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On helping quiet students

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ABSTRACT

One major argument surrounding classroom interaction is that it provides learners with a suitable context to develop their language proficiency. It is worthwhile to say that there are a number of factors that influence the amount of interaction taking place in the classroom. In some occasions, teachers seem to have a problem handling interactions in their classes since some learners tend to be quiet. The quietness of such learners in the classrooms poses a very serious problem as the teacher remains helpless and unsure of what to do. This article aims to suggest some remedies based on several recent studies that have been conducted on quiet students in different parts of the world. After discussing related themes, such as the importance of classroom interaction and the suggested reasons for learners' quietness, this paper synthesises their findings first, and later generates a three-step model teachers may implement in their practices to encourage quiet students to engage more in classroom interaction.

Keywords: Quietness, classroom interaction, silence, model, teachers' behaviours

1. Introduction

"Silent" or "quiet" students seem to pose a serious problem in the classrooms since their teachers, in most cases, remain hopeless and unsure of what to do to engage them in the classroom interactions. Snell (1999) identified those quiet students as the "passive ones" who would do their best not to speak even a word in the class. When teachers are asked to justify the strange silent behaviour of those students, most of their answers would revolve around describing them as unprepared or indifferent, which can be misinterpretations of their quietness (Townsend, 1998). The quietness of those students and their evasion of participating in the classroom interactions do not always mean that they are failures or low-achievers in their classes.

This paper is based on the assumption that being engaged in the interactions taking place in the classroom can push learners to develop their language proficiency. Therefore, investigating and consulting literature on what solutions have been proposed by both researchers and teachers seem to be inevitable. Generally, this paper aims to suggest some strategies that teachers can implement in their classes to encourage their quiet students to participate in the classroom interactions, either with their teachers or with their peers. The following research question will be addressed: what might teachers do to help quieter students engage in classroom interactions (either teacher-student or student-student) in order to encourage participation and assist in proficiency?

It is worth mentioning that synthesizing the research findings on teachers' effective strategies of engaging quiet students in the classroom interactions can bring about improvements in classroom practices of those teachers suffering from this problem. In answering the previous question, the organization of this paper will be as follows. The first section will deal with the rationale behind classroom interactions; that is, the reasons why teachers organize such activities that require the learners to interact with the teacher or with their peers. The second section will attempt to explore the reasons for the quiet behaviour of some silent students in the classrooms with reference to case studies conducted on this issue. After drawing attention to the research findings concerning what makes those students avoid classroom interactions, the third section will synthesize the pedagogical implications that have been borne out by recent studies and present them to the readers in a clear-

cut model that can be consulted and used by teachers. In the conclusion, general comments and a summary of paper's findings will be provided.

2. Why classroom interactions?

It is worthwhile to understand the underlying arguments behind the importance of the classroom interactions before discussing (later) the techniques used by teachers to engage silent students in taking part in them. First of all, in its simplest sense, classroom interaction, as defined by Masouleh and Jooneghani (2012) "is the oral interaction that occurs between teachers and students and among students in classroom" (p. 33). This definition seems to be easy to follow as it views the classroom interaction from a pedagogical aspect (its types), rather than a linguistic one (its patterns). It also emphasizes Vygotsky's (1978) perception of considering learning as being social before anything else (Li, 2011).

Most of the studies that explored classroom interactions came down to agree that the interactions taking place in the classrooms are essential to the learning process (Mackey, 1999; Wells, 2007; Tatar, 2009; Gillies, 2014). As expressed by Mosouleh and Jooneghani (2012), "pupils will learn most successfully when they are given ample opportunities to interact in conversation" (p. 35). The opportunities meant here can be classified into three types: language acquisition (language development) opportunities, thinking and reasoning opportunities and opportunities to develop knowledge about the world. Regarding the first type of opportunities, interactions, as argued by Long in his interaction hypothesis, can help learners acquire the language (Mackey, 1999). In other words, when learners are given a chance to interact with others, their language will develop through two ways: noticing how language is used by other speakers and negotiating the meaning with them. Hall and Verplaeste (2000) emphasized Long's argument for interaction by assuming that the interaction activities conducted in the classroom can "shape both the form and the content of the target language" (p. 7). The authors did not cite any empirical study to support their claim. However, one study that could be cited to show the importance of interactions in language development is the study of Jacqueline and her group on a boy named Jim born to deaf parents. Since the child did not have interactions with his parents, his language kept lagging behind until he began "conversational sessions" after which his language developed remarkably (Lightbown & Spada, 1999). Jim can be compared to learners in the classroom whose language can develop when they are engaged in interactions.

