

Promoting Learning through Interaction: Examples from the English Language Classroom

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Abstract

Classroom interaction is helpful for language learning. Every learner is expected to develop competence in English language learning, in order to function effectively in the multilingual Nigerian setting. English as the official language in Nigeria occupies an important position. Considering the importance, role and functions of English in Nigeria the primary goal of the English language curriculum is that learners should acquire communicative competence in English. From our observation we found that learners learn more comprehensively through classroom interaction. This research also discovered that applying the basic principles of interactive language teaching can promote learners initiative and autonomy, which in turn begets linguistic and communicative competence. To achieve this goal, the curriculum recommends the communicative language teaching approach for teachers of English; to enable learners achieve communicative competence in the use of the English language. Teaching through interaction enhances observation, using apt methods, strategies and resources which in turn promote learners autonomy and initiative. This study thus, emphasizes the need to use interactive strategies in order to enable students to use, practice and achieve fluency in the language. This paper therefore, explores some interactive strategies applied in the classroom with a focus on re-tooling English language teachers for more productive teaching and learning.

Keywords: Learning, Interaction, English Language and Classroom

1. Introduction

Interaction is onus of the communications. Thus, applying the basic principles of interaction in language teaching helps to promote learners initiative and autonomy, which in turn begets linguistic and communicative competence. Interaction in language teaching stresses the importance of providing learners with more activities to directly communicate with, using the target language. Contemporary approaches in English Language teaching favor the adoption of learner-centered task based on the strategies the teachers adopt for teaching.

The teacher is expected to give full roles to the students. There should be maximum interaction in shared contexts. In a second language context, there is the need for activities that will make the learners practice the target language in the class in order to use it effectively in their socio-cultural setting. Obviously, learning is usually motivated if proper materials, activities and tasks are designed; thus there is need for the use of qualitative interactive strategies because, they make enormous difference in students' attitude towards language learning (Dornyei, 2003:14). The use of interactive strategies encourages collaborative work which in turn reduces the learner's anxiety. It helps learners to exhibit increased self confidence and motivation to learn and also make the classroom conducive for learners to use the target language in interaction.

Learning strategies are the actions learners engage in consciously or unconsciously as they learn new information. Wenden and Rubin (1987) define strategies as any set of operations, steps, plans, routine used by the learner to facilitate the obtaining, storage, retrieval, and use of information. Similarly, Richards and Platt (1992) posit that learning strategies are intentional behavior and thoughts used by learners during learning that adequately help them to understand, learn or remember new information. In other words, interactive strategies are those activities designed by the teacher to enhance learners' participation and negotiation in the learning process. The strategies are useful in clarifying issues and in sharpening the learners' communication skills. Working in small groups / pair activities provide a convenient environment for learners to use the language in negotiation, interaction, argument and communication.

1.1 Technique

Some of the techniques adopted in this study are that proposed by Aigo (2012) who describes the interactive teacher as;

- a facilitator,
- a manager,
- a resource person,
- an independent participant,
- a researcher and a learner.

In his words Aigo (2012) states that; ‘as a facilitator, he makes the process of learning an easier task; helps students to clear away road blocks and to find shortcuts. As a manager, he plans lessons, organizes learning activities, gives feedback and structures the classroom time. As a resource person, he offers advice and counsels when students are in need of such services. As a researcher and a learner, he tries to ascertain the students’ progress rate and ways of assisting these students. Thus, the interactive teacher strives to achieve a balance between students and teachers input and contribution.

1.2 The Theory

The theory that underpins this work is the constructivists' approach to learning. Constructivist theorists posit that learning is more effective when students collaboratively and actively engage in the learning process instead of working in isolation. It is through interaction with people, environment and relating concept taught to what they already know that learners experience things, reflect on their experiences and by so doing they construct knowledge. The constructivists assert that knowledge is not given but gained through real experiences that have purpose and meaning to the learner. In using the constructivists’ strategies, a lot of emphasis is placed on group interaction; collaboration and scaffolding which can be in form of coaching, mentoring and modeling.

2. Interactions and Learning Strategies

Several years of research has shown that the learner can learn best through interaction because interaction helps in meaning negotiation in language use. Interaction is defined by Wagner (1994:8) as, “reciprocal events that require at least two objects and two actions. Interaction occurs when these objects and events interact with one another” Thus there is usually a mutual influence through giving and receiving messages in order to achieve communication. Interaction in the classroom aim at enhancing learning; they are also referred to as learner-centered strategies which are principally used to enhance learner autonomy (Holec 1979) and affective engagement in learning, (Ahern 2012). In another view Long (1996: 413) posits that the most valuable way input is made comprehensible is through interactional adjustments. These are the attempts of learners and their conversation partners to overcome comprehension difficulties.

