BringingClassroom Interaction Closer to Natural Conversation – Why and How? A Pedagogic Inquiry

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Abstract: *After the heydays of Generative linguistics in the last decades of the twentieth century, its influence on applied linguistics in general and in second language acquisition research has been waning. In its place, the sociocultural aspects of language learning attract more research and theorizing, following the revival of interest in Lev Vygotsky. It is in this context, this paper argues for more space and time for natural conversation among learners and between learners and the teacher so that part of the ease, speed and perfection which are the hallmarks of first language acquisition can be brought to second language learning, as well. Research in conversation analysis (CA) highlights the role of natural conversation in building bondage among interlocutors who are not guided by any pre-specified agenda related to the topic, turn taking, hierarchy, or protocol which are the main features of usual classroom interaction. In the absence of pedagogic distancing by the teacher and self-alienation on the part of the teacher, natural conversation is likely to flourish in the second language classroom. Therefore, it has also been suggested that the efficacy of informal classroom conversation is likely to result in better classroom management on the part of the teacher since learners will be fully engrossed in learning activities promoted by the fear-free atmosphere.*

Research studies have established a marked distinction between natural conversation and classroom interaction(Ellis, R. 2008). Following this line of thinking, this paper tries to inquire the possibilities of 'elevating' at least part of classroom interaction into normal conversationso that learners may acquire the basics of real life communication. Though both the quality and quantity of exposure are crucial to learning a second language in formal classroom situations, it is the quality of the target language that gets the learner engaged in natural communication. If the variety of the spoken idiom possesses personal warmth, and if beginners are constantly exposed to this informal variety, they feel at home. Once we get the learner engaged in 'languaging' activities (Swain, 2006), quantity of the input plays the crucial role in sustaining the learner's motivation and interest. This paper first tries to identify the nature of the language which dominates classroom environment, used for academic and class managementpurposes, then outlines the features of natural conversation, and finally proposes the need, and means of bringing classroom interaction closer to natural conversation so that young learners start learning language by *using*or functioning in language.

I would like to fix the term 'languaging' as pivotal to the interaction in second language instruction. Though the term was in currency forty years ago (Lado, 1979), Merrill Swain uses it in a specified and restricted sense, following Lev Vygotsky's theory of sociocultural genesis of language. Of the available theories, I am convinced that Vygotsky's cultural-historical activity theory (CHAT) best suits the Indian English classrooms.

Establishing a firm connection between language and thought, Vygotsky(1978) states that the development of all higher order mental functions are mediated, and language is one of the most effective tools of mediation. Following the role of language, not just as a tool for communication, but as the most important means of defining and interpreting the world around, through multitudes of meaning making processes, Swainasserts:

This shaping and reshaping of cognition is an aspect of learning. Languaging, as I am using the term, refers to the processes of making meaning and shaping knowledge and experience through language. It is part of what constitutes learning, and is made visible as learners talk though with themselves or others, the meanings they have, and make sense of them. this means the capacity of thinking is linked to our capacity for languaging—the two are united in a dialectical relationship (Swain,2006:95).

Conversation analysis, a research area which shares an interface of various disciplines such as sociology, philosophy, clinical psychology and linguistics, identifies four fundamental aspects of conversational organization in real life: turn taking, repair, action formation and ascription, and action sequencing (Sacks,H. et al, 1974). The prime objective of any second language instructional programme naturally tends to be to approximate the learning outcome in the target language to that of the first language. But, why and where do we

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fail in our teaching a second language? If we follow the line of research in conversation analysis, and study the nature of classroom interaction using its matrix of turn taking etc. we may realize the source and nature of stumbling blocks that obstruct 'learning without tears'. We may conclude that language cannot be acquired through formal 'interaction' which takes place in the classroom in the form of the teacher's asking questions and the learner's answering them, however correct the answers are. In these chunks of interactions, the focus of the learner is most likely on the accuracy of the answer -- on the factual accuracy in the subject classes, whereas in the language class, it is the accuracy of grammar (and occasionally, of pronunciation as well).

The term 'elevating' used at the outset of this paper may need a little explanation.Classroom interaction between teachers and learners usually centres on academic rituals such as timetable, work allotment, class work, assignment and so on in which the elements of personal involvement may be less. Rod Ellis (2008) points out that classroom interaction usually tends to be teacher-centred because

… itmediates between pedagogic decision-making and the outcomes of language instruction… Teachers plan their lessons by making selections with regard to what to teach (syllabus), how to teach (method)… . When acted on, their plans result in 'classroom interaction'.This is not planned in advance, but rather is 'co-produced' with the learners. In part, it will reflect the pedagogic decisions that have been taken..."(Ellis, R. 2008:783-84).

