Interactive Teaching Techniques for Communicative Language Teaching in EFL Environments: A Survey

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Abstract

EFL classrooms in the Middle Eastern countries are heavily dominated by a lopsided and now obscure grammar translation method. The teacher is at the centre and learners are more often than not, passive recipients of information. However, with greater inclusion of interactive techniques and awareness among the teachers of learning strategies, there is willingness for change. This paper explores as a survey the language tasks that can be used in the EFL environment, assesses learner feedback and opens up new possibilities of research in the field.

Keywords: Teaching Techniques, Language and Linguistics, ELT, EFL, Classroom Activities, Communication

1. Introduction:

Interactive teaching is a direct outcome of what we know as Communicative Language Teaching or CLT which aims at learner-centred classrooms where the approach is meaning-based instead of being form-based to achieve communicative competence. Here are some characteristics of the communicative approach:

- The teacher acts as the facilitator who guides the learners to become autonomous.
- It focuses not only on correct grammatical structures, but also on situations where to use them.
- It requires of the teaching community to prepare authentic materials that address the learning needs of the students.
- It focuses on language functions and the ability to use them.
- It relies on specially designed tasks that help the learners become fluent and efficient users of the target language.

2. Review of Related Literature:

Barrow and Pithers (2016) cite a combination of several techniques being used in schools in the United States to help English learners. In the English Only Programs, three systems are popular: i. Structured English Instruction where only English is used as the medium of instruction and education with the aim to improve learners' overall proficiency in the language; ii. Structured English Immersion where the materials are in English but instructions are consciously in simple English; iii. Content-based English as a Second Language where English is the medium of instruction, materials, learning tasks and classroom techniques are employed with the aim to develop learning content as well as language cognition. In classrooms that employ another language in addition to English, the methods used are Dual Language, Two way Immersion, Traditional Bilingual, Developmental Bilingual, and Heritage Language. What is noteworthy is that CLT is not the only approach used. The efficacy of any one approach is discounted by them in the conclusion to their study where they state that this is due to the diverseness in the ultimate goal of English education amongst the researchers and policy makers.

In a remarkable study of CLT that is in tune with the current knowledge society, Ricoy and Feliz (2016) studied the use of Twitter as an educational tool with higher education students. They found that with increased comfort with use of technology, student participation in the education process also increased as they felt motivated to learn. It also increased the interaction amongst the learners. The role of interactive learning environments has been studied by Chang and Wu (2016) who studied the effect of gamification designs in MOOCs (Massive Open Online Courses).

They found that these interactive techniques successfully engaged the learners in education process using simple mechanics like rewards and goal setting. Hunt (2015) studied syllabus design and materials selection of the PACE (Practical Application of Communicative English) for freshman students. The environment under study is EFL with limited or none out-of-class language interaction. The stated aim of the syllabus is achieving skills which will be of use to the learners in real life situations once they are out of college: communicative competence, fluency, usable vocabulary, and development of interpersonal skills, in short. It is noteworthy that one of the five components of the syllabus is taught through the 'Widgets' textbook. This is a task-based book with sequentially arranged tasks that he describes as 'real world' in nature. Assessment of Integrated English language skills by means of tasks based on technology assisted trialogues has been studied by So et al. (2015). Needless to say, these give a lot of scope for simulation of real life language use situations. The results showed a positive correlation between the tasks and student engagement and English proficiency. Clearly, task based EFL can be a fulfilling experience for the learners.

In a study of Game Embedded CALL System to facilitate vocabulary acquisition and pronunciation, Young and Wang (2014) found that those who learned English pronunciation by a combination of drill and game-based activities performed far better than those who learned the same component by drill alone. In addition, the study also revealed that learner involvement and active participation was more in the game-based sessions. CLT began to develop as an alternative to the structural approach in the 1960s in the USA. However, it was not until two decades later that the philosophy began to take concrete shape. Swain, one of the early proponents of this approach, as early as 1995 had underlined the significance of task-based, engaging, fun activities to keep the language learner motivated in the classroom. This translates to, also, ample opportunity for oral participation to keep up learner enthusiasm. In short, he emphasises the use of Communicative tools if any reasonable targets of language acquisition have to be met. Communicative syllabi allow the teacher to give up the role of the sole manager of the language classroom. In fact, it changes the role of the learner as well who is treated as an independent entity. Group dynamics eases the bewilderment of the teacher as most communicative tasks rely heavily on pair or more collaborative work. This is especially advantageous for the poor learner who feels more secure (and hence more motivated to learn) in an environment where peers cushion his/her weaknesses. The learning atmosphere is relaxed with emphasis shifting from treating learning as an arduous process to sub-conscious learning. Learning by play takes the centrestage taking out much of the solemnity of the process. Errors are treated as part of the learning process and hence a healthy component of the language class.

