

Investigating EFL Classroom Interaction Process in Iraqi Intermediate Schools

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Abstract

In recent times, the traditional interaction structures of English both language classrooms and roles of teachers and students are gradually changing. This marks the shift from the teacher-centered classrooms to student-centered classrooms; moving towards 'student-centered learning' and 'collaborative working modes'. The contemporary educational world views teachers and students as communicators. In such situations students get more opportunity to 'participate', 'observe', 'reflect on' and 'practice social ways'. These opportunities expose the students to a more 'meaning-making' and 'knowledge construction processes'. The shift from traditional teaching and learning process to the contemporary one has posed great challenges for teachers, who are always working under pressure to complete the syllabus designed for the academic year. In such a situation it is very important to ascertain if this idea of student-centered classroom is present in the recent classroom. Educationally oriented research into classroom interaction makes it essential for further studies into the classroom interaction in the modern classroom. Hence, this study aims to observe the interaction process that takes place in English classrooms of four government schools in Hilla (Centre of Babylon Governorate). This paper also suggests measures to improve classroom interaction and language learning in the English classes. The main findings from the study are as follows: (a) the classroom interaction is teacher-centered, (b) teachers partially facilitate learning, the classrooms are controlled by teachers (c) the ratio of the teacher-talk is more than student-talk.

Keywords: Classroom interaction, teacher-centered learning, Student – centered learning.

الخلاصة

في الآونة الاخيرة تغيرت التراكيب التقليدية التفاعلية الخاصة باللغة الانكليزية لكل من لغة الفصول الدراسية وادوار المدرسين والطلاب تدريجيا. ويمثل هذا التحول في الفصول الدراسية من التمرکز حول المدرس باتجاه التعلم المتمركز حول الطالب والعمل التعاوني. عالم التعليم المعاصر يرى المدرسين والطلاب كمتفاعلين. وفي مثل هذه الحالات فان للطلاب فرصة "المشاركة"، "المراقبة"، "ابداء الرأي" و"الممارسة الاجتماعية". هذه الفرص تمنح الطالب المجال للتعرف الى "بناء المعنى" و "المعرفة". عمليات التحول من التدريس والتعلم التقليدية الى المعاصرة يشكل تحديات كبيرة للمدرسين الذين يعملون دائما تحت ضغط اكمال المنهج المصمم للسنة الدراسية. وفي هذه الحالة من المهم جدا معرفة ما اذا كانت فكرة تمحور الفصل الدراسي حول الطالب هي موجودة بالفعل في الصفوف المعاصرة. تعليميا، التوجه البحثي نحو الصف التفاعلي هو اساسي لاجراء مزيد من الدراسات حول التفاعل الصففي في الصف الحديث. وبالتالي فان هذه الدراسة تهدف الى مراقبة عملية التفاعل الذي يحدث في فصول مادة اللغة الانكليزية في اربعة مدارس حكومية في الحلة (مركز محافظة بابل) حيث يقترح هذا البحث ايضا تدابير لتحسين التفاعل في صفوف تعليم اللغة الانكليزية. النتائج الرئيسية التي توصلت اليها الدراسة هي كما يلي: (ا) التفاعل الصففي

يتمركز حول المدرس (ب) المدرسون يسهلون بشكل جزئي عملية التعلم، حيث الفصول خاضعة لسيطرة المدرسين (ج) نسبة كلام المدرسين أكثر من الطلبة.

الكلمات المفتاحية: التفاعل الصفّي، التعلم المتمركز حول المدرس، التعلم المتمركز حول الطالب

1. INTRODUCTION

Classrooms provide a great environment for student-teacher interaction and the use of language as a means of this interaction. In a traditional learning and teaching environment, teachers controlled the class and students had less opportunity to communicate verbally. But research has shown that the current scenario lays emphasis on maximum student talk than teacher talk. Teachers are expected to facilitate the classroom interaction, giving more space for student-student interaction rather than only teacher-student interaction. This could be either in pairs, groups or through projects and presentations. Cohen, Manion, Morrison and Wyse (2010:267) state that "interaction with adults and collaboration with peers can provide opportunities for children's learning and for their cognitive development". According to Mercer and Littleton (2007) students' theoretical development and educational achievement is administered through classroom interaction.

