

Teacher Talking Time in the EFL Classroom

Tiempo de participación oral del profesor en el aula de inglés como lengua extranjera

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Classroom Research may be simply defined as ongoing and cumulative intellectual inquiry by classroom teachers into the nature of teaching and learning in their own classrooms (Cross and Steadman, 1996, p.2).

This paper reports on a piece of classroom research, aiming to support the hypothesis that most of the talk in my English-as-a-foreign-language elementary and intermediate classrooms was done by the teacher, presumably implying a more teacher-centred approach. In terms of the percentage of teacher talk, the results indicate that the discrepancy between the amount of teacher talk actually done in these classrooms and that which was hypothesized as being in conflict with a learner-centred approach was notably high. This appears to imply that, although I talked more than the learners on some occasions, my lessons were much more focused on them rather than on me, the teacher.

Key words: Classroom research, teacher talking time, learner-centred approach, English as a foreign language, teacher-centred approach

Este documento reporta sobre una investigación realizada en el aula, con el fin de comprobar la hipótesis de que el profesor hizo la mayor parte de las intervenciones orales en las clases de inglés como lengua extranjera en los niveles elemental e intermedio, lo que implica presumiblemente un enfoque más centrado en el profesor. En términos del porcentaje de intervención del profesor, los resultados indican que la discrepancia entre el volumen de su participación oral en las aulas y el que según la hipótesis conduciría a un conflicto con el enfoque centrado en el estudiante, fue notablemente alta. Esto parece indicar que, aunque en ocasiones mi participación oral fuera mayor que la de los estudiantes, mis lecciones se centraron mucho más en ellos que en mí, el profesor.

Palabras claves: Investigación en el aula, tiempo de participación oral del profesor, enfoque centrado en el estudiante, inglés como lengua extranjera, enfoque centrado en el profesor

INTRODUCTION

Purpose and Significance of the Study

For the wealth of information it can provide, gauging the amount of talk produced in the second- or foreign-language classroom (Henceforth, L2 classroom) seems to be an interesting investigation. It can offer, for instance, feedback on the teaching approach actually adopted in a given classroom, despite the claims of the teacher.

The piece of classroom research reported on this article aims to support the hypothesis that most of the talk in my English-as-a-foreign-language (EFL) elementary and intermediate classrooms in the second semester of 2001 was done by the teacher, presumably implying a more teacher-centred approach. The verification of such hypothesis would contradict the teaching principles I purport to follow, namely, those of a learner-centred approach.

Benefits Derived from the Investigation

At least two benefits derived from the investigation reported on this paper can be outlined here. One is that it can inspire other in-service language teachers to conduct research in their classrooms. The fact that classroom research is considered to be an important tool for professional development (Cross and Steadman, 1996) seems to suffice for its exploitation in the L2 classroom. The other is that it satisfactorily answered the question posed at the onset of the study, which allowed me to continue working with the groups under investigation reassured that, contrary to what had been hypothesized, my lessons revealed the adoption of a learner-centred approach if the amount of talk done in the classroom can actually indicate tendencies in terms of learner-centredness and teacher-centredness.

SOME TENETS OF A LEARNER-CENTRED APPROACH (LCA) TOWARDS L2 TEACHING

Second-language-acquisition (SLA) literature provides a number of interesting discussions on the aspects that constitute the tenets behind a learner-centred approach as applied to L2 learning. First

and foremost, capitalising on elicitation in the classroom is of prime importance in an LCA lesson. Students are not a *tabula rasa* on which supercilious teachers can record their knowledge; instead, they have knowledge and experiences of life and language which can contribute greatly to the learning process. Rutherford seems to endorse this view. He argues that, when attempting to learn an L2, the learner is equipped with two kinds of prior knowledge, which he labels *knowledge that* and *knowledge how*. The first consists of an innate perception of the various possibilities of the target language (TL) and the learner's capacity to infer the unknown based on his/her rudimentary interlanguage. The second corresponds to the learner's first language (L1) learning experience, to wit: 'the ability temporarily to bend the new language into forms that will, with maximal efficiency, serve the initial desire for rudimentary communication' (Rutherford, 1987, p. 7). The implication of Rutherford's elaboration seems to be that the more learners contribute in the L2 classroom, the more they are likely to learn. Hence, teachers should never underestimate the ability of their students.

The focus of an LCA lesson is on learners' experience and interests: the students may lose interest should the teacher choose an unattractive topic, or just follow the coursebook. If, however, teachers use the coursebook as an aid for the completion of tasks related to the students' areas of interest and experience, the students are more likely to become involved in the lesson, thereby learning more (Nunan, 1989).