Ellis also points out that there is a marked distinction between 'interactions that occur in naturalistic settings' and 'those that occur in classrooms'(p.779). 'Pseudo-productions' dominate the latter. In that case, it may not be wrong if one concludes that the more distanced these two types of interactions are, the slower the learning of a second language.

In India, one reason why teachers of English do not dare to let learners engage in free conversation in the classroom may be the fear of getting the class 'out of control' and thereby getting a bad impression about them as 'inefficient' by administrators, heads and parents. A few decades ago, when many classes were conducted in a single hall for lack of infrastructure facilities, the fear of 'indiscipline' was more or less obvious. But, as schools prospered, and privatization of education became the norm rather than the exception, schools do have separate classrooms these days, and separate rooms for housing lab, library and so on. Still classes remain to be (and should be) more or less silent, especially the English class. Why? Shades of fear are at work behind this unpleasant silence; quite a few fossilized superstitions too on the part of the school administrators contribute to the 'stillbirth' of communication in the English classroom. This paper tries to investigate the sources of silence in a language classroom, in a changed era in which the old notion of 'language *for* communication' has been redefined as 'language *as* communication'.

Mistaking the cargo for the carriage is most likely to damage the whole business; and that is what is happening in the case of English in the Indian classrooms. Content subjects such as physics and social science are cargo; the language through which they are taught and learnt is the carriage. 'To teach English' even today for most teachers seems to be teaching the rules of usage. The notion of communication does not arise at all. Classroom communication does not happen; what takes place in the classroom is questions and answers.

How to blend classroom management and classroom communication so that both get enhanced? In fact, they are not two entities; but two sides of the same coin. When the class is taken as a speech community, being a part of it means communicating with the rest of the community, do things and get things done. This 'doing and getting things done' is exactly what class management means. For example, when a teacher insists on collaborative learning, the underlying principle is caring and sharing, and language here operates as a medium of expressing emotions, feelings and thoughts. That is to say, an individual shares his cognitive and emotive self with the rest of the community through communication. Language here is not just a tool; language *is* communication.

Classroom management, as a component in the syllabuses of pre-service induction programmes may focus mainly on soft skills, since there are separate components in the syllabuses which deal with communication or language.For instance, Muntner, M. (2008) identifies quite a few components of effective class management such as positive climate, teacher sensitivity, regard for student perspectives, behavior managementand classroom organization . Some others rightly view teacher-learner interaction as the effective means to produce better learning output in terms of content knowledge.

The teacher assumes most of the responsibility for structuring and scaffolding student learning when new content domains are being introduced, but as students develop expertise, they assume increasing responsibility for regulating their own learning (Brophy,2001: 236).

As a result, novice teachers are likely to forget or ignore the role of learner-teacher interaction, which includes those stock words and phrases called phatic communion, in building a strong relation between them. Research studies of the 1980s in interaction analysis (IA) concentrated mainly on the stumbling blocks of the interlocutors in conversation. Therefore, the objective of IA was mainly to identify the negative elements of the speaker in action, so that feedback could be provided for further repair of speech. Moreover, the focus was on form—grammaticality and accuracy–rather than on function (Ellis, 1984; Long, 1996).However, a reawakening

seems to have taken place as a continuation of IA with greater focus on meaning negotiation in classroom conversational analysis (Ko, 2013).

Referring to the emergence of conversation analysis, Jack Sidnell (2020) remarks: "Language is both a cognitive and an interactional phenomenon". This statement may remind students of linguistics of the heydays of Generative linguistics in which the socio-cultural aspects of language 'use' went rather neglected.

Critically assessing the research trends in theoretical and applied linguistics of more than a decade (2005 to 2016), Lei and Liu concludes that

"…over the past 12 years, researchers have become more interested in sociocultural and language policy issues, but less interested in the learning of some formal linguistic issues, such as phonology and syntax."(Lei and Liu , 2018: 9)

This swinging towards the sociocultural factors of language learning, which was initiated by Vygotsky seems to be a healthy sign promising better prospects for the teachers and learners of ESL. Reviewing Lei and Liu's empirical studyin 2018, Anderson notes that recently there seems to be

…a sustained move away from the cognitively-oriented research that dominated the SLA literature in the 1970s-1990s, and towards more socioculturally-oriented, multilingual research into language learning and teaching…It's noticeable that many of the topics that show the highest decline in popularity bear links to what might be classed as mentalist and/or neo-Chomskian theories of grammatical and phonological acquisition, topics that tended to dominate both SLA and other applied linguistics research in the 1980s and 1990s…This increase is paralleled in the rise in citations of key authors within sociocultural theory, such as Lantolf (2006) and Vygotsky (1978). (Anderson, 2018).

Illustrating the notion of 'languaging', Merrill Swain emphasizes the role of sociocultural experience underlying the processes of language learning. "Languaging" is the use of language to mediate cognitively complex acts of thinking. It is the process of making meaning and shaping knowledge and experience through language" (Swain, 2006).

