LECTURE 8

Learners' Contribution to CR Discourse

8.1. Learner Participation in Classroom Discourse

Swain (1985) states that besides the necessary comprehensible input, learners must have opportunities to produce the language if they are to become fluent, native-like speakers. Swain describes learners as being 'pushed' into developing their linguistic abilities when they participate in 'meaning' interaction. Moreover, for learners to actually produce the language, they must attend to both the meaning of what they say and the form of how to say it. This forces LLs to move from semantic to syntactic processing. Language production must occur within the context of social interaction.

The Functions of Output

1. The noticing/ triggering function: while attempting to produce language, learners notice that they do not know to say (to write) precisely the meaning they wish to convey.

2. The hypothesis testing function: the output may someimes be, from the learners' perspective, a 'trial run' reflecting their hypothesis of how to say (to write) their intent. If learners were not testing hypotheses, then changes in their output would not be expected following feedback.

3. The metalinguistic (reflective) function: using language to reflect on language produced by others or the self mediates second language learning. The idea originates with Vygotsky's sociocultural theory of mind. The latter is about people operating with mediating tools, and speaking is one of these tools. Speaking is initially an experior source of physical and mental regulation, i.e., an individual's behaviour is initially regulated by others.

4. Developing automaticity: to be effective in the use of mlanguage, one needs to use language with some ease and speed. To obtain this automaticity requires frequent opportunity to link together the components of utterances so that they can be produced without undue effort.

5. Developing discourse skills: mainly to develop turn-taking skills (Cook, 1989) through participating in discourse (meaning-making needs a collaborative activity).

6. Developing a personal voice: a learner who depends on what others say is unlikely to be able to develop a personal manner of speaking, and cannot

influence others. During language learning, one must have the opportunity to steer conversations along routes of interest to the speaker, and to find ways of expressing individual meanings.

7. Generating better input: one could get good quality input by using output (speaking) to give one's interlocutor's feedback, i.e., the input becomes more finely tuned to the listener's current competence (Long, 1985).

8. Inforcing syntactic processing: listeners are aware that it is not enough simply to extract meaning from unput, but they may also need to pay attention to the means by which meanings are expressed, to use this knowledge as the basis for their own production.

8.2. Mixed-ability Classes and Classroom Interaction

According to Gurgenidze (2012), mixed ability teaching is related to working with students who have different personalities, skills, interests and learning needs. Though most classes are usually multi-level, teachers find teaching such classes a very difficult and demanding task as it involves planning lessons which include a diversity of tasks corresponding to a variety of learning styles and abilities. The differences which cause problems in such classes are in language learning ability, language knowledge, cultural background, learning style, attitudes towards language, mother tongue, intelligence, world knowledge, learning experience, knowledge of other languages, age, gender, personality, confidence, motivation, interests, and/ or educational level. However, these variations occur in different degrees in different classes.

Gardener's Theory of Multiple Intelligences tells us that we all may learn in different ways and we also have natural preferences to the way in which we enjoy learning. If we only teach in one way many students will be disadvantaged. They will find it difficult to engage in the lesson and may switch off. They are not less able than others, they just need a different kind of simulation.

Mixed ability level teaching is related to working together with students who have different personalities, skills, interests and learning needs.

The adoption of a flexible methodology is considered a challenge by some teachers as they have to put more effort when designing their lessons, they might need to learn new organizational and/ or CR management skills.

Teaching a non-homogeneous group of pupils can be viewed positively because it serves as a trigger for teachers' professional growth and development as it

involves the usage of variety of approaches, teaching techniques, interaction patterns, and tasks.

Mixed ability classes are a fact of not only language classes but of all courses. Since no two students can be the same in terms of language background, learning speed, learning ability and motivation. It is utopian view to think that our classes could be homogeneous in terms of these aspects ; no matter where we live in the world or at which school we teach.

In the middle of 1930's, some scholars in the UK decided to divide students according to their IQ tests. However, it was seen that the new groups still had variations among students, and it is not feasible to change these groups and the curricula every time (Kelly, 1979). Prodromou (1989) indicates that even when students are grouped according to their scores, their progress will always be at different levels due to the teaching methods, materials, and/ or learning style differences. The teachers become the key factor in reaching each and every student in the class.

