

Learning from Action: Exploring Strategies to Encourage the Use of English in Small Group Discussions in Monolingual Classes of Year 1 Science Students

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Abstract

It has been pointed out in some research that many Hong Kong students are motivated to learn English instrumentally. They learn English because it is a compulsory subject and a passport to better job opportunities. English is, however, something remote from their daily lives in today's Hong Kong. Moreover, there are limited opportunities for students to discuss and exchange ideas in English in classrooms. Under these circumstances, it is not surprising to find that first year university students who are required to discuss in English have some difficulties in expressing their ideas fluently, and often switch between Cantonese and English. As a language teacher in university, I feel the need and responsibility to help students discuss in English with confidence. I explored the ways to enhance the use of English by Science students in small group discussion. I surveyed their attitudes toward language use, tried three extrinsic motivational devices and evaluated their effectiveness regularly. The exploration lasted for two years. Classroom discourses collected from three English enhancement classes were used for illustrations. I found that extrinsic motivational devices were also effective in enhancing language use.

Background Information

There are many factors leading to the limited use of English by Hong Kong EFL learners, namely motivation, anxiety, confidence, perception of the role and status of English, medium of instruction, learning and teaching approaches in classrooms, and socio-cultural and political reasons. These factors have been examined by different researchers (e.g., Cheng et al., 1973; Fu, 1987; Lai, 1993 and; Poon, 1989, cited in Sweeney and Farmer, 1994). However, it is difficult to identify a single major factor that limits the use of English because all factors interact with one another.

In Hong Kong, many students are motivated to learn English instrumentally (Fu, 1987; Poon, 1989, cited in Sweeney and Farmer, 1994). They learn English because it is a compulsory subject and a passport to better job opportunities. English is, however, something remote from their daily lives with a burgeoning of Cantonese entertainment in today's Hong Kong (Lai, 1993, cited in Sweeney and Farmer, 1994). On the other hand, English teachers (this also applies to other subject teachers) who have to complete the syllabus and ensure a high passing rate in public examinations, can afford little time to try different methods of teaching, encourage more interaction between teachers and students in classrooms and to meet the different expectations in learning attitudes between secondary school and university. In this climate, it is not surprising to

find that first year university students who are required to discuss something in English are not able to express their ideas well, and are inhibited by their tutors' and peers' fluency (Lee, 1995).

As a language teacher in university, I feel the need and responsibility to help first year students to express their ideas fluently and effectively, and to be more willing to use English in small group discussions so that the growth of discussion skills and language facility can be applied to students' major disciplinary studies. Although researchers have presented a variety of assumptions about Hong Kong EFL learners' attitudes towards English, I think it is necessary for individual teachers to acquire a better understanding of their specific situations, and remedy specific problems diagnosed in their situations without accepting theories unquestioningly. Teachers understand their teaching situations and know their students better than academic researchers. In this light, they are suitable for deciding on remedies to solve problems arising from classrooms (Atkin, 1992). I believe that one of the possible ways for teachers to do this is to diagnose problems in their own contexts, and solve them by engaging in the critical reflections on everyday teaching strategies. This enables teachers to research their specific situations and learn from actions. (Whitehead, 1989; Sparks-Langer and Colton, 1991; Canning, 1991; Kember and Gow, 1992; Crookes, 1993; Day, 1993).

Action Research: What is It and How Good is It?

Many definitions of action research can be found in the literature (Ortrun, 1991; Crookes, 1993). Crookes (1993) has pointed out two characteristic features of action research. First, action research encompasses teacher involvement in a research activity and the research questions emerge from a teacher's own concerns and problems. Second, action research enables a teacher to do research on his or her own teaching and the learning of his or her own students. Action research can take many forms such as journal writing, observation, self-reflection, etc., but it basically encompasses a self-reflective spiral of planning, acting, observing, reflection and replanning, which can be undertaken individually or in collaboration with colleagues who are interested in finding solutions to the same problem (Ortrun, 1991). There is a close link between reflection and action. The investigation processes in non-linear and new actions are always initiated in reflective thinking.

