Authentic Oral Interaction in the EFL Class: What It Means, What It Does not

La interacción oral auténtica en la clase de inglés: lo que significa y lo que no

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The communicative approach in EFL education has generated a concern for the development of communication in the foreign language classroom within which the promotion of oral interaction is usually paramount. However, what constitutes authentic oral interaction is sometimes not clearly understood and some of the activities that take place in the classroom seem unlikely to generate meaningful opportunities for the development of oral interaction. To address this gap, this paper characterizes four samples of oral communication exchanges that occur in Colombian EFL secondary school classrooms in Monteria and discusses their effectiveness for developing meaningful oral production in both student-student and teacher-student interaction. The paper has two main sections: the first is devoted to the analysis of student-student interaction, and the second to discussing teacherstudent exchanges.

Key words: Oral interaction, English as a Foreign Language (EFL), oral production

El enfoque comunicativo en la enseñanza del inglés como lengua extranjera ha generado una preocupación por el desarrollo de la comunicación en el aula de clases, en la cual se da gran importancia a la interacción oral. Sin embargo, aún se entiende poco lo que constituye la interacción oral autentica y por ello las actividades de aprendizaje generan pocas oportunidades significativas para el desarrollo de la interacción oral. Por ello, el presente artículo caracteriza cuatro ejemplos de interacción oral comunes a las aulas de inglés de escuelas públicas de Montería, Colombia y discute su efectividad para desarrollar una producción oral significativa en la interacción estudiante-estudiante y profesor-estudiante. El artículo tiene dos secciones: la primera se encarga del análisis de la interacción estudiante-estudiante, la segunda discute la interacción profesor-estudiante.

Palabras clave: interacción oral, inglés como lengua extranjera (ILE), producción oral

Introduction

The development of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) has brought with it a great variety of activities for promoting oral communication in the EFL classroom. I

am sure that many of us are acquainted with an array of terms like tasks, role plays and simulations, project work, conversation strategies, dialogues, presentations, and many other activities that we call communicative and that we have used in our role as in-service or pre-service teachers to promote oral communication. The use of these activities, we assume, renders our teaching practice 'communicative' and so, when asked how we teach, we usually say we use the communicative approach, or that we develop oral communicative competence in our classrooms. However, have we ever wondered about what we understand by oral communication and its characteristics? Is it the dialogue students speak in front of their classmates based on a prepared script? Is it the oral presentation they make about a particular topic? Is it the uttering of model sentences based on patterns provided by the teacher? Are all those activities equally successful in developing communication?

The objective of this paper will be to provide an informed discussion of what authentic oral communication involves and the possibilities it has in the EFL classroom. In doing so I will explore both student-student and teacher-student interaction as they presently occur in classrooms and describe them in terms of their conformity to what can be called authentic oral communication. My central argument will be that both the studentstudent and teacher-student interactions that usually occur in EFL lessons, represented by what I have called the 'script-based dialogue' and by the IRF exchange (Initiation-Response-Followup), resemble authentic oral communication very little and thus seem unlikely to generate meaningful opportunities for the development of foreign language proficiency.

The discussion that follows will be based on observation and transcriptions coming from state, secondary school classrooms in Monteria (Colombia). The usual learning conditions within these classrooms imply a scarcity of technological, bibliographical, and material resources; they also imply large classes and teacher-centered instruction, where the primary source of oral language is the teacher him/herself. The data I will use have been collected mainly through non-participant, unstructured observations and audio recordings, and are part of an ongoing action research project about the development of communication standards and citizenship through the use of tasks (task-based learning). The discussion is organized into three main sections: in the first one, the main theoretical issues that inform the paper will be briefly presented. In the next section two types of student-student interaction will be analyzed in terms of their value for developing EFL conversational skills. In the last section, teacher-student interaction is given a close look considering, equally, how it seems to promote or hinder the growth of these skills.

Theoretical Briefing

This short section deals with the main theoretical aspects that underlie the discussion presented in this paper. However, rather than explaining them in detail here, I have opted for a brief, general explanation of each one. The reason for this is that almost all these theoretical issues will be retaken throughout the paper and discussed in more detail as they are weaved with classroom interaction data. In this way, I hope to be able to make my points clearer and sufficiently grounded.

