Enhancing Students' Communicative Skills through Classroom Interaction in Iraqi EFL Classes

Ahmed K. Fahad

University of Thi Qar

College of Education

Department of English

February 2012

الخلاصة:

كانت مهارة التخاطب والمهارات اللفضية دائما تعتبر قياسا لتعليم اللغة في كل ارجاء العالم. في العراق، كان مستوى متعلمي اللغة الأنكليزية كلغة اجنبية دائما غير مقنع واصبح امر اعتيادي ان نجد خريجي اقسام اللغة الأنكليزية في الجامعات يواجهون تحديا واضحا في اكتساب مهارات التخاطب الشفوي. يبدو ان هناك افتقار واضح في تقديم اللغة الهدف داخل الصفوف ولطالما كان التركيز دائما على القواعد والتركيب وعادة لا يكون هناك خطاب داخل الصف باللغة الهدف بين الأستاذ والطلبة وحسب رؤية الباحث لم نجد هناك دراسة واحدة اجريت لبحث التركيب الأجتماعي للحديث داخل الصف في وضع تدريس اللغة الأنكليزية كلغة اجنبية في العراق والتي تم تعريفها من قبل "رينكيما" (١٩٩٣، ص ٥) على انها العلاقة بين الشكل والوظيفة في التخاطب اللفضي والذي اثبت فاعليته كستراتيجية لتعليم اللغة. ان هدف هذه الدراسة هو لبيان اهمية هذه الأستراتيجية وكيفية تطبيقها في السياق العراقي. تعتبر العناصر الثلاثة (المعلم والمتعلم والمنهج) في العراق غالبا ما تكون مؤطرة باطر كلاسيكية. التعليم غالبا ما يكون متمركز حول المدرس وهو الذي يقوم باغلب المهام اما المتعلمون فهم ليس الا مستلمين سلبيين للمعلومات. اما مناهج تعليم اللغة الأنكليزية كلغة اجنبية فغالبا ما تكون مركزية وموضوعة من قبل وزارة التربة ولا تشتمل في الغالب على استخدام اللغة الهدف داخل الصف ويقتصر دور المتعلمين بها على مهام تتعلق بالتمارين النحوية والواجبات البيتية. حديثا، على اي حال، اصبح الأهتمام في اللغة الأنكليزية في العراق كبير. فبعد ٢٠٠٣ انفتح العراق على العالم واصبح اللغة الأنكليزية مطلوبة لشريحة واسعة من الناس: الذين يبحثون عن عمل، الذين يرومون اكمال دراستهم وكذلك للذين يطمحون للتحصيل الأكاديمي الذاتي. من اجل ارضاء هذه الحاجة، بزغت معاهد اهلية بشمل واسع.

Abstract:

Oral Proficiency and communicative skills have always been a benchmark of ELT all over the world. In Iraq, the level of EFL learners has always been unsatisfactory and it is very usual to find that graduates of Iraqi University English Departments face real difficulty in gaining proficiency skills. There is an apparent lack of exposure to the target language in Iraqi classrooms and the focus has always been on the grammar and form. There is no real classroom discourse between teachers and learners and according to the researcher's knowledge, there has been no one single study conducted to investigate the social construction of classroom talk in Iraqi EFL classes and its importance. Discourse which is defined by Renkema (1993, 5) as the relationship between form and function in verbal communication proved to be an effective language learning strategy and this article is meant to show the importance of this strategy and how it could be applied in the Iraqi context. In Iraq the three classroom factors (i.e. Teachers, learners and textbooks) are bound with classical framework. Teaching is teacher-centered where teacher has to do the majority of tasks and learners are merely passive receivers of information. EFL Curriculum is centralized by the Education ministry and is not oriented to use the target language in class and students mainly work on tasks centered on the drilling and grammar exercises of the homework. Recently, however, the interest in the English language in Iraq has increased. After 2003, Iraq has been opened up to the international community and English has become an important qualification for those seeking jobs, students willing to pursue

their graduate studies and for those aspiring for academic self achievement. To satisfy this need, Private language institutes emerged rapidly.

Aim of the Study:

The study aims to enhance students' use of oral proficiency inside classrooms. It is very normal to find that EFL learners in Iraq have accurate grammatical skills, but very poor oral proficiency. Iraqi teachers usually complain that the limited resources available in their classrooms as well as the lack of exposures to the native language are reasons for such level. However, enhancing learners' communicative skills through stimulating and encouraging students to interact in the target language is both possible and effective and cooperative learning principles can be adopted in Iraqi EFL classrooms. Nunan (1991) stated that language is acquired as learners actively interact with each other to communicate in target language.