Learning is an active, social process in which students construct new ideas based on their current knowledge. Thus, learners are encouraged to work in groups to share their perspectives, bring up prior knowledge on the task. In second language teaching and learning, instead of teaching the skills in isolation, they are integrated in such a way that they reinforce each other and reflect how language is used in real life contexts.

Most of these interactive strategies are used to reflect the different styles of learning, and enhance practice and skills of the learners. More so, these strategies make students to work in groups, to be physically active, move their seats or desks and change groups as they collaborate . Working in groups of 3-6; each student has the chance to speak in a safe environment, discuss in small groups which implies that they must learn listening and negotiation skills that are crucial in enhancing fluency in language.

Students learn better when they are intimately connected with their fellow students; this reduces anxiety, and increases their confidence. Interest and motivation are crucial in getting language learners stay long on a given task and interact meaningfully in the language, this in turn improve their communication skills. Knowles (1975) posits that Students' language skills cannot be improved without engagement, and motivation is seen as a crucial element in improving students' engagement in learning, both within and outside the class. It has also been observed that, teachers of English rarely use interactive activities in teaching. Research evidence confirms that they are preoccupied with more effort to cover the syllabus and get the learners ready for examination. Scholars such as ;(Omo-Ojugo, Etim and Udosen (2007) express displeasure at the predominance of the use of the teacher-centered methods.

Similarly, Obanya (2002; 2004) discusses the use of frontal teaching in the education system and concludes that it is principally responsible for the learners’ inability to communicate effectively in English. The result is that the teacher covers the syllabus but learners' performance in the language is very poor; learners simply memorize rules and sentence structures learnt and present it in abstraction using mechanical exercises.

Ugbor (1986), Omojuwa, (2009) & Udosen (2010) confirm the adverse effects of not adhering to the methodological prescriptions in the English language curriculum.

The 21st century teaching goals emphasize the production of autonomous and independent learners who will be self-directed while achieving life-long learning, (Holec 1979). Resources and methods listed previously are meant to be effectively used to equip the learners with the language tool for effective communication in the language and as a tool for other school subjects. This implies that communicative and linguistic competences are the goals of the English language curriculum. Teaching strategies adopted by English language teachers must take cognizance of this goal by being interactive and practice oriented.

2.1 Relevance of interaction in English Language Classroom

- Learners learn best if they work in groups to share different perspectives
- It enables them bring their prior knowledge on the task.
- Learning is more effective when students collaboratively and actively engage in the learning process.
- It is through interaction with people, their environment and relating the concept taught to what they already know; that help learners to reflect on past experiences and in knowledge construction.
- The learner gains knowledge through real experiences that is purposeful and contextualized.
- Through collaboration learners develop the habit of thinking as they learn.
- Learners are made to be active participants in the classrooms.

It is against this back drop that the researchers will explore how some of these strategies can be effectively utilized to enhance the teaching and learning of English.

3. Methods and Strategies used in English Language classroom

Many Scholars such as Izuagba, (2012) Njemanze, (2010) and Aigo, (2012) have proposed different interactive method and strategies that can be used to enhance English language teaching and learning; they include;

- ❖ Group work
- ❖ Think -Pair- share
- ❖ Debates
- ❖ Prediction
- ❖ Discussion and practice method
- ❖ Diagrams
- ❖ Brainstorming
- ❖ Scaffolding
- ❖ Small group activity
- ❖ Role playing method
- ❖ Jigsaw
- ❖ Mentoring and many others

However, the following are considered more adequate in this paper

3.1 Role Playing Method

This is an important strategy used to engage the students in activity that will bring out their intellectual potentials. “Role playing helps the students to examine thoughtfully different ways of resolving social and personal conflict. It equips students with skills to be more efficient and effective in their world. It has the function of identifying the real potential of students in average classroom setting” (Njemanze, 2010:261). It enhances student involvement in a classroom setting. By playing the role of another person, the student learns to modify his behavioral pattern and attitude. He is exposed to interpersonal relations and feelings of high or low esteem; if he/she does well or derails. In our use of English language classroom, some students were assigned roles based on the literature test. In the process they were criticized and others tried to play similar roles better

3.2 Discussion and practice method

This strategy exposes students to deeper reasoning in order to make them contribute effectively in the discussion. Discussion and practice method help students to discuss, analyze and criticize issues raised in the classroom. Discussions are elaborately and collaboratively arrived at and responsibility for learning is shared. In our

classroom, learners were asked to discuss the issue of school girls who were abducted by Boko Haram Insurgents. This scenario helped the shy students to discuss freely and their errors corrected by their lecturers. Learners are able to freely discuss their learning experience based on the knowledge they generated from collaborative learning. The positive effects of concept mapping technique and other collaborative learning strategies on the performance of students have been widely researched and documented empirically. These strategies should be used by the teacher to enhance the learners' performance.

