ENGAGING UNMOTIVATED EFL LEARNERS IN CLASSROOM TALK

Haifa Alnofaie
Asst. Prof., Taif University, Saudi Arabia, haifa.alnofaie@gmail.com

Abstract

The aim of this paper is to demonstrate the teacher's efforts in engaging her unmotivated EFL learners in classroom talk. The paper identifies elicitation techniques that the teacher used in the third turn of the triadic exchange for extending turn-taking. It also identifies the types of learner initiatives that create learning opportunities. The teacher, who is the author, introduced 8 Saudi learners of EFL (aged 18) to a mystery, and they were required to take turns in classroom talk. 40 minutes of classroom interaction were recorded and analysed qualitatively. The analysis was informed by CA methodology. The paper shows that the teacher role moved beyond giving negative or positive feedback. Her role entailed extending learners' responses through inviting disagreement, suggesting alternatives, paraphrasing and shaping learners' responses, linking learners' contributions and increasing wait-time. As a result of her efforts, learners were engaged in different types of turn taking, including presenting new ideas, building on others, disagreeing with others and extending one's turn. Another finding was that, during interaction, learners were not only engaged in turn-taking, but they were also learning the use of the new language. These findings add to the small body of available literature on elicitation techniques that involve learners in extended turns and create space for learning. It is hoped that the findings in this paper could inform EFL teaching practices. More investigations that address the issue of engaging unmotivated EFL learners in classroom interaction are needed, and more teaching techniques that would facilitate their engagement need to be identified.

Keywords: unmotivated learners, EFL, elicitation techniques, turn taking, learner initiatives, learning opportunities

1. INTRODUCTION

EFL language teachers are very often faced with the complexities of increasing the motivation of their unmotivated learners. Research on EFL motivation in the classroom has related learners' low motivation for learning EFL to some factors such as the emphasis on teaching writing skill at the expense of other language skills, using uninteresting materials, the absence of the link between language courses and learners' future career, the lack of rapport between the teacher and his learners and the absence of technology (Madrid, 2002; Bacha and Bahous, 2011; Papi and Abdollahzadeh, 2012). The issue of teacher motivational strategies has not been widely researched (Papi and Abdollahzadeh, 2012). The criticism with the few existing studies is that they are limited to investigating the perceptions of teachers and learners regarding motivational strategies, relying on quantitative measures (Papi and Abdollahzadeh, 2012). A very limited number of studies have investigated the teacher application of motivational strategies in real class environment, using observations and self-evaluations (Guilloteaux and Dornyei's, 2008; Papi and Abdollahzadeh, 2012). This paper examines the teacher motivational practices in inviting low motivated learners to take turn in classroom talk by analysing classroom discourse qualitatively.

2. MOTIVATING LEARNERS TO SPEAK THE NEW LANGUAGE

Engaging EFL learners in speaking is a challenging task for teachers. This task becomes more challenging if learners are unmotivated to learn the language. Research in the Saudi context has shown high speaking anxiety rates among Saudi learners of EFL and this might affect the level of their motivation (Alrabai, 2014; Al-Saraj, 2014). This phenomenon raises the question of how to encourage unmotivated learners who feel anxious about speaking the new language to take turn in classroom talk.

In classroom discussions, learners are expected to engage actively in talk by demonstrating different types of turns. Waring (2011) suggests a typology of turns initiated by learners. According to this typology, learners initiate turns to exploit an assigned turn, volunteer a response or initiate a new sequence. In addition to Waring's (2011) typology of learner initiatives, the types of utterances that occur in turn-taking has been identified by Brown and Kennedy (2011): presenting new ideas, building on others, disagreeing with others and extending one's turn. It should be noted here that learner initiatives create learning opportunities (Waring, 2011). During turn-taking, learners can learn the use of new words and grammar. Such opportunities can enhance learners' consciousness about the use of language.

In order to allow for the above mentioned types of turns and utterances to occur in classroom talk, teachers are required to employ some techniques to facilitate learners' engagement in turn-taking. Some effective techniques that help teachers to engage learners in turn-taking and create learning opportunities, as identified in literature, include asking referential questions, extended wait-time and shaping learner contributions through paraphrasing and feedback (Li, 2011; Walsh and Li, 2013). Further techniques are identified by Brown and Kennedy (2011) such as linking learners' contributions and building on learners' talk. Based on an analysis of classroom talk, the following section will highlight some of the teacher techniques used for encouraging turn-taking and will show how learners were engaged in different types of turns.