Action research emancipates teachers from the domination of imposed voices of academics. It allows teachers to be involved in research activities and develop their own visions of education. Teachers are no longer dependent on academic's voices when they decide on teaching strategies and curriculum; they are autonomous and have the power to make decisions on the solutions to the problems related to their teaching situations (Canning, 1991). Decisions are made through continuous critical reflection on and evaluation of the application of actions and strategies in classrooms. Besides facilitating teachers' professional development and pedagogic communication, the results of action research bring changes to the curriculum, the institution and even society (Day, 1993; Schratz, 1992). Cohen and Manion (1980) have suggested that action research can be utilised towards five general outcomes, which are quoted by Nunan (1990:64) as follows:

1. as a means of remedying problems diagnosed in specific situations, or of improving in some way a given set of circumstances;
2. as a means of in-service training, providing teachers with new skills and methods and heightening self-awareness;
3. as a means of injecting additional or innovative approaches to teaching and learning into a system which normally inhibits innovation and change;

4. as a means of improving the normally poor communications between the practising teacher and academic researcher;
5. (although lacking the rigour of true scientific research) as a means of providing an alternative to the more subjective, impressionistic approach to problem solving in the classroom.

As has been mentioned previously, teachers are the ones who understand their teaching situations and know their students better than outside researchers. Thus they are the right people to diagnose the situations, remedy problems and ultimately improve the situations. Teachers are not only teachers but are also research participants and investigators in the language classrooms. The whole investigation process includes critical reflection of the situation, planning, action(s) to be taken, observation and critical evaluation of the action(s).

Action Learning Research Project

Objective

The objective of the action learning research project is to explore strategies to encourage the use of English by Year 1 Science students in small group discussions in English enhancement classes.

Some anecdotal evidence has indicated that the students do not take advantage of the opportunities unless a teacher monitors the discussion. They discuss in Cantonese (hereafter called L1) for different reasons. The cause of the problem seems to be attributable to the attitudes of science students who do not seem to place a high priority on English (hereafter called L2) or language skills in general. Therefore, I think it is necessary to investigate why the Science students use Cantonese, and the contexts in which Cantonese is used, prior to the exploration of strategies to encourage the students to use more English in enhancement classes.

Duration

This project started in January 1995 and was completed in December 1995.

Subjects

The subjects comprised three classes of mixed ability students from the Faculty of Science (hereafter called Classes A, B and C). Two Science classes (Classes A and B) were in 1994-95 and one Science class (Class C) was in 1995-96. There were about 18 students in each class. Most of the students obtained 'D' Grades in Use of English at the Hong Kong Advanced Level Examination. They were taking a compulsory English enhancement course conducted by the English Centre, University of Hong Kong for all Year 1 Science students.

Data Collection: Method and Procedures

In order to diagnose the situation and to devise the most appropriate plan to encourage the three classes of Year 1 Science students to use more English in group discussions, I conducted the research in the following ways.

1. Surveyed the students' attitudes;
2. Devised an action plan;
3. Observed the extent to which English was used in discussions and reflected;
4. Recorded and analysed the students' discussions once a month;

5. Reflected upon the effectiveness of the plan and acted again.

Recording and analysing the students' discussions complemented the subjective data. The analysis focused on the extent to which Cantonese was used, the context in which Cantonese was used, and the behaviour of the students when Cantonese was used.

Five group discussions were recorded in Classes A and B from January to March in 1995, and ten group discussions were recorded in Class C from October to December in 1995.

The Action Plan

According to the two survey results (1994-95 and 1995-96), I identified four common salient features. First, the students were inclined to interact in English in discussions because they felt that they had to meet the teacher's expectations. Second, they preferred to work in groups of four or five and to interact with people whose level of English proficiency was the same as or less proficient than theirs. Third, they did not mind whether the teacher was a native English-speaker or a non-native English speaker. Fourth, they were used to switching to Cantonese for five main reasons: task complexity, inadequate vocabulary, efficiency, small talk and habit.

