UC Berkeley
The CATESOL Journal

Title

Empowering Students by Teaching the Language of the Classroom

Permalink

Journal

ISSN

Authors

Sarosy, Peg
Sherak, Kathy

Publication Date

DOI

Copyright Information

Peer reviewed

PEG SAROSY
KATHY SHERAK
American Language Institute, San Francisco State University

Empowering Students by Teaching the Language of the Classroom

Envision the following scenarios:

During and following your presentation of a new teaching point, you are sure that your students do not fully understand what you have said. Yet, the students listen to you in silence and in spite of their confusion, proceed with a follow-up exercise as if they did understand.

In your grammar class, students have brought in their homework and with great enthusiasm you ask them to go over their answers with a partner. Willingly, students pair up, but rather than witnessing any grammatical discussion or hearing any English you see students looking at their partners' homework in silence, pointing and nodding and then writing in changes to their own answers.

In your speaking class, you ask your students to work in small groups to come to a consensus on a controversial issue to give them practice with the language of agreeing and disagreeing. To your surprise students use the nonverbal game of "rock-paper-scissors" to make the group's decision.

In each of these scenarios of typical classroom events, the work of the classroom does get accomplished. That is, students listen to the teacher, go over answers, and work in groups; however, these scenarios also feature a wealth of missed opportunities for content and language learning. Students are not only avoiding English, but also losing valuable opportunities to interact autonomously with the course content, remaining dependent on the teacher as the main source of information.

In the first scenario, without independently asking clarification questions such as "Could you give me an example?" and "What is the difference between X and Y?" students miss important information from the teacher.

In the second scenario, without using expressions like "What did you get for number 1?" and "How did you get that answer?" students' comprehension of the grammatical concepts remains shallow because they do not fully explore and expand their knowledge.

In the third scenario, without using expressions such as "What is one point we agree on?" and "We may not all agree, but what can we live with?" the discussion remains superficial.

One explanation for these students' lack of success in these scenarios is that they simply may not be familiar with the classroom event or interaction pattern. For example, for many students it is highly unusual to share homework answers or interrupt the teacher. Indeed, in creating a classroom dynamic that is more participatory and interactive, teachers have also created new and challenging expectations for students, requiring students to communicate using a second language and to take an active role in their learning.

In order to take this active role, students need to have an understanding of how things work in a classroom, or what Saville-Troike and Kleifgen call metaphorically "scripts for school" (1986). One way for teachers to help students respond to these challenges of the new interactive classroom is to do as Johnson (1995) suggests and "make the norms that govern classroom communication both explicit and predictable." But sometimes even when teachers do this by explicitly providing rationale, modeling, and scaffolding, many students still fail to learn collaboratively, actively, and autonomously.

In other words, this structuring helps students know the expectations of the interactive classroom. However, we are convinced that many language learners fail to engage in the classroom conversation because they lack the necessary language strategies for doing so. In other words, these students know what to do but not how to do it.

As crucial as these strategies are, they are often overlooked, perhaps because they seem unremarkable to most teachers. As students, native speakers tend to learn the "script" for performing tasks in the classroom by osmosis, rarely explicitly, in their early education. Thus from early on, most native speakers use classroom language strategies unconsciously, making it difficult for native speakers who become teachers to perceive these strategies as an outstanding component of classroom norms that should be explicitly taught.

While it is difficult for teachers to perceive a need to teach these strategies, students learning English depend on them to accomplish all their work in the classroom. As the above scenarios illustrate, students need specific language strategies for interrupting the teacher and asking for clarification, going over exercises with a partner, and coming to a group consensus.

In order to create interactive and participatory classrooms that truly serve as training and practice grounds for our students' academic and linguistic challenges, we must explicitly teach this language and help students become confident using it. It is this very facility with classroom language strategies that will give students a key to what has been called "Classroom Communicative Competence" (Johnson, 1995).

