

How will the change of teaching strategy affect my classroom interaction?

Background

It is an undeniable fact that language plays a very important role in human life. It is the tool for communication and language usage cannot be overemphasized in education. In delivering quality education, language is clearly the key to communication and understanding in the classroom. That is, language is the channel through which classroom interaction is carried out to achieve the intended learning outcome. We cannot talk about language without talking about the cultural aspect of it. It is through this cultural lens that the speech community members direct interactions and relationships. Studies show that when there is quality teacher-student interaction, students' engagements increase thereby enhancing students' academic success and the reverse is true (Allen & Allen, 2009; Herrman, 2013; Pianta, Hamre, & Allen, 2012; Rocca, 2010). Poor teacher-student interaction and/or student-student interaction create social tension in the classroom and this impedes information flow which usually affects progress of work and academic success. According to Herrman (2013), classroom interaction or students' class participation is dependent on the social interdependence that exists in the classroom. He asserts that positive classroom interdependence enhances and promotes interaction where student are encouraged to help one another and give feedback to achieve common goal and success.

Most of the studies about teacher-student interaction are devoted to the early years of schooling and the elementary education (Pianta, Hamre, & Stuhlman, 2003; Roorda, Koomen, Spilt, & Oort, 2011). It is good that attention be given at the foundational level of education in order to ensure success in future academic endeavours. This notwithstanding, attention should also be given to the other levels of education since learning at these levels come with unique problems.

As said earlier, language as the major channel for classroom interaction can promote or maim teaching and learning. In a monolingual classroom environment, language is usually not a big issue when it comes to interaction since both the students and the teacher have the same or similar language background. Classroom language becomes a problem when there is a diverse language background for the members of the learning community (including the teacher). That is, in a bilingual and multilingual classrooms, language is a big issue in terms of students' achievement because it can affect interaction between the members (Cheung & Sung, 2014; Jacoby & Lesaux, 2014). It becomes worse when the teacher's language is different from that of the students (especially teaching college students) and students struggle to comprehend due to the instructor's accent in the speaking of the English language (Cook, 1999; Lippi-Green, 1997). In such a situation, the students and the teacher confront a dilemma of which way to go: the teacher's way or the students'. That is, in such a classroom, interaction becomes problematic and if not handled well can impede the progress of academic work and waste the time and energy of the students and the teacher. This becomes a big worry when the teacher is passionate about the work she or he does and will always want to ensure students' success. This problem is exactly what is happening in my classroom, hence this study.

I am an African student and a Graduate Teaching Assistant in the Department of Teaching and Learning in the College of Education at the University of South Florida (USF), USA. I teach third year college students who are being prepared for teaching in the early years of schooling. I speak a variant of English that I will call 'Ghanaian English' because I had all my education in Ghana except the doctorate degree which I am pursuing currently at USF. Though English is the medium of instruction from the upper primary up the educational ladder in Ghana, all the teachers who teach English (English Teachers) in the public schools are Ghanaians who learned the English

from non-native English speakers. Even schools which have English native volunteers have them for not more than two years. This obviously shows that I speak and understand the English language but cannot speak like the natives since I had no natives around to help me acquire the native accent nor had the opportunity to be taught by native English teachers.

My current students are dominantly whites who speak the native English fluently. Even the few non-natives have acquired the native-like accent and so can communicate fluently with the natives. Also, almost all their lecturers are native English speakers who have no communication problem with the students when it comes to classroom interaction. Again, these students are in their first year in the College of Education and typically experience adjustment issues as they transition into their major area of study. They also face challenges associated with tensions arising from their field experience which demands them to translate into practice what is being learned in the university classroom. This requires that the students develop a deep understanding about what is taught in the classroom so that they can practice it in the schools. Furthermore, these pre-service teachers need to experience a real meaningful classroom interaction to serve as a model for them in their practice. Now, here is the case where students find it difficult to understand some of the things I say due to my accent and vice versa. It is against this background that the researcher deemed it necessary to go into this action research to explore the best strategy that will help promote effective classroom interaction to enhance her own practice and to promote student success.

