AN ALTERNATIVE APPROACH TO OVERCOME PROBLEMS OF LARGE CLASSROOMS

Tunku Mohani Tunku Mohtar
University of Malaya, Kuala Lumpur

ABSTRACT

Teaching large classes has always been a problem to many language teachers. The situation becomes more problematic when the students' proficiency in the language is very poor and participation among students is almost negligible. Many students are reluctant to speak the language because they feel that they cannot master the correct form of the language and hence remain passive during English language lessons. Many teachers resort to group work to enable their students to interact among themselves Since the number of students in the classroom is big, the problem regarding noise is inevitable. Movement by both the teacher and students is also restricted as the students' desks are fairly close to one another. Hence getting into groups becomes cumbersome

This article deals with some strategies of overcoming problems of teaching in large and often overcrowded classrooms. It looks into the possibilities of promoting teaching and learning outside the classroom during regular teaching hours. It provides a rationale for the teaching of English outside the classroom and discusses some principles regarding it. It also presents activities, which have been conducted and proven to be successful

Introduction

The teaching of English as a second or foreign language has always been challenging to the classroom teacher. This is especially so when there is a large number of students in the classroom. The situation is exacerbated when the students' proficiency in the language is very poor. Participation among the students is almost negligible thus rendering teacher talk to dominate the classroom scene. The growth of the use of the English language has been staggering (Brown, 1991) especially in the 'outer circle' (Kachru, 1988) among which are countries such as Singapore, Malaysia, and India, and the 'expanding circle' (Kachru, 1988) which include countries such as China, Indonesia, and Japan. According to Kachru (1988) English is not learned as a tool for interaction with just native speakers of the language. In most of the countries in the 'outer circle' it is also used among the non-native speakers of the language. However, several varieties are used and they differ

16

from the standard variety. It is thus the responsibility of the language teachers to get the students to use the 'standard variety' which simply means correct and good language. Many students are reluctant to speak the language because they feel that they cannot master the correct form of the language and hence remain passive during English language lessons. Many teachers organize group work to enable the students to interact with each other using English. Since the number of students in the classroom is big, the problem regarding noise is inevitable. Another problem is the restriction of movement by both the teacher and students as the students' desks are placed fairly close to one another. Hence getting into groups becomes cumbersome. Even if this can somehow be done, the teacher may be prevented from moving around the room to attend to each of the students' problems as space for movement is restricted.

This article thus offers a strategy for overcoming some problems of teaching in large and often overcrowded classrooms. It looks into the possibilities of promoting teaching and learning outside the classroom during regular teaching hours. The general timetable is not affected as these lessons are conducted during the time allocated for English language lessons. Teaching and learning need not be confined to the classroom as 'schooling may take place in the park, the parking lot, or the playground' (Clark and Kadis, 1971:38).

Despite curricular aims that the students should be able to acquire the skills and knowledge of English to communicate in certain everyday activities and job situations (Malaysian English Language syllabus, 1990), in many English language classrooms interaction among students is lacking. Motivating students to speak has always been a challenge to the language teachers.

Rationale

To quote Rivers (1983:110) 'If we wish to develop natural language use, we take the language out of the classroom'. This statement has been interpreted in the sense that the students and the teacher interact outside the classroom. The classroom often presents a formal place for the use of language. Teachers conduct lessons as stipulated in the syllabus and students try to use the language as correctly as possible. An alternative approach would be to create a learning situation outside the classroom. This strategy can be effective as it can serve the following purposes:

1. **Overcome students' inhibitions**

    Many students feel inhibited to speak in the classroom because their command of the English language is very poor. This may be due to the fact that 'some students find it more humiliating to lose face in front of their peers than in front of their teacher' (Prabhu, 1987:32). By taking them outside the classroom, the teacher can

interact more freely with individual students. It is believed that interaction between the teacher and the learner is more beneficial than interaction between one learner and another (Prabhu, 1987). When students perform an activity outside the classroom they do not feel the pressure of having to interact as dictated by some teaching materials used in their lessons nor the pressure from the teacher. They will be able to use the target language more naturally to accomplish a certain task though at times they may resort to their first language. They can engage in informal conversations in such a setting. Learning in informal settings can be more engaging than classroom learning (Carnell, 2000) . Students will also feel relaxed and comfortable and therefore will be able to learn more in shorter periods of time (Dulay, Burt and Krashen, 1981). Observations have shown that when students are in a relaxed, positive state of mind or mood, they process information objectively, use common sense and give good judgements and utilise competent problem-solving and learning skills (Stewart, 1984)

ii) Reduce anxiety

The lessons conducted outside the classroom can help reduce the students' feeling of anxiety. The less anxious the learner, the better language acquisition proceeds (Dulay, Burt and Krashen, 1981). Naiman et al. (1978) found that for their subjects (French learners of grades 8 to 12) classroom anxiety, a high level of rejection and similar feelings may be related to failure. Classrooms that promote low anxiety among students enable them to lower their affective filter (Dulay and Burt, 1977) and hence motivation and self-esteem can be developed.