From the earliest classrooms to the contemporary classrooms , there has been a great shift in the notion of classroom process and interaction. The student-teacher interaction is viewed from a different perspective. Language learning as a tool for classroom interaction is given greater focus. Wells (1999), remarks that learning is not only a 'constructive process' of the mind but a 'meaning-making process' and 'enculturation into social practices'. He thus affirms that it has become essential to develop constructive space in the classroom to enable learners to participate in diverse centers of practice. Learners are to be encouraged to interact with peers and contribute to the classroom interaction process. The role of learners has shifted from silent recipients of knowledge to active participants in the learning process. They play a vital role in the entire classroom process and contribute much to the language learning process. Kumplainen and Wray (2002) report that the shift in theoretical concepts of language learning has greatly altered the classroom interaction. Classroom interaction moves beyond structured teaching to a communicative classroom teaching in the real life setting. Hence, it is essential to observe and understand the actual classroom process, its communication and interaction. The focus of the present study is thus,

- to observe if the classroom interaction is student-centered
- to observe if teachers facilitate learning or transmit knowledge
- to highlight the ratio of teacher-talk and student talk in these classrooms
- to suggest methods to enhance classroom interaction

1. CLASSROOM LEARNING PROCESS

Seliger and Long (1983:246) consider the language classroom as a 'complex drama for social interaction'. They further comment that the objective of this drama is to facilitate language acquisition which is based on the assumption that language classroom provides learners a benefit over naturalistic setting. He assigns two roles in this theatre, the first is the role of the student individually and in groups and the second role is that of the teacher. According to him, learners play a dual role; first where they practice language in a formal setting, performing drill exercises, activities and second, where they use language in a real communicative setting, as 'asking explanations', making 'small talk' and 'commenting'. Teachers also play a two-fold role as they instruct, explain and drill the target language as well as communicate with learners in situations outside the classroom .The language learning process comprises

of interaction in a formal framework and in a real-life situation and both play an important role in achieving the aim of learning the language.

Language learning is the ultimate goal of any classroom learning process. This process includes teachers input, students' participation, interaction and communication within peers and the teacher. According to Lier (1998:90) the two basic ways of observing the language that is produced by learners in the classrooms is by focusing on 'what is said' and 'what is done'. He comments that the purpose of observing 'what is said' helps to study the specific linguistic features of the learners' inter language and their development over time. On the other hand, the purpose of focusing on 'what is done' helps to understand the ways in which language is used in the classroom. It gives a better perspective of the language learning process. He states that a study on 'what is done' needs a detailed understanding of the classroom interaction and an examination of what is meant by 'initiative', 'participation' and 'involvement'(Ibid:90). Therefore, it is essential to examine the different ways in which students participate and interact in the classroom, the different ways they use the language in the classroom and what is actually done in the language classrooms.

The classroom process aims at learning the target language, through attention, participation interaction communication and cooperative transmission. Participation of the students in an interactive communicative setting helps to achieve the goal of language learning. The centrality in the language classroom is the process of learning. Lier (1998) suggests that the study of the classroom learning process can be investigated from two directions: from the top-down or from the bottom-up. Thus, the hierarchy that he has designed gives an overview of the various components of the classroom learning process. These components contribute equally to the classroom learning process which aims at language learning