More emphasis on communication than on accuracy is another feature of a learner-centred approach, since one of the aims of most students learning an L2 appears to be the achievement of aural/oral skills. Moreover, it is likely that those learning an L2 will use it more frequently to communicate with other non-native speakers than with native speakers of that language. If that is the case, the ultimate goal then is to be able to understand and respond to each other. Students, consequently, need opportunities to practise communicating in the

TL without being haunted by the constant fear of making mistakes (NIED, 1999). Thus, in an LCA lesson, teachers should not interrupt learners' interactions on the spot; instead, they should make notes and give feedback later.

Learners should learn by doing: the more actively involved students are in their own learning, the more likely they are to retain what they have learnt. Activities such as tasks completed in small groups, in which learners are engaged in experimenting with the TL, and having to choose regarding learning, are examples of *learning by doing*. Tasks appear to be, indeed, a major component of a learner-centred approach (Nunan, 1988).

In a lesson following an LCA, tasks are open-ended; that is, there is more than one possible answer, different from traditional grammar-based tasks, for instance, which are either right or wrong and test only one skill at a time. They are generally unimaginative, often in the form of multiple-choice answers and totally divorced from 'real world' situations. Open-ended tasks are wider in their focus and involve a variety of language skills (Brodie et al., 2002).

Finally, in an LCA lesson, learners are constantly exposed to the TL through the use of authentic materials such as electronic articles, magazines, newspaper, and audio and video recordings. This exposure seems to suggest that an approach centred on the learners helps them learn far more than the linguistic code. For one thing, besides being informed about current events, being able to explore cultural traits from other countries, and by being allowed to participate actively in the classroom, learners can be encouraged to think critically and develop problem-solving skills through creative tasks and group work (Ministry of Education and Culture, Namibia, 1999).

Clearly, underlying these tenets is the idea that a learner-centred approach implies less teacher talk and more opportunity for students to speak in the L2 classroom. It seems, thus, that the rate of teacher talk vis-à-vis student talk plays a pivotal role in determining whether or not one's teaching methodology is in line with an LCA, insofar as

apparently the more learners talk, the more they are in control of learning. However, deciding on the ideal amount of time one should spend talking to one's students is a rather complex matter if the different levels of proficiency are taken into account. The paucity of information in SLA literature on appropriate proportions of L2 classroom talk across levels of proficiency is a strong indicator that more research needs to be conducted so that practitioners can make informed decisions about their talking time in the classrooms.

REGULATORS OF THE AMOUNT AND TYPES OF TEACHER TALK IN THE CLASSROOM

It seems that the amount and type of talk L2 teachers do in their classrooms are largely dependent on both the specific goals of the syllabus adopted and their pedagogical principles. Nunan and Chaudron consistently underscore the following points:

- "Of course, whether or not it is considered a good thing for teachers to spend 70 or 80 per cent of class time talking will depend on the objectives of a lesson and where it fits into the overall scheme of the course or programme" (Nunan, 1991, p. 190).
- "What constitutes an interaction of a particular size or purpose, and the degree to which the nature of the interaction is negotiable, depends on the rules of speaking established by the teacher. Enright found the two classroom teachers he studied differing in the degree to which student contributions and negotiation were possible. One teacher's constitution was the traditional teacher-centered one of 'do not speak unless you are spoken to,' while the other's 'open or child-centered' constitution was characterized by 'if you have something to say, say it,' among other rules" (Chaudron, 1988, p. 118-119).

As regards Nunan's suggestion, in case the lesson has a non-conversational purpose (e.g. a writing lesson), one may expect a period of teacher talk for lecturing the students on the processes involved in the construction of a paragraph, for instance, followed by a silent period allotted to

the students to experiment with techniques of composition production.

Chaudron pinpoints the old-school and new-school principles as major regulators of teacher talking time and type of teacher talk in the L2 classroom. Teachers who still maintain that students should be 'spoon-fed' probably put themselves on a pedestal in the classroom and believe that learners' contributions should be kept under control, or should not be verbalised whatsoever during their lessons. Conversely, those who believe otherwise, besides allowing more freedom of expression in the classroom, also interact with the learners in various ways.