In view of the students' surveyed attitudes towards small group discussion, I finally decided on an action plan that aimed to increase the use of English by imposing three extrinsic instrumental motivational devices. The reason I imposed the extrinsic instrumental motivational devices was that the students' motivation and attitudes towards the use of English in language classrooms had been found to be 'instrumental'. Their attitude and behaviour varied with the teacher's expectations. In this light, the first device was to let the students know my expectations and negotiate with them on the rule that English must be used exclusively for a designated period of time. If anyone violated the rule, he or she would receive a knock on his or her table. The second device was to exercise the power of teachers by reminding them of the rule and joining the students' discussions frequently. The third device was to record the students' discussions regularly.

Results of the Action Plan

Classes A and B, from January to March 1995

It was found that the total amount of time the students switched to L1 was 3.58 minutes out of 800 minutes, that is about 0.43 per cent. The students switched to L1 in six social contexts, namely inadequate linguistic knowledge (vocabulary and expressions), expression of personal feelings, small talk or jokes, at the beginning of the discussion, and when they sought procedural information after the teacher intervened. The frequency of L1 use was relatively very high in three social contexts out of the six social contexts: inadequate linguistic knowledge, small talk and seeking procedural information.

Table 1

group	L1 frequency	Social Contexts					
		inadequate linguistic knowledge	at the beginning of discussion	expression of feeling	small talk or joke	return to discussion	seeking procedural information
27th February, 1995.							
1	7	6 (42 sec.)	1 (2.5 sec.)	0	0	0	0
2	16	10 (21 sec.)	0	1 (4 sec.)	2 (32 sec.)	1 (2 sec.)	2 (15 sec.)
3	8	6 (18 sec.)	0	0	2 (42 sec.)	0	0
28th February, 1995.							
1	1	0	0	0	0	0	1 (2 sec.)
2	7	7 (34 sec.)	0	0	0	0	0
Total freq.	39	29	1	1	4	1	3
Total sec.	214.5 sec.	115 sec.	2.5 sec.	4 sec.	74 sec.	2 sec.	17sec.

Class C, from October to December 1995

It was found that the total amount of time the students switched to L1 was 16.5 seconds out of 263 minutes in the six identified social contexts. The frequency of L1 was also relatively high in the three social contexts: inadequate linguistic knowledge, small talk and expression of personal feelings.

Table 2

group	L1 frequency	Social Contexts					
		inadequate linguistic knowledge	at the beginning of discussion	expression of feeling	small talk or joke	return to discussion	seeking procedural information
30th October, 1995							
1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
2	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
3	1	0	0	1 (2 sec.)	0	0	0
4	1	0	0	1 (2 sec.)	0	0	0
5	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
27th November, 1995							
1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
2	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
3	4	1 (5 sec.)	0	2 (4 sec.)	1 (3.5 sec.)	0	0
4	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
5	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
total freq.	6	1	0	4	1	0	0
total sec.	16.5 sec.	5 sec.	0 sec.	8 sec.	3.5 sec.	0 sec.	0 sec.

In short, the three classes of students only switched to L1 for about 4 minutes out of a total of 1063 minutes, that is about 18 hours. The students did sustain their discussions in English, despite the occasional use of Cantonese.

Contexts and Students' Behaviour

The following paragraphs exemplify and describe the four contexts in which the frequency of L1 was relatively high.

1. In the Case of Inadequate Linguistic Knowledge (Vocabulary and Expression)

- When P1 (participant 1) switched to L1, P2 (participant 2) and P3 (participant 3)
- a. continued to refer to the word/expression in L1 in the subsequent utterances until the word/expression was supplied in L2.

For instance,

P1: What is this word ?

P2: $\frac{\text{øL } \beta\text{r}}{\text{(stew)}}$?

P1: $\frac{\text{øL } \beta\text{r}^\circ\text{H } \text{øL} \dots \text{A } \beta\text{r}^\circ\text{H}}{\text{(stew? What to stew?)}}$?