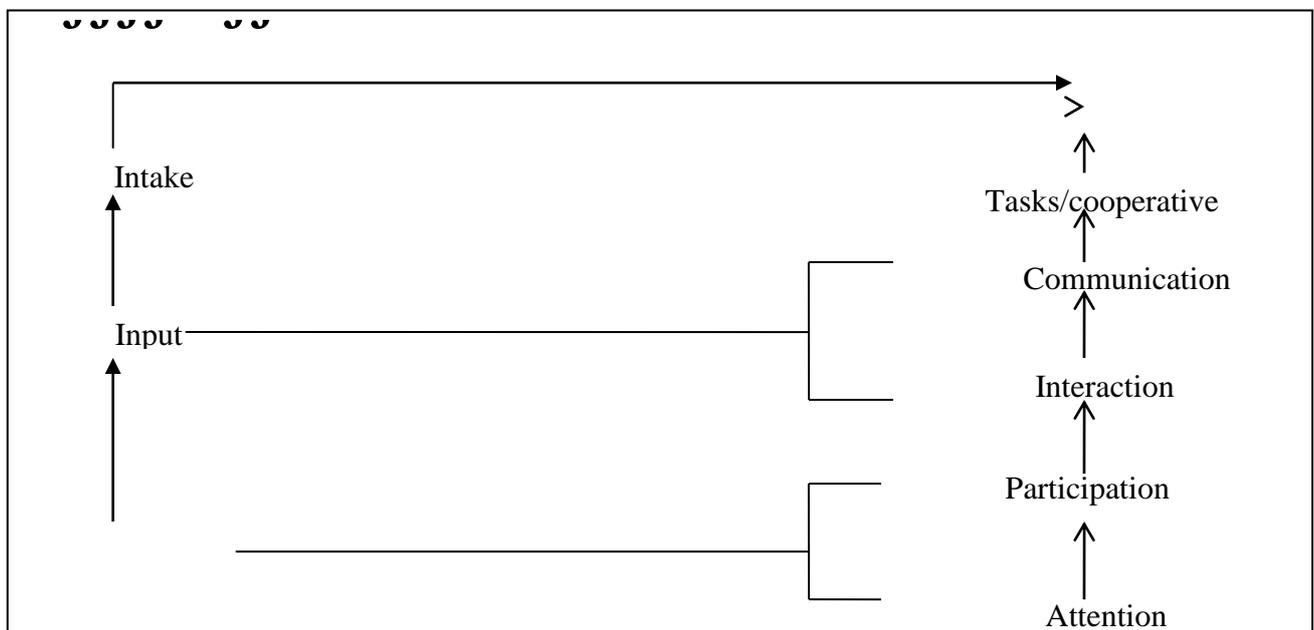


Figure 1: A hierarchy of classroom learning process (Lier, 1998: 94)

Aim: language

Blommaert (2005:10), on the other hand attributes different forms of 'meaningful semiotic human activities' to classroom interaction. According to him, languages are complex and are a collection of different varieties. He suggests that the study of language in society should include the study of different varieties which come under the label of 'English'. He further categorizes varieties on the basis of certain parameters and they are: "(a) varieties identified on the basis of the modes or channels of communication: spoken versus written, direct versus indirect communication, etc. (b) geographically identified varieties –dialects, regional accents; (c) socially identified varieties often called 'sociolects' – class varieties, professional jargons, peer-group talk, age, gender, or ethnically marked varieties, etc.; (d) situationally or domain-identified varieties, i.e. varieties used on particular occasions or in particular social domains, such as peer-group talk, dinner table conversations, doctor-patient interactions, classroom interactions etc.; (e) styles, genres, formats of communication – formal versus informal varieties, storytelling, jokes, casual chats, public speech, media discourse, etc" (Ibid:10). Classroom interaction is an important domain which comprises verbal – non-verbal, formal and informal communication. Classroom interaction can be determined by the kind of classroom interaction that takes place in the language classroom. It cannot be studied in isolation but by observing the nature of teacher talk and student talk in the classroom.

According to Mercer and Littleton (2007), classroom communication contributes to 'learners' intellectual development and their educational attainment'. Learners develop the overall language oral and aural skills through the classroom communication . Teacher talk comprises instructions and explanations that the teacher prepares as a part of the lesson. Some part of the teacher talk is unprepared but initiated through interaction with students. Teacher talk does benefit students' knowledge and ways of talking if the teacher incorporates and creates on 'students initiated words' or 'student proposed intellectual links'. The teacher plays a major role in shaping the classroom interaction and the language learning process. Teacher-talk and student-talk form an essential part of the communication that takes place within the classroom. The recent theories have proved that teacher needs to encourage maximum student participation; therefore motivate students' to use language in the naturalistic setting. Student- talk helps them learn both the structured component as well as the communicative application.

