

Using Metacommunication to Foster the Classroom Interaction

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When people communicate, they do more than exchanging information (Sanford & Roach, 1986); they use metaknowledge about interpersonal relationships and the nature of communication to manage the dialogue (Roach & Nickson, 1986). When two interactants engage in a dialogue, one necessary task is to regulate the relationship between them. Communication theorists state that when people talk, they communicate on at least two different levels simultaneously: at the most direct level, they communicate the content of the utterances; and also at a more subtle level they communicate their wants and perceptions. This second level of communication is called metacommunication (Watzlawick et al 1967). Metacommunicative acts then could be adopted in an educational context which is the classroom session to promote the interaction between the speech partners: the teacher and his / her students.

1. Participants Identification

The target population is 2nd year LMD, a promotion of 60 university students. They are learners of English as a foreign language (EFL), are native speakers of Algeria, and study at Djillali LIABES University of Sidi Bel Abbes. They are both males and females in their first year, their age range is between seventeen and eighteen. LMD students are selected on the basis of their availability, because all of them have had good, sometimes excellent scores in English in the baccalaureate examination 18 to 18.5/20. As a first promotion adopting L.M.D system, it was a prerequisite for acceding to the new experiment.

2. Research Tools

Two research tools were adopted to achieve this modest research study: an interview and a questionnaire, they were designed to investigate some discursive features as well as embedded communicative traits at the pioneers of the L.M.D system in Sidi.Bel.Abbes. Overall, they turned around the broad educational spectrum and yielded to a satisfactory reliability.

3. Discussion

In both the questionnaire and the interview addressed to the target population, students did not know in advance which topic would be selected and they had no choice in the matter. If topics were given in advance, it would lead to attempts at rote –learning a topic, consequently, to unnatural responses. In order to be equipped with an absolute fairness; participants were given enough time to process the language and performing the final deliveries.

3.1. Table 1

Achievement oral test results

Interview revelations

Participants demonstrated different sometimes divergent attitudes and replays towards proposed topics. Attitudes mean metamessages to express their easiness or uneasiness vis-à-vis the tackling or the extension of certain topics.

Tackled Issues	Cooperation Rate %
Retailing an educational experience	20
Describing the learning atmosphere	20
Self-description	20
Free talk	40

3.1. Table 2

Achievement written test result

Questionnaire revelations

As a matter of reinforcement, a semi-structured questionnaire was adopted to find out the deeper abilities and lacks of the target population. Respondents replayed amply in conversational skills, vocabulary enrichment, and in receptivity rate, but they were a bit economic in section four.

Test Components	Cooperation Rate%
Conversational skills	29
Vocabulary enrichment	27
Receptivity rate	26
Debating point	08

4. Learners' Adaptation with Language System

The ability to communicate effectively in English is now a well – established goal in E.L.T. However, students can identify personal needs to communicate in spoken and written English and seek opportunities to perform and improve in the target language. Even in an improvised atmosphere, learners might be offered a multitude of settings where they can learn a lot. **Abbs** and **Freebrain** have something to say in this respect:

“To be able to operate effectively in the real world, students need plenty of opportunity to practice language in situations which encourage them to communicate their needs, ideas and opinions”.

(Abbs & Freebrain 1986: Blueprint Intermediate, page 1)

The concept of what is meant to know a language and to be able to put that knowledge to use in communicating with people in a variety of settings and situations. One of the earliest terms of this concept was communicative competence (**Hymes 1972**). It encompasses the social and cultural knowledge needed in order to understand and use linguistic forms. This view, therefore, entails not only knowledge but also ability to put that knowledge into use in authentic communication.

The first urge and need for the learners as noticed is to perceive and understand the utterance i.e. to answer implicit questions of: What did the teacher say? And what does it mean? Then, he/she proceeds to decipher it, this means that the interpretative machine starts. Perceiving

and understanding the utterance complete the communication cycle, without completing the basic cycle, very little learning will take place.