One current issue in EFL education comes from the discussion of how human beings appear to become part of their cultural system and the role learning plays in this process. Outstanding within this discussion is the work of Lev Vygotsky (1978) and his ideas about the culturally and socially mediated nature of human cognition

(Lantolf, 2000). The main assumption of this theory is that "individual development must be understood in, and cannot be separated from, its cultural and cultural-historical context" (Rogoff, 2003, p. 50). In this view, the social and the psychological interact in meaningful ways and create each other. Another important concept from the Vygotskian legacy is the concept of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). The idea behind this concept is that learners become able to do things when they are provided help by more mature, knowledgeable or skilled peers with tasks that otherwise they would not be able to accomplish alone (Van Lier, 2004). In a developmental sense, the support gained through the interaction extends learners' ability, pulling them to higher levels of performance. The extension of these two powerful ideas for the field of EFL has led to a wide recognition of EFL learning as increasing participation in activities or situations when the language is used.

In this view of EFL learning, the concept of interaction has gained increased recognition over the past decades. A pioneer in this area is Long (1983), who stated in his interaction hypothesis that opportunities to attend to form during negotiated interaction were conducive to language learning. Several reasons that support this hypothesis include the assumptions that learners receive feedback on their production during negotiated interaction and that they have opportunities to modify their output, or oral language production, during this negotiation (Long, 1996). This concern for interaction has also been expressed by other authors (Ellis, 2003; Hall & Verplaetse, 2000; Kumaravadivelu, 2003; Pica, Lincoln-Porter, Paninos, & Linnell, 1996; Van Lier, 1996), who see it as a fundamental condition for second and foreign language learning. It is in this broad area of knowledge and research that the subsequent discussion and characterization of authentic oral communication in the EFL class fit.

Student-Student Interaction in the EFL Class

The value of student-student interaction for the development of EFL proficiency has been highlighted with communicative language teaching and with the advent of theories of learning that emphasize the social nature of first and second language acquisition (Lantolf, 2000; Lantolf & Thorne, 2006; Van Lier, 2000, 2004). Today it is widely known that students can learn from and among themselves. Thus, different ways in which they can interact meaningfully have come to be favored in classrooms. Although there are different options for promoting student-student interaction in the EFL classroom, not all of them seem to foster authentic oral communication and, as a result, hardly suit the communicative lesson.

A very common activity that I have found in EFL classrooms in the context under study consists of a dialogue students perform in front of their classmates. This dialogue is usually prepared in advance and is mostly carried out as the recitation of a script. This activity, teachers argue, promotes oral communication because students are using the foreign language to exchange true information about themselves, and also because they practice pronunciation and grammar. My opinion is to the contrary, that such an activity has little to contribute to the development of oral communication and is really far from being an authentic communicative event. What is worst, its persistent occurrence in classrooms might be reproducing the wrong belief that it indeed constitutes authentic oral communication and that, as a result, it should be carried out as frequently as possible.

In the remainder of this section I will present two student-student interaction events and weigh their value for developing learning-promoting, authentic, oral

communication. One of the events, between two students, corresponds to a dialogue, which has been prepared and then performed in front of the class; the other corresponds to a survey activity in which learners are trying to get information from their classmates about routines.

Interaction Event No. 1: The Script-Based Exchange

The short piece of interaction below (see Table 1) comes from a sixth grade classroom in a state school in Monteria and concentrates on the topic of personal information (name, place of origin, age, etc.). In order to foster students' ability to communicate orally, the teacher asked students to do a dialogue based on a model she presented in the previous lesson. Students had to prepare the dialogue for homework and then perform it in pairs in front of their classmates.

Interaction Event No. 2: The Survey

The excerpt in this second example (see Table 2) is also from a group of sixth graders. In this case they are learning how to ask for and give information about routines and times. The exchange that follows comes from the sixth lesson on the topic and is part of a survey students are taking to collect information about their classmates' routines using a format the teacher provided. The format has pictures of the activities they should ask their classmates about, as well as a sample question and answer.

