Acceleration of Agency Though Conscious Decision-Making in the ESL Classroom: A Study of In-Service Teachers

Ipshita Hajra Sasmal

ABSTRACT

In this study, I started out with the aim of examining the relationship between teachers' decision-making processes and the interactional choices available to them in the classroom at the tertiary level. I would like to argue that awareness of this relationship will enable teachers to build theories and engage in continuous professional development (CPD). I made an attempt to examine the initial beliefs and assumptions of the teachers by reflecting on critical incidents from their teaching experience. I then identified their dominant interactional patterns, following which teachers justified and reflected on the interactional choices available to them using the Self Evaluation of Teacher Talk (SETT) tool (Walsh, 2006). This allowed me to identify the dominant or fundamental assumptions. At the next stage of reflection, the dominant theory of practice was reframed as the desired theory of practice in the form of simple statements indicating the macro principles on which teachers base their teaching. The desired theory of practice was implemented in the classroom and teachers initiated the change process. Finally, teachers reflected on means to sustain the changes.

Key words: CPD, critical reflection, decision-making, choices, theory of practice

INTRODUCTION

In a language classroom, the dynamics of interaction depend on the teacher's decisions and the interactional choices available to her/him. These decisions and subsequent actions also reflect how her/his beliefs operate in practice. Thus, the teacher's belief system is a powerful tool, which directly influences her/his decision-making process. In this paper, I will attempt to study ESL teachers' classroom discourse and argue that most often, teachers are unaware of the

interactional choices available to them. I will further argue that acceleration of agency in making conscious decisions with regard to classroom interaction can remarkably change the ESL classroom discourse. This can be done in the context of CPD in the form of mini-action research projects.

The study was conducted within the action research paradigm with six in-service teachers of English at the tertiary level. The objective of the study was to explore questions about classroom interaction, and how teachers could find solutions by reflecting on the interactional choices available to them. Such projects serve as a link between theory and practice of critical reflection in ELT, where "teacher agency" is the primary focus and enables teachers to question their existing beliefs and assumptions.

ASPECTS OF CLASSROOM INTERACTION

In this section, I will present some of the features of second language classroom communication that are *controlled* by the English language teacher. These include the IRF(Initiation-response-feedback) sequence, elicitation techniques, repair or feedback mechanisms and adapting speech for student needs. All of these aspects of classroom communication were taken up for investigation in the present study.

I studied communication or interaction in the L2 classroom within the IRF/E structure, where I is the teacher initiation, R is the student's response and F/E is the feedback, follow-up or evaluation (Sinclair & Coulthard, 1997; Johnson, 1995; Ellis, 1998; Walsh, 2002). The L2 classroom discourse has been found to present a structure where the teacher controls the topic as well as turn-taking. The teacher can thus "restrict or allow learners' interaction". Even in the most "decentralized" classrooms, it is "the teacher who orchestrates the interaction" (Breen, 1998, p. 119).

An extract of the interaction has been given as follows:

(I) T Can anyone tell me who is Sam Pitroda … without opening your books? Yes, Pratik?

(R) S He is an IT professional

(F) T He is an IT professional.

(I) T What is he known for?

(R) S2 He gave new [sic] direction to IT.

(F) T Okay. He gave a new direction to Information Technology in India.

In the above extract, for every response of the student, the teacher has two responses (initiation and feedback). Chaudron (1988) observes that "teacher talk" represents approximately two thirds of classroom speech.

In ESL classrooms, classroom discourse is dominated by teachers asking questions and students responding to those questions. Such *elicitation techniques* are also how teachers control classroom communication. Teachers typically use "closed" questions, which elicit short responses from the students. Other studies argue that referential questions produce more spontaneous responses than display questions (Brock, 1986 & Nunan, 1987).

Repair, like other classroom practices, is a ritual for teachers. They never question it as it is not intended as criticism. This ritual, which typically occurs in the feedback move (of the IRE sequence), however, impacts learning in a big way (Jarvis & Robinson, 1997). Teachers may correct errors directly or indirectly, overtly or covertly; they have many options. During the flow of a lesson, teachers must make split second decisions, which have consequences for the learning opportunities they present to their students. Feedback is generally considered to be evaluative (Allwright & Bailey, 1991). However, appropriate repair strategies which are related to the pedagogic goals of the lesson must be preferred over randomly selected choices. These strategies can be "language centered" or "content centered".

