Chapter 5: Observing Learning and Teaching in the Second Language Classroom

Part 1
Introduction

- Most people would agree that learning a second language in a non-instructional setting is different from learning in the classroom.
- Most believe that learning 'on the street' is more effective.
- This belief may be based on the fact that most successful learners have had exposure to the language outside the classroom.
In this chapter:

- We explore the differences between classroom settings for language learning and other settings where people learn a new language without instruction.

- We try to answer the following questions:
  - What is special about this 'natural' language learning?
  - Can we create the same environment in the classroom?
  - Should we create the same environment in the classroom?
  - Are there essential contributions that only instruction and not natural exposure can provide?
We are going to compare different learning settings/environments:

- **Natural acquisition contexts**
- **Structure-based instructional environments** (e.g. Grammar-Translation and Audiolingual methods)
- **Communicative** (p.196), **content-based** (p. 197), and **task-based** (p. 205) instructional environments
Natural acquisition contexts:

Where can we find natural acquisition contexts?

- Contexts where the learner is exposed to the TL at work or in social interaction

- If the learner is a child, in a school situation where most of the other children are native speakers of the TL and where the instruction is directed toward native speakers rather than toward learners of the language.
Structure-based instructional environments:

What are the main characteristics of the structure-based instructional settings?

- In this setting, the language is taught to a group of second or foreign language learners.
- The focus is on the language itself, rather than on the messages carried by the language.
- The teacher's goal is to teach students the vocabulary and grammatical rules of the TL.
- Some students in structure-based classes may have opportunities to continue learning the TL outside the classroom. However, for others, the classroom is the only contact with the TL.
- In some cases, the learners' goal may be to pass an examination rather than to use the language for daily communicative interaction beyond the classroom.
What are the general characteristics of communicative, content-based, and task-based instructional settings?

- They might involve learners whose goal is learning the language itself.

- However, the style of instruction places the emphasis on interaction, conversation, and language use, rather than on learning about the language.

- The topics that are discussed in communicative and task-based instructional environments are often of general interest to the learner (e.g. how to reply to a classified advertisement from a newspaper.)

- In content-based instruction, the focus of a lesson is usually on the subject matter (e.g. history or mathematics,) which students are learning through the medium of the second language.
Communicative, content-based, and task-based instructional environments (cont.):

What are the general characteristics of communicative, content-based, and task-based instructional settings?

- In these classes, the focus may occasionally be on the language itself, but the emphasis is on using the language rather than talking about it.

- The language that teachers use for teaching is not selected solely for the purpose of teaching a specific feature of the language, but also to make sure learners have the language they need to interact in a variety of contexts.

- Students' success in these courses is often measured in terms of their ability to 'get things done' in the second language, rather than on their accuracy in using certain grammatical features.
In the chart in Table 5.1, p. 111, we compare natural and instructional contexts for second language learning.

Think about the characteristics of the four contexts represented by each column.

For each context, decide whether the characteristics on the left are present or absent.

- Mark a plus (+) in the table if the characteristic is typical of that context.
- Mark a minus (-) if it is something you usually do not find in that context.
- Write '?' if you are not sure.

Note that the 'Communicative instruction' column has been subdivided into teacher-student and student-student interaction. What happens when learners talk to each other? Is that different from what happens in teacher-student interaction?
Learning one thing at a time?

- Language is not presented step by step.
- The learner is exposed to a wide variety of vocabulary and structures.
Natural acquisition settings

Frequent feedback on error?

- Learners' errors are rarely corrected.
- If their interlocutors can understand what they are saying, they do not remark on errors.
- They would probably feel it is rude to do so.
Ample time for learning?

- The learner is surrounded by the language for many hours each day.

- Sometimes the language is addressed to the learner; sometimes it is simply overheard.
High ratio of native speakers to learners?

The learner usually encounters a number of people who use the target language proficiently.
Variety of language and discourse types?

- Learners observe or participate in many different types of language events:
  
  - brief greetings, commercial transactions, exchanges of information, arguments, instructions at school or in the workplace.
  
  - Older children and adults may encounter the written language in the form of notices, newspapers, posters, etc.
Pressure to speak?

- Learners must often use their limited second language ability to respond to questions or get information.
- In these situations, the emphasis is on getting meaning across clearly, and more proficient speakers tend to be tolerant of errors that do not interfere with meaning.
**Access to modified input?**

- Modified input is available in many one-to-one conversations.

- However, in situations where many native speakers are involved in the conversation the learner may have difficulty getting access to language he or she can understand.

