TEACHER CONTROL IN THE SECOND LANGUAGE CLASSES

Georgeta OBILIŞTEANU, Brânduşa-Oana NICULESCU

"Nicolae Bălcescu" Land Forces Academy, Sibiu, Romania,
pusa_obi@hotmail.com, **branducosma@yahoo.com**

Abstract: *An important aspect taken into consideration in making the distinction between the traditional and the modern methodologies used in teaching a second language is related to the control exercised by the teacher in managing the foreign language environment. The traditional methodology is largely teacher-centred, with the teacher playing a very dominant role as the organizer and the controller of all classroom activities, as well as the evaluator of the learners' performance. The modern methodology is learner-centred, allowing students to take centre stage and get a hands-on practical experience of using the language for communicative purposes. Nevertheless, this distinction should not lead to the diminishing of the teacher's power and authority since making the shift from the teacher as total controller of all that happens in the class to mediator/facilitator supposes a multitude of roles that he/she has to assume within the classroom. The efficiency of a foreign language teacher can be determined by the level of development of the language competences as mirrored in the learners' listening, reading, writing and speaking skills. The necessity and importance of classroom teaching control must be emphasized, as well as the roles a teacher plays in achieving the objectives proposed for each lesson.*

Key words: control, communication, classroom environment, emphasis on the learner, freedom of the students.

1. Introduction

Over the last few years, the field of education has shifted its traditional focus from the teachers to the process of learning and the development of learners who are no longer viewed as mere receptacles to be filled with the knowledge and skills supplied by the teacher, but as direct participants in their learning.

Due to this change of focus, words like 'control', 'authority', 'guidance' have become old-dated in pedagogy, being associated with non-communicative activities. As Biao puts it, "in the domain of second language teaching, the word 'control' has a somewhat negative implication and has often been associated with classroom activities considered as old-fashioned, teacher-centered or non-communicative" [1]. The interdependence between the lower degree of student-student interaction in a context where the teacher works as an instructor has been lately exaggerated, as well as that between the higher degree of student communication exchanges and the lack of control exercised by the teacher in a context where he/she works as a facilitator.

However, teaching has always supposed teacher control. In any teaching-learning encounter, the role of the teacher in the classroom is of undeniable significance since the way in which the classroom environment evolves depends on the types of function he/she fulfills. Furthermore, the interactional patterns that develop between the teacher and learners go hand in hand with the degree of control the teacher has over how learning takes place. In our opinion, the more control the teacher exerts, the more chances students have in engaging with the target language.

In a well-organized second language lesson, the teacher's major role is to assist learners in the process of internalizing and storing the new language they are trying to learn by providing them with relevant and appealing didactic activities.

2. Control and communication

Research has shown that teachers' actions in their classrooms have a great impact on student achievement. A good second language lesson is more than a series of activities and exercises that the teacher has devised or brought together to deliver his/her teaching. It involves much more than simply presenting the material in the textbook at hand.

The selected materials and the organization of the lesson reflect a solid understanding of his/her subject, of the teaching approach he/she has adopted to correspond to the kind of teaching situation he/she is in.

He/She should also take into consideration the students' needs, as well as their learning styles and preferences. An important skill in teaching is the ability of a teacher to make his/her learners the focus of his/her teaching, by acknowledging their different needs and learning styles, giving feedback on their learning in ways that help develop their confidence and self-esteem and employing strategies that create a positive and effective classroom environment.

Clearly, his/her preparation needs to be tailored according to the focus of the class – be it a speaking skill-developing class, a reading class, a vocationally oriented class, a class for adults, or a class for young learners.

A language lesson consists of a coherent sequence of activities that lead toward achieving the lesson goals or objectives. A common lesson sequence found in many second language classes is made up of a series of activities referred to as presentation (introduction of new lexical-grammatical structures), practice (learners' use of the new language items through completion of guided practice activities) and production (learners' use of the newly acquired lexical-grammatical structures

through participation in freer, more open-ended tasks).

All of these activities involve teacher control. In fact, the whole idea of teaching revolves around the control exerted by the teacher from extracting the general goals from the curriculum, designing the syllabus and establishing the specific objectives for each lesson to making predictions about what might happen in the classroom or the difficulties students might encounter and maintaining active student involvement in lessons through a careful organization of the lesson and selection of didactic activities.

As pointed out by Richards J. and Bohlke D., teachers can achieve a more teacher or learner-focused approach to teaching [2]. The focus more on teacher performance than on learner performance is reflected in the following aspects of the lesson:

- the teacher does more talking than the learners;
- the learners contribute with little input in directing the shape and direction of the lesson;
- the teacher exerts great control in managing the class, controlling the stages and order;
- the way the teacher presents information and explains tasks;
- the extent to which the lesson reflects the teacher's lesson plan.