Apparently, the two excerpts contribute to developing oral communication; more specifically, conversational skills. However, a close analysis of them shows that the second one seems more successful at that than the first. In my opinion, this might be a result of the way in which the second excerpt mirrors real communication, opening opportunities for learning the foreign language in realistic ways. On the contrary, the first event yields little resemblance to authentic oral communication and thus has little to offer for the development of EFL oral proficiency as will be shown below.

Table 1. Transcript 1

Turn	Student	Transcript
1	S1	… comienza tú Carlo... dale ((laughter))
2	S2	Espérate [Wait]…what is your *name*?
3	S1	My... *name*... is... Miguel... what is... your *name*?
4	S2	My *name* is Carlos
5	S1	Where *are* you from?
6	S2	Se me olvidó... [I forgot it] ((in a soft voice))
7	S1	Where *are* you FROM... = ¡Que si de dónde eres!
8	S2	=Montería... I am is from Montería
9	S1	*Are* you new... in the city?
10	S2	Este:... I am *twelve. Twelve*... ¿así? [Like this?]
11	S1	No... respóndeme que sí [Answer yes]... yes, yes ((in a soft voice))
12	S2	Yes ((laughter))

Note: Transcription conventions have been kept at their simplest. Italics indicate erroneous pronunciation; capital letters indicate higher tone of voice.

Table 2. Transcript 2

Turn	Student	Transcript
147	S1	What time do you *get* up?
148	S2	I get *up fif* o'clock
149	S1	What time do you take a shower?
150	S2	Take a shower at *fif fif...fif fif* (five)
151	S1	What time do you… *gu* to *school*?
152	S2	Go to school *fif tirty*
153	S1	What time do you... have dinner?
154	S2	A las *fif* o'clock... five o'clock
155	S1	I…Yo soy [I am] I, I… Tú tienes que decir lo que dice aquí [You have to say what it says here] ((S1 suggests S2 to use the pronoun *I* so that the sentence is grammatically correct))
156	S2	What time do you *brush your teeth*?
157	S1	Xxx o'clock
158	S2	What time do you... do *your… home…*work?
159	S1	At five, five, five
160	S2	Mira yo en inglés es I… I… I… [Look, I in English is I]

One of the problems of the first activity, which limits the development of oral communication, has to do with the fact that the conversation was planned in advance, written down as a script. This is seen in the fact that one of the students forgot his line in the script (turn 6) and was helped by his classmate, who clearly knew what his classmate had to say. This situation clashes head on with one of the characteristics of this type[1] of speaking event: that of *spontaneity*. In real conversation very rarely do we plan ahead what we want to say, but we leave it to the moment of interaction and tune our utterances to it as the conversation unfolds, relating them to previous utterances and foreseeing the ones to come – a concept called *contingency* in language teaching literature (Van Lier, 1996). Additionally, in a real conversational encounter we are not told what to say by the person to whom we are supposed to say it, as occurs in turn 11 in Transcript 1. The second excerpt seems more successful in this respect. In this case students are using the survey format as support for asking their classmates questions and this helps them in producing their utterances in real time; that is to say, they did not write the questions in advance and are repeating them parrot-like, but are looking at the drawings in the survey format and then uttering the necessary questions based on the knowledge of the language they have or are gaining through this activity. It is true that we do not usually look at drawings in real life to be able to have a conversation like this. However, this second excerpt is more likely to engage learners in the type of language use that is characteristic of authentic oral communication (Ellis, 2003). As a result, it appears to be more successful in developing spontaneous oral production than the first one. (See also how the questions and answers in the second excerpt seem to flow more smoothly with much less hesitation; they are also perfectly tuned to the situation, which is more in line with the contingent nature of authentic communication).

This concern for spontaneity is very closely related to the issue of *automatization*, or the production of speech without having to organize it in your mind first (Ellis, 2003; Harmer, 2007; Van Lier, 1996). When students have to use the foreign language in a way that mirrors 'real operating conditions' (i.e. as it occurs in communication in everyday life), making decisions of what to say and how to say it at the moment of speaking, there is a higher chance that they develop an automatic use of the language (Ellis, 2003). This is one of the characteristics of a high level of proficiency. The second transcript seems to fulfill this condition properly, as can be seen in the fact that they are not uttering their participation from a script, but creating and shaping it as the conversation takes place.

