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Student interaction in the implementation of the jigsaw technique in language teaching

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

This chapter is the introductory one to depict the initial issues of the whole study. It covers the background of the study, the research questions – implicitly indicating the short term objectives of the study, and the significance or the long term objectives. A section of the preview of the chapters in the thesis ends this introductory chapter.

1.1 Background of the Study

The classical lock-step teaching – also termed ‘traditional competitive classroom’ (Slavin, 1985:6) – refers to the teacher-centered classroom instruction in which students are placed in the same instructional pace and content by, among others, being explained a grammar point or asked questions. This lock-step instruction has been considered disadvantageous. It sets severe constraints on discourse potential (Long et al., 1976) and becomes one of the obstacles blocking language acquisition (Long, 1975 in Long et al., 1976).

The argument against lock-step teaching does not, however, mean that it is useless. It does not mean that lock-step teaching will be unnecessary as it has its own merit (Harmer, 1994; Long & Porter, 1985; McDonough & Shaw, 2003; McKeachie et al., 1994). One most frequently used argument for the use of this lock-step teaching especially in a language class is the advantage for the students to get a good language model from the teacher. Put simply, it will not be sufficient to rely merely on this classical teacher-centered instruction which has been commented on negatively as early as 70’s when Barnes (1973) points out the ‘audience effect’, the inhibitions resulting from having to speak ‘publicly’ in front of a large group of fellow students.

The current trends in teaching have implicitly required modifications of existing methods and techniques which have traditionally been employed in language classrooms. In other words, with recent innovations in methods, teachers are continually encouraged to modify the teaching practice they prevalently put into practice or to reduce their classical lock-step teaching. The current alternatives in language instruction mostly take the form of classroom techniques in which self-directed learning or more individual-oriented teaching

are introduced. A strong statement revealing the positive reactions to modify the teacher-centered instruction is made by McDonough & Shaw (2003:194):

Managing classes so that learners 'work in pairs' or 'divide into groups' is now so much part of the everyday practice of large numbers of English language teachers that the instructions leading to these activities sometimes seem to be 'switched on' automatically, occasionally with a frequency difficult to justify. It happens in all kinds of content – dialogue practice, sharing opinions, reading aloud, comparing answers to questions, doing grammar drills, formulating questions in an information-gap task – the list could be extended considerably.

The recent instructional classroom techniques which are basically 'group work' in orientation have been argued both for pedagogical as well as psycholinguistic reasons. The pedagogical reasons, pointed out by Long & Porter (1985) and later similarly argued by Brown (2001), concern at least the following four potentials of group work: (1) it increases the quantity of language practice opportunities, (2) it improves the quality of student talk, (3) it maintains individualized instruction, and (4) it creates a positive affective climate in the classroom. Another one claimed by Long & Porter (1985) is that group work enhances student motivation. Meanwhile, the psycholinguistic reason, Long & Porter (1985) further put forward, covers the potentials of group work related to the existence of comprehensible input and negotiation work which are considered favorable for students' language learning.

What is implied from group work implementation as indicated in the previous paragraph is the use of peers as agents in the learning process. Positive implications from the use of peers in the learning process have been drawn. Similarly argued, peer influence has been identified to be beneficial by developmental and educational psychologists for at least two reasons (Rohrbeck et al., 2003). Firstly, the use of peers means providing an opportunity for students to be teachers for one another to stimulate cognitive development. Secondly, peers contribute to task orientation, persistence, and motivation.

In Indonesia, since the implementation of the Competency-Based Curriculum in the 2004/2005 academic year, cooperative learning as one of the current trends in classroom instruction which is characterized by a more carefully structured group work has gained increasing acceptance throughout the country. To achieve this, two groups of agents – the teachers as well as the students – ought to change. The Indonesian teachers will inevitably have to challenge themselves – altering their classroom instruction which is typically teacher-fronted. As a consequence, the teachers should inevitably drop their ordinary role of 'Mr. Know-All' and, instead, adopt the 'new' role of fellow learners or co-learners who

join with their students in the quest for knowledge. This consequently also forces ‘the other agent’ namely the students to challenge themselves – abandoning their old learning method – which is, in laymen’s term, characterized as ‘waiting to be spoon-fed’. In other words, the increasing acceptance of cooperative learning should be evidenced in the paradigm shift in teaching practice from a teacher-centered to a more individualized instruction or, using another term, to a more communicative, learner-centered approach.