3. Research Problem

Devising new, relevant task based activities can prove a real challenge for the EFL teachers as they grapple with the dual issues of covering the content intended to be taught and keeping sufficient scope for fun to engage the learners. Moreover, the wide range of Communicative syllabi can leave the teacher confused. Different theorists and language teachers work on a few strategies that they design as they gain on experience. However, this survey endeavours to present a large compilation of task-based interactive activities presented by Kevin Yee as *101 Interactive techniques*. The compilation is the result of more than twenty years of reading, seminars and workshops that the writer attended. Many of these are adaptations from materials developed by Thomas A. Angelo & Patricia Cross (1993), Alison Morrison-Shetlar & Mary Marwitz (2001), Mel Silberman (1996), Arthur Van Gundy, and Ryan Watkins (2005). Of these, I have isolated forty techniques that I used at various times in my lectures over the years. After using any of these new techniques in my lectures, I made it a point to record my evaluation of its efficacy. I present these here as Interactive Experiments for the EFL Classroom Based upon Kevin Yee's 101 Interactive Techniques:

1. Advice Letter: In this activity, students were asked to compose letters of advice to their juniors on how to be successful in the course. This was extremely useful as a teacher's resource as it gave an immediate feedback on what worked best for the students.
2. Anonymous Peer Feedback: This technique encouraged much introspection amongst the learners as they identified not only the weaknesses of others but also their own.
3. Application To Major: A very useful activity as it helped the learners correlate the subject matter to a major in the subject. Needless to say, doing well in the exam is an ever present concern amongst the EFL learners.
4. Ask The Winner: with my EFL students, this collaborative activity proved especially effective as the more proficient learners help the less proficient ones answer a question.

5. Assignment Assessments: As a teacher, learner feedback on home assignments is vital to check their efficacy as a learning tool. During my tenure, I have often modified the assignments once this activity is carried out.

6. Blender: In this activity, students come out with their critical and creative thinking which help them to achieve integration.

7. Board Rotation: A very successful group activity, it is like 'Spin a Yarn' where each learner contributes to the making of the whole. A very good exercise for helping the learners organise their materials, it teaches them how to integrate ideas into a readable unit.

8. Brainstorming in A Circle: As teachers we often use brainstorming as a means to collect ideas. This always proved to be an excellent pre writing activity carried out in groups where learners pass around a sheet of paper on which they jot down all the ideas that come to their mind on a topic. It is also a very effective technique to involve the poorer learners who feel inhibited in speaking up before the peers.

9. Brainstorming on The Board: This worked very well as a pre-lesson exercise for dealing with grammar items as learners contributed their ideas on the topic and thus helped gauge their previous knowledge.

10. Brainstorming Tree: This is a follow-up on the earlier activity. Isolating the important words from Brainstorming on the Board, I could encourage the learners to build upon them.

11. Bumper Stickers: Learners love it if they get to flaunt their knowledge to the world. This idea of getting them to design bumper stickers summing up a lecture works wonders with beginner level students.

12. Categorising Grid: While doing Verbs with the lower intermediate group of learners, I developed a language game based on this activity. I cut out sentences dividing the subject and predicate parts and asked the learners to fix the right combinations onto a grid card given to them.

13. Chain Notes: This feedback activity was not successful with my EFL learners as given the prevalence of the outlook that teacher is the focus of a class, the learners were rather shy of offering their views, in fact, very often the feedback envelope would come to me empty!

