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Informal Feedback in the English Language Classes of Gauhati University: An Ethnographic
Study

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Abstract

According to Thomas (1987), though learning is a private process, it is also the result of the external interaction which takes place between the participants viz. the teacher and the learners in the classroom.

The language classroom can be considered as a microcosm of society and as such the interaction in the classroom can be considered as a reflection of the communication outside it.

The cultural conditioning and defining of the roles of the teacher and the learner play an important role in the teaching-learning process. The feedback that is provided by the teacher is an important part of classroom interaction. This paper attempts to determine the quality of the informal feedback in the English language class and also tries to ascertain the extent to which it is provided to the undergraduate students of Gauhati University. It is believed that the findings will throw light on the quality of classroom interaction and also assist in raising awareness about its importance.

A few aspects of feedback that will be analysed in this paper in an ethnography of communication (EoC) framework are provided below.

- How does the relationship between the participants i.e. the teacher and the learners influence the kind of feedback and in turn the quality of teaching and learning in the classroom?
- Does cultural conditioning play a role in the classroom interaction?

For this study a survey was conducted in three colleges affiliated to Gauhati University.

Students and teachers of the General English paper were interviewed with the help of semi-

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structured interviews. The findings indicate that the feedback system is almost non-existent in colleges due to numerous problems that need to be addressed in an expedited manner. The reasons for the faulty feedback system have also been addressed in the paper.

Keywords: ethnography of communication, informal feedback, classroom interaction, cultural conditioning



**Informal Feedback in the English Language Classes of Gauhati University: An
Ethnographic Study**

Introduction

According to Thomas (1987), irrespective of the pedagogic approach taken, it is the interaction in the classroom, the assumption and assignment of different kinds of participant role, which mediates between teaching and learning. Be it within the classroom or without, communication is governed by a set of rules.

Students in Assam are lacking in the communication skills that would enable them to walk shoulder to shoulder with their counterparts in other parts of the world. This inability to perform in English may be due to a number of ethnographic reasons like the quality and quantity of communication that takes place in the language class, the relationship between the participants in the classroom and so on.

The cultural conditioning and defining of the roles of the teacher and the learner play an important role in the teaching-learning process. The feedback that is provided by the teacher is an important part of classroom interaction. This paper studies the quantity and quality of feedback provided by the teacher to the undergraduate students of Gauhati University from an ethnographic perspective.

Rationale behind the study

To understand the rationale behind this study, the significance of informal spoken feedback as a part of classroom interaction and the reason for borrowing the ethnography of communication (EoC) as the framework for this study need to be highlighted.

Hattie and Timperley (2007) have defined feedback as the information that is provided to someone on the basis of their performance or understanding. Mackey (2006) has observed that a number of second language acquisition researchers have claimed that the feedback provided by the teacher during conversational interaction helps in L2 acquisition. This claim has been further supported by experimental studies.

By that definition, informal feedback can be said to be the information that is provided by the teacher as a part of an ongoing interaction with the learner. Therefore, a cordial and comfortable relationship between the teacher and the learner is a must for informal guidance and counselling given by the teacher and also for the learners to receive it in the intended manner.

A healthy feedback system is one in which there is a substantial volume of interaction between the giver and the receiver. The receiver can disagree, ask a question, clarify a doubt by repeating the information, or even talk back in the communication process. The last point made of talking back is especially significant in the context of this paper as in the greater Indian pedagogic landscape, it is almost sacrilegious for a learner to talk back to the teacher. The Ethnography of Communication (EoC) has been borrowed as the frame of reference for this study in order to understand the role of cultural conditioning in providing effective informal feedback in the General English classes of Gauhati University, Assam.

According to Barua (2011), the language classroom can be considered as a microcosm of society and as such the interaction in the classroom can be considered as a reflection of the communication outside it. However, the language used in the classroom will be different from that used outside it in terms of topic, quantity of communication, relationship among the participants, the place in which communication will take place and so on. The style adopted for communication in the classroom will be different from that used outside the classroom. Moreover, the quantity of communication will differ. A student is more likely to talk less in the classroom than outside it. This is because in the greater Indian cultural context, young people are conditioned to keep quiet.

Literature review

Ann Malamah Thomas' book, *Classroom Interaction* talks about the different types of classroom interaction between the teacher and the learner and among the learners. This work further reinforced the researcher's belief that feedback provided by the teacher is an important part of classroom interaction. However, the scope of the book does not deal directly with the role of informal feedback in classroom interaction. The researcher's PhD thesis on '*Determining the English language needs of the Gauhati University Undergraduates*' was also a point of reference for this study as it uses the ethnography of communication as the framework of study. However, it does not discuss the aspect of feedback at length.

Kamberi's (2013) study on *The significance of teacher feedback in EFL writing for tertiary level foreign language learners*, though on providing feedback on students' writing, has shown

that direct corrective feedback from the teacher is preferred to feedback from peers by the majority of the participant students.

A number of researchers including Klimova (2015) have observed that though its importance is acknowledged, there is very limited research on the meaning of feedback in the classroom.

The work of Mackey (2006) is the closest to the present study. In his paper, the relationship between the interactional feedback given in the classroom, instructed learners noticing of L2 forms during classroom interactions and their subsequent development of L2 was studied.

In his work, *Interactional feedback and classroom L2 instruction*, Mackey (2013) observes that when the instructions are focused on form then various types of interactions are encouraged. He also refers to Long (1998), according to whom any interactional move that is aimed at making learners more aware of language forms is known as 'focus on form'. This process is 'crucially incidental' as the students' attention is drawn to the forms while engaged in meaning-focused communication through interactional feedback. However, according to Ellis (2001), the research on this kind of incidental focus on form is quite limited.

