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Students' Responses to Teacher's Requests in 'CraftEng'

Abstract – Summary

In our running world, Teaching English as a Foreign Language for beginners is a crucial point of education. To motivate young learners is essential in life-long-learning so it is important to find the best way of introducing foreign languages for children. The teachers have a number of methods and approaches in their hands to choose from in order to produce as many effective language users as possible. During the lessons – next to questions -, teachers use commands and requests to get the students to respond and to react to them. What is more, creative activities and games are popular among students. Schools work by different tactics to invite more and more learners to acquire second language in their institutions. 'CraftEng' is one of the new trends.

1. Introduction

In our publication, we investigate the importance of students' responses to teacher's requests and commands. We focus on Teaching English as a Foreign Language for beginners. (In our paper, we use the EFL abbreviation for 'Teaching English as a Foreign Language' expression.)

Before writing this thesis, we visited and observed five lessons in Benjámín Szőnyi Reformed Primary School in Hódmezővásárhely, in a city in the southern part of Hungary. The school works with an innovation: the English teacher starts to teach the language in the 2nd grade, at the age of eight. The speciality of this education is that it happens not during English classes but it happens during Craft lessons. We indicated the name of this innovation in the title of this paper; 'CraftEng' is a compound consisting of two words. 'Craft' implies that it is used in lessons where art and craft are emphasized, and 'English' suggests that everything works in English during the whole class. So, we observed five 'CraftEng' lessons in the second grade in 2007.

We have two objectives in our thesis; first to investigate the responses of the students to the teacher's commands and requests in 'CraftEng' lessons focusing on the way they happen: in English, in Hungarian and by doing the action; second is to examine the balance among these three aspects.

Our paper aims at examining teacher's commands and requests in connection with students' responses and reactions to them with the help of contemporary interpretations and readings focusing on the functions and on the results of 'CraftEng' classes. In the title of this publication, we emphasize the importance of interactions between teacher and students. Our goal is to make an attempt to introduce one of the major aspects of interactions between teacher and students highlighting commands and requests together with reactions to them. Moreover, we intend to give evidence that foreign language learning is essential in every human being's life.

In the first part of our publication, we give a brief presentation on the importance of foreign language learning. We also summarize some studies that present bilingual education and a concrete program on this topic called 'The Immersion Program.' Afterwards,

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our goal is to focus on the importance of motivation in second language acquisition; motivation that is especially necessary for beginners and for young learners. We show one of the teaching approaches as the basis of the lessons we observed; Total Physical Response is the method that is used by the teacher in ‘CraftEng’ classes. (In our paper, we use the TPR abbreviation for ‘Total Physical Response’ expression.)

In our publication, we use academic sources on this issue to explore how each factor influences foreign language learning. We mainly focus on academic literature. These sources contain studies, articles in journals and observations. Following the literature review, we draw up our research questions, and then describe the research itself including the methods of data collection. Next, we demonstrate our findings in both a descriptive form and in the form of a table that compares the teacher’s requests and commands to the students’ responses. We seek to compare and contrast the responses in Hungarian, the responses in English with the responses by doing the actions. Finally, we draw conclusions based on the research method used and its outcomes.

2. Elements of ‘CraftEng’

During our observations, we realized that four main aspects are very important in answering our research questions: first, the connection between foreign language learning and bilingual education; second, teaching the regular school curriculum in English; then the students’ motivation; and finally the teaching approach that is used in ‘CraftEng’ lessons. To introduce all of these angles, we use contemporary readings and studies such as academic sources from periodicals, observations and lectures.

2.1. Bilingual Education

The cognition of the world is the basis and the condition of the development of language. Language is ready when people use the same term to name the same object.

We accept Iain Chambers’ words: “Language is not primarily the tool of communication, it is the device of cultural construction in which our ego and intelligence are constituted.”(Chambers I. 2002) We, people live in the world born into a culture. We agree with Wolfhart Pannenberg in the sense of “every culture uses a language so language is part of a culture.”(Pannenberg W., 1998). Man lives his life by creating things around him and language is the device for the man to build up the world. Language does not change life but life changes language.

