Contrasting Task Structuring Practices in Two ESL Classrooms

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Amidst many instructional strategies that aim at improving students’ communicative competence in L2 fields, instructional scaffolding has been recognized as an effective one. Briefly, instructional scaffolding, originating from sociocultural theory, posits that the teacher scaffolds student learning with tailored assistance through communicative interaction. As such, in instructional scaffolding, dialogue plays a crucial role. Yet, few studies ascertained that it is not only dialogue but also related structure that foster effective learning. This case study examined the ways in which two ESL teachers structured classroom activities and their influences on students’ communicative interaction. The data consisted of classroom observation, field-notes, interviews, and class artifacts. The findings illustrated striking differences in the teachers’ task structuring practices in terms of the nature and type of classroom activities and the level of student involvement. The detailed analysis of the teachers’ task structuring indicated a need for strategic lesson planning, self-reflective teaching and teacher development for many classroom teachers who do not know how to practice scaffolded task structuring.

I. INTRODUCTION

Now the command of English is not an option but a requirement for many L2 learners in this global village for their academic and career success. This trend urges classroom teachers in ESL and EFL fields to seek for strategic instruction that promotes learners’ communicative competence. Now there is a growing recognition that instructional scaffolding is an effective instructional strategy that fosters learning in a contextualized manner. Briefly, instructional scaffolding refers to the teacher’s mediated assistance that is provided at the moment of students’ needs through communicative interaction. Given the primacy of dialogue in instructional mediation, many research studies have examined the role and effect of dialogic scaffolding (e.g.,
Maloch, 2002; McCormick & Donato, 2000; Mohr, 1998; Nystrand, 1997).

Although it is true that dialogue is an essential medium for the teacher to assess learners’
needs and to provide appropriate assistance, some researchers caution that it is not only dialogue
but also associated structure that foster effective instruction (Gallimore & Tharp, 1990; van Lier,
1996). While most studies have looked at how dialogue is used as a tool for microscaffolding
(dalogic assistance provided on a moment-by-moment basis), some have gone beyond this and
have examined how dialogue and related structure are served as means for macroscaffolding
(instructional assistance by laying out superorganizational framework) (e.g., Pompetti-Szul,
1997). Although these studies (i.e., Gallimore & Tharp, 1990; van Lier, 1996) highlight the
utility of macroscaffolding in carrying out effective instruction, such studies are rare in L2 fields.
The paucity of macroscaffolding studies as such became a motivation to conduct the present
case study.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Instructional scaffolding derives from sociocultural theory that posits learning takes place
through interaction (Vygotsky, 1978). The gist of sociocultural theory is the teacher (or a more
experienced peer) scaffolds students’ learning at their zone of proximal development (ZPD).
Here, ZPD refers to an assisted social space. Although instructional scaffolding tends to be
identified as dialogic scaffolding (or microscaffolding), it also involves macroscaffolding. These
two tiers of instructional scaffolding are often interwoven and have considerable overlap
(Pompetti-Szul, 1997; van Lier, 1996).

Among many early studies on instructional scaffolding, Wood, Bruner, and Ross (1976)
studied the role of tutoring in problem-solving, and reported the major features of instructional
scaffolding as recruitment, reduction in degrees of freedom, marking critical features, frustration
control, and demonstration. Later, Langer and Applebee (1986), after a series of scaffolding
studies in reading and writing classes, came up with the more refined and encompassing features.
They include ownership, appropriateness, collaboration, structure, and internalization. While
these features come from dialogic scaffolding studies, they can function as both micro- and
macro-scaffolds. For example, for ownership, the teacher can help students have ownership
through discursive efforts (i.e., by telling them, “You can do it.” or “It’s your responsibility.”)
and by structuring the task that prompts students to carry it out on their own.