The theory underlying the emergence of the new teaching paradigm briefly described in the previous paragraphs is constructivism. Kaplan (2002) points out that constructivism is based on the idea that the learning environment should support multiple interpretations of reality, knowledge construction as well as context-rich and experience-based activities. Teachers who are in favor of the constructivist principles believe that learners ought to be engaged in doing something as learning is an active process of which meaning is constructed out. Moreover, the teachers, who are in favor of social constructivism, maintain the idea that learners learn by interaction with their fellow students, teachers and families, or more specifically that learners learn with, referring to Thorne’s (2000) argument, a more competent others’ assistance.

What is implied from the principles of constructivist thinking briefly presented above is that it is high time that teachers abandoned their whole-class teacher directed technique. Teachers are required to transform their traditional class into a ‘constructive’ class. Teachers are, in other words, faced with the constructivist thinking of how to involve students in relevant tasks so that the students are really engaged in the classroom.

In the field of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) instruction in Indonesia, students are commonly engaged in the classroom discourse which is typically teacher-directed. Reading instruction, for instance, is commonly conducted by the teacher’s conventionally leading the whole-class discussion. The classroom interaction to discuss the text – its factual information, implied meaning and main idea – is then typically teacher-centered. The teacher reads the text, and asks a question; the students wanting to respond raise their hands; the teacher calls on one student and the student called on tries to state the correct answer. Termed as ‘competitive structure of Whole-Class Question-Answer’ (Kagan, 1999:16), this sort of classroom arrangement establishes negative interdependence among students. When the teacher calls on a student, the others lose the opportunity to answer. A particular student’s failure to give a correct answer, Kagan (1999) further asserts, increases the opportunity for other students to receive attention and praise resulting in

poor social relations and peer norms against achievement. This particular classroom structure can actually be altered to make the class more interactive or more cooperative.

The three-phase model – a teacher’s elicitation (the Initiation move), a student’s response (the Response move), and a teacher’s feedback (the Feedback move) thus forming the common IRF classroom discourse – indicates that the students do not get involved much in class. The main issue is then once again how the teacher can involve more students in his or her reading class. The class teacher is challenged to implement the sorts of assistance to trigger more student-student interaction which is not easily available in the conventional instruction – in the one where “talk between learners in the classroom has been discouraged and treated as disruptive and subversive” (Mercer, 1995:85). The teacher is, in other words, basically encouraged to provide opportunities for the students to learn maximally on their own.

Along with the challenge to address more students’ involvement, some ‘dramatic developments’ (Nunan, 1999:69) have been available. Innovative teaching approaches, methods and techniques have been introduced. One instructional paradigm that has received considerable attention in the educational literature has been cooperative learning.

Cooperative learning is based on the premise that learning is best achieved interactively rather than through a one-way transmission process which has become the common practice of lock-step teachers. Cooperation among students rather than competitiveness becomes essential, and an individual's learning success or failure is linked with the learning success or failure of other group members. A key assumption of cooperative learning is that students working in groups will learn from and teach one another.

One of the most promising cooperative learning techniques widely considered is Jigsaw (Aronson, 2005, 2008). In the Jigsaw technique, each student assigned in small groups is expected to be an ‘expert’ on one particular topic by initially working with other students from other groups assigned the corresponding expert topic. Returning to their base groups, each student in turns shares his or her expertise and eventually the students in the group are assessed on all aspects of the topic. To be more specific, in a Jigsaw class, students are typically engaged in two teams: expert teams and home teams. As Jigsaw teachers believe that each student owns the capability to be the contributor of knowledge, students are encouraged to learn from their fellow students in their expert team and when they go back to their home team, they are encouraged to teach one another the material

they have worked on or learned in the expert team. This Jigsaw design facilitates students' interaction in the class enabling them to value each other as contributors (Aronson, 2005, 2008).

