

Giving Oral Instructions to EFL Young Learners

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Abstract

This paper addresses the various difficulties encountered when delivering oral classroom instructions to EFL young learners. It is essential for teachers to develop an awareness of the importance of clear oral instructions for good class management.

We examine teacher talk, important features for classroom management and some developmental characteristics of children. We support our viewpoints with data obtained from an action research study that consisted of classroom observations of EFL young learner classes.

Resumen

Nuestro trabajo se enfoca sobre las dificultades que se presentan al dar instrucciones orales a niños que están aprendiendo inglés como lengua extranjera. Consideramos que es esencial que los profesores tomen conciencia de la importancia de dar instrucciones claras para el buen manejo de la clase.

Nos referimos al habla del profesor, a importantes particularidades del manejo de la clase y a algunas características de los niños. Nuestros puntos de vista se basan en datos obtenidos a través de un estudio de investigación-acción el cual consistió en la observación de clases de enseñanza de inglés para niños.

Background to the Project

As part of our task as Methodology teachers we are in charge of the supervision of student-teachers in their Practicum. People who enroll in our programme are non-native speakers of English that spend five years at university to graduate as EFL teachers. The practicum covers two academic years. Having spent many hours observing classes and collecting data on observation schedules with different categories, we were able to identify several problems related to class management. We decided to focus on one particular area: giving instructions to young learners.

As Wallace (1998) points out deciding exactly what is to be observed is very important. At first the idea of making an instrument was not very clear but we had observed many instances in which unplanned and unstructured oral classroom instructions were very ineffective. We thought, then, that by making a list of the most common problems encountered we could be able to prepare an observation schedule to collect samples. The following is the observation tool we devised:

Looking at Instructions	
Problems	
1. Talking without engaging students' attention	
2. No demonstration or modelling	
3. Students asking for clarification before hearing the whole instruction	
4. No organization of pairs or groups	
5. No checking understanding	
6. Speech modification	
a) phonological distortion	
b) Un-English discourse	
Identify the problem	
·	Categorize it writing the corresponding number
·	Write the example
.....
.....
.....

Fig. 1. Observation tool

With this observation tool we visited a number of EFL primary classes with students ranging from nine to eleven years old.

We will first discuss teacher talk in general and teachers' instructions in particular, then we will refer to children's characteristics and finally to the results of our research.

Teacher Talk

Teacher talk is central in the language class not only for classroom organization and for the process of acquisition (Nunan, 1991) but also as a means for controlling student behavior (Allwright & Bailey, 1991). Research has shown that teachers tend to do most of the talking. In FLL contexts, teacher talk is generally the only source of comprehensible input and live target language model. Several aspects of teacher talk have been the focus of research: amount of teacher talk as compared to that of students, code switching, speech modifications, types of questions used (Nunan, 1991), error treatment, (Ellis, 1994), and the functional distribution of teacher talk in relation to pedagogical and functional moves (Chaudron, 1988); however, to our knowledge, scarce attention has been paid to the delivery of oral instructions specially in second or foreign language contexts.

Studies of classroom interaction have shown that it has a well-defined structure (Coulthard, 1977) and that pedagogic discourse differs from natural discourse. Teachers modify their speech during instruction in a way that resembles *caregiver talk* but with some peculiar and distinct features at the level of phonology, lexis, syntax, and discourse. In general terms teacher speech is modified in a variety of ways under the influence of the task and the proficiency level of the learner. Some of the main characteristics of the register are higher pitch, exaggerated intonation, short sentences, frequent repetitions and recurrent use of questions (Scarcella and Oxford, 1992). In his review of the research on teacher speech, Chaudron (1988) identifies the following modifications: lower rate of speech, more frequent pauses, exaggerated pronunciation, basic vocabulary, low degree of subordination, use of declaratives and statements, and repetition. In other words, teacher talk used with students is simpler, shorter and it is pronounced more carefully than typical speech (Osborne, 1999: 11). The underlying hypothesis is that modified speech is “more comprehensible, and therefore, potentially more valuable for acquisition” (Nunan, 1991: 191). Gile’s Speech Accommodation Theory states that speakers make adjustments to their speech as a result of their attitude towards the interlocutor. Teachers’ modification of their speech would be a case of *convergence* –speech is modified to make it more similar to that of the interlocutor.

Many researchers have tried to demonstrate the benefits of simplified input. Krashen (1985) states that for acquisition to occur the student should be exposed to large amounts of comprehensible input. For him, optimal input for language

acquisition is a little beyond the learner's current level of language proficiency (i+1). Input may be made comprehensible by the use of verbal and nonverbal clues. Hatch (1983 as cited in Scarcella and Oxford, 1992) mentions some of the characteristics of simplified input at the different linguistic levels: pronunciation (fewer reduced vowels and contractions, slow rate and longer pauses); vocabulary (less slang and fewer idioms, fewer pronoun forms, use of gestures and pictures); grammar (shorter utterances, repetitions and restatements, more collaborative completions; discourse (requests for clarification, more frames, such as ok, salient conversation components). Enright (1991) explains that teachers adapt their language in different ways to address children: nonverbal adaptation through gestures, mimes, etc; contextual (visual and auditory aids); para-verbal (speaking clearly, slowing pace, using pauses) and discourse (rephrasing, repetition,).