Michael Swan argues that “Language is what distinguishes us as human beings. It is our greatest cognitive achievement, and the foundation of all our other achievements. Its separate realizations – individual languages – are beautiful structures.” (Swan M., 2005).

Stephen Krashen claims that “It is helpful to distinguish two goals of bilingual education. The first is the development of academic English and school success, and the second is the development of the heritage language. Good bilingual education programs achieve both goals.” (Alatis J. E. ed., 1999). He argues that good bilingual programs have three characteristics: “1) they provide background knowledge through the first language via subject matter teaching in the first language; 2) they provide literacy in the first language; 3) they provide comprehensible input in English, through ESL (English as Second Language) and sheltered subject matter teaching.” (Alatis J. E. ed., 1999). He concludes that more education in the primary language has the result of more success in English language acquisition. This fact shows that subject matter knowledge and literacy in the first language have a deep influence on the second language acquisition (Alatis J. E. ed., 1999).

2.2. Foreign Language Immersion Programs

According to Myriam Met “Immersion is defined as a method of foreign language instruction in which the regular school curriculum is taught through the medium of the language. The foreign language is the vehicle for content instruction; it is not the subject of instruction.” (Met M., 1993). In her study, she introduces two kinds of immersion programs: in total immersion every subject is taught in the foreign language including reading and language arts; in partial immersion – however – only half of the school day is spent by using the foreign language, and the school chooses the subjects taught in the foreign language but reading and language arts are always chosen (Met M., 1993). The immersion programs have four goals: “1) developing a high level of proficiency in the foreign language; 2) developing positive attitudes toward those who speak the foreign language and toward their culture(s); 3) developing English language skills commensurate with expectations for student’s age and abilities; 4) gaining skills and knowledge in the content areas of the curriculum in keeping with stated objectives in these areas.” (Met M., 1993).

In her study, Myriam Met suggests that the steps and the way of English language introduction is always school-dependant. She gives evidence that although there are attempts, there is no specific rule for the grade level and age when to start teaching English for young learners. She adds that “Obviously, students in the immersion sequence are unlikely to profit from instruction in regular foreign language courses. Immersion students are fluent in the foreign language by Grade 2 or 3. Provision should be made for their continued growth in the foreign language in the later grades in the form of specially designed courses similar to the language arts courses students receive in English.” (Met M., 1993).

2.3. Motivation

‘Second language acquisition’ “can be defined as the way in which people learn a language other than their mother tongue, inside or outside a classroom.” (Ellis R., 2003). “Whereas language aptitude concerns the cognitive abilities that underlie successful second language acquisition, motivation involves the attitudes and affective states that influence the degree of effort that learners make to learn a second language.” (Ellis R., 2003). As Rod Ellis suggests, motivation has different types:

1. instrumental motivation is based on functional reasons, like to pass an examination;
2. when students are interested in the culture of the society of the target language, it is called integrative motivation;
3. resultative motivation means that the result of learning is more motivating because of success in learning;
4. intrinsic motivation involves the learners curiosity and interests (Ellis R., 2003).

According to Jeremy Harmer, there are motivational differences among the students. Children, adolescents and adults are differently motivated. “Children need frequent changes of activity: they need activities which are exciting and stimulate their curiosity: they need to be involved in something active.” (Harmer J., 1997). In his article, Tim Bowen argues that the use of mother tongue in English classes – especially with younger learners and students at beginner level – is a factor of motivation. He also claims that as a motivation, the use of mother tongue gives the feeling of security to the beginners (Bowen T.: Using L1 in Class, 2009). Éva Czifra says that “The most important factors of motivation that can help you succeed should be inner, like curiosity, the need to explore new territories, the desire to reach new heights of intelligence. The need is also important and so is encouragement from others, from our environment, from other’s ideas and thoughts.” (Czifra É., 2005).

2.4. Total Physical Response

According to Katalin Bukta, Total Physical Response (TPR) is a teaching method in which teacher activates students via instructions, and the students react with physical actions. She suggests that in TPR, language is limited into instructions (Bukta K., 2006). Diane Larsen-Freeman argues that the Total Physical Response “is an example of a new general approach to foreign language instruction which has been named ‘the comprehension approach.’ It is called this because of the importance it gives to listening comprehension.” (Larsen-Freeman D., 1986).

