ubiquitous and they were mostly evident when the teacher talked off-topic. The following are a couple of examples of these one-sided interactions in which there was no response or feedback: “You may find a hard time finding an apartment building [here]”, “Some Americans don’t speak clearly”, “[you say] *when I get back home* or *when I go back home*”. Upon production of these statements, the teacher was not expecting the students to give any response. The purpose was usually to give the students information about the language (e.g. pronunciation, vocabulary use) or about an everyday issue (e.g. where to find an apartment).

The second stage of teacher-student interaction is “response” which was provided by the student/s in response to a prompt by the teacher. The most recurrent

type of response the students provided was answers (to teacher's questions). The following are examples of students' responses: (T stands for teacher, and S stands for student)

T "What do you like about it?"

S "The windows"

T "Was [the classroom] like this when you came in today?"

S "Yes"

T "Do you understand her?"

S "Yes"

T "What's crucial?"

S "Very important".

Students' responses here were related to some area of linguistic knowledge (i.e. vocabulary, pronunciation, grammar) because these were the areas that the teacher usually asked about. At times, a student's response was a restatement of what the teacher said. This was evident when the teacher drilled the students on pronouncing some word or utterance. The students tended to respond with questions when they did not understand the teacher's prompt. At other times, students responded simply by silence when they had no relevant response.

What is noticeable about students' responses to the teacher is that they were usually brief. The vast majority of students' responses were incomplete sentences; and they usually ranged from one word to two or three words long (as it is the case in the examples above). Moreover, not all students had equal chances to participate in answering teacher's questions. Responses were most of the time provided by very few students. Unless the teacher called on the rest of the students to urge them to participate, only a couple of students dominated. Although the teacher tried—through continuously requesting different responses—to give equal opportunities for all of the students, most of them remained silent and unwilling to participate. One factor that might have encouraged this state of affairs was the absence of any kind of control on the students' responses on the part of the teacher. The students were allowed to shout out their responses which gave the more active and capable students the chance to dominate and created a safe environment for the hesitant ones to stay quiet.

Teacher's feedback is the final stage in teacher-student interaction. Feedback was provided as a result of teacher's evaluation of the appropriateness of a student's response. Teacher's feedback falls into two main types: positive and negative. Positive feedback was provided when the student's

response/answer was accurate. This type of feedback was intended to reinforce accurate knowledge and encourage the students for more participation. The teacher provided positive feedback in many ways; as explicit as using words such as "ok, yes, correct, right, very good, etc." or implicitly through nodding or raising no major objections. When the teacher did not object to a student's response, feedback could be thought of as part of the following utterance when the teacher advanced to the next point or part of the task in hand. For instance, in the following exchange, the teacher indicated that the student's response was correct by simply moving to the next question.

T "Crucial, what's crucial?"

S "Very important"

T "Recover? Think of health" the teacher asked about the meaning of *recover* in the context of health.

In other rare occasions, however, the teacher gave positive feedback merely by repeating what the student said. Negative (or corrective) feedback, which is the second type of feedback, was provided in response to the students' erroneous answers or responses. Corrective feedback was offered in many ways; the most recurrent ways were direct correction, repetition, repetition request and indirect prompt. In direct correction procedure, the teacher responded with "no" or "incorrect" and he either followed that with the correct answer or let the student figure out the correct answer him/herself. When using the repetition techniques, the teacher got the student to realize and correct a mistake through repeating the ill-formed response. This type of corrective feedback is shown in the following exchange:

T "Which one do you like?"

S "The left one"

T "The one on the left"

S "Yes"

In a repetition request, the teacher asked the student to repeat his/her response in order to get him/her to realize the mistake and self-correct. This type is demonstrated in the following teacher's responses: "Say it again", "So, is it *a, b, c, or d?*" The teacher also gave indirect prompts to get the students to realize what went wrong and help him/her self-correct. An indirect prompt was usually a pause or an indirect question. When the teacher paused, he allowed the student to give another response or let other students engage and help the student. An indirect question usually served



as a prompt that made the student realize what was wrong in his/her response; this type of feedback is shown in the following exchange:

T “[what does] stress [mean]?”

S “Nervous”

T “Stress can make you nervous?”