14. Chalk Talk: This simple activity is found very engaging by learners at all levels of English proficiency. The element of surprise as the learner who gets the chalk passed to them is required to speak, put learners' inhibition at the backburner and engages them totally in the game.

15. Choral Response: Getting the EFL learners to rote learn vocabulary by repeating words and their meanings in a chorus, though a tempting exercise was often a failure in my EFL classes. In fact, the learners preferred individual dictionary work to learn new words.

16. Circle The Questions: This activity is based on the principle of recapitulation as the learners check out from individual handouts of a set of questions pertaining to the previous lesson, as to which questions they do not know the answer to. These are then posed to the teacher. This exercise, however, did not work well with the intermediate students but was a huge success with my advanced learners. The reason is the minimum level of proficiency that they needed in order to use the question checklist.

17. Course Related Self-Confidence Surveys: This is a feedback activity for self assessment as learners answer a simple question set to check how far they think they have progressed in a particular language skill. My intermediate class of learners especially benefitted from this as they focused more on the skill where they were not satisfied with their performance.

18. Defining Features Matrix: Adopting this technique even with my advanced EFL learners was not successful. The reason as I see now, was their less than desirable proficiency in the language.

19. Definitions and Applications: This collaborative activity was always welcomed by the learners while revising previously done grammar concepts.

20. Direct Facebook Friendship: In the electronic age, learners are especially delighted to be 'friends' with the teacher. In fact, I went a step further by requesting my learners to post their assignments on google cloud while working on group projects to enable all members to work simultaneously.

21. E-Mail Feedback: As a feedback tool, this proved useful with EFL learners irrespective of level; with the teacher not present, learners were always forthcoming to point out the shortcoming of the lesson.

22. Empty Outlines: This end-of-class activity is great as a recapitulation tool as learners fill out the gaps in the lecture outline given to them.

23. Exam Evaluations: In the EFL set up, it is important to constantly check the validity of achievement tests. While hitherto we requested peers to evaluate our question papers, I feel it is useful to also ask the learners' feedback on the papers and to see if their needs are being addressed.

24. Forced Debate: My advanced learners always found this task engaging as each one of them got a chance to speak their mind at least once on a topic that I chose for debate. However, the only problem that came was with the less proficient in the group who felt intimidated to speak in front of their peers.

25. Haiku: The monotony of lessons is broken pleasantly with this artistic task that needs the students to write Haikus, some in fact, were so enamoured of the activity that they wanted to compose poems which they later read out to the class.

26. Movies Application: With this activity I try to link the class lesson with movies that the learners identified with the central idea of the story they read. In fact, some movies were such hits with these intermediate learners that we ended up watching sections of these in the class. This works as a fabulous activity to interact and bond with learners early in the term.

27. One Minute Papers: An effective task to recap the learning of writing of reports and articles as the learners are able to list in the right order, the steps to follow to compose a piece of writing.

28. Pass The Chalk: A classroom adaptation of musical chairs, learners are easily engaged in this activity meant for spontaneous speaking; the excitement of passing the chalk also takes their mind off the anxiety of having to speak before the peers.

29. Pick The Winner: I used this task while teaching the writing of newspaper reports to my advanced learners. It is an effective collaborative writing activity as half the class writes as one group. Multiple techniques are required of the learners to compose the article such as brainstorming to collect ideas. Later the two groups evaluate each other's work before merging to form one whole.

30. Pop Culture: Though this task was differently conceived originally, I modified it for my intermediate learners during speaking-listening classes: I played them contemporary pop songs accompanied with cloze passages.

31. Power Point Presentations: While we all use PowerPoint to prepare presentations for our learners, I reversed roles with them and asked them take on the role of the teacher by preparing presentations for their peers on their favourite topics.

32. Pre Class Writing: Before the new term began, I always sought the students' choice on the topic they would like to be taught along with one reason for their choice.

33. Press Conference: This worked as a great speaking task as I exchanged a class with a colleague to be a guest speaker and interact with the learners: EFL learners find it rather novel to speak to an unknown person in the language.

34. Quote Minus One: I adapted this task to do the Phrasal Verbs with my advanced learners whom I asked to fill the gaps in utterances with suitable phrasal.

