"I Treat Them All the Same":

Reflecting on Classroom Communicative and Interactional Competence

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ABSTRACT

I am delighted to be invited to write a paper for the inaugural edition of the journal *Applied Linguistics Inquiry*. I am also honored to be invited to serve on its editorial board. In this paper, I will first describe the seminal study reported by Biggs and Edwards (1991) to serve as a backdrop for a discussion of classroom communicative and interactional competence. The paper outlines how teachers can reflect on such competence by exploring teacher questions, teacher feedback, grouping and nonverbal communication, and classroom communicative and interactional competence. The paper ends with a discussion of evidence-based reflective practice as professional development as well as the place of emotions in reflection.

KEYWORDS: Reflection; Communicative competence; Interactional competence

"I Treat Them All the Same"

I still remember the day, many years ago, when I saw the provocative title "I Treat Them All the Same" (Biggs & Edwards, 1991). It prompted me to ask myself: "Do I treat them all the same?" It was the first time I really looked at *all* my students and tried to explore how I set up communications and interactions in my classes. Until then, I took everything for granted and assumed that *all* my students fully understood what was required of them during activities and in my classroom in general. Then I had this sudden realization that all may not be as routine as I had imagined, and I may even have been unwittingly blocking opportunities for my students to learn with the communication patterns I had established or has allowed to be established in my classroom. I realized that I would need to explore and reflect on the communication and interactional patterns in my classroom and see if these are really what I had wanted and were providing opportunities rather than blocking them for my students to learn.

The seminal Biggs and Edwards (1991) study that triggered all these reflections actually took place in England and examined the interactions of five teachers (all white, majority teachers) working within multiethnic classes (of mostly Panjabi children, the largest minority group). Specifically, the researchers were interested in looking into the underachievement of ethnic minority children (EMC) by trying to identify patterns of language behavior that may have placed them at some disadvantage and that could be mediated through language. Generally, they discovered that all five teachers interacted more frequently with majority children than with the EMC in the following categories: general overall interactions, exchanges with students lasting more than 30 seconds, and indeed, most discussions on tasks.

In addition, Biggs and Edwards (1991) discovered that the EMC adopted a topic-associating-style approach to classroom communication, while the majority children adopted a topic-centered style. The teachers found it easier to relate to the majority children because they could expand classroom communications directly through the comments and questions that they used in everyday speech, be it in the classroom or in their homes. However, the same teachers could not understand how the EMC children communicated. This misunderstanding could have stemmed from the fact that these children all came from a cultural background that included informal or experiential learning, usually characterized by little direct verbal interaction, in which skills tended to be acquired through observation and imitation and where immediate verbal feedback (including evaluation and criticism) was rare. In addition, there was little pressure for systematic testing at various stages in the learning process within their cultural backgrounds.

Consequently, I realized that there is an important need for *all* teachers and particularly language to be able to recognize, understand, and reflect on their practice and especially how communication patterns influence (positively or negatively) their students' learning (Farrell, 2015, 2018a,b, 2019, 2021, 2022a). Indeed, language teachers, because they have all of the power and authority to direct classroom interactions, control for the most part who interacts with who, and this unique status in the classroom allows the teacher to arrange interactions that facilitate (or block) learning. Language teachers can provide maximum opportunities for language learning, as Sert (2019) noted, when interactional practices are fine tuned to pedagogical goals, and thus teachers, he notes, should become more aware of the importance of classroom interaction in relation to learning. Thus, language teachers should reflect on how patterns of communication and interaction are set up in their classes, and how these patterns of communication either provide or block opportunities for *all* students to learn and such patterns are present in teacher questions, teacher feedback, grouping and nonverbal communication. All of these eventually lead to classroom communicative competence.

Reflecting On Teacher Questions

One of the most common ways in which teachers communicate with their students during class is by asking (and answering) questions. Teachers use questioning at the beginning of their classes to establish who controls the interaction, what the topic is for that class, and who is expected to speak. Many teachers also use questions during the course of the class to constantly check their students' understanding of the particular concepts they are teaching at that time. In fact, teachers use questioning as the most frequent means of communication in their classrooms. Forrestal (1990), for example, discovered that almost 60% of the total time a teacher talks in class involves the use of questioning of some sort, and most questions teachers ask their students are those to which the teacher already knows the answers (sometimes called *display-type questions*, such as 2+2—of course, the answer is 4). Walsh (2015) notes that display question, although they can be useful for eliciting responses, checking understanding and/or guide learners towards a 'required' response, they can also shut down learning because they promote more mechanical classroom interactions. Thus, he suggests that teachers ask more genuine questions during lessons, and these are called *referential-type questions*. Such type of open-ended questions according to Walsh (2015), leads to more natural discussions and responses, but ultimately it all depends on the lesson objectives of each lesson. For example, many grammar-focused lessons use display questions to check for quick understanding that the students are following, and for discussions, more referential type questions are more appropriate to generate more practice speaking. If asked though, many teachers have no idea how many questions they ask in each class or what type of questions they favor in their classes, or indeed the function of questions in their lessons. This is problematic because unless teachers become more aware of how and why they use questioning during their classes, this strategy is unlikely to be an effective aid to instruction.

