TEACHER AS MEDIATOR IN THE EFL CLASSROOM: A ROLE TO PROMOTE STUDENTS' LEVEL OF INTERACTION, ACTIVENESS, AND LEARNING

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ABSTRACT: *Versus to old, traditional approaches and methods of teaching a language, recent and new approaches of teaching and learning a foreign language have focused on providing a learner-centred environment in which learners can have more control over their learning process and more autonomy on how to accomplish tasks and activities. This article highlights the position and role of the teacher as a mediator and the types of responsibilities he/she should take to successfully play this role and guarantee an interactive and interesting learning to the students.*

KEYWORDS: Teacher, Classroom, Learning, Students

INTRODUCTION

Teacher's role has changed and continued to cope with new requirements of the dynamic atmosphere of foreign language teaching in educational establishments. With this regard, many roles and responsibilities have been attributed to an efficient foreign language teacher. Vadillio (1999) believes that the teacher of the foreign language should have a profound competence of different aspects of the target language in addition to owning some personal qualities like warmth, tolerance and sensitivity. A good teacher and the actions he/she performs in the classroom during teaching learning process, has a great role in provoking efficient learning of the students (Markley 2004). Rockoff (2004) believes that teacher can also have a fundamental role in the academic achievement of students and his/her quality can remarkably influence the students' outcomes. Teacher can mediate learning and conduct learners through the process of learning successfully by adopting the following procedures:

Interacting with students

Interaction between teacher and students involves mutual communication. In the process of interaction teacher provides students with linguistic input and output to promote their linguistic competences for communication. He/she also helps the students form an open-minded and active mental attitude to make them ready to accept the language and the culture they are learning (Brown 2001). Questioning is the basal type of teacher-student interaction in the classroom which is known as IRF or " Initiation, Response and Feedback". When the questioning is effective, it can provoke students' interest in study, enhance their active participation and thinking and ensure a smooth implementation of interaction for the ultimate purpose of language learning. In the EFL classrooms teachers usually pose both referential and display questions. Display questions which are typically closed and specific, their answer is clear and the purpose of asking them is to know if the students remember or understand the subject. On the other hand, referential questions are open and their answer is not clear and ready-made .They are questions of analysis and inference which teacher asks students or students ask each other to acquire information concerning the topic of the lesson. Thus, In order to make the teacher-student interactions more similar to real and authentic

communication in life, teachers should lesson display questions and increase referential ones. Moreover, students should be given sufficient time to reflect on their responses. The purpose of raising this two types of questions in the classroom is to elicit information from students about the taught topic and knowing that to which extent they have understood it.

Facilitating student-student (group, pair) interaction

Wei (2004) considers collaborative learning among students as the central feature of an interactive classroom. Group work as a main form of interaction provides more linguistic practice and resonance for students. It also fosters their learning autonomy and sense of responsibility (Schunk 2000). Pre-task instruction, while-task progress, termination of the task and the post-task feedback are features which are attributed to the group work.

In pre-task instruction, in order to save time and avoid confusing students about the requirement of the task, teacher keeps interacting with students during performing the task. He/She poses simple questions and gives hints to lead students to the right answer but she/he should be aware of that long contacts may distract the attention of other students. Additionally, teacher should notify students of termination of the task and have prepared some reserved tasks beforehand. If some students finished the task before the schedule, she/he can give them the reserved tasks to work on.

In during-task progress, while students are discussing the topic and the task in groups, teacher can carry on a round supervision and inspection in order to urge them to complete the task. He/she can also mediate their task and offer them necessary support to overcome the limitations related to the task. Furthermore, he/she can encourage them to use the target language during the activity as much as possible (Ur 2000). Some students might be silent, passive and unwilling to participate and interact. Therefore, the teacher has to engage them in the process and make suitable alignments to ensure a balanced participation of students in a task or an activity.

Then, in termination of task stage, the appropriate time for a task is calculated at the beginning of the activity so that the task can be completed within the given time. However, in order to get best results teacher can disregard the time limit and terminate the activity immediately if she/he noticed that students are about to be bored or tired. Boredom and weariness will clearly yields to decrease in students' efficiency and output. Sometimes teachers do not consider students' learning capacity and limitations in the classroom. This can also turn learning into a tiring and tedious process rather than an entertainment.