This article presents our method for integrating explicit classroom language strategy instruction into the classroom. Through explicit training in classroom language strategies, we extend the metaphorical meaning of "script". Teachers have given students the role of "active" student; this training now gives them the language and the experiences for successfully fulfilling that role.

In addition to this pedagogical mandate to create a more interactive classroom, current English Language Development-English Language Arts (ELD-ELA) standards for the state of California and Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) national standards mandate that teachers bring their students "closer to the educational mainstream" by providing instruction in a plethora of language-dependent skills such as: "participating, initiating, sharing, requesting, negotiating, comparing, collaborating, clarifying, managing, expressing, responding, interpreting, confirming, justifying and questioning," and the list goes on. We maintain that a crucial step that teachers can take toward meeting these standards is to provide instruction in the language necessary for demonstrating success in these skills.

While we've seen this strategy instruction succeed in our Intensive English Program, we believe this instruction can be implemented in a wide variety of teaching contexts.

Implementing Classroom Language Strategy Instruction

The first step in teaching classroom language strategies starts at the lesson planning stage. When planning an exercise or activity for a lesson (let's say a role play, a reading discussion, or a grammar game) it is crucial to "examine the linguistic and interactional demands embedded in classroom events by recognizing ... how students will be expected to talk and act, and what linguistic and interactional skills students will need in order to participate" (Johnson, 1995). We advocate applying this scrutiny to a wide variety of everyday classroom events. Indeed, we urge teachers at the lesson-planning stage to constantly ask not only what students will need to **do** but also what students will need to **say**.

Below you will find a list of some of the classroom events and expressions that we've identified as common and important to developing classroom communicative competence. Notice that for each classroom event, the expressions tend to be fixed and formulaic, easy to teach and easy to learn. A sampling of classroom events that we've identified includes:

- Interrupting and Asking for Clarification
- Going Over Exercises with a Partner
- Giving Feedback on a Peer's Written and Spoken Work
- Coming to a Consensus
- Dealing with the Teacher's Questions
- Defining Words
- Referring to a Reading During a Discussion

The list of expressions below is not comprehensive for every proficiency level. We've included some of the key expressions to provide a glimpse of the language expressions that are possible. Depending on the needs and the level of your students, you might want to teach just a few of the expressions at a time and look for opportunities in your curriculum to recycle this language practice.

Classroom Events and Language

Interrupting and Asking for Clarification

One of the most critical strategies for classroom communicative competence is the ability to manage the flow of information from the teacher. That is, students need to be able to interrupt and ask for clarification when they do not understand and they want more information. Interrupting is not as straightforward as it may seem. Students must realize when they do not understand, then, stop the teacher, and finally, ask a comprehensible question that correctly identifies the point of confusion (spelling, vocabulary, concept). To add to the complexity, students must also be polite and avoid looking foolish in front of peers. Those students who feel it is rude to interrupt the teacher must further challenge themselves to behave in a manner that their own culture says is inappropriate.

Sample Expressions for Interrupting and Asking for Clarification
- Excuse me; I have a question.
- Could you repeat that more slowly?
- Could you give me an example?
- Could you explain that?
- I'm sorry, what does X mean?
- How do you spell that?
- Please write it on the board.
- What's the difference between X and Y?
- So, are you saying…?

Going Over Exercises with a Partner

When teachers assign exercises in class or as homework, it is common to have students compare their answers with a partner in order to deepen their understanding of the material. As straightforward as this task may seem, students must do more than simply see what their partner's answer is. This complex task requires students to use specific language to express their knowledge of the course content, analyze similarities and differences, and eventually come to a consensus about the correct answer.

Sample Expressions for Going Over Exercises with a Partner
- Who wants to go first?
- What did you get for number 1?
- I got something different.
- I got the same thing.
- Could you explain your answer?
- How do you know it's X?
- Why did you put that?
- I think it is X because….

