

Teacher-Student Interaction: Direct Instruction versus Suggestive Instruction

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Abstract

The core element in all academic discourse is pedagogical practice. To engage learners actively, to interest them in the content, to guide them to correct their mistakes, and to make them independent learners, teachers need to regularly interact with students. Teacher-student interaction is an important aspect of learning as it creates opportunities for the learners to construct their knowledge including language with the help of a more knowledgeable and expert person, i.e., their teacher. A teacher-led interaction may be direct or indirect in class; it may facilitate learners in comprehension, or at times may confuse the learners in comprehending the message of the teacher. The reasons for students to get confused include differences in cultural context and the requirements of the learning situation in the classroom. The learning process is affected due to differences in the interaction styles of teachers and students. Identification of the communication style, conscious efforts by the learners to understand the message, and careful planning of the classroom processes that include direct as well as indirect communication style by the teacher can help the learners to own their learning and to help the teachers to be more effective.

INTRODUCTION

Language is a means of communication. Language serves the function of expression as well as perception. So, language is an integral part of various processes related to

interaction including learning. In the words of Lier (1996:5) "Interaction is the most important element in the curriculum." Everything that is learned in a classroom is done through language. Teachers present content, they ask questions to students, and

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students respond to the questions asked by the teacher, students talk to each other, and students read what the teacher writes on the board or in their notebooks, students write papers... all this is done through language.

Classrooms serve as a social setting. According to Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, learning is a socially mediated process in which children acquire culture, beliefs, problem-solving, and skills with more knowledgeable members of society. Social learning becomes a part of the cognitive learning. The concept of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) in Vygotsky's theory of learning is often interpreted as the possible gap between what a learner can do without help, and what they can do with support from someone with more knowledge or expertise. In a classroom, a teacher is generally the more knowledgeable person who helps students to learn newer things.

Teacher-student interaction is instrumental in fostering active student participation, enhancing the motivation of students and bringing a sense of achievement to them. These reasons contribute to making

classroom teaching-learning process more effective because teachers also affect the psychology of students. Teacher-student interaction becomes important in a language classroom especially the second language where student motivation and participation become crucial factors in preparing students to learn the language and providing opportunities for using the language. Thus, students learn not only about language but also learn the language itself through their interaction with their teacher.

The skills and knowledge of a language are learned in a language classroom when teachers and students interact with each other for various purposes — from introducing a lesson to doing assessments and providing feedback to students. During each interaction, a teacher communicates something to her students. Do students fully understand what the teacher is saying in the way the teacher wants them to?

The examples given below illustrate the difference between what a teacher says and how students may interpret and respond to what the teacher is saying.

Example 1

Beginning a Lesson	
Teacher A	Teacher B
Students! Open your book and start reading lesson 4 which is a story about an enormous turnip.	Students! Do you know what a turnip is? Would you like to know about a turnip that was so huge that it could not be pulled out from the ground?

Example 2

Correction of Work	
Teacher A	Teacher B
This sentence is wrong. Change 'going' to 'go.'	Do you think 'going' is the correct verb in this sentence? How can this sentence be corrected? Do you think a different tense form can be used in place of the one used in this sentence? Do you think this sentence can be modified? How? Would you consider referring to the tense forms while reviewing your sentence?
	Pay attention to the underlined word and correct the sentence.

Differences in Communication Styles in the Given Examples

The learning environment created by teacher B in both the examples, from a pedagogical perspective, is empowering for the students. In example 1, teacher B is creating excitement for learning in her class and students decide whether they want to read the story or not. In example 2, teacher B is encouraging the students to reflect and is initiating the culture of self-assessment. Not only this, teacher B is trying to make students look at the errors committed by them in a polite manner and without making them feel ashamed about making mistakes in the process of learning. The most distinguishable aspect in both the cases is that the students are encouraged to play an active role in learning which is prescribed and sanctioned by almost all the modern and progressive learning approaches.

Is the situation equally reassuring from a language perspective? The

situation becomes slightly problematic. In example 1, the instruction given by teacher A to the students is direct. The researcher observed that students have no confusion about such a message and they are likely to follow the instruction as it is directed to them. Instruction given by teacher B is suggestive and students are most likely to follow the instruction. Most students would be excited to know about a very big turnip but some students may not understand the message and respond negatively to the choice given to them. In example 2, while correcting a sentence, the suggestion given by teacher A is direct and it was observed that the students would at once understand and make the change in the sentence as suggested by the teacher. The suggestion given by teacher B, on the other hand, is indirect and students may not pay attention to the error the teacher is suggesting the students to focus upon. Chandler (2003) also

finds that indirect feedback is too demanding for learners.

