The impact of pedagogic conditions for language use on the learners

Abstract

This case study explores the impact of a series of workshops intended to improve the pedagogic conditions for language use in the classroom. The focus was on fostering learner involvement on the assumption that this would lead to more meaningful language use. Different data-collection methods were used in order to analyse the factors at play that the learners perceived as relevant. From the analysis of the results obtained, the implications for language teaching are drawn.

Introduction

One of the learners who participated in this study made use of the following quotation as part of her reflections on what she had gained from the language classroom on the course of this investigation:

"Do not accept everyday matters as a natural thing since . . . NOTHING must seem natural, NOTHING must seem impossible to change."

Bertolt Brecht

Contained in these words, there is a clearly optimistic view of classroom-based research which serves as a reminder that the desire to change and improve may be shared by both the teacher and the learners. In fact, the case explored here is one where both parties worked together to identify context-specific issues out of the reality of their classroom. The driving force behind this study is the firm conviction that there are always aspects of the teaching/learning process that need betterment. In tandem with this, there was the need to improve the conditions for language use in my classroom.
The study begins with a baseline analysis of the present situation at the start of the study. It then goes on to formulate a problem that derives from the way in which the language classroom caters for the communicative aspect of language proficiency. In due course, a proposal for action is planned. The proposal hinges on a task-orientation, that is the use of tasks as a means to maximise the conditions for language use. Its rationale is informed by relevant literature but the action proposed is tailored to the requirements of my context of situation. Thus, though systematic and principled, the proposal is not shackled by any tried and tested model. The focus of the study lies on the analysis and interpretation of the data collected in order to explore the impact of conditions for language use on the learners.

Background to the study

The aim of this section is to provide the reader with the most salient features of the context of situation that serve as the baseline for the study.

The institutional context and language teaching

Instituto de Enseñanza Superior “Olga Cossettini” (IES) in the city of Rosario, Argentina, is a state Teacher Training College that offers initial teacher preparation. Given that on graduation, the students are certified to practise their profession across a broad range of contexts and levels, one of the goals of the TEFL programme is to help the learners achieve a satisfactory level of language proficiency in its linguistic and communicative aspects. In accordance with this goal, attention should be given to the formal aspects of language -accuracy-focused and content-oriented-, as well as to language use -fluency-focused and interpersonality-oriented (Brown and Yule 1983).
My concern is that when the learners are in a situation in which they need to use language, I believe the message is put at the service of language, instead of putting language at the service of the message. In other words, it would seem that the underlying concern for language forms overrides the balance between language form and meaning that should characterise communicative acts in a classroom context (Ellis 1994).

In view of my perception, I decided to collect some baseline data from the learners so as to define the present situation more objectively. To this end, I selected two methods of data collection so as to compare and confirm findings across methods: a questionnaire with closed items and a semi-structured interview.

Baseline study of the present situation

The analysis of the data reveals that there is an imbalance between the linguistic and the communicative aspects of language proficiency: (1) there is a focus on language as content, determined by activities that prioritise accuracy and language forms at the expense of meaning (Skehan 1998); (2) there is a focus on teacher-led classroom behaviour, determined by the initiation-response-feedback sequence with the learners often restricted to a responding role (Coulthard 1985), and by the lockstep condition with all the learners working at the same pace under the direction of the teacher (Wright 1987); (3) speech does not proceed in real time, that is messages are not produced and processed on-line while words are being encoded and decoded (Bygate 1987).

As derived from the baseline analysis, language is used by the learners as a passive response to teacher initiation, to the lecture mode, to the lockstep condition, to transmission of knowledge. All these unfavourable conditions to
produce and process learner-initiated messages that are fluency-focused and interpersonality-oriented need reviewing. In my belief, the solution lies in maximising the conditions for language use so that the learners use English meaningfully, the way proactive senders and receivers of messages interact in real life – for a purpose, in a context, in real time (Bygate 1987).

**Action plan: maximising pedagogic conditions for language use**

The local problem of language use could be solved through a *task-orientation*. By a task-orientation, I mean *the use of tasks to maximise the conditions for the learners to produce and process learner-initiated messages that are fluency-focused and interpersonality-oriented*. A task-orientation, as I see it, is a means to an end since it entails the use of tasks as a pool of resources to solve a specific problem, apposite to the context-sensitive nature of this proposal (Murphy 1998). I propose the use of tasks because they have intrinsic properties that may pave the way for the promotion of language use. The concept of task and the task properties are explored below.

