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An Analysis of Teaching Practice: Voices from the Language Classroom

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Background

As Sheen (2002) points out, one of the current debates in applied linguistics focuses on the most effective form of grammar instruction in the communicative classroom (Lightbown 2000; Norris and Ortega 2000). The debate revolves around the degree to which teachers need to direct learners' attention to understanding grammar whilst retaining a focus on the need to communicate.

Thus, on the one hand, there are those who advocate separate and explicit attention to grammar and teaching of discrete points of grammar (e.g. De Keyser, 1998). There are other researchers, on the other hand, who advocate minimal interruption to communication by limiting attention to grammar (Doughty and Varela, 1998) (Sheen, 2002). They claim that teaching grammatical forms in isolation usually fails to develop the ability of learners to use forms communicatively.

Research Questions

This piece of research focuses on two different language and teaching contexts: England and Turkey. These two contexts are analysed since both Modern Foreign Language (MFL) syllabuses in England and Turkey assign different emphases on grammar teaching and form-focused instruction. The MFL syllabuses in the Turkish National Curriculum appear to put relatively more emphasis on developing students' awareness of language. Throughout the syllabuses language teachers in Turkey are encouraged to teach grammar explicitly to develop student understanding of language structures of the target language. The teachers in English context, on the other hand, are encouraged to introduce the linguistic items in ready-made chunks, without labelling them. Therefore, the hypothesis put forward for this study is that the grammar teaching and form-focused instruction in the two countries will be different and this difference will impact on classroom interaction.

British language education in the 80s was substantially influenced by the emergence and promotion of the 'communicative approach'. Educators and applied linguists all shared a commitment to 'language in use', and to a view of 'communicative competence' as the ultimate objective of language teaching (Mitchell, 2000). The MFL programme in Turkey also based its teaching objectives on the general goal of developing communicative abilities as well as on developing student awareness of the target language.

Overall, both English and Turkish MFL syllabuses put emphasis on functional aspect of language and developing communication skills of students. According to English and Turkish MFL syllabuses, students should be exposed to the target language as much as possible and they should be able use the language for real purposes. However, it is not clear to what extent these objectives are implemented in actual classroom practise since learners' communicative competence have generally been regarded as 'poor'. As Dogancay-Aktuna (1998) states, it seems that students' competence in secondary schools in Turkey does not develop beyond the basics in most cases. There is a growing perception among the MFL professional community in England that learning outcomes are not satisfactory because a disappointing portion of pupils are making the transition to creative control of the target language system despite the focus on communication.

Methods

Systematic classroom observations and classroom audio-recordings are the main data collection methods in this piece of research. A semi-structured interview schedule was also used in this study to interview the modern language teachers in order to provide their perspectives on what was happening

in the classroom. The interviews took place just after the lessons and the interviews were related to what had occurred in the lesson. Transcriptions of the lessons and detailed field notes are also believed to help readers to visualise the lessons in this study.

The data in this research was collected in the secondary schools in both England and Turkey. About 70 lessons were observed at two levels (13-14 and 14-15 year age group). In Turkey, English classes were observed whereas in England, the observation was conducted in German and French classes. Two types of schools were observed in Turkey: selective and non-selective schools. The instruction of English varies across types of schools because of differences in the amount of time dedicated to it in the curriculum. The selective and non-selective schools in this study were state schools. However, the way teachers gave instructions and the materials used in these two types of schools were expected to show great diversity due to the reason outlined above. The participants in this study were modern language teachers and non-native speaking students.

Frame

As many researchers suggest a considerable progress has been made on the psycholinguistic front of classroom research through mainly experimental design and also case studies. However, there is a dearth of empirical classroom-based data to establish what teachers are actually doing in the classroom and how they are implementing the objectives of language teaching and learning in the classroom context. It is particularly important for this study to establish the type of real classroom-based data which might provide directly relevant information for language teachers in the two different contexts.

Research findings

Language teaching in secondary schools observed in England and Turkey appear to have more similarities than differences, despite classroom culture differences in the two countries. Although the orientations of the classrooms and the emphases in MFL syllabuses are different, teachers' practices, on the other hand, are found to be quite similar. For example, classes in both England and Turkey mostly use similar type of activities (i.e. teacher-controlled activities). As stated earlier, the MFL syllabuses in the two countries recommend teachers to focus on developing students' communicative abilities and speaking skills. However, it does not appear to have been applied into the classroom contexts observed in either country since most of the classroom discourse is tightly controlled by teachers.

Contrary to expectations, this piece of research also failed to provide clear evidence about the effect of focus on form/meaning on students' use of target language.

As Nunan (1987) puts it, it is necessary to have a realistic awareness about what is happening in the classroom in order to assist teachers in their professional development. Research such as this study might provide directly relevant information for teachers and educators and might be valuable to teachers who can identify with it.