Teachers often modify their speech to suit student needs. Chaudron (1988), lists four aspects of teacher speech which are adapted to help student comprehension in the L2 classroom. Firstly, teachers use simplified vocabulary and avoid idiomatic expressions. Secondly, they use simplified grammar and short sentences. Pronunciation is also modified by using slower, clearer speech. Finally, teachers use a lot of facial expressions and gestures. Lynch's (1996) taxonomy discusses ways in which teachers adapt their speech to improve student comprehension. These include confirmation checks, comprehension checks, repetition, clarification requests, reformulation, completion and backtracking. However, these strategies can benefit students only when teachers make a conscious effort to keep in mind the intended learning outcomes while using them.

I would like to argue that teachers are not consciously aware of these aspects of classroom communication and the choices available to them. Their decisions are thus not based on conscious judgements but "routines" formed over years of teaching.

Choices and Decisions

Researchers have studied choices and decisions within the objective/behaviourist and subjective/cognitive paradigms. However, when these approaches to decision-making came under severe criticism, choice was considered from the socialist perspective. According to this view, choice is controlled and constrained by social

institutions. Social psychologists argue that an individual's cultural upbringing determines his/her choice preferences. Cultures can be either "*individualist*" or "*collectivist*". Harry Trandis, in his book *Individualism and Collectivism*, notes that "individualists are primarily motivated by their own needs, rights, and the contracts they have established with others and give priority to their personal goals over the goals of others" (Trandis as cited in Iyengar, 2011, p.31). Collectivist societies (such as that of Japan) are taught to privilege the "we" in their choices, and so they see themselves primarily in terms of the groups to which they belong, such as family, coworkers, village or nation.

Theoretical Framework for the Study

The following framework shows how beliefs are related to choices. All information is interpreted through an individual's system of beliefs and perception. Since beliefs are considered a "latent construct", a framework of reflection is proposed which "uncovers" these beliefs by understanding the choice process. Such an understanding, it is argued, will assist the teacher to "unearth" those beliefs which are otherwise difficult to articulate.
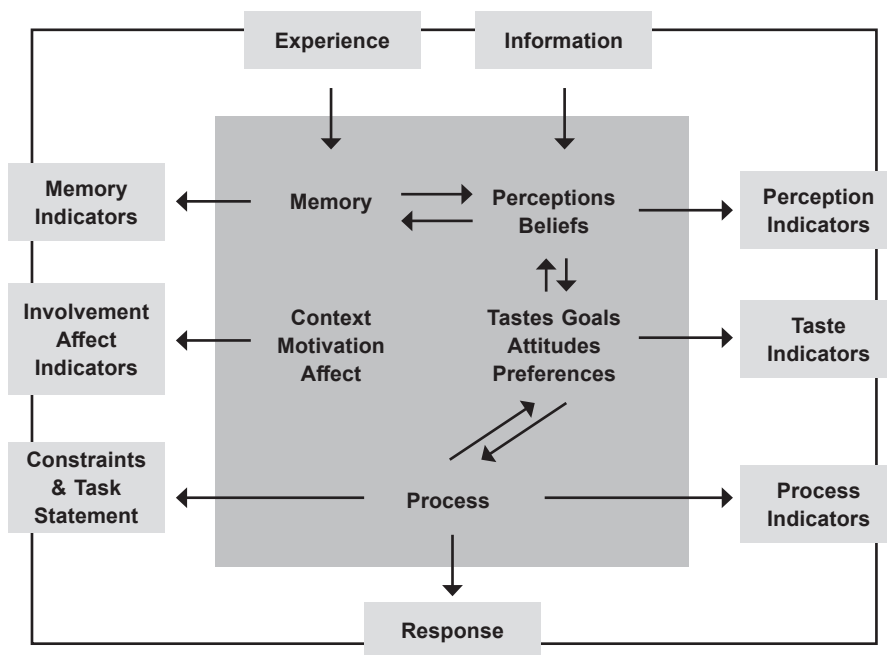

Figure1. Theoretical framework for modeling choice behaviour. Reprinted from Ben-Akiva et al. (1999, p. 192)

This discussion on decision and choice is advanced further through the description and characterization of a framework (Reflection on choices or RC), designed to help English language teachers critically reflect on their classroom interactional processes by understanding their "latent" beliefs. An attempt to study critical reflection of the individual teacher within the social context can provide a platform for "transformative action" within the classroom. These links provide an understanding of how teachers engage with their social worlds (at the level of the organization and communities of practice) and construct their professional identity (Fook & Gardner, 2007). However, in order to explore these links, a framework of critical reflection that is "neither purely individualistic nor essentially collective" is required.