Literature Review:

There are, generally, two views on ELT. There is the view that focused on the psycholinguistic perspective that seeks to explain second language learning as a cognitive processing in brain of individuals (Doughty & Long, 2003). The other view conceives of second language learning in a socio-linguistic term. Here language learning is seen as an emergent, socially constructed phenomenon (Firth & Wagner, 1997). This is an interaction-based instruction that makes available samples of the target language to the learners through classroom interaction. Second

language classrooms are to be considered as a community group and a social place not just a learning one. There is a pressing need to give students fair opportunity to use, produce and practice English inside classroom and to give them a sense of various forms and meanings used in everyday conversation in English.

Though, recently, communicative Language teaching approach turned to be the goal for learning the English language in Iraq, observation of the classes showed that the classroom interaction as a learning strategy has not been implemented into the classroom practices. According to the Iraqi ministry of education, students' performance in the Examination of the third intermediate level for this year (2011) which has witnessed the kick start of the adoption of the communicative approach curriculum in the third intermediate level, students' performance was among the worst compared with previous years. The interactive model is not being adopted. According to this approach students were taught by teachers that are not often interacting with them. Here, teachers have been accustomed to the traditional way of teaching English in which they are considered an authority who dominate the whole of the class. The curriculums they use are intended to put everything into the students' heads and no attention is paid to any kind of interaction between teachers and learners. Most classroom talk here is concerned with pedagogical content and not with real life situations in the target language. Hymes (1972, 45) stated that "there are rules of use without which the rules of grammar would be useless". This approach often left students uninterested.

Unlike public EFL classes in Universities, EFL classes in private language Institutes in Iraq adopt communicative language learning

approaches, adaptable English language courses textbook and a rather learners-centered teaching. In these classes, learners are given more opportunities to communicate in the target language inside classrooms. According to Sze (1995, 229) this approach increases the amount of speaking practice in the classroom. The communicative competence sought here embraces knowing what to say to whom in what circumstance and how to say it. The students are exposed to real life situations and taught social expressions and idioms as used by the native speakers of English

Methodology:

This research is qualitative in nature and is based on real observation of two different students' discussion groups: Group 1 involves 10 students recently graduating from an English language University department (University of Thi Qar in the city of Nasiriyah) and Group 2 contains 10 graduates of an EFL course from a private language institute (Nasiriyah Institute for English language teaching located in the city of Nasiriyah). The two groups were given a topic for discussions in two different times with the aid of a dialogue facilitator. The Observations were based on identifying the level of the fluency in using the target language as well as the use of social expression and suitable vocabulary in communicating in the target language. Learners were asked to handle the discussion using English only. The topic is about current political affairs in Iraq and is familiar to the two groups. The facilitator started the topic with brief description followed by questions that stimulate discussions among the learners.

Analysis and Results:

It was clear that the learners in Group 1 who were taught using traditional language learning approach and who were not given an opportunity to communicate in the target language inside classroom showed poor oral proficiency and are hesitant and allow the interference of their mother language in expressing in the target language. Errors in Fluency among learners in Group 2 were less. The use of natural conversational strategies developed by Sacks et al (1973) such as Preference organization, Prefaces, repair and Topic shift were apparently adopted by the learners in this group. Talks among the private language institute graduate learners contain more fluency and control over the vocabulary and the use of social expressions used in the English language. The textbook that were adopted in this classrooms use communicative approach to English language teaching: The New Headway English course frequently teaches students social expressions and the functional use of tenses rather than the formal one. University graduate learners, when in a position to express socially, tend to use the Iraqi social forms literally translated into that context. Hesitation, self repair and incomplete utterances were apparent among this group of graduate learners.

This study has distinguished two types of EFL classrooms in Iraq through having sample students from each type and gets them involved in a group discussion. The results showed that the private language institutes graduate students who were previously given wider opportunity to communicate in the target language are more confident in using the target language. They have communicative skills that aid them to handle the discussion more fluently. They have more control over what Hymes

(1972) called "communicative competence" or the ability to communicate efficiently in English. Conversely, university English department graduates are less proficient in using the target language and they were observed to be less fluent, hesitant and allow the interference of their mother language in coping with instances were socially and culturally bound expression are met. They find difficulty in maintaining fluency when communicating. Those learners were observed to find difficulty in interpreting certain utterances that are not transferable from the mother tongue into the target language. They are in ignorance of the socio-linguistic behaviors and the social expressions of the target language.