  (e.g. An American learning Arabic as a second language participating in a conversation with eight Saudis who are conversing in Arabic or a Saudi learning ESL participating in a conversation with seven Americans conversing in English)
The events and activities that are typical of structure-based instruction differ from those encountered in natural acquisition settings.

In GRAMMAR TRANSLATION approaches, there is considerable use of reading and writing, as learners translate texts from one language to another and grammar rules are taught explicitly.

In AUDIOLINGUAL approaches, there is little use of the first language, and learners are expected to learn mainly through repetition and habit formation, although they may be asked to figure out the grammar rules for the sentences they have memorized.
Learning one thing at a time?

▷ Linguistic items are presented and practiced in isolation, one item at a time, in a sequence from simple to complex (based on teachers or textbook writers)
Frequent feedback on error?

- Errors are frequently corrected.

- Accuracy tends to be given priority over meaningful interaction.
Ample time for learning?

Learning is often limited to a few hours a week.
High ratio of native speakers to learners?

The teacher is often the only native or proficient speaker the student comes in contact with, especially in situations of FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNING.
Variety of language and discourse types?

- Students experience a limited range of language discourse types.

- The most typical of these is the **Initiation/Response/Evaluation (IRE)** exchange where the teacher asks a question, a student answers, and the teacher evaluates the response.

- The written language they encounter is selected primarily to provide practice with specific grammatical features rather than for its content.
Pressure to speak?

Students often feel pressure to speak or write the second language and to do so correctly from the very beginning.
Access to modified input?

- Teachers often use the learners' native language to give instructions or in classroom management events.

- When they use the target language, they tend to modify their language in order to ensure comprehension and compliance.
Designers of communicative language teaching programmes have sought to replace some of the characteristics of structure-based instruction with those more typical of natural acquisition contexts.

In communicative and content-based instruction, the emphasis is on the communication of meaning, both:

- between teacher and students
- and among the students themselves in group or pair work.
Learning one thing at a time?

- Input is simplified and made comprehensible by the use of contextual cues and gestures, rather than through structural grading.

- Students provide each other with simplified and sometimes erroneous input.
Frequent feedback on error?

- There is a limited amount of error correction on the part of the teacher, and meaning is emphasized over form.

- Students tend not to overtly correct each other's errors when they are engaged in communicative practice.

- Because the focus is on meaning, however, requests for clarification may serve as implicit feedback.

- The need to negotiate for meaning may help students see the need to say something in a different way.
Ample time for learning?

Learners usually have only limited time for learning.

In a typical teacher-fronted classroom with 25-30 students, individual students get very little opportunity to produce language in a sixty-minute class, and when they do, it's usually in the form of a short response to a teacher's question.

When students work in pairs or groups, they have opportunities to produce and respond to a greater amount of language.

Sometimes, however, subject-matter courses taught through the second language can add time for language learning. (e.g. In international schools in Saudi Arabia, students are exposed to the TL all the time as the medium of instruction. However, in public schools, students might only be exposed to the TL four hours a week.).
Communicative instructional settings

High ratio of native speakers to learners?

- It is usually only the teacher who is a proficient speaker.
- Learners have considerable exposure to the interlanguage of other learners, particularly in student-student interaction.
- This naturally contains errors that would not be heard in an environment where the interlocutors are native speakers, but it provides many more opportunities for students to use the target language than is the case in most structure-based instruction.
Variety of language and discourse types?

- A variety of discourse types may be introduced through stories, peer- and group-work, the use of 'authentic' materials such as newspapers and television broadcasts.

- Text materials may include both those modified for second language learners and those intended for native speakers.

- In the latter case, teachers use instructional strategies to help learners get the meaning, even if they do not know all the words and structures.

- In student-student interaction, learners may practise a range of sociolinguistic and functional features of language through role-play.
Pressure to speak?

- There is little pressure to perform at high levels of accuracy.
- There is often a greater emphasis on comprehension than on production, especially in the early stages of learning.
Access to modified input?

- Modified input is a defining feature of this approach to instruction.
- The teacher makes every effort to speak to students in a level of language they can understand.
- If students speak the same first language, they may have less difficulty in understanding each other.
- If they come from different language backgrounds, they may modify their language as they seek to communicate successfully.
Observing schemes

Many different observation schemes have been developed for use in second language classrooms.

