BRITISH COUNCIL

Mikaela Armelini y Nadia Carolina Albornoz

Maximising learner talking time in remote teaching

10 April 2020

Contents

Background

According to Stanley (2019), "remote language teaching occurs when teachers are brought into the classroom virtually, using videoconferencing technology, in order to teach a language in a way that replicate as far as possible the way teaching would be if the remote teacher (RT) were physically present in the classroom". Remote teaching offers learners a unique learning experience: face-to-face remote classes and blended learning. One of the main challenges for remote teachers, however, is to ensure a learner-centred classroom where children are able to make the most of using L2 in every lesson.

Nunan (1989) suggests that learning will be facilitated when learners are actively engaged in attempting to communicate in pairs or groups rather than passively listening to the teacher. Pair work and group work, by definition learner-centred activities, can be useful tools to promote interaction and learner talking time. They provide the students with many opportunities to use the target language and practise their speaking skills. In this paper, learner-centred tasks and activities that really maximise learner talking time will also be explored.

Ceibal en Inglés (CEI) is a project with the objective of ensuring that all Uruguayan learners have access to English lessons across the country and encompasses a forty-five-minute slot remote lesson per week taught by a remote teacher (RT) by means of video conference equipment, and two other forty-five-minute slots with a classroom teacher. Lesson plans designed for the program follow a communicative approach, and, in general terms, follow the PPP (Presentation, Practice and Production) model.

Every remote lesson covers a series of stages: greetings and routines, presentation, recognition, focus on language, production and homework. In spite of the fact that face-to-face and remote teaching differ in many ways, it is of vital importance that RTs foster a learner-centred class providing an environment in which students talking time (STT) is maximised and unnecessary teacher talking time (TTT) is reduced.

STT is crucial in learner-centered teaching since it has the focus shifted from the teacher to the learners: the latter participate actively becoming the protagonist of the learning process. The key in creating an effective a learner-centred lesson might probably be understanding how beneficial it is to give students as many opportunities as possible to use the target language and practise their speaking skills and being also aware of its subsequent and inevitable impact on their learning process.

As mentioned above, the awareness of the amount of STT in the remote lesson on the RT's part has an important role in fostering a learner-centered lesson. Aiming at maximising STT in every single activity in the class will accordingly impact students' learning process. It may not be the case that profound changes in CEI lessons will need to take place but instead, a subtle tweaking to lesson routines, for example, would just motivate learners and prompt them to become the protagonist of the video conference lesson from the very beginning.

Strategies to maximise learner talking time

Purposeful pair work and group work

As stated by Fihel (2010), work in pairs/groups considerably increases the amount of students' practice since it allows students to use the target language, to help one another and also encourage weak or not confident students to practice L2 in a safe atmosphere. Pair work and group work, as opposed to whole-class activities remarkably increase STT and are, by definition learner-centred activities. Having a group of students ask questions and other group answer them is an example where all of the talk is done by learners. For instance, instead of asking students "What´s the weather like today?", a good idea is splitting the class in two and having a group asking and the other answering "It's… and ...", and finally everybody asking the RT about the weather in his/her city.

Even though in almost every CEI lesson plan there is a pair work / group work activity, it is essential to train learners to work in pairs and groups. Some very important aspects are giving clear instructions, asking instruction checking questions (ICQs), demonstrating, giving examples. Giving students enough preparation time before checking is also fundamental.

Reasons for listening to each other

We need to keep in mind that the main purpose of these stages is to provide students with the opportunity to practise their speaking skills with a sense of achievement and also build their autonomy as learners of the language. On that basis, it is necessary to ask ourselves: "How can we make these exchanges as meaningful as possible?"

