

An Analysis of the Responses of L2 Learners in Stimulated Recall Sessions with reference to Classroom Interactions in a Tertiary Level English as an L2 Course

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Abstract

The primary purpose of this paper is to elaborate on the findings during the stimulated recall sessions or class discourse recollections in relation to a study of classroom interactions in undergraduate English as an L2 Classroom in Assam. The stimulated recall sessions or the class discourse recollections had two phases. In the first phase, the learner participants were asked to retrospect on their perceptions of the classroom activities and interactions using the audio recordings of the selected class sessions. Along with the audio recordings, the corresponding field notes were also provided to the learner participants to assist them in recalling the class sessions. In cases when the learner participants had nothing to reflect upon, the researcher asked them to recall their thoughts and perceptions of the classroom discourse at various moments selecting the portions useful from the field notes and the audio recordings.

Key words: L2, Culture Teaching, Pedagogy, SLA, ELT

Introduction

According to Gass and Mackey (2000), the purpose of stimulated recall sessions is to “seek to uncover cognitive processes that are not evident through simple observation” (p. 20). For convenience of discussion, since these sessions were oriented towards the culture-related discourse in English as an L2 classroom in a study of classroom interactions, they are termed as class discourse recollections (Doley, 2015). To be precise, these class discourse recollections were part of the study that attempted to collect data in relation to thought processes in various classroom activities, discussions, and interactions of the learner participants.

The Class Discourse Recollections

There were 12 class discourse recollections based on 6 recorded class sessions with 12 learner participants enrolled in the course. The researcher conducted the recall sessions individually with the learner participants. Only those class sessions which had more classroom discussions and interactions between the instructor and the learners and among the learners were followed by the class discourse recollections conducted by the researcher. The schedules of the recall sessions were given to each of the learners according to their convenience. The learner participants were informed of the schedule for the recall sessions a day ahead of the date and time for the sessions. In the case of the learner participants making a request for a change in the schedule because of some reason, a new date and time of their convenience was given to them as per their request. The point that was stressed by the researcher in the scheduling of the sessions with the learner participants was that there should not be excessive time duration between the class sessions and the recall sessions in question (Stern,1983).

Structure of the Class Discourse Recollections

As far as the structure of the recall sessions is concerned, the sessions were divided into two sections. In the first section of the recall sessions, the learner participants were requested to retrospect on the opinions and statements made by them with regard to the discussions and interactions during the class sessions. It was designed to refresh the learner participants' memory very quickly to get them prepared for more specific questions about the class sessions (Putz,1997). In the second section of the recall sessions, more specific questions were asked. To begin with, the learner participants were requested to give their interpretations of the classroom discourse that they recalled. The researcher followed this up with three common questions to all the learner participants which served as the main body of the recall sessions. The first of these three questions was-“What did you expect to learn from that particular poem on that day?” The second one was- “What did you think about that particular discussion on that moment?” The third question was- “Did you have any personal experience to support your comment on that moment?”

Although the recall sessions were pre-designed along a particular structure, the researcher did not maintain a similar structure for each of the learner participants (R.C.Laffayette,1997). The structure of the recall sessions was adjusted to the requirements of the individual recall sessions. The questions other than the three overarching questions mentioned in the previous section asked by the researcher showed variations as per the learner participants' input on the classroom discussions and interactions during the recall sessions. Later, the data collected from the transcripts of the recall sessions were coded into different categories by the researcher.

Learning Goals and Expectations of the Learners

It is interesting note that the learning goals and expectations expressed by the learner participants in relation to the individual class sessions showed similar trend as the general goals and expectations from the course stated by the learner participants in the questionnaire. Learning new words was the expectation of nine out of 12 learner participants from the single class sessions.

Eight of these nine learner participants who said learning new words was their expectation from the class sessions in question added that they expected to learn new phrases and expressions in English from these individual class sessions. Some of these learners were highly enthusiastic about the class sessions in relation to their expectations. One of these learners said, "Before we were not so familiar with the olden form of English, we needed to learn that. The words used in the poem, the rhyme schemes, and all that contributed." Another learner participant said, "I wanted to learn some, as I came across some new words you know, to an extent."