Finally, in post-task feedback stage, teacher provides the students with feedback about the level and quality of their performance in the learning task or activity. The feedback can be presented in various forms for instance; exchanging ideas with students, listening to their suggestions and evaluating them, giving correct solutions and showing the results of different groups so as to be discussed in the class.

Developing interactive tasks

In interactive teaching learning setting, task learning overlaps in teacher-student and student-student interactions. Therefore, teacher should manage to establish concrete interactive tasks and facilitate the implementation of these learning activities on the basis of curriculum syllabuses and standards (Ellis 2004).To fulfill this goal, teacher should protect students'

initiatives. It is also crucial for teacher to consider students' anxiety, level of difficulty of the task and how this task or activity is going to be implemented in the classroom.

Since students are different in their cognitive levels and linguistic competence, teacher should bear in mind these differences before working out the task for them. Knowing these differences helps the teacher determine the level of difficulty and the suitability of the task for students. According to Vygotsky (1978) 's view, learners mostly gain their achievements within ZPD (Zone of Proximal Development). Therefore, at the beginning of learning teaching process, teacher might perform most of the work but after that students also take their share of responsibility. With the progress of students competence, teacher can gradually pull the scaffolding away and thus the students can perform the task independently. The important point in scaffolding students in this stage as Schunk (2000 p.245) postulates is "to ensure that scaffolding keeps the learners in the ZPD, which is altered as they develop capabilities". So, too much scaffolding may violate students' autonomy and little or no scaffolding will result in students' failure and frustration. Students' anxiety in the learning environment is another important factor that teachers should be aware of .This mental state of feeling fear and nervousness is created when the learner needs to manipulate and use the target language to express herself/himself.

According to a research, moderate anxiety can help students focus on completing their learning task, nevertheless unreasonable and excessive anxiety can have a great negative effect on students' learning and result in their avoidance or even abandonment of learning (Brown 2001). Hence, the teacher should try to minimize the effect of this mental burden and help in creating a circumstance which facilitates interactions between him/her and his/her learners or among learners themselves through which they can verbalize their opinions confidently without any stress.

Teacher should also take into account that the main goal of studying a foreign language is to learn how to communicate with that language. So, ignoring the meaning and merely focusing on linguistic functions and forms while designing a task, cannot make a good and successful language learner. Communicative ability originates from applying linguistic elements with meaning. Therefore, the task should first concentrate on expression of meaning rather than grammatical forms. This is to help the students understand the correlation between the grammatical forms and their functions as well as between the language and the context. Secondly, the task should consider students' needs and be linked to veritable communicative matters and issues that learners currently deal with or may face in the future. It should help them in dealing with and solving the communication problems that they will come across in their daily life situations.

Developing interactive settings

Setting is considered a formative factor in language instruction. It is an important domain by which as Brown (2001) says the teacher can assist and back up learners' learning. In an interactive setting, teacher not only provides tasks to students and facilitates interactions but also creates an excellent learning environment where students can get benefit from her/his support and co-operate with each other (student-student interaction).Thus, students can obtain their individual learning goals by utilizing a great variety of informative sources in accomplishing a task. In order for the teachers to be successful in creating interactive surrounding for an effective language learning, they should highlight the following aspects;

First, they should form a link between learners and multimedia or the internet. The multimedia web provides students with stimulus-response and aural-oral interfaces. This leads to stimulating their interest in study as well as reinforcing their memory and cognition to knowledge. This accordingly results in achieving the goal of autonomous construction to knowledge in teaching learning process. Via internet, students can access sources without spatial and temporal limitations. These sources can equip them with well-disposed and favourable conditions to develop their autonomous and individual learning. Internet also enables students to gain skills and knowledge by studying sources, contents and materials which are adjustable to their personalities (Wei 2004). Furthermore, it can enable them to dominate the progression of their personal learning on the basis of the feedback they receive from the online self-assessment testing systems.

