

LECTURER-STUDENT INTERACTION: CAN IT HELP OVERCOME THE LANGUAGE AND COMPREHENSION PROBLEMS OF STUDENTS IN ENGLISH MEDIUM LECTURES?

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Introduction

It is believed that lecturer-student interaction (of dialogic nature), which enables students to take a more active role in discussions is likely to be beneficial for students' lecture comprehension and language development. Although there have been studies at primary level, there has so far been little research into dialogic interaction in tertiary-level L1 (first language) classes, and none yet carried out in the L2 (second language) context. Therefore, this study investigates the extent of dialogic interaction practised at a faculty (FX) of a Sri Lankan university in conjunction with a thorough consideration of the factors that influence interaction between lecturers and students.

Methodology

This study, involving 30 students and 4 lecturers, was undertaken as a pioneer study in this context in Asia by analysing L2 lectures given at FX. A mixed methods approach was employed to address the research questions using both qualitative and quantitative methods (Tashakkori and Teddlie, 2010; Creswell and Plano Clark, 2011). Data were collected from lecturer and student questionnaires, lecturer interviews, student group interviews, observations of 24 lectures and audio recordings. Of the observed lectures, a total of 12 lectures were transcribed verbatim and analysed using an analytical framework, which was especially designed to analyse the FX lecture discourse. This framework was also used to locate these lectures on a scale from monologic (without interaction) to dialogic (interaction was available).

Discussion and Conclusion

The study revealed the complexity of the perception-practice dynamic, and the multi-faceted sub-set of factors which influenced students' and lecturers' behaviour in class, and their perception of that behaviour. Students' lecture comprehension problems and classroom interaction were influenced by their language proficiency, though the students considered the lecturers' lecture delivery style to be more important than their own language proficiency. In this study it was revealed that a culturally embedded behaviour perpetuated by senior students, known as ragging (a kind of bullying), restricted the classroom interaction of the students as well as the friendliness of the lecturers.

In terms of lecture delivery style, of all the observed lectures only two contained some interactional episodes in addition to monologic segments, while the others were found to be highly or mostly monologic. Students were also found not to be cooperating with lecturers in classroom interaction, despite stating a preference for learning through interaction. The students asked only very few questions in all the observed lectures, and answered in a limited number of lectures. The lecturers asked more knowledge testing questions than any other kind, while there were only a few concept development questions – the type which can help develop dialogic interaction.

The present study using an especially designed analytical framework along with a mixed methods research design, has unearthed a rich data source in order for us to understand the existing lecturing situation at FX and the connected issues in developing lecturer-student interaction. The nature of the majority of the lecture delivery itself did not provide opportunities for students to interact in the classroom, while the few lectures which developed interactional exchanges were perceived by students as useful for understanding the content easily and gave them confidence to use the language. Nevertheless, the dialogic interaction, which is believed to benefit content and language learning (Dong, 2002; Gibbons, 2003; Haneda, 2005; Haneda and Wells, 2010), was totally lacking. In addition, it was revealed that the lecturers were unaware of the importance of such dialogic interaction in classes or of the knowledge required to develop them, though there are marked differences between interaction and dialogic interaction.

The analytical framework developed in this study can be used in future research studies and more importantly it can be used in teacher preparation activities to identify favourable lecture deliveries, as mentioned earlier. The framework as a basis can be used to indicate the gap between the present level of interactivity in lectures and the desired level and can be of greater value to the teaching and learning in higher education. Therefore, this study being the first to unearth the practising of dialogic interaction at tertiary level undergraduate classes can make a concrete contribution to the teaching and learning in higher education, mainly to the concept of developing content and language development through dialogic lecture delivery at tertiary level L2 content classes.

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