4. STUDENT – CENTERED LANGUAGE LEARNING

Student-centered learning places students at the core. According to Ginnis and Brandes (2001:6) student-centered learning is about 'attitudes and relationships' and just a 'bag of tricks'. Student-centered approach does not mean absence of the teacher but an active role of the teacher in motivating, developing, inventing and adapting ideas to encourage student to improve and create their own learning experience . But teachers' are expected to equip themselves with the new trends and practices in language learning and teaching. Although there are teachers who are self motivated to organize a student- centered classroom; yet, it is important that they understand the pedagogical approaches that are currently being encouraged in the classrooms. Teachers in the contemporary classroom are required to move from the traditional 'teacher-centered lecture model of instruction to learner-centered model of facilitating learning. Phifer (2005) encourages schools to create an environment that motivates students to involve in 'meaningful learning activities'. It is essential to involve students in activities and discussions where students participate actively. It is important to encourage students to participate in peer and group work and student-centered discussions.

Hale and City (2006:3) emphasize the importance of student involvement in classroom discussion. According to them, student – centred discussions motivate students to develop intellectually as well as socially. They state that it is ideal to encourage student-centered discussions in the classroom because the aim of these discussions are "(1) for students to deepen their understanding of ideas in a text, as well as their own ideas and the ideas of others, and (2) to develop students' ability to engage in a civil, intellectually challenging discussion of ideas" (Ibid:4). Student-centered discussion encourages students to interact with peers and present their views and ideas. Such discussions provide an environment for student-centered learning.

Learning in groups also motivates students and creates an environment for effective learning. Interacting in groups enables students to 'negotiate meaning', 'to express themselves in the language of the subject'. It enriches students listening skills, reading skills, skills of presenting ideas both in writing and speech and building the qualities of teamwork (Jaques and salmon,2007:1). At present most of the classrooms overlook such student-centered interactions. The classroom discussions are teacher-centered, where the teacher controls the content either with the purpose to complete the syllabus or teaching conventionally. Since language learning and education is a field that mediates between theory and practice, it is essential to make the language learning process interactive and meaningful. Thus, classroom interactions should aim to be student-centered rather than being only teacher-centered.

In the light of the above stated theoretical background, the present study aims to observe the classroom interaction in four government or public schools in Hilla /Babylon Governorate. The main focus of the study is to highlight the interaction in these classrooms and to give suggestions to enhance the classroom interaction. The aim is to improve the language learning process in the present-day classrooms, to make language learning communicative and interesting for learners.

5. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

5.1 The Study: The shift from traditional to contemporary practices of classroom interaction has made it important to understand the same in the actual classroom where language learning is an essential target to be achieved. It is important to understand the classroom environment, the interaction pattern, and the method of language learning and teaching. Therefore, the objectives of the study are:

1. to observe if the classroom interaction is student-centered
2. to observe if teachers facilitate learning or transmit knowledge
3. to highlight the ratio of teacher-talk and student talk in these classrooms
4. to suggest methods to enhance classroom interaction

5.2 Methodology: Classroom research is empirical, which bases its findings on data and statistics collected from the naturalistic or real setting. Therefore, it is also concerned with what the learners and teachers do in the classroom. It focuses on the classroom process and interaction. The present ethnographic study essentially explores the classroom environment with specific focus on the classroom interaction. The data for the study was collected through classroom observation and informal discussion with students. The design of the study, sample, tools, data analysis and findings are presented as follows.