In our observations, we have detected an oversimplification and overmodification of teacher speech that results in phonological distortion and unidiomaticity (*problem 6 a and b*). We consider that teachers could instead use more contextual aids or discourse strategies such as rephrasing or repetition.

Instructions

As regards the functional allocation of teacher talk, J. D. Ramirez et al. (1986 as cited in Chaudron, 1988) found that two-thirds of teacher explanations in elementary bilingual programs are procedural ones (i.e. ways of structuring lesson activities). Soliciting moves, in other words those intended to elicit a) a verbal response b) a cognitive response or c) a physical response are an essential element of classroom discourse (Bellack *et. al.*, 1966 as cited in Coulthard, 1977).

In an interesting article, Holmes (1983) analyzes directives in L1 classrooms in New Zealand and Britain, showing how the successful interpretation of these directives by children requires matching a complex range of linguistic forms to the social rules of the classroom. Children do not have difficulties in recognizing the controlling role of the teacher in the classroom. They "seem to learn to scan all teacher's utterances for potential directive function" (Holmes, 1983: 112) identifying those that have the force of commands and that in other contexts may be interpreted as suggestions or advice. Willes (1975 as cited in Holmes, 1983) explains that students are moved by a strong desire to please their teacher.

Holmes groups teacher directives into three main categories: imperatives, interrogatives and declaratives

Speech Function: Directives		
	Form	Example
1. Imperatives	a. Base form of verb	<i>Speak louder</i>
	b. You + imp.	<i>You go on with the work</i>
	c. Pres. Part.	<i>Looking at me</i>
	d. Verb ellipsis	<i>Hands up</i>
	e. Imp + modifier	<i>Turn around, please Jo</i>
	f. Let+ 1st pers. pro.	<i>Let's try</i>
2. Interrogatives	a. Modals	<i>Will you read this page for me?</i>
	b. Non-modals	<i>People at the back are you listening?</i>
3. Declaratives	a. Embedded agent	<i>I want you to draw a picture</i>
	b. Hints	<i>Sally, you are not saying much</i>

Fig. 2. Syntactic forms of directives. Based on Holmes, 1983

It is evident that teachers' directives may be realized in a wide array of forms. Holmes found in her data that imperatives were the most frequent type in all its variants and these were explicit enough not to cause any misunderstanding except for those that contained elliptical forms. Indirect forms did not cause much trouble either specially if they referred to required or proscribed activities. Most of the interpretation problems she found were related to contextual factors or behavioural expectations of the teacher.

Children's Characteristics

We will now consider some of the natural abilities and characteristics children have since by trying to understand better how children learn we will learn from them. Hopefully, this insight can eventually influence our teaching and the way we work with kids. The process of child development and maturation strongly influences language development. The problems teachers showed when giving instructions might be taken as an evidence of an overlook of the forces that drive children between 9 and 11 years old. Following Piaget (1967) we can say that these children are at the concrete stage where experience plays a major role in all learning.

When we witness teachers *talking without engaging students' attention* (problem 1) or *students interrupting impatiently* (problem 3) we have to remember that children learn by doing (Holderness, 1991). If children are learning a language, they tend to talk all the time very often using their mother tongue. *No demonstration or modeling* (problem 2) ignores the fact that children have a good instinct to get the "sense or meaning of a situation". They work out the meaning, they interpret clues provided by the context or situation more quickly than words. The *organization of pairs or groups* (problem 4) is very important if teachers want to capitalize the fact that children are curious and active and that they engage in physical activities as much as they learn through interaction with other people (Brumfit 1991). As Moon (2000: 53) very well states children must be introduced to group work since they may not be familiar with this way of working and might see it as a "new freedom to misbehave". *Checking understanding* (problem 5) is also important, specially understanding of the whole message. As Halliwell (1991) observes this can be done by being alert and watching faces, movements and attitudes.

Effective Instructions

In our observations of young EFL learner classes, the various difficulties encountered by teachers when delivering oral classroom instructions were related to both classroom management and teacher speech.