Establishing a part-whole relation between conversation and languaging, this paper proposes to reduce the gap between formal classroom interaction and natural conversation. Conversation analysts emphasize the role of environment in their analysis of language in use.

An underlying, guiding assumption of research in conversation analysis is that the home environment of language is co-present interaction and that its structure is in some basic ways adapted to that environment. This distinguishes CA from much of linguistic science, which generally understands language to have its home in the human mind and to reflect in its structure the organization of mind (Sidnell,2020).

Two mutually contributing factors together turn natural conversation in SL classroom into rigid interaction. First, is the formal teaching of the target language which gives the learners an impression of impersonal, detached, inquiry-response type of interaction. Secondly, on the part of the learners, the highly formal atmosphere of the classroom invites a corresponding formal language use, as well. Though 'the co-presence' of teacher-learner is present in the classroom, the 'home environment' goes missing.

Conversation analysts tend to emphasize the fact that interaction is the arena for human action. In order to accomplish the business of everyday life…we interact with one another. Conversation analysis seeks to discover and describe (formally and in a rigorous, generalizable way) the underlying norms and practices that make interaction the orderly thing that it is(Sidnell, 2020).

A language classroom rightly demands a better status than a meeting place between the teacher and the learners to engage themselves in academic activities. The four-walled space may be treated as an interface between the learners' collective lived experience and the newer vistas awaiting them in the syllabus, coursebooks, and tests. Here, the second language teacher, of course, is the tourist guide who conducts the learners round 'the brave new world' through the stories, prose pieces, poems and activities related to them. The personal touch of the guide transforms the sightseeing tour into an exploration. As a result, the learner escorted by the teacher, traverses terrains beyond the coursebooks and even the syllabus. It is the warmth of conversation between them, not the specialized knowledge (grammatical competence) that makes the tour a memorable experience, hence the significance of classroom conversation. The manipulated interaction fails to get the learner involved in communication, since there is no information gap in those exchanges.

Conversation analysts are more interested in natural language use than pre-structured interaction as commonly heard in classroom interaction.

"A key issue in conversation analysis," says Brian Paltridge, "is the view of ordinary conversation as the most basic form of talk. For conversation analysts, conversation is the main way in which people come together, exchange information, negotiate and maintain social relations"

Based on the nature of classroom communication, several categories have been identified (Allwright, 1980; Mc Tear, 1975 and Ellis, 1984). Mc Tear identifies four types: mechanical (no exchange of meaning),

meaningful (meaning is contextualized, but no information conveyed), pseudo-communicative (new information is conveyed, but not as in a naturalistic discourse) and real communication (spontaneous speech resulting from the exchange of opinions, jokes, classroom management, etc.) (Ellis, 2008).The first two focus on the code or form, whereas in the last – real communication – exchange of information takes place; pseudo-communication lies somewhere in between, remarks Ellis (p.788).

This classification seems to be of paramount significance in ESL classrooms since teachers are expected not to stop with the first three stages. The final target must be the fourth stage in which self-triggered, voluntary initiative is taken by the learner in search of sharing information or leading to self-expression. At the same time, it must be noted that in an exposure-poor environment, the two interlocutors (teacher- learner/ learner- learner) inevitably have to pass through the first three stages before reaching the stage of real communication. Very few ESL teachers in India are lucky to have learners who hail from the upper strata of socio-economic background, and who naturally communicate in the target language.

Based on the first step, namely turn taking in the matrix, conversation analysts point out that natural conversation and classroom interaction -- whether in second language or subject classes -- follow different types of turn taking procedures. In classrooms, there seems to be a 'strict allocation' of turns, initiative is always by the teacher, the freedom to interrupt is reserved for the teacher, the norm of onespeaker at a time is followed, and a predetermined topic is discussed. (McHoul, 1978; Lorscher, 1986; Van Lier, 1988; and Markee, 2000 as cited in Ellis, 1984).

It is high time, Indian research in applied linguistics and classroom practices paid more attention to the sociocultural aspects of second language learning. What Block prophetically stated almost two decades ago, about the imminent 'social turn' in SLA research is coming true.(Block, D. 2003:139).

Time will tell if I will be deemed to have read current trajectories accurately and if my speculations might one day be considered fairly good predictions. Time will also tell if there really will be a social turn in SLA (Block, D. 2003:139).

To conclude, once again let me follow Vygotsky's suggestion of the importance of adult-peer interaction in developing communicative competence. To 'elevate' the rather rigid and formal classroom interaction into lively conversation between learners and teachers and among learners, what the ESL teacher should possess first is higher order communication skills, both in quality and quantity. Secondly, the teacher must be able to fuse effective communication skills into classroom management. Freedom of communication in the class not only enhances learners' communication skills, but on the part of the teacher, it may also lead to better class management, as well.

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