3. A SNAPSHOT FROM EFL CLASSROOM

The teacher was teaching college students who were in the preparatory year. She had 8 EFL learners in her class. All of them were repeaters of the listening and speaking course. In one of her classes, the teacher introduced her learners to a mystery (see the Appendix). The mystery was cognitively demanding because learners needed to analyse the events and draw a conclusion. They were divided into groups and each group had to provide a conclusion. Classroom interaction was analysed using Conversation Analysis (CA) methodology. The extracts below demonstrate the efforts made by the teacher and learners in order to maintain the flow of talk and extend turns.

Extract 1

9. T: OK let's move to the second group. Do you agree with the first group?

10. H: No

11. T: No! O:kay: we have a <u>different</u> answer here(.)

12. H: She has not seen (.) a <u>murderer</u>

13. T: ↑ What does that mean she has not seen a murderer? (.2)

14. H: She was I-looking for a new man and e:::r

15. T: She was looking for someone who is special (.) she was looking for a new man (.)

16.   ↓ do you think she was looking for someone who is ↑ special maybe even if he is a murderer?

17. H: She… [she did not want a rich man

18. T: [She did not want a rich man because she is rich ↑so she is not <u>mentally</u> ill because

19.   she was looking for a different man

20.   ((Some Students are silent others whisper))

The teacher requests an answer from the other group. H provides the teacher with an answer (line 10) and extends her view in line 12. The teacher's clarification request in line 13 encourages H to paraphrase her answer (line 14). H struggles with finding the right words and the teacher scaffolds her contribution by reformulating H's answer (lines 15-16). Although the teacher requests clarification (Line 16), H's turn in line

17 is to extend and clarify her view previously stated in line 14 and not to respond to the teacher's question. This turn by H (line 17) represents one type of learner initiatives which is exploiting an assigned turn (Waring, 2011). The teacher reformulates H's response and repeats her previous answer (Lines 18-19). Paraphrasing and shaping learners' contributions provide learners with opportunities to learn the use of the new language (Walsh and Li Li). This extract shows how the teacher reformulates responses and requests clarification in order to extend the learner's turn. More efforts for encouraging other types of turn-taking are presented in Extract 2.

Extract 2

21 T: ↑But if you remember in the sto:ry he is ugly he is thin pale and ill so do you think he is

22 a special man (.) someone who is murderer ill and pale

23 H: She love strange man

24 T: Do you think she likes strange behavior? Is that what you mean?

25 H: °Yeah°=

26 Y: =But this lady is still abnormal that's why she chose this man.

27 T: You think she is abnormal and ↑what's wrong with her choice? Do you think her choice

28   is wrong?

The teacher challenges H's view (lines 21-22) and H manages to provide another possible explanation (line 23) and this might indicate that challenging statements that address learners' higher order thinking skills could improve the quality of classroom interaction. The teacher's clarification request (line 24) encourages Y to initiate a turn, without being selected, to disagree with H's answer (line 26). Y's initiative represents volunteering a response, one type of learner initiatives identified by Waring (2011), for the purpose of expressing disagreement. The next extract (Extract 3) is about discussing the second question of this mystery.

Extract 3

31.   T: One group says that she is suffering from a mental disorder another group disagrees.

32.   now look at the second question which is=

33.Ss: = Who killed Clay?

34.T: Who killed Clay?

35.   ((background noise))

36.T: ↑Yes ladies listen to the first group.

37.R: Danielle's friend killed Clay because may be she want to marry this man ((laughs))

38.T: You think Helen want to marry Clay

39.R: Yes

40.T: She is jealous! (4)

41.N: Is it wrong?

42.T: No N there is no right or wrong answer here.

43.N: Good then.

In Extract 3, the teacher moves to the second question 'who killed Clay?'. R provides a response to the teacher's question (line 37), followed by the teacher's confirmation request (line 38). The extended wait-time (4 seconds) gives N an opportunity to task if the answer is wrong (line 42). By requesting confirmation from the teacher, N's turn marks a new sequence, which is another type of learner initiative (Waring, 2011). The traditional interactional pattern in the EFL classroom is IRF. This means that the teacher initiates a question,

the learner responds, and finally the teacher provides feedback. In line 42 above, the learner initiates a question and the teacher provides a response, followed by the learner's expression of relief. This is not a common interactional pattern. It should be noted here that the challenging design of mysteries might appear confusing for some learners. Therefore, it is the role of the teacher to explain the aim behind mysteries in the EFL classroom, so learners feel free to say what they think.