REFLECTION ON CHOICES FRAMEWORK

Adapting from the models of Fook (2010), Fook & Gardner (2007), and Cottrell (2011), I present a *three stage* framework of critical reflection (Reflection on Choices) to study the behaviour of teacher choice as follows. The three stages of the framework are:

1.   Awareness building

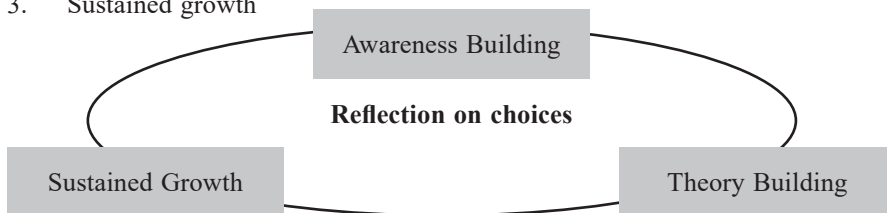2.   Theory building

3.   Sustained growth

Figure 2. The reflection on choices framework (Sasmal, 2014)

Each stage in the framework represents different levels of "changed awareness" and "changed practice". The entire process reflects how these levels are linked and how the learning from each stage is transferable. The levels in each stage are given as follows:

Stage 1: Awareness Building

Step1: Unearthing of initial assumptions and beliefs

Level 1: Experience sharing

Level 2: Narrating critical incidents

Level 3: Identifying initial assumptions and beliefs

Step 2: Moving to a deeper level through reflection on choices

Level 1: Evaluation of teacher talk

Level 2: Identifying choices

Level 3: Justifying choices to understand the dominant/fundamental assumptions and beliefs

Stage 2: Theory Building

Level1: Dominant/fundamental assumptions and beliefs against present (desired) experiences/values/assumptions/beliefs

Level 2: Analysis of the gap between espoused theory of practice and actual practice

Level 3: Dominant assumptions and beliefs are reframed as desired theory of practice

Stage 3: Sustained Growth

Level 1: Desired theory of practice is implemented in class

Level 2: Initiating the change process

Level 3: Taking steps towards sustaining the changes

In the following sections, I have closely examined ESL teachers' decision-making process in the classroom using the above framework of Reflection on Choice (RC).

METHODOLOGY

The case studies reported in this paper are part of a more detailed research on critical reflection and teachers' beliefs. Six teachers from three engineering colleges in Hyderabad, all with roughly five to ten years of teaching experience, participated in this research. At the time of the research, three out of six teachers were doing a PGCTE course at EFL University through distance learning. The data reported in this paper pertains to the responses of these three teachers. The responses of two teachers are discussed in greater detail.

The process of critical reflection was studied over two semesters (roughly one year). The study was qualitative in nature and included classroom observations (both audio and video), reflective grids, workshops, informal discussions and interviews as data collection tools. During this time, the six teachers met the researcher every two weeks, and as a group we conducted the first and second stages of critical reflection. In addition to this, formal workshops were

conducted every month during the first semester, where we discussed skill-based teaching versus content-based teaching, aspects of second language classroom communication and professional development. In the second semester, we studied the third stage in the framework on reflective choices, that of sustained growth through classroom observations, after-class interviews, discussions and teachers' log books. Teachers also wrote a reflective essay discussing some of the "critical incidents" from their experience.

As part of the compulsory English course, in the first year engineering curriculum, "speaking" is one of the skills that teachers need to focus on. This skill is taught through activities specified at the end of each unit of the text book. Presentations, group discussions, telephonic conversations, role plays and other speaking activities are also a part of the course.

