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Reciprocal Teaching: A USEFUL TOOL IN INCREASING STUDENT-TALKING TIME

RECIPROCAL TEACHING (RT), A STRATEGY THAT ATTEMPTS TO ESTABLISH AN ACTIVE and relatively expanded dialog between teacher and students and among students themselves, is gaining importance in educational circles. Pioneer RT researchers Palincsar and Brown (1984) developed this strategy to reinforce comprehension in L1 and ESL reading classes. Because of its success, it soon began to be applied to other areas of study. The purpose of this article is to demonstrate how the principles underlying RT can be effectively used to increase student-talking time in the L2 classroom, and thereby improve their communicative competence in the target language.

When RT is used, the classroom is not a one-way street, in which the teacher maintains strict control of the environment, but rather a two-way street that allows active participation by students. In such a classroom, the teacher assumes the role of facilitator and monitor, and students are encouraged to perform

actively in cadence with the teacher and/or among themselves. Students are given a solid opportunity to improve their communicative competence in the target language because they have the openings they need to talk in class.

Among the procedures that RT utilizes to promote this desired teacher-student (T-S), student-teacher (S-T), and student-student (S-S) exchange are such well-known tactics as paraphrasing, reported speech, and question formation. In conjunction with these tactics, I refer in this article to a procedure called concept-checking, which is not as well known, and provide examples of it.

The vocabulary of RT

In RT theory the terms *long-turn* and *short-turn* are often used. A short-turn, often referred to as *language for informational purposes,* is a markedly abbreviated exchange between persons. A long-turn, often referred to as *language for transactional purposes,* is an extended conversation involving a series of exchanges. Brown and Yule (1983, 16–17) describe the distinction: "A short-turn consists of only one or two utterances, a long-turn consists of a string of utterances which may last as long as an hour's lecture…. [W]hat is demanded of a speaker in a long-turn is considerably more." The researchers point out that the long-turn speaker takes responsibility for creating a "structured sequence of utterances" that enable the listener to "create a coherent mental representation" of what the speaker is trying to say. Brown and Yule (1983, 19) stress that training students to produce short-turns "will not automatically yield students who can perform satisfactorily in long-turns." The point is, teachers should do all they can to encourage students to produce complete sentences rather than short utterances.

Through the use of paraphrasing, reported speech, question formation and concept-checking, students learn to find synonymous expressions or substitutes, practice relaying information, and familiarize themselves with the structuring of questions. The teacher makes certain that the instructions or concepts have been understood. When the teacher asks a question such as "Did you have a good weekend?" students tend to give short responses, that is, a short-turn such as "Yes" or "No." Likewise, if a teacher asks, "What did you do?" a student

could simply say "Nothing!" Such a response provides no details; it merely responds to the question in as brief a way as possible. Clearly, teachers need to prompt students to produce longer utterances if they are to be effective communicators, and they need to help listeners get a clearer idea of what is expected of them. They can do so by beckoning the student, by word or gesture, to give a long-turn answer, such as: "Uh… I went to the movies with some friends. We saw a terrific movie and after the show, we had something to eat." Producing long-turns is part and parcel of RT.

Of course, short-turn answers can also be legitimate responses. However, from an instructional point of view, they neither further communicative competence nor allow the target language to become properly rooted in the student's mind. If students are to make progress in a foreign language, they need to be trained to produce utterances that engage them in a consistent fluent dialog. This requires effort and practice, but the results will be greater fluency and retention for the student.

The next part of this paper focuses on the procedures that RT uses: paraphrasing, reported speech, question formation, and concept-checking.

Paraphrasing

The ability to paraphrase is an alternative to using direct quotations when you want to use someone else's ideas. When you paraphrase, you state an author's thoughts in your own words through the use of synonymous words or equivalent phrases. In the language classroom this ability is practiced when the teacher asks a student to paraphrase what a classmate just said or what the teacher just explained. From my experience as an EFL teacher, I have learned that encouraging my students to paraphrase is not an easy undertaking. However, with practice, the students made notable progress. The following sample dialogue shows how paraphrasing in RT can be used.

Teacher: Let's talk about holidays or festivals in our country. What's an important holiday or festival in Peru, Karina?

Student: Well, for me it's Independence Day.

Teacher: Tell us what you know about this holiday.

Student: OK. July 28 is the day when Peruvians celebrate Independence Day. On that day all houses have a flag on the roof, and many people go out with their families to visit historical spots such as the Main Square.

Teacher: Thanks. Juan, can you say in your own words what Karina just explained to the class?