We must also consider what happens after the teacher asks the question and how long he or she waits for a student to answer is also an important reflection for teachers. Good questioning behavior requires allowing students sufficient time to think about and to respond to questions. Rowe (1974) reported that the teachers she observed waited less than *one second* before calling on someone to respond. Furthermore, even after calling on a student, they waited only about *one second* for a response. Such teacher behavior does not make sense because teachers minimize the value of their questions by failing to give students time to think. In language teaching Walsh (2015) notes that wait-time is a very important tool for many teachers, and he suggests this tool should be consciously considered to involve more students in classroom interactions. Walsh (2015) notes that extended wait-time n language lessons can increase the number of learner responses and can also result in more complex answers from learners. Indeed, wait-time becomes even more important in online teaching environments where students will need even more time to provide responses because of the lack of instantaneous interactions that are the norm in face-to-face lessons. As such, language teachers in online environments will have to be even more strategic when asking questions and waiting for their students to respond.

Reflecting On Teacher Feedback

Feedback is a prominent feature of all classroom communications, and giving feedback is very important for language teachers (Wong & Waring, 2009). By providing feedback to students, teachers are generally communicating one of two things: the teachers like the response, or they do not like the response. In other words, feedback provides students with a measure of their

current progress and tells them whether or not they need to improve in any way. Regardless of their age group, students are very savvy; they quickly learn how to read a teacher and the particular ways in which he or she provides feedback.

Generally speaking, when people provide any kind of feedback in communication, they are giving the speaker the information that they are listening to what is being said, and it can be verbal (such as "OK" or "Really!") or nonverbal (such as a nodding of the head or a smile). This process of giving and receiving feedback is ongoing and can be positive (such as in the examples mentioned previously) or negative; when negative (such as a frown), the intent is to change the behavior or direction of the communication. Not many teachers, however, realize that *OK* can have many different meanings, yet it is the most frequent comment teachers use after student responses in class (Fanselow, 1992). Similarly, a teacher responding with 'very good' can have an unintended effect of closing opportunities for learning because it can signal that the topic has ended and there will be no more discussion (Wong & Waring, 2009). Thus, Wong and Waring (2009) suggest that feedback symbols such as 'very good' be used sparingly, and teachers accept learner's correct responses in less evaluative ways such as saying 'alwright'. If learners provide incorrect answers, they maintain that teachers can ask them 'are you sure' to delay or ask for repetition or pursuing with questions such as: 'Why do you say that?'.

Teachers provide feedback to students with some different purposes in mind, such as providing *information* for both teachers and students, providing *advice* for students, providing students with *motivation* and providing feedback that can lead to *student autonomy* (Lewis, 2002). Feedback is one way for teachers to tell their students what they are doing well and what they need to improve on. Feedback from students tells teachers how both individual students and the class as a whole are doing so that they can adjust their instruction accordingly. Thus, feedback provides an ongoing form of evaluation for both teachers (of their teaching) and students (of their progress), which is in addition to the information provided by the regular end-of-term grading system. Connected to the valuable information that feedback provides for both teachers and students is the follow-up of specifically advising students as to how they can improve their learning if it is deemed a problem. Teachers can follow up their feedback with suggestions for specific learning strategies that the students should incorporate into their learning; if possible, the teacher should model these strategies rather than just explain them. Depending on how it is presented, feedback can provide motivation for students by encouraging them to stretch their abilities to the fullest.

Reflecting On Grouping

Whole-class grouping is probably the most common classroom learner arrangement—the students usually sit in rows, and the teacher is located at the front of the room. This type of learner grouping has both positive and negative effects on student learning. From a positive perspective, whole-class learning may actually be a more efficient way of instruction in situations where teachers have to deal with very large classes and have a limited time to teach a specific curriculum. Indeed, when the whole class is together, it can promote a sense of security among slower learners because they can rely on the faster learners to provide group answers until the slower learners catch up. Whole class grouping also has some negative effects on student learning.