Assimilating the language system requires that students understand and retain its functional rules and units in deep memory for future use in producing and performing new utterances. The assimilation of the system does not require that all the rules be made explicit, since many are acquired without conscious realization, but it does require that the system be assimilated for functional use.

The development of the basic skills, skill means facility and ease to use the language for communication in order to carry on the linguistic functions simultaneously with intentional thinking. The learner performs at the skill stage before we can say that the language has been mastered. The typical use of language involves analyzing, socializing, obtaining, and giving information through which several mechanisms are activated. The learners can thus show that they are in communicative touch and able to adapt their language and their linguistic knowledge according to situations. A very important issue arises in this respect which is communicative language ability:

4.1 Learners' Linguistic Competence

Linguistic Competence is concerned with knowledge of the language itself, its form and meaning. Thus linguistic competence involves knowledge of spelling, pronunciation, vocabulary, word formation, grammatical structure, sentence structure, and linguistic semantics. We can judge, then, that a learner who is able to list orally and in writing a set of words and concepts having a close link to each other, as in describing the educational atmosphere like 'module', 'system', 'strategy'... In addition to the ability to select specific vocabulary and knowing its pronunciation and graphic forms, as well as the ability to add prefixes correctly to for example 'perfect', 'happy', 'pleasant', and to obtain negative equivalents, in this way the students are developing competence in using word formation rules correctly. The ability of describing recent events is also encapsulated, by using have / has and the past participle of the main verb, it contributes to develop grammatical competence in forming the present perfect tense.

4.2 Learners' Pragmatic Competence

Pragmatic competence is generally considered to involve two kinds of abilities. In part it means knowledge about language in order to achieve certain communicative goals or intentions. This has also been called illocutionary competence. In these ways, the sociolinguistic component of pragmatic competence enables a speaker to be contextually appropriate, to select the suitable words for the suitable situation. What is relevant to incorporate in this instance is the language exposure; it means that learners should be exposed to a multiple settings in order to draw a conclusive result which is whether they are able to cope with situations linguistically or not. Another fact interacting with pragmatic competence is that they should know when to speak and when to keep silence, when to intervene and when to leave a silent break.

4.3 Learners' Discourse Competence

One significant aspect of competence in conversational use of language is how to perform the turns in discourse, how to maintain the conversation and how to go further in a topic. Speakers have to develop strategies as initiating, entering, interrupting, and checking in conversation. In an advanced stage they come to master the use of topical discourse markers which signal the direction of discourse such as 'By the way' which aims at (introducing an incidental remark); I'd like to take up an earlier point which aims at (returning to consider an earlier argument); and That's all very well but... which aims at (challenging an argument).

Learners also need to develop a similar kind of competence for written texts. For example, students reading technical English will have to follow the structure of different types of expository prose such as descriptions of processes, cause-effect analyses and comparisons ...etc. These various abilities needed to create coherent written texts or conversation, and to understand them, they have been termed discourse competence.

4.4 Learners' Strategic Competence

Strategic competence consists of using communication strategies. These strategies come into play when learners are unable to express what they want to say because they lack the resources to do so successfully. Students have to be accustomed to compensate for this either by changing their original intention or by searching for other means of expression at their disposal. They have to design suitable expressive mediums to cope with different communicative situations and put

themselves in a meaningful context which they have created in trying to express something. The student in fact remembers the difficult linguistic situations where he / she was asked to cope with them and adjust his utterances in accordance to situational requirements.

4.5 Fluency

The term fluency is related to language production and it is normally reserved for speech. It is the ability to link units of speech together with facility and appropriate slowness. This implies practicing activities in spoken English while interpreting and assessing the meaning of what the students hear and construct suitable responses independently of language input from the teacher. When it comes to perform their own constructions of what have been processed, they have to go with a reasonable speed. The fluency component is in fact a constructive detail which requires certain linguistic knowledge and time ingredient to have a fluent student.