**The concept of task**

As a definition of task, I suggest following Nunan who considers the task ‘as a piece of classroom work which involves learners in comprehending, manipulating, producing or interacting in the target language while their attention is principally focused on meaning rather than form’ (1989:10). The value of this definition lies in that the task is regarded as having ‘a sense of completeness’ and as being a ‘communicative act in its own right’ (ditto) while the transaction of the task may pursue both communicative and pedagogic ends. Embedded in this conception of the task, I interpret there are the following properties:
a focus on meaning
- some communication problem to solve
- an emphasis on interactional language (fluency-focused and interpersonality-oriented)
- some semblance with real-world activities
- some input data that sets out what the learners are to do in relation to the input
- a stress on cognitive processes mobilised through experiment and experience
- a demand for task outcome/completion

Bearing in mind these features, I presume that tasks have the potential for the learners to (a) fulfil a genuine purpose, that is solve a communication problem to reach an outcome; (b) use language as a means to an end, that is activate cognitive processes to do something with the input data and communicate while concentrating on meaning; (c) interact with each other in real time and manage the interaction while taking heed of their reactions and contributions.

Implicit in this proposal is the intuitive claim that a task-orientation may promote meaningful language use and learner proactivity in the classroom, whereby the learners may put language at the service of the message provided further requirements are met. These are expanded next.

Requirements

One requirement is to create a space that functions as a workshop for the co-operative production of outcomes (Wallace 1991). In order to foster interactivity and interpersonality (affective engagement), I propose group work since this pattern may (a) increase the amount of participation (b) reduce teacher-centredness (c) allow for learner co-operation and negotiation (d)
improve the affective climate (e) motivate the learners (Long 1989). To this end, the seating arrangement must be kept fluid and group patterns, varying in size and composition, be implemented at different stages. Varied interactional patterns may enable the learners to work cohesively and collaboratively compromising their individuality with group dynamics (Mc Donough and Shaw 1993).

Another requirement is to create a space with an element of reflection, the ongoing dialogue of thinking and doing (Schön 1987) so that the teacher and the learners can harmonise their contributions and do not come to perceive the task ‘as an isolated moment of work, but as a social event within the specific interpersonal experience’ (Breen 1989:191). In order to articulate reflection, I propose the use of two tools: learning diaries for learners to record their thoughts and feelings about what is done in class, why and how, and learner-teacher dialogue to explore and expand issues in the diaries together with the learners (Wallace 1998). These tools can provide feedback loops to monitor progress and feed-forward loops to make adjustments.

The implementation of a task-orientation brings about a change in the roles. The tasks are steered by the classroom manager who draws on the learners in order to reach task outcomes, whereby the learners may act as participating managers since they will be in control of messages and interaction (Legutke and Thomas 1991).

In order to make the most of tasks, I propose the design of task modules within which the tasks are sequentially coherent, i.e. following a given order, and synchronically coherent, i.e. dovetailing and complementing one another (Wallace 1991). In keeping with sequential coherence, the tasks are arranged in order of complexity, attending to the information processing load and to the selective channelling of attention towards desirable aspects of language
performance (Skehan 1998). In keeping with synchronic coherence, the tasks are thematically-linked and foster production and comprehension of messages by integrating the four language skills.

The proposal for action having been explored, the next issue of concern is the description of the research study, designed in order to investigate the impact of the proposal-in-action.

The research study

The general goal of the study is to evaluate the impact of the pedagogic conditions for language use. The specific objective is to explore the factors at play during the proposal-in-action since these may shed light on relevant issues. The hypothesis is that the implementation of favourable pedagogic conditions may promote meaningful language use.

Design, procedures and data

I studied the impact of eight workshops on the learners over a month. The learners were asked to record a diary entry after each week of lessons, using some proposed guidelines (Alwright and Bailey 1991). They were requested to record what they felt was important to them in their lessons and to expand on why they felt those issues were relevant. To minimise the problem of contamination of data, I did not ask permission to use their entries for my research until the last day of classes (Numrich 1996).

