

Learner initiative in the language classroom.

This article looks at learner initiative in teacher-fronted activities and how this can influence classroom interaction. Extracts from lesson transcripts of adult evening classes in Italy are used to give a precise definition of what is meant by learner initiative and to illustrate how it can change interaction patterns. It is suggested that learner initiative could have an important role to play in promoting comprehensible input and output and therefore language learning. It will be seen how, by giving learners more space and time, initiative can be actively encouraged. However, there are direct implications for teacher training as it is necessary to change traditional interaction patterns and make learner initiative more effective.

Key words: learner initiative, classroom interaction, Italy,

### Introduction

The growing interest, over the last twenty years, in the study of the language used in foreign language classrooms is based on the realisation that successful language learning probably depends as much on the type of interaction that takes place in the classroom as on the method used (Ellis 1985:143). Moreover, it is now widely recognised that learner initiative, participation and involvement in instruction represent an important aspect of classroom interaction.

However, in spite of growing recognition of the importance of learner initiative, there has been little attempt either to define what it means or to analyse the ways in which this initiative is expressed and the effects it may have on classroom interaction.

This study represents an initial attempt to describe learner initiative during one particular form of classroom organisation, that of teacher-fronted interaction. The aim is to identify how learner initiative can influence interaction patterns, the implications this may have for success in learning the target language and how teachers can encourage initiative in the classroom

### Classroom discourse

Classroom discourse is a form of institutional talk and as such has certain characteristics, described, for example, by van Lier (1988:139). Firstly, it is oriented to pedagogical goals; the participants are interacting for the specific purpose of learning. Secondly, the participants have the roles of 'instructor' and 'instructed' and therefore have unequal rights of participation. Finally, there is a certain amount of centrally-focused attention with basic rules of participation: either one person speaks at a time or multiple speakers say more or less the same thing.

As a result of these characteristics it is generally the teacher who initiates interaction, introduces the topic and decides who can talk and when. Van Lier (1996:184-185). points out that, while this may have advantages of control and efficiency, the consequences are that:

... this efficiency comes at the cost of reduced student participation, less expressive language use, a loss of contingency, and severe limitations on the students' employment of initiative and self-determination.

The organisation of classroom interaction in teacher-fronted activities is therefore such that it is apparently difficult for learners to take any form of initiative. And yet, if they do take the initiative, learners can direct the interaction in such a way that it responds more closely to their needs and at the same time develop their interactional management skills

### Defining learner initiative

Before looking at how learner initiative may influence interaction patterns, it is necessary to try to formulate a definition of exactly what is meant by 'learner initiative'.

At its most general, learner initiative is an attempt to direct the interaction in a way that corresponds more closely to the interests and needs of the learners as evidenced by the interaction itself. For the purposes of this study two main conditions were identified for a turn to count as initiative in teacher-fronted interaction:

1. the learner's turn does not constitute a direct response to a teacher elicitation;
2. the learner's turn gains the 'main floor' and is not just limited to a 'sub floor'.

Generally speaking, the first condition means that the learner's turn is self-selected but not in order to answer a teacher elicitation. Gaining the floor means there must be

uptake, normally by the teacher, but possibly by other learners too. The following is an example of learner initiative, in this case used to negotiate the organisation of an activity (transcription conventions are in the appendix ):

Extract 1

- 1 T so now in your groups in English you decide what you will do with  
your money okay?
- 2 → S we have to wr- to write?
- 3 T to think
- 4 → S only?
- 5 T you have to think and then later we will {(discuss)}
- 6 S { not } write?
- 7 T you can write if you want

It is also noticeable in this extract how the learner succeeds in negotiating a change in the organisation of the activity so that the teachers agrees that he can write his answer.

The study

Although research into language classrooms has increased considerably in recent years, we still understand little of classroom processes, thus the need to go into actual classrooms to investigate remains pressing. For this reason, the current study relies entirely on naturally-occurring data.

The data were collected through audio recordings and observations carried out during regularly scheduled, general English evening classes for adults at a University Language Centre in northern Italy. The learners were both university students and local people and all were native Italian speakers. Five qualified and experienced EFL teachers were involved and their groups were at pre-intermediate, intermediate and upper-intermediate level.

#### An example of learner initiative

The following extract from an intermediate level group illustrates the type of effect on interaction that learner initiative may have. This example also shows the complexity of the phenomenon under investigation.