A second issue that deserves particular attention has to do with the ideational meaning of the exchange (Halliday, 1994). I have contextualized this concept here as the 'ideational relevance' of the two exchanges. That is to say, the extent to which the participants of the exchange are truly interested in finding out what the other has to say and the extent to which they do not know, in advance, the information the other participant will provide. This, in simpler words, can be referred to as *content relevance*. The first excerpt obviously lacks this. At the beginning of the exchange it can clearly be seen how S1 already knows S2's name. Additionally, these two students studied in 5th grade together, so they already know that both of them are from Monteria, and that neither of them is new in the city. In my view, these two situations might render this short exchange unrealistic, meaningless, as lacking motivation and, as a result, unlikely to develop authentic oral communication. The second excerpt, instead, seems to be providing new information about students' routines and the corresponding times. The content relevance of this excerpt can be seen as well in the fact that the information students are providing is true and the other classmate does not know it in advance. Although it is very likely that students might not be truly interested in knowing their classmates' routines, this activity clearly engaged students, perhaps because it involved them in exchanging relevant content in real operating conditions of language use. This is usually one of the features that keeps conversations going and encourages participants to use language in their attempt to find out more information.

Another important issue characteristic of meaningful and realistic oral communication has to do with the way the utterances (the form) suit the communicative situation in an *appropriate coupling between of form and function* in real time. It is this aspect that helps us decide what to say (meaning) and how to say it, (form) depending on the situation in which we find ourselves and depending on what was said before by us and the other participants of the conversation. Although this process is mostly and best carried out unconsciously, "meaningful use of language will necessarily imply the establishment of relevant form-meaning mappings" (van den Branden, 2006, p. 7) This is closely related to the concept of automaticity and has direct implications for the usefulness of the FL in the classroom and for the motivation towards learning it in the long run. In the first transcript, students seem not to be involved in such decision-making for the decisions about what to say had been already taken and, thus, the relationship between form and meaning is distant and perhaps lost. This can be seen in the fact that S2 is not paying attention to the meaning of S1's utterances and thus answers something completely unrelated to S1's question (turns 9 and 10). This situation renders this part of the exchange unsuccessful in terms of sociolinguistic competence, for the triad meaning-form-situation is not appropriately matched. Something different seems to be happening in the second excerpt. In this case, both students seem to be perfectly aware of what is going on and thus ask and answer accordingly, as can be seen in almost all the turns. In other words, they are matching their utterances to what is required in terms of form and meaning and, as a consequence, in terms of sociolinguistic competence (Bachman, 1990).

The type of situational awareness just described, which turns into appropriate form-meaning use, seems to be also present in the form of *language awareness* concerning how the linguistic system should work (Van Lier, 1996). This seems to be what makes S1, in transcript 2, notice that there is something inappropriate in S2's answers in turns 150 and 152, and thus tries to provide explicit correction in turns 155 and 160. Although this part of the exchange does not reflect what is characteristic of realistic communication (you do not usually correct what other people say when you are talking), the fact that S1 turned her attention to form in this precise moment has important implications for language learning, for it is an act of *noticing* a language item and how it should work (Bitchener, 2004; Ellis, 1994, Van Lier, 1996, Watanabe, 2008). Attention to form within a communication event among students has been documented by different authors and has been called *collaborative dialogue*: It is knowledge building dialogue. In the case of our interests in second language learning, it is dialogue that constructs linguistic knowledge (Swain, 2000). The general feeling about it is that, as it is the learner who focuses on form on his/her own accord, it might successfully contribute to learning how the language works and developing communicative grammar, for this act of noticing becomes an *affordance* for appropriating the foreign language (Van Lier, 2000) based on students' output (Swain, 2000). In other words, collaborative dialogue of this sort creates language learning opportunities that contribute to foreign language development in the long run (Kumaravadivelu, 2003).

The creation of learning opportunities for students to develop the foreign language is not unique to student-student interaction. As will be shown in the following section, teacher-student interaction can also carry the seeds for language growth or, more commonly than we would wish, for language learning failure as well.

