

Explicit Teaching of Conversational Features through Consciousness-raising Activities

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Abstract:

Communicating efficiently and appropriately is considered to be the ultimate goal of foreign language learning. However, even though EFL learners are taught the speaking skills for many years, their level of conversational competence is far from satisfactory. This may be due to the fact that teachers and students seem to be unaware that holding a natural, spontaneous conversation is a skill that involves mastering the linguistic and the conversational features of the language. The present research paper considers explicit teaching of conversational features. It specifically aims to explore the effect of explicit teaching of these features in conversation through consciousness-raising activities.

Key words Conversation, conversational features, formulaic expressions, consciousness-raising activities

1. Introduction

The ability to hold a conversation in English should be a priority for the great majority of EFL learners who often assess their progress in terms of their proficiency attainment. However, many of them seem to be unaware of the fact that holding a conversation in a way that is both accurate and appropriate is the most difficult skill to develop as it involves mastery of not only the linguistic aspects but also other features that characterize native discourse .

It is in this context that many researchers have suggested that explicit conversational features instruction is necessary to develop EFL learners' ability to communicate in the target language According to them, this should be not only done in terms of language forms but also in terms of the following aspects: managing the conversational features, familiarity with culture-specific rules of spoken discourse and awareness of pragmatic conventions (Thornbury and Slade, 2006). In fact, research has revealed that conversational features such as formulaic language, turn taking, sequence organization, and repair should be incorporated into the language classroom so that learners foster their ability to communicate and engage in social interaction with others (Barraja-Rohan, 2013).

With the advent of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), conversation instruction has been given much importance. CLT equips students with tools for developing learners' conversational performance for real-life communication and language techniques are tailored to get students involved in the authentic and functional use of language for meaningful purposes. Therefore, the focus of conversation class is on providing learners with the opportunity to use the language fluently and creatively by the design of some interactional activities such as role-plays, simulation, information-gap, jigsaw, information transfer activities. However, even if these activities purport to develop learners' fluency by getting students to interact in contexts that are as realistic as possible, they may fail to enhance learners' conversational competence given the fact that the different conversational features and formulaic language are not taught explicitly. Exposing learners to masses of conversational input without any focus on the rules that govern conversational features may accelerate their language progress but may not provide them with the opportunity to recognize and produce sequences of social actions in the same way they are performed by native speakers in different contexts.

The students' low conversational performance might be due to the fact that many teachers are unaware of the requirements of spoken interaction instruction: they usually convey to the learners "a false picture of conversational discourse in the target language" (Sze, 1995, p. 234). This is evidenced by the fact that these teachers tend to put focus on the linguistic aspects of the language rather than on the other aspects involved in natural conversation. These mechanisms involve the knowledge of the formal characteristics of spontaneous speech

(fillers, overlaps, feedback tokens, styles of speaking) and the other aspects involved in natural conversation. These aspects include the opening and closing of a conversation, and the production of sequentially organized sequences when inviting, requesting, announcing news, etc .

Defining conversation

Conversation is the basic form of human interaction and may be “the most appropriate and egalitarian vehicle for the display of oral proficiency” (Van Lier, 1989, p. 494). They also reveal that conversation is a multifaceted construct so intertwined with daily interactions that it is difficult to define. However, definitions which simply define conversation as “an interactive spoken exchange between two or more people” (Pridham, 2001, p. 2), or “talk which is not motivated by clear pragmatic purpose” (Eggins and Slade, 2000, p. 19) may be too general because talk involving more than one speaker does not necessarily constitute conversation. This is evidenced by the fact that even though the classroom conversation is often characterized by great deal of oral interaction between teachers and students during a lesson, it cannot be qualified as genuine conversation .

Aspects of conversational competence

Conversational competence refers to as the ability to make use of conversational features that are indispensable to successful conversation. These features, according to Riggensbach (1998, p. 57), include the following :

..the ability to claim turns of talk, the ability to maintain turn of talk once claimed, the ability to yield turns, the ability to backchannel appropriately, the ability to self-repair, the ability to ensure comprehension on the part of the listener, the ability to initiate repair when there is a potential breakdown, and the ability to employ compensatory strategies .