The second type of opportunities provided by the classroom interactions are those that develop the learners' thinking and reasoning skills. Gillies (2014) maintained that classroom interactions help learners build their minds. To explain that further, through facing a conflict and talking it through, learners can evaluate their "cognitive perspectives", and after solving the matter through talking with each other or with the teacher, their reasoning and cognition can improve (Vygotsky 1978 as cited in Gillies, 2014, p. 64). Although this sounds clear and convincing in a sense, it does not make a single indication of the type of learners who can reach that high level of sorting out conflicts in interactions. Li (2011) conducted a study to evaluate how classroom interactions can make learners develop their thinking skills. The study involved the analysis of six abstracts from 18 Chinese teachers' lessons, and the researcher concluded that teachers can maximize learners' opportunities to develop their thinking when they engage them in discussions that lead them to negotiate with each other.

As far as the third type of opportunities is concerned, classroom interaction is to a greater or lesser extent “influenced by the constructivist approach” (Masouleh & Jooneghani, 2012, p. 33). That is, through interactions, learners can create their own meaning and understanding of the world around them. The experiences of learners when they are involved in discussions and debates in the classroom can be a rich source of knowledge that can be reshaped as they are exposed to the experiences of their peers or even their teachers (Xie, 2009). When these experiences are negotiated in a learning environment with rich interactions, learners’ views of the world and their understanding of it can change to the better.

After a brief discussion of the rationale behind why classroom interactions matter in the classroom context, the following section will focus on the reasons why some students prefer to be quiet in the classroom.

3. Reasons for “quietness” in the classroom

Although this paper’s aim is to shed light on some strategies suggested by recent research on how to engage quiet students in classroom interactions, discussing the reasons behind students being quiet during classroom interaction lies at the heart of the discussion. In order to suggest some comprehensive solutions, the sources of the problem should be identified first. It is important to mention here that the findings of the studies used in this section will be used again in the next section (which suggests what teachers can do) because the two are strongly interlinked, and one leads to the other.

Quiet or silent students, as identified by Jones (1990), “are those who do not interact at all during whole class discussions” (as cited in Johnes & Gerig, 1994, p. 171). They, as he claimed, are opposite to what he called “target students” who dominate the talk in the classrooms. The findings of the studies cited in this paper seem to suggest four main reasons why some students prefer to be silent during classroom interactions. These reasons are learners’ individual learning styles, preserving self-images, teachers’ ineffective ways of handling interactions and cultural influences.

3.1 Learning styles

There has been much concern expressed over learners’ learning styles as being one reason for students’ quietness in the classroom interaction. In a study conducted by Townsend (1998) the researcher observed and, later, interviewed four students who were identified as silent by their teacher during a literature class. Two of the four students attributed their quietness during the discussion to their own learning styles in two different ways. The first one said, “well listening, yeah, listening to other people helps me under-, you know connect ideas in my mind” (p. 75). The second one confessed that she loved to write rather than talk in the class. Although the two participants attributed their quietness to different reasons, their statements come down to one path: individual learning styles. Although the study showed several important points, one of its drawbacks is the very small sample size, so a question of the generalisability of the study to other contexts can be raised. Along similar lines, in another study exploring the reasons why Chinese students seem to adopt a passive role and avoid interacting with the teachers in the classroom, Xie (2009) conducted a study in China which involved the observations and later “stimulated recall” interviews of 30 students in university English classes. The study found out that most of the students admitted that they prefer to listen in order to learn, and this confirmed what Cortazzi and Jin (1996)

found about the learning styles of university Chinese students (cited in Xie, 2009). As the two studies clearly showed, learners sometimes avoid interacting in the classroom due to their 'learning by listening' preference.

3.2 Preservation of self-image

With respect to the preservation of the self-image, the discussion here centers around the idea that some learners avoid classroom interactions to save their faces in two major situations.