Statement of the Problem

In my classroom (college class) I notice that the interaction pattern between me and the students is not as smooth as expected. There are repetitions of statements most of the time to ensure understanding on both sides (teacher and students) as we are not used to each other's language

(accent). This makes the teaching and learning one-sided, uninteresting and worrying, and this greatly affects student learning. What makes the situation more worrisome is that these college students are pre-service teachers who need to get the right exposure for their practice. This makes most of the students feel bored and tend to just keep quiet and look on. That is, the current interaction pattern in my classroom is making most of my students passive learners and if this is not addressed early, this pattern may undermine their teaching career. It is in this vein that this study intends to investigate and explore the appropriate strategy that can enhance effective classroom interaction to promote students' success. This question guided the study: How will change of teaching strategy influence effective interaction in my college classroom?

Literature Review

Rocca (2010) reviewed articles on student participation in college classrooms. The aim was to synthesize studies on college students' classroom participation. The author synthesized only academic published articles between 1958 and 2009 that focused on college students' in-class participation. The reviewed articles indicated that class size should not exceed 35 students, but if it is not possible, instructors should break students into smaller groups, use smaller groups outside class meetings, or use clicker systems or response card during class discussions. Seats should be arranged to suit the topic for discussion implying that it can be varied when necessary. The reviewed research showed that creation of a supportive and welcoming atmosphere in the classroom promotes students' participation. Moreover, instructor's immediacy behaviors like eye contact, proximity and smiling were shown to be good indicators that support students' participation. The use of positive feedbacks, allowing wait time when questions are posed, giving prior preparation by giving materials or topics for discussion to students before class, and avoiding verbal aggression are all strategies teachers can use to increase classroom participation of college students.

This research is very important to the current study because almost all the studies reviewed have a similar focus to my teacher inquiry. The study showed different ways of encouraging student participation, which is the objective of the current study. This research gave me insight into the

strategies and procedures that are useful in the creation of supportive atmosphere that promote students classroom participation. It also helped in the identification of approaches and methodologies that support students' participation. The methodological insight gained from the study was useful for the intervention stage of the current study, especially concerning the development of the questionnaire.

Herrmann (2013) examined the impact of cooperative learning on student engagement in a class with 140 students. The author provided a comprehensive background of cooperative learning, indicating that focusing discussion on students promotes student engagement. The theoretical framework for the study was social interdependence which stipulates that the social structure of the classroom determines the interactional pattern of the members and in turn influences the learning outcomes. The author implemented the intervention over 10 weeks. His course delivery structure was whole class lecture and group (20-25) tutorials for discussion of the work sheet. The normal tutorial format was used during the first 5 weeks before implementing the cooperative learning strategy. Data collection included pre-test, post-test and a questionnaire. In all 4 questions were used for tutorial discussion. The first 3 demanded students to describe, explain or compare political theories. Students were given prior preparation by providing them with the questions to be discussed in group out-of-class study. At tutorial, each group discussed their question before they all applied the knowledge from the theories to solve the fourth question on a case study. The data was analyzed qualitatively. The findings showed that most students liked the cooperative approach with just a few complaining that they did not have enough notes. The findings showed that the use of cooperative learning increased students' in-class engagement but the author cautioned that simply adopting one of the cooperative learning structures does not necessary promote deep learning.

This study is important to the current study in that both are examples of action research, focusing on similar objective and using college student participants. The study's literature review guided the use of the group work in the current study as it indicated that the positive effect of cooperative is neither universal nor automatic and that if group work is not used appropriately it may not yield the needed result. It served as a guide to avoid fruitless approaches. The author's intervention and data collection design were relevant as they served as a guide to the development of the questionnaire for my data collection and the use of grouping during the intervention

implementation of the current study. The author's caution for researchers not only to just focus on the participation but also to pay attention to the outcome of it was useful to my action research as it got me informed of strategies to use to achieve both objectives.

Foster et al. (2009) investigated how low-responding students can be made to participate in class discussion. Their main aim was to find ways of enhancing class participation with special attention to students with low academic standing. They comprehensively discussed what the research said about the effect of student participation and non-participation. Their focus was to assess the effect on two credit levels (small vs. no credit). Students' self-record was also added as a motivational tool for low-responding students in the study. Participants were selected from a college core course made up of six sections. It was a general course of a teacher preparation program. Class participation level (low responding) was the criterion for the 45 sample selected randomly. The study was conducted over two consecutive semesters. Students' answers from their study guide, home work and their self- recording of class participation were their data source. For the oral class participation, students were given reading assignments prior to class discussion. Their finding showed that students who gained credit for class participation had just a little higher percentage over those who were not given credit. The results implied that students' inability to participate in class is not always teacher initiated but could be attributed to characteristics students bring to a course. This study is relevant to the current study in that it focuses on increasing students' participation even though the former focused on only low-responders. Also, knowledge gained from this study will guide me to work on instructor initiated attributes that affect student participation negatively in the classroom and look for strategies for making my course attractive to students which leads to intrinsic motivation.