Penny Ur (1991) in her book *A Course in Language Teaching* devotes a unit in part I to explanations and instructions. She defines instructions as "the directions that are given to introduce a learning task which entails some measure of independent student activity" (p.16). She proposes some guidelines for giving effective explanations and instructions. Although she does not make a difference

between directions for children or older students, her recommendations may well be applied to teaching children. She advises teachers to think ahead what words and illustrations to use. She also recommends making sure to have all the students' attention before giving instructions and giving them before dividing students into groups or handing out materials. The use of repetition or paraphrase as well as the presentation of the instructions in different modes is also proposed. She remarks the need to be brief in explanations, but this should also be considered when giving instructions to children and mainly if these contain a string of directives. Students according to Sinclair and Coulthard (1975 as cited in Holmes, 1983) will tend to respond to the final of a list of questions and commands.

Ur (op cit.) suggests making an actual demonstration of the activity either with the full class or with one student and also checking understanding but not just by asking students if they understand but by requesting them to do something that will show their understanding.

In summary, to avoid misunderstandings context is crucial (Holmes, 1983). It is necessary to provide rich contextual clues, including gestures, objects and pictures. At the same time, teachers should try to avoid code-switching to the first language. This has an effect on students' talk for different reasons but mainly because as mentioned above teacher talk is sometimes the only live target language available to them. Nunan (1991) cites a study of target language use carried out by Zilm which revealed that an increase on the teacher's part in the use of the target language was followed by a parallel increase in the use of the foreign language by the students.

Results

In this section we will discuss the results obtained after collecting data in primary classes (excluding bilingual schools) with the observation tool designed by us. Problems quantified by percentages are shown in Fig. 3.

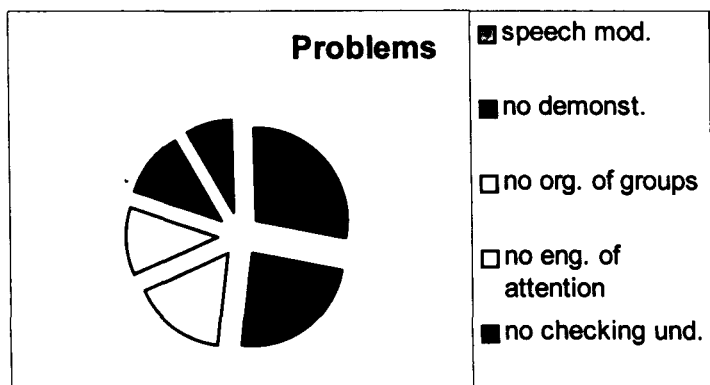


Fig. 3 problems by percentages. Speech modification 28 %; No demonstration 24 %; No organization of pairs /groups 16%; No engagement of attention 12%; No checking understanding 12%; Asking for clarification before hearing whole instruction 8 %

The most conflicting category was (to our surprise) *speech modification*, mainly *un-English discourse*. In a context like ours where English is taught as a foreign language, teachers' language learning concentrates mainly on academic aspects, at the expense of other aspects equally important. For example, in class teachers need to demonstrate adequate English competence for pedagogic purposes such as giving instructions, prompting and encouragement, keeping order, etc., which is very different from understanding and using terminology for the description of the English language systems (grammar, lexis, phonology, discourse, etc). Several studies have shown that classroom interaction has a well-defined structure (Coulthard, 1977) and that pedagogic discourse differs from natural discourse. In the case of monolingual audiences the caregiver talk referred above can take a different dimension. Because teachers share the mother tongue with their learners and because they themselves have not been exposed to this type of caretaker speech in English, they tend to use expressions that resemble Spanish discourse in order to make the message accessible to children. This special register favours comprehension, but lacks idiomaticity, which would block communication cross-culturally. Summing up, we can say, then, that we perceived an imbalance between the general language competence of trainee-teachers and the language competence needed to address children for teaching purposes.

Close to this percentage is *no demonstration or modelling* which means that the fact that students understand situations better than language is not taken into

account and explanations are not often backed up by physical demonstration involving the kids.

The third place in the rating is for problem 5 *no organization of pairs or groups*. This is also interesting to point out since most modern primary English textbooks invite teachers to use pair or group work as a way to increase language input and pupil participation. Techniques for forming pairs and groups should be used to make this way of working effective and meaningful to kids.

Even if the other problems, *talking without engaging students`attention, students asking for clarification before hearing the whole instruction and no checking understanding* did not have a significant percentage, they are worth taking into account.

In short, our research study reveals, as Ur (1991) very well states, that teachers must plan the delivery of instructions beforehand, thinking not only of the words to be used but also the gestures and aids to demonstrate meaning. We also agree with Wright (2003) when he summarizes the characteristics of effective teacher commands. According to him, these should be brief, must refer to one task or objective at a time, are stated as directives rather than questions, use specific language and should not include negative emotion or sarcasm. Moreover, he advises teachers to avoid long explanations and at the same time to give students a reasonable amount of time to comply with the command.

As a final note, we would like to point out that a primary task underlying the results of this study is the development of a language component in teacher preparation programmes to link the study of language and the use of language for pedagogic purposes.

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