Teacher-Student Interaction and the Development of Oral Communication

Teacher-student interaction is an important source of EFL learning in the classroom. Given the conditions of most of our state schools where scarcity of resources makes it difficult to expose students to oral samples of the foreign language, the use of English by the teacher becomes a tremendously important source, if not the most important, of real foreign language use. In this part of the paper I will concentrate on two different types of teacher-student interaction and will analyze their potential for promoting meaningful EFL learning within the framework of authentic oral communication as described above. The first type corresponds to what has been called an IRF exchange (Sinclair & Coulthard, 1975, cited in Van Lier, 1996); the second, to a pedagogical conversation (Van Lier, 1996) by the teacher and students. Both types will be discussed using two samples of teacher-student interaction. The first comes from my own data on secondary school classroom interaction in the Colombian context; the second comes from Seedhouse (2007).

Interaction Sample No. 3: The irf Exchange

In their influential work on the analysis of classroom discourse, Sinclair & Coulthard (1975, cited in Nassaji & Wells, 2000) characterized the IRF exchange (which stems from initiationresponse- follow up) as the most common type of interaction that is found in classrooms. This exchange usually takes place in teacher-student interaction and has been described as a "closed rather than an open discourse format..." (Van Lier, 1996, p. 152), due to the fact that it limits the learner's participation to one turn (the second turn or *response*) and hems it in between the eliciting turn (the first turn or *initiation*) and the evaluative one (the third turn,

follow up or *feedback*)[2]. The characteristics of this type of interaction are summarized by Van Lier (1996, p. 153), whom I quote fully here:

- It is three turns long.
- The first and the third turn are produced by the teacher, the second one by the student.
- The exchange is started and ended by the teacher.
- As a result of (b) and (c) the student's turn is sandwiched between two teacher's turns. 2 For a detailed description and discussion of the IRF exchange see van Lier (1996) and Nassaji & Wells (2000).
- The first teacher's turn is designed to elicit some kind of verbal response from a student. The teacher already knows the answer (is 'primary knower'), or at least has a specific idea 'in mind' of what will counts (sic) as a proper answer.
- The second teacher's turn (the third turn in the exchange) is some kind of comment on the second turn, or on the 'fit' between the second and the first. Here the student finds out if the answer corresponds with whatever the teacher has 'in mind'.
- It is often clear from the third turn whether or not the teacher was interested in the information contained in the response, or merely in the form of the answer, or in seeing if the student knew the answer or not.
- If the exchange is part of a series, as is often the case, there is behind the series a plan and a direction determined by the teacher. The teacher 'leads', the students 'follow'.

In recent years, the validity of the IRF exchange has been revisited and deeply discussed. For example, Nassaji & Wells (2000) present a detailed account of the different configurations and possibilities the IRF offers for learning. One important conclusion of their study is that the IRF is not necessarily a useless exchange and might have learning potential when the third turn (the F turn) is conceived as open and not evaluative (that's why they call the F move Follow-up rather than feedback). However, for the present discussion I will concentrate on a configuration of the IRF exchange as including a Feedback, evaluative move. This stems from the pervasive nature of the evaluative move in the lessons I have had the chance to observe.

An example of the IRF exchange from a sixth grade lesson on the topic of routines and times, with the F-move in the evaluative function, is presented below (Table 3).

Table 3. Transcript 3

Turn	Student	Transcript
1	T	Victor? What time…what time… do you get up?
2	Victor	I get up at six o'clock.
3	T	I get up at six o'clock. Very good… ¿Qué estaré preguntando? [What am I asking?]
4	S?	¿Qué hora es? [What time is it?]
5	T	No, what time do you get up?
6	S?	¿A qué… a qué hora se levanta?... [What time do you get up?] At six…
7	T	Seis y media [Half past six], not at 6:00… good…
8	T	Faber…what time do you get up?
9	F	I get up at in English.
10	T	I get up at… y me dices la hora [And you tell time the time]
11	Faber	…((goes on thinking, no does not provide any answer))
12	T	Ok Faber te dejo pensando [I'll let you think]
13	T	Cristian, What time do you get up?
14	Cristian	I get up at 5:00.
15	T	I get up at 5:00, very good.
16	T	Now… let's continue.

