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"Yes, you can". Constraints and resources in teaching speaking to secondary school students

Abstract

If we were to describe the situation in foreign language teaching and learning in Poland in just two words, it would be "quite good", but if three words were allowed, it would have to be "not quite good". Although knowing English seems to be a priority with Polish students (and their parents) as well as educational authorities, classroom learning of a foreign language is still associated with boredom or difficulty, teachers find students unmotivated, and students find teachers demotivating. As teacher trainees coming back from their practicum report, students at the Gimnazjum (*junior-high-school)* level differ greatly, not only in their ability to speak English but also in their willingness to use the language in the classroom. Unfortunately, as teacher trainee questionnaires show, many teachers find it difficult to overcome this problem. Unfortunately, they seem to contribute to it by letting learners use Polish in their English lessons, as well as using a lot of Polish themselves. There are too few opportunities for secondary-school students to communicate in English during their English lessons. The article is an attempt at showing some possible ways out of this methodological paradox for the young teachers who are entering the scene of the foreign language teaching theater.

Keywords: classroom interaction, teaching speaking, pre-service teacher experiences

Introduction

Motivated by the problems, which I had noticed both as a foreign language teacher trainer, observing teacher trainees at work during their practicum, a parent informally "interviewing" my teenage children, and as a language learner in a beginner Spanish course myself, I decided to have a look at the area of foreign language classroom interaction. Looking from three different perspectives might be helpful in finding potential solutions to the problem, I thought.

In state schools, English teachers seem to underestimate the opportunities that the classroom offers for and preparing the foreign language student for interacting in real world. I would like to sound optimistic, and say "Yes, you can" when asked by student trainees if there is a way for young teachers to help teenagers develop their speaking skills effectively.

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Classroom interaction and classroom interactional competence

Pondering upon classroom interaction we start from a picture of an average class of 14-year olds. The foreign language teacher faces a bunch of students. What are they like? Some eager to talk, some rather reluctant. Some willing to learn and some less willing. Or perhaps, undecided. Also the teachers differ. Some of them more competent in classroom interaction, some less. Some classrooms look like "an English classroom", decorated with posters and language rules, others do not betray what the students study, as it used by different teachers to teach different school subjects.

Whether small or large, traditionally or non conventionally arranged, the language classroom should be a safe setting in which the students are supposed to learn how to behave verbally in naturalistic settings, that is the real world. Thus the students' communicative competence will depend on their ability to practice in the classroom. The participants, that is students and the teacher, must work together to keep the classroom discourse afloat. "Unlike speaking (…), classroom interaction is a joint competence " (Walsh, 2012, p. 5).

Unfortunately, as Walsh suggests further, "to produce materials and devise tasks which focus on interaction is far more difficult than to devise materials and activities which train individual performance" and "although contemporary materials claim to adopt a task-based approach to teaching and learning, they do not, (…) train learners to become better interactants. All attention is directed towards the individual's ability to produce accurate, appropriate and fluent utterances (ibid: 2). These remarks make me think of Polish teenagers trapped in classrooms where one exercise ("activity") follows another, whose English is, however, seldom heard.

Polish-English classroom interaction exemplified (nature of the problem)

My intuition of the existing problems can be supported by samples of classroom interaction collected by one of our students in her MA thesis, which are presented and analysed briefly below:

Extract 1 below is taken from a middle school classroom in Mielec (Lesser Poland) where the English teacher is starting a lesson with a group of learners. They have been scheduled an extra lesson of English the day after. The teacher is thinking about the possible content of that lesson, planning it together with the students, it seems.

S1: We can watch a movie?

T: (…) I'm not sure if we have equipment there, because it's room 36… and… what's there?

Ss: Jest projektor…

T: A projector… or maybe I'll prepare something for you… a film… you will see…

S2: Żelazna Dama

S3: Ma Pani?

T: But actually we need two hours. We won't manage to finish it during one hour… I will see ok?

S4: zaczniemy teraz a skończymy jutro.

T: No, not now… because we are going to talk about something different. You will see in a moment. Who is absent?

S4: Wszyscy są.

As we can see, the students are actively planning for their extra lesson… but mostly in Polish. There was a good start "We can watch a movie?", grammatically imperfect, but perfectly communicative, but soon, perhaps because of "vocabulary problems" the Polish "projector" appears. The teacher continues speaking English and the whole exchange remains bilingual. Another explanation could be, the students feel uneasy discussing their ideas for the extra lesson in English (this is spontaneous exchange, not part of the "lesson"). This is also visible a moment later when they actually switch into English:

T: (…) well …right …ladies and gentlemen, last week we talked about… Jacob?

S5: Calling.

T: What was it?

S3: Phone calls.

When asking about the content of the last lesson, the teacher easily elicits responses in English, however brief.

T: yes, we talked about phone calls. Do you remember any phrases?

S2 Hi.

T. Hi (laughs). What else?

S6: Can I speak to…?

(Zięba, 201, p. 75)

The fragment shows the way in which the students use English in class: when asked direct questions by the teacher often in a reluctant manner, and with monosyllabic responses. They do not use the target language for real communication. English is an artificial code, students do not feel comfortable or willing to use it as a means of communication.