▪ *Design of the study*

As the study is designed to observe the student-teacher interaction and communication prominent in the language classrooms, it uses quantitative methods to describe this situation. The study uses quantitative and qualitative methods to describe and present the data collected. A descriptive survey is conducted using tools for observation and discussions. The various techniques used during the course of the

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research are observation and discussions. The tools used in this process are checklist (See appendix 1) and questionnaire. The items of the questionnaires and checklist have been collected on the basis of the related literature, interviews, the open ended questionnaire, the information found in the teacher's guide, previous studies which deal with teaching techniques and experts opinions since this questionnaire was exposed to jury of specialist in TEFL .Each member in the jury has been kindly requested to modify, change or odd what he/ she finds suitable to both of them.

▪ **Population and Sample of the study:**The population refers to any set of items, individuals, etc. which share some common and observable characteristics and from which a sample can be taken (Richards. et al, 1992:282). The population of this research comprises Iraqi EFL intermediate classroom for the academic year (2016 – 2017).

The sample selected for the study consists of four government schools situated in Hilla which represented a population of all intermediate EFL classrooms. The classes observed are at the intermediate school level (1st , 2nd and 3rd). A minimum number of two and a maximum number of three classes from each school were observed. Five students from each class (1st , 2nd and 3rd)were selected for a discussion. Thus, the total sample size is ten English classrooms and sixty students for discussion.

▪ **Data analysis method:**The data collected through the checklist is analyzed with the help of MS Excel software. The findings are presented in a tabular form and a descriptive interpretation is given.

6. DATA ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

a. To observe if the classroom interaction is student-centered

Peer work

Total										
Present	0									
Not present	10	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
Partially present	0									

Present	0	%
Not Present	100	%
Partially Present	0	%

Group work

Total										
Present	0									
Not present	10	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
Partially present	0									

Present	0	%
Not Present	100	%
Partially Present	0	%

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Note-taking, on-task discussion

		<u>Total</u>											
Present	3					1		1		1			
Not present	5												
Partially present	2	1	1	1		1					1		
		1								1			
											Present	30	%
											Not Present	50	%
											Partially Present	20	%

Student presentation

		<u>Total</u>											
Present	0												
Not present	10	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1		
Partially present	0												
											Present	0	%
											Not Present	100	%
											Partially Present	0	%

Independent work at the desk

		<u>Total</u>											
Present	10	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1		
Not present	0												
Partially present	0												
											Present	100	%
											Not Present	0	%
											Partially Present	0	%

Teacher engages all students in answering and explaining

		<u>Total</u>											
Present	7	1		1	1	1			1	1	1		
Not present	2		1				1						
Partially present	1							1					
											Present	70	%
											Not Present	20	%
											Partially Present	10	%

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• **Findings:** The above recorded data entry shows that in the ten classes observed there was no peer work or group work conducted. In 50% classes there was no note-taking. Students were not encouraged to present the lesson or chapter in the class and most of the time they worked at their desk. In 70% classes teachers encouraged students to explain the text.

• **Interpretation:** It is evident from the report that interactive learning was hardly encouraged in these classes. These classes followed the traditional method of teacher instructing, asking questions and explaining and student listening. The discussion in the classes was mostly conducted between the teacher and students. There was minimal interaction between students; rather there was more interaction between teacher and students.

• **Comment:** Therefore, these classes reflect teacher-centered interaction and learning and not student-centered interaction and learning.

b. To observe if teachers facilitate learning or transmit knowledge

Teacher facilitates a question and answer sequence

		<u>Total</u>											
Present	7	1		1		1		1	1	1	1		
Not present	1												
Partially present	2		1										
				1		1							
		Present										70	%
		Not Present										10	%
		Partially Present										20	%

Teacher explains the entire lesson

		<u>Total</u>											
Present	0												
Not present	7												
Partially present	3	1	1		1	1	1		1		1		
				1				1		1			
		Present										0	%
		Not Present										70	%
		Partially Present										30	%

Teacher facilitates student learning

		<u>Total</u>											
Present	0												
Not present	3												
Partially present	7		1		1			1					
		1		1		1	1		1	1	1		
		Present										0	%
		Not Present										30	%
		Partially Present										70	%

language. Language is an important tool for communication; hence, it is essential for teachers to encourage and plan interactive classes. The following are suggestions to reinforce the language learning process; thus, improve classroom interaction :