Numerous issues concerning Jigsaw, which is fundamentally a kind of small scale cooperative group work, have been examined in quantitative and qualitative studies (see, for instance, the Jigsaw studies which are carried out in non-language classes and annotated in a bibliography by Totten et al., 1991, and studies by Sannia, 1998; Kurnia, 2002, to name but a few, which are carried out in language classes). Nevertheless, there are still many issues to investigate when this promising Jigsaw technique is used as a new technique in traditional Indonesian classrooms. There are still many unexplored questions about how small group work operates and what students actually do when Jigsaw is implemented. This qualitatively-driven research is then an attempt to reveal student interaction in the implementation of the Jigsaw technique in one EFL classroom in Indonesia.

1.2 Research Questions

The present study involved university students who worked in small, cooperative learning groups in their regular reading class. The students were engaged in a classroom setting that implemented not only whole class teacher-directed or traditional approaches but also cooperative learning approaches.

This study focuses on student interaction in the implementation of the Jigsaw technique. Maintaining the class sessions which are dominated by cooperative learning, providing special preparation for students towards cooperative behavior, giving them the opportunity to set their own types of information to discuss in the group by deleting the comprehension questions prevalently appearing below the text discussed, emphasizing high-, middle-, and low-achieving students' interaction, and assigning roles to each student (detailed in Chapter 4), this research provides a unique contribution to foreign language teaching (elaborated in the subsequent section). The general research question to focus states "Is the Jigsaw technique applicable in Indonesian English as a Foreign Language (EFL) class instruction?" from which the specific research questions are formulated as follows:

1. To what extent are students involved in group interaction?
 - 1.1 To what extent are students involved with regard to the whole group interaction?
 - 1.2 To what extent are students involved with regard to the common pattern of Initiation-Response-Feedback discourse?
 - 1.3 To what extent are students with different levels of ability involved in group interaction?
 - 1.4 To what extent is there impact of assigned roles on students' involvement?
2. What types of information do students use in order to understand a text?
3. How do students help one another in group interaction?
4. To what extent do students with different levels of ability ask for assistance and get assisted?

1.3 Significance

The long-term objective of the study is to provide valuable insights into the functioning of peer group work. As this research is a classroom based study, it does not have as its main objective immediate generalizability of its findings. There will, however, be some points of interest that other classroom teachers may find useful to know about peer group interaction that they can apply to their own contexts. As van Lier (1988) points out, the relevance of classroom research is the insights it provides to teachers.

Moreover, since this study is a research project that is conducted by a teacher, the findings are more directly applicable to teachers' needs than other types of language research. It somehow proposes guidelines for EFL teachers who wish to implement cooperative learning to enhance their students' proficiency in English as well as motivation toward learning English. This study might also encourage teachers to look more closely at students' working in small group communication particularly in an EFL classroom. Such awareness is an essential step towards assisting students to become successful learners hence aiming at autonomy in learning. In brief, it is expected that this study can, in the long run, add more understanding on the process of cooperative language learning which entails major changes for both teachers and learners.

1.4 Preview of the Thesis Chapters

In this chapter the initial issues covering the background, research questions, and significance of the study have been presented. The next chapter provides literature review. Chapter 3 is mainly dedicated to discuss the pilot studies of 2007 and 2008. Chapter 4 presents the methodological issues characterizing the main study. Chapter 5 is spent on presenting the interaction analysis classification and categories employed to analyse the data. Chapter 6 is predominantly devoted to the outcomes of the data analysis along with discussions of the findings. The last chapter, Chapter 7, concludes our study.