FINDINGS ON TEACHER TALKING TIME

Apparently it is a general belief in the teaching-learning world that teachers either talk or should talk more than learners. This belief is to a certain extent supported by research. Bellack et al. (1966) and Dunking and Biddle (1974), all cited in Chaudron (1988), found out, for instance, that about 60 per cent of the total amount of talk done in L1 classrooms is done by the teacher; and further investigation claimed that the figures are about the same as for L2 classrooms. In Table 1 there is an outline of the results of four investigations reviewed by Chaudron (1988) in each of which, although the researchers have applied different criteria, they underscore the prevalence of teacher talking time over student talking time:

There seem to be two major arguments against these scientific pieces of evidence of the popular belief that teachers' speech either is or should be predominant in the classroom. On the one hand, the concept of the relationship between teachers and learners in the classroom environment seems to have changed a great deal since the time when those pieces of research were carried out. On the other hand, and most importantly, all of the subjects in those investigations were children. Experience and common sense seem to lead one to assume that children, by their very nature, demand a great deal more of talking by the teacher than adults do. Therefore, one might find it hard to believe that the teachers participating in these studies would do more than half of the talking in those classrooms were the subjects adult learners, let alone were the investigations carried out today.

Another point that might be important to consider here concerns types of classrooms. Would teachers' moves be predominant in, say, content-oriented classrooms? Do science subjects demand more teacher talk than, say, arts or social sciences subjects? Regarding language-oriented classrooms, is it not compulsory that foreign-language teachers take more turns in their classrooms than do their second-language peers, notwithstanding their teaching style? These questions seem to be still lingering in the available literature on teacher talk.

Table 1. Investigations on teacher talking time (Adapted from Chaudron, 1988, p. 51-54).

Researcher/year	Context	% Teacher talk (range)
Legarreta (1977)	Five bilingual education kindergarten classrooms representing two programme types ("Concurrent Translation" and "Alternate Days")	70% - 80% Median = 77%.
Enright (1984)	Two bilingual kindergarten classes similar in context to those in Legarreta's.	42.9% - 84.9% Median = 64.5%
Bialystock, Fröhlich and Howard (1978)	One grade 6 French immersion class and one grade 6 "core" French (FSL) class in Canada.	Teacher talk: a. French immersion teacher: 68.8%. b. Core French teacher: 6.3%.
J.D. Ramires et al. (1986)	Seventy-two kindergarten through grade 3 classes (L1 Spanish children in English immersion, and early-exit transitional bilingual education classes).	Not mentioned.

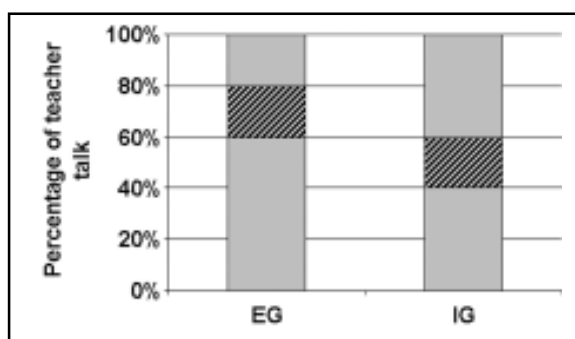
THE INVESTIGATION METHOD

The Research Question and Hypothesis

As the result of some reflection about my own praxis in the classroom in the year 2001, I noticed that I was talking more than I should when meeting my EFL elementary (EG) and intermediate (IG) groups, since I believe that my teaching must be in line with the tenets of a learner-centred approach. This means, to a certain extent, more student and less teacher talk in the classroom (NIED, 1999). I decided, thus, to investigate whether or not teacher talking time was excessively superior to student talking time in these two classrooms.

The initial hypothesis was that teacher talking time was in the range of 60 to 80 per cent and 40 to 60 per cent during the elementary and intermediate lessons, respectively (Table 2). In my view, these figures are beyond the adequate level of teacher talking time at any level of L2 classrooms whose focus is on oral communication.

Table 2: Hypothetical amount of teacher talking time in the EG and IG EFL classrooms.