A more learner-focused approach to teaching is reflected in features such as these:

- the degree of engagement learners have with the lesson;
- the amount of student participation and interaction that occurs;
- the learning outcomes that the lesson produces;
- the ability to present subject matter from a learner's perspective;
- how well the lesson addresses learners' needs;
- how the lesson is reshaped based on the learner feedback;

- the teacher's response to learners' difficulties.

Many teachers wrongly assume that the less control they exert on the class, the more communicative it will be. In fact, communication and control are not mutually exclusive. The central role of the teacher in teaching does not exclude the central role of the student in learning. According to Biao, the teacher can be allowed to keep complete control while at the same time the learner is exercising his/her almost complete initiative:

"The so-called teacher-centeredness does not necessarily lead to the loss of the learners' focusing on the use of the language in the classroom as on their own initiative. On the contrary, it is precisely the teacher's direct control of the classroom activities that guarantees the full play of the students' potentials and initiative" [3].

Therefore, the more control a teacher exercises, the better opportunities students have in using the target language through the specially devised practical tasks. By devising activities that are appropriate to the proficiency of the group of learners he/she is working with and providing them with clear responsibilities, much of the learning responsibilities is taken away from the teacher and moved towards the learners, allowing them to play a more active and participatory role in their learning. These meaningful tasks related to communicative teaching – provision of relevant, exciting opportunities of engaging with the language, encouraging authentic communication, sensitivity to individual needs, motivations and preferences, as well as establishing a good learning climate require control by the teacher.

One important thing that must be understood and underlined is that despite the sound professional background and hard work of a teacher, learners are the ones who painstakingly develop their communicative skills. As Kumaravadivelu points out, "teaching, however purposeful, cannot automatically lead to learning for the simple reason that learning is primarily a personal construct controlled by the individual learner" [4]. Thus, the teacher can at best create a classroom environment that is conducive to learning, produce and fully exploit learning opportunities by involving the learners in the learning process.

Also insisting on the central role of a learner's motivation in the natural process of acquiring a second or foreign language and achieving communicative ability in it, Choudhury notes the teacher's main contribution to this process [5]:

"The communicative skills of the learners can be developed if they are motivated. Hence, teachers should facilitate this process by creating diverse communicative activities, especially intended for pair-work and group-work, that are interesting and challenging to the learners, as they progress in the path of acquiring and using the target language beyond the textbook and the classroom."

3. Teacher roles

Most teachers take on a variety of roles within the classroom. In ensuring participation in a group in second language teaching, a teacher may change his/her roles in the classroom by taking into account not only the cognitive needs but also the emotional/affective and social demands [6] of the students he/she works with.

The classroom activities run smoothly as long as the teacher's control is subtle and flexible in dealing with many variables involved in the social and personal dimensions of the classroom lesson – age, sex, attitude, personality, social class, attitude towards language learning, motivation.

Learners come to the second language class with their previous learning experiences under different educators. They may be more or less motivated and have a positive or negative attitude towards learning. As far as the level of language proficiency is concerned, second language classes are usually a heterogeneous mix. As a result, their interest and participation in the classroom activities varies quite a lot: some are active, others are passive, some are

interested, others are bored, friendly or hostile, serious or trouble-making. An important motivating factor is the content of a lesson. If the lesson is too difficult, students may lose face and become frustrated. On the other hand, if the lesson is too easy, students may feel insufficiently challenged.

Thus, the teacher's control is all the more necessary. The positive learning environment depends on his/her quick reaction to mischievous behaviour, on the handling of praise and reprimand in making appreciations on the students' involvement in the tasks. It is well-known that positive encouragement is beneficial for the praised as it results in an improvement in his/her behaviour, reinforcing the learning strategies employed. At the same time, censure should be brief and not given in public so as not to offend his/her feelings, making him/her adopt even a more hostile or even aggressive attitude towards the second language class.

Effective classroom management is the process involving a set of rules, standards and expectations. By means of well-defined and consistently applied rules, students know what types of conduct are acceptable in the classroom and which ones will not be allowed.

According to Sue B.'s seven major roles of a teacher in the 21st century [7], the teacher can act as a *controller* (the teacher is in complete charge of the class, what students do, what they say and how they say it), *prompter* (the teacher encourages students to participate by making suggestions on how to proceed in an activity), *resource* (the teacher is a kind of walking resource centre ready to offer help and available to be consulted by learners when it is absolutely necessary), *assessor* (the teacher grades learners and corrects learners' mistakes in a sensible not offensive way), *organizer* (the teacher sets up activities, gives instructions and feedback; he/she can also serve as a demonstrator, being able to get engaged with learners), *participant* (the teacher gets involved and engaged with the learners in order to enliven the atmosphere and change the pace), *tutor* (the teacher acts as a coach in the students' project work or self-study by providing advice and guidance).

