Debating - a step to communicative language use

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Abstract: This article re-assesses the value of debating as a classroom activity for intermediate and higher level English language learners. It argues that debates satisfactorily fulfil the criteria for a communicative language activity and can provide a useful transition from controlled practice to more spontaneous forms of expression. A re-assessment of the technique carried out with students at KMUTT confirmed that the participants found debating to be a motivating and rewarding form of language practice.

Introduction

For most of us, the ultimate goal of language teaching lies beyond the commonplace exercises of the language classroom: it is the hope that our students will some day develop the ability to communicate freely, i.e. to use English for negotiating meanings appropriately in some sort of interactional context (Brown, 1994).

Achieving this goal involves guiding our students beyond the familiar territory of controlled language exercises towards the more risky area of free expression. But this is no easy task. In fact, Ur (1983:3) concedes that "If communicative practice is one of the most important components of the language teaching process, it is also one of the most problematical." Moreover, it seems that good intentions in this direction are not enough: Nunan (1987) cites evidence that what passes for interaction in many classes with a 'communicative approach' is not very communicative at all. Perhaps it is time, then, for a re-assessment of what constitutes communicative language practice.

Types of communicative practice

Nunan (1987) discerns both 'strong' and 'weak' versions of communicative language teaching, the former disregarding all forms of controlled practice and the latter, as ascribed to Littlewood, allowing for a pre-communicative stage for the mastery of basic structures and vocabulary. The desired outcome, as Littlewood himself explains, is that in communicative activities "the production of linguistic forms will become subordinate to higher-level decisions related to the communication of meanings" (1981:86).

Littlewood's demarcation of a boundary between the pre-communicative and communicative stages may seem arbitrary to some, but it emphasizes the fact that

in terms of language practice, preparing for genuine communication demands something other than 'more of the same'. For a start, unlike most typical classroom interaction, real communication operates with units of language beyond the sentence level (Johnson & Morrow, 1981). These units may be described as "utterances" or "moves" (Coulthard, 1977) and they bring into play aspects of language other than the grammar-based knowledge used in the "short turns" of typical classroom speech (Brown & Yule, 1983).

To be specific, Canale (1983) has proposed that in addition to grammatical competence (mastery of the language code), communicative competence also calls for sociolinguistic competence (the ability to judge the appropriateness of an utterance to the situational context), discourse competence (the ability to combine grammatical form and meaning to achieve a coherent spoken or written text) and strategic competence (the ability to compensate for breakdowns and to use appropriate rhetorical effects). In his view, it should be the goal of communicative language practice to "facilitate the integration of these types of competence for the learner" (Canale,1983: 18).

This more comprehensive view of the nature of communicative competence results from a shift away from the structuralist era which viewed language simply as a collection of discrete items that could be learned (and tested) separately (Spolsky, 1995). Today, as a result of influences from psychology, sociology and humanistic approaches to learning, we have a more holistic view of language and our expectations of communicative practice therefore include not just mastery of the language code but the ability to use it effectively in realistic contexts. This implies that to be effective, communicative language practice must also be purposeful, i.e. it should provide learners with a genuine reason to speak and not just something to speak about (Ur, 1981).

In setting up classroom speaking activities, it is useful to note the concept of "communicative stress" as described by Brown and Yule (1983: 34). Assuming that speakers will perform at their best only when they feel comfortable about using the target language, the authors propose the following conditions for minimizing communicative stress:

1. Context features
   - The listener should be the speaker's peer or junior
   - The environment should be familiar
2. Listener's state of knowledge
   - The listener should know as much of the target language as possible
   - The listener should lack/need the speaker's information
3. Type of task
   - The speaker should be familiar with the information
   - The information should provide its own structure (e.g. a series of events)

Finally, it is worth remembering that the pre-conditions for the successful acquisition of communicative competence are essentially humanistic, i.e. in language practice, learners should have the motivation and opportunity to express their own identity and to relate to people around them (Littlewood, 1981; Brown, 1994). Nunan also emphasizes the affective factors which appear to underlie genuinely communicative practice:

> When learners' interests are engaged and when they are able to bring their own schemata to classroom activities, these can be truly communicative (Nunan 1987 144)

Debates as a type of communicative language practice

Many activities have been developed to encourage communicative language learning. The list is familiar and includes drama, role-play, simulation, games, structured conversations and information gap activities. Debates, however, do not seem to have enjoyed much popularity, perhaps because they are perceived as being too difficult and formal for ordinary classrooms.