Myers and Claus (2012) investigated students' reasons for communicating with their instructors in the classroom. Their aim was to examine the extent to which the classroom environment influences student-teacher interaction during teaching and learning. The authors based their investigations on five motives: relational, functional, participatory, excuse making, and sycophantic. One hundred and seventy five undergraduate students were selected for the study. One week was used for the data collection in the form of a questionnaire. In order to ensure students' familiarity with their instructors, the data was collected 2 weeks prior to the end of semester. The instrument covered the following subheadings: student communication motives,

communication climate, **correctedness** classroom climate inventory. The results showed that classroom climate supersedes all other reasons that foster student-teacher communication in the classroom. This finding connects with most of the research findings of students' class participation studies. This research is vital to the current study because it suggests that classroom climate can contribute to students assuming roles as active discussants in the classroom which can be added to the intervention. That is, this research has shown one direction that the current study can adopt.

Forez (2011) replicated two existing studies on the use of case-based instruction (CBI-Authentic presenting knowledge in a real-life situation: Clinical method of teaching and learning) and direct instruction (DI-Traditional lecture and recitation method of teaching). Her focus was to empirically use these strategies on two groups of students with similar characteristic to help clarify the confusion about which strategy works better. She taught each of her undergraduate pre-service teachers with just one method. That is, each of the group with just one of the two chosen strategies. Both groups were female early childhood pre-service teachers at the initial stages of their program. The instruments used for data collection were pretest, quizzes, and cumulative final exams. One semester (Fifteen weeks) was used for the conduct of the study. The major finding of the study was that students who underwent CBI outperformed the DI students. The research is very important to the current study because it was an action research which examined the efficacy of teaching strategy to enhancing students learning which is similar to the objective of my action research. Also, some of the author's interventional strategies like the use of small group-student led discussion at the beginning of lessons followed by whole-class instructor led discussion guided the direction for some of the strategies to be used for my intervention.

Methods

The study is an action research that took in an undergraduate classroom in the United States of America. The participants were level one pre-service teachers majoring in Early Childhood admitted to the college of education during the Fall semester. All the 30 students (females) reading that course I teach (Language and Emerging Literacy) were selected for the study because all of them needed the knowledge in the course for their training and future job. The study lasted for 6 weeks within the 15 weeks for the semester. The course syllabus stipulating the required textbook, weekly readings, and assignments with their due dates were given to students at the first class meeting yet was re-discussed at the beginning of the study. Additional simplified materials

relevant to the topics in the required textbooks were given to students. To ensure that all the students read the required topic before class, In-Class-Write was conducted at the beginning of every class. Also, relevant videos on topics were used alongside the texts. Areas of concentration were given to students ahead of weekly readings where necessary to help them identify the focus of the topic. The course was taught once a week (Mondays) for 3 hours in a face-to-face mode. An online system 'Canvas' was also used for submission of assignments, dissemination of information and for grading. The intervention strategy for lesson delivery was group discussion which took the form of small-group student led discussion followed by whole-class teacher led discussion as used by Forez (2011).

During the intervention period, the In-Class-Write was done in small groups where partners or group members shared their reflections on the weekly readings, synthesized and wrote their composite ideas before they shared with the entire class. During the sharing period, I often shared my personal view on what was being discussed. This method replaced the typical individualistic and independent In-Class-Write which student were made to do at the beginning of each class. Due to Herrmann's (2013) advice on the appropriate use of group work, during the group In-Class-Write I went round the groups to check on members' participation and also see if they were actually discussing what had been tabled. The most used strategies for the intervention were 'Think-Pair-Share', 'Think-Pair-Share-Repeat' and 'Board Rotation'. Other strategies like 'Pass the Pointer/Chalk' and 'Quote Minus One' were used in a game-like manner to elicit students' individual opinions on issues. These strategies were varied to avoid monotony. During the whole group discussion, I did not dominate the discussion rather the above stated strategies were used to motivate and promote students' in-class participation during whole class discussion. I contributed to the discussion with comments and also re-echoed salient points.