During the pilot study, most of the teachers expressed concern with regard to the "teaching of speaking". The critical reflection incidents discussed in this paper are an attempt to "unearth" teachers' assumptions about their decision-making process in the classroom while teaching speaking skills. This has been done with a view to move from a reflective "awareness stage" to "a linking with practice" stage. This critical reflection by the teachers on their dominant assumptions allowed them to come up with some "changed practices". To conclude, the teachers were asked to develop a "theory of practice directly from experience", and consciously include in it their desired values/beliefs/perspectives rather than the dominant ones. We were aware that this process could function in several ways depending upon "the meaning of the incident for the individual teacher, how it was theorized and understood and what kind of assumptions were 'unearthed' or 'shaken up' for each teacher" Fook (2010, p.42).

In the first stage (awareness building), the teachers began by analyzing a "critical incident" from their experience. Within a group, each teacher was helped by others to reflect on the incident by being asking a set of questions that derived from the RC framework. Some of these questions were: what does your practice imply...?; what were you assuming when...?; how did you influence the situation through your presence, perceptions, interpretations and assumptions?; what were your beliefs about teaching speaking/communication/classroom interaction and where did they come from?; what perspectives are missing?; what are your own constructions (specially binary categories)?; what language patterns have you used and what do they imply?; what is your own thinking? An attempt was made to maintain a "reflective group culture" called "critical acceptance" (Fook, 2010, p. 42). This was thus an environment which provides optimum challenge as well as security. The aim of this environment was to encourage participants to find out for

themselves what kind of thinking and practices they wished to develop instead of teaching them a pre-determined framework.

HYPOTHESIS

The following hypotheses were formulated for the purpose of the study:

1.   Teacher's interactional choices reflect their beliefs and assumptions about classroom communication.

2.   Reflection on choices (RC) is an effective tool to uncover teacher's dominant/fundamental assumptions and beliefs.

3.   The RC framework enables teachers to link their awareness about dominant assumptions and beliefs with their classroom practice, resulting in changed awareness and practice.

DATA ANALYSIS

The six teachers (Deepa, Jayashree, Lakshmi, Sirisha, Sunita and Kadambari) who participated in the study were at different levels of their professional development cycle, as discussed in Tsui (2003).

In the first case study, Deepa experienced tensions in her beliefs and assumptions. She articulated them as follows:

•   Encouraging student participation while teaching from the textbook

•   Involving students while teaching vocabulary items

•   Decreasing teacher talk and encouraging more student interaction

•   Allowing students to manage topics of discussion

•   Ensuring that students understood explanations, instructions and feedback

She then analyzed her classroom discourse though a process of collaborative critical reflection within the RC framework. The following patterns emerged from her analysis:

Table 1. *Reflection on choices: Identifying choices*

Present pattern of classroom interaction	Other interactional choices available
Display/product/choice questions	Referentialquestions/process questions/meta process questions
Direct repair	Scaffolding/Seeking clarifications/ Confirmation checks

Content feedback	Scaffolding
Form-focused feedback	
Teacher echo	Asking students to speak loudly/ asking another student to repeat
Extended teacher turn	Extended learner turn

Deepa reflected on her interactional choices, matching them with her pedagogic goals as shown in table 1. She found a gap between her espoused beliefs and actual practice. In the process of justifying her practice, she discovered how she could attain her pedagogic goals by using other interactional choices (for example using referential questions rather than too many display questions). This helped her to re-frame her theory of practice. Deepa reached the "awareness stage" which was linked with "practice" through the process of theory building.

Table 2. *Identifying dominant assumptions and beliefs*

Dominant interactional feature	Dominant/fundamental belief/assumption
Display/product/choice questions	Classroom interaction must be strictly controlled by the teacher
Direct repair	Mistakes should be directly pointed out
Content feedback	Students' should be told directly what is the correct answer
Form-focused feedback	
Teacher echo	Teacher must repeat every student utterance so that everybody in the class can hear
Extended teacher turn	Teachers need to explain the content and thus need to speak more
IRF sequence	Classroom discourse must be strictly structured

In the second case study, Jayashree went through the same cycle of critical reflection as discussed earlier to arrive at her espoused beliefs and assumptions. However, when she analyzed her classroom discourse, very different patterns of interaction emerged. The glaring gap between her espoused beliefs and actual practice was so difficult for her to accept that she decided to discontinue the RC sessions and opt out of the study. However, after extensive discussions with her friends she joined back to complete the RC cycle.