Research: investigating classroom discourse to invest in young teachers' CIC

Reflecting on Walsh's worries about the way in which both teachers and materials focus on accuracy and individual performance I decided to check whether this is actually the case in Polish Gimnazjum. As a starting point I used the classroom interaction sample obtained from a Gimnazjum level MA research project, (see 1.1) The research plan was firstly, to *observe* classes in Gimnazjum during the practicum

supervision to obtain first-hand experience. In the second step I decided to *talk to selected student trainees* and *survey a larger group* of them to find out what is, according to the students, missing in the speaking skill development at this level**.**

Research questions

In order to contribute to our understanding of the problems of classroom interaction in English, we would like to answer the following questions.

1. Do English teachers support learners' development of speaking?
2. Is L2 used to a sufficient extent by teachers?
3. Are students encouraged to use L2 i.e. given a chance to learn from their own output?
4. Do students spontaneously get involved in classroom interaction in L2?

Observation

During their school practicum Maria and Ola, two pre-service teachers were observed while teaching an intermediate English group at a Gimnazjum in Krakow. The practicum lasted for one semester (winter 2014/2015). My observation showed the following: the ratio of interaction in L2 and L1 was found to be less than satisfactory: students used mainly Polish, and answered in monosyllables when asked a question in English. The teacher often had to translate instructions into Polish as this was the students' expectation. The teacher also prompted the students to work using their mother tongue ("Proszę, zaczynamy.") When talking to the two students after their lessons, I obtained the following data:

A. How would you describe the learners in the class?

"…(some students), especially the weaker ones react as if they did not care (for their marks)."

"you cannot slow down the pace of work, for instance give them a lot of time to copy form the blackboard, or discipline problem will occur"

"[the students] followed my instructions eagerly only when they were promised some kind of a reward."

"The students were willing to speak only if speaking was a part of a game. The prospect of being awarded with some points and climbing on the scoreboard was very motivating for them."

B. Why was it a problem to use English?

"they did not follow instructions in English so I had to repeat them in Polish every time."

"the students are afraid of making mistakes, unwilling to speak English, if you ask a question they will ask "A mogę po polsku?"

"Even though I tried giving instructions in English, they didn't even listen to them, they were waiting for the Polish translation. Maybe they got used to being given the Polish

translation right after the English instructions so they weren't even trying to understand the English one."

"Sometimes some students knew the answer to my questions but they didn't want to say it out loud because they were afraid of being an object of ridicule since they weren't sure if their pronunciation was correct."

C. What solutions (of the problem of low student output in English) did you try out? Were they efficient?

"I spent a lot of time preparing games for them, and it paid back. They are more than happy to play."

"The students were willing to speak only if speaking was a part of a game. The prospect of being awarded with some points and climbing on the scoreboard was very motivating for them. So I've decided to assign points for speaking activities or simply for answering my questions out loud."

The observed student teacher trainees' case might allow to formulate a thesis that Gimnazjum students are subject to negative practice of translating instructions and low expectations from their teachers. They are often self-conscious and depend on the opinion of the peers. Making mistakes has not been accepted as natural part of learning. Motivating them to speak is easier said than done. They seem to expect "rewards" rather than derive satisfaction from the fact that they can say things in a foreign language.

The survey: novice teachers observing English classroom interaction in Gimnazjum

21 student teacher trainees, having completed their practicum in 14 different schools in the Małopolska (Lesser Poland) region, were asked to complete a survey based on their practicum experience one month after finishing their Gimnazjum Observation and Teaching Practicum which lasted for one semester (winter 2014/2015). In the survey, the young teachers were asked to rank the truthfulness of 21 statements referring to the classroom interaction in the English classes they visited on a 1 to 5 scale.

Below I present the results of the survey under three headings: trainees' evaluation of the observed in-service teachers' speaking practice, their evaluation of the observed learners' attitude to speaking, and finally, the trainees' evaluation of their own success in teaching to speak during the practicum.

As we can see, there is too little communicative activity in the English classes observed. Teachers do not always subscribe to the 'English only' principle. Whole class discussions (here we could wonder how many students actually participate in them) prevail over pair work. Teachers do not wait for students to speak, and students do not speak |"out of their own will."

Table 1. In-service teachers and speaking practice

1. Using English in the classroom (no less than 80% of the time)	3.4
2. Encouraging communication in English – by giving time to think and scaffolding student output	3.6
3. Pretending not to understand Polish output (or penalising it)	1.7
4. Creating positive classroom atmosphere – through smiling, maintaining good rapport with the students	4.1
5. Mild error correction, positive feedback	3.7
6. Planned communicative situations in English: pair work	3.3
7. Whole class discussions	3.6
8. Role plays and simulations	2.85
9. Spontaneous communicative situations: instructions and requests	3.6
10. Jokes and comments on ongoing situations	3.7
11. Small talk: asking students of their plans and experiences (e.g. "did anyone go skiing last weekend?)	3.5