Subjects

Due to its nature, this study involved both the teacher and the students. Thus, on the one hand, one part of the population of the study consisted of a single subject: the teacher (myself), being a bilingual Brazilian non-native teacher of English holding a BA in Liberal Arts from the Federal University of Amazonas (UFAM), and serving as a supply teacher in the Department of Foreign Languages and Literature of this University. Importantly, I capitalised

heavily on Jane Willis's (Willis, 1996) task-based learning approach (TBL) in my lessons during this investigation. On the other hand, two Portuguese-speaking groups of EFL students, both from the city of Manaus, capital city of the state of Amazonas in Brazil, but characterized differently in several aspects, comprised the other part of the population. The first group consisted of 10 elementary-level students attending the Closed Caption Project. This was a project which capitalised on massive video viewing in the classroom, and which was supervised by Professor Nelson José Fontoura de Melo from UFAM. The group met on Saturday mornings in three-hour sessions. Furthermore, this group was rather heterogeneous as regards age and literacy level: four students in their mid-teens, at the high-school level; two in their early twenties, at the undergraduate level; and four in their early thirties, at the postgraduate level. The second group was an intermediate-level group attending the Liberal Arts course at UFAM. Unlike the other group, these 22 students were fairly homogeneous regarding both age range (in the 19 to 25-age bracket) and level of literacy. Additionally, another difference that appears to be worth pointing out is that this group met twice a week in 100-minute sessions. In terms of economic background, the groups were evenly balanced: there were members of the working-class and middle-class in both groups.

Materials

In order to capture the amount of talk done in the two classrooms, a TP-M105 AIWA micro cassette recorder, and eight TDK-60 micro cassettes were used. The amount of talk was afterwards timed with a DW-003 CASIO stopwatch.

Data Collection Procedure

There were considerable variations in the recordings involving the two groups. For one thing, only parts of four lessons were audiotaped in the elementary classroom. Importantly, the parts of these lessons captured on tape amount to 240 minutes of recording. For another thing, four whole

lessons were audiotaped in the intermediate classroom. However, due to some unexpected routine alteration, this group's tally was 165 minutes of lesson on tape.

Once the data were collected, the amount of talk that both the groups and I did was timed discretely without any elaboration on the types of moves produced by both sides (For details on some teacher talk statistics according to types of moves, see Chaudron, 1988.). The percentage of the amount of talk I did in each classroom was then calculated (Table 3). At this point, it may be worth drawing attention to the fact that the recordings in both classrooms were non-stop, so much so that they included pauses as well as all the activities that were being carried out at the same time in these classrooms, such as pair and group work, reporting, and listening to audiotapes. Moreover, on the first day that the intermediate group was audiotaped, due to both a malfunction of the equipment and the spaciousness of the room, a great deal of student voice emerged unintelligible on tape. A solution to this problem was to tally as student talking time also all the recorded unclear chunks of student speech.

Data Analysis Procedure

The following arithmetical formula was applied for reckoning the percentages of talking time in both classrooms:

$$PTTT = (TTT/TTCR) \times 100$$

$$PSTT = (STT/TTCR) \times 100$$

Where:

PTTT = Percentage of Teacher Talking Time.

PSTT = Percentage of Student Talking Time.

TTT = Teacher Talking Time.

STT = Student Talking Time.

TTCR = Total of Talk in the Classroom.

The figures in Tables 3 and 4 show the amount of talk done by me (TTT), the students (STT) and periods of silence (SL); this latter includes audiotope listening, videotape viewing as well as written exercise activities. These figures are expressed in minutes and as percentages against

class length (CL). However, there are at least two aspects to be considered involving these time-length variables. The first is that, if the PTTT and the PSTT are achieved in relation to the CL as Nunan (1991) suggests, it is impossible to tell whether or not the teacher makes more moves than the group, since there are occasions when teacher and students talk at the same time. The other aspect is that, through the calculation of the PTTT and the PSTT from the TTCR, the percentage of teacher talk versus student talk is rendered unambiguous. In addition, the SL percentage plays a pivotal role in determining the significance of the amount of talk done by the teacher, in comparison with that of the students. Importantly, without taking this third variable into account, the PTTT emerges as delusive. Consider, for instance, the calculation of the PTTT on the basis of a given CL; if the result is, say, 10%, it does not imply that the teacher has talked less than the group; if alternatively the SL equals 80%, the students will have talked as little as the teacher. It was thus decided that the calculation of TTT in both classrooms should be made based on the TTCR, rather than the CL (Tables 3 and 4).