In Harmer's view [8], the term of *'facilitator'* is used by many authors to describe a teacher who shares some of the leadership with the students and fosters learner autonomy by acting as more of a resource than an instructor or transmitter of knowledge and using pair and group work at length.

Teachers may play several of these many roles in the course of teaching a lesson. The capacity to assume these roles effectively depends to a large extent on their professional expertise, their experience and on the rapport they establish with their students. After all, teaching and learning are essentially two parts of a collaborative process.

4. Student grouping

An important aspect which should not be neglected is the organization of the students. The unfolding of the lesson and the performance of activities also depend on the size of the groupings into which the class is divided, the arrangement of their seats, even on the naming of the group communicators.

The most common student groupings in today's second language classroom are: lockstep, pair work, group work and individual work.

In *lockstep*, students are under the control of the teacher. Usually, whole-class teaching is used at the beginning of the lesson in order to quickly focus the students' attention on a language item or on a learning task. Since this mode of teaching involves teaching all the students together, teachers should decide, depending on the teaching situation, when it is appropriate, as well as the amount of time allotted and the moment of transition to other types of learning in which students have to collaborate in order to accomplish the interactive tasks in meaningful ways.

Pair work in the course of the lesson is absolutely essential as it offers many advantages: the learners get a chance to work independently, which is good for motivation and good preparation for group work when they will have to take a lot of responsibility for what they do; they can face and talk directly to one another, so it is much closer to the way language is used outside the classroom; pair work provides some variety during the lesson – two or three short pair work activities are a good way of breaking up the lesson.

Group work is widely used as a means to increase students' talking time by providing students with meaningful didactic tasks that engage them in practicing the newly taught language items; clear responsibilities should be assigned so that each learner knows what is expected of him/her: more challenging tasks, such as acting as the group reporter or taking notes about the group discussion for the better students and monitoring the use of native language (inevitable in monolingual classrooms) for the weaker more reluctant student ones.

Both pair work and group work provide opportunities for sustained interaction, being recommended for promoting accuracy, as well as fluency in language use.

Individual work allows students to work on their own, at their own pace on activities suited to their proficiency level and relevant for their needs and interests. There are didactic activities in a lesson where students are asked to perform individually – listening to or reading a text, writing a paragraph on the basis of a topic sentence or a short narrative with the first/last lines provided. This type of work helps promote self-esteem and leads to students' gaining control and becoming independent in handling situations similar to the language used outside class.

Conclusions

The instructional-educational process is based on the teacher exercising influence over students. This influence can occur only within effectively managed classes. The main issue is not whether the lesson is teacher-centred or student-centred, but whether a fair ratio between them is achieved.

A lesson in which the teacher exercises total control, leaving no room for the students to take responsibility for their learning is as bad as a lesson in which there are opportunities for the students to discuss among themselves, but no response from the teacher to their difficulties and no learner feedback.

The students' freedom of performance on tasks (the strategies, procedures and interaction patterns they employ in completing the didactic tasks) is dependent on the teacher's careful planning and preparation of the lesson and in effective class management. The tactful way of exercising strict or relaxed control depends on the learning situation he/she is in and the students he/she works with.

References

[1] Biao, Zuo, *Misconceptions: Clarifying the Concept of Control*, English Teaching Forum, Vol. 34, No. 3-4 July/October, pp. 2-10, 1996.

[2] Richards, Jack C., Bohlke, David, *Creating Effective Language Lessons*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2011, p. 25.

[3] Biao, Zuo, *Op. cit*.

[4] Kumaravadivelu, B., *Beyond Methods: Macrostrategies for Language Teaching*, New Delhi, Orient Longman, 2006, p. 44.

[5] Choudhury, Anindya Syam, *Classroom roles of English language teachers: The traditional and the innovative*, Contemporary Online Language Education Journal, I, pp. 33-40, 2011.

[6] Zoltán, Dörnyei, *Motivational strategies in the language classroom*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2001, p. 60.

[7] Sue, B., *The 7 Roles of a Teacher in the 21st Century*, 2013, retrieved from https://www.etoninstitute.com/blog/item/26-the-7-roles-of-a-teacher-in-the-21st-century

[8] Harmer, Jeremy, *The practice of English language teaching*, London, Longman, 4th edition, 2007,   p. 57.