Table 2. The learners' attitude to speaking

12. Students willing to participate in class activities	3.2
13. Students using English	2.1
14. Students not afraid of committing mistakes or vocabulary gaps	2.4
15. Students initiating talk	2.6
16. Students speaking English despite difficulties	3.5

Table 3. The teacher trainee self-evaluation

17. Using English in the classroom (no less than 80% of the time)	4.4.
18. Encouraging communication in English	4.4
19. Creating positive classroom atmosphere	4.3
20. Planned communicative situations in English	4.2
21. Spontaneous communicative situations	3.9

The trainees' speaking activity looks more creative than the one of the in-service teachers. The student teachers made attempts to use English and encouraged learners to do so. This is, of course, their subjective view of their own teaching. As we know, stated behavior may be influenced, among other things, by one's belief system, which "deals not only with beliefs about the way things are, but also with the way things should be" (Arva and Medgyes, 2000 after Woods, 1996, p. 70). Anyway, young teachers can be expected to break the traditional routine, and before they fall into a well-established format of teaching, the way they were taught, they will attempt to introduce new ways and practices.

Results

According to Walsh (ibid) understanding successful classroom interaction seems important for pre-service and in-service foreign language teachers in their learning to teach and in their attempt to improve their teaching in a specific context. From the small scale research conducted in Krakow's lower secondary schools we can see that the quality of this interaction leaves a lot of room for improvement. Major drawbacks of the observed teaching style refer to the fact that teachers often "surrender" to students' low expectations as to their own competence. Speaking English in class is often "beyond the students' capacity", and little is done to change that. This is not to say that teachers do not try their best. Especially young trainees, instructed to use as much English as possible and encourage the students to use English whenever possible, can be expected to bring in some new light. However the "tradition" of using Polish during foreign language lessons, as if English was just an ordinary school subject, gets very much in the way of improving secondary school students' speaking skills.

The first barrier seems to be the general attitude of students towards their first attempts to speak English in public, their fear of incorrect pronunciation, ungrammatical talk and peer ridicule as a result.

Young teachers must know the values of pair work and group work and be encouraged to experiment with the techniques. The students should be expected to speak freely, corrected mildly, praised for risk taking, and punished for criticizing others, should such behavior take place. Mutual empathy and cooperation should be the prevailing spirit in a foreign language class, otherwise it is not surprising students develop inhibitions, expecting not to be bothered to speak English. Such an attitude does not promise much in terms of preparing the students to become actual users of English beyond the classroom in their private life and further academic career.

"Yes, you can". Some constructive methodological steps for teacher development

Considering all the problems encountered when visiting secondary schools, I would like to propose a repair scheme for trainee and in-service teachers. For English Department students it could be used during TEFL classes, prior to their Teaching Practicum; for in – service teachers, workshops offered during M.A. extramural or post graduate studies would be the right place to focus on the problem.

From the efferent to the aesthetic approach

The first suggestion (change of approach) is to consider Rosenblatt's (1986) distinction *efferent and aesthetic approach*, originally used to improve the reading ability (Martyniuk, 2001 after Kramsch, 1993). The following chart suggests the direction in which we might go in the foreign language classroom if we want to achieve more interaction within, leading to more speaking interactive skills outside of it.

Table 4. Efferent and aesthetic approaches to speaking

From	To
Efferent product oriented task oriented approach	**Aesthetic process oriented relational approach Rosenblatt (1986)**
Exam – oriented practice	Skill-oriented
Asking and answering questions	Chatting
Impersonal language use	Personalizing
Speedy lead – in	Spending time on talking (contextualizing, dramatizing, reflecting)

What can be achieved through the change of approach is more student engagement, more interesting classes, and more speaking skills of the students (through increased input and output alike). Teachers, however, need to "slow down", see speaking skills as a goal in itself, and develop their own interactive skills, going beyond typical teacher talk.

Native speaker style

Another suggestion (change of style) is to look up and try to emulate native-speaking teachers. First of all, they use English for communicative purposes. Although they speak at an almost normal speech rate, the students are able to understand them without undue effort (Aarva & Medgyes, 2000, p. 365). The classes have a relaxed atmosphere, with the teachers behaving in an ostentatiously non-teacherly fashion. They discard several elements of the educational culture, such as formal greetings, calling on shy or reluctant students, or automatically correcting every error (ibid). Polish teachers of English should observe lessons taught by native speakers, analyse classroom discourse and attempt to emulate the conversational style of native speakers, which definitely leads to the improvement of students' interactive skills.

Concluding remarks

> "Classroom interactive competence manifests itself through the ways in which interactants create space for learning, make appropriate responses 'in the moment', seek and offer clarification, demonstrate understandings, afford opportunities for participation, negotiate meanings, and so on. These interactional strategies help to maintain the flow of the discourse and are central to effective classroom communication" (Walsh, 2012, p. 12).

Polish teachers of English need an encouragement to provoke students to speak, even imperfectly, in the classroom. It seems advisory for teacher trainees in Poland to try and emulate the ease with which native speakers run their lessons. Keeping the merits of a non native teacher, such as good methodological preparation, experience in learning a language, understanding students better, while "stealing" some of the advantages of the native teaching style might turn out to be a solution to the problem of speaking at the secondary level.

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