35. Read Aloud: This always worked best for lectures at the end of the day as learners exhausted with a day's learning are happy to sit and listen as I read out a section of the lesson to them.

36. Real World: Teaching of a foreign language loses its glint if we are not able to link it to the learners' real world. I often ask my learners at the completion of a topic to state on index cards how it relates to their real world needs of language use.

37. Self Assessment of Ways of Learning: This feedback forms to elicit from the students the way of learning most suited to each one individually proved particularly useful with the lower intermediate group. Once the data was obtained on a questionnaire at the beginning of the term, I tried to group them into similar learning strategies, but this was less often due to pressures of time and syllabus.

38. Student Pictures: I adapted this activity by asking the learners to bring pictures from home and then helping them undertake free writing tasks based on these. This activity worked best with the intermediate level of students.

39. One-minute papers: This task works well for any language item as the students were made to take a minute to quickly sum-up what they learnt that day. Most importantly, it helps reinforce grammar rules at the lecture's end.

40. Think Break: This reinforcement activity works wonders with the writing class as I allowed the learners a 'Think Break' of twenty seconds to mentally answer a rhetorical question such as, 'What comes first while composing a paragraph?'

4.Using the Interactive Approach in EFL for college learners:

Interactive language learning offers to the learners what may be called immediate payoff in terms of language use. In contrast to conventional language teaching, the Interactive or Communicative Approach gave up the almost obsessive preoccupation of the teachers with getting the learners to 'master' the language, to focusing on the ability to 'communicate'. It is an approach (as opposed to a methodology) that places the learner at the centre of the educational universe by recognising his/her 'needs' as the driving force of the classroom proceedings.

English is taught in Saudi Arabia as a foreign language from class four onwards but frequently the translation method finds teacher's favour with Arabic being the dominant language of communication. It may well be noted here that the researcher's use of English is limited to an average of three to five minutes in a class of forty minutes. Further, language use opportunity for the learners is almost absent as the one-way-transmission-of-information method adopted by the teacher automatically rules out learner participation.

5. Result

Even on 'completion' of a three-year degree programme with a Major in English language, learners from the region fail to make it either to the international job market or to the portals of higher education in the western world with its tough pre requisite of a reasonable standard of English proficiency. With a huge amount of the exchequer finding its way into English language training, the teaching community need to seriously consider their approach (not methodology). It is the need of the changing times as also of the learners to shift the focus to Wilkins' 'notions and functions' rather than 'grammar and vocabulary'. My experiments in the EFL classroom, much like those of others like Kevin Yee have shown that interaction, which is the ultimate goal of language learning, can also function as the means to achieve it.

5. Conclusions

Very often the teacher even in an interactive language classroom undertakes an activity or a task with the assumption that because it offers a possibility of greater learner participation, it would work well as a learning tool. This research went a step further by also seeking learner feedback using a questionnaire at the end of the term during which these techniques were used in the EFL classroom. The analysis was interesting. Of the sixty respondents, 91.66% i.e. fifty-five learners reported greater satisfaction from the techniques as compared to the conventional pedagogy. A good 80% i.e. forty eight out of sixty respondents reported that the classes agreed well with their real life 'needs' of language use. Further, the tasks were more successful with the grammar items as 75% i.e. forty-five of the respondents felt that they grasped grammar better through the task based method than when taught the conventional way.

These conclusions clearly establish that the interactive task based language classroom is definitely more alive and dynamic as students are no longer passive recipients of information but are actually creators of information. These activities add 'fun' to the serious business of foreign language learning, taking away much of the performance anxiety and creating more opportunities for language use in an unobtrusive way. Thus, motivation to learn is given a boost. Learners immediately connect the learning environment to their real life needs and are able to assess not only their progress but also the learning strategies. It may be right, however, to point out here that the sample for the current research (sixty intermediate and advanced level learners at College of Science & Arts, Methnab, Qassim University, KSA) is a relatively small number but this study may be the beginning of larger pedagogical research with a bigger and more varied set of respondents. Till then, one clear cut benefit of this study has been to encourage EFL classrooms to be more interactive with less dependence upon printed materials and greater synergy with the real needs of the learners.

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