4.2 Learning in Teacher-student Interaction

The subject of teacher-student interaction was usually either directly or indirectly related to the system of the language. That is, the teacher was usually asking (or giving information about) pronunciation, grammar or vocabulary, and the students responded within these areas. Thus, the kind of knowledge the students acquired from teacher-student interaction was related to how the system of the language works. When the teacher engaged in interaction with the students, he was providing, eliciting, or commenting on (i.e., providing feedback) information that concerns the way the various parts of language function. Although this was not exclusively true, it was the norm with the vast majority of teacher-student communication. The following are examples in which the focus was on pronunciation, vocabulary, and grammar respectively:

1- T “*It is important to stress*; what does that mean?”

S “empha, empha, empha” the student was trying to pronounce the word *emphasize* in order to explain the word *stress* that the teacher asked about.

T “You can say it, try it”

S “stress”

T “No, the word you’re trying to say”

S “emphasis”

T “No, not emphasis, what is the word?” the teacher then pronounced it slowly and asked the students to repeat after him.

2- T “To say that a building is structurally sound, it is built to last long time; what’s *sound*?” S “intact”

T “How about in good condition or strong”

3- T “All right, *contagious*, Hassan *contagious*” The teacher asked Hassan to use the word in a sentence.

S “The flu contagious between the students in class”

T corrected him “The flu is contagious among the students in class”

In the first interaction, the focus was on the meaning of an utterance but then the interest shifted to pronunciation as one of the students found difficulty in pronouncing a word. Similarly, in the third interaction, the teacher asked the student to use a word in a sentence; however, the focus shifted to

grammar when the student made a grammatical mistake which the teacher corrected through the technique of repetition, which was discussed earlier.

In one interactional cycle with the teacher, students may be expected to engage in learning three times. The first one is when the teacher poses a question or gives a prompt or topic for discussion. At this time, the students learn from their thinking and reflection about the question or prompt. The teacher sometimes allows the students to work in groups to prepare their answers or responses, which helps them build and synthesize their knowledge. The second stage of learning takes place when the learners are providing their answers or responses. At this time, they interact with the teacher and/or their classmates which provides a context where they add to and modify what they know. In the third stage, which is the last one, the students enhance their knowledge by eliminating errors and imprinting the correct responses or answers through teacher’s feedback.

As it was stated earlier, the way the teacher interacted with the students did not exclusively follow the cycle of initiation, response, feedback. The teacher sometimes left direct instruction on pronunciation, vocabulary and grammar and engaged in general conversations with the students. These conversations were mostly unrelated to the study material and hence could be labeled as “off-task”. The teacher was almost always the dominant speaker in these conversations. Although it is not always very clear what learning took place – depending on what language features the students noticed and acquired in the conversation, these conversations provided exposure to comprehensible input (Krashen, 1985). Other conversations were useful to the students because they were informative about cultural issues and everyday life of English-speaking people. Additionally, teacher’s talk could be considered as a listening activity for learners. Because the teacher is a native speaker of English, the students could, for example, benefit from his pronunciation and intonation and reflect on how he used the language to address different issues. Simply stated, the teacher could be a model for the students to follow in terms of his effective performance. The following is an example when the teacher was talking about some slang expressions:

T “Some Americans don’t speak clearly. Some use double negatives like *I don’t got*

no money, I don't got nothing. Have you ever heard that?"

S "But you have to say I don't get anything?"

T "I don't have anything. If you hear a double negative you know they don't really mean it. I don't got nothing actually means I have something, but they mean I don't have anything"

T "Djoo ee"

Ss "What?"

T "Did you eat?" ...

4.3 Student-student Interaction

Unlike teacher-student interaction, student-student interaction was less systematic. It was more casual and irregular. Table 2 below shows the most recurrent pattern of student-student interaction. Student-student conversations were usually made up of recurrent initiation-and-response format as the following example demonstrates.

S1- "Did you go to Canada?"

S2- "Yes"

S1- "Do you drive?"

