

Teacher Level of Interaction with Learners Based on Classroom Seating Position

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Abstract

From experience, I have noted that in most classrooms teachers tend to nominate either high ability or extrovert students to speak, hence, the same students tend to participate most of the time. This research aimed at determining if teacher level of interaction with learners is based on students' seating position. I conducted the research and had ten hours of observation of English language lessons in selected secondary schools in Nairobi between March and November 2012.

The findings indicate that the number of contributions from each learner was linked to the classroom seating. I also found that the teacher should give positive reinforcement to the responses given by learners and encourage all students to be active. The study also confirmed that there must be a fair distribution of questions and feedback directed to all students despite their seating position to result in an all inclusive/equal participation.

Key words Interaction, seating position, teacher, learners, nominate, contributions, questions, observation, participate, active, reinforcement, responses.

1. Introduction

Some teachers still employ the traditional classroom seating arrangement in columns. Seating position influences interaction patterns in the classroom hence; this paper discusses other researchers' views on this and tries to prove some of these observations. Kathleen et. al (1996) note that research by Adams and Biddle in the 1970's claimed that most verbal interaction between the teacher and students took place with students who sat in the front row and in the middle of the room which offers good eye contact opportunity with the teacher. Such learners get more from the lesson than those who do not interact with the teacher as much, due to their seating position. Richard advises teachers not to pay attention to a small part of the classroom or to stand too near to those in the middle as not to see those at the sides but to make amends and be fairer by giving all learners an equal chance.

From my previous experience in observing teachers, I have noted that in most classrooms teachers tend to nominate either high ability or extrovert students to participate in lessons. In this observation, the intention is to observe the frequency of contributions from individual students, to see if seating positions correlate with frequency of contributions and to determine where the teacher directs questions and the types of questions asked. I am also keen to see the extent to which there are Action Zones within the classroom. An action zone is identified as the place where most of the interaction in the classroom occurs; this could be in the front, middle, left or right. Classroom layout and seating positions of students affect interactional dynamics in lessons. Richards & Lockhart (2006) and Wajnryb (1992) discuss how these might be implemented in the classroom. There should be two or more action zones in a classroom. Students could also be moved around for all to benefit from the one action zone if there is no extra space.

Below are some factors that influence student individual participation in the classroom:

According to Stipek, D. (2002) teachers' have perceptions and categorise students as 'good' according to their behaviour or high performers and these are the ones who are often nominated. Teachers find students who behave well and always aim at pleasing the teacher easier to teach. Such students are respectful and participate actively in class by asking and answering questions. They will have low perceptions of other students' competence and all these will affect student learning. Teachers' behavior towards students is therefore affected by their beliefs about students. Factors that determine active participation from students are; how friendly the teacher is to them, their proximity to the teacher (seating position) and how much the teacher interacts with them. Payne, and Brophy note that a teacher's physical closeness to a student facilitates interaction with students. Students who participate most actively sit in certain class positions as teachers tend to more often nominate those who sit in the front row and middle seats in the classroom (the T) and ignore students outside the T seating

pattern. Students who sit in the back corners are rarely asked to answer a question. High performers go to the T and low performers or those who do not want to participate go to the corners where they believe they are not likely to be nominated. Payne, and Brophy note that a teacher's physical closeness to a student affects time on task and facilitates interaction with students.

David, J.L. (2010) with reference to other authors also identifies some teacher behaviors that affect student behaviors in the classroom. Teachers give less accurate and detailed feedback and guidance to students they perceive as low achievers while they give students perceived as high achievers more detailed and accurate feedback. The teacher mostly gives attention, directs questions or feedback to students who participate and are free to call for help. In most cases it is the assertive high-achieving students. Low achievers are asked fewer and easier questions than high achievers.

I got interested in this topic because in many classrooms, generally there is a traditional teacher/student relationship, and class members may feel uneasy about participating fully in the type of tasks one finds in the communicative classroom. Most students want to come to the classroom and be receptive by taking notes. They neither like being asked to answer questions nor to contribute to discussions or presentations. Such students tend to sit at the back of the classroom imagining that the teacher easily notices those who sit in front and they are often asked questions. Teachers also tend to nominate the outgoing students to respond to questions hence the same students tend to participate most of the time.

2. Aims and objectives:

- a. To establish the classroom seating position of students who participate most actively in lessons.
- b. To observe where the teacher directs questions or feedback.
- c. To find out if the teacher confirms students' own perceptions of themselves.
- d. To determine the type of questions/feedback that are directed to students and their classroom seating positions.

3. Observation instruments:

3.1 Number of contributions from learner

- **Rationale:**

Observation Instrument one served to note the number of contributions from each learner using a map of the classroom layout to determine whether participation is linked to classroom seating plan.