The learners were divided into small groups each with a co-ordinator who attended a 20-minute focus group meeting at the end of every week. There, I indirectly raised issues from their diary entries that needed clarification since taking that step would allow me to make adjustments (Murphy 1993). Their
comments were recorded in the form of minutes and used to complement the study of the diary data.

All lessons were observed by an experienced teacher who kept an observer's journal. To minimise contamination of data, I did not spell out to her the problem I had detected. She would record critical incidents in her journal, and I would do so in my field-notes (Wallace 1998). Weekly meetings were held to reflect on critical incidents and thus enhance awareness.

Steps towards the analysis of data

When classes had finished, I studied the diaries to discover recurrent themes. In order to ensure depth of analysis, I then selected a representative sample of 10 for the purposes of the present study. In an effort to compare and contrast findings, I inspected the following data:

(a) learning diaries  
(b) minutes of the focus group meetings  
(c) observer’s journal  
(d) field-notes

The results that follow are based on an analysis of the sets of data to identify frequently mentioned themes and salient entries.

Evaluation of results

Here I shall evaluate the impact of the proposal-in-action and explore the factors at play that resulted from the analysis of the data. These factors were grouped around the most salient themes detailed below.
Learner-learner relation

When the learners work with tasks they interact with each other and are engaged affectively. The data indicate that group work has proved beneficial because the learners could get to know each other better; share their ideas and feelings; learn from others - the reduction of the centrality of the teacher giving way to spontaneous learner-initiation.

Initially, group composition featured little variation and there was a tendency to join the nearest and dearest. These would detract from interpersonal relations and would encourage cliqueness instead (Hadfield 1992). In order to foster random groupings, the learners then were asked to form in fluid interactional patterns according to colour diagrams displayed on the board. This procedure struck the right chord mainly because the learners found it visually and kinaesthetically stimulating. The random groupings and the interactional language necessary to transact tasks helped the learners to stress affective bonds, to become more sensitive to each other's presence and to modify their contributions to the developing discourse.

Attitude to language

The learners made attempts at managing the interaction and negotiating for meaning. They felt motivated to take the floor, to express meaning and understand the meanings of others. Another important point to make is that they used language functions – such as arguing, suggesting, hypothesising – that the asymmetrical interaction between teacher and learner working in lockstep may not bring into play. In retrospect, I should acknowledge the data available for the analysis of language use are rather thin. Besides, it may be difficult to assert whether 4 weeks have been enough to make the most of interactional language.
Classroom atmosphere

The need for a positive atmosphere ranks high among these learners’ priorities. For some, feeling free to think and express themselves and having their contributions valued makes for a congenial, affable, comfortable climate. References to a relaxed classroom atmosphere may be indicative of some degree of confidence to commit themselves to their views and to initiate messages. There was some preoccupation among the learners with the teacher being non-judgmental with regard to the views they expressed. This may well have arisen because the learners have moved from a transmission model where the teacher is in control of language into the less tangible spheres of thinking and feeling, typical of interpersonality-oriented language.

Views on learning

The change from the lecture to the workshop mode has meant some learner disskilling tinged with the learners’ feeling that they were not learning ‘content’. It is relevant to note that the teaching/learning process may still be perceived by the learners from a content-orientation, stressing the formal aspects of language (phonetics and vocabulary range). Yet, there also seems to be the realisation that there are other factors that play a part in the process, namely an interpersonality-orientation that highlights affect and cognitive processes, coupled by a sense of involvement (Hadfield 1992).

Centrality of learners

Classroom dynamics has enabled the learners to feel a sense of competence that has immediate relevance to the teaching/learning process (Williams and Burden 1997). The learners express their willingness to take a more active role because they perceive a communicative purpose and feel free or...
uninhibited to express their opinions. In my belief, the learners are more active because the change in classroom dynamics has drawn them away from a responding role (Ellis 1994).

Symmetry of teacher-learner relation

This is perceived as a pivotal change that has a direct bearing on the classroom. Affective engagement with the teacher derives from a sense of trust, respect and shared involvement. These factors have lowered the social distance between the teacher and the learners, and strengthened equal distribution of referent power, i.e. motivation-based (Wright 1987), whereby individuals show commitment and interest of the other members. The synchrony of the teacher and the learners’ roles in terms of energy and enthusiasm strikes a happy medium that translates as a motivational give-and-take and makes for a better climate.