Classroom context is another aspect which deserves attention and if well-arranged and organized can contribute to smooth progression of interactive activities. To create this fine context, teachers can first arrange the students' seats according to the size of the class and the task or activity they have designed. They can divide students into small groups of separate tables providing sufficient space to avoid mutual interference from groups or they can use 'horseshoe' and 'circle' model so that each student can see others and can engage in multi-interactions with different students of the group during discussion (Brown 2001). Since students in the classroom have different levels of proficiency in English, the teacher can divide the groups in a way that in each group students with different levels of proficiency are incorporated. Teacher in such class plays the role of a mediator, facilitator, organiser and consultant. She/he walks and goes around the class listening to different groups and whenever necessary, she/he can participate in the discussion or give support. This models whether in pair work or group work, give each student equal opportunities to partake in the discussion and therefore, enjoys the task. These discussion models activate students' autonomy and independence as well as increasing their chances to communicate in target language.

Third, teacher should try to generate copious rapport between themselves and their students based on mutual trust and esteem. Teacher and students should create a unity and together construct a learning ambiance full of equality, harmony, and liveliness which promotes efficient learning. He/she should also be aware of the approach by which he/she evaluate students' performance. Inordinate criticism or praise can have a negative consequence on students' progression. Teacher should know when, how and to which extent the student should be praised or criticised. Even criticism should be constructive and encouraging so as have a positive result and does not frustrate or disappoint the student.

Finally, Teachers can adopt collaborative and competitive instructional styles while implementing their tasks and activities in EFL classroom. Competitive style of interaction arouses students' enthusiasm and initiatives but meanwhile, it can result in the failure of interaction on the account of competition (Brown 2001). Collaborative style of interaction on the other hand, focuses on the spirit of cooperation and sharing ideas. Therefore, during doing a task, teacher can inform students about the significance of their individual performance in accomplishing the target task in the completion-style .In the meantime, he/she should emphasize on the importance of collaboration and cooperation with peers through interaction as learning goals are obtained by sharing and perfecting their individual perspectives.

Providing feedback

The place of feedback, as one of the most in important and influential responsibilities in teaching learning process, is undeniable. It is the act of commenting on the performed output of the students and simultaneously providing information and guidance (feedforward) to improve their future output and performance in the written or oral form. Gibbs and Simpson (2004) stress the power and influence of feedback on students' achievement regarding their assignments. An effective, and constructive feedback on students' performance is integral to learning. It helps students' cognize the strong and weak points of their performance and get the chance to improve their future performance. Constructive feedback is a very influential way to contribute in others' learning. When teacher supplies the student with a specific guidance to bridge the gap in learning, the feedforward impact will be greater and feedback focus will automatically turn into learning rather than marks. The figure below illustrates this process.
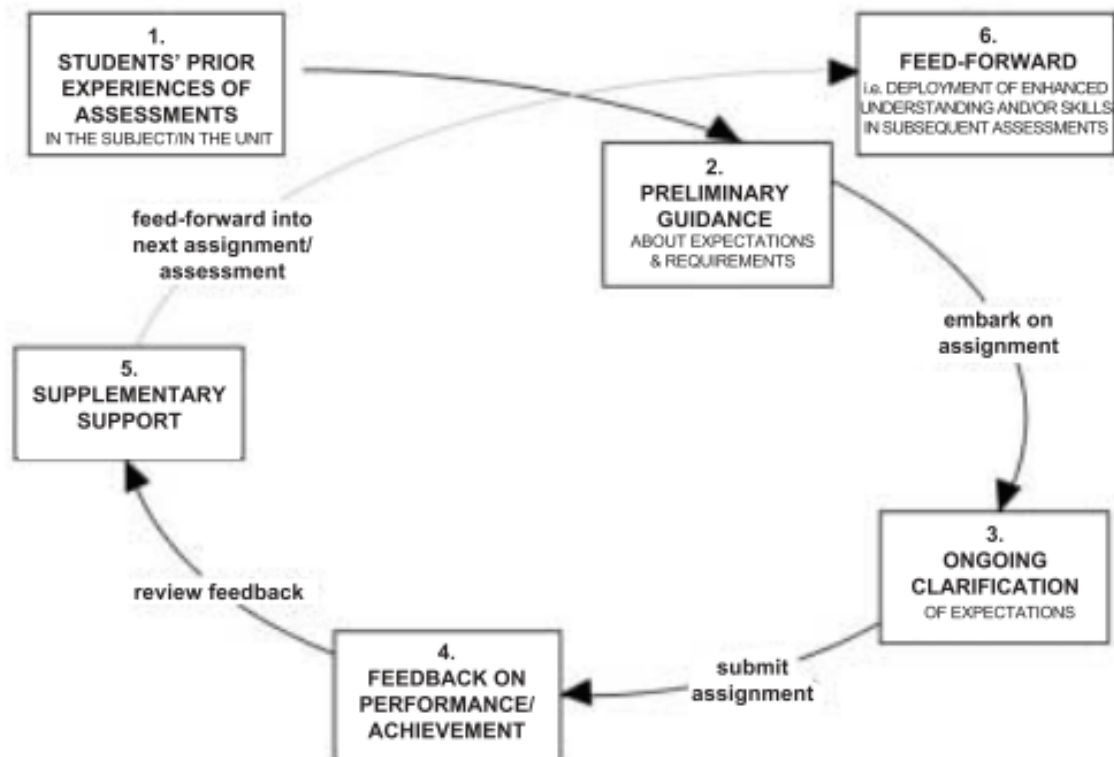
Figure: Guidance and feedback loop (Hounsell, McCune, Hounsell & Litjens, 2008, p.60)