The following were Jayashree's initial beliefs and assumptions:

•   Relying only on textbooks to teach English is not enough; additional material helps students to learn the language through interesting activities.

•   Students must be encouraged to speak in the classroom even if they resist.

•   The teacher can provide a "good model" for students when they read the text aloud.

Students must take feedback seriously.

These beliefs and assumptions were then evaluated against her classroom discourse and interactional choices. The following table shows Jayashree's dominant pattern of classroom interaction and her interactional choices:

Table 3. *Reflection on choices: Identifying choices*

Present pattern of classroom interaction	Other interactional choices available
Display/product/choice questions	Referential questions/process questions/ meta process questions
Direct repair/corrective repair	Scaffolding/Seeking clarifications/ Confirmation checks
Summarizing by the teacher	Summarizing by students
Completing student turn	Allowing student to complete turn, scaffolding
Extended teacher turn	Extended learner turn
Topic management by the teacher	Topic selection by students
Strict IRF pattern	Authentic interactional patterns
Predominance of Managerial and Materials mode	Including skills and classroom context modes

As Jayashree justified her interactional choices in various sessions of RC, she identified her dominant assumptions:

Table 4. *Identifying dominant assumptions and beliefs*

Dominant interactional choices	Dominant beliefs and assumptions
Display/product/choice questions	Classroom discourse must be controlled by the teacher
Direct repair/corrective repair	Students' mistakes need to be pointed out so that they can correct them

Summarizing by the teacher	The students did not understand the content of the text. The teacher's summary will help to "explain" the text in a simplified language
Completing student turn	Students need help from the teacher to complete a turn
Extended teacher turn	Teachers need to speak more than the students in the class
Topic management by the teacher	The teacher knows what topic will work in the class
Strict IRF pattern	Teacher controls the classroom interaction pattern
Elaborate critical feedback on students' public speaking skills	Elaborate feedback will help students to improve their speaking skills

After the dominant/fundamental beliefs were identified, Jayashree tried to articulate her dominant theory of practice and reframe it as her desired theory of practice. This level of critical reflection proved to be the most enriching for all the teachers. Once the desired theory of practice was framed, Jayashree worked on implementing it in her classroom. This initiated the "change process". Finally, Jayashree engaged in critical reflection on how to sustain the changes in her teaching context.

The case studies of four other teachers validated the findings of the first two case studies.

Steps 1 and 2 of Stage 1 of the RC cycle showed how reflection on critical incidents and experience sharing could be used as a tool to uncover teachers' initial beliefs and assumptions about classroom communication. *This validates the first research hypothesis*. Stage 2 of the RC cycle allowed teachers to analyze their classroom discourse and identify patterns in their interactional choices. This analysis helped teachers to uncover their dominant or fundamental assumptions and beliefs (*hypothesis1 and 2*). Finally, Stage 3 of the RC cycle in the case studies showed how the teachers' personal "theory building" helped to link the "awareness stage" with the "practice stage". *(hypothesis 3)*

The study clearly shows how teachers' beliefs about classroom communication are reflected in their interactional choices. Six different teachers teaching the same course ended up having very different classroom interactional patterns because of the interactional choices they made. The findings of the study point towards the

fact that teachers' decision-making process can be a more conscious activity when they explore their available choices in the classroom and reflect on them. Such acceleration of agency leads to professional development which can be sustained even in difficult teaching learning contexts.

CONCLUSIONS

The RC framework described and evaluated in this study has the potential to initiate and sustain teacher learning and change within the CPD model. This framework can be used in in-service teacher training programs to raise awareness about classroom interactional patterns. As they reflect on their espoused beliefs and match them with transcripts of their classroom teaching, teachers can identify dominant patterns in their discourse. This will enable them to articulate their desired theory of practice and link it with their actual classroom contexts. However, teachers in the Indian context will benefit from the process only when it is included as a "compulsory" assignment during the in-service teacher training programs, or in collaborative reflection groups of like-minded teachers. Alternatively, workshops using RC as a tool for critical reflection can also benefit intrinsically motivated teachers to reflect on their choices and engage in personal theory building. Such an intensive activity will empower them to engage with CPD.

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Ipshita H. Sasmal teaches at the Centre for English Language Education, Ambedkar University, Delhi. Her research interests include English language teacher education, teacher cognition and teacher beliefs.

ipshita@aud.ac.in