The example illustrates a common event in the EFL class. In fact, it is so common that it has come to dominate teacher-student interaction in many of the lessons I have had the chance to observe. The first IRF exchange occurs between turns 1 and 3: the teacher starts by asking the question *"What time…What time… do you get up?"* (the eliciting turn or initiation), and the student provides an answer to that question saying *"I get up at six o'clock"* (the response), and in the third turn the teacher gives her feedback or evaluation with "*very good*" (the feedback, or follow up). This pattern is repeated from turns 3 to 8, 9 to 13, and 14 to 16.

Despite its common use in the EFL class, this type of interaction has several implications that, in my opinion, limit rather than propel meaningful learning. The first one has to do with the *amount of student talk* it promotes. As can be seen in the example, the teacher dominates the talk to a point that she produces 62.5% of the participation (10 out of 16 turns). This leaves the 35 students she has with only 37.5% of the chances to use the language orally. Following a very simplistic but logical equation, the more chances students have to use the language orally, the more opportunities they might have for developing their oral communication abilities. However, that is not the case in this example where student participation is significantly reduced, nor is it the case in some of the different studies where teacher-student interaction has been analyzed and where the IRF exchange usually accounts for two thirds of the total interaction (Van Lier, 1996) that occurs in a classroom.

Another issue worth analyzing has to do with the *roles* each one of the participants of the exchange assumes in the talk. In the example, the teacher is the one who

always initiates the talk, as is evident in turns 1, 8 and 13, where she asks different students the question, '*What time do you get up?*'. She also fulfils the roles of a) reuttering, or re-casting, what students say (turns 3, 10 and 16) in order to acknowledge their participation; b) evaluating students' answers by accepting (turns 3 and 15: '*very good*') or rejecting them (turns 5 and 7, '*no, not at six*'); c) deciding who is supposed to talk (turns 1, 8, and 13 where she nominates participants), and d) deciding the course the interaction will follow (turn 16, '*now… let's continue*'). The students, on the other hand, are left with the role of providing only an answer to the teacher's elicitations (turns 2, 4, 6, 9 and 11). The fact that it is the teacher who manages the talk by assuming different roles, and in doing so uses language to fulfill varied communicative functions, leaves the learner with scarce opportunities to use the language communicatively and for different purposes, thus reducing the amount and variety of EFL practice in the classroom.

In terms of spontaneity, content relevance, promotion of automaticity, and the coupling of form and meaning, this piece of interaction seems to have the same problems discussed in the previous section for student-student interaction. Namely, that the third turns of the IRF instances are evaluative- something very rare in authentic conversation; the conversation is not oriented towards exchanging meaningful relevant contents, but towards verifying knowledge (grammar and pronunciation); and finally, answers and questions do not appear to flow in an automatic fashion, appropriately coupled one to the other in a contingent way, but in jumps from verifying form to exchanging meaning. These reasons, then, seem to make this piece of interaction unrealistic and thus barely significant for the development of foreign language proficiency.

One final issue worth considering in this analysis has to do with *conversational symmetry* (Van Lier, 1996). This aspect refers to how the rights and responsibilities are distributed in the conversation. That is to say, each of the participants has the right to decide when to talk and what to say[3] and is not told when to talk or what to say. In the EFL classroom it is usually the teacher who makes the decision of who talks next and what he/she should talk about, but this is something that does not usually happen in real talk. In our example, the teacher is 'the one in charge' and tells the students when to talk and what to say. Although it is the teacher's responsibility to guarantee that the interaction flows in an orderly way, exercising too much control through this type of interaction might generate students' reluctance to participate and thus result in less motivation, not to mention the implications it might have for the distribution of power and the perpetuation of the *status quo* in the classroom (Lemke, 1990, cited in Nassaji & Wells, 2000).

Although the IRF exchange is the most common type of interaction that occurs in the EFL class, it is not the only one. There are other types of interaction whose characteristics seem to contribute more successfully to developing language learning. One of them is the type of interaction Van Lier (1996) calls the 'pedagogical conversation', or contingent interaction. I will describe it in the following subsection.