P3: $\frac{-\text{I } \text{øg } \beta\text{r}^\circ\text{H}}{\text{(How to write?)}}$?

P2: $\frac{\text{øL } \beta\text{r}}{\text{(stew)}}$!

P3: What is English ?

P4: Steamer.

or

- When P1 (participant 1) switched to L1, P2 (participant 2)
- b. responded to the Cantonese term/expression but P1 continued to discuss in English.

For instance,

P1: Well, I think $\frac{\text{a] } \text{;}\geq \text{II}'' \text{ } \text{Y}}{\text{(steam should be)}}$ steam.

P2: $\frac{-\text{I } \text{øg } \beta\text{r}^\circ\text{H}}{\text{(How to write?)}}$? Okay. Continue.

P1: Well, well, time is running out and so...

P2: No, no, no, data collection.

P1: Pictures.

- c. ignored the word/expression/idea in L1 and answered/continued in L2. Both students continued to discuss in L2.
- d. supplied the English word
- e. P1 continued to discuss in L1 for some time until P2 started a new topic and the group resumed to discuss in English.

2. In the Case of Seeking Procedural Information

When P1 switched to L1, P2 reminded P1 who used L1 immediately

3. In the Case of Expressing Personal Feeling

When P1 switched to L1, P2

- a. responded to P1's feeling in L2

For instance,

P1: *B/≈Â ≠^ §Â ¶n √⁻ TMÌ πF°C ≠'' Æf TMG ¶n √⁻°C*

(I am afraid it is difficult to express in English. It is difficult to have a good effect.)

P2: Well, I think so.

- b. responded to P1's feeling in L1 and continued to discuss in L2

4. In the Case of Joking

When P1 switched to L1, P2 and P3 responded to the joke in a chain of L1 utterances. In between the L1 utterances, there were one to two L2 utterances/words/expressions.

Discussion

The data seem to suggest that the three devices encouraged the subjects to sustain their discussions in English successfully. It appears to have a positive correlation between the quantity of English used in discussion and the effectiveness of the extrinsic instrumental motivational devices, at least in the short term. The subjects followed the instructions and discussed the topic in English most of the time. Switching to Cantonese for fun or assistance only lasted for about four minutes during the 1063-minute (17.6-hour) discussion. In the following paragraphs, I am going to suggest some reasons for the success, as well as some alternative strategies to facilitate discussion and promote language use in monolingual classes in university context.

Reasons for the Success

Authority of Teachers in Chinese Culture

The encouraging results may be attributable to authority of teachers in Chinese culture. Authority of teachers stems from Chinese attitudes towards authority in a role-relationship, such as father and son, senior and subordinates, influenced by the Confucian tradition. Traditionally, parents and teachers tend to enjoy status and authority at home and at school because of their age, life experience and knowledge. Children and students are expected to be obedient and well behaved. The assumption of Chinese submission to authority in terms of age, status and tradition has been proved by a number of psychologists (Bond, 1986, pp.127-9). It is

also found that 'Chinese are easily induced to comply overtly with authority, although this compliance by no means implies private acceptance' (Hiniker, 1969, cited in Bond, 1986, p.128). Thus, when I expressed my expectation about learning behaviour to the students, and negotiated the rule of the game with them, the expression and negotiation might have been interpreted as an instruction that was given in an indirect way. The students did not show any overt disagreement. The reason of 'interacting in English in discussions because this is expected by the teacher' given by the subjects (see the section above on The Action Plan) in the surveys, is a reflection of this Chinese traditional attitude.

Enforcing the Negotiated Rule Persistently

Second, persistence in enforcing the rule and recording the discussions also contribute to the quantity of English used in the discussion. Persistence in enforcing a negotiated rule is significant, particularly when the learning attitudes of students are found to be passive.