iii) Promote better teacher-student interaction

An activity conducted outside the classroom makes the lesson more informal. The teaching and learning atmosphere is less stifling and students can feel more relaxed. The physical and structural barriers between the teacher and the students can be broken down. In the classroom the physical setting is such that the teacher occupies the space in front of the room and the other part belongs to the students. At times the students resent the teacher's encroachment into their area. They also feel awkward to stand in front of the classroom which is the teacher's territory. The area outside the classroom has no specific place for anyone. Therefore, interaction can easily take place as both the students and the teacher are free to move about. The teacher is thus able to break down the time-honoured authority structure of teacher and students relations (Rivers, 1983). According to Rivers, this is essential for natural language use. Individual students can approach the teacher very easily. The teacher can then help those students who would otherwise have no opportunity to talk to the teacher. Rapport between the teacher and the students can then be fostered as the teacher can get to know the students individually and can also find out the types of students and

the kind of assistance they need. A student who may not be able to do a task on her own may benefit when a more expert individual provides as much help to the learner as required. This is termed as 'scaffolding' by Vygotsky (1978). It suggests that the help given can be gradually withdrawn as the learner gains confidence in using the target language.

iv) Promote better student-student interaction

Group work is sometimes hampered in the classroom by lack of space. Even if it is done, the students keep to their own cultural groups and noise is a constant problem. Outside the classroom the students can move about freely and interact with one another. They can have discussions with members of the other groups as they perform their tasks. This will eliminate the tendency for groups to be cliquish. According to Clark and Kadis (1971), children tend to be more action oriented than adults and some of them have a special need to move about in space.

Interaction involving two-way communication is the best way to negotiate meaning and ultimately to acquisition of the target language (Long, 1983a, 1983b; Pica and Doughty, 1985; Swain, 1985). Although the task may not specifically dictate to the students to discuss in groups, the nature of the task may make interaction possible. Hence the language used for interaction will be that of the students' own initiation based on their needs at the moment. It may not yet be wholly in English but as students are aware that the final product will have to be in English, they will use English to the best of their ability. They will seek the teacher's help when they need it.

v) Provide rich context for learning

The environment outside the classroom can provide a rich context in which the target language can be learned. It should therefore be exploited to foster natural language use. Concrete 'here-and-now' topics are essential for language acquisition (Dulay, Burt and Krashen, 1981). An example is a project on the beautification of the school. Students are exposed to the real situation outside the classroom. Such a natural physical environment can give rise to a natural language environment, that is, the focus is on the content of the communication. This will enhance the development of communication skills (Dulay, Burt and Krashen, 1981). The extralinguistic factors can help the students get the meaning of the unfamiliar sounds of the target language as concrete referents can be seen, heard or felt while the language is being used (Dulay, Burt and Krashen, 1981).

Activities which are conducted outside the classroom can contribute towards learning the target language particularly when the students' language proficiency is low

and their vocabulary is very limited. Vocabulary items can be learned easily when the referents can be seen and/or touched and they are real. Students are able to understand the sentences used to express certain concepts or situations as mentally or visually perceived by them, for example, in referring to water in the drain as stagnant, students can easily understand the meaning of the word 'stagnant' as the context can be seen in real life by them.

vi) Provide quasi-life experiences

Activities which make use of the environment outside the classroom can provide real or quasi-life experiences to the students. These experiences give the students more opportunities to receive input (Eyring, 1991). Learning becomes meaningful when the activities are natural, that is, where skills are integrated (Moustafa and Penrose, 1985) when content is contextualized, (Omaggio, 1986) and when purposes are real (Cray, 1988). Hence an activity such as that requiring the students to write a letter of complaint, a survey around the school would allow the students to gather information about the school premises which warrants a complaint to the principal. The teacher can provide the language input so that the students can use it meaningfully. Students can see and learn about things around them and the language input can thus be motivating to the students as they are able to do the task. The teacher can supply the language input as the students require it even to the extent of giving different linguistic items to each of them. In this way, the weaker students are able to get more attention from the teacher. Ellis (1984:184) believes that a key factor in second language acquisition is 'the opportunity afforded the learner to negotiate meaning with an interlocutor preferably one who is adept at 'foreign or teacher talk'. Such an atmosphere is conducive to learning and hence favours the growth and development of motivation (Ladousse, 1982).

vii) Increase student responsibility for their own learning

It is through activities conducted in an informal atmosphere that students are able to be responsible for their own learning. Their sense of achievement can be enhanced as they are able to accomplish the task, step by step. Besides, the students are able to have some fun. The activities can also help the students use their own experiences to discover novel ways of using language within a certain setting, and this will give them a sense of ownership. The whole teaching and learning situation incorporates elements of the humanistic approach whereby understanding, personal assumption of responsibility and self-realisation (Stevick, 1990) are nurtured. In activities such as a treasure hunt, students can be made to work in groups. They need to cooperate to carry out the instructions given or to solve a problem in order to find the treasure. However, students should not be left entirely on their own. The teacher has to guide them and check their work as they carry it out.