Another important feature of the effective feedback is its ability to nurture students' autonomy. Addressing the gaps and providing possible solutions and ways to bridge these gaps through detailed feedback, gradually turns students into self-regulated learners this in turn, increases their abilities to adjust behavioral aspects, thinking and motivation with assessment standards, criteria and learning results and goals.

Feedback can also align teaching and learning. It can play a crucial role in establishing coordination among teaching learning and assessment processes. When the feedback is covertly connected to the marking schemes, learning results, it can function as a tool that

creates and maintains meaning for both teacher and learners by reinforcing the assessment purpose and its relation to learning outcomes (Biggs 1999). Moreover, a well-written feedback in addition to giving the parents and students' guidance on how to improve certain social and academic areas, can help the teacher reflect on the students' social and academic progress better. It makes the teacher become more aware of each student's strengths and weaknesses and provides an opportunity to the teacher to reflect on her/his teaching style or methodology and make the necessary changes in order to make the teaching, learning process more successful.

Feedback's impact on the learners experience is also worth mentioning. It positively or negatively affects learners' motivation and self-esteem. A well-written and constructive feedback on assessments can encourage them and promote their confidence and attitude towards learning. On the other hand, a judgmental and poorly worded feedback can easily frustrate them and damage their confidence. The following two examples which are genuine comments of students about teacher's feedback, clearly demonstrates the pivotal effect of feedback on the learning process:

1) *"No feedback on the first assignment, like literally none. Just ticks, ticks and more ticks, followed by a pretty average mark. Why so many ticks then. Maybe some crosses. Or, oh, I don't know, some constructive criticism. Heck any words at all.*

2) *The opportunity to submit learning tasks was also valuable as the feedback helped me a lot. I doubt I would have passed the assessments without the feedback."* (Krause KL, Hartley R, James, R & McInnes C (2005))

CONCLUSION

Teacher can mediate learning in the classroom and help learners learn better by interacting with them. He/she can facilitate interactions among students by producing interactive tasks and activities and encouraging learners to involve in group and pair work. Moreover, she/he can create an interactive, unstressed environment which motivates learning and promotes participation.

Feedback significance in teaching learning process is remarkable. Teacher can mediate learning via providing a constrictive and motivating feedback along with indicating major errors in oral or written tasks and activities. This in turn, can keep students interested and enhance learning whereas a criticizing and poorly worded feedback can result in learners' frustration and disappointment.

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