Conversational competence is not limited to the mastery of conversational skills and strategies. It also refers to the ability to have an adequate oral proficiency as it involves the ability to produce clear, smoothly flowing and well-structured speech with an effective logical structure. In addition, this competence is concerned with the learners’ ability to converse effectively and appropriately using the following variables : length of runs, pause ratio, speech rate , use of pragmatic features (Thornbury and Slade; (2006 (

The language of conversation is also characterized by formulaic language. This term subsumes a wide range of terms such as, prefabricated routines, chunks, rote-learned sequences, fixed expressions, collocations, idioms, phrasal verbs, routines, recurrent word combinations, etc. Many researchers including Pawley and Syder, 1983; Wray, 2002; Boers et al., 2006 have stressed the importance of formulaic language in enhancing EFL learners’ fluency in

communication. According to Boers et al. (2006), EFL learners' can benefit from having a command of formulaic sequences in three ways: First, these sequences which are idiomatic in nature and which are not predictable by grammar rules, may help them produce utterances that sound native-like. Secondly, using these utterances directly from memory can help them reduce hesitations and increase the length of runs and, thus, improve their conversational fluency. Thirdly, if they appropriately use these prefabricated chunks in their discourse, they will reach a high degree of accuracy because these utterances offer them 'zones of safety' where they can settle momentarily while they monitor input and plan subsequent output" (Thornbury and Slade, *ibid*) .

Conversational language is also characterized by numerous social and contextual factors as well as pragmatic presuppositions due to the fact that a conversation is a social activity. An example of this is that in the adjacency pair (How are you ? / Hi), where the first speaker is not asking a question, and the second speakers is not providing an answer. In addition, conversation closely related with the culture of the target language. What people say in a conversation, how they say it, when they say it, and what gestures they use to reinforce their verbal utterances are all governed by cultural norms that determine such conversational features ?

The context of teaching conversation

The language teaching programs in language classrooms usually prioritize the teaching of speaking skills and the development of learners' oral fluency. However, second language learners find difficulties to use the language fluently and appropriately. To reach native or near-native-like oral proficiency they are required to show the ability to master the grammatical and semantic rules of the language as well as to use the language in the context of interpersonal exchanges. For Goh and Burns (2012) speaking is a 'combinatorial' aspect that involves the use of linguistic aspects and conversational features and communication strategies which "cohere simultaneously to constitute speaking competence and to facilitate fluent and intelligible speech production". Fluent oral proficiency can be attained when learners use the language in appropriately in social interaction. This means that they should show the ability to understand and use effective conversational and sociocultural features along with the control of idiomatic expressions involved in native speech discourse .

However, even though teachers manage to make their learners do a lot of talking in the classroom, they fail to develop their ability to hold a conversation in an appropriate way. A reason for this that these teachers tend to maximize their students talk for the duration of a class period by getting them to work on communicative activities such as problem solving tasks and communication games in pairs or in small groups to practice language skills (pronunciation, vocabulary and grammar). Other teachers do allow 'conversation classes' by

simply organizing classroom discussion about a given topic chosen and prepared beforehand in view of enabling them to ‘practise’ conversation while many others ask their students to reproduce model conversations that are most of the time contrived or designed to practice some specific grammatical points in situational dialogues in pairs or in small groups to talk about things that happen in a restaurant or at the market, etc. where the focus is usually on controlling students’ pronunciation and grammar rather than on improving their oral and communicative skills (Richards, 1990) .

According to Nunan (1991), the ability to carry out a conversation appropriately and interact with other people using the characteristics involved in natural conversation might be the only good means of developing their oral proficiency. In the same vein, Nolasco and Arthur (1987) and Wray (2002) suggest that EFL learners should be aware of all the features of ordinary conversation and of the purposes of their use. For example, they should be aware of how speakers in an ordinary conversation take turns in an organized way, how they produce social actions such as requests, offers, news announcement, etc. in their sequential contexts and how they repair problems in speaking , hearing and understanding. According to them, helping learners be familiar with these skills will facilitate their attempts to converse in English, improve their fluency and reach native-like competence.

Communicative language teaching and conversation instruction

Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) made its appearance. It emerged as a reaction against the assumptions underlying the previous language teaching approaches and methods. CLT rose to prominence as a result of the development of three related areas of research: functionalism, discourse analysis and communicative competence

CLT first partly sprang out from the field functionalism which advocates that language is used not only as a means of communication but also as a way to “ represent our experiences of the processes, persons, objects, abstractions, qualities, states and relations of the world around us and inside us” (Halliday,1989, p. 145-146). Discourse analysis helped the development of conversation instruction in the CLT. The main findings of this field revealed that conversation is far from being unstructured and banal, but has evident ‘patterns and regularities’. The third research area which influenced the development of CLT was communicative competence which, involves not only the linguistic forms of the language (mastery of vocabulary, word formation, sentence formation, semantics, and phonology) but also its social rules (i.e., the ability to produce and recognize socially appropriate utterances in different socio-cultural contexts) .