The first situation in which some learners think that they are preserving their self-images by avoiding interacting in the classroom is when they view interactions as testing situations. For example, in a study done by Reda (2009) in which 15 students were asked to write diaries about their experiences of being quiet in the classroom and were interviewed afterwards, the findings showed that most of the participants perceive the interaction in the classroom as "a high-stakes testing situations in which they are expected to provide a right answer" (p. 2). Clearly, in the previous study, seeing interactions as testing situations pushes the learners to avoid interacting so that they would not throw an answer that would be seen as wrong in front of their peers. What is rewarding about the previous study is that the method of asking the participants to write first about their experiences and then talk resulted in rich and detailed reflections.

The second situation in which some learners think they are saving their faces by avoiding classroom interaction is when they believe that they have weak language abilities or weak communication skills. For instance, Tatar (2009) conducted a study on four Turkish students studying in the U.S by using weekly interviews and observations of those students in their classes for about five weeks. The study sought to highlight why some students prefer to be quiet in their classes. The results showed that these students do not interact in their classrooms because they think that their language is not as good as the others'. Similarly, in Townsend's study (1998) mentioned earlier, one male student attributed his silence in classroom discussions to not understanding what was going on around him, which definitely relates to deficiencies in language abilities (comprehension). Despite the fact that weak language abilities can be a reason for not interacting in the classroom, some learners find it a getaway not to bother to participate. That is, when they are asked about their silence and passive role in the classroom, they find it easy to blame their language skills.

3.3 Teachers' ineffective ways of handling interactions

Turning now to examples of teachers' behaviours and how they can play a role in making students quieter during classroom interactions, some studies seem to suggest that teachers' feedback patterns during classroom discussions can impinge on learners' amount of participation (for example Waring, 2009; Li, 2011). As an example, in a study by Johnes and Gerig (1994) in which 101 students were observed, 32 out of the 101 were identified as silent in the classroom. The silent ones were interviewed by the researchers. Not only did these students have low interaction rates; rather, they did not interact at all and were judged as verbally passive by their teachers. The study concluded that the teachers' ways of handling discussions do not appeal to the learners. An example of such an ineffective way is Initiation-Response-Feedback (IRF) which was downgraded by Li (2011) who argued that such a feedback pattern does not create interaction opportunities for the learners since it only encourages retrieval of information. Added to the discouraging IRF feedback pattern, in Xie's study (2009), it was

concluded that some of the teachers' behaviours in handling interactions can discourage learners from participating in the classroom. Examples of such behaviours include teachers sticking rigidly to their plans, giving personal opinions to evaluate students' replies and judging "the relevance of student-initiated ideas" (p. 13). Indeed, Xie's study has important pedagogical implications on what teachers can do to encourage quiet students to interact in the classroom.

3.4 Cultural influences

Since learning is a social activity before anything else, the contextual factors in the surrounding environment will more likely come into play during the classrooms interactions. Although culture can be a supportive tool in some contexts that can help students interact more, question, comment or express their opinions, it can be a barricade in other contexts. The cultural aspect meant here is the concept of "a teacher" in students' minds. To exemplify, in the study of Abd-Kadir and Hardman (2007) in which the researchers analyzed the classroom discourse in Kenyan and Nigerian classes, it was stated that because teachers are seen as "figures of authority and respect" (p. 12), students would not question what their teachers say or at least comment on it, which can eventually affect teacher-student interaction negatively. Moving to the China as another context, Xie (2009) maintained that Chinese students find it very hard to question the elderly, or rather they find it an impolite behaviour. Very similar to that, Tatar (2009) also stressed that being quiet in the classroom is more related to the cultural backgrounds of the learners which sometimes discourage them from challenging teachers' ideas in a discussion. One of the participants in Tatar's study said, "[i]f I were an instructor I would not be interested in a student who arrogantly defends his ideas" (p. 291). Taking a closer look at the studies mentioned above, it seems obvious that the way culture imposes certain ideas and perceptions on students can affect their interaction rates in the classroom.

After highlighting the reasons behind students' quietness during the classroom interaction, the fourth section will present some pedagogical implications about what teachers can do to encourage those quiet students to interact.

