A discourse-based evaluation of a classroom peer teaching project

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A discourse-based evaluation of a classroom peer teaching project

The use of student-generated materials and peer teaching in the language classroom offers a creative way to increase learner participation. Previous studies have shown that, provided they receive adequate assistance, learners can benefit from producing and teaching their own classroom materials. These studies have described ways of implementing peer teaching in detail. This article focuses specifically on the language produced by teams of Japanese university students as they taught their own materials. Such a focus is clearly important to the evaluation of the practice of peer teaching. Excerpts of classroom dialogue from this study show how communication and interaction lay at the heart of the peer teaching process and reveal different ways in which students assisted and engaged their peers. The peer taught lessons offered learning opportunities related to both lesson content and language learning.

Introduction

The use of student-generated materials and peer teaching in the foreign language classroom is relevant to the notions of learner autonomy and the learner-centered classroom. A learner-centered approach to pedagogy is now well established in language teaching literature. Harmer (2007: 394) describes how

“students need to be encouraged to develop their own learning strategies so that as far as possible, they become autonomous learners. … Giving students agency (enabling them to be the doers rather than the recipients of learning action) is one way of helping to sustain their motivation.”

Dörnyei and Murphey (2003: 105-6) suggest strategies to help students become agents of their own learning such as: allowing them to make choices about the learning process; granting them ‘genuine authority’ including aspects of management; encouraging ‘student contributions and peer teaching’.

These ideas are also characteristic of cooperative learning. Cooperative learning promotes inter-group reliance and, in an ELT context, can help to develop communicative competence and encourage peer-to-peer interaction in the target language (Ning 2011). Crandall (1999) presents a rationale for cooperative learning in the second language classroom, remarking on its positive effect on motivation and the affective environment. It also individualizes instruction for learners and gives them greater opportunities to speak and contribute. In a list of further potential benefits (ibid.: 233-40) she includes the following:

“Providing comprehensible input and output” (p. 234): especially when learners support each other by offering assistance with L2 forms, including negotiation of meaning or even specific instruction.

“An increased range of speech acts or language functions” (p. 237): learners progress from simply asking questions and giving instructions to engaging in other varieties of discourse such as the provision of assistance and the encouragement of student initiative and communication.
The benefits of cooperative learning are not achieved simply by putting students into groups and having them talk. Rather, activities should be structured in such a way that communication and the exchange of information serve to support learning. As Crandall suggests, learners need to be motivated to help each other to learn and to succeed in the completion of classroom tasks (cf. Sachs, Candlin, Rose and Shum 2003).

Student-generated materials and peer teaching, as structured classroom activities, can be considered applications of cooperative learning with the potential to lead to the positive features described above. Giving learners a role in determining classroom content extends agency and encourages greater engagement in the learning process. Previous studies have presented examples of students producing their own materials and thereby drawing on each other’s knowledge and skills as a resource for learning.

Assinder (1991) asked EFL students on a preparatory course at an Australian university to prepare teaching materials to accompany a selection of television news stories. Students followed a lesson format modeled by the teacher and, after selecting a short news recording from a bank of video materials, groups of six students devised comprehension and discussion questions, and identified and highlighted problem vocabulary. The students taught their own materials, first to a paired group and thereafter to a separate class. The project included a preparatory discussion about what constituted a good lesson and how it should be taught. The project was assessed highly by students and the study presents a considerable list of positive observations including increased motivation, participation, in-depth understanding and authentic communication.

Brown, Iyobe and Riley (2013), working at a university in Japan, asked groups of four to five students to produce ‘negotiation scenarios’. A notional project or problem, such as deciding a school budget, had to be settled in the style of a group role-play. The student-generated materials comprised a written explanation of the problem, the signposting of relevant considerations and advice for preparation and decision-making. The materials were then passed over to another group who would perform the scenario. The project did not include peer teaching per se but time was allotted for groups to check with each other on any parts of the scenario they did not understand. Brown et al. describe benefits such as strong engagement and the development of academic skills including learning assessment.

The peer teaching project described in this article took place within a university ‘Oral English’ course. The course aimed to help students develop fluency and to gain experience in a range of styles of communication. In the first semester they researched a topic and gave a scripted oral presentation to share their findings with the rest of the class. For the second semester I sought an alternative way for the students to share information and this took the form of peer teaching. At a basic level I hoped that it would result in greater interactivity with students engaging more with each others’ topics than was possible during traditional classroom presentations. Peer taught lessons would allow the audience to discuss, ask questions and make their own contributions.

Further, I hoped that peer teaching would lead to learning opportunities both for the student-teachers and for the audience. The former would need to have a good grasp of
their facts in order to teach content and to field questions. In terms of English, they would need to find the linguistic means to give clear instructions and to motivate their peers, thus engaging in kinds of interaction not generally associated with traditional classroom activities.