To meet the scope of this paper, focus will be put on Celce-Murcia's (2007) model. In this framework, the focus of communicative competence research is more social and less linguistic and emphasizes the following two components:

Formulaic Competence

Formulaic competence can be defined as the learners' ability to use fixed and pre-fabricated expressions. These expressions can take the following forms: a) fixed phrases such as all of a sudden, of course, etc. b) collocations such as spend money , play the piano, etc. c) idioms such as to kick the bucket , to get the ax, etc. and d) lexical frames such as looking forward to, see you soon, etc .

Interactional competence

According to Celce-Murcia's (2007, p. 49) model, interactional competence addresses not only knowledge regarding how to perform common L2 speech act sets but also conversational competence and non-verbal features. Therefore, interactional competence consists of three components First, actional competence which refers to the learners' ability to use speech actions in SL/ FL contexts. Second, conversational competence which refers to the use of turn-taking system within interaction and also to the use of conversational strategies such opening, closing, interrupting a conversation, etc. The last component refers to the paralinguistic competence which is concerned with the body-language or physical space between the speakers.(

Celce-Murcia's (2007) revised model provides useful insights to be incorporated in the language classroom in to get the learners linguistically and culturally competent. Among the most significant insights is the learners' knowledge about the culture of the target language. According to Celce-Murcia (2007, p. 52), social and cultural aspects of the language should also be carefully supplemented by authentic discourse and context to help learners produce meaningful discourse for themselves .

The contribution of conversational analysis

In spite of the contribution the three aforementioned areas of research, the current communicative approaches have been trivialized with some critics among which the fact that they have inadequately dealt with conversational competence as most of the models of communicative competence consider it as dependent on or included in other components. According to Markee (2005, p.406), CLT has overlooked interactional competence which he identifies as a broader term for 'conversational competence'. Moreover, this competence involves the different semiotic systems - the turn taking, repair, and sequence organizations that underlie all talk-in-interaction, and other aspects such as eye gaze and embodied actions .

However, it is often argued that the aforementioned problems can be addressed using conversational analysis (CA) which investigates the order, organization and orderliness of social action in discursive practices in order to understand how talk is organized and how interactants understand and display understanding of each other as their talk unfolds. Researchers including Wong and Waring, 2010 have all claimed that CA can provide a comprehensive and systematic way of describing the structure of conversation and explicating the sequential organization of language actions such as invitations, offers, requests, news announcement, etc. If incorporated in language teaching, CA can be an effective tool not only to raise awareness to causes of the difficulties learners have in understanding and producing natural conversation but also to enhance interactional and conversational abilities.

Conversational analysis can be beneficial in the teaching process. It can contribute in helping teachers to be aware of the cultural norms involved in conversation and get them manage and capture all the conversational features. In addition, CA research enables language teachers to uncover different levels of complexity, constraints, and order that are often unique to each L2 interaction. In other words, the use of CA principles to analyze L2 data can explicate certain phenomena related to L2 spoken discourse (mainly, natural conversation). For example, the turn-by-turn analysis allows language educators to understand how particular actions are understood and accomplished by participants in L2 interaction and helps them provide an effective instruction. In addition, CA framework can provide teachers with a solid understanding of the sequence organization of conversational structures and equip them with the necessary tools to teach students how particular interactional practices (openings, closings, refusals, requests, announcement, etc.) work in real situations.

Teaching conversational features through consciousness-raising activities

If first language learners are usually exposed to the target language in their daily lives and, thus, provided with a lot of opportunities to use it for real-life purposes, learners in foreign language settings have only scarce opportunities to use the target language. In addition, foreign language learners cannot achieve adequate mastery of the target language simply through interacting with other learners (i.e., through engaging in conversation with their teachers or peers). Even after a long period of contact with the target language and sufficient exposure to authentic language, some features of conversation cannot be adequately acquired. Porter (1986, cited in Thornbury and Slade, 2006, p.210) suggests that the conversational features should be explicitly taught to develop learners' conversational competence because many of these features can only be learned (i.e., cannot be acquired). One way of doing this is to raise learners' awareness to the conversational features while providing them with relevant language input and activity. In other words, getting learners notice how the target

conversational features work in context can help them discover how native speech works and how the different conversational features are used in order to hold an effective and appropriate conversation .

While researchers in the field of second language acquisition such as Dornyei and Thurell, 1994; Ellis 2010 have advocated that raising learners' awareness to language forms at the level of syntax and morphology can be an effective way to help learners acquire and foster their understanding how these forms work in context and eventually use them in their productions, other researchers (Bernesten , 2002; Sze, 1995; Thornbury and Slade, 2006; Wong and Waring, 2010,) suggest to extend this focus on form to conversational features. According to Schmitt (2002), learners' constant use of conversational features (formulaic expressions as well as other conversational features) through consciousness-raising activities can help them improve their conversational fluency in three areas: functional use (effective and appropriate management of speech acts such as invitations, requests, announcement, etc.), social interaction (enhancement of social solidarity and avoidance of communication breakdowns) and discourse organization (especially spoken through the use of linguistic and syntactic devices). In other words, consciousness-raising activities can help learners notice how the target language features work in context to discover how native speech works and how the different conversational features are used in order to hold an effective and appropriate conversation .