Data collection instrument used were questionnaires and diary document. The questionnaires were used for three main reasons: to find out students perception about the strategies, how it motivate their in-class participation and their impact on their comprehension of lesson. To enable students to freely express how they felt about what goes on in the classroom concerning their learning, most of the question items were open-ended. The items were consistent with questions in other studies that worked on students' in-class participation (Forez, 2011; Herrmann, 2013; Rocca, 2010). The diary or journal was used to document my observation on what goes on during the lesson with special attention to students' participation and comprehension of lesson. Three sets of

questionnaires were administered in the course of the study. The first was a pre-intervention data and it was administered in the first week of the study. The second was administered within intervention week- 2 into the actual intervention of the group discussion or cooperative learning. This was done to see if the intervention strategy was working or not. The third one was administered after class during the 3rd week of the intervention period. I was reflective during the implementation of intervention and data collection period as this guided the modification of items on the questionnaires and selection of strategies.

The data was analyzed qualitatively using the trends, themes and patterns generated from the data. The themes and patterns from the questionnaire and that of the diary documents were similar. The few differences will be presented in the results and discussion.

Results

Pre-Intervention

The pre-intervention data were collected in the first week of the study. The main aim of this data was to solicit student's views on things that can be done to improve classroom interaction. According to Myers and Claus (2012), students have different reasons for participating in classroom interaction. All the students present for the class (29 students) completed the questionnaire because one missed class that day. Students were to state two things they thought would help improve class interaction and explain their answers. All the 29 students present for the class completed the questionnaire because one missed class that day. Students were to state two things they thought would help improve class interaction and explain their answers. The major theme that showed up was the use of group discussion or group work. Reasons students gave for the use of group discussion included:

Group discussion makes class activities fun and interactive. It allows us work as groups for fun activities.

It makes us get more understand of what is being asked.

It is the best way to get the views of others.

It makes me understand things better than just you (instructor) alone explaining.

Another theme that came up from this data was giving feedback. Most of the explanation to this was my not giving them feedback after they have responded to questions. Some students enjoyed being more active in class when their input or views are appreciated. Some also talked about giving the right or better/specific feedbacks:

Acknowledge us if our answers were good or not just move on to the next person.

Sometimes in class when we answer the question we are unclear if our answer is right/wrong so we

don't answer the next question. Sometimes after answering a question I feel dumb/criticized and keep

the next answer to myself.

Give a better feedback to our responses and make us feel appreciated.

Acknowledge the comments of each student.

However, there were other minor themes like 'add videos to the lesson', 'time management', 'make better facial expression', 'pick on people', and 'use more examples' which were worth noting as they helped direct the rest of the study. These minor findings were taken seriously because they were in line with Rocca's (2010) findings as factors that can affect classroom interaction negatively. These findings from the pre-intervention data were in line with Myers and Claus (2012) that students have various reasons for their in-class interaction/participation. This result indicated students' reason for not participating in class discussion and presented suggestions that can be adopted to make it better from the students' point of view.

Main Data

The main data was made up of two sets of questionnaires administered on the 2nd and the 3th week into the study and journal/diary documented after each class during the period of the study. The first set of questionnaires administered focused more on effect of the group discussion on students' in-class participation. The second set elicited information of the effect of group discussion on comprehension of concepts. The diary data was used to augment the data from the questionnaires.

Effect of Group Discussion on Student's Class Participation

To assess this, the questionnaires had three open-ended questions which demanded to students to share one thing that went well in class, the effect of the group work on their class participation and also to share one thing that can be done to make it better. All the 30 students responded to these questions. The results from this data indicated that most of the students liked the group discussions very well, especially the partner discussion used at the beginning of the lesson. The findings from the questionnaires and the diary document revealed that the students were excited with the small group discussion because it worked well for them especially when it was used for the In-Class-Write at the beginning of the class. Students said the introductory small group activity motivated

most of them to participate in the discussion. They said the small group discussion helped them to organize their thoughts which led to good communication. On the issue of what went well in class, some of the students' responses were:

Communication today! Was able to understand and learn.

The group discussion went very well. I liked the sharing that went along with it.

Group activity in the beginning. We are able to learn from each other.

It was great! the group discussion today went really well. We had some great answers to your questions.