Still another learner expressed his expectation of learning new words this way, "Yes, I wanted know many different words which I did not know before. When I read the poem then I saw these words, so I wanted to know about the meanings of these words." Expressing a similar expectation from the class session in question, another learner participant said, "It...poem improves vocabulary a lot. By reading the poem, I can learn new words and know about the language he, the poet, used in the poem" and made a statement about the quality of the language

used in the poem saying, “Its standard, the level of the language is very standard and I needed to learn a lot from the poem.” The learner participant was referring to the use of rhetorical devices and diction in the poem as he clarified in the statements that followed.

Another learner, who had similar expectation, stated, “Because in the poem, there is a conversation, a conversation which I have not come across before. The rhyme-scheme, idioms, phrases, which I have not seen before. Basically the whole book, since it has only poems. I did not read these poems before. So, first of all I thought it would upgrade my language in some way or the other, my conversation in English and all.” Here, the learner was referring to communication skills by the word “conversation”, as he clarified later part of his recall session. But there were some learners who showed a moderate expectation from the class sessions in question. One of such learner participants said, “I didn’t expect much. The poems were written in a language that’s not that useful for day to day conversations. It’s fifty-fifty.”

The responses of the learner participants to the first of these three questions concentrating on their personal expectations from the class sessions in question show that expectations related to communication skills in English was at the top of their priority list. The class discourse recollections were conducted by the researcher only around the class sessions taught by the instructor, Bhola mastor. The other class sessions taught by the rest of the teachers were not considered for discussion in the recall sessions. The learner participants were asked to focus on all the classroom activities of the class sessions including the written assignments and surprise quiz organized by the instructor, Bhola mastor, in the recall sessions.

One learner participant referred to probable questions in the end semester examination as their expectation from the class sessions. The learner spoke about the importance of these examinations in terms of his individual career goals. He stressed the point that the marks that one gets in these examinations decide one’s future plans. So he was worried about the questions asked in these examinations. He expected that the instructor to bring up the probable questions and explanatory discussions of these questions in the class sessions. Another two learners stated that they expected a discussion on human life, as they were reading poems in the course, from

the class sessions. They explained that the reading of the poems would benefit them by giving them a criticism of life. Reading of the poem could, they said, “make them better human beings.”

Although majority of the learner participants had development of communication skills for their initial expectations from the class sessions in question, they made adjustment to their expectations during the actual class sessions. Their initial expectations before the actual class sessions and the overall expectations from the course under study expressed in an earlier questionnaire showed similar pattern. But they made adjustments to these expectations as the class sessions went on. Along with the learning of the English language skills, learning of cultural issues also started to capture the attention of the learners.

Learners’ Feedback on the Instructor’s Elaborations

When the instructor asked the learner participants about some specific moments of classroom discourse during the class sessions ahead of the recall sessions, majority of the learner participants wanted to comment on the instructor’s explanatory comments in the class sessions. Referring to the poem which was discussed during the class session in question and instructor’s explanatory comments on the poem, one of the learner participants said, “He made me think of what the poet might be going through, what was going though when he heard her singing.” Another one comments on the choice of words of the instructor in terms of presenting a good model for language learning in the class sessions, “The line which he said that variety is the spice of life as he was talking about the varieties. Yes, it’s true, without variety, life will really be so boring. Moreover, he said that we would have seen the same faces every day; it would really be, like you have, the same food items we go on having. It would be very boring. So, variety is needed in our life.”

Although there were some positive comments on the explanatory commentary of the instructor, the structure and length of the comments and elaboration received mixed response from the learner participants. One of the learner participants thought that his lectures were “very lengthy at times and they lacked more interactive quality.”

Another learner commented that the instructor had “a plan in mind but he brought up too many issues at one go. There should have been less number of topics to handle in the class.” Justifying the instructor’s dealing with too many issues “at one go”, he further said that the instructor might have been “forced to do so, because he had so many things to say within a very limited length of time. The syllabus is too big for so much of attention on minor issues in the text as he did.” Another learner participant commented that the explanatory commentary provided by the instructor were very informative and learned, “too much of background information left little time for the poems themselves.”

Still another learner reported that he found the explanatory commentary of the instructor rather “difficult to follow” as the instructor “went very fast”, giving the learner participants less “time to ponder and to respond.”

Learners’ Reaction to Co-Learners’ Comments

As far as the co-learners comments and interactions were concerned only one learner participant, Gayatri, pointed out that the discussions among the co-participants in the course in the later part of the class sessions were “very effective.” Gayatri further said that the interactions among the co-learners anchored by the instructor “made her forget the time of the class” as whenever it happened the learners were “too busy in their minds to say something about the topic.” She referred to the class session when the topic of same-sex friendship was discussed in the classroom. But she also pointed out the fact that the co-learners at times “got too attacking as they laughed at something they did not have the mind to accept.” The discussion and debate on that topic “kept on haunting” her “even after that day. They teased me with names and titles I didn’t like.”