There are reasons why an approach to conversational features through consciousness-raising activities should be seriously considered, and why such an advocacy may be particularly appropriate. First, consciousness-raising activities are student-centered. Second, they can also help learners to reflect on specific utterances of language and urge them to express their own view on how and why these utterances are used in the given context. Third, the modes of these activities can be either written (a story, for example) or spoken (a dialogue, for example). Finally, these activities prioritize fluency rather than accuracy (Dörnyei and Thurell, 1994) .

Thornbury and Slade (2006, p. 296) provide a model of teaching conversation based on consciousness-raising activities arranged into three phases: exposure, instruction and practice.

Exposure: students are required to listen to how proficient speakers perform conversational skills or read authentic conversation extracts. They are also encouraged to later incorporate those features in their own conversation. They are also asked to notice how native speakers perform the conversational skills and how these speakers differ in terms of the choice and use of these skills .

Instruction: Students are explicitly taught an element of conversation using conversation transcripts and video extracts (including the use of sequences of film and TV drama) as these extracts “allow learners time to notice features that may not be noticed for a long time if only heard in the flow of real-time conversation ” (Willis, 1996, p. 75-76). In this step, teachers should help learners observe how these features work in conversation through the use of ‘language-focused questions’ such as : a) notice the underlined words in conversation, b) what do they have in common ? c) What is the function of each one of them ? and d) Do you have the same words in your own language, etc .

Practice: In this step, the students are provided with practice opportunities that target both accuracy and fluency. Phrased differently, learners are encouraged to produce the different features that they have focused on before. They can be required to do activities such as completing a dialogue, discussing about a given feature, telling a friend about a particular story ‘in free- flowing talk’ and improvising their own conversation including the target features appropriately.

Other researchers (Newton, 2006, Dornyei and Thurrel, 1994) offer a rich menu of consciousness- raising activities that can also be used to teach conversational features. For example, Newton (2006) advocates the use of consciousness-raising activities where learners are encouraged to participate in group work or in pairs. This, according to him, would develop the learners’ focal attention to the t to be taught and to foster the discovery of conversational patterns through interaction. In these activities, learners in groups or pairs discuss sequences of conversation from films and native speakers’ data in order to “maximize the intake from the input, as well as to focus on the intended target features” (Newton, 2006, p. 120). Swain, (1998) suggests collaboration tasks where the focus is on the exploitation of learner reflection using meta-linguistic resources. In these tasks, learners listen or view the audio or video recording of their production activities (e.g., pair conversational exercise, role plays, etc. and to analyze their own performance referring back to the instructed features.

Conclusion

Developing foreign language learners’ conversational competence is not receiving the adequate attention in language classrooms as conversation is often considered as a less important aspect of language compared to other aspects such as pronunciation, grammar and writing. Even though the communicative approaches have introduced communicative activities such as information-gap filling, communicative games and role-plays. These activities can increase the learners’ speaking in the classroom and provide them with the necessary environment to practice conversation, they have not given learners the opportunities

to foster their conversational skills. In this research study, we have attempted to demonstrate that learners can acquire many mechanisms of conversation such as the allocation of turns, sequencing and repair strategies through conversational interaction in the classroom and through exposure to conversational input. We believe that helping learners be aware of the conversational features involved in natural conversation and getting them practise these conversational features would greatly help them understand how these mechanisms are organized and eventually use them in their own conversation. In other words, our students can learn to use conversational features adequately and appropriately by participating in conversations, just as they learn to read by reading or write by writing (Hatch, 1978) .

Deficiencies in learners' conversational competence as discussed in the introduction herein suggest that requirements for effective conversational features instruction need to be reinforced in language classroom. In this paper, it is suggested that there is urgent need to enable university level students to understand the dynamics involved in natural conversation and raise their awareness to how conversation works in order to improve their ability to hold a conversation effectively and appropriately. Moreover, teachers should provide students with more opportunities to interact with one another to make the classroom talk spontaneous, reciprocal and natural. To achieve this, they should encourage them to be more collaborative in the talk where they can introduce topics of their own choice and take turns freely to maintain the flow of conversation. Furthermore, teachers should raise learners' awareness to how speech actions are used in native social interaction using insights from conversation analysis. To get their learners acquire these speech actions, teachers should equip them with selected instances of natural conversation and provide them with the rules and strategies to help them understand the cultural norms and aspects that are involved in this conversation.

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