#### Extract 2

- 1 T have you almost finished?  
2 S yes  
3 T yes have you finished?  
(2)  
4 T yeah? okay then let's have a look erm  
5 → Francesca erm excuse me  
6 T yeah  
7 → Francesca how can I say when the television is on?  
8 T what do I say not how do I say what do I say  
9 Francesca what do I say {when}  
10 T {when} the television is on?

- 11 Francesca eh
- 12 T the television is on?
- 13 Francesca eh (cio'è) (= that is) er may I say the television is on?
- 14 T yes. yeah yeah to be on the television is on or opposite the television is?
- 15 S off
- 16 T off that's {right}
- 17 → Francesca { or }the television works
- 18 T is working?
- 19 Francesca eh
- 20 T that's different if you say the television is working it means that there isn't a problem with it
- 21 Francesca ah
- 22 T all right it doesn't er mean that it's on or off right it means that there's a good picture that the sound is good that it's working correctly clear? yeah? let's have a look then

This example shows how learner initiative can lead to complex interactional sequences. Francesca takes the initiative twice in this sequence, in turns 5-7 and 17 and both times there is interactional adjustment in order to negotiate mutual understanding between Francesca and the teacher as to the exact function of Francesca's questions. The teacher must twice ask for confirmation, in turns 10-12 and 18, and Francesca is forced to reformulate her first question in turn 13 in order to make it comprehensible in interactional terms. Moreover, Francesca's initiative leads to direct correction in turn 8 and therefore explicit teaching of the L2, as well as

indirect correction in turn 18. The teacher also uses the opportunity provided by Francesca's initiatives to provide explicit vocabulary teaching in the form of revision of the opposites 'the television is on/off' and explanation of the difference between 'the television is on' and 'the television is working'. Moreover, she also indirectly provides important input and exposure to the target language in the form of words to do with television 'sound/picture' and the collocations 'good sound/good picture', as well as the related item 'the television works'.

This reflects recent theories of vocabulary learning (see for example Nattinger and De Carrico 1992) as, by taking up learner initiatives, teachers frequently produce lexis that is in some way related to those utterances and therefore provide the learners with a context for vocabulary items as well as examples of collocations and lexical phrases.

### Learner initiative and second language acquisition

Although there is no definite agreement as to how classroom interaction may contribute to second language acquisition, both reception-based and production-based factors have been identified as important. It will therefore be useful to examine the role that learner initiative and teacher response may have in accomplishing language input and output.

### Language learning and input

According to Ellis (1993:8), comprehensible input is one of the most important ways in which learners obtain new information about the language, while Wong-Fillmore

(1985) notes that the teacher may be the only really competent English speaker available to provide comprehensible input. However, this input, in order to be effective must also be modified in order to be comprehensible. The most effective modifications are those made when learners explicitly indicate that adjustments are necessary to aid their understanding.

Pica et al. (1987:755) conclude from their experiments using native speaker/non-native speaker dyads that changing the roles of learner and teacher so that learners can take more initiative will probably lead to more interaction and thereby increase comprehension of input.

#### Language learning and output

According to Swain's (1985) Comprehensible Output Hypothesis, in order to acquire a language successfully, learners must not only be given opportunities to produce the language, but they must also be pushed into making their meanings clear. By encouraging learners to make their output more comprehensible via the use of clarification requests and comprehension checks, teachers may actually help to improve accuracy (Ellis 1993:8) as learners are forced to attend to both the form and meaning of their utterances. This can be seen in extract 2, where, having first explicitly corrected the form of Francesca's initial question in line 8, in line 12 the teacher then pushes her to make her interactional meaning clear.



However, evidence shows (Musumeci 1996) that teachers rarely insist that learners make their messages comprehensible. They usually either do their best to understand or abandon the interaction, as the following extract clearly shows:

Extract 3

- 1 T does anyone know that expression it's a goose chase
- 2 S yeah goose chase
- 3 S1 caccia all'oca  
(2)
- 4 T yes is it the same in Italian
- 5 S1 not really
- 6 T if you say it's a goose chase in English it means you're putting a lot of effort into something but it's completely useless in other words you're running after a goose but you can't catch the goose cause I don't know the goose  
(2)
- 7 T hides or or goes in a different direction you don't manage to achieve your objective  
(2)
- 8 → Claudio it's the opposite of er er goose or fox
- 9 T yeah it is really yeah
- 10 Claudio (could be)
- 11 T it could be yes  
(2)
- 12 T okay

In turn 8 Claudio takes the initiative but the meaning of his utterance is not clear.