Despite such negative experience of the after effect of debates and discussion among co-learners, she was positive towards such debates and interactions in the classroom as she said that such things may “happen after such discussions. But things work out”.

One of the learner participants referred to the need for showing his presence felt in the classroom during the discussions in the class session in question. He said, “I wanted to show my mind. That I can also think and say you know. That was what I was thinking that moment.” He also said that his willingness to say something also “depends on the topic.” On “how much” he “knows about it.”

Causes of the Learners’ Interactions as Expressed in the Class Discourse Recollections

As far as the third question of the three overarching questions asked by the researcher is concerned, majority of the learner participants, 7 out of the 12 participants, said that recollection of past experience had an impact on what they said in the class sessions in question.

One of the learners participants said that he got affected by a memory of an incident of the past when a made a point in the interaction about same-sex friendship but he said, “Yes, there are. But...can’t share.”

Another learner participant said that he felt the need to speak something when the topic of the power of death in the discussion of the Christian concept of death was “hitting the floor” as his “grandfather died suddenly of stroke but it’s such a power that I cannot go against its will.”

Another learner participant informed that he got himself in the middle of the discussion when the instructor told the story of the master and the three servants from the Bible because it reminded him about himself and his habits. He said, “It strikes me because it resembles me a lot, because I am a bit lazy, so I don’t anything on time. I keep postponing my works, so from this poem I got to learn that I should not postpone thing for tomorrow.”

Still another learner participant referred to the discussion in the class session when she commented on the power of the beauty of nature as they were discussing the nightingale and the highlands in UK in the class. She recollected an experience from her past and said, “...while, while I was travelling to a place, I was travelling to Jorhat, there I was travelling with my cousins

to a countryside place, I saw...saw some people are working in the, working in their paddy fields and they too were singing something and expressing their feelings. Whether they were expressing their feelings or not, but when I was travelling, the expression of the people was in a happy mood, they were happy while reaping their grains and the smile could be seen in...the smile could be seen in their faces. Although these people were unknown to me...but the sweet song...sweet song and the normal use of language mesmerized...and mesmerized me and also made me think that although...it does not mind whether people are rich or people, only the thing that matters is how we enjoy our lives and how you enjoy our life and express our feelings in front of everyone.”

One learner participant mentioned the fact a contemporary political incident motivated him to participate and comment on the issue of dictatorship when they were discussing the poem “Hawk Roosting” in the class. He said, “Such leaders, Hitler like people, are everywhere. In modern India the case is no different.” Then he went to discuss the political leaders that he had in mind. Two learner participants responded by saying that a scene from a movie actually inspired them to say what they said in the class sessions.

One of the learners said, “I saw that movie Troy and I understood the story of Ulysses. I knew about Achilles and the Greeks and the Trojan horse from that movie. As the topic came for discussion, I was happy to say something.” The learner was referring to the discussion of the poem “Ulysses” in which the instructor narrated the story of the Trojan War to build up the necessary background information.

Two learner participants spoke about their curiosity to know and discuss human relationship made them participate in the discussions in the class sessions in question. Both of them referred to the discussion of same sex friendship in relation to the sonnets by William Shakespeare.

One of the learners said, “It’s not here like that. We sleep together in the villages but, we are not such people. People don’t mind young men in the same bed.” He was referring to the fact

that the idea of such relationship on the physical level is not understood and suspected in the villages where he was born. ’

Conclusion

In conclusion, it can be said that learners took various roles in their interactions with one another and with the instructor creating a dynamic and multi-faceted classroom. Individual differences among the learners in terms of their expectations and perceptions resulted in differential interpretations of the classroom discourse. The learners constantly adjusted themselves to the various instructional practices and structures of discourse in the classroom both in relation to the instructor and the co-learners (Spada & Lightbown,2009). Although some learners exhibited reservations in terms of their initial expectations and later involvement in the interactions in the actual classroom discourse, majority of the learners had positive view of the classroom activities in the class sessions. It reflects the complex nature of a L2 classroom where instead of homogeneous group of learners exhibiting static constancy in terms of expectations and interaction strategies, there is fluidity and flexibility in their approach and interpretations of classroom discourse between the instructor and the learners and among the co-learners.

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