Along with these research studies, many subsequent empirical studies examined instructional
scaffolding - mostly in L1 field and some in L2 area. Among these, the majority worked on
dialogic scaffolding, and some touched upon both dialogic and macroscaffolding (e.g.,
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Helmar-Salasso, 2001; Pompett-Szul, 1997). While these studies reported various features of dialogic scaffolding, some of them illustrated that macroscaffolding also comes into play in instructional scaffolding – although it was not explicitly stated in most studies.

In an L1 setting, Mohr (1998) explored effective primary teachers' instructional practices and found a number of common constructs. First, these teachers used a lot of collaborative terms such as 'we', 'together,' asked students many open-ended questions, and provided positive feedback. They then assigned students various roles such as writer, helper, tutor and teacher, and had them become interdependent by framing noncompetitive atmospheres. In a similar study conducted in a mixed setting of L1 and L2 (one ESL and one mainstream class in K-5 schools), Roehler and Cantlon (1997) reported that the teachers in these classes mediated student learning by offering them explanations, verifying and clarifying student understandings as well as by engaging them in problem-framing and problem solving tasks in a collaborative manner.

Then in an L2 area, Anton (1999) examined the discursive practices of two teachers at a university and reported that the teacher in a learner-centered classroom provided successful dialogic assistance by using directives, assisting questions and repetition, whereas the teacher in a teacher-centered classroom rarely used these communicative strategies and consequently failed to provide students with mediated assistance. Recently, Helmar-Salasso (2001) explored the scaffolding practice of an exemplary ESL teacher in a literature-based urban high school classroom and reported that the teacher mediated students' thinking and discussing abilities through dialogic assistance (e.g., tapping understandings, focusing, and telling) while she scaffolded the instructional context by building a literate community and leaving a room for literate thinking.

Briefly, what these empirical studies illustrate in common is successful scaffolding involves discourse and related structure – sometimes working independently and other times interdependently.

Instructional scaffolding, as discussed above, is indeed an effective instructional strategy. Yet, as most classroom researchers agree, it is a challenging strategy for many classroom teachers - especially those who are used to traditional recitation-mode of teaching and are inexperienced in teaching. Likewise, Hogan and Pressley (1997) hold that the process of scaffolding requires the full range of good teaching skills. They also add that each component of a scaffolding sequence is a familiar instructional strategy but using them in combination results in more than the sum of the parts. Furthermore, using this approach in a whole-class setting demands the teacher to have multiple levels of ZPDs. Van Lier (1996) then suggests that the teacher should have a rich menu of activities to generate productive work in the multiple ZPDs. He further mentions that these activities should have repeated occurrences, and to be structured around for a safe environment. In such an environment, students can have positive
interdependence, interiorize strategic ways of learning and apply them to other learning contexts.

This instructional strategy can put stress not only on teachers, as explained above, but also on students. Unlike in a traditional classroom where students sit quietly and listen to the lecture, they assume an active role participating, thinking, and collaborating in many problem-solving tasks. Although it can be difficult initially, through guided practice, they learn to think reflectively, constructively and critically (Nystrand, 1997). Also, as advantages in L2 classrooms, in a collaborative climate, students can have many inputs and outputs for communicative interaction (Anton, 1999; Gass, 1997).

Despite a number of advantages the existing studies illustrate, scaffolding studies are not many in L2 field - especially on macroscaffolding. Considering that macroscaffolding becomes a foundation for effective instruction, there is an urgent need of more macroscaffolding studies. The present study attempts to address this need.

III. METHOD

This case study sought to describe and explore the influences of the teachers’ task structuring practices on students’ communicative interaction in two ESL speaking classes. In understanding the case, Stake (2000) stresses that the boundedness and the behavioral patterns are key factors. In this study, the case was bounded for two ESL teachers’ task structuring practices. The researcher (myself) then examined the dominant patterns of the teachers’ task structuring behaviors and the ways in which they promoted or hindered students’ communicative interaction.