When I spoke to the teacher about this episode after the lesson, she admitted that she had no idea what Claudio meant but had wanted to get on with the lesson. Obviously, this is the sort of decision that teachers have to make all the time and, especially in larger groups, they may feel they cannot fairly get into complex negotiating processes with just one learner. On the other hand, in a monolingual context such as the one studied here, teacher-fronted interaction may be the only opportunity learners have of actually negotiating comprehensible output since, in pair and group work, recourse to the L1 is the most natural solution to any difficulty in comprehension.

#### Some implications for the teaching and learning process

Given that learner initiative in teacher-fronted activities may therefore provide a useful source of both input and output, and given that teacher-fronted interaction still occupies a prominent place in language classrooms (between approximately one third and one half of the lessons in this study), it is necessary to identify how this type of interaction can be best exploited to promote learner initiative.

Kumaravadivelu (1993:13) suggests five macrostrategies to help teachers encourage learners to initiate and participate in interaction. The macrostrategies he suggests are: 1) create learning opportunities; 2) utilise learning opportunities created by learners; 3) facilitate negotiated interaction between participants; 4) activate the intuitive heuristics of the learner; 5) contextualise linguistic input (for details see Kumaravadivelu, 1993:13-14). Particularly relevant for encouraging learner initiative

are macrostrategies two and three. Learner initiative nearly always represents a learning opportunity and should therefore be exploited wherever possible. Negotiated, or meaningful, interaction means involving the learner in clarification, confirmation, comprehension, repairing and so on (ibid:14).

So how can learners be encouraged to create their own learning opportunities and how can the teacher utilise them? And how can negotiated interaction be facilitated? I would identify two main principles:

1. give learners space
2. give learners time

### Space

Giving the learners space implies, as Johnson (1995:45) points out, creating more opportunities for learner participation in the learning process by allowing “for greater variability in the patterns of communication”. Teachers should therefore use learning opportunities created by the learners themselves, picking up topics introduced by learners, or allowing them to decide how to develop a particular activity and manage their own learning. The following extract shows how one teacher tried to do this:

#### Extract 4

- |   |          |   |
|---|----------|---|
| 1 | T        | air pollution okay everybody agree with air pollution? . in Barta |
| 2 | SS       | yes//yes  |
| 3 | T        | yeah  |
| 4 | → Matteo | especially in er winter   |

- 5 T especially in the winter { time }
- 6 → Matteo {when}
- 7 → Antonio when we have er a high pression
- 8 T when you have high pressure? yeah what happens when you  
have high pressure in the wintertime? what happens here?
- 9 S1 ((unint)) a terra (=to earth)
- 10 T ((laughter))
- 11 Fabio there's a fog
- 12 T okay
- 13 Fabio there isn't the wind and { the air }
- 14 T {there's no} { wind }
- 15 S2 {it doesn't} rain
- 16 Fabio and the air is the same for a very big time
- 17 T yeah for a long time yeah the air doesn't change so all the  
pollution what happens to the pollution it just?
- 18 Fabio the pollution stay (up to) the city
- 19 T right it stays right on the city { but}
- 20 → Fabio {also} in summer because the ozone  
in (some parts of) the city ((unint))
- 21 T yeah you have to be careful (especially) if it's too hot so there's  
pollution in the summer and in the wintertime both okay

In turns 4, 6 and 7, Matteo and Antonio jointly take the initiative to keep open a topic that the teacher seemed to be about to close. In turn 8 the teacher decided to

incorporate Antonio's previous turn into the lesson by using it as the subject of her next elicitation. Consequently, the discussion is reopened and moves forward, but in a way that has been decided by the learners themselves. When Fabio also tries to introduce another sub-topic, pollution in summer, in turn 20 the teacher accepts his contribution and incorporates it into her summary of the discussion, but she does not allow him to develop it, presumably deciding the lesson must move on. It is also noticeable in this extract how the teacher takes up the learners' contributions in turns 8, 14, 17 and repeats them in such a way as to correct the form of the utterance. In turns 8 and 17 this actually has the triple function of indicating acceptance of the content of what the learner has said, correcting the form of the utterance and framing the teacher's subsequent move. In this sequence, learners were given space to create their own learning opportunities which were then incorporated by the teacher into the lesson. (There is a similar example in Johnson, 1995:23)

## Time

Giving the learners time is closely connected to giving them space. Thornbury (1996) reports on how lesson transcripts were used with trainee teachers to encourage them, among other things, to increase their 'wait time'. By training teachers to wait 3 to 4 seconds before taking the floor again, instead of the more common one second, the positive effects obtained include more learners responding, an increase in the length of the response and an increase in the number of learners initiating questions.

