THE DISCOURSE NEEDS OF AN EFL CLASSROOM

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The Student Audience

The student audience for this task is EFL children between the ages of 4 and 6 who have never been exposed to English before (I'll refer to them as 'zero kids', because they don't know any English at all.) They are ideally in class for at least three hours a day, Monday through Friday, with a half-hour of break after the first hour and a half of class. Because these children have never been instructed in English at all, they lack alphabet recognition, phonics recognition, reading, writing, basic vocabulary, and recognition of question and answer format. For some of them, the EFL classroom is their first venture into a school classroom.

The Discourse Needs of the Student Audience

EFL students need to accomplish three discourse goals: 1) communicative competence (achievement), 2) social interaction with their peers in the target language (affiliation) and 3) turn taking strategies (power/control.)   These discourse needs are based on Maslow's idea that every individual shares the desire to fulfill certain needs, including (but not limited to) 1) achievement, 2) affiliation, and 3) power. Achievement is defined as the feeling of accomplishment an individual has when he/she completes a task to a satisfactory conclusion. Affiliation is the feeling of involvement or friendship an individual has when he/she can relate well to his/her peers in a given situation. Power is the feeling of control that one is able to exert over one's environment and/or peers.

Establishing Communicative Competence

Communicative competence is the ability to speak the target language with confidence. This is especially difficult to teach to zero kids, as they have had no experience with the target language before they entered into the classroom. The first priority for the teacher is to ensure that she/he has control over the children in the classroom, lest they run amok. This is done by teaching the children basic classroom commands such as: "Sit down", "Stand up", "Walk", "Run", or "Stop." Other important phrases include "Break time", "Don't hit", "Don't kick", and "Don't bite". Once the basic physical commands are learned, the teacher can move on to such commands as "Put your book away" or "Come here". The key to the students learning these commands is simple: lots of repetition. Another useful tool when teaching these phrases is the use of gestures to animate what you want the student to do. For example, if your command is "Sit down", a good way to teach the kids the phrase is to physically sit down as you're saying the phrase. Allow the children to imitate your movements along with your phrase. Such an activity may seem time-consuming, but just imagine trying to get a child to sit down in his desk if she/he was never taught the English command, "Sit down." The result would be a child up and running around the classroom while the teacher repeatedly says, "Sit down, sit down, sit down." The semantical meaning of "Sit down" is lost on a child who only knows "Sit down" in his/her home language.

The second priority in establishing communicative competence in zero kids is to teach them basic phrases in English. Such basic phrases include:

Hello/Goodbye/Bye-Bye.
How are you? I'm fine, thank you and you? I'm fine, thank you.
What is your name? My name is...
What do you see? I see..
What do you hear? I hear...
Can I use your pen? pencil? crayons? colors? Yes/No

When teaching these basic phrases initially, the teacher should use direct scaffolding to teach the children how to phrase the proper answer. After much repetition, the children will begin to answer without scaffolding prompting. The list of 'basic phrases' grows as the children's communicative competence increases, and the teacher should not drill phrases that have already been firmly established in the students' lexicons. The instructor should continually follow the progress of her/his students so that they are always being offered new, functional sentences of English. One good idea is to monitor the classroom to see what the communicative needs are. If, for example, one child wants to borrow another child's crayons and the teacher hears them speaking in the target language to achieve this goal, then the teacher knows that this is an area which needs to be covered during the conversational part of the lesson. Such monitoring is crucial to EFL students' successful acquisition of communicative competence.

Social Interaction in the Target Language

Establishing social interaction by using the target language is another challenging goal in the EFL classroom. Because the students are all from the same home culture, they will undoubtedly share a language, and will prefer to converse with each other in the home language (L1) rather than use the target language (L2.) Similarly, the students will most often respond to the teacher using L2, and never L1 (unless the teacher is a product of the home culture.) In order for language acquisition to be productive, however, the students must learn to portray their personalities in L2, despite their obstinacy.

Peer socialization in EFL classrooms most often happens naturally. Once again, because the children share in L1, they will most often form relationships through the discourse of the home culture first. It is the job of the EFL teacher to utilize activities in the classroom that allow the children to formulate relationships with each other using the target language. One activity would be to divide the children into groups of three of four and allow them to 'teach' English to each other using a stimulus that had been introduced to them during the course. One student should be designated as the 'little teacher' (Kramsch [1987]calls this person the 'gatekeeper' [p. 26]) for two minutes or so, then should appoint another student in the group to take over so that everyone has a turn. Other ways of stimulating social interaction between the children is to allow them to engage in pair work while they are completing an activity, or to allow them to perform a mini role play in order to practice new phrases or vocabulary. All types of student interactions need to be constantly monitored by the instructor so that the children do not revert to L1.

Teaching Turn Taking Strategies to EFL Students

  All EFL language learning originally involves the students speaking out and repeating what the teacher says. Often the students answer as a chorus, as beginning language competence does not allow for a student to raise his or her hand and speak an entire sentence of English. After the students have developed enough communicative competence to speak whole sentences (regardless of syntactical ability), they should be re-instructed in the art of taking turns. Kramsch says, "Students must learn to listen to the utterance of the previous speaker across its delivery, process it [and] interpret it, create and formulate a reply as they listen, find a natural completion point in the speaker's discourse, and take the floor at the appropriate moment." An EFL teacher basically has to shift gears, from engaging in repetition and having a teacher-oriented teaching style, to engaging in listening and allowing the students to practice L2. He/She must teach students that listening to each other is an important skill.