4. What teachers can do to encourage quiet students to participate

By synthesizing the findings and the pedagogical recommendations that have been borne out by the studies that explored the issue of quiet students in the classrooms, a model that can help teachers engage quiet students in classroom interactions will be presented in this section. The reason for developing such a model is to act as an umbrella under which the pedagogical implications and practical recommendations of the relevant studies can be presented consistently. Needless to say that the major challenge teachers are burdened with in the classroom discourse is "converting lurkers and stalkers into talkers" (Peck, 2012, p. 18). The model has three parts: (1) Personalized interaction, (2) Interactive teaching, and (3) Allowing in-class and online interactional reflection.

4.1 Personalized interaction

The main aim of personalizing the interaction in the classroom is to get students interested and willing to participate. In fact, this can be achieved through two techniques: building on or bringing students' ideas and involving cultural issues as topics for discussions. First, in the study of Townsend (1998), which is mentioned earlier, the findings suggest that teachers can let students generate the questions that interest or rather puzzle

them about the world, and the replies provided by their peers can be expanded into topics for a classroom discussion. Similarly, Nystrand, Wu, Gamoran, Zeiser and Long (2003) maintained that teachers can encourage learners to actively participate in the discussion when the experiences of the learners are used as “ a source of knowledge” (as cited in Xie, 2009, p. 19). Johnes and Gerig (1994) expanded on the technique of using students’ ideas in the classroom by asserting that students in the classroom need to create meaning of themselves, so the researchers suggested that teachers should talk through their students’ ideas. In a recent study, Tani (2005), the researcher invented a very interesting activity in order to get her quiet Asian students to participate during a term-long course in an Australian college. The tool was called “questions-writing time” in which each student had to write one question which should be related to the lecture and useful to the audience at the same time. They had to write their questions on cards during the break of the lecture. The teacher had to collect the question cards and use them as discussion topics in the second half of the lecture. The technique was evaluated using questionnaires at the end of the course, and one of the changes the researcher noticed was the increased rate of quiet students’ participation. In attempting to explain that, one can argue that when students feel that the discussion is centered on what concerns them, they will be driven to participate.

Secondly, teachers can make use of students’ culture to encourage them to participate. In the study of Tatar (2009), one pedagogical implication the study proposed was that teachers can integrate cross-cultural issues into the discussions so that even students claiming that their knowledge is limited might have something to say since such topics are very familiar. As an example, if a teacher in the Middle East brings the topic of women’s right to get a job, the students, especially females who are seen silent most of the time, will most probably say their opinions. Critically speaking, although what the studies suggested regarding teachers raising interesting topics for discussions is applicable, some teachers might argue against it by claiming that sometimes they are under pressure to teach what they are told by the institutions and are not given freedom to make decisions.

4.2 Interactive teaching

This part of the model proposes an attempt of reshaping the feedback patterns of the teachers. This can be done by first changing the IRF pattern. In a study done by Abd-Kadir and Hardman (2008) which included the analysis of 20 video-taped lessons from Kenya and Nigeria, it was found out that IRF pattern was widely used by the teachers, and the researchers argued that such a pattern offers very limited opportunities for students to engage in classroom interactions. In agreement with that, Xie (2009) stated that teachers could look for other “interactional possibilities” to encourage learners to participate (p. 18). The reason why most learners seem to dislike such a pattern is that it makes it clear to them that the teacher is seeking one specific answer nothing more. An alternative technique, as Abd-Kadir and Hardman (2008) suggested, is “more dialogic forms of teaching” (p. 10). To clarify what these dialogic forms consist of, Reda (2009) advised teachers to make the best out of open-ended questions. These questions can encourage quiet students to start interacting and gradually get involved more, especially if these students are involved in what Warning (2009) proposed as “student-initiated negotiations” (p. 796). In addition to that, the dialogic teaching form can also include what Xie (2009) noted about teachers not seeking specific answers that match their expectations. When students come to realize that there is no right or wrong answer, they will be pushed to participate in their classes.