S2- "Yes, I went to Canada by my car, driving"

S1- "Women are not good drivers in my country, some of them"

S2- "Men do more accidents in my country"

Table 2: Stages of Student-student Interaction

Student-student interaction	
Initiation	Response & <i>implicit feedback</i>
Question	Answer
Suggestion	Suggestion
Comment	Comment
	Question

Anything can trigger (or be a subject of) student-student interaction. Students usually talked about anything that interested them, either related or unrelated to learning English. Even when they were working on a specific learning activity, the students seemed to talk about anything that came to mind. What was noticeable about student-student conversation was that the students did not usually give explicit feedback to each other. Feedback on appropriate language use in student-student interaction was elicited from either advancement or breakdown in communication. If the conversation was continuing normally, this could be regarded as an indirect indicator that the interlocutors were doing well in terms of pronunciation, lexical choice, and grammar. If, however, one interlocutor was having difficulty, it could be regarded as a sign that something went wrong in one

speaker's production. We can think of the first situation as positive feedback and the second as negative feedback.

In the example above, it is clear that both students were doing well in terms of articulating their thoughts. This could be recognized from the smoothness of the conversation. A tentative conclusion thus, is that hints of feedback are embedded in the responses the students provided to each other. The students might not be self-conscious about the feedback they provide to each other but that was what actually informed them how well they were doing when they engaged in conversations.

4.4 Learning in Student-student Interaction

As the teacher usually provided knowledge about the subsystems of the language, the students were putting their knowledge into practice as they talked to each other. Student-student interaction was a very healthy atmosphere for language practice. The students seemed more relaxed and willing to share what they had in a more natural way than when they talked to the whole class or the teacher. When they spoke together, they did not seem to hesitate to express their ideas the way they liked. This was evident from the speed, easiness and engagement they showed when they interacted with each other.

Student-student interaction contributed to students' knowledge through providing a welcoming environment to practice, reflect on and monitor their production. To put it in other words, oral production allowed the students to test their pronunciation, lexis and structures; such conversations provided a vibrant venue for comprehensible output (Swain, 1993, 2005), an important factor in language acquisition. A major part of what students learned from peer interaction relates to reinforcement of their knowledge rather than expanding it. Because the students were at a comparable proficiency level, what they learned from each other was easy to uptake and not as challenging as what they learned from the teacher. This is based on the easy language they used when they communicated with each other.

Generally speaking, teacher-student and student-student interactions appear to complete each other in the way they improve the student's linguistic abilities. Teacher-student interaction served the function of offering knowledge on how the sub-systems of the language (e.g., pronunciation, grammar) operate, and student-student interaction presented a site in which the students could actually use and revive the



knowledge they have already acquired. The former provided knowledge on how to function and the latter provided an opportunity to actually function. A very good analogy of this relationship is acquiring knowledge on how to drive a car (knowledge about the skill) and actually getting on the road and driving (performing the skill). One kind of knowledge appears to be based on the other. Simply talking about driving is not enough to get somebody to drive a car successfully, and sitting behind the wheel and getting on the road without prior knowledge on how to handle the controls of the vehicle is similarly ineffective. This view is compatible with cognitive theories to language acquisition (e.g. McLaughlin, 1987, 1990; Schmidt, 1992)

Although both teacher-student interaction and student-student interaction are important in terms of language learning, most of the students had only little opportunities to participate in each type as indicated by the observation. In teacher-student interaction, the teacher usually communicated with more active students who sat at the front. These students responded to the majority of the questions posed by the teacher and they also asked most of the questions. The data indicate that two students dominated teacher-student interactions. The teacher attempted to push other students to partake in such discussions by calling on them individually but this was not effective. Likewise, the students did not have enough time to talk in student-student conversations because the teacher assigned limited time for such activities. Moreover, occasionally, the teacher did not monitor these activities which allowed some students to converse in their native language instead of English.

4.5 Other Features of Teacher-student and Student-student Interaction

In addition to what has already been discussed, there are some properties that distinguished the way the students talked to each other from the way they talked to the teacher in front of the whole class. These properties, which are summarized in Table 3, indicate the degree of comfort the students experience in each type and may provide some explanation of why they were resistive to talk with the teacher. When they talk to the teacher, the students tended to produce short utterances. This may be attributable to the fact that the students were monitoring their performance more carefully and being cautious in order to avoid more

complex utterance that might lead to mistakes in front of the class and/or the teacher. Anxiety is another noticeable feature in students' performance, which might be an outcome of the psychological and mental pressure (avoiding mistakes and manipulating the language) the student goes through.