Although language learning specialists believe that the best situation for language learning is one that is relatively 'open' in structure and in which students can talk freely with one another, the LEP (Low English Proficiency) students need the help of the teacher (Wong-Fillmore, 1985). Wong Fillmore discovered that classes which were open and those that made heavy use of individual work were among those found to be the least successful for language learning. Knowing that he or she is able to gather some information and to express it in English with or without the teacher may help give the student a sense of achievement.

Principles of conducting lessons outside the classroom.

Lessons which are to be conducted outside the classroom have to be well planned and managed if they are meant to accomplish the goals of teaching and learning. Certain principles need to be adhered to.

i) **Preparation of activities and tasks.**
The activities must be well thought out. Instructions must be clearly explained to the students before they are let out of the classroom. Such a measure is necessary so that the students are aware of the objectives of the lesson. The time for them to complete the task should be specified and observed during the implementation of the lesson. This will ensure that students are kept on task and that they do not digress from what they are required to do. It would be of great help if the required linguistic structures and vocabulary items are given to them before they carry out the activities. Thus after 'skill getting' (Rivers, 1990), students would be able to use the language items in the course of accomplishing the task or tasks. It is necessary to equip them with some language items which they can use in order to communicate. According to Kalivoda (1972), failure to communicate in the foreign language when talking about real needs is probably a major contributor to boredom, irrelevancy and apathy which students associate with foreign language courses.

ii) **Purposeful and meaningful activities.**
One of the criteria of a communicative activity is that the task must be purposeful. Students should know that they would learn something outside the classroom and that it would be more meaningful performing the task outside the classroom than in the classroom. Activities therefore, should be planned in such a way that the environment outside is made use of to enable students to use the target language. Examples of activities which have been tried are:

a) Writing a letter of complaint.
Students are required to write a letter to the principal of the school to inform him of the unsatisfactory condition of the school. Students survey the school premises to gather information.

b) A school beautification project.
Students are given a situation in which a competition is held for students to come out with a proposal to beautify the school and its premises. The product includes a description of what is to be done and a graphic presentation of it. All the students' products are displayed on the school board.

c) Asking for and giving directions.
Students are given instructions to follow to get to certain places. They are required to ask for directions in case they are in doubt. A variation of this is a treasure hunt. Students are given directions to follow in order to find the treasure. The directions are written so that the students have to read very carefully in order to find the treasure. Another variation is 'blind man's buff'. Students work in groups giving directions to one student who is blindfolded. This is a listening and speaking activity. Students have to give very clear instructions so that the student who is blindfolded will be able to follow the directions well. The student who is blindfolded on the other hand, has to listen very carefully to be able to do the task. He or she may ask questions if the instructions are not very clear.

iii) Cooperation rather than competition.
Students are encouraged to cooperate with one another within their groups or with members of other groups so that the task can be done smoothly. Competition can cause friction among them. Even in the case of an activity like the treasure hunt, a different set of directions can be given to each group of students so that each group will be able to find something.

iv) Variety of activities.
The activities to be used outside the classroom should be varied so that students are stimulated to learn something each time they are outside the classroom. These activities should cater to the different needs of the students. They should also enable the students to carry them out even at times other than during English language lessons.

v) Supervision by the teacher.
It is important for the teacher to observe the students as they perform the tasks given. The teacher needs to move around to ensure that each student is given the assistance he or she needs.

Sample lesson.
Topic : Writing a letter of complaint.

Stage 1. (20 minutes)
Students are told of the objective of the lesson, that is to write a letter to the principal of the school, complaining about the unsatisfactory condition of the school canteen. The necessary vocabulary items such as *canteen, drain, field, stagnant,* are taught

Students are told that they are to collect information from the canteen. They are required to write down notes as they gather information. They are allowed about 30 minutes to do the task.

Stage 2 (30 minutes)
Students are let out of the classroom. The teacher checks to see that every student is able to do the task. The teacher helps them out by providing the vocabulary items or language expressions they require at that time. New vocabulary and language items can be learned on the spot if they are relevant to the task. Incidental learning of new items is encouraged.

Stage 3 (30 minutes)
Students return to the classroom for a discussion. The teacher asks the students for the information they have gathered and writes it on the blackboard. Whenever a point is expressed in an ungrammatical sentence, the teacher can accept the point but writes it out in the correct form for all the students to see. Students are then told to select five points to write the letter individually.