Research questions

A few aspects of feedback that will be analysed in this paper in an ethnography of communication (EoC) framework are provided below.

1. How does the relationship between the participants i.e. the teacher and the learners influence the kind of feedback and in turn the quality of teaching and learning in the General English classroom?

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2. Does cultural conditioning play a role in the classroom interaction?

Wright (1989) has talked about the social role and status of teachers and learners and how in most societies, the social roles of teachers and learners are accorded high and low status respectively. It will be worthwhile to look at this aspect and how it influences the giving of feedback in the classroom.

Methodology

The method that was adopted for this study was the survey research method using the Google forms application. A total of 60 participants were randomly selected from three different colleges in and around Guwahati city. The instrument that was used was a questionnaire designed by the researcher.

Findings

1. According to the student respondents, they had three to four English language classes in a week.
2. How does your teacher teach in the English language classroom?

	Frequency count
Gives lectures only	42.3%

Asks questions and gives lectures	53.8%
Gives tasks, activities, discusses with the students, gives group/pair work etc.	3.8%
Any other	0

3. Are you given any assignments in the class?

	Frequency count
Yes	69.2%
No	7.7%
Sometimes	23.1%

4. How often does your teacher tell you about your performance in the class or in the English paper?

	Frequency count
Never (there is no interaction between the teacher and students)	3.8%

Sometimes but very rare	57.7%
Always	38.5%

5. If the answer to Q no. 4 is 'Never', than why do you think that is so?

	Frequency count
Too many students	11.1%
The relationship with the teacher is such that there can be no interaction	0
Too little time and too much to cover in the course	33.3%
Don't know	11.1%
Any other	44.4%

6. Would you like to know how well you are doing in the English language paper from your teacher in an informal manner?

	Frequency
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	count
Yes, of course.	96.2%
No. I would not like to interact with the teacher as I am not comfortable.	3.8%

7. What kind of interaction do you have in the English language class?

	Frequency count
No interaction. Teacher does most of the talking.	53.8%
There is a two – way conversation between the teacher and the students (in the form of Q and A sessions)	42.3%
There are interactions at different levels e.g. between the teacher and students, among the students etc.	3.8%

8. How will you describe the relationships of the students with their English language teacher?

	Frequency count
There is a good rapport between the teacher and the students	4%

Students are quite comfortable talking to their teachers but there is very little interaction	56%
Students are quite intimidated by the teachers so they maintain a distance	-----
Don't know	40%

**An ethnographic analysis of the feedback system in the General English classroom
based on the findings of the study**

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As already mentioned in the introduction, informal feedback can be considered as an integral part of classroom interaction. However, the findings of this study suggest that there is very limited scope for the undergraduate students of Gauhati University to obtain such feedback from the English language teacher as classroom interaction is very limited. If the B.A. General English class is considered as a communicative situation, the main communicative event in that situation would be a teacher delivering a lecture. It is a unidirectional flow of speech as she does not expect her students to speak during the class except on rare occasions when she asks them a question or corrects them when they make mistakes. Even in such situations, the students are seldom encouraged to speak. The message forms as gathered from the survey are explanations, instructions, questions from the teacher. The teacher controls the dynamics of the language class and is considered the supreme authority in the language and has complete power over the learners. The learner is the passive and silent receiver. The learner's silence in our language teaching and learning situation is a culturally conditioned one. The broader Indian culture does not encourage young people to

question their elders. They are brought up to believe that what the elders say cannot be questioned.

The effect of this cultural conditioning on the critical thinking ability of the learners is another potential area of research. They are rarely asked for their views on issues. Moreover, the learners do not participate in the classroom proceedings because of the fear of being either ridiculed or scolded by the teacher. This status quo persists inside the language class where learners remain tight-lipped in the presence of their teacher. There is a distance between the teacher and the learner in the language classroom, which can be one of the reasons for the lack of a robust feedback system in the General English classrooms of Gauhati University. The learners feel safe in the silence that is expected of them and therefore, the flow of speech in the class is mainly unidirectional.

The teachers, on their part, are aware of the demerits of teaching only by the lecture method, but, they end up delivering lectures because of reasons like lack of time to complete the prescribed course, large classrooms, few classes in a week etc. Cristopher F. Green et al (2007) have cited large class size, students' level of proficiency and time constraints as the usual reasons for the undeveloped discussion skills in the ESL/EFL classroom.

These difficulties can be overcome with proper training. For instance, it is a misconception that group work and pair work cannot be carried out in large classes. Students are the passive listeners but if given a chance they would welcome role plays, games and any activity that would require active participation on their part.

According to the student respondents, the English language classes can be made more interactive by the introduction of activities like role play, group work/ pair work, seminars, language games, quizzes etc.

Conclusion

It is quite evident from the findings that the type of classroom interaction and the relationship between the participants in the language classroom do not facilitate any kind of informal feedback to take place in the General English classroom. The problems are deep-rooted and can be attributed to the twin factors of 'weight of tradition' and 'institutional inertia' in the words of Hutchinson and Waters (1987). Teachers and students are still playing the traditional roles of sender and receiver respectively in the English language classroom. This work has crucial implications for the teaching-learning process at the undergraduate level concerning English, in terms of potential application of the insights gained. It is anticipated that this study will be able to bring the prevalent feedback system into focus. These, in turn, can be utilized by the various agencies involved in the overall teaching-learning process, namely, policy makers, committees of courses, course designers, teacher trainers, teachers and evaluators.

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