Some Problems in Mixed Ability Classes

Effective Learning

As a teacher, our aim is to reach all of our students. However, it is well-known that every student has a differnt way of learning, and learns and progresses at different speeds. Thus, while some students may find the learning task very easy to deal with, others may find it difficult to understand. Besides, learning also depends on what students have brought with them into class. Since each come from a different family, a different environment and/or a different nation, the multi-cultural population of the classroom may be an obstacle for the teachers in reaching the students, which eventually results in ineffective learning. Although it is quite difficult for the teacher to know about each student and to follow what each one does during the lessons even in small classes, it is important for teachers to monitor each and every student and to reach their needs in a variety of ways to achieve effective teaching.

Materials

Since most lge textbooks are designed for an ideal classroom environment, teachers always have to deal with the problem that students react to the textbook differently due to their individual differences. First, some students may find the textbook boring and hard, whereas some find it interesting or very easy. Also, as lge teaching course materials are currently based on content (based or theme-based syllabi, some students may find the topics dull, strange, or meaningless ;

whereas others fin dit enjoyable, familiar or interesting. Thus, the teacher has to evaluate and adapt the materials according to their class.

Participation

Since the CR is the first and only environment for many foreign lge learners, they should use this chance as much as possible. However, some students find it difficult to speak in the target language for many reasons ranging from interest to confidence, from age to knowledge. Other students, however, would like to express everything they think or feel by using the new lge. As a result, some students may take many turns, while others do not speak for the entire lesson.

Interests

Interest problems may arise due to the differences among students in terms of their attitude towards the subject matter and/ or the teacher, their knowledge, and their personality. For instance, some students may find lessons boring, as the topic has no familiarity with their own life or their interests. Further, some of the students may not be interested in the lesson, unless they do get the chance to express their own ideas since the teacher talks too much during the lesson or the other students take many turns.

Discipline

Often the quicker students finish the tasks given before the other students. As a result, they may misbehave while waiting for the others to finish. The weaker students, on the other hand, cannot finish the tasks as quickly as the strong ones and may lose their confidence and/ or show ill-disciplined behaviour. Consequently, mixed abilities may result in CR management problems.

How to Cope with these Problems

1.	Teaching should appeal to all senses, all learning styles and all intelligences. It should be based on a meaningful context for all learners. To exemplify, for visuals you can use coloured chalk or board markers to attract learners' attention to the point. Hence, teachers can make use of visuals to grab students' attention and to motivate them because een the most passive learners are often interested in realia and/ or colourful and interesting posters.

2.	It is advisable to have plans for the early finishers in case they finish the tasks earlier. Like an extra exercise, a handout or a reading passage.

3.	All students do not need to carry out an entire in-class activity. While every student should do certain parts, only some of the students (weak ones and early finishers) do all of it (Ur, 1996 : 306). And tests could include optional questions

: while every student completes some parts of the test, some other parts may have options from which the students choose. Also, different tasks can be given to different learners according to their language progress or interests, or optional tasks can be prepared from which students choose.

4.   Open-ended tasks or questions (as writing a letter, an ending of a story/book/film, or a response to a picture) have a variety of possible correct answers instead of a single answer. These tasks allow each learner to perform at his/ her own level.

5.   It is important for teachers to give students the opportunity to express their ideas, feelings and experiences, though they may lack confidence or enough lge knowledge. By personalizing the task, all students can participate voluntarily. Knowing students' personalities helps the teacher to prepare and adapt materials easily in order to make them interesting or relevant to students, which adds variety to the CR environment and establishes a positive atmosphere.

6.   Students love games, competitions and dramatization, so these are ways of ensuring their interest in the lesson.

7.   Group/ pair-work activities are useful not only for the teacher to observe students but also for the students to cooperate and to learn from each other. When a strong student works with weaker students, the student can be a source of knowledge in the group. On the other hand, the teacher may form groups of weaker and stronger students separated from each other, and s/he can give different tasks to these groups.