COMMENTS ON THE RESULTS OF THE INVESTIGATION

The Intermediate Group

As the audiotaped lessons were expected to be based on tenets of the communicative approach (Larsen-Freeman, 1986), the students were kept busy working on tasks (Willis, 1996) either individually, in pairs or in small groups so much so that, as I was talking to a group or a single student, student-student interaction was taking place elsewhere in the classroom. These teacher-individual student, individual student-teacher or teacher-small group interactions originally amounted to another 25 minutes in the TTT slot in the first two lessons. However, these extra minutes were subtracted from Table 3 later, since they would require different categorisations which might go beyond the scope of this paper. Importantly, albeit some experts might dismiss this

kind of interaction as non-teacher talk, there is no evidence whatsoever to the contrary in the literature reviewed. This dismissal might be ascribed to the overlapping figures: the PTTT and the PSTT can both tally, say, 80% of any given CL. This can be easily exemplified by the instance of a classroom where the learners are working in groups and, as they interact amongst themselves, the teacher is interacting with a particular group or a particular pupil; it is possible that the PTTT can partially or entirely coincide with the PSTT at the end of the lesson. Thus, notwithstanding the fact that the teacher is not addressing the whole group, it seems reasonable to consider the turns taken by him or her in those particular instances as teacher talk, which in turn could well fall into some of Milk's (1982) teacher-moves categories.

In Table 3, there is a distribution of the length of time (minutes) the students spent talking amongst themselves and to me, and the time I spent addressing the whole group against the length of the lessons (CL). Moreover, the peculiarity of the four minutes in the TTT slot corresponding to my moves in the session comprising the first two lessons recorded is accounted for by the fact that all the details about the task carried out by the five small groups into which the students were divided on that occasion had been explained in the previous session. For this very reason, one can argue that the type of activities implemented in the

classroom is a significant variable in the process of TTT/STT tallying. For one thing, in a lesson that should involve activities such as video viewing or composition writing for most of it, both teacher talk and student talk would be drastically reduced for obvious reasons. For another thing, the teacher should do most of the talking should the lesson focus on involved explanations of grammar rules, for instance. These arguments seem to be in line with Nunan's comments on the amount of teacher talk in the L2 classroom (Nunan, 1991).

Notice that the PTTT and PSTT in relation to the TTCR for this group were 15% and 85% respectively.

The Elementary Group

Two factors involving the audio recordings in the elementary group render them different from the data collection in the other classroom. For one thing, although lessons were merged into 180-minute hebdomadal sessions, the data were collected from the beginning of each meeting up to the 120th minute of classroom activity. For another thing, the nature of the lessons in this classroom differs markedly from those given to the intermediate group. In this classroom, there was massive video viewing, which accounts for the large figures in the SL slot, as can be seen in Table 4.

For this group the PTTT and PSTT against the TTCR were 47% and 53% respectively.

Table 3. The tallying of the amount of talk in four lessons to the IG.

	TTT minutes	%	STT minutes	%	SL minutes	%	CL minutes	TTCR
First two lessons	4	4.94	75	92.59	2	2.47	81	
Second two lessons	18	21.43	50	59.52	16	19.05	84	
Total	22	13.34	125	75.76	18	10.90	165	147

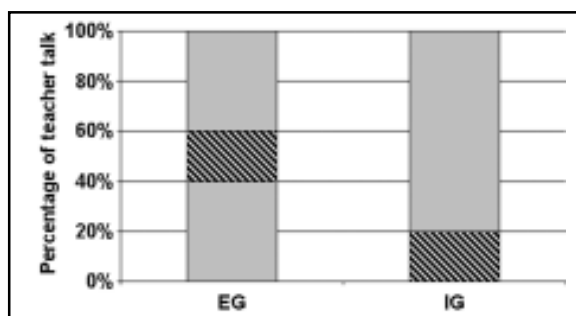
Table 4. The tallying of the amount of talk in four lessons to the EG.

	TTT minutes	%	STT minutes	%	SL minutes	%	CL minutes	TTCR
First two lessons	37	30.84	42	35	41	34.16	120	
Second two lessons	38	31.67	44	36.66	38	31.67	120	
Total	75	31.25	86	35.84	79	32.91	240	161

Rejecting the Hypothesis

As Table 5 illustrates, in the EG classroom, the actual amount of TTT was in the range of 40 to 60 per cent, and 0 to 20 per cent in the IG classroom.

Table 5. Actual amount of TTT in the EG and IG EFL classrooms.



The comparison between the figures in this table with those outlined in Table 2 indicates that the initial hypothesis about the amount of teacher talk in the two classrooms investigated was not supported by the results of the research. For one thing, the 47 per cent of TTT represents 13 per cent less than the minimum hypothetical TTT (60%) in the EG classroom. This difference is even higher, if the analysis is conducted in terms of mean ($\bar{X}_1 = 70\% - \bar{X}_2 = 50\% = 20\%$). For another, the 15 per cent of actual TTT tallied in the IG classroom is twenty-five per cent less than the minimum TTT hypothesized for this group (40%). Here, too, if the means are considered, the discrepancy between the hypothesized PTTT and the actual PTTT considerably high ($\bar{X}_1 = 50\% - \bar{X}_2 = 10\% = 40\%$)².