Table 4. Transcript 4

Turn	Student	Transcript
1	S	Kung fu
2	T	*Kung fu*? You like the movie *Kung fu*?
3	S	Yeah… fight.
4	T	That was about a great fighter? A man who knows how to fight with his hands.
5	S	I fight… my hand
6	T	You know how to find with your hands?
7	S	I fight with my hand.
8	T	Do you know karate?
9	S	I know karate.
10	T	Watch out guys, Wang knows karate.

Interaction Sample No. 4: Contingent Interaction

Contrary to the IRF exchange, contingent interaction seems to be related to the concept of conversation. In Van Lier's terms, conversation is aimed at the construction of communicative symmetry, or equal (or at least almost equal) "distribution of rights and duties in the talk" (1996, p. 175). In contingent interaction there is no certainty as regards the direction the talk will take, for it depends on the local, moment-to-moment positions and contributions of each of the participants. As Vygotsky (1986) puts it,

In conversation, every sentence is prompted by a motive. Desire or need lead to request, question to answer, bewilderment to explanation. The changing motives of the interlocutors determine at every moment the turn oral speech will take: it does not have to be consciously directed –the dynamic situation takes care of that. (p. 99)

Relating the concept of contingent interaction to the way proficiency grows, it is possible to say that it is in contingent interaction where "language provides affordances that engage learners" (Van Lier, 1996, p. 171); that is, where learning opportunities are created and learners take advantage of them. In this way, the complex set of processes that underpin L2 learning might be more effectively activated.

Before we go on, let us see an example[4]. The teacher has been asking learners to talk about their favorite movies when one of the learners introduces a topic within the flow of the talk.

This piece of interaction is different from the first one we studied (the IRF exchange) and, in my opinion as well as that of several authors (Seedhouse, 2007; Van Lier, 1996; Wood, 1988), seems to have important implications for the development of foreign language proficiency and learning in general. One such implication comes from the fact that in this example the student's amount of talk is higher and richer than in example 3. In this case, the student's amount of talk constitutes 50% of the turns, which means that the students might have more opportunities for using the language in communication.

The above is also related to the fact that it is no longer the teacher who starts topics or expands on them. As could be seen in the example, the learner initiates the talk about *Kung fu* (turn 1), takes it in the direction he wants (his fighting abilities, turn 5), is 'primary knower'[5] of the information (turns 3, 5 and 9) and uses what the teacher says to build his own talk. This interaction seems to be more symmetric than what happens in example 3 and, as a result, is some steps ahead in the process of developing EFL learning.

One additional point of discussion is that it is the learner who initiates the talk or proposes a topic for discussion (turn 1). The teacher then steers towards the student's utterance and asks a genuine question about it (turn 2, *Kung fu?* You like the movie *Kung fu?*); that is, the teacher is truly interested in the information he is asking for and, contrary to the IRF exchange, does not know the answer in advance (he is no longer 'primary knower'). This causes the exchange to develop in a more realistic way for the teacher and student are sharing true information and are interested in doing so because the teacher is not evaluating the student's contribution but commenting on it and subtly helping the learner construct what he wants to say. Additionally, in the example above, the talk started by the student's presentation of his favorite movie and ended up in an exchange about his fighting abilities, with the joke the teacher makes in turn 10. This, in Vygotsky's words, means that the dynamics of the situation took care of the course the talk followed, of its unpredictability. This exemplifies one of the characteristics of contingent interaction, if not the most salient.

Following Seedhouse's (2007) analysis of this same excerpt, it is important to note that the student's grammatical resources are fairly limited, but this does not impede him from initiating the talk (turn 1), developing it (turn 3) and turning the discussion to his fighting abilities (turn 5). We can also see how the student "very skillfully manages to co-construct meaning with T in the L2 from his limited grammatical resources" (turn 12). What this shows is that students can in fact not only initiate talk in the classroom and contribute to developing conversation, but can do so with a very few linguistic resources, which contradicts one of the teacher's most common complaints when developing oral communication in the EFL class; namely, that students cannot talk because they do not know enough vocabulary and grammar.