Student: Sure. On July 28 Peruvians remember Independence Day. On that day they have a flag on the roof of their houses and families like to visit historical places, for example, the Main Square.

This dialog demonstrates how the long-turn facilitates T-S, S-T, and S-S exchanges. Student-talking time is increased. Someone might claim that this is mere repetition. Far from being so, paraphrasing requires students to cope with vocabulary items and structural forms in order to present the same information in a different way. It gives students the opportunity to participate actively and apply their own personal touch. Since students first have to grasp what is expressed, listening comprehension is also practiced.

Reported speech

Many teachers find that helping students learn how to use reported speech is difficult; I agree. It is not easy for students to change a direct statement, question, or command into an indirect one. Again, practice is the remedy, and RT gives students the practice they need to accomplish this. T-S, S-T, and S-S exchanges provide immediate opportunities to practice reported speech. At any given moment, the teacher can ask a student to report to the class what a fellow student or the teacher has just expressed. An example:

Teacher: What are you planning to do on your vacation, Alcides?

Alcides: I'm going to Cuzco with my friends.

Teacher: What did Alcides say, Elsa?

Elsa: He said that he was going to Cuzco with his family.

Teacher: And what are you planning to do?

Elsa: I'm staying in Lima.

Teacher: Carlos, what did I ask Elsa?

Carlos: You asked her what she was planning to do.

This sample dialogue shows how a one-on-one interchange can serve to involve other members of the class. The use of reported speech could present a problem for students in a basic program, particularly if they were not yet exposed to the needed structures. In such a situation, the use of prompts on the board can help ease students into making acceptable responses. For example:

Teacher: Where does your husband work, Teresa?

Teresa: He works in a bank.

Teacher: María, what did Teresa say about her husband?

Prompt on the chalkboard:
    She just said that…

María: She just said that he works in a bank.

Here, the student only had to repeat what her classmate had said. True, this is an elementary example; however, any enterprising teacher can find ways to facilitate the use of more complex forms. Here is where the wise use of prompts, whatever their format or source, can help ensure that the objective of a lesson is met.

Question formation

Learning how to structure questions is a complex endeavor because the word order that underlies questions has its own logic. This can become a perplexing challenge for students. I have discovered that RT has helped my students deal with the complexity of question formation by prodding them to form their own questions in long-turn discourse with their peers. A casual perusal of ESL/EFL classrooms reveals that it is the teacher who asks most of the questions, thereby unnecessarily increasing teacher-talking time. As a result, students are deprived of the opportunity to become proficient in question-making, a necessary real world skill. Two examples show how this can be done. The first is applicable to a basic class, the second to an intermediate one.

Course: Basic 1
Function: Asking for and giving information about age.

Teacher: Oscar, how old are you?

Oscar: I'm 15 years old.

Teacher: Oscar, ask Sandra how old she is.

Oscar: How old are you, Sandra?

Sandra: I'm 17 years old.

Teacher: Choose another person, Sandra.

Sandra: OK, how old are you, Pedro?

Course: Intermediate 5
Function: Making recommendations.

Teacher: Carmen, ask a classmate how schools can be improved.

Carmen: José, how can schools be improved?

José: I think computers should be purchased for all students.

Teacher: Gladys, ask José a follow-up question.

Gladys: How will schools afford to buy those computers?

José: Schools ought to try to get funding from companies or the local government.

The examples above are brief, but they suggest what can be done with RT. What is important to note is that the students themselves structure the questions. The teacher sets up the conversation in such a way that questions have to be asked and responded to by the students. The teacher remains the guiding and facilitating force, but the talking-time is the province of the students. To insure success, the level of the students must be taken into account. A lesson should not be beyond the competence of the students.

Concept-checking

Students should be cognizant of the implications of the lesson and understand the instructions they are given to complete a task. Here is where concept-checking becomes important in the language classroom. After giving and modeling instructions, teachers can ask their students to verbalize them. RT utilizes this routine to heighten the students' attention and comprehension. How many times have we asked students if they understand a lesson only to receive the invariable response, "Yes"? Our question should rather be: "What is it that you understand?" Students will then be expected to verbalize the content of a lesson or describe instructions that were given. Comprehension checks can take on different formats: students can repeat the information, summarize it, or paraphrase it.