  One way for the students to practice taking turns is to insist on the students raising their hands when they want to speak. By reinforcing the idea that one student cannot 'talk over' another, the students learn to be patient and to listen to what the other person is saying. Another strategy is to teach the children to wait for pauses in another person's speech before starting to speak their own thoughts. Yet another idea is for the teacher to facilitate in his/her own actions the way he/she expects the students to listen to each other's comments. For example, if the teacher is surrounded by three students, one of whom has already engaged the teacher in a conversation while the other two are constantly trying to get the teacher's attention, the teacher should let the student who originated the conversation finish what he/she is saying before turning to the others. By modeling what to do in a situation where everyone wants to talk to you at one time, the instructor communicates non-verbally what is expected of the students as well.

An Outline of Ideas on Teaching the Needs of the Discourse

I. Communicative Competence
  A. Physical commands
    1) While saying the command, mimic the activity that is expected. Allow the students to have fun with this; turn it into a game.
    2) After the students have been introduced to commands, pick one student to say the command and have the class follow his/her instruction (teacher can aid the student by whispering the commands in his/her ear, scaffolding by immediately performing the command that the child says, etc.)
  B. Basic phrases
    1) Dedicate one part of the lesson plan to speaking – introduce new words to the students by using lots of scaffolding (answer your own question)
    2) Have the children come up to the front in pairs and play 'ask and answer' to demonstrate the use of basic phrases to the class (ex. How are you? I'm fine, thank you and you? I'm fine, thank you pattern)
    3) Walk around the classroom during another activity (such as coloring) and ask each child a phrase individually (scaffold if necessary)
    4) Vocabulary acquisition – draw pictures on the board of some of the objects or animals in a song (for the Itsy Bitsy Spider, for example, the teacher could draw a

spider, rain, the sun, down [arrow pointing down], etc.) Point to the pictures and say the name. When the students are familiar with the pictures, call on individuals to come up and erase a certain picture off the board (this works for phonics also; draw a picture of S-suh-spider and ask the children to erase the S-suh-spider – the familiar format expedites greater learning)

      C. ABC recognition

          1) Sing the ABC song to familiarize the children with the names of the letters.

          2) Use flash cards to introduce the letters and their names – show 10-12 cards at a time so as not to overwhelm the children. Ask the children to repeat the name of the letter you say; eventually ask them to name letters of the alphabet out of sequence

          3) After flash cards have been modeled, allow individual children to be the 'little teacher' and show the cards to the group, again asking for the spontaneous response

          4) Play alphabet bingo (store bought)

          5) Throw plastic letters on the floor and allow the children to come and pick up whatever letter you call out (the bigger letters the better)

          6) Allow the children to use alphabet puzzles to reinforce ABC order and names of the letters – children may complete the puzzles in pairs

          7) Bring in English magazines (usually available even in EFL environments) and ask the children to find certain letters – As, Ps, Qs, etc. Ask them to paste the letters onto a piece of construction paper.

II. Social Interaction Using L2

      A. Conversational interaction

          1) Engage the children in role-plays using phrases that were taught earlier in the lesson

          2) Set up the children's desks into two groups that are facing each other. Have each group ask the other questions and have the other respond.

          3) Have story time and ask the children open-ended questions (Ex. What color is the ball? How many balls do you see?)

          4) Allow the students to handle the same materials as the teacher (instructional poster sets, etc.) Separate the children into groups and ask them to quiz the other children on what they see/what is it?

      B. Physical interaction

          1) Play charades – choose from a list of words students are familiar with

          2) Sing songs that have actions or make up actions to go along with songs to promote interest in singing them (London Bridge is Falling Down, Itsy Bitsy Spider, Where is Thumbkin?)

III. Turn Taking Strategies

      A. Raising their hand

          1) When involved in any activity, announce to the students that you'll only allow children to play who are raising their hands

          2) Positively reinforce children who raise their hands

          3) Play Simon Says to reinforce the phrase "Raise your hand."

4) Refuse to continue an activity if the students are calling out an answer. Wait until everyone is quiet and raising his/her hand.
B. Teacher Modeling
    1) Allow children to 'teach' in small groups. Each 'little teacher' must control the actions of the group and choose someone else to be the 'little teacher' after a few minutes. (This is a good opportunity for the teacher engage in reflection of her/his teaching style, as the students will imitate what they have seen.)

CONCLUSION

When a teacher is setting up his/her EFL classroom, he/she must strive to create a classroom that addresses student expectations, promotes use of L2 (use posters, books, posted student work), encourages students to take risks, and acknowledges how frustrating intercultural interaction can be. The instructor should pay attention to every detail so as to make the EFL classroom as culturally representative as possible and to create a conducive culture in the classroom while providing the tools necessary to aid progress in all needs of discourse.

REFERENCES

Kramsch, Claire. (1987). Interactive discourse in small and large groups. In Wilga M. Rivers (Ed.), <u>Interactive language learning</u>. (pp. 17-30). Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.