However, Oller and Richard-Amato (1983) have pointed out that if adjusted to the level of the participants, debates generate high levels of interaction and communication and lower the self-consciousness of students. As for their formality, debates need only be as formal as the participants and teacher would like them to be (Ur, 1981). If conceived of as a 'formal argument' (Skillman & McMahill, 1996) the debate may be conducted according to fairly strict rules of procedure This type of debate calls for research, analysis, organisation and logical argumentation skills, as well as the rhetorical skills required for persuasive delivery. On the other hand, impromptu debates allowing, say, a 10-minute preparation time, are more in the nature of loosely structured discussions with a reliance on extemporized speech and an ability to think on one's feet.

In either case, the debaters are communicating purposefully and using their own backgrounds and experience. The ideas they express are mediated by their own personal styles and they are engaging a variety of language competencies to carry out the task in hand (e.g. maintaining the flow of discourse or repairing false starts). In terms of lowering stress, we may say that classroom debates meet all the conditions outlined by Brown & Yule (1983) except the final one, i.e. debates do not provide their own structure so the cognitive difficulty of the task (analysis, argumentation, organisation) is thereby increased. However, this may be viewed as a plus in academic learning contexts, especially if sufficient time has been allocated for preparation.

As a form of classroom practice, debating offers a natural progression for those who have already experienced communicative language activities through group and pair work. In addition, where students are given the responsibilities of choosing the topic, deciding on procedures and preparing material themselves,

there is scope for additional peer interaction and personal involvement. Interaction can be further increased by letting the audience decide the outcome of the debate. This ensures that debating is more than just a spectator sport – it encourages the audience to listen attentively, evaluate arguments and (if this model is chosen) to question the speakers directly at the end.

Reports of debates in language teaching

Suwanikhajorn (1992) concluded at the end of a research study that debates in EFL teaching markedly improved students' speaking skills and confidence levels. According to the feedback she received, learners showed highly positive attitudes towards the debating technique. She attributes this success to the fact that debating encourages "real communication in a supportive environment" and gives the students, as young adults, the chance to express opinions of their own about life outside the classroom.

Talansky (1985) regards debating as an important step towards the achievement of a more learner-centred classroom. This is not because, as is often assumed, the students will automatically take charge of their own learning, but because debating encourages teacher and learners to co-operate in the pursuit of a common goal.

Leong (1983), another advocate of classroom debating, draws attention to its "controlled spontaneity" which gives learners a feeling of real communication within an overall controlling framework provided by the rules. He concludes:

> Spontaneity is something we may not be able to teach our students, but with a few controls, a classroom situation can develop in which students feel secure enough to create meaningful language. (Leong, 1983: 322)

A contemporary re-assessment

In order to re-assess how Thai students would respond to the debating technique, the writer decided to record the responses of a class of intermediate proficiency level postgraduate students at King Mongkut's University of Technology Thonburi. Two debates were organized with two teams of five participating in each. A speaker (chairperson) was elected for each debate which was structured around the Thai model, i.e. each successive speaker commenting on the previous one(s) with the final speaker summing up the team's case. The topics proposed by the students were "Thai university students should continue to wear uniforms" and "Motorcycles are a better form of transport than cars in Bangkok". Each speaker held the floor for no more than five minutes and each debate took about an hour. The audience decided the outcome by vote. At the end of each debate, the speakers recorded their comments in a journal. They were asked to focus their responses on two areas: the actual experience of participation and the value of debating as a form of language practice.