Teacher B in both the examples is trying to prepare the students for more participatory learning and more responsibility in learning. Some students, however, may feel that the teacher is not helping them at all because they are not getting any direct instruction or suggestions from her. In example 1, teacher B may seem, to such students, as dependent on them for making even a small and simple decision. In example 2, teacher B may even be considered incompetent because she is not telling the students how to correct the grammatical mistake in a sentence. As a result, some students may even ignore the suggestions given by the teacher.

In both examples, the language, rather than conveying the message of the sender (in this case, the teacher), may confuse the receivers (students). The researcher draws from her own experiences both as a student and as a teacher observing students, when the language of some of the teachers was hard to decode; as a teacher when a few students becoming confused about the feedback given to them, and furthermore, as a teacher-educator when some of the teachers did not respond to my indirect suggestions.

Why does language not help in the learning process? If a teacher conveys the message to the students and students know the vocabulary and syntax of the instruction given by the teacher, why does the message not reach the students?

What is amiss? According to Fatiha Guessabi, “Learning a language, is not only learning the alphabet, the meaning, the grammar rules and the arrangement of words, but it is also learning the behaviour of the society and its cultural customs.”

Students who are from cultures where language is spoken indirectly, may well understand the message even if the instruction is conveyed in suggestion mode or if the feedback is given indirectly. Such students appreciate the indirect use of the language, because they understand that the teacher tries to avoid any discomfort that may arise due to direct criticism. They, at times, may find the direct use of language harsh. Contrarily, students acclimated to the direct use of language may find the indirect use of the language by the teacher baffling. These students may think that the teacher is biased against them because they do not get any direct suggestion or instruction from the teacher and see other students not complaining about the instruction or suggestion that they consider vague. They commend a teacher who talks to them in direct language because they can understand the message immediately.

Culture and Communication Styles

Indian classrooms are multicultural and multilingual. Each language and culture has their distinct communication styles. Some cultures have a linear and direct style of conveying messages and some

have a circular and indirect style of communication. The direct and linear style of communication emphasises the message rather than the context of the message. The message is explicit and the conversation is generally addressed directly to the person who is to be given the message. It focuses on the cognitive aspect of the message by reducing the ambiguities in the communication so that message is conveyed as it is intended to be done. But the affective aspect of the communication is ignored in the direct communication style.

Indirect or the circular style of communication values the affective aspect of the communication by carefully selecting words and tone while conveying a message in communication. In this communication, context building is given importance and the main message is given in the form of suggestion and contextual cues. But there is no certainty that message is conveyed as it was intended to be. People belonging to a certain type of communication culture find the other one challenging to understand and to participate in. Therefore, learning a communication style, other than the familiar one, may facilitate the process of meaning making in communication. Learning new communication styles thus, becomes critical not only in the development of communication skills but also in learning intercultural skills.

Learning the Other Communication style

A direct and linear communicator, while listening, must make efforts

to understand the non-verbal cues of communication such as facial expressions, gestures, paralinguistics tone of voice, body language and posture and eye contact in the context of the words to make meaning of the communication taking place with a circular and indirect communicator. Asking questions may also prove helpful in getting a clear meaning of a seemingly ambiguous message. While speaking, the direct and linear communicators must be aware that they may be perceived as harsh, aggressive, and crude by the listeners. So, they may try to talk a little about context and may select to be a little indirect.

An indirect and circular communicator, at the time of listening, must understand that a direct and linear speaker values sincerity in conveying messages and is not necessarily aggressive, insensitive, or offensive. While speaking, an indirect and circular speaker must be cautious of 'going round and round' around the main point because building context and being diplomatic may become frustrating for a direct and linear communicator. So, keeping the conversation to the main point of the communication may prove helpful in making the communication more meaningful and effective.

Hence, for effective communication to take place, the speaker and listener both must first accept that they may have different communication styles. They must pay close attention to the communication styles of others not only to understand the differences

in communication styles but also to be aware of their own biases towards certain styles of communication.

Activities and Strategies That Promote Effective Communication in a Class of Different Communication Styles

Teachers may encourage students to participate in communication activities that facilitate understanding of communication styles other than their natural communication style.