The group discussion at the beginning of class for the in-class-write, then discussion as whole group

set a positive base for the class. I enjoyed the group work the most.

This result is consistent with findings of most of the studies done on the effect of group work on students' in-class participation (Herrmann, 2013; Myers & Claus, 2012; Rocca, 2010). Example of students' responses to the effect of group discussions on their class participation:

Group discussion helps me organize and gather individual thoughts. We share ideas and collaborate

Everyone voiced their opinion and we are given the chance to share.

It allows us to deeper understand the information because we share ideas in a relaxed way.

Helps us self-assess our interpretation of the readings.

It is a good form of learning because it enables me share ideas with very few people at first, modify it

with friends before telling the entire class.

This notwithstanding, one student responded that the group discussion had no impact on her learning and 2 did not respond to this question. On what can be done to make classroom interaction better than what was existing, students gave examples like:

More group activities/discussion.

Involve more body moving activities

Vary the activities

More time should be given to group work because sometimes we don't finish our small group discussion before we are made to share with the entire class.

There were some few contradictory comments like ‘Manage time well. Move through slide quickly and don’t ask too much questions at a time’, ‘Group work are just too much’. Whereas most students request for more time for group work others had problem with the time used for group work. This was in line with Herrmann’s (2013) finding that showed that not all students like group work. What I did in the study was that, I did not underrate minor themes that came up because I had Herrmann’s caution (simply adopting one of the cooperative strategies does not necessary promote deep learning) in mind. I paid more attention to the ‘time management’ that resurfaced here as it showed up in the pre-intervention data. Seeing that I could not follow my time budget for activities in the lesson, we discussed it as a class and selected two prompters from the students who helped the entire class to keep to time and this really worked for the class. Aside from this, students were involved in other classroom decision taken because I learned from literature reviewed for this study that classroom climate supersedes all other reasons that foster student-teacher communication (Myers & Claus, 2012; Rocca, 2010).

Impact of Group Discussion on Comprehension

Though the second set of the questionnaires focused on the impact of group discussion on understanding of concept, my aim of improving classroom interaction was to help my students understand what I teach and not just the talking aspect of it. This questionnaire was made up of close and open-ended questions. The results showed that when group discussion is backed by the appropriate strategies, it makes students take responsibility of their learning through active participation which enhances comprehension. This connects with Forez’s (2011) findings which showed that the CBI strategy which made students take active part in the lesson due to its nature proved to be more effective with comprehension than the DI. Some of the responses students gave about the strategies used in the group discussions were:

It encourages sharing which made me understand the lesson.

Highlighted the main points and enhanced understanding.

Allowed group to gain a better understanding by hearing others point of view.

Interacting with classmates kept my attention span.

Helped us have more perspective on things. We were able to compare ideas.

Very engaging/participatory. Joyce! I loved your class today. Use more of these strategies because

they are helpful for fieldwork.

These responses were confirmed with the themes that emerged from the journals. The most re-occurring themes in the journal were ‘Enthusiasm’, ‘Participatory’, ‘Excitement’, ‘Healthy Competition’, ‘Intelligent Responses’ which were similar to the questionnaire data. The excitement of the class could be seen in the tone of students’ responses. This finding support the findings in existing research that showed that when an appropriate strategy is used, student participation is improved and comprehension enhanced (Herrmann, 2013; Myers & Claus, 2012; Rocca, 2010). However, there were few students who said they preferred to work alone and that group discussion waste time. This made me add ‘Pass the Pointer/Chalk’ and ‘Quote Minus One’ to the strategies to cater for such students.

Conclusions/Implications

In trying to find practical solution to my non-participation classroom problem, the findings showed that when group discussion is supported with appropriately strategies, students’ class participation increases. The study confirmed the assertion that using different strategies in lesson delivery works better for students as it caters to individual difference (Rocca 2010). This study contradicts with Foster et al. (2009) findings which showed that student participation had no influence on comprehension because my findings indicated that active participation has positive influence on students’ comprehension. The study demonstrated that group discussion supported with contextually appropriate strategies promote effective students class participation that leads to authentic comprehension of concepts (Herrmann, 2013; Forez, 2011; Rocca, 2010). Further the study indicated that when minor themes that come up in studies considered as in my case, individual differences are cared for.

Future research will examine the extent to which students’ class participation impact on students’ understanding of concepts.

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