I observed two lessons each of two hours with this first instrument. I used numbers to mark the number of contributions a student made and an * to indicate the students who did not participate. I also marked whether the contribution made by a student was voluntary or was teacher-nominated. This and the seating plan helped me to note the number of contributions from each student and determine whether participation was linked to classroom seating plan. In the majority of classrooms, desks are arranged in columns and most likely the teacher will focus attention on those sitting in front or in the middle without noticing the other students.

Date: 25/5/2012
 Time : 8:30-10:30
 Level: Advanced

Table 1: Seating plan sample 1

TEACHER					

Seating plan

KEY:

Arabic numbers - indicate the number of times student sitting at a particular position contributed

* - indicates that the student did not participate.

N - Means the student was referred to by name

Results:

OBSERVATION INSTRUMENT 1/LESSON 1

Date: 28/5/12

Time 8:30-10:30

Level: Advanced

Table 2: Seating plan observation 1

TEACHER					
1	2	2	2	2 no name/ nominated active/volunteered	
		*	1	*	2 nominated 1 picked by teacher
*	1N	*	1N	*	1

Seating plan

KEY:

Arabic numbers - indicate the number of times student sitting at a particular position contributed

* - indicates that the student did not participate.

N - Means the student was referred to by name

15 students

OBSERVATION INSTRUMENT 1 LESSON 2

Date 4/6/2012

Time 11:30-1:30

Level: Advanced

Table 3: Seating plan observation 2

TABLE							
	*		*		2 N	*	1 N
*		1		1 N			1 N
					*	*	2 N
2 N		2 N	3 N		*		2 N
							1 N

Seating plan

KEY:

Arabic numbers - indicate the number of times student sitting at a particular position contributed

* - indicates that the student did not participate.

N - Means the student was referred to by name.

3.2 Direction of questions/feedback

• **Rationale:**

Observation Instrument two serves to observe where the teacher directs questions/ feedback. To find out if the teacher confirms students own perceptions of themselves as evidenced in Instrument one. After one observation with the first instrument, I felt it was necessary to drop coding students referred to by name because it had no implication to this instrument.

I also realised that I needed symbols to mark volunteers and those deliberately nominated by the teacher to determine if seating position influenced teacher's choice of who to nominate. I indicated this on instrument one table but they need to appear as symbols on the key.

Date: 28-5-2012

Time: 11:30-1:30 PM

Level: Advanced

Table 4: Seating plan sample 2

TEACHER						

Seating plan

KEY:

Arabic numbers - indicate the number of times student sitting at a particular position contributed

* - indicates that the student did not participate.

V – Volunteered

NT – Nominated by teacher

Results

OBSERVATION INSTRUMENT 2

Date: 28-5-2012

Time: 11:30-1:30 PM

Level: Advanced

Table 5: Seating plan observation 3

TEACHER							
*	1 V	*	*	*	Space	1 V	2 V
*	*	*				2 V	1 V
*							

Seating plan

KEY:

Arabic numbers - indicate the number of times student sitting at a particular position contributed

* - indicates that the student did not participate.

V – Volunteered

NT – Nominated by teacher

3.3 Type of questions/feedback directed to students

• **Rationale:**

Observation Instrument three was used to determine the type of questions/feedback that is directed to specific students and where these students sit.

The third observation instrument was used to observe two lessons of two hours each. Continuous adaptations to the previous instruments contributed to great improvement of subsequent observations.

I modified the instrument by adding to the key, students who were referred to by name. In the first lesson observed, the teacher seemed to have mastered names of most students. Any time no response was forthcoming the favourites were nominated probably when the class did not know the response. This mastery of names could have contributed to the positive response/participation from almost all areas of the classroom.

For the second lesson under this instrument the only applicable aspect of the key is teacher’s reference to learners by name because all students actively participated voluntarily or through deliberate nomination of teacher even though not the same number of times.

Date 4/6/2012

Time 8:30-10:30

Level: Advanced

Table 6: Seating plan sample 3

TEACHER							

Seating plan

KEY:

Arabic numbers - indicate the number of times student sitting at a particular position contributed

* - indicates that the student did not participate.

N - Means the student was referred to by name

Results

OBSERVATION INSTRUMENT 3/LESSON 1

Date 4/6/2012

Time 8:30-10:30

Level: Advanced

Table 7: Seating plan observation 4

TEACHER							
3 N	2 N		*		*	*	3
	*	*	1 N			2	1
*			*		3 N	1 N	*
	1 N	4 N		1	1 N	1	2

Seating plan

KEY:

Arabic numbers - indicate the number of times student sitting at a particular position contributed

* - indicates that the student did not participate.