Giving Feedback on a Peer's Written and Oral Work

One of the most common tasks in the communicative classroom is giving feedback on a classmate's writing and speaking. Teachers recognize that this is usually a new and potentially strange experience for students and thus train students in what peer feedback is, why it is beneficial, and perhaps how to fill out a peer evaluation form effectively. One crucial part of peer evaluation that teachers need to address is how to give effective verbal feedback to a peer. Here, students have to tactfully give both praise and criticism in a non-threatening way and ask for feedback that is specific and applicable. Knowing the appropriate expressions for accomplishing all of this will enable students to experience success with this challenging process.

Sample Expressions for Giving Feedback on a Peer's Written and Oral Work
- I really liked your paper/speech.
- I like what you wrote/said there because....
- This part was unclear. Could you please explain?
- What do you mean by this? Why did you...?
- I think you need/are missing _____ there.
- Maybe you could _____there.
- Did you understand what I wrote/said there?
- Does it make sense?
- Actually, what I want to say is....
- Thanks! That's a good idea!
- I'll think about that.

Coming to a Consensus

In most group discussions, whether they are about solving a social problem or deciding what to take on a desert island, one requirement is that students have to compare, agree and disagree, and compromise with the goal of coming to a consensus. Even in the less obvious context of preparing a role play, students must negotiate what they will say, how they will say it, and who will say it. This negotiation process is highly complex and in addition, accomplished without the direct guidance of the teacher.

Sample Expressions for Coming to a Consensus
- What do you think?
- What does everyone else think?
- Does everyone agree?
- I have an idea.
- That sounds pretty good.
- That would be great, except....
- These two ideas are really similar.
- So, is everyone satisfied with this?
- Does anyone have anything to add?

Dealing with the Teacher's Questions

One of the most common classroom events occurs in front of the class when the teacher asks a student to answer a question. This exchange goes well when the student knows the answer, but problems arise when the student responds to a question with silence. It is impossible for the teacher to know what the silence means. It could mean: the student is unprepared; the student doesn't know the answer; the student didn't understand the question, or the student is shy. This is a high-risk interaction for students in that they must hazard a guess and save face. In addition, if they do not know the answer, they have to request clarification and stall for time. By using the following expressions students eliminate this confusing silence and remain active in the classroom conversation.

Sample Expressions for Dealing with the Teacher's Questions
- I don't know/ I don't understand.
- I can't remember.
- What was the question?
- Could you repeat that?
- Can you give me a minute to think about that?
- Can I pass on that? or Pass.
- I'm not sure but....
- I don't know what _____ means.
- Is it...?

Defining Words

When leading a class, teachers typically and regularly check comprehension by asking students to define words and concepts. This exchange is often unsuccessful. Below is a classic exchange:

Teacher: What does it mean "to vote"?

Student: President.

The student has responded with information that is related to the target vocabulary, but the information is incomplete and unclear. Therefore, the teacher does not really know whether the student truly understands the vocabulary and typically compensates by filling in the full definition for the student. Teachers can provide students with tools for expressing their understanding of vocabulary by teaching the highly formulaic language for explaining the meaning of words.

Referring to a Reading During a Discussion

In the classroom, teachers want students to express their ideas about a reading and often we are satisfied when students voice any opinion about what they have read. Ideally, to help students practice academic skills and critical thinking, we also want students to make connections between their own ideas and the ideas in the reading. In this case, teaching the language for referring directly to the author, lines, and paragraphs of a reading can help students demonstrate their authority with the text and enter the academic conversation.

The Stages of Classroom Language Strategy Instruction

We have shown the incredible variety of classroom events that require students to use specific language. The challenge now is introducing the language to students and helping them to use it. In our training we do the following:

- First, we give students information about the importance of each classroom event as well as sociolinguistic information.
- Second, we present the actual expressions inductively.
- Finally, we incorporate practice activities that give students the opportunity to use the expressions.

By going through these steps, teachers make their expectations for classroom interaction explicit and most importantly give students the means for meeting these expectations. The aim in teaching this language is to not simply encourage students mindlessly to say these expressions, but instead use the expressions as a tool to interact more actively and autonomously with the course content. Furthermore, this training provides them with structured experiences and strategies they will draw on for the remainder of the term and beyond.