- i. Teachers should generate interactive learning, by conducting peer and group work.
- ii. Teachers should encourage students to work on projects which could be initiated by the teacher in the classroom.
- iii. Teachers should encourage students-centered discussions.
- iv. Teachers should guide students' use of language and help them think collectively.
- v. Teachers should encourage students to present lessons in pairs or groups.
- vi. Teachers should give appropriate guidelines for students to participate effectively in groups.
- vii. Teachers need to observe their own classes and reflect on their teaching practices to upgrade and make their teaching more effective.
- viii. Teachers should limit their talking to specific instructions and interventions and motivate students to contribute more to the classroom learning.
- ix. Teachers should encourage maximum student-talk giving them the opportunity to use the language in real life situations.

9. CONCLUSION

The findings prove that these classes are not student-centered. There is very less student participation as teachers control the class. Although, teachers facilitate learning partially; yet, there is maximum teacher -talk prevalent in these classes. Traditionally, teachers instruct, explain and question most of the time. They transmit knowledge to students. They very seldom initiate a task or an activity where students are given an occasion to use language in communicative situations. Thus, these classrooms reflect teacher-centered learning. However, students look forward to interactive sessions in the class. They feel motivated and confident when they use the language in the classroom. Students are aware of the importance of learning the language; hence, they have expressed the need to use language in real life situations.

The shift in the trends of language learning and teaching poses great challenges for teachers, administrators and policy makers. The present society has undergone social and economic changes. These changes force educators and researchers to revise the aims of education with specific focus on skills that students would need in their future lives. Traditional teaching trends are not very effective in helping students to develop their 'thinking and learning skills' that are needed in the world beyond the schools and classrooms (Kumpulainen and Wray, 2002:145). It is important for teachers to update their knowledge and understanding of the classroom practices in order to encourage a collective meaning-making learning process. According to Cohen, Manion, Morrison and Wyse (2010: 290) teachers need to evaluate their teaching strategies in terms of the effectiveness of: 'direct instruction with whole class interactive teaching, exposition and explanation, questioning, discussion, responding, summarizing and setting up tasks and activities to encourage collaborative learning'. Wells (1999) also elucidates that the role of a teacher is that of a 'sensitive coach or an expert partner'. The teacher needs to integrate and structure the classroom interaction towards a 'shared understanding'. The teacher also affects the classroom interaction which is an essential means for language learning and teaching. Walsh (2011) encourages teachers to examine the extracts of the classroom interaction and use them for reflection. He further states that such reflections by teachers will help improve classroom practices. Classroom is an essential domain that demands effective interaction between teachers and students, students and students. This interactive meaning-making classroom process ensures effective language learning and teaching.

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Thus, teachers can support in strengthening the language learning process and complement classroom interaction. Teachers play a major role in putting theory into practices. They have to discern while implementing the contemporary trends into their classroom learning process. It is crucial to make teaching and learning delightful and refreshing; so that the aim of language learning is achieved successfully.

Appendix (1)

Classroom Observation Checklist of Teacher's - Student's Interaction

	Teacher-student Interaction	Class No.	present	Not present	Partially present
1	Teachers control, initiate activities, and provide feedback.				
2	Teacher explains the entire lesson.				
3	Responds appropriately to student questions and comments.				
4	Teacher uses authentic language not known before with students where questions are usually displayed or practiced.				
5	Teacher invites class discussion and solicits student input				
6	Teacher clarifies and supports ideas when responding to questions				
7	Teacher introduces activities promote real communication through examples, repetition, questions and role-play				
8	Teacher interrupts when appropriate to ask for assistance, further information or clarification				
9	Teacher responds and facilitates questions and answers sequences				
10	Teacher Uses peer and group work				
11	Teacher engages all students in answering and explaining				
12	Teacher gives independent work at desk				
13	Teacher Demonstrates awareness of individual student learning needs.				
14	Teacher Facilitates student learning.				
15	Encourage students on note-taking, and task-discussion				

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