Observation of lesson conducted

A lesson was tried out among Form Four students of low English proficiency level. It was observed that the students enjoyed themselves during the lesson as they were all deeply involved. Every student was able to do the task. They showed no inhibition in approaching the teacher to ask for help. Even the weakest student made this attempt as it did not draw the attention of the other students. A conference between the teacher and individual students could be conducted.

During the classroom discussion, the students were very responsive. Most of them were able to contribute to the discussion. Even the weakest students managed to do it as they had received help from the teacher as well as their peers.

Conclusion

An outdoor lesson can be interesting and motivating to the students provided there are resources outside the classroom which can be made use of. Some schools may lack resources such as a garden or a field. Sometimes, the lesson can be well planned but its implementation is subject to the vagaries of the weather. The teacher has to be flexible to be able to adjust accordingly.

Flexibility in teaching is greatly desired to enhance learning. This does not only mean adjusting the teaching techniques in the classroom to cater to the needs of the students It also means changing the physical setting of teaching. Teaching outside the classroom helps ease the boredom of facing the same physical environment in the classroom. The environment outside the classroom can provide interesting as well as challenging situations for teaching and learning.

The approach to teaching discussed shows one way of conducting lessons. There is, of course, no one 'best' way of doing anything (Johnson, 2001). 'Instead there are ways that may be more or less appropriate according to situation' (Johnson, 2001: 208). The teacher can try innovative ways of teaching but 'if a teacher does not believe in what he is doing, his performance is likely to be weak' (Johnson, 2001: 209).

References

Carnell, E. 2002. Dialogue, discussion and feedback- views of secondary school students on how others help their learning. In S. Askew (ed.) *Feedback for Learning*. London: Routledge Falmer.

Clark, D.H. & Kadis, A.L. 1971. *Humanistic Teaching*. Columbus: Charles E. Merrill Pub. Co.

Cray, E. 1988. Why teachers should develop their own materials. *TESL Talk*, 18 (1):69-81.

Dulay, H. & Burt, M. 1977. Remarks on creativity in language acquisition. In Burt, M. H. Dulay & M. Finnochiaro (eds.) *Viewpoints on English as a Second Language*. New York: Regents. pp. 95–126.

Dulay, H, Burt, M. & Krashen, S. 1981. *Language Two*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Ellis, R. 1984. *Classroom Second Language Development*. Oxford: Pergamon Press.

Eyring, J.L. 1991. Experiential language learning. In M. Celce-Murcia (ed.) *Teaching English as a Second or Foreign Language*. Boston: Heinle & Heinle Publishers. pp. 346-359.

Johnson, K. 2001. *An Introduction to Foreign Language Learning and Teaching*. Harlow: Pearson Education Ltd.

Kachru, B. 1988. Teaching World Englishes. *ERIC/CLL News Bulletin*, 12 (1):1-8.

Kalivada, T.A. 1972. Let's use foreign language for real communication. *American Foreign Language Teacher*, 2:14-15.

Ladousse, G.P. 1982. From needs to wants: Motivation and the language learner. *System*, 10(1): 29-37.

Long, M. 1983a. Linguistics and conversational adjustments to non-native speakers. *Studies in Second Language Acquisition*, 5(2):177-193

_____ 1983b. Native/non-native speaker conversation in the second language class-room. M. Clark & J. Handscombe (eds.) *On TESOL '82*. Washington D.C. TESOL.

Moustafa, M & Penrose, J. 1985. Comprehensible Input PLUS the Language Experience Approach: Reading Instruction for Limited English Speaking Students. *Reading Teacher*, 38 (7):640-647.

Naiman, N. et al. 1978. *The Good Language Learner*. Toronto: Ontario Institute for Studies in Education.

Omaggio, A. 1986. *Teaching Language in Context*. Boston: Heinle & Heinle.

Pica, T & Doughty, C. 1985. Input and interaction in the communicative language classroom. A comparison of teacher-fronted and group activities. In S. Gass & C. Madden (eds.) *Input in Second Language Acquisition*. Rowley, MA: Newbury House. pp. 115-132.

Prabhu, N.S. 1987. *Second Language Pedagogy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Rivers, W. 1983 . *Communicating Naturally in a Second Language*. Cambridge Cambridge University Press.

_____ 1990. *Speaking in Many Tongues*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

Stewart, D. 1984. The effect of teacher/student state of mind in raising reading achieve ment in high risk, cross cultural youth. Paper presented at the Fourth Annua Conference of Psychology of Mind. Honolulu.

Swain, M. 1985. Communicative competence: Some roles of comprehensible output ii its development. In S. Gass & C. Madden (eds.) *Input in Second Languag Acquisition*. Rowley, MA: Newbury House. pp. 235-253.

Vygotsky, L. 1979. *Mind in Society: The development of higher psychological process* Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press.