By using comprehension checks, we can be sure that our instructions are understood and at the same time give students added practice in the use of effective language. For example, students can be asked to paraphrase or summarize recent information about the difference between the simple past and the past continuous in this manner: "Now that you know the difference between the simple past and the past continuous, and you have done some exercises, what is your understanding of the distinction between these two tenses?" This procedure can be particularly profitable when students are engaged in pair or group work. Too often such work degenerates into a feckless exercise. Monitoring student comprehension is an excellent way to remedy this. At different intervals the teacher can ask: "What are you doing now?" or "What did your partner just tell you?" In fact, after the task is completed, the teacher can say: "Tell me what you have done."

Axioms to teach by

It is useful to examine the role of the teacher in RT in greater detail. Below I enumerate several axioms fundamental to the technique. Inherent in all of them is the notion that the teacher plays the role of facilitator and monitor, helping the students perform their tasks and checking on the dynamics of their interactions.

Axiom 1: Step back

Teachers have to keep in mind that the students are to be given the control of the activities, but always under the teachers' guidance and supervision.

Axiom 2: Say the whole sentence

At least a complete sentence and preferably an extended dialog (long-turn) should be sought on the part of the students. This will better inure students with the language elements than would be the case with a short answer (short-turn).

Axiom 3: Teach the language of the classroom

Learners need to become familiar with the language that the teacher uses and the language they can use as students. If the students

are beginners, the necessary expressions can be written as prompts on the board or wall. For example, the teacher might use one or more of the following expressions:

- Could you read the next question?
- Would you mind answering the question?
- Will you tell us what you think?
- Open your books to page ___.

Students are likely to find the following expressions useful:

- What does ____ mean?
- Please repeat your question, sir.
- I didn't understand the last point.

Of course, many more expressions could be added on either side. Be aware that the natural tendency to use the native language is a danger that can plague a classroom. Teachers might insist on the use of the target language for classroom chatter, but they still need to provide students with facilitating cues when necessary.

Axiom 4: I teach you

At the beginning of a task, clarify the objective of the activity or the procedure; then model the directions.

Axiom 5: You teach me

When the students are instructed and shown what to do, ensure comprehension of the procedures by asking different students to verbalize the information:

- "What is the objective of the activity?"
- "Are you going to work in pairs or in groups?"
- "What do you have to do?"

Teachers can also ask students to paraphrase questions they just answered and pose them to somebody else: "Now ask one of your neighbors the same question." They can also have students paraphrase definitions: "Now that I have defined it for you, what's the meaning of *token?"* The same can be done with explanations: "What are *If* clauses?"

Axiom 6: We teach each other

Students can share our role by asking their peers similar questions:

- "What did the teacher explain to the class?"
- "What is your group's conclusion?"
- "Are you finished, or do you need more time?"

This technique allows us to monitor levels of understanding of the task or procedure *before* ("What do you have to do?"), *during* ("What are you doing?") and *after* an activity ("What have you done?"). Students also learn to listen to their neighbors attentively, learn reciprocally, and become more active in the learning process.

Possible reservations

Most teachers acknowledge that RT is a useful tool for increasing student-talking time. However, some teachers object to all the time spent on paraphrasing, reported speech, question formation, and concept-checking and the energy they must expend to ensure that these techniques are executed properly. Teachers may feel frustrated and dismayed by what they perceive as inadequate responses from students. In turn, students could lose confidence in themselves or feel threatened if they fail to carry through on the instructions that are given. These are clearly undesirable sequels and should be countered.

There is no doubt that RT can become time-consuming, but only if it is overused. Teachers should gradually and judiciously introduce the technique into the classroom, giving students a clear idea of the rationale behind RT. Once students appreciate its importance, they are more likely to be willing to engage in the exercises, particularly when they see results. I use the word *judiciously* because teachers should be careful not to significantly exceed the current level of competence of the class. Krashen and Terrell's (1983) "input + 1" dictum in their hypothesis on *Comprehensible Input* is decidedly valid in RT. Students should not feel overwhelmed or they will fail to communicate. Teachers must always make ready use of prompts. This tallies with the supportive role that they have as facilitators. The chalkboard is one visual aid that is at the immediate service of the teacher. With practice, students will become less dependent on prompts. Indeed, practice cannot be neglected, since students perform in proportion to the practice that is given.

Conclusion

It is important that student-talking time be maximized and teacher-talking time be used strategically to provide students with the open-

ings they need to communicate with the teacher and among themselves with long-turn utterances. Reciprocal Teaching has been engineered specifically to accomplish such a goal. It has proven to be an effective way to substantially increase student-talking time. It should become a key tool in the teacher's repertoire as a way to help students internalize language and improve their communicative competence in the world outside the classroom.

References

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