5. Communicative Problems in the Classroom

Spontaneous university conversations are in fact a good place to deal with naturalistic observation of spoken interaction. A general problem in discourse analysis is that students look at data and don't know what to say. There are so many things which might be commented on: a great range of phonological, lexical or syntactic features, as well paralinguistic and non verbal behaviour. All of which can contribute to conversational organization. When almost anything might be relevant, we need some way of focusing the attention.

Starting then from our commonsense stereotypes of classrooms, consider some communicative problems which teachers have in classrooms, and some of the communicative functions which their language should therefore serve in both teaching and classroom management.

Teachers have to devote a great deal of time and effort to keep in touch with their students – not only because of far-reaching ideal of communication conditions, they have to hold their students attention, get them to speak or to be more precise in what they say or write, and to check on whether at least most of the students follow what is going on.

Teacher talk is therefore very different from preachers' talk. Trying to control and teach a class full of students of eighteen is very different from delivering a monologue which is also very different from commentators talk: from commentating to describing. Teachers' talk is characterized by a great percentage of utterances which perform certain speech acts including: informing, explaining, defining, questioning, correcting, prompting, ordering, requesting...It is also characterized by discourse sequences which have few, if any parallels outside teaching, including: dictation to the class, group answers, and the like.

Another major part of our commonsense knowledge of classrooms is that teachers have more power and control than students, and this should also be identifiable in their language. Much classroom talk is characterized by the extent to which one speaker, the teacher, has conversational control over the topic, over the relevance or correctness of what students say, and even over when and how much student may speak. This means that he / she controls even the quantity of interferences and students' talk. Also the topic has rarely been discussed in the context of what is central concern of sociolinguistics of face-to-face interaction: how talk is heard by speakers to be organized and coherent in various ways, and therefore how it is heard to be appropriate to different social situations and encounters.

It seems intuitively clear that teachers' talk is particularly characterized by utterances which serve particular functions; this may enable us to collect and analyze a rich source of data on this range of speech acts. Another very recurrent problem threatening the good enrolling of the classroom session is the students' reluctance. When the student hesitates to get involved in the discussion in a given moment of the time session because of uneasiness or tiredness; this has a negative consequence on both the teacher and the cooperative side of the learning process. Another meaningful point is that when the student feels himself /herself vulnerable in a given interactional task which might prevent him / her to follow the course event perfectly.

6. Levels of Treatment in Learners' Spoken Communication

In spoken communication the focus is on an amalgam of treatments: grammatical, verbal and non verbal as well as translation ability. Every detail makes sense within the broader picture of spoken communication treatment. Some features are embedded in the folds of the oral communication; others are interwoven with idiosyncratic considerations and learners'

asymmetrical degrees of interpretations. Thus discrete elements are significantly important in describing spoken interaction and immanent linguistic behaviours.

6.1 Grammatical Treatment

The word grammar usually refers to the rules in a language for changing the form of words and combining them into sentences. We are concerned with some grammatical tasks as the verbal accuracy as well as tenses. The selection of the adequate verb in the right place should be successful at an extent.

Here comes the concept of topicality and the relationship that it has with the weight of words, because the claim on topicality is that the superior interpretation that defines the words in their grammatical form links them with the contextual interpretation form. This implies that the degree of topicality and grammaticality correctness criterion might converge in one point.

In any grammatical task the learner has to manage an adequate combination of words into sentences and cares about tenses as well as the choice of the accurate verb. These three facets shape the grammaticality of a sentence or an utterance and make it acceptable. The student verbal interaction can be constrained by ungrammatical accidents notably in spoken transactions within which little attention is paid to the grammatical accuracy. This makes it extremely difficult to make a successful symbiosis between grammar and the selection as well as the retrieval of words.

6.2 Verbal & Nonverbal Treatment

The indisputable fact is that in everyday transactions between L2 Learners which are non-native-speakers of English, they use simultaneously or alternatively nonverbal communication. Some learners are more involved in the nonverbal string than others, they speak and physically reinforce what they are saying and what they intend to say and till where they want to reach. Sometimes messages physically communicated are effectively conveyed than verbal ones; moreover they might vehicle the genuine meaning.