Classroom management

The aspect of the teacher’s management style that receives most saliency is ‘organisation’, something that helps the learners to be clear about the central purpose and direction of their action. This, it is suggested, has led them to plan their route towards task outcomes with the assurance that they are on firm ground, and thus they can use time to the best of their abilities. It should be noticed as well that the role of classroom organiser may have been less pivotal than the learners believe. In fact, there is much in tasks’ linking and sequencing that promotes purposefulness and an element of self-direction.

Problem-solving
This refers to how the learners perceived that the teacher has aided in the solution of problems. It was necessary to make some adjustments to the original work-plan and deal with problems in conjunction with the learners. The incident that receives most saliency arose in the third workshop out of the learners’ concern for the production of written texts, which the classroom had not catered for thus far. Such concern stemmed from the learners’ desire to have practice for the final written exam, which may reveal that they were more interested in writing as a product than as a process.

Therefore, guidance and intervention were required to help the group overcome an unproductive situation. This critical incident has been instrumental in highlighting a basic change in the learners’ outlook on the teaching/learning process. And this change is the awareness that learning problems may be better solved co-operatively and that their contributions are vital to orient the teacher towards the search of satisfying solutions (Williams and Burden 1997).

Educational perspective

The learners begin to draw a link between this classroom experience and their future professional role. They have become aware that the experience they have gained in the traditional classroom might inadvertently filter down to their own classrooms in future. This implies that while the learners are expected to teach language communicatively, they have realised that their earlier experience in the language classroom might have been contradictory with such pedagogic goal.

Proactivity
The tasks have provided the breeding ground for activities that gauge proactivity or openness, contrasted with defensiveness or passive acceptance on the part of the learners (Allwright and Bailey 1991). The learners become open to task demands and this may have been the jumping-board to use language at the service of the message. In this sense, the tasks are perceived to facilitate language use in situations that bear a real-life semblance. The value of the tasks is recognised mainly in terms of context-embeddedness, purposefulness and problem-solving. Unlike within a content-orientation, language is not used as an end in itself, but as a vehicle for conveying learner-initiated messages that express thoughts, feelings, attitudes.

Task linking and sequencing

Coherent task linking and sequencing is recognised as the means to integrate activities and the language used through them, thus maximising depth of understanding and meaningful relations. Real-life carrier topics are perceived to trigger meaningful language use, a significant factor from a communicative as well as educational perspective. Communicatively, real-life issues lend the activities a sense of immediacy. Educationally, relatedness to real-life has been perceived by the learners to be developmental because the input of tasks has raised their awareness of social problems.

Challenge and creativity

Another factor that hints at meaningful language use is that the learners are ready to face the challenge posed by tasks and reach an outcome. Through experience, they develop a taste for challenge and regard the tasks as an incentive for the creative expression of meaning. My interpretation is that the learners perceive the tasks as a challenge because the tasks in themselves
are difficult but feasible (Long and Crooks 1992) and also because the learners need to collaborate with peers in order to reach an outcome.

Reflection

The data indicate that before introducing an element of reflection into classroom practice, the learners may have taken language and classroom procedures at face value. Through reflective thinking, they become aware of their change of attitude to language and of their needs. This suggests that language is now perceived as a dynamic process that may foster development and change. Through reflection, the learners discover the value of thinking critically about their work and thereby of learner feedback.

In order to draw the strings of this evaluation, I would say that on balance the impact of pedagogic the conditions for language use on the learners reveals that the learners have used language as a vehicle to communicate, to interact with others, to express thoughts and feelings - to say something to somebody for a purpose and in real time. However, encouraging as the results obtained through this study may be, it should be remembered that this has been a case study of one class carried out over a month and that further research is necessary. However, I believe there are certain implications for language teaching that are worth considering. To this I turn now.

Implications

In this section, I evaluate how far the results obtained support the proposal that pedagogic conditions may maximise meaningful language use. To make this evaluation, it may be necessary to consider three criteria:
Feasibility: Can favourable pedagogic conditions be implemented on a regular basis?