8.   Extra homework always helps the teacher of mixed ability classes. Extra work should be of something that the students would enjoy doing. A good way of dealing with mixed ability may be individual and team projects. Also, students would be more enthusiastic to work in such projects if they can choose their topic.

9.   Portfolios are another efficient way of dealing with mixed ability groups. Thus, not only the teacher but also each student has a record of his/ her progress during the term. This record also shows the needs of the student for further progress.

8.3.   Tasks and Interaction

Task has figured to as an important construct in SLA research, serving both as a device for instructional treatment in experimental studies and for measuring the outcomes of this treatment (Ellis, 2008). For Bygate et al., (2001), a task is defined as "a contextualised, standardised activity which requires learners to use language, with emphasis on meaning, and with a connection to the real world, to

attain an objective, and which will elicit data which can be used for purposes of measurement" (p. 12). And Bialystok (1990) stated that a task is one type of elicitation methods which is important in determining the strategies that will be observed. Further, Bialystok and Swain (1978) argued that research that is conducted in entirely natural conditions is more challenging to investigate and the findingss are often hard to interpret. While "controlled laboratory study assumes the researcher that the phenomenon under investigation will be addressed and the superfluous variance owing to extraneous contextual factors will be minimized, or at least capable of being documented and controlled" (Bialystok, 1990, p. 61). However, Poulisse (1990) argued that "finding a task which was in between controlled and natural tasks was not easy" (p. 83).

And the relationship between task features and language use comes in three main types according to descriptive research: "(1) tasks and the negotiation of meaning, (2) tasks and learner production, and (3) the co-construction of tasks through interaction" (ibid). When we come to discuss the link between tasks and negotiation of meaning, we have to consider Long's 'Interaction Hypothesis' (1983b, 1996). The underlying assumption of research from this perspective is that it has to be viable to construct a multidimensional framework, orchestrating tasks in terms of their promise for second/ FL language learning on the basis of psycholinguistically originated connotations. First of all, Pica & Doughty (1985 a,b) found that small-group work in language classrooms only resulted in more negotiation work than teacher-fronted lessons when the task was of the required information type. Newton (1995) found almost double the quantity of negotiation in tasks where the information was shared. And Foster (1998) reported that required information exchange tasks consistently elicited more negotiation and more modified output. In addition, Nakahama, Tyler & van Lier (2001) came to conclude that conversational activity offered "a larger range of opportunities for language use" (p. 401). Comparing NNs-NNs interactions, Gass & Varonis (1985) found that more indicators of non-understanding occurred in the one-way task.

And about tasks and L2 production, Ellis (2008), among other studies (Foster & Skehan, 1996; Skehan & Foster, 1997, 1999), postulated how tasks and the way they are performed influence the fluency, complexity, and accuracy of learners' L2 production. And these studies investigated a number of variables as 'familiarity of information', the 'degree of structure' and the 'complexity of outcome'. They also investigated implementational variables such as pre- and within-task planning and task rehearsal (Ellis, 2008). Whereas interactionist and cognitive theories view tasks as devices that predispose learners to engage in interactions which are, therefore, to some extent predictable on the basis of the design features of the tasks and the methodological procedures for implementing

them, 'sociocultural theory' emphasizes that the activity that derives from a task is unstable, varying in accordance with the specific goals and motives of the participants (ibid). In different words, from a sociocultural perspective, there is no straightforward relationship between task-as-workplan and task-in-process. Such an approach acknowledges that the interaction that results from a task is "dynamic, fluid, and locally managed on a turn-by-turn basis to a considerable extent" (Seedhouse, 2005, p. 556). The view of 'learning' that underlies this perspective is that of a competence that is co-constructed and embedded in interaction (Ellis, 2008).