This kind of interaction could be related to Wood's (1988) concept of contingent teaching, or Van Lier's (1996) 'pedagogical conversation', both of which refer to teaching that assists performance through the pacing of help based on the child's contributions to the interaction. It falls also within the conception of human development as the transformation of participation in sociocultural activity (Rogoff, 2003) and within the ZPD (Vygotsky, 1978) that Ohta (2000, cited in Seedhouse, 2007) contextualized in relation to second language acquisition as "the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by individual linguistic production, and the level of potential development as determined through language produced collaboratively with a teacher or peer" (p. 9).

In transcript 4, and following again Seedhouse's (2007, p. 13) analysis, the learner's actual developmental level can be seen in turn 3 with the telegraphic utterance "*yeah... fight*", which the teacher expands to the native-like form "*You know how to fight with your hands?*" in turn 6. Thanks to the teacher's embedded support, the learner starts producing more elaborated utterances that seem to be moving up the scale and signal the area of potential development. This is the case of "*I fight... my hand*" (turn 5) and "*I fight with my hand*" (turn 7), which are very likely the result of the learner's noticing and subsequent uptake of the teacher's embedded correction and of the scaffold he has constructed through his interaction[6].

Based on the previous two examples, it can be said that the IRF exchange seems a limited and limiting interactional format that encourages very little participation on the part of the learner and, as a result, reduces the possibilities for learning the foreign language. Contingent interaction, on the other hand, seems to open possibilities for a more symmetric, meaningful, realistic, and effective interactional mode in the pursuit of EFL proficiency.

Conclusions

In this paper I have tried to show the different aspects that seem to account for what can be called authentic oral communication in the EFL classroom. In order to do so I have presented and contrasted different examples of teacher-student interaction in teacher-centered lessons and student-student interaction in a script-based dialogue and in a contingent conversation based on a survey task. My main claim has been that both the script-based dialogue and the teacher-student IRF interaction have very little to offer in terms of EFL proficiency growth. I do not mean by this, however, that they should be banned from the language classroom nor that they are a waste of time for both students and teachers. I think they retain some value in terms of pronunciation practice, confidence in handling the sounds of the language, and perhaps motivation, for the first case, as well as controlled language practice and the keeping of an orderly lesson for the second.

The major reasons that support my position have to do with the authenticity, content relevance, contingency and symmetry of language use and of the language use situation in both cases (Halliday, 1994; Van Lier, 1996, 2004). As was argued, for oral communication to be authentic there need to be a considerable degree of spontaneity and a true exchange of meaning to which the interacting parties are oriented and in which they are interested. Additionally, when the interaction gives no room for the uncertain, for managing it in terms of its linguistic realizations and its topic, little opportunities are offered for students to develop automatic language use and thus make appropriate, online matching of form and meaning. Additionally, we have seen that unauthentic communication usually provides a variety of language use roles for the teacher, relegating students to passive members of the language exchange.

Through the discussion of the different situations that were presented above I have also tried to put together a set of basic criteria for making informed pedagogical and practical decisions as regards what constitutes communication in the foreign language class and of the way we shape, choose or adapt our EFL learning activities. In this way, I think, we can better tune the activities we design or choose in order to suit both students' needs and the demands that the language learning process poses. Although my emphasis has been on the secondary school classroom, the proposed criteria might equally serve the purposes of more demanding EFL or ESL teaching situations.

The occurrence of contingent interaction or pedagogical conversation in English in the EFL learning contexts I have had access to is extremely scarce. This means that an appealing research path to follow would be to look for pedagogical strategies to engage both teacher and students in learning to generate conversations in English within the classroom. The path is a challenging one, given the conditions in which EFL learning takes place in our contexts, but that makes it more fascinating.

[1] There are many more types of speaking events, many of which might indeed not be spontaneous and might have to be written in advance e.g. a public speech. So, spontaneity is not necessarily a characteristic of *all* speaking situations.

[2] For a detailed description and discussion of the IRF exchange see van Lier (1996) and Nassaji & Wells (2000).

[3] This is also referred to as *talk management* and *topic management* (Kumaravadivelu, 2003).

[4] This example comes from Seedhouse, 2007, p. 12.

[5] See Nassaji & Wells (2000).

[6] Van Lier (2004) presents an interesting revision of the concept of scaffolding as it applies to SLA.

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