4.3 Allowing in-class and online interactional reflection

With regard to allowing in-class and online interactional reflection for interactions, research seems to suggest several techniques teachers can apply to encourage learners to participate. One way to allow students sufficient time to reflect on the topic before bringing it to the discussion in the classroom is online social networking. For example, Peck (2012) conducted a study in which 50 students from an Australian university were presented to a social networking website and they were asked to interact online about their lectures. The study hypothesized that if students interact online, the participation rate would increase in the classroom. It was concluded that interacting online, especially before the tutorials, makes pupils more interactive in face-to-face classes. Another similar study was done by Pearson (2010) in which he incorporated the use of online blogs with more than 200 students in four terms. The researcher noticed that some very quiet students actively participated in the online blogs, so it was concluded that silent students “feel more comfortable articulating their views online than in traditional class discussions” (p. 210). The reason why such online tools are viewed as “an amazing ally to the teacher” is because quiet students might find online interaction less threatening than face-to-face interaction (English, 2007, p. 59). Although what the previous studies suggested is really interesting, it might not be feasible in every context because of the limited available teaching resources and time constraints.

Another and more feasible way of allowing interactional reflection was highlighted by Reda (2009) who assumed that silence can be a tool for communication when used properly. She elaborated on that by advising teachers to integrate reflection into the discussion. That is, students should be given time to think through their ideas and reflect on them before sharing them with the rest of the class. A very important and useful technique that provides learners with an opportunity to rehearse their ideas before sharing them with the whole class is the use of small group discussions. This can encourage quiet students to participate more. For instance, in a recent study done by Roberts and Tuleja (2008) which involved trying out some techniques to help 106 Chinese students from Hong Kong University to actively interact during their classes, it was concluded that small group discussions push learners to interact more than whole-class discussions. Although some students might still continue to be silent during whole-class discussions, they would, as the study of Radinsky et al. (2006) revealed, participate more and more in their small groups.

In addition to the previous techniques of allowing students time to reflect on their ideas before sharing them, Tatar (2009) suggested that teachers can structure their discussions in a way that allows students to listen and reflect first and then discuss. This undoubtedly can encourage those quiet pupils who cannot generate ideas on the spot to participate in classroom discussions. One type of activities recommended by Townsend (1998) was “run-overs”. This means that a discussion topic is carried on from the previous class so that the students might have an idea of what to say to the rest of the class. Almost all of the previous suggestions (except using online resources) seem to be applicable and within the reach of every teacher to encourage quiet pupils to participate.

5. Conclusion

Since the underlying assumption of interaction contends that learners’ proficiency develops as they engage more in interactions, teachers should take this as one of their principles in teaching. In their efforts to engage students in the classroom interactions, teachers are sometimes confronted by some students who would reject to utter even a word or who would do their best to evade contact with the teacher. That being said, this paper’s main aim was to review recent studies that tackled classroom interactions to suggest several ways teachers can do to help

quieter pupils engage in classroom interactions. To achieve that, it was necessary to understand first the rationale of classroom interactions to show how important it is to engage all students to take part in them. Second and more important was the need to identify the reasons behind the quietness of some students during classroom interactions so that the solutions would be comprehensive. After that, the paper, in its core section, presented a model that synthesized all the suggestions and the pedagogical implications expressed in some recent studies. The model seeks first to get learners interested in the interactions by personalizing the topics. Secondly, it recommends an interactive form of teaching to encourage the learners. In the third part, it proposes some techniques of restructuring classroom discussions. Despite that the paper has suggested some practical techniques; it remains limited in terms of the feasibility of some strategies, such as the use of online interactional tools. Also, some studies did not directly address what teachers can do to encourage the quiet students to participate; rather, they explored the reasons behind their quietness and made several practical suggestions at the end.

ICT bridges the gap between education and learning experience. Unless and until concerns about equity and access are addressed, the mandatory inclusion of ICT in the curriculum remains a continuous issue and new technological gadgets are becoming meaningless. Since the technological gadgets play a prominent role in every walks of human life, ICT stands first and it is an important gadget and commendable one. So application of knowledge in ICT needs improvement in education field. Though ICT facilitates teaching and learning process, it has limitations. The new technological gadgets such as video, whiteboard, tablet, OHP, digital board, TV, recorder, CDs, DVDs etc. help us a lot to teach and to learn. We can do what else we need to do with them but it is up to us to use them.

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