Further, Mori (2002) stated that pre-task planning inhibited learners from attention to moment-by-moment development of the talk. In other words, pre-task planning had a nugatory rather than beneficial effect on the way the task was performed as it denied learners the opportunity to engage in authentic conversation (Ellis, 2008). Platt and Brooks (2002) investigated 'task engagement' (i.e., the attainment of intersubjectivity and control of a task) from a sociocultural perspective. The researchers concluded that performing a task is a 'struggle' that can only be successfully managed when learners achieve control over the task. In sum, task performances are always constructed rather than determined by task design features and methodological procedures, and it is also the case that the task-as-workplan will predispose learners to behave in ceratin ways (Ellis, 2008). The relationship between tasks and interaction can benefit from both an etic and an emic approach, which should be then seen as complementary rather than oppositional (ibid).

Tasks, in language teaching, are seen as important vehicles providing learners with the means to develop communicative competence by experiencing language as it is used outside the class (Slimani-Rolls, 2005). Tasks appear to be an ideal construct to link the fields of SLA and language pedagogy (Pica, 1997; Ellis, 2003). There is a general consensus among researchers such as Long (1988, 1989); Varonis & Gass (1985), Doughty & Pica (1986); Pica (1987), Pica et al., (1993) that the use of two-way information tasks in group work and pair work, involving learners in sharing essential information initially distributed only partially to each member (Slimani-Rolls, 2005), provides favourable settings for learners to negotiate meaning, via the conversational adjustments they make in interaction. This consensus in favour of two-way tasks for language classrooms is challenged by other studies (Duff, 1986; Nakahama et al., 2001), suggesting that the two-way task cannot pretend any general supremacy over the one-way task. Varonis & Gass (1985) and Bejarano et al., (1997) found that it was, in fact, the one-way task that generated more meaning negotiation. Thus, if the aim of negotiation studies is to isolate the most effective task type to impact on language

acquisition in the classroom, "they have done little but suggest that a commonsense use of a balanced diet of one-way and two-way tasks is currently the safest way for teachers" (Slimani-Rolls, 2005, p. 196). Thus, in the present study, three main tasks were selected that range between one-way information exchange task and two-way information exchange task.

Demands for successfully accomplishing these tasks can be classified within four categories: engagement, risk-taking, knowledge and control (Vann & Abraham, 1990). All tasks in this study required 'engagement', a factor identified by Jakobovits (1970) as critical to language learning. Here engagement meant spending sufficient time on the assignment, clarifying and verifying the task demands where necessary, and providing evidence of attentiveness (Vann & Abraham, 1990). All learners in both groups were engaged in all tasks they performed in the two phases (pre- and post) of the work. The tasks also required what Beebe (1983) called 'risk-taking'. One can argue that all second/ foreign language learning requires learners to take risks (Vann & Abraham, 1990). Learners in this study took substantial risks as they struggled to find measures/ techniques/ words to bridge between their linguistic deficiencies and their communicative goal(s). Different types of knowledge are asked into play here. Declarative and procedural knowledge take the prime position. The relationship between these two is seen as a continuum rather than a dichotomy, with declarative knowledge (knowing WHAT) evolving into procedural knowledge (knowing HOW) through practice (Ellis, 2008). Also, background (or schemata) knowledge is to enable learners to fit the new information presented in the task into their already established framework of knowledge (Vann & Abraham, 1990). Moreover, the tasks demanded varying levels of cognitive 'control', processes that manage selection and coordination of knowledge (Vann & Abraham, 1990). As Bialystok & Ryan (1985) noted, control in coordinating information becomes increasingly important where monitoring procedures are needed to oversee several aspects of a problem, for example, form and meaning, or meaning and context. Further, following the work of Vann & Abraham (1990), the tasks of this investigation were arranged so that they progressed from least to most demanding along the dimensions of engagement, risk taking, knowledge, and control. However, it should be noted that these factors sometimes intersect; for example, insufficient knowledge for a task may cause a learner not to engage.

For Slimani-Rolls (2005, p. 199), one way tasks "are tasks not requiring information exchange and are therefore referred to as 'optional exchange' tasks". In other words, while the speakers provided information, their classmates were not requested to supply any. However, two-way information exchange tasks "each person holds information the other must acquire to be able to carry out the task

successfully" (Slimani-Rolls, 2005, p. 199-200). Two-way information-gap tasks provide optimal conditions for active participation by all students and thereby generate conversational modification (Bejarano et al., 1997).