Some of the activities and strategies are:

1. Students may be given a simple checklist to help them identify their communication styles. Such a checklist may be developed based on the discussion on the communication style given above. An example of such a checklist is given below:

How do I talk? Mark a tick (✓) on the statement that describes best what you are most likely to do in the process of communication.

Sr. No.	Statement	Mark if applicable
1.	I do not add unnecessary details to my ideas while conveying messages.	
2.	I try to understand the implied meaning of the speaker while listening or reading.	
3.	I tend to add details before coming to the main point.	
4.	People tell me that sometimes I seem harsh while talking.	
5.	I find it hard to stick to the time limit given for speaking.	
6.	I understand what is spoken or written, but not beyond that.	
7.	Sometimes people ask me the main idea of my conversation.	
8.	If I must convey a message to someone, I generally give an example of someone else.	
9.	I feel bored when someone goes on speaking before coming to the main point.	
10.	I generally use words or phrases such as may be, as per your choice, probably, I think, etc. while talking.	
11.	I try to avoid questions and direct statements.	
12.	My answers are short.	

Students who mostly select statements 1, 4, 6, 9 and 12 may talk directly most of the time and the students who select the statements 2, 3, 5, 7, 8, 10 and 11 may talk indirectly.

2. Students are asked to identify the main idea from the communication of the characters of stories selected or created by the teacher or examples of direct and indirect communication as found in conversation with students or colleagues. Details of the activity are given below:

Name of the activity: What was the message?

Material required: Script of story or Dialogues written on cards

Type of activity: Group activity

Process: Students are divided into groups of four each. The teacher tells a story or speaks some dialogues from selected stories or excerpts of the conversation. Each group is given a different character or dialogue to focus on. In their groups, they discuss the main idea of the message of the character and how easy or difficult it was to understand the message. They share their discussion with the class one by one. The teacher concludes the discussion and draws the attention of students towards direct and indirect styles of communication.

3. Students are asked to identify the tone of a conversation.

Name of the activity: How did I feel?

Material required: Dialogues from stories written on the cards/ excerpts of conversation

Type of activity: Group Activity

Process: Students are divided in groups of 4 each. The teacher reads out dialogues from stories or excerpts of conversations from cards. While doing so the teacher may make use of both direct and indirect manner of providing feedback. Each group is given a dialogue or conversation excerpt to focus on. They listen and share in their groups; how did they feel after listening? One student from each group shares the summary of the discussion of the group. The teacher concludes the discussion and draws the attention of the students towards the merits and limitations of speaking in directly and indirectly.

4. Students are given a word limit for writing answers, even in regular classroom activities such as:

- Students are asked to summarise a conversation.
- Students are asked to write the main idea of a poem or a written article.
- Students are asked to rephrase a suggestion, feedback or comment given to them, in their communication style.
- Students are asked to note down and discuss the non-verbal cues used by the speakers while participating in speaking activities.

5. Students are given a time limit for speaking on the topics selected by them. When students participate in classroom discussions or answer questions, they can be encouraged to stick to the given time limit.

- Students are encouraged to ask questions for clarity on the suggestion given to them or on a response given to them by others.
- Students are asked to change the given statements related to conversation, feedback or suggestions in a communication style that is different from their own communication style.
- Students are asked to focus on responding to a question rather than on the tone of the voice of the speaker, when they participate in activities such as debates, presentations on given topics, etc.

In addition to the activities given above, teachers and students may design more activities together to include culture in the classroom processes and to have a better understanding of the different communication styles. In other words, the activities must focus on developing socio linguistic competence in the classroom so that teacher A and teacher B (examples 1 and 2) both can connect with their students and the students with them and each other.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion to the above discussion, it can be proposed that in a classroom, students and teachers may have different styles of speaking, based on their cultures. As a result of this difference, the communication happening in the class may not fulfill the function of conveying a message in its true form. So, what is the way ahead? What is the solution to this interaction style conflict? The answer to these questions is related to Ellis' (2000) assertion that "learning arises not through interaction, but in interaction" (cited in Walsh, 2011, p. 51) which implies that in classrooms, teachers and students need to understand that learning about interaction, through interaction itself is as important as learning through interaction. Both the sender and receiver of the message (teachers and students) need to pay close attention to the meaning making process, especially when the instruction is suggestive or indirect, as used by teacher B in examples 1 and 2. Teachers, in such situations, would have to create opportunities for students and help them to understand a style of interaction that is different from what they are habitual of. A language, in its true function in a classroom, must help in communication and learning and not confuse the learners.

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