The structure of the peer teaching project

The setting for the project was a private university in Japan. It was used in three first-year classes of around 17-20 students whose proficiency level was approximately intermediate to higher intermediate. Their TOEIC scores (the test is taken by all incoming first-year students) ranged from 480-560. The students were majoring in Law but had three obligatory English classes per week.

The project included various phases of assistance and task modeling which are summarized in Figure 1. In the first stage of the project, the teacher (myself) produced and taught two sample 30-minute lessons based on topics such as crime, cinema and trade. I prepared a worksheet for each lesson with around four different activities including cloze exercises for vocabulary building, discussion questions and short decision making tasks. I also introduced a list of ‘teaching phrases’ to help the students manage their lesson and discussed the issue of time-management. In a second training stage, students formed groups of three based on a shared interest in a topic on which they wanted to produce a lesson. But before they produced their own lesson, each group was given a further sample lesson prepared by the teacher and were asked to teach this lesson to the rest of the class as a dry-run or rehearsal. In the final stage the same groups worked together to produce and team-teach their own 30-minute lessons.

Each group made a worksheet with three or four activities based around their chosen topic. They were free either to replicate the types of activities contained in the sample lessons or to devise their own. The non-teaching students were arranged into groups of three during these lessons in order to help each other answer the questions on the worksheets and to discuss the topic together. The student-teachers’ lessons contained whole-class activities and smaller group activities. In the former, a student might be called on to read a paragraph aloud or answer a quiz question. In group activities, groups might be asked to reach a decision (e.g. agree on a good idea for a new public holiday) or discuss a question related to the topic. During the group activities, the student-teachers patrolled the classroom to check on progress and help out if necessary.

Examining the students’ discourse

Peer teaching has proved to be a popular component in the course. A busy and animated atmosphere prevails in the classroom when the lessons are taught and I have been impressed by the students’ enthusiasm to communicate and by how conscientiously the student-teachers guide their peers through the lessons. I was interested in investigating the students’ discourse to see in detail how the structure of the project might help to deliver on some of the principles of cooperative learning. In other words, to see whether the project promoted peer to peer interaction in the way that I intended and to discover potential learning opportunities arising through cooperation and assistance between the students. This included the transfer of
knowledge relating to lesson content and focus on L2 form arising from the process in general.

I therefore made recordings of the final stage of the project. Each of the student-teachers (henceforth ‘ST’) carried a small MP3 recorder with a clip-on microphone as they taught their own lessons. The recordings included whole-class discussion, interaction with smaller groups as the STs patrolled the class and interaction with fellow STs as they managed their lesson. The excerpts that follow, as well as giving a flavour of the classroom atmosphere, reveal the interactive nature of the students’ lessons and show how the various participants worked together to achieve an exchange of knowledge pertaining to the topic of each lesson and to the target language.

**Authentic interaction**

With the STs teaching the lesson and the rest of the class working in groups, classroom discourse was dominated by student voices. The most common activity type in the students’ lessons were those that required group discussion or deliberation, so oral communication was very much at the centre of the project. I myself made only occasional interventions to address L2 accuracy or to assist with organizational oversights.

Chappell (2013) discusses the difference between classroom talk and authentic communication, and how too much time in the classroom consists of the former, in particular, the ‘recitation script’ where the teacher asks a question, a student answers and the teacher then ends the exchange with a short feedback response. Authentic conversation on the other hand “is interactive and therefore jointly constructed and reciprocal” (ibid.: 2). Excerpts 1 and 2 are characteristic of Chappell’s description of authentic conversation. Both STs and students initiate topics while the STs encourage participation and acknowledge their students’ contributions. The students also pay attention to L2 form, seeking out alternative ways to express their message.

**Excerpt 1**

In a lesson about coffee, the worksheet has asked students to match varieties of coffee with their key ingredients. For example, Irish Coffee contains whiskey and Vietnamese Coffee contains condensed milk. The ST has approached a group to check on their progress.

1. ST: How are you doing?
2. Student 1: What?
3. ST: How are you doing?
4. Student 1: Oh. I don’t know. I have no idea.
5. ST: [laughs] Do you eat coffee – eat no - drink coffee?
7. ST: Oh! Good.
8. Student 1: But I don’t know the difference.
9. ST: Eh milk or sugar?
10. Student 1: Uh a little sugar.
11. ST: Oh, yeah.
12. Student 2: He can drink without sugar.
13. ST: You can?
14. Student 3: I drink only dark eh black.
15. ST: Only black ah good.

Student 1 signals at turn 4 that he is struggling with the question on the worksheet. The ST does not address this specific problem, and asks instead about the group’s coffee drinking habits. It is unclear why the ST does this, but it may be that he has detected a drop in interest and is attempting to reengage the students at a general level. The ST makes an effort to keep the conversation going with his questions at turns 9 and 13. Attention to form is seen in the self-corrections at turns 5 and 14.

