Teachers' Beliefs About Balancing Input and Output in the Interactive Classroom

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ABSTRACT

English has been selected as a compulsory subject at Chinese universities for several decades; however, students' English competence has still not reached a satisfactory level. This is sometimes due to the fact that the balance between teachers' input and students' output is difficult to achieve. Given that speaking is an acknowledged weakness of Chinese English learners and the most direct approach to testify students' output, the research context is constrained to English speaking classes at Chinese universities. Thus this essay makes an attempt to explore English teachers' beliefs about balancing input and output in the interactive classroom based on a case study of speaking classes by means of online interviews.

Keywords: *interactive classroom, English teachers' beliefs, balance between input and output.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Much interest has been aroused recently in educational research on the role of input, interaction and output played in the second language teaching classroom. Different educational researchers have dedicated themselves to exploring those hypotheses through either empirical evidence or experiment. This essay is a case study of the English speaking classes at Chinese universities through examining teachers' beliefs about balancing input and output in the interactive classroom, which has not been involved very much in previous research.

2. OVERVIEW OF RELATED RESEARCH

First and foremost, it is well known that at the very beginning of the studies within this area, Krashen (1985) developed the input hypothesis on a gradual basis, stating that exposure to comprehensible input is both necessary and sufficient for second language learning to take place[1]. However, in more recent studies, VanPatten (1993) advanced two new concepts, namely input processing and processing instruction with the intention of explaining how learners get different linguistic forms from input and how they parse sentences during the act of comprehension whilst their primary attention is on meaning[2].

What is more, Long, in the early 1980s (for example,

1983) proposed that one way input is made comprehensible is through 'interactional modification'[3]. Subsequently, he reformulated his interaction hypothesis, placing more emphasis on the processes by which input becomes intake through introducing the notion of elective attention[4]. Swain (1995) gradually formulated her output hypothesis, implying that noticing is one of the functions, which can play a consciousness-raising role in converting the input into intake to considerable extent[5]. She further explored the output hypothesis and beyond by mediating the acquisition through collaborative dialogue. There is no doubt that such dialogue is initiated through social interaction, which could engage students in knowledge building [6].

As indicated by those hypotheses, both input and output are correlated with interaction in facilitating second language learning, whereas interaction serves as a communicative bridge connecting input and output together. In spite of the hypotheses exploring the relationship between input, interaction and output, the question remains that there are limited studies examining the balance between input and output in the interactive classroom. As a result, this essay attempts to investigate teachers' beliefs about balancing input and output in the interactive classroom at Chinese universities by means of online interviews.

3. RESEARCH AIMS AND QUESTIONS

Given the problems of Chinese college students' comparatively poor performance in foreign language production, particularly oral English, it is of great importance to assess teachers' beliefs and perceptions about balancing input and output in the interactive classroom, especially speaking classes. What is more, teachers' existing teaching strategies need to be examined. Therefore, the following research questions are identified:

(1) What are teachers' attitudes and perceptions regarding the role input and output have played respectively in English teaching and learning in the interactive classroom?

(2) How do teachers meet the challenge of balancing input and output in the interactive classroom?

(3) What are teachers' specific teaching strategies for addressing this challenge?

(4) Why do teachers adopt such teaching strategies?

4. TEACHERS' BELIEFS ABOUT BALANCING INPUT AND OUTPUT

In the interview, three teachers were chosen to express their own opinions based the above questions and key issues concerning the balance between input and output will be accentuated. With the purpose of bridging the gap between input and output, the issue of balance will be illuminated from the standpoints of "time allocation", "challenges of balancing input and output" and "teaching strategies to tackle such challenges".

4.1 Time Allocation

As for the time which is allocated to input and output respectively, all of the three teachers responded that they did not pay much attention to this point. They further explained that when preparing for the lesson plan, they usually did not mark the specific time spent in each part of their teaching, instead, they preferred to have a general idea about it in their minds and managed the time flexibly.

Teacher A specified that although she was not used to noting the time spent in each part of the class in the lesson plan explicitly, she laid great emphasis on time management. During the speaking class, she liked to consciously control the time utilised in imparting her own knowledge and guiding students to express themselves in different teaching activities. To be precise, she would normally spend the first twenty minutes of the forty-five minutes' class on illustrating the topics and interacting with students about some warm-up questions, and then make use of the extra time to engage students into output-oriented activities. Teacher B highlighted

that such time management is likely to be adjusted on different occasions. He further pointed out students from his different classes show different degrees of initiative and enthusiasm for speaking English in front of their classmates. If some students felt reluctant to share any opinions, he had to spend more time in encouraging and guiding them to speak as much as possible. By contrast, teacher C stated that she usually allocated more time in clarifying the topic and complementing additional knowledge about the topic, such as relevant vocabulary and phrases. She further explained that since the students in her classes are rather passive compared with others, she ought to inject more time and energy in enabling them to speak out with confidence.

4.2 Challenges and Corresponding Teaching Strategies

Though all of the three teachers are not very conscious of the time allocation to input and output respectively, they still held the belief that achieving the balance between input and output in interactive classroom is of great importance in procuring the ideal pedagogical effect. Nevertheless, they explicitly stressed that they had been confronted with challenges when coping with the relationship between input and output.