The following extract illustrates a teacher giving her learners time. In fact, the learners are also given space and encouraged to negotiate understanding with the teacher.

Extract 5

(The group is correcting an exercise where learners had to complete sentences with the correct verb)

- 1 T okay did anybody do the one with verbs the first part?  
(6)
- 2 T did anybody do this one?
- 3 S yes
- 4 SS yes  
(5)
- 5 → Maria I didn't understand phrase number nine  
(2)
- 6 T no
- 7 Maria I didn't find er the (word)
- 8 → Claudio I don't know if it's (ir)regular o:r
- 9 T look it's up there you've got correct  
(2)
- 10 T correct's the noun and and it's a regular verb  
(2)
- 11 T yeah for number nine
- 12 Maria yes
- 13 T erm he doesn't really bla bla bla\* anybody to believe { him }
- 14 → Barbara {which} bla  
bla bla? I didn't understand what does er
- 15 T well er he doesn't think that anybody's going to believe him

((3))

16 T he imagines that nobody is going to believe him is the sense

\* The teacher uses the expression 'bla bla bla' as a substitute for the verb and thus avoids giving away the answer to the exercise.

This sequence is noticeable for the frequent and lengthy pauses which, I believe, rather than being the evidence of problems in the interaction, are actually conducive to promoting learner initiative. The teacher initiates this sequence by simply asking if the learners have done their homework and putting the exercise on the OHP. When they limit their answer to 'yes', she allows a five second pause which is followed by Maria's first initiative. This is an example of allowing both space and time. The teacher simply introduced the activity of checking homework, but she allowed the learners to follow this up in the way they preferred, giving them ample time to do so. The result was three clarification requests initiated by three different learners.

The use of polar questions can actually provide a wealth of opportunities for initiative, providing learners have been taught that simple yes/no answers are not always interactionally appropriate, insofar as it facilitates the learners in taking up the teacher's topic in order to introduce their own sub-topics, a form of initiative van Lier (1988:152) calls 'topicalization'.

If learners are to be given more space and time in the classroom, there are clearly direct implications for teacher training courses too. The general emphasis on the importance of good lesson planning and teacher control in many teacher training

courses tends to put pressure on trainees to follow lesson plans as closely as possible and avoid any unplanned learning opportunities (Cadorath and Harris, 1998).

Teacher training courses should make trainees aware of learner initiative and of the need to give learners space and time. The use of lesson transcripts for analysis and discussion in teacher training sessions has already been described, for example, by Thornbury, 1996. Transcripts and audio/video recordings can be used to increase awareness of learner initiative and the ways in which it can be encouraged, and to illustrate the positive effects and practical implications of using learning opportunities which come from the learners themselves. Moreover, they can also be used to raise the whole issue of teacher control and the roles of teachers and learners in the classroom. Discussion sessions can then be followed up by making the encouragement of learner initiative and the use of space and time the specific subject of feedback on lesson observation.

## Conclusion

Although the study presented here is limited to a particular context, the results would seem to be compatible with second language acquisition studies concerning the negotiation of meaning and the creation of learning opportunities. On the basis of this, the conclusion is that encouraging learner initiative may have positive outcomes on successful language learning and that, therefore, teacher training should seek practical ways of introducing this into the EFL classroom.



WORD COUNT: 3, 298

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## Appendix

### Transcription conventions

I have given only a very simple transcription, but sufficient to illustrate the points being made.

Identified learners and places have been given pseudonyms

- T indicates the teacher
- S indicates an unidentified student
- ((10)) indicates the approximate length of longer pauses
- { yes } indicates overlapping utterances
- {okay }
- ( ) indicates uncertain transcription
- (= ) indicates translation of Italian text.

Learner initiative in the language classroom.  
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