From the above analytical account, we can summarize the results in a chart based on whether the topic discussed for each group. The diameter used here based on the observation and judged on whether the features were either RARE or HIGH. This is shown in the table below:

Communicative features	Native language intervention	Fluency	The Use of Conversational strategies
GROUP 1	High	Rare	Rare
GROUP 2	Rare	High	High

Conclusion:

This paper has examined current classroom practices in two different institutions adopting different language teaching methodologies. The study results showed how classroom interaction is both effective and possible when there are interested teachers adopting activating techniques. Unlike practices usually conducted in Universities, classroom practices that are conducted in the private language institute result in an acquisition of the oral proficiency. At the end of this article, some plausible recommendations have been suggested to improve the classroom practices in the university classroom and to adopt strategies that enhance classroom interaction among the learners in Iraqi EFL classrooms. There is a call to treat classroom as a community that would be utilized by teachers for the learning of English and specifically to gain conversational skills. There is an ever-increasing need that students in EFL classrooms are directed to fulfill a functional need (Taylor & Wolfson, 1978). We take the position that, according to Wenger (1978), learners are members of classroom as a community of practice oriented to rules and shared views about their actions and about themselves as member of community. Meng (2011, 100) stated that the communication between teachers and learners in the classroom is an important part in improving students' communicative competence and stressed that teacher's language can facilitate or hinder the process of classroom teaching. Iberri-Shea (2009, 20) also asserted that students can take part in a class discussion and they can be stimulated to do so by teachers who choose among variety of tools and strategies.

Recommendations:

It has been felt that classroom interaction in Iraqi public EFL classes has great potential as a teaching device. A comparison of two different classrooms adopting different methodologies and practices reveals that there is an urgent need to restructure the teaching practices and to start thinking seriously of abandoning that traditional ELT approaches which teach language in isolation and to adopt functional language component. For that reason, utilizing classroom time to conduct a real conversation in the target language is far more effective than filling up students with grammar and tedious drilling. An emphasis has been made toward the use of the target language inside classrooms and advocates for strategies that teachers can use to encourage and stimulate learners toward this.

Though, generally, university level EFL classrooms in Iraq are usually large classes with limited resources, teachers can have activating techniques to keep the students involved and have them doing and producing rather than merely passive receivers of information. It could, however, be argued that the limited resources in the Iraqi Public EFL classes such as the lack of sufficient place, audio-visual aid and multimedia, and the ever-lasting over crowdedness in classrooms may hinder any recommendations that may be raised here, but conversational class demands nothing more than teachers that have the interest to use activating techniques inside their classrooms. This article calls for the use of the English conversation inside the classroom and enhance interaction in a form of cooperative learning. Teachers can, within the poor available resources that are typical of public EFL classrooms in Iraq, improve teaching and make the classroom a better learning environment through the use of variety of tools and strategies. Teachers do not have to buy special instructional material or textbooks to use these interactive methods. Regular textbooks can be adapted without too much

effort on the teachers' part (Ilola et al, 1994, 7). From the results and the literature reviewed, I have selected techniques that could be applied as best practices for an interactive EFL classes in Iraq.

Questioning is one of the main activity that teacher can use to stimulate learners to use the target language. Markee (2004) advocates for the use of "Counter questions" which are started by learners and then returned by teacher as an answer and comment turn as well. Questioning students can stimulate their participation in the lesson. According to Meng (2011, 101), more referential questions should be put forth in classroom instead of display questions. Referential questions can help negotiate meaning in the communication between teachers and learners. Brown and Yule (1983) asserted the importance of this when they draw a distinction between two function of language: the transactional use which is concerned with the expression of content, and the interactional use which is concerned with establishing and maintaining social relationships. The application of this strategy in Iraqi classrooms is effective and can enhance the role of social context of language content. Teachers may not pay much attention to errors made by students in this respect as it is normal that students who participate in group discussions may display frequent lexical, grammatical and formal errors.