Excerpt 2

In excerpt 2, the lesson is about Christmas (the lesson took place in December) and a student is offering his thoughts on Santa to the patrolling ST.

1. Student 1: Santa is, Santa is, each. Santa is each my parents.
2. ST: No! [laughs]
3. Student 1: No? [laughs] No?
4. ST: No.
5. Student 1: My Santa is only my parents.
6. ST: Do you realize? [laughs] How old do-did you realize?
7. Student 1: I-I shinjite [believe]
8. ST: discover?
9. Student 1: I believe in Santa
10. ST: Ah okay okay. You are pure. [laughs]

In terms of learning opportunities we can see attention to linguistic form throughout this short dialogue. Turn 5 is an improvement on the student’s opening statement at turn 1. The same student has to fall back on the L1 in turn 7 but manages to recall the word he is looking for ‘believe’ in turn 9. Finally, the ST reformulates his question within turn 6 making it more comprehensible. Both excerpts show attention to form in the context of authentic and spontaneous classroom communication.

Content focused learning

Successful cooperative learning relies on learners wanting their peers to reach a goal and providing appropriate information to let them achieve it. The next four excerpts show some of the ways in which the STs did this: by answering questions, using hints and supplying model answers.

Excerpt 3

Here, the class has been presented with several categories of festivals and has been asked to think of specific examples. ‘Category B’ on the worksheet is ‘harvest festivals’ and a student is asking the ST for help.

1. Student 1: B, please give me a hint.
Thanksgivings Day? It’s ah Thanksgivings Day. It’s ah America and Canada’s festival. It’s harvest festival.

3. Student 1: What do they celebrate?
5. Student 1: Thanks..? [confirming name]
6. ST: Thanksgiving.

The ‘hint’ actually takes the form of an answer at turn 2 which would have been sufficient for the student to complete the entry on the worksheet, but she wants to know more and requests further information at turn 3. The ST then elaborates on her description of Thanksgiving.

Excerpt 4

Excerpt 4 comes from the same lesson. On the worksheet are four photographs of festivals from around the world and the students must guess where each one takes place. The same ST is offering assistance.

2. Student 1: Malaysia?
3. ST: Uh it’s in Europe.
4. Student 1: Makedonia (Macedonia)
5. ST: No. [laughs] And nan darou na? (what can I say?) Near to Holland.
6. Student 2: Berugii (Belgium)
7. ST: It’s correct.
8. Student 1: Berugii? Berugii? Bel?
9. Student 2: Belgium [bɛldʒʌm]
10. ST: [bɛldʒʌm] mitai na (looks like [bɛldʒʌm] doesn’t it)
11. Student 2: B-E-L-G-I-U-M

The ST first confirms two correct answers and then offers effective scaffolded assistance, providing enough information to encourage engagement without revealing the answer. Her two hints at turn 3 and turn 5 both prompt guesses and ultimately lead to a successful outcome. From turn 8 the students explore the English name for Belgium, its pronunciation and spelling.

Excerpts 5 and 6 are examples of STs giving a model answer. In Excerpt 5 the ST finishes his segment by offering supplementary information that the students had not mentioned when giving their own answers. He seems keen not to let his research go to waste, reporting it to the class as fully as he can.

Excerpt 5

ST: Incidentally I explain Number 2. Santa image. His image in each other- in each countries is different. Some countries eh he look red but some countries blue and brown. All coun-eh countries is different. Yes. Eh. Formally, eh red
Santa Claus is the red Santa Claus image is defined by Coca Cola in 1930. And Santa was spread in Meiji period in Japan. Actually Santa existed in Meiji but steadily admitted [accepted] by people in after World War 2. Yes. Okay.

Excerpt 6

In Excerpt 6 the ST gives a model answer before asking students for their own example of a local festival.

ST: In my town in Gifu we have *Ukai* [cormorant fishing] *Ukai*. Bird catch *ayu* [type of fish] fish. It's *ano* [eh] historical and harvest festival. If you have any festival?

The excerpts in this section show the ST as expert, possessing knowledge that the other students need to complete a task or to better appreciate the content of the lesson. Knowledge is shared through interaction: through student requests for help or by STs taking seriously their roles of informant and facilitator.

Language focused learning

In the previous section, the students’ dialogue centred on factual content pertaining to each topic, but students also discussed language form during the lessons which was a further locus of potential learning. Focus on form was sometimes proactive when STs predicted potential difficulties with language and sometimes reactive in response to a breakdown in communication or when students noticed a gap in their knowledge of English. Instances of proactive and reactive focus on form are exemplified below.