Tim Bowen argues that “Originally developed by James Asher, an American professor of psychology, in the 1960s, Total Physical Response is based on the theory that the memory is enhanced through association with physical movement. It is also closely associated with theories of mother tongue language acquisition in very young children, where they respond physically to parental commands.” (Bowen T.: Total Physical Response, 2009). He suggests that TPR activities integrated in English classes are important to use because they are motivating and purposeful in foreign language teaching. He adds that in TPR, language production follows listening that gives security to the students (Bowen T.: Total Physical Response, 2009).

According to Tim Bowen, one of the main problems with the Total Physical Response approach is that although it gives a supportive and positive classroom environment, it is basically restricted to commands using imperative forms (Bowen T.: Total Physical Response, 2009). Jeremy Harmer claims that “TPR allows a pre-speaking phase where students are not forced to speak until they feel confident to do so,” and “The students thus learn language through actions, through a physical response rather than through drills.” (Harmer J., 1997).

3. Research Questions

The main interest of this paper is to highlight the teacher’s requests and commands together with the students’ responses to them in EFL classrooms at a beginner level, especially in Craft lessons in the 2nd grade. Based on the above, we intend to get answers to the following questions:

1. In what percentage do the students respond in English, in Hungarian and by doing the action to the teacher’s requests and commands?
2. What are the factors that cause this result?

4. Research Methodology

The research was carried out in Benjámín Szőnyi Reformed Primary School in Hódmezővásárhely, in a town in the southern part of Hungary. Students’ learning are of mixed abilities, however, the majority are poor learners with low motivation. One group was involved in the research. The group started to learn English in the school-year when we observed the lessons. The second grade class was at beginner level; the group was more or less homogeneous in their knowledge of the English language by the end of the half term of that year. We intentionally focused on the second grade in our research from two aspects: first, the school starts to teach English in this grade, so these students are the very beginners; and secondly, in this grade students learn English only in Craft lessons in one and a half classes per week. The group consisted of girls and boys, too.

We applied classroom observation to achieve our goal. We observed five lessons from

one of our colleagues. She is the only teacher in the school who has the right to teach Crafts in English. She did not use any course books. She used technical devices instead, such as paper, crayons, paper clips, glue, scissors and so on.

Our observation sheet contained general information about the group including age, level, number of students and the product of the lesson. The main part of the sheet focused on the teacher's requests and commands together with the students' responses to them. We observed the teacher's sentences and the students' reactions, as well. We found it important to examine how many times the students responded in English, in Hungarian and by doing the action.

5. Results

In this part of our publication, we summarize the results of our observations, and our aim is to show the answers to our research questions focusing on the numbers of the data collection.

We filled our observation sheets with our notes while observing the lessons. Through our observations, we intended to show how many commands and requests were used by the teacher in order to get the students to do the tasks as well as how many times responded the students in English, in Hungarian and by doing the action. We also examined whether there was no response to the teacher's requests and commands at all. This collected data is listed in a table (See: Table).

Based on our observations, we state that the teacher used as many commands and requests as were necessary in order to achieve the goals of the lessons (Bere I.–Gál J., 1998). The aims of the 'CraftEng' classes were to create some hand-made objects like a train, an egg, a crown and a butterfly. Only one of the lessons was titled as a 'Game,' although its goal was also to create something, to create a dice used for playing a game.

According to the notes taken during our observations, we realized that the teacher always got responses from the students. It meant two things for me: first, the students were motivated enough to communicate with the teacher; second, the students liked the activities the teacher gave them because doing the tasks caused happiness and joy to them.

The number of the commands and requests used by the teacher gave evidence that students were given the opportunity to respond to them. These sentences were student-centred and were at the level of the beginners. The teacher worked as a facilitator to the students to help engage them in the steps of the classes. The teacher also took into account the nature of the students by focusing on their abilities and interests.