Harmer (1995: 243) called whole-class grouping "lockstep" learning and explained: "All the students are 'locked into' the same rhythm and pace, the same activity . . . the traditional teaching situation, in other words, where a teacher-controlled session is taking place." In this arrangement, the teacher controls all of the communication and the class, regardless of how many students are in the room, is seen as only one group. In such an arrangement, students have few opportunities to interact with the teacher or with each other because of the amount of control the teacher asserts, not to mention that the seating arrangement (in rows) makes interaction unnatural. When teachers use a whole class grouping arrangement, they are assuming (although I do not think most teachers are consciously aware of these assumptions) that *all* students proceed at the same learning pace; however, we also have students who are slower and have different learning styles and use different learning strategies than the main group. All this may be lost and hidden to the teacher because he or she is probably monitoring the whole group and not individual student reactions.

Another type of interactions that are popular in classrooms are small group or pair work learner arrangements. Such arrangements mean that teachers encourage *learner autonomy* and *collaborative learning* in their classrooms (Farrell & Jacobs, 2020). Learner autonomy involves "learners being aware of their own ways of learning, so as to utilize their strengths and work on their weaknesses" (Farrell & Jacobs, 2020: 10–11). Pair work provides opportunities for learner autonomy in that our students can learn how to access the quality of their own work within the pair or group; this lessens the threat of assessment being based solely on teacher evaluations. Thus, students working in pairs and groups can become self-dependent and self-motivated to learn because the teacher is no longer in total control and no longer solely responsible for student learning. In addition, in order to enhance learning in pairs, students need assistance from their peers that would not be available in whole-class activities, and this also calls for more collaboration with these same peers. Collaborative learning, also known as cooperative learning, consists of learners engaging in group activities that enhance student-student interaction. For this to happen, the teacher must support the pairs rather than abandon them with the hope that meaningful dialogue will just happen if you put the students together.

Reflecting On Non-Verbal Communication

So far, we have only focused on spoken communications in the classroom and how teachers can reflect on and assess these communications to see if they are providing or blocking opportunities for student learning. Of course, there is another type of communication that occurs in all classrooms is nonverbal communication. As Stevick (1982: 163) put it, "If verbal communication is the pen which spells out details, nonverbal communication provides the surface on which the words are written and against which they must be interpreted." It is important for teachers to be able to control their own nonverbal communication and to be able to read their students' nonverbal signals in the classroom. Nonverbal communication can be focused mainly on kinesics and proxemics. Kinesics deals with gestures, posture, touching behaviors, facial expressions, and eye behaviors. Proxemics deals with space and seating arrangements and examines who interacts and responds more verbally and non-verbally in classrooms and where the teacher is placed during these interactions. We must be cautious when interpreting the meaning of nonverbal behaviors because they may have multiple meanings (as do many of the words we use) depending on where they are used (context), how they are used, and who uses them. For the latter, a detailed knowledge of the person may be required before we can conclude the meaning of the nonverbal behaviors he or she may use.

Classroom Communicative and Interactional Competence

Some language teachers assume that all the participants in a classroom know how to communicate and interact and that their interactions are mostly smooth. In other words, we teachers assume that all our students have some kind of classroom communicative competence. Johnson (1995: 160) defines classroom communicative competence (CCC) as, "students' knowledge of and competence in the structural, functional, social, and interactional norms that govern classroom communication." Johnson (1995) further suggests that teachers must *define* their students CCC, *establish* it and *extend* it. It is very important for the students to be able to understand established patterns of classroom communications so that they will be able to follow what the teacher expects from them.

In terms of communication interactional competence (CIC), Walsh (2013), suggests it is "teachers' and learners' ability to use interaction as a tool for mediating and assisting learning" (Walsh 2013: 130). As Walsh (2015) notes, when teachers can extend CIC, they provide more learning opportunities for their students. When students know what they are supposed to do each day without having to spend too much time working this out each day, they can better focus what they are supposed to be learning. This focus on classroom interactional competence (CIC) was also highlighted by Walsh (2013) when he maintained that teachers and learners need to develop this if they are to work effectively together.

Evidence-Based Reflective Practice

The previous sections on exploring and reflecting on various aspects of classroom communication and interaction introduces the need for language teachers to engage in reflective practice as part of their professional development and is based on the belief that teachers can improve their understanding of their own teaching by consciously and systematically reflecting on their teaching experiences (Farrell, 2018a). The key to reflecting on classroom communication patterns in the manner they have been addressed in this paper is that teachers must gather concrete data (evidence) about classroom communications to make informed decisions about their teaching.

As language teachers the only real concrete evidence we have that a lesson has occurred is a recording and transcription of the communication that represents the moment-to-moment communications between the teacher and students and between students themselves that occurred during the lesson. As Walsh (2015) notes, we can only get a real understanding of the complexities of classroom communication and interaction when we have a precise representation of what is really occurring. The most important type of precise or concrete classroom communication data a teacher should collect is a recording of the communications and a record of this recording in the form of a written classroom transcript. If we rely on our memory of classroom communications and events, we may miss some important data because we all have selective memories. Recordings and transcriptions are the best concrete evidence we teachers can get about our work. We can collect this type of concrete data by placing an audio recorder or video recorder in our classroom. If students break up for group or pair work, place the audio recorder in the middle of one of the groups because it may be impossible to record what each group is saying.