First, adapting the content of the dialogues to students' reality is always a good starting point. For instance, if the suggested activity on the lesson plan states that students have to ask each other about how much time they spend doing different routine activities, RTs can try asking them to include their real life activities in the dialogues before they start interacting. In this way, they will feel more interested and encouraged to listen to what the other student is saying. Moreover, once the interactions have finished, the RT can ask students to compare their answers in order to find similarities and differences between the answers they have provided. This is a task which implies that students have to listen to each other giving the activity a meaningful outcome.

Using full sentences

There are certain activities - especially question/answer ones- which trigger one-word answers on learners´part. One way of maximising STT is encouraging more extended contributions: the use of full sentences as opposed to single word responses. The interaction becomes even more enriching if follow-up comments are made, giving incentive to meaningful communication.

One activity that works well as an example of single-word triggerer (or what is worse, a letter) is the one in which the learner, after watching a video, is supposed to provide with the correct order of scenes. In this case, what is suggested to maximise STT is, instead of accepting"A 2" as an answer, e.g. ,prompting students to provide with a description for every scene via means of body language, starting a sentence ("They …………..""), asking follow-up questions (What are they doing in A?), drilling full sentences, etc. Needless to say, the technique chosen should always be according to learners' level and autonomy in L2.

Eliciting

Eliciting is key when it comes to creating a student - centred classroom. Whenever we ask students to use their previous knowledge in the presentation or revision stages of the lesson, RTs are giving them the chance to activate ideas, vocabulary and structures in their heads, and to connect of all them with the new content.

Paving the way to make the most of eliciting in the remote lesson is quite simple. We need to facilitate instances in which learners lead the recycling and presentation stages by using what they already know as much as they can.

Let's take one of the CEI activities as an example. Week 76 in level 3 invites students to recycle question words. Rather than showing them the flashcard with all the WH words on it, what the RT can do is to cover them and just show their beginnings and the pictures that illustrate their meanings. Next, the RT will say "To ask about an object we use…" and encourage children to complete the sentence. For weaker students, a good alternative is to add some incomplete questions which are familiar to students to the visual support described before. For instance, for the question word "where" the slide on the screen can show the incomplete question ".......... are you from?" together with the answer "I'm from Uruguay" to facilitate recognition and finally close the cycle with an Concept Checking Question such as "Are we asking about a person or a place?".

This technique contributes to active learning, gives learners protagonism, avoids spoon feeding information to the students and helps them get memorable information that they will not easily forget.

Conclusion

CEI programme gives learners the opportunity to be part of a forty-five minute remote lesson per week. Due to its rather short duration and as it is the only weekly meeting with the Remote Teacher, exploiting ways of maximising learner talking time during the remote lesson becomes crucial: it fosters a learner-centred classroom where children are able to make the most of using L2 in every lesson.

The techniques presented above help reduce unnecessary teacher talking time and increase the participation of the students in each lesson, encouraging them to take an active role in each step of the lesson. This certainly allows learners to be part of a meaningful learning process that breaks down the traditional idea of a teacher centred approach, making children the protagonists of all the stages of the remote class, making the whole experience memorable.

Contact information

Mikaela Armelini, Remote Teacher Coordinator, British Council, Argentina.

mikaelaale.armelini@britishcouncil.org.ar

Nadia Carolina Albornoz, Remote Teacher, British Council, Argentina.

nadiacarolina.albornoz@britishcouncil.org.ar

References

Fihel, M. (2010). *TEFL Methodology: Pairwork and Groupwork*. Retrieved from: http://angielski.edu.pl/metodyka/specjalistyczne/metodyka/business-english/angielski-na-urlop/tefl-methodology/tefl-methodology-pairwork-and-groupwork (Last accessed 31 October 2019)

Nunan, D. (1989) *Understanding Language Classrooms*. Hemel Hempstead: Prentice Hall International.

Stanley, G. (2019). *Innovations in education Remote teaching*. Retrieved from: https://www.teachingenglish.org.uk/sites/teacheng/files/Innovations%20in%20Education%20-%20Remote%20Teaching-V8_1-164_WEB.pdf (Last accessed 31 October 2019)