As we mentioned before, the students always had the chance to respond to the teacher's commands and requests, and they made the best of the opportunities. The students responded to all of the teacher's commands and requests. They used three ways of responding: response in English, response in Hungarian and response by doing the action. The students needed help in their work during the lessons that was noticed by the teacher right at the same time as the students' responses did not fit to the original requests or commands.

To sum up our observations in numbers, the teacher used 117 commands and requests during the five observed lessons. To these, the students responded in English 14 times, they responded in Hungarian 58 times and responded by doing the action 45 times. The proportion of these data in percentage is the following: response in English is 12%, response in Hungarian is 50% and response by doing the action is 38% (See: Table).

Table. Results of the classroom observation

Number of lessons	Number of the teacher's requests and commands	Number of the students		
		do the action	respond in English	respond in Hungarian
1	23	8	3	12
2	22	7	4	11
3	29	13	3	13
4	15	6	2	7
5	28	11	2	15
Total				
5	117	45	14	58
In %	100%	38%	12%	50%

Source: The authors' own observation

The majority of the students' responses happened in Hungarian. We believe that the cause of this dimension is that the group started to learn English at the beginning of the school-year of our observations. So, the students did not get accustomed to the new situation in their education. What is more, they learnt the foreign language in a special medium which resulted in the fact that the students had to cope with two challenges at the same time. They faced to the difficulties of second language acquisition and they faced to the troubles of Craft lessons at the same time.

We point out the importance of the students' responses by doing the action. The large number of this viewpoint shows that the use of the Total Physical Response approach – under these circumstances – was effective because the students listened and understood the teacher's commands and requests. On the other hand, they were shy to speak and they did not need to communicate as this mode is the basis of TPR.

We emphasize that only a few occasions showed that the students were able to react in English. In some of these cases, the responses were questioning back to the teacher's requests and commands. We think that these reactions were the result of effective communication among the teacher and the students.

We stress that 'CraftEng' is an innovative program in the school where we observed the lessons. We believe that both the teacher and the students have to face to a new educational system in the sense of teaching English in Craft classes. We add that we felt happy being in the second grade as an observer during 'CraftEng' lessons, and we thought of ourselves how we could cope with similar tasks as it was in teaching English language during Craft classes.

To conclude, we found it salutary to observe these lessons because we was contrasted to a new way of teaching English for beginners, for young learners; what is more, the regular school curriculum was also in the centre of 'CraftEng' classes at the same time.

6. Conclusion

In this publication, our aim was to examine teacher's requests and commands in connection with students' responses to them. The focus of our observation was the way of students' responses in 'CraftEng' lessons: whether it happened in English, in Hungarian or by doing the action. We also observed the quantity of these three aspects in contrast to each other.

The observed lessons showed that teaching commands and requests, using the impera-

tive forms were the most frequently used activities in 'CraftEng' EFL classrooms. These activities did offer the students opportunities to prepare for communication, mainly for speaking. The lessons observed showed that using commands and requests took a considerable role in the process of listening. The aim of the Total Physical Response method is to prepare students for producing the language accurately. The teacher helped the students to take part actively in the work of the lessons according to their pace, and she always gave a helping hand to them.

The students of the observed lessons were active participants. They followed the instructions, and their listening comprehension was facilitated by pre-teaching vocabulary and by repetition of the activities. The aim of teaching listening is to make students feel comfortable when they speak. Using Crafts helped students to enjoy every moment of the process of second language acquisition.

Pre-teaching vocabulary was useful for activating students' previous knowledge. Activities calling forth background knowledge of the students made them more enthusiastic to cope with the tasks. We think it would be beneficial to carry out a large-scale research to investigate the attitude of other groups towards learning English in Craft classes.

All in all, the teacher allowed enough time for the ESL students to work creatively in 'CraftEng' lessons, and the activities were appropriate to the students' skills. To the teacher's requests and commands, the students' responses were mostly Hungarian answers or questions, and the reactions sometimes did not fit to the original sentence at all. What is more, responses in English were the lowest in relation to the other aspects. Our observation revealed that the teacher succeeded in getting the students communicate, and in helping them to become conscious language learners.

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