*Why are they used?*

- to look at how differences in teaching practices are related to differences in second language learning
- in the training of new teachers
- in the professional development of experienced ones.
Observing schemes

- Excerpts from 4 transcripts of second language classroom interaction
- 2 present teacher-student interaction & 2 present student-student interaction
- The teacher-student transcripts come from classrooms that differ in their approach to second language teaching
  - structure-based instruction
  - communicative approach
Classroom comparisons: Teacher-student interactions

With each transcript, there is a chart where you can indicate whether certain things are happening in the interaction, from the point of view of the teacher and that of the students.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Teacher</th>
<th>Student</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Errors</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feedback on errors</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Genuine questions</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Display questions</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negotiation of meaning</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Metalinguistic comments</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Classroom comparisons: Teacher-student interactions

Characteristics of input and interaction

- Compare the two charts.
- What are the similarities and what are the differences?
Classroom comparisons: Teacher-student interactions

*Characteristics of input and interaction:*

**Classroom A:**

1. **Errors:**

Very few on the part of the teacher.

However, her speech does have some peculiar characteristics typical of this type of teaching (e.g. The questions in statement form-often asked with dramatic rising intonation: 'You don't know what it is?').

Students don't make too many errors because they say very little and what they say is usually limited by the lesson.
Classroom comparisons: Teacher-student interactions

Characteristics of input and interaction:

2. Feedback on errors:

Yes, whenever students do make errors, the teacher reacts.
Characteristics of input and interaction:

3. Genuine questions:
   - Yes, a few, but they are almost always related to classroom management.
   - No questions from the students.
Classroom comparisons: Teacher-student interactions

Characteristics of input and interaction:

4. Display questions:

Yes, almost all of the teacher's questions are of this type.

Interestingly, however, the students sometimes interpret display questions as genuine questions (T: What are you doing, Paul? S: Nothing.).

The teacher wants students to produce any sentence in the 'present continuous' but the student worries that he's about to get in trouble and asserts that he is doing 'nothing'.

This is a good example of how the teacher's pragmatic intent can be misinterpreted by the student.
Classroom comparisons: Teacher-student interactions

Characteristics of input and interaction:

5. Negotiation of meaning:

Very little

Learners have no need to paraphrase or request clarifications, and no opportunity to determine the direction of the discourse.

The teacher is focused only on the formal aspects of the learners' language. All the effort goes into getting students to produce a sentence with the present continuous form of the verb.
Classroom comparisons: Teacher-student interactions

Characteristics of input and interaction:

6. Metalinguistic comments:

Yes, this is how the teacher begins the lesson and lets the students know what really matters!
Classroom comparisons: Teacher-student interactions

Characteristics of input and interaction:

Classroom B:

1. Errors:

Yes, students make errors.

Even the teacher says some odd things.

Her speech also contains incomplete sentences, simplified ways of speaking, and an informal speech style.
Classroom comparisons: Teacher-student interactions

Characteristics of input and interaction:

2. Feedback on errors:

Yes, sometimes the teacher repeats what the student has said with the correct form (e.g. 'he bugzz me' -emphasizing the third person singular ending).

However, this correction is not consistent or intrusive as the focus is primarily on letting students express their meanings.
Classroom comparisons: Teacher-student interactions

*Characteristics of input and interaction:*

3. **Genuine questions:**

Yes, almost all of the teacher's questions are focused on getting information from the students.

The students are not asking questions in this exchange.

However, they do sometimes intervene to change the direction of the conversation.
Classroom comparisons: Teacher-student interactions

Characteristics of input and interaction:

4. Display questions:

No, because there is a focus on meaning rather than on accuracy in grammatical form.
Classroom comparisons: Teacher-student interactions

*Characteristics of input and interaction:*

5. Negotiation of meaning:

Yes, from the teacher's side, especially in the long exchange about who has a bicycle!
Classroom comparisons: Teacher-student interactions

Characteristics of input and interaction:

6. Metalinguistic comments:

No. Even though the teacher clearly hopes to get students to use the third person ending, she does not say so in these words.
Although the activities in the two transcripts are both teacher-centered, the transcripts are very different from each other.
Classroom comparisons: Teacher-student interactions

**Classroom A**
- the focus is on form (i.e. grammar)
- the purpose of the interaction is to practice the present continuous.
- Although the teacher uses real classroom events and some humor, there is no real interest in what students are doing.
- There is a primary focus on correct grammar, display questions, and error correction.

**Classroom B**
- the focus is on meaning, conversational interaction, and genuine questions
- There are, however, some brief references to grammatical accuracy when the teacher feels it is necessary.
Thank you