Taylor's (1978,38) suggestion to construct a speech situation and then to give assignments to students is another effective strategy in Iraqi EFL classes. Iraqi EFL classes usually focus on the linguistics rule of the language. Here, a call has been made to practice not only the syntax and vocabulary, but also the specific sociolinguistic rules appropriate to the speech situation. Students will enjoy the lesson when there is sufficient stimulation from the teacher. Ibrerri-Shea (2009,20) asserted that

students can take part in a group or class discussions regardless of what resources are there in the classroom

Sometime, due to the extreme lack of exposure to the target language in Iraq, EFL learners do not have good conversational skills that enable the teachers to use activating techniques for enhancing classrooms conversation. The use of the native language is permitted here and is not considered a pitfall. Liebscher and O' Cain (2005, 237) argued that "code-switching" in classroom in the sense of community of practice has a participated related function in which there is a common understanding about the teachers' and students' purposes for their presence in the classroom. There is no risk in permitting students to use the first language when the conditions are right, that is, if learners feel comfortable using both the first and second language in the classroom. In Iraqi EFL classrooms, then, students may not be strictly discouraged to use their native language. Ilola et al (1994, 7) stated that native language use is not necessarily always inappropriate. For example, if students are trying to better understand the activity procedure, it may be helpful if they are allowed to use their native language to some extent.

Task-based teaching is highly recommended for teachers to make language lessons more interactive especially when it links pair and group work with relevant activities. Iraqi EFL teachers and learners will have two main challenges here: the large classes and the limited time available in the lessons in order for group work to be maintained. Typically seats in Iraqi classroom are arranged in rows fixed to the floor and make it difficult to move chairs to make group work. Yet there is always a way out. A classroom may not have the latest in sophisticated material, but every classrooms have students and peer interactive approaches is always

possible (Ilola et al, 1995,2). It could be possible to ask the students in one row to turn around and talk to the students sitting in the row behind them. Another solution is to assign tasks to be prepared outside classroom and then discussed inside classroom. This strategy is effective in coping with the limited time available in the typical EFL lessons in Iraq. In a project conducted as part of the Shaping the way we teach English course implemented in Iraq (2009), it has been proved that using external authentic language material in a form of a task is effective. Students were assigned to use the internet resources to come up with materials relevant to the lesson topics. This has contributed in stimulating students to communicate in the target language.

References

1. Brown, G. & Yule, G. (1983). *Discourse Analysis*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

2. Doughty, C. & Long, M. H (2003). *Handbook of Second Language Acquisition*. Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publication.

3. Fahad, A. (2009)."Shaping the way we teach English" Course project. *Using the internet resources as an authentic language material in Iraqi EFL classes. Iraq*

4. Firth, A. & Wagner, J. (1997). *On Discourse, Communication, and Fundamental Concepts in SLA Research*. Modern Language Journal, Vol. 81, PP: 285-300.

5. Hymes, D. (1972). On communicative Competence. In J.B. Pride and Janet Holmes (ed). Sociolinguistics. Harmondsworth, England, Penguin books: 269-293

6. Iberri-Shea, G. (2009). Using Public Speaking Tasks in English Language Teaching. *English Teaching Forum*, Vol. 47, No. 2. PP: 18-29.

7. Ilola, M. L., Power, K. M., & Jacobs, G. (1995). Structuring Student Interaction to promote learning (ed). In Kral, T. (1995). *Selected Articles from the English Language teaching Forum 1989-1993*. Washington, USA.

8. Liebscher, G. & O'Cain, J.D. (2005). Learners Code-Switching in the content based Foreign Language Classrooms. *The Modern Language Journal*, Vol.89, No. 2, PP: 234-247.

9. Markee, N. (2004). Zones of interactional Transition in EFL Classes. The *Modern Language Journal*, Vol.88, No. 4, PP: 583-569.

10. Meng, X. (2011). Action Study of teacher's language on EFL classroom interaction. *Theory and practice in language studies*, Vol. 1, No.1, PP, 98-104

11. Nunan, D. (1991). *Language teaching Methodology*. London: Prentice hall

12. Renkema, J. (1993). *Discourse Studies*. USA.

13. Sacks, H., Schegloff, E. A., & Jefferson, G.(1974). A simplest Systematics for the Organization of Turn Taking for Conversation. *Language*, Vol. 50. PP: 696-735.

14. Sze, P. (1995). Teaching Conversation in the Second Language Classroom: Problems and Prospects. *Education Journal*, Vol. 23, No. 2, PP: 229-251.

15. Taylor, B.P & Wolfson, N. (1978). Breaking Down the Free Conversation Myth. *TESOL Quarterly*, Vol.12, No. 1. PP: 31-39.

16. Wenger, E. (1998). *Communities of Practice: Learning, Meaning, and Identity.   Cambridge*. Cambridge University Press