Table 3: Properties of Student Talk

Teacher-student	Student-student
Shorter utterances	Longer utterances
Serious/deliberate	Spontaneous
Anxious	Relaxed, casual

In student-student conversations, the way the students spoke seemed more or less the opposite of that in teacher-student conversations. The students spoke relatively faster and they apparently produced longer utterances. They were spontaneous to speak about whatever came to their minds and they sounded more casual. This might be because they were not much worried about making mistakes in front of their partners. They absolutely appeared more relaxed and comfortable than when they spoke with the teacher in front the class. These differences may be related to the degree of privacy they had in both situations; while they were "on the spot" in teacher-student interactions, in student-student interactions the listeners were usually one or two classmates or friends. It must be stressed that although these issues were to a great degree obvious from the observation; their interpretations are obviously tentative. Additionally, these features are applicable to the performances of most of the students but not all of them.

5. Conclusion

The present study was conducted in an effort to describe the nature and organization of ESL classroom interaction, both teacher-student and student-student fronted, and show how each type promotes language learning. Teacher-student interaction mostly consisted of three parts; namely, prompt, response, and feedback. The teacher generally dominated this type of interaction and he usually talked about linguistic particularities in relation to pronunciation, grammar, and vocabulary. The students were often listeners and when they spoke, they gave short utterances. Most of the students were hesitant to speak with the teacher, and they spoke only when he called on them. In teacher-student interaction, the students were exposed to knowledge on how the language is used properly; yet, spontaneous use of linguistic knowledge was limited to occasional instances. Sometimes the teacher abandoned the question-response-feedback

pattern and gave casual speech about some general subject which, hypothetically, provided rich comprehensible input for the students.

Student-student interaction usually consisted of two parts (i.e., initiation and response). The students talked on a variety of topics that did not necessarily deal with the study material or involve direct language learning. When they spoke to each other, the students sounded more relaxed and produced longer utterances than when they spoke with the teacher. The most relevant role of student-student interaction in language learning is that it provided a context in which the students could naturally use their linguistic knowledge (i.e. produce comprehensible output). This type of interaction represented an easygoing environment in which they could use their knowledge of language more spontaneously.

Both teacher-student and student-student interactions are important for language learning because they seem to complement each other. Teacher-student communication is a main source of knowledge about the linguistic system, and student-student communication is a unique setting where learners could practice and reinforce what they know about the language.

Implications

Classroom interaction is the activity through which second language learning takes place. Language teachers as well as learners should utilize classroom interaction as much as possible to serve their teaching and learning objectives. The language teacher in particular, plays a major role in controlling and designing classroom activities so that they promote language learning in the best way possible. Language educators should specifically be careful in dealing with the many details that affect classroom interaction; most importantly, how much each student participates in discussions, and how to get reticent students to take part in those discussions. The language teacher can come up with effective ideas that break the silence of his/her students without affecting the friendly atmosphere in class. The teacher, for example, can assign a group of student to be discussion leaders for a specific period of time. Additionally, the teacher can avoid explicit corrective feedback and use more integrated techniques to draw learner attention to his/her mistakes.

Language teachers should also be aware of their students' needs to talk with

each other. The students need to incorporate what they learn in their working language system; otherwise, language instruction might not produce the desired outcomes. The teachers should allocate enough time for student-student discussions in order to allow the students to apply and activate what they passively learn from regular instruction. This is important because, for example, learning the structure of the present progressive tense and when it is used without having the chance to actually use it might not achieve the teaching/learning objective of getting the students to apply that knowledge as they speak or write. Another related issue that teachers should consider, is the organization of peer discussion. It is imperative to organize the class in pairs or, in groups of three at most. Larger groups would encourage more active students to dominate the conversations. For the teaching/learning process to be effective, and to focus on both the knowledge and skill, the teacher should make sure that the students have similar opportunities to participate in both teacher-student and student-student discussions.

Limitations

While the audio-recording technique was very helpful in obtaining what the teacher and students said, at times, especially in group discussions, it was not possible to get intelligible utterances without getting very close to the students. This was not possible; thus, the researcher had to record one group at a time which means that a good deal of student-student interaction was not utilized in the study.

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