Extract 4

54   T: What made someone kill Clay? (6)

55   Ss: silence

56   H: May be he kills himself because he feel guilty (.) he is married to a

57   beautiful wife or he loves her=

58   S: =He wants to achieve he want her to live good life with another

59   person

60   T: OK H and S he feels that he does not deserve a good lady she

61   should find someone who is much better

62   Ss: Yes

63   L: (2) If someone love someone he can't kill himself I love her ↑why I kill myself.

64   ((inaudible noise))

65   T: Go ahead L you want to say something.

66   M: Teacher may be Daniel's friend killed Clay because she want to

67   save her friend.

68   T: You think Helen cares about Danielle about her life

69   M: Yes

70   T: Who agrees with her?

The initiative by H (lines 56-57) is to volunteer a response to the teacher's question. S volunteers another response to build on and clarify H's view (line 58). It seems that the teacher pause time (6 seconds) encourages these initiatives to occur. The teacher then links the two learners' contributions and reformulates their answers in lines 60 and 61. The teacher's effort to clarify the two learners' answers seems to encourage L to state her opinion which differs from her classmates (line 63-64). M takes turn without being selected to introduce another possible option (lines 66-67). In this extract the learners take turns without being selected by the teacher. The teacher's question 'what made someone kill Clay?' encourages learners to think of the motives of killing him to identify the killer. Open ended questions that encourage higher order skills can lead to multiple turn-taking by learners. The extract shows that asking referential questions, extending wait-time and linking learners' contributions can lead to a sequence of learner initiatives (Brown and Kennedy, 2011; Li, 2011; Walsh and Li, 2013).

CONCLUSION

This paper demonstrates a better understanding of how an EFL teacher encouraged unmotivated learners to take turn in classroom talk. The extracts discussed in this paper show some successful techniques used by the teacher to encourage turn-taking. The teacher managed to extend learners' responses through asking referential questions, inviting disagreement, suggesting alternatives, paraphrasing and shaping learners' responses, linking learners' contributions and increasing wait-time. Speaking of learners, although they were unmotivated, they initiated turns to start a new sequence, exploit an assigned turn and volunteer a response. The types of their utterances included presenting new ideas, building on others, disagreeing with others and extending one's turn. There were opportunities for learners to learn and practice the use of the new language by listening to the teacher's reformulation of their answers or by their efforts to produce clear utterances. It is hoped that the discussion in this paper would encourage EFL teachers to rethink their practices and come up with new strategies for motivating unmotivated learners.

REFERENCE LIST

Alrabai, F. (2014). A model of foreign language anxiety in the saudi EFL context. *English Language Teaching*, *7*(7), 82–101. http://doi.org/10.5539/elt.v7n7p82

Al-saraj, T. M. (2016). Foreign language anxiety in female Arabs learning English : case studies, *1229* (April). http://doi.org/10.1080/17501229.2013.837911

Bahous, R., Bacha, N. N., and Nabhani, M. (2011). Motivating Students in the EFL Classroom: A Case Study of Perspectives. *English Language Teaching*, *4*(3), 33–43. http://doi.org/10.5539/elt.v4n3p33

Brown, K., and Kennedy, H. (2011). Learning through conversation: Exploring and extending teacher and children's involvement in classroom talk. *School Psychology International*, *32*(4), 377–396. http://doi.org/10.1177/0143034311406813

Guilloteaux, M. J., and Dornyei, Z. (2008). Motivating language learners: A classroom-oriented investigation of student motivation. *TESOL Quarterly*, *42*(1), 55–77. http:// doi: 10.1002/j.1545-7249.2008.tb00207.x

Li, Li. (2011). 'Obstacles and opportunities for developing thinking through interaction in language classrooms', Thinking Skills and Creativity, 6, pp. 146-158. http://doi:10.1016/j.tsc.2011.05.001

Madrid, D. (2002). The power of the FL teacher's motivational strategies. Cauce, 25, 369–422.

Papi, M., and Abdollahzadeh, E. (2012). Teacher Motivational Practice, Student Motivation, and Possible L2 Selves: An Examination in the Iranian EFL Context. *Language Learning*, *62*(2), 571–594. http://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9922.2011.00632.x

Walsh, S., and Li, Li. (2013). Conversations as space for learning. *International Journal of Applied Linguistics (United Kingdom)*, *23*(2), 247–266. http://doi.org/10.1111/ijal.12005

Waring, H. Z. (2011). Learner initiatives and learning opportunities in the language classroom. *Classroom Discourse*, *2*(2), 201–218. http://doi.org/10.1080/19463014.2011.614053

APPENDIX

Mystery 1 'Married to a murderer' Task Instructions: Listen to the story and answer the 2 questions on the task sheet.

Why did Danielle Marry Clay

Who killed Clay?

Each group should write their answer on the answer sheet