Excerpt 7 is from a lesson on the social and psychological significance of colours. The STs have asked the groups to think of possible answers to questions such as why footballs are black and white or, in this case, why barbers’ poles are red, white and blue. The ST is asking a group to report its answers to the whole class.

Excerpt 7

1. ST: Okay Number 3 question. Why are barbers put red, blue and white pole? Uh, Group 3? Red means?
2. Student: Red means ar-artery?
3. ST: Yes correct ‘artery’ In Japanese *doumyaku* and blue means
4. Student: Vein?
5. ST: Yes correct. Vein means *joumyaku* And white means?
6. Student: Bandage
7. ST: Yes correct, bandage, bandage, in Japanese *houtai*. There are various opinions. For one opinion in 12th century Europe a barber also worked as surgeon.

The ST has made use of the lexical items, *vein, artery* and *bandage* in producing her lesson and has decided that a translation is necessary for the class. This is a display of what Legutke and Thomas term “intellectual empathy” (1991: 278) which describes
how learners are well attuned, perhaps more so than the teacher, to their peers’ level of proficiency and understanding.

In the next two excerpts, STs deal with sudden language difficulties.

Excerpt 8

1. ST: “Please tell me your opinion” de kotaete moratte? (We ask for answers with ‘Please tell me your opinion’?)

2. ST: Okay please tell me your opinion. Eh, Group 1 please.

The STs are waiting for the groups to complete an exercise. In the first turn the ST is talking quietly to her peer ST to confirm how to solicit answers from students in English. The next turn occurs some 40 seconds later when the ST repeats the phrase, this time out loud, to begin a whole-class discussion.

Next, an ST consults privately with a peer ST, asking for an English translation of a phrase he needs to check on the groups’ progress. He immediately repeats it out loud to the rest of the class in turn 3.

Excerpt 9

1. ST 1: Konkai no jikan irutte nante iu no? (How do I ask if they need more time?)

2. ST 2: Does anyone need more time.

3. ST 1: Oh [laughs] Does anyone need more time?

These final two excerpts illustrate learning opportunities in the form of ‘pushed output’ (Swain, 1995), where the act of communication has served as impetus for STs to seek out unfamiliar English expressions.

Discussion

Peer teaching contributed effectively to the aims of this course, the foremost of which was to give students speaking practice and develop greater fluency in English. The lessons generated uninterrupted peer interaction and the recordings reveal a friendly and cooperative atmosphere in which students worked together to discuss and explore the topic of each lesson. Moreover, during interaction that centred on the exchange of ideas and the construction of meaning, the students focused on language form, taking the opportunity to self monitor and modify their L2 output when they believed their message was not quite clear enough. They also helped each other to understand unfamiliar L2 vocabulary and to produce L2 messages when those proved problematic.

The students took to their role of teacher with enthusiasm and strove to produce materials that were of interest to the class. I was often impressed at the depth of their research and it seemed that the novel role, with its accompanying responsibility, motivated them to gain as broad a knowledge in their topics as possible given the time constraints of the course. Enthusiasm is of course contagious and when it came to
teaching their lessons the STs were adept at maintaining their peers’ interest and engaging them in goal-oriented interaction.

Crandall (1999) considers potential resistance to practices in cooperative learning. In cultures where teacher-fronted instruction is the norm, learner-fronted lessons may carry the risk of chaotic practice. A fear of over-reliance on the L1 or of exposing learners to non-target-like L2 might also make some teachers hesitate before ceding control of lesson content (pp. 240-42). Such resistance is clearly relevant to the practice of peer teaching as described in this article.

Japanese students are likely to have experienced only teacher-fronted classes until university level (Sakui, 2004). Despite this, the students in this study exhibited considerable skill when roles were switched: as described above, they kept their students on topic, they encouraged them to think and to speak English, and they strove to make the contents of their lesson comprehensible. The initial stages of task modeling and rehearsals served to reduce confusion by easing the students into their new roles, and the regular classroom teacher was of course present to help out during their lessons if necessary.

Conclusion

The use of student-generated materials does not necessarily entail peer teaching and I could have taken an alternative approach and taught the students’ materials myself. Yet, in reducing the students’ contribution in this way, many of the learning opportunities revealed in the recordings would have been lost. Peer teaching described here did more than simply provide students with increased speaking practice. It encouraged them to make use of processes such as cooperation, scaffolded assistance and negotiation of form and meaning. In so doing, they demonstrated what Legutke and Thomas call ‘didactic capabilities’ namely “the ability to make insights and findings available to others – the ability to teach one’s peers” (1991: 276). The discourse presented in this article shows that learners can demonstrate these capabilities and also reveals valuable learning opportunities arising from the process of peer teaching.

Notes

1 Transcription conventions: Italics represent use of L1 Japanese. Round brackets contain English translations. Square brackets provide contextual information and phonetic descriptions.

(3878 words)
References