Teacher's comments and discussion

The most striking feature was the enthusiasm shown by both participants and audience – they seemed to take very naturally to this form of language activity, appearing motivated and involved at all stages. Especially noticeable was the enjoyment everyone gained from the friendly competition involved in the give-and-take of argumentation. It was encouraging too, to note that many of the 'quiet and shy' once given their share of the limelight, spoke interestingly and won approval from the audience.

In order to be able to express a number of topic-related concepts such as social values, hypothetical situations and future possibilities, the speakers required a superior level of grammatical competence. Inevitably therefore, grammatical inaccuracies were evident in all of the speeches. However, once errors were no longer the main focus of attention, it was the interest value and overall communicative effectiveness which held the listeners' attention. This brings to mind Littlewood's (1981) observation that the best criterion for assessing communicative practice is not formal accuracy but how effectively the task is performed. The comments of some students illustrate the liberating effect on their speaking performance of the shift in focus away from formal accuracy. A sample of these comments is given below:

- *I do not worry about grammar but enjoyed presenting the reasons supporting my topic and contradicting the other side.*
- *We had a chance to speak without fearing of incorrect grammar so that made us more happy with the debate.*

For others, the experience was liberating in another sense because the debates, which *required* the speakers to disagree, provided a non-threatening context for the expression of contradicting viewpoints in a way that is not normally possible in Thai classrooms:

- *The good thing in the debate is I can discuss to everybody in the opposite team. In the classroom, some one doesn't like the other people to discuss his opinion.*
- *We feel free to debate the opinion of the other side and dare to comment some opinion that we don't agree.*

It was also interesting to note how well students adapted to the changed context of situation in this form of public speaking, compared to what they had experienced in their more formal oral presentations made earlier. Judging from the students' comments, the team atmosphere contributed a lot to developing their confidence:

- *The debate made me feel more confident than presentation because I have a lot of people in my team.*
- *My friends could help me to be bold in speaking to the audience.*

The greater informality of the debate led to more direct interaction with the audience. There were also fewer memorized speeches (and consequent memory lapses), and less evidence of nervousness and anxiety. The speakers drew their examples largely from personal experience, with a view to striking a note of recognition or sympathy from the audience. Humorous examples (usually used in rebutting the opposition's arguments) were kept within the limits appropriate to the situation. The participants' ability to adjust appropriately to a new speaking context indicated an awareness of the sociolinguistic aspect of communication.

Being a member of a debating team presents additional challenges of discourse because each speaker must be mindful of the input from all previous speakers. The participants in these debates managed more or less successfully to introduce and summarize the arguments for their own side and to make the necessary links between speakers ("X already discussed pollution, now I am going to tell you about"....). They were also able to contradict their opponents ("X said ...., but it's not true") and to identify and link inconsistencies in the arguments of successive speakers from the opposing side. This points to an active use of discourse competence by speakers of both sides in order to present their respective cases coherently.

The speakers also employed strategic competence, particularly at times when comments and replies had to be made on the spot. Strategies employed here included paraphrasing, circumlocution, gestures and calling for help from teammates in Thai. The speakers also displayed a fairly well developed sense of rhetoric, mainly in the form of questions directed to the audience ("Do you know why....?"; "Have you ever seen....?"). Some speakers also cumulatively built up their arguments, repeating key phrases for effect.

Overall, the participants appear to have used a variety of language competencies to achieve their communication goals. They also expressed, in their comments, views suggesting that debating was an experience different in quality from the type of language speaking practice that they had previously been used to.

Conclusion

Teacher observations and student comments from this informal re-assessment confirm that debating is interactive, purposeful and motivating, and can bring into play the speakers' grammatical, sociolinguistic, discourse and strategic competencies. Debating thus appears to fulfil satisfactorily the criteria for a communicative language activity. It is particularly suitable for leading intermediate and higher level students from controlled classroom speaking practice to the more risky but rewarding area of free expression.

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