N - Means the student was referred to by name

INSTRUMENT 3 /LESSON 2

Date 25/6/2012

Time 9:30-11:30

Level: Advanced

Table 8: Seating plan observation 5

TEACHER					
N	N	N	N	N	
N	N	N	N	N	N
N	N	N	N		N
N	N	N	N	N	N
N	N				N
N	N			N	N

Seating plan

KEY: N - Means the student was referred to by name

4. Evaluation of findings and final summary

Lesson one instrument one, confirmed that the number of contributions from each learner is linked to the classroom seating. This is because as much as the teacher tried to encourage other learners to contribute, when no student volunteered/raised up their hands the teacher still picked the keen students to contribute even though sometimes their names were not mentioned. Despite encouraging other students to contribute the teacher still resorted to working with the keen students to move on.

Keen students sat at the front and middle sections considering the number of contributions which were at least two each. At times, the teacher asked them to let the others also contribute and picked on others to try hence there was a fair distribution of questions although there were notable areas where no contributions came from. Specific students were referred to by name while others were referred to by use of the term 'yes.'

The second lesson observed using instrument one also confirmed the same. It was notable that there were students seated in certain areas that did not contribute. There was a competition on the board between columns

and this activity made many students volunteer to participate. The teacher also did not nominate some other students as many raised up their hands and were not given a chance yet some got more than one chance. Teachers need to take this into consideration for equal participation. The students who were nominated to contribute were all known to the teacher by name and it seems they are the ones the teacher perceives as 'good learners'. Subsequently, they were asked questions with some even having more opportunities than others.

The lesson observed using instrument two also confirmed that the teacher only directed questions and appropriate feedback to specific areas of the classroom. In this lesson, only one section of the class was active; on the passive side only one answered a question. The teacher only nominated those who had their hands up and did not encourage the others to try neither was there any positive reinforcement to the responses given by learners. Probably the teacher needed to reinforce learner responses to motivate them. It seemed to be a weak class. Maybe the teacher was pitching the lesson wrongly. There was need for the teacher to create a friendly environment to involve all learners and motivate them to be active.

In the first two-hour lesson under instrument three, the teacher attempted to reinforce learners' responses and to master students' names, which raised the level of participation. Despite this, there were some biases described below which confirmed that questions and more positive feedback was directed to specific students. There were some students who raised up their hands to answer questions but were not seen by the teacher because the teacher was looking at the usual favourite students. Those who answered more frequently and others who did not were commended through verbal reinforcement. There were also some students who did not receive any verbal reinforcement or comment after contributing and others simply got the response 'yes' after giving a correct answer. Out of those who contributed some were known by name while others simply referred to as 'yes.' The teacher seemed to have some favourite students and any time no response was forthcoming they were nominated. This could be because the class did not know the response and the teacher wanted to move on. There was also clapping to reinforce positive response and the teacher mastered most names. These could have contributed to more participation.

The second lesson observed under instrument 3 also affirmed that questions and more positive feedback was directed to specific students to make all learners participate. In this case, questions and feedback were directed to all students despite their seating position and it resulted in an all inclusive/equal participation. In this class, all students participated although some participated more than others did. It was not easy to determine the number of times each student participated because there was also group work and each group reported back. During the lesson summary, the teacher nominated as many students as possible at random to answer questions even if they did not raise up their hands. This was good as it made learners who were not attentive to be alert. Even though some did not know the correct answers or took time to answer, the teacher was patient with them. In this case, the teacher's interaction with learners created a conducive environment for learners to contribute despite their seating position. The teacher enhanced this by giving all learners an equal opportunity to participate. Addressing learners' by name also made them feel valued and they developed a positive attitude towards learning. The instrument influenced the teachers' behaviour.

5. Conclusion

Teachers should ensure that all learners get equal opportunities to participate actively in class irrespective of their seating arrangement and should direct questions and positive feedback to all learners in the classroom. Classroom layout might prove to be a key factor. Some teachers prefer a horseshoe layout for easy access for feedback, maintaining eye contact and monitoring lesson stages. Rows and columns are noted to be more suited for exams. They are less appropriate for group work activities since rows/lines of tables stand in the way of communication and students.

An awareness of class action zones helps teachers to position themselves and learners in the place(s) that gives everyone equal attention since teachers subconsciously involve certain students in the lesson more than others. There is a correlation between seating position and class contributions. Students who do not sit in an action zone are likely to make fewer contributions and be questioned less by the teacher than those sitting in more advantageous positions. Knowledge of action zones in the classroom will help teachers to pay attention to areas outside the action zone and create a more inclusive classroom atmosphere.

If less challenging questions are asked the bright students tend to switch off in class. So there should be effective questioning through proper questioning strategies. The teacher readily turns to another student or answers the question if the low achiever is unable to answer instead of delving deeper. These students are less likely to respond to whole class discussion or questioning and are often disregarded when their response is incorrect. The

teacher rarely nominates students who are reserved. Yet, when high achievers are questioned, the teacher more readily gives clues, probes for evidence or reasons, or encourages a more extensive response. They receive positive response even when their responses are incorrect. During classroom discussion only students who feel comfortable with the teacher answer questions or participate.

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