During the interview some participants agreed with whatever others were saying with simply trying a shake of the head and opening up the hands to simultaneously say “yes”. Others, central

participants communicate by responding verbally as well as they adopt Kinesics as it was pioneered by (the American anthropologist **Edward T. Hall 1950**). It includes body movement, gestures, facial expression, eye contact, speaking volume, and posture. The last nonverbal signal means a lot for a pivotal participation in a discussion / an interview. A communicator might play a pivot role in leading, orienting, and shifting a topic consequently others are followers in such instance. L.M.D group as a sampling has this category of communicators who scans first the potential topic, then dominates the discussion.

Another nonverbal consideration which is the adoption of Proxemics (pioneered by **Hall 1950**).It entails social distance between communicators, space, and territoriality (untouchable space). Participants generally respect a certain distance when communicating, this fact has a trivial importance in our culture as noted by (Hall 1950) **“this is normal conversational distance for Arabs”**. In actual conversations, participants exchange words and thoughts without paying attention to these conversational details, unless one of them has traveled abroad and noticed these cultural differences. The fact of getting closer or keeping distance does not pose serious problem in analyzing a conversation / an interview and retrieving a result.

6.3 Translation Ability Treatment

Translation is the activity of changing something spoken or especially written into another language .In order to approach L.M.D learners from this side, translating an extract from French into English is an accessible task for them. Some students are competent in the French language; this helped transpiring successfully translated pieces of language. The fact that they seek common words and expressions between the two languages displays the linguistic transfer which occurs immediately and yield fast production.

A translated extract depends heavily on the linguistic luggage the speaker has under his / her disposal at the moment. He creates then techniques to suit the content meaning of the spoken task and makes it coherent. Finally, the speaker delivers the ultimate delivery when he cares about the context in which the words emerge. Translators take into account these parameters as well as the time constraint within which they have to limit themselves with. Immediate translation obeys to all these details prior performance in order to obtain a consistent piece of language.

When a learner translates deliberately an extract from French into English, the linguistic passage from the two languages might be constrained by some perceptive and articulatory considerations. Similar semiodifficulties attached to another context factor might arise while translating and should be taken into account. The linguistic transfer then, is an internal process which is governed by complex mechanisms.

In others, Concomitant processes take place while translating an extract, during which the speaker cares about a triangulation of factors prior production. He tries at first to seek words which convey similar meaning than the original words mentioned in the original text, then maintaining the gist of the extract. Finally, the speaker checks on whether the translated text suits the context in general and if there are no outlandish ideas or words.

7. Pedagogical Implications

7.1 Developing Situational Knowledge

The learner should possess the appropriate non-linguistic knowledge for understanding the teacher's communicative intention; he/she needs situational knowledge as well as social knowledge. It generates three corresponding aspects of the skill involved in understanding meanings:

- a. The ability to understand linguistic structures and vocabulary.
- b. Knowledge of the potential communicative functions of linguistic forms.
- c. The ability to relate the linguistic forms to appropriate non-linguistic knowledge, in order to interpret the specific functional meaning intended by the speaker.

An important implication of the third aspect is that the foreign language learner needs more than a fixed repertoire of linguistic forms corresponding to communicative functions. Since the relationship between forms and functions is variable and cannot be definitely predicted outside specific situations, the learner should also be given opportunities do develop strategies for interpreting language in actual use.

However, communication is a two sided process, and it could equally well be argued that the speaker has failed to verbalize his message adequately. He/she may fail to judge the linguistic and non-linguistic knowledge, or he/she does not select linguistic forms that would be interpreted as

he intended. Consequently, the hearer's failure to understand the message ahead occurs. When we speak, we are constantly estimating the hearer's knowledge and assumptions, in order to select language that will be interpreted in accordance with our intended meaning. The teacher for instance should produce sufficient language to express his/her communicative purpose in that situation. He/she may find that he has overestimated his students' knowledge. For this reason he/she tries to use their reaction as feed back about the failure of his attempt, and remedy it with new language.