If TTT versus STT in the L2 classroom can be an indicator of the teaching principles adopted by me, these results seem to indicate the adoption of a more learner-centred approach towards the intermediate group, and the establishment of a balance between teacher-centredness and learner-centredness in the elementary classroom. This equilibrium can be explained by the type of activity carried out (video viewing) as well as the level of the students in this

particular classroom - it seems beginning level classrooms tend to demand more TTT.

SOME CONCLUSIONS

Issues Arising from the Results of the Study

While it might be the case that the type of investigation which involves the tallying of the amount of talk produced in the L2 classroom is undervalued by some language-oriented experts, it can be of considerable value to reflective teachers. The results of the study reported here, for instance, can unveil a number of postulations related to the relevance of the distribution of the amount of talk in the L2 classroom. One such postulation is whether or not the overlap between TTT and STT should be regarded as a negative aspect by LCA advocates. Many would be likely to agree that there is no negativity whatsoever in such concurrent tallying, since in student-student, student-teacher (or otherwise) interactions both parties (students versus teacher) are equally involved in the process of speech production even if in different proportions.

Considering the balance struck between TTT and STT in the EG classroom, for example, was those students' learning prejudiced by the fact that I was talking as much as the students in the classroom? If examined in the light of the nature of the activities carried out by the EG students, one might argue that, even when allotted a lesser share of the TTCR, students can still have their learning skills improved to a great extent and in various fronts from the type of lessons I have implemented, namely, (1) listening comprehension; (2) pronunciation; (3) intonation; (4) syntactical aspects and (5) vocabulary, just to cite a few.

Another issue that may be raised on the basis of these results is the question of whether or not the type of learner-centredness suggested by the high level of STT in the IG classroom contributes effectively to a solid development of L2 intermediate students. One might claim that at this level STT should not cover 85 per cent of the TTCR yet, since these students still need a great

¹ \bar{X}_1 = Hypothesized PTTT and \bar{X}_2 = Actual PTTT for EG.

² \bar{X}_1 = Hypothesized PTTT and \bar{X}_2 = Actual PTTT for IG.

deal of exposure to native-speaking models for consolidating their aural/oral skills in the target language, mainly in a foreign-language learning environment, as is the case with the participants of this investigation.

Finally, considering my approach towards classroom management and my capitalisation on task-based activities mostly in the IG classroom, one tends to accept that, despite the tentativeness of the investigation, the results somehow indicate a greater focus on the learners.

The creation of an environment in which learners learn by doing appears to be one of the concerns of a learner-centred approach, inasmuch as it seems the greater the involvement of the students in the process of learning, the higher the likelihood of retaining newly learnt items (Stern, 1992). At this point, activities anchored in TBL, which in most cases have to be completed in small groups, appear to be a valuable tool to the development of learner-centred lessons (Nunan, 1988; Willis, 1996).

The assumption that the classrooms investigated are in alignment with the principles of an LCA in terms of TTT implies that lessons designed and implemented based on TBL are successful in keeping TTT at a low level in L2 classrooms aiming at the achievement of communicative competence in the TL. Nevertheless, TBL, which currently seems to pervade L2 classrooms worldwide, should not be applied without caution. It is desirable that close monitoring of both the long- and short-term outcomes of this teaching approach should be done in order to avoid responsibility for any sort of placebo effect in the classroom (Pica, 2000).

A Safe Course for Dynamic and Productive Lessons

As Hixson and Tinzmman (1990) anticipated some time ago, in the educator's world, only change remains the same. In other words, the teacher should never be satisfied with results indicating professional progress. Instead, he or she must pursue the continuous development of their expertise as educators, as Hixson and Tinzmman

(1990: 9) suggest: "(...) to remain effective, teachers (...) will need to continually upgrade their skills, expand their knowledge, and develop new strategies to meet the needs of increasingly diverse students and their parents".

This seems to constitute a safe course for keeping one's lessons both dynamic and productive. It does not mean to say, though, that less TTT equals dynamic and productive lessons. Good lessons seem to be resultant of a number of factors that can range from language theories favoured by the teacher to his or her personality traits (Holland and Shortall, 1997). But this, as well as most of the other issues raised from the results of this study, seems to merit the implementation of other classroom investigations (Allwright and Bailey, 1991; Chaudron, 1988; Nunan, 1992).

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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