For the teacher, adopting a task-orientation means taking on the additional job of designing tasks, planning and monitoring change, maintaining a communication flow with the learners. All of these imply the need of time resources and, more importantly, a closer awareness of the teacher’s professional role in order to improve relevant aspects of the teaching/learning process. For the learners, it means taking an interactional perspective on language use, which implies coming to grips with a series of factors at play on their way to adjusting to intervening changes. For both parties, conditions for language use implemented on a regular basis leads to a positive change in the classroom environment in general and in interpersonal relations in particular, though it should be remembered that the formal bases of these learners’ language proficiency were already settled and that what remains is strike a balance between linguistic and communicative aspects of language proficiency.

Effectiveness: Does the improvement of pedagogic conditions for language use result in a positive outcome?

At the price of a certain oversimplification, there would seem to be two assets in promoting favourable conditions for language use. First, pedagogic conditions have been the means to activate cognitive processes so as to use language in real-time while taking into account the receiver’s reactions. Second, they have been the means to strengthen affective bonds between classroom participants, the teacher and the learners. This study sheds light on the multiplicity and complexity of classroom factors that may have an impact on the learners. Though 4 weeks may not have been enough to claim that the learners matured as communicators, they have moved in the right direction.
Learner Proactivity: Do the learners become proactive as a result of improved pedagogic conditions?

The learners in this study have become proactive, that is they have mostly behaved as language users who take the lead to communicate with somebody for a purpose and prioritise meaning. In other words, proactivity has translated as learner, rather than teacher, initiation of meaningful interaction. In the first instance, recourse to the workshop learning mode, to group interaction patterns, to an element of reflection have been instrumental in promoting learner proactivity. Primarily, this presumes tapping on the learners’ cognitive and affective resources, and creating the need to communicate effectively. Furthermore, awareness of what is done and why, has amounted to pre-service learners beginning to draw a link between their own experience as language users and their future professional action. This has an educational value, and helping pre-service learners to advance towards proactivity can be beneficial for them as teachers-to-be.

On balance, this evaluation indicates that language use has benefited from the improvement of pedagogic conditions though it should be borne in mind that further research is necessary.

Conclusion

Revisiting the hypothesis that the implementation of favourable pedagogic conditions may promote meaningful language use, it is possible to conclude this study on an encouraging note. A move has been made in a beneficial direction involving the implementation of pedagogic routes appropriate to this individual teaching situation and the interpretation of their impact on the learners.
The relevance of a task-orientation to a TEFL programme, if brought to the classroom within this frame of reference, may far outreach the development of the learners’ capacity to use English communicatively. When the learners leave formal instruction, they will already have had the opportunity to think critically about their own experience as communicators, and this may indeed foretell a more promising future for the teaching profession.

Freire’s words on the implications of carrying out a project contain the essence of what this study has attempted to do:

“There is no project that implies no future, no future that implies no dream and no dream that implies no hope, which do not lie in mere vain wait, because the future must be created, built by us through the transformation of the present. Hope only arises when one waits in action.”

Paulo Freire, quoted in a learner’s diary entry

In conclusion, in the study presented through these pages, the impact of action may have transcended the language users it has been initially meant for, i.e. pre-service EFL learners, and may reach the ultimate beneficiaries of the process, i.e. their learners-to-be. If this is so, the experience gained in the language classroom may place pre-service EFL learners in a better position to meet the language demands for communicative language teaching.

Bibliography


Asociación de Profesores de Inglés de Buenos Aires
Asociación Civil sin Fines de Lucro Personería Jurídica c.7111 res. 8524/79 CUIT: 30-66211994
M.T. de Alvear 1369 (KEL S.A.), C1058AAU Ciudad de Buenos Aires
Telefax: (011) 4326-3725 (Lib. Rodriguez) info@apiba.org.ar www.apiba.org.ar


**Presenter**

Analía Dobboletta is a Language lecturer in the English Teacher Training programme at Instituto de Educación Superior ‘Olga Cossettini’, Rosario, and teaches at Asociación Rosarina de Cultura Inglesa. She holds an MA in English Language Teaching and Applied Linguistics from King's College, University of London.