Although it is possible for teachers to assert their authority over students and monitor the use of English in discussions in classrooms persistently, the effectiveness of the three devices may still vary with individual teacher's personality and ethnic origin, as well as individual student's personality and level of English proficiency. Some English teachers may feel that the devices are too 'harsh' to students, and find it difficult to apply them in classrooms. Some students may still be addicted to the habit of switching between the two codes when teachers are not around because they do not have sufficient linguistic knowledge. In other words, individual teacher and students differences seem to interact with the use of the three devices in a subtle way. Their relationship deserves careful investigation.

Alternative Strategies to Facilitate Discussion and Promote Language Use in Monolingual Classes of Year 1 Science Students

Motivating Year 1 Science Students to Use English for an Integrative Purpose

Despite that the three extrinsic devices succeed in promoting the use of English in the research, these devices are not long-term strategies. I think a more effective way to motivate Year 1 Science students to use English is to conduct an in-depth discussion with them on the functions of using English for transactional and interactional purposes (Brown and Yule, 1983) inside and outside the language classroom. The aims are to help them understand the purpose of using English. In other words, their motivation should be integrative, not instrumental. This is particularly important not only for Science students but also other undergraduates, who still have some difficulties in expressing ideas in English in discussions after learning the language for over 13 years. If they are motivated to learn English for an integrative purpose, they may be more willing to take risks in experimenting with the language, and stretch their limited language ability to talk about the topic and personal feeling. This solves the problem of retreating to L1 in the cases of inadequate linguistic ability, inconsistent responses to L1, small talk and seeking procedural information as revealed in the transcribed discourses. Although there is no definite answer on the relative effects of the instrumental and the integrative motivations (Gardner et al., 1983; Ramage, 1990; Olshtian et al., 1990; Crookes and Schmidt, 1991; Gardner and MacIntyre, 1991; Clement et al., 1994), Year 1 Science students may find language learning more interesting if they are able to use English for communication in a variety of situations.

Providing Relevant Language Input for the Topics of Discussion and Social Interactions

It is also necessary for teachers to pay heed to the fact that some Year 1 Science students may not have adequate knowledge of appropriate English terms and phrases to discuss some topics, express personal feelings, as well as to make jokes (see the section above on Contexts and

Students' Behaviour). I think these problems could be solved by (1) supplying them with more appropriate language input before the discussion begins and (2) including social English in the curriculum. Curriculum developers or syllabus designers tend to assume that social English can be acquired through other social contexts, such as extra-curricular activities. The assumption seems to rest on a misbelief that student social interactions outside classrooms are conducted in English. In fact, not many students have the opportunities of exposing themselves to informal English or idiomatic use of English in extra-curricular activities, parties and gatherings. Since the data have revealed that the subjects need social English for fun and personal expression, I would like to suggest reconsidering the place of social English in academic communication in a university context.

Limitations of the Research

Since the research was conducted on a small scale, it is difficult to state categorically that the devices will lead to a greater use of English in small group discussions. The effectiveness of the devices will vary with individual teacher and student differences. The six social contexts are only suggestive and are subject to changes based on the data collected. The results and analysis may not be sufficient to make a generalisable conclusion.

Conclusion

The action research has provided me with some useful insights into the way in which L2 is used and learnt in a classroom context. It has also raised my awareness of using action research as a tool to improve my teaching. The research has not yet come to an end; there is always something that I, as a language teacher, can learn from my students and language enhancement classes, and which can then be improved. I would like to conclude the paper by summarising the different stages of my action research in the following diagram, adapted from the work of McNiff (1988).

PROBLEM: My students often use Cantonese in small group discussions when I am not around. How can I encourage them to use more English in discussions?

PLANNING AND ACTING: Collected students' reasons why they used Cantonese, expressed my expectation and negotiated with them on the rule of the game.

OBSERVING: Kept notes of my observation every time after the lesson. Recorded the students' discussions.

REFLECTION: The method seemed to work well in the short run because the percentage of Cantonese used in the discussions was quite low. But the students had problems in using English for social purposes.

REPLANNING: Plan to explore the students' intrinsic motivation towards the use of English, discuss the intrinsic and extrinsic motivations with the students so that they can understand the functions and roles of English inside and outside the classroom.