Once the data has been collected, the teacher then needs to transcribe the part of the recording that relates to the focus of the investigation. For example, teachers can transcribe only parts of their lesson, such as the opening or the closing, each time they give instructions, each time they ask a question, or whatever part of the lesson they are interested in. After this transcribing, the teacher can analyze and interpret the transcript. After making interpretations about the communications that exist in their classes, teachers can decide if these are the types of communications and interactions that facilitate learning. In the following sections, I discuss the interconnected ways teachers can engage in professional development through reflective practice.

Engage in Group Discussions

One way to begin the reflection process is to get a group of interested teachers to come together to talk about their teaching—especially the communication patterns they see existing in their classes. All the group members have to be equally responsible for keeping the group on track, so the group should negotiate when, where, and how often they want to meet. They should also negotiate an agenda for each meeting and distribute responsibilities evenly between the members (Farrell, 2014).

Engage in Classroom Observations/Discussions

The group of teachers can decide to engage in classroom observations along with audio or video recording their classes so that they can see and hear the exact interactions and communications that take place in specific classes and gauge their effect on learning. Observation can be carried out alone, as in self-observation, pairs (as in critical friendships) can observe each other's classes, or the group can try to observe each member's classes in turn. That said, I suggest that classroom observations should start with the teachers looking at their own classroom communication patterns and interactions. For example, participants can tape their own classes and transcribe the parts of the tape that they are interested in investigating. In this way, the teachers can develop more confidence in describing their own teaching to others (especially to parents and administrators) because they have specific evidence in the form of recordings and transcripts, and they can also bring these to their group discussions with other teachers (Farrell, 2011).

Engage in Journal Writing

Journal writing can also be carried out alone in the form of a diary, in pairs writing to and for each other, or in the group writing to and for each other. I suggest that teaching journals provide teachers with a written record (evidence) of various aspects of their practice, such as classroom events and interaction, and allow teachers to step back for a moment to reflect on these issues (Farrell, 2013). When teachers write regularly in a teaching journal, they can accumulate information that on later review, interpretation, and reflection can assist them in gaining a deeper understanding of the types of communication and interaction that occur in their classes. These journals can then be shared with the members of the teacher group, and the other members can comment orally or in writing. In addition, the group may want to collaborate to write a group journal with all members taking turns adding excerpts about classroom communication and interaction. This type of collaboration may raise more questions about important issues concerning aspects of communication and interaction that may not normally occur if writing a journal alone. Of course, there are many ways teachers can engage in professional development other than the three outlined above, but I have found that these three (group discussions, classroom observations, and journal writing) are a good beginning for teachers and they can be the most productive.

Finally, for most teachers, professional life is hectic as their day begins well before they enter their classrooms, and never really ends given the endless preparation, planning, and grading that they must engage in. Thus, teachers must be wary of being paralyzed as a result of reflecting on their classrooms and as such should also consider the emotional aspect of engaging in all of the activities outlined in this paper. For example, Stanley (1998: 587) has cautioned language teachers that when engage in reflective teaching, they may have some "emotional reactions to what is uncovered through investigation." Because emotions are said to be a the 'core' (Holmes, 2010: 147) of reflective practice in the context of teaching, attending to this affective side of teacher reflections, can help develop a greater awareness and understanding of their emotions, and language teachers should thus be emotionally ready to face what they may discover after they begin their reflections (Farrell, 2022b).

Conclusion

This paper outlined a seminal study by Biggs and Edwards (1991) that served as a backdrop for a discussion of classroom communicative and interactional competence. The paper outlined how language teachers can reflect on such competence by exploring teacher questions, teacher feedback, grouping and nonverbal communication, and classroom communicative and interactional competence. The paper then discussed the idea of language teachers engaging in evidence-based reflective practice that entails teachers recording, transcribing and interpreting the results as part of their professional development. The paper ended with a discussion of reflective practice as professional development that encouraged teachers to reflect in groups, and/or, classroom observations, and/or journal writing. Regardless of which reflective tools teachers use, I agree with Walsh (2015) who noted that by reflecting on their own classroom communications and interactions, language teachers can not only improve their professional practice but also provide more learning opportunities for their students. In addition, all language teachers should be. In addition, just as the act of teaching is not lacking emotions, so too emotions cannot be detached from the teacher who is reflecting (the reflector), because the moment feelings behind events and behaviors are revealed, thus all teachers will reflect through their personal emotional lens (Farrell, 2022b).

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