We have developed a variety of activities to use at each stage of the training process for each classroom event named above. We will illustrate the

training process for one classroom event: going over exercises with a partner. These kind of activities can be adapted for any classroom event discussed in this article.

Introducing Students to Strategies
for Going Over Exercises with a Partner

Going over exercises with a partner is like many of the classroom events we've outlined in that it is probably new to students and a potential cause for discomfort. Below you will see how we present cultural and sociolinguistic information through discussion questions and a reading. This information and reflection is important because "students sometimes will not put into practice, or even want to try, some of the new language and behaviors we teach them until they've had a chance to recognize and discuss their discomfort" (McNulty 1999).

Prereading Questions
1. In your country, after you completed your homework exercises, what did the teacher do with your homework?

    _____ The teacher corrected it and returned it to us.

    _____ The teacher called on the students to say the answer and corrected us in the classroom.

    _____ Other. Please explain.

2. How do you feel about talking about your answers with other classmates? Circle a number on the line below. Explain your answer.

    Like   1   2   3   4   Dislike

Reading

Directions: Many teachers in the United States have different philosophies of how to handle students' homework. Read the following teacher's ideas about homework.

A Teacher Talks About Homework

I have a grammar class of 15 students and I usually give about 30 minutes of homework every night so that students can practice the things they learned during the day. You might think that's a lot of homework for them or a lot of correcting for me to do every day, but actually I don't correct the homework. I have the students go over their homework exercises with each other the next day. I don't do this because I'm lazy, but because I believe that getting the right answer is only half the work for students.

A student really learns when he or she can explain or ask about an answer. That is what they do in pairs in my class. At first, this is really strange for students, because in their countries the teacher usually corrects the wrong answers and returns the homework to the students.

Once students get used to going over exercises this way, they become great at it. It's fantastic to hear them really discuss and review the concepts they are learning. Of course I give them answers when they really can't find the right answer.

> **Postreading Questions**
> 1. In your own words, what does the teacher do with the students' homework?
> 2. Why does she do this?
> **3.** What do you think about the teacher's ideas?

Ways to Introduce Students to Classroom Language Expressions for Going Over Exercises with a Partner

Rather than simply giving students a list of appropriate expressions to use, we make this introduction stage engaging and contextualized by presenting the target language in a dialogue. By analyzing a dialogue, students discover both what to say and how to say it.

> **Directions**
> Read the following conversation in which two students in a grammar class go over their homework answers with each other.
>
> ### Ping and Aya Go Over Grammar Exercise Answers
>
> Ping: What did you get for number 1?
> Aya: I put "drinks" because it says "usually." So it's his daily routine. What did you put?
> Ping: I got the same thing. I am confused about number 3. I put "is talking" but I am not sure. What did you put?
> Aya: I got something different. I got "talks."
> Ping: Could you explain your answer to me?
> Aya: The reason I put that is because it says "for three hours every day." That means it's what he does every day.
> Ping: Oh, I didn't see the time phrase at the end of the sentence.
> Aya: I am confused about number 4.
> Ping: So was I. Let's look at it together.
> Aya: I put he "is having."
> Ping: How did you know it was present progressive?
> Aya: Because it didn't say just <u>one</u> time. It said "between 1:00 and 2:00" so I thought it was in progress during that time.
> Ping   I put simple present because of the word "normally," but I wasn't sure what "normally" means exactly.
> Aya: Let's ask the teacher about this one.
>
> **Dialogue Analysis**
> 1. In the dialogue, what does Ping say to start the discussion?
> 2. In the dialogue, what do Ping and Aya say to compare their answers?
> 3. In the dialogue, what do Ping and Aya say to ask for an explanation?
> 4. In the dialogue, what do Ping and Aya say to explain an answer?