The most efficient communicator in a foreign language is not always the person who is best at manipulating its structures. It is often the person who is most skilled at processing the complete situation involving himself and his hearer; taking into account the knowledge already shared between them, from the situation or from the preceding conversation and selecting items which will communicate this message effectively.

Foreign language learners need opportunities to develop these skills, by being exposed to situations where the emphasis is on using their available resources for communicating meanings as efficiently and economically as possible. Since these resources are limited, this may often entail sacrificing grammatical accuracy in favour of immediate communicative effectiveness. In the same way as for comprehension then, the learner needs to acquire not only a repertoire of linguistic items but also a repertoire of strategies for using them in concrete situations. The classroom should provide a multitude of situations in which the student can elicit both the adequate vocabulary and knowledge according to that situation.

7.2 Amplifying Metacommunicative Awareness

Metacommunication refers to verbal monitoring of the speech situation; it includes messages about the channels of communication, checks on whether they are open and working messages which serve to keep communication smooth control. It serves to organize speech and checks who speaks and how much, and cues for speakers to stop talking or interrupt (e.g., cues for turn - talking).It checks on whether messages have been received, understood and controlled over the content of acceptable communication, the concept of metacommunication is also close to **Goffman's (1964 :63)** of a social situation as being:

“an environment of mutual monitoring each other’s behaviour interpreting it, reading between the lines, and so on. In other words, keeping in touch with other speakers, so that the speech remains flexible.

Metacommunicative expressions thus, serve in their turn to draw attention to the constant gap between what is said and what is meant; and therefore to the need to do constant interpretative work on speech. In general, classroom talk about language should be rich in terms and expressions for meaning and language functions, notably between the teacher and the learners.

As soon as teachers attempt to analyze the language intuition, they should tackle the problem of metacommunication or more specifically, multimodality of communication, which was elaborated by **Bateson (1972)** .His argument, is that specific relationship can be born between friends. In the educational institution, between classmates, if there is a real exchange of metamessages, they would bite each other, or joke by exchanging agreements, or refusals. Laughs are the fundamental question which the linguists ask in this respect: how can the observer analytically distinguish joking play from a serious negotiation, or how is it possible to comprehend the immanent sense of an interaction as lived by the participants themselves?

7.3 Managing Classroom Interaction

In the classroom interaction initiating a discussion is typically more problematic than continuing it once it is under way. However, the teacher has the added problem of explaining to students, who do not speak very good English. The teacher finds himself/ herself obliged to say exactly what required to them? Almost all his / her efforts are therefore, devoted to coaxing along the communication process itself: proposing a topic of discussion, checking if the students are following ,defining terms, inviting the students to speak , editing and correcting their language.

Generally, the teacher proposes or even improvises a topic accessible to them in an attempt to make the less able students get involved and participate in a homogeneous way with the very able and able learners. In reality even those who are in the periphery of the classroom talk or a debating course wish to be invited to share and say a word. The teacher’s feed back has its role

which consists of correcting and assessing the students' utterances and contributions. The smooth correction is determinedly important in this instance in fostering the learners' willingness, notably those who feel vulnerable in some spoken tasks.

8. Conclusion

Curiosity pushed me to investigate the new experiment called LMD and to identify more its pioneers and to know what differs them from other students of the classical system. According to them, a small promotion is advantageous for the learning process, for a better assimilation which implies a better co-operation. A small promotion means also a less nosy atmosphere which might foster the leaning occurrence.

The newness of the experiment gave birth to a certain feeling of apprehension at the beginning. According to LMD students, they have a vague sight concerning its prospect and the perspective that it could offer. This impression begins to vanish, and the majority of them begun to take the puppet's threads. Another very significant fact, as far as classroom management is concerned, according to L.M.D students, a small promotion is advantageous for the learning process; for a better assimilation which implies a better co-operation.

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