3.3 Prediction

This is an interactive activity which enables learners to think as they learn. It teaches reflective thinking, critical and creative thinking. For instance, in teaching reading comprehension, the title of the passage can be used for this activity. The teacher can also read the introductory sentences and ask the learners to make a prediction on what could be the next action, using common question word such as; apply, construct, locate, what would be the expected result and more. It does not really matter how exact their predictions are, the important thing is that the learners are given the opportunity to communicate in the target language. The teacher also can use probing questions to make them reflect, share and think deeper.

3.4 Small Group Activity

This strategy is related to the discussion and practice method. Such words as demonstrate, interpret etc are used in this activity. The difference is that every student in this group is maximally involved in activity participation. The co-coordinator induces an activity that is fully participatory, involving brainstorming sessions.

3.5 Brainstorming

This involves creative activity which generates spontaneous ideas. Brainstorming can be undertaken as a pair-task, or in groups. It can be use at any point during the lesson. Such words as what was the motive? What is the main idea, what is the relationship between? And more are used to elicit response. Brainstorming has the following qualities;

- It is usually short as it does not last for more than five minutes
- It helps the learners to think deeply about the concept by relating it to their prior knowledge and background.
- As they brainstorm, each learner in the group brings to the task his/her experience and this enriches their knowledge and what is generated.
- Brainstorming makes them learn how to think critically and reflectively.
- Through brainstorming, students develop team spirit and the ability to work as a group.

3.6 'Think-Pair-Share'

Using this interactive strategy to teach grammar, the grammatical item is introduced and each learner is expected to first work alone, think and come up with the solution. This is done in a short period of time and it induces group discussion. The discussion centers on the answers each person or group present to the group task. This is reviewed in order to reach a compromise. The group work provides the learners a safe environment for everyone to ask questions, and find out why some answers are right or wrong. There could be disagreements, arguments as the learners discuss; they can refer to their texts for solution or invite the teacher who is always around to monitor and facilitate the activities. The teacher does not give the answers unless in very difficult contexts; rather he uses probing questions to make the group think deeper and reflect in order to resolved the issue. Example of the topic used in this activity is in teaching lexical relations such as homonyms, homophones, antonyms and more.

3.7 Group work

Group work gives students the opportunity to learn from their classmates and exchange information, build teams and form cohesion. At the end of the interaction, each group is encouraged to present her work to the whole class. The presentation further gives students the opportunity for whole class interaction, argument and explanation. The teacher then summarizes and clarifies all issues on the task.

3.8 Diagrams

Diagram is another interactive activity used in showing the relationships among concepts. It is a technique used to visually represent the relationships among different concepts. Diagrams are graphic tools for organizing and representing knowledge. In diagrams, key concepts are usually represented using squares while the sub ideas are put in circles. They may also be connected with arrows in a downward-branching hierarchical structure in the order related to the concepts

4. Findings and Results

This study discovered that interaction in the classroom facilitate teaching and learning of the English Language. They encourage collaborative activities which keep the learner mentally alert in the classroom. Interactive learning strategies allow students to engage with new material as they learn. This helps them to process the information, think through problems and arrive at their own meaning. They do not only enhance retention, but make learning a fun rather than a struggle. Teachers can use one or more multiple interactive strategies in a particular language lesson to effectively engage the students in the task and make them use the language effectively

A lot of research evidence has confirmed that these interactions in English language classroom enhance learning and retention and facilitate the development of autonomous learners. Teachers need to adopt these strategies in order to improve their teaching competencies. Collaborative learning strategies, including interactive strategies, provide genuine communication and interaction environment for learners to illustrate their individual ideas (see Okebukola, 2002). They are also able to participate equally, experiment and use the target language more than they would have been able to do in a whole class arrangement. These strategies make the learner to be self motivated and self directed to learn. Finally, Danmole (2011) affirms that; when students are working together without the teacher controlling everyone, they take some of their own learning decisions, decide what language to use to complete the task and work without the pressure of the whole class listening to what they are doing.

5. Conclusion

Obviously, the teachers' role as the motivator, organizer and programme director is usually instrumental to the achievement of successful learning experience. The benefits of interaction in classroom are enormous and these strategies have worked in our classrooms. The teacher's tasks are greatly reduced and the students are encouraged to think critically thereby enhancing their initiative while utilizing their time effectively. This is because the method used in classroom interactions which is traced back to the Constructivist theory of learning is learner-centered. Thus the general principle of the Constructivist theory which emphasize that learners come into class with ideas from different backgrounds and they are able to 'construct' knowledge when they collaborate and perform tasks in a classroom context, is evident in this study. The teachers facilitated learning and learners were active participants in the learning process. This paper thus, advocates for the adoption of the interaction in the teaching and learning of the English language in our various classrooms.

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