Ways to Practice Classroom Language Expressions for Going Over Exercises with a Partner

Simply introducing and drilling these expressions will not automatically transform students into proficient users of classroom language. As with exposure to any new language, students need an immediate, focused practice stage in which they actually use the target structures. This helps "students know what's expected of them and have an opportunity to prepare and be more willing and able to participate" (Johnson, p. 155).

We've developed a wide repertoire of games and role plays to practice all the classroom events mentioned above. After introducing the language for comparing answers with a partner, we have students play a quick and fun guessing game about their classmates. In this case, the vocabulary and information in the game is simple, so the students can focus on using the classroom language strategies for comparing answers.

In designing this activity, we create short, general descriptions about a handful of the students in the class. The information is known to students from previous class activities. Students read a description of an unknown student and guess who it is from a list of possible options. For example:

X is from Korea. X likes to go shopping. X likes to ski and gamble at Lake Tahoe and often misses classes on Friday. Who is it?
Daisy   Tae-Ho   Danny   Sung-Wa

The students make their guesses individually first and then compare answers with a partner. The goal is for students to share and explain their answers, so the exchange will ideally sound like this:

Student A: What did you get for the first one?

Student B: I think it's Tae-Ho because he's always absent.

Student A: Oh, I got something different. I put Daisy because I know she likes to ski.

Student B: So does Tae-Ho, so could you explain why you say it's Daisy?

Student A: It's Daisy because all the information is true about her, but only some of it is true about Tae-Ho.

During practice activities, the teacher's role is to give feedback on how well students are using classroom language strategies.

Review of the Stages of Classroom Language Strategy Instruction

As you saw previously, a thorough training in classroom language strategy instruction would include these stages:
- Giving students information about each classroom event
- Teaching the classroom language expressions
- Incorporating practice activities

The above training for going over exercises with a partner might require a considerable investment of classroom time. Alternatively, you can provide students with a briefer training as long as you include these three crucial stages and do more than simply give students a list of expressions.

Conclusion

Throughout this article we have referred to classroom language strategy instruction as a way to increase students' academic competence and confidence. We believe that teaching students to be proficient in the language of the classroom leads to increased Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP). When Jim Cummins (1979) described CALP, he was referring to proficiency with academic tasks such as understanding academic vocabulary, navigating a textbook, and listening to lectures. Our approach, teaching classroom language, empowers students to access the language embedded in the academic tasks that Cummins discussed.

This training in classroom language strategy instruction ideally should be infused into every classroom. In a content classroom, it should be implemented along with content reading and writing instruction. In a language classroom, it should be implemented at every proficiency level and in every skill area. In our intensive English program for example, even beginning students in our grammar classes use strategies for comparing answers, sharing meaningfully, disagreeing, and analyzing, leading to a deeper understanding and retention of the material. During whole class activities in more advanced reading classes, we see students who genuinely participate, maybe shyly at first but later with more success, because they use strategies to interrupt and ask for clarification. Not only do students become more successful language users, but they become more proficient critical thinkers as well.

Furthermore, when we train students by introducing and practicing classroom language strategies, we further empower them to "take charge of their own learning" (Holec, 1981) and to take another step toward autonomy. In short, this training gives students the tools to participate collaboratively, actively, and autonomously both in their language classrooms and in their content classes. Ultimately, the reward for students who receive this strategy instruction is that they can now transfer these new skills to any professional setting, including the workplace, where they will encounter similar demands for interaction, participation, and critical thinking.

Authors

Peg Sarosy supervises teachers and designs curriculum at the American Language Institute at San Francisco State University. She has taught in several intensive English programs. She has also taught English as a Second Language (ESL) composition at San Francisco State University, has taught workplace ESL, and was a USIS Teacher Trainer in the Czech Republic from 1991 to 1993.

Kathy Sherak supervises teachers and designs curriculum at the American Language Institute at San Francisco State University. She has also taught ESL composition at San Francisco State University, has conducted training sessions for the JET program, and was a Fulbright Teachers of English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) Lecturer in Italy in 1990. She was Program Chair for CATESOL 2002.

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