Both teacher B and teacher C were concerned about the role of feedback played in balancing input and output. I suppose that feedback serves as a linguistic catalyst to modify students' output based on teachers' input. Teacher B put forward that during the interactive activities, especially group discussion, in speaking classes, he found it difficult to control the time utilised to give feedback and observe students' performance. On the one hand, if he simply observed students' performance, they would take the chance to talk about something unrelated with the topic. On the other hand, if he consistently showed his views while students were discussing with each other, they would get less time to express themselves. This is exactly the dilemma he had been in for a long time. So as to keep himself away from such a dilemma, he intentionally selected one representative in each group to summarise all the group members' ideas respectively.

Teacher C raised another concern about feedback when asking students questions in the speaking classes. She maintained that although she sometimes corrected students' mistakes in an indirect way, she cannot find much improvement in students' later long-term performance. She believed that oral instruction can only serve as temporary building blocks for students' language development. As interactionist researchers have claimed, corrective or interactional feedback, for example oral, instructional, error-and-form-focused evidence about deficient L2 production, facilitates short-term L2 learning[7]. As students are expected to achieve long-term improvement, they should be aware of their

own mistakes and correct them consciously in later performance. Teacher C hence assigned her students to prepare enough for next class's task after each class, such as the search for related background information about the next class's topic.

Moreover, teacher A faced the challenge of offering students equal opportunities to express themselves. She specified that there were always the specific several students with better oral English taking the initiative to speak. On such occasion, even though she allocated balanced time between input and output, she could not guarantee that every student gained the chance to practice English in the classes. So she made every attempt to motivate the students who are comparatively passive to participate in the interactive activities, such as debate. Nonetheless, such students sometimes were not willing to be cooperative, and their silence wasted other students' time to some extent. So as to improve such a situation, teacher A would like to make a note after the name of the student, who actively took part in the interactive activities, as an additional mark to praise his or her performance during the whole semester except the final exam.

As presented above, a number of interesting findings have been yielded from this study. More significantly, they have been discussed and analysed on the basis of each teacher's specific teaching context. This can also bring about varied pedagogical implications in second language learning and teaching, which will be demonstrated in detail in the chapter of conclusion.

5. PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

In terms of pedagogical implications, the data gathered from this research contributes a lot to this. Although all of the three teachers are not perfect in balancing input and output in their speaking classes, some of their teaching strategies still make a difference in the interactive classroom.

First and foremost, all of the three teachers are conscious of using authentic materials to different degrees as a linguistic catalyst to stimulate students' interest. As internet technology develops at a quickening pace, multi-media education enjoys more and more popularity among both teachers and students. English newspapers, video clips and films can all be regarded as visual aids, which represent an inexpensive, as well as a versatile, pedagogical tool. All of the three English teachers exemplified the function of such visual aids served in their speaking classes, but they did not specify the teaching procedures involved in using them.

Secondly, with respect to teaching strategies both for input and output, all of the three teachers brought attention to their own approaches aimed at making their input more comprehensible and their students' output more effective. As for input, using pictures and making

words into a story are both interesting ways to impress the students and consolidate their memory about the knowledge conveyed by the teachers. Forms of output, such as group discussion, presentation, role-play, debate and such teaching activities can all be carried out in the real interactive classroom. All those teaching strategies intend to convert teachers' comprehensible input into students' comprehended input as much as possible.

Thirdly, the key point lies in that all of the three teachers are not quite aware of balancing input and output in their classes and they are all confronted with different challenges of addressing it. In some sense, this is one of the important factors resulting in students' incompetence in expressing themselves fluently and freely compared with other competences in English. From my understanding, Chinese English teachers should make greater efforts to achieve the balance between input and output in the interactive classroom. For example, they could explicitly specify the time allocated to each part of their classes, so as to first make sure that the time spent on input and output is balanced. More importantly, they themselves should make

6. LIMITATIONS

In spite of several findings yielded from this research, limitations can by no means be underestimated. Firstly, the three oral English teachers selected to participate in this research are exclusively from only one Chinese university, so the findings of this research are not able be applied to every similar situation. Secondly, the findings are based on teachers' beliefs and perceptions, but not on samples or experiments of actual interactive classroom experience, or more specifically, speaking classes. Therefore, the examples illustrated are not objective enough as the original video or tape record of speaking classes. If time and space are permitted, observation can be adopted to collect multi-layered data in the following research. Finally, as the views of the three English teachers were all interpreted by the researcher, subjectivity will always be an interruptive factor.

Undoubtedly, this empirical study has yielded a lot of valuable findings and exerted certain influences on oral English teaching in the future. Nevertheless, further related educational research about the role of balance between input and output played in the interactive classroom needs to be conducted in a more objective way, such as through experiments or more diverse methods as a way to gather data.

7. CONCLUSION

To sum up, this essay mainly presents teachers' both similar and diverse views of their beliefs about balancing input and output in the interactive classroom, specifically, in speaking classes at Chinese universities. This topic is progressively constructed on the basis of

critical overview of related literature about input, interaction and output. Case study occupies a crucial position in the whole research design and interview is thus implemented as the research method to explore teachers' beliefs in-depth. Given that the purpose of case study is to identify participants' unique perceptions in some depth rather than to generalise through the perceptions of specific participants, the semi-structured interview is particularly adopted to gather more flexible and valuable data.

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