1. Description of Classes and Participants

The description will be made in the order of the Advanced Speaking Class (the A class) and the Speaking class (the S class):

The A class

Linda, the teacher in this class, was a Vietnamese-American in her late 20’s who taught this course for the first time. She previously had taught ESL children in public elementary schools for about three years. The objective of this class was to help students enhance their academic and communicative competence – yet, an emphasis was given to improving their oral presentation skills. The students, in total fifteen, were from various countries, and were in
advanced proficiency levels. While there were various activity units such as role-plays, individual and group presentation projects, most of them were run as the preparatory sessions for the individual and group presentations. In these preparatory sessions, Linda involved them mostly in reading comprehension in an I-R-E (Initiation-Response-Evaluation) or lecture format.

On a typical day, the teacher came into the class five or ten minutes earlier and did administrative work at her desk. In the meantime, students walked into the classroom and sat at their regular seats. Then Linda circulated the class, checking students' homework. Once it was done, she asked the students to open the textbook, and worked with them on reading comprehension. Toward the end of the class, Linda informed students of homework assignment for the next class and announced other important information.

The S class

Tom, the teacher in the S class, was a Caucasian in his early 30s. He was a veteran teacher who taught at this institute for about 7 years. Tom also taught this course for a number of semesters. The objective of this class was to assist students in acquiring academic and communicative competence. There were fifteen students who came from many different countries, as in the A class, and their proficiency levels were high-intermediate. While most activity units were similar to those in the A class, Tom engaged students in various activities from role-plays to a series of practice activities for individual and group presentations.

On a typical day, Tom came into the classroom with a brisk walk, and students sat in circles. As students worked on several activities in a different grouping format each day, their seats always changed. After checking students' attendance, Tom introduced an activity, and then students were in charge. When they worked in small or big groups on the task, he walked around and checked if everything was okay. Then, the teacher and students reviewed the task as a whole-class. Before closing the class, if there was a homework assignment or important information, the teacher wrote it down on the board and talked about it to students.

2. Data Collection

The data, consisting of non-participant classroom observation, field-notes, interviews and class artifacts, was collected during the spring semester of 2002 at an ESL institute affiliated with a state university in the U.S. The A class had classes two times a week whereas the S class had classes five times per week. During the observation period, except for the first few weeks, the researcher tried not to miss any class so that she could trace the natural progression of learning and teaching. She made copious field-notes during observations and recorded expanded field-notes after class. The researcher also interviewed the teachers and some of their students –
three times each - had informal chats and email communications. The observation and interview data were audio-recorded and later transcribed. Lastly, the researcher collected class artifacts such as class handouts and students’ homework assignments.

3. Data Analysis

During the classroom observations, data was analyzed on an on-going basis. Once the researcher became familiar with the interactional patterns of the teachers and students, she tried to ascertain the dominant patterns of the teachers’ task structuring practices. For these, she looked at both the teachers’ verbal and nonverbal behaviors and conducted macroanalysis. Yet, when it was deemed necessary, she carried out microanalysis (i.e., line-by-line discourse analysis). The researcher then classified these patterns into scaffolded and nonscaffolded task structuring. When the teachers’ task structuring effort led students to engage in the task, it was categorized as scaffolded assistance, and conversely, when it did not, it was termed as nonscaffolded assistance. In the analysis, references were made to the scaffolding features reported in the literature (e.g., Hogan & Pressley, 1997; Langer & Applebee, 1986; van Lier, 1996). Once the data analysis was completed, she reviewed the entire data and made necessary revisions.

In the meantime, in order to triangulate the data, the researcher used the multiple data collection sources, sought member-checking by having regular meetings with her colleagues in the doctoral program, asking their opinions and advice, and analyzing negative evidence.

IV. RESULT

The teachers’ task structuring practices were contrasting in various ways. They were particularly striking in light of the nature and type of the classroom task and the level of student involvement. The dominant features in each class will be discussed in what follows.

The A Class

Despite the teacher’s hard work, nonscaffolded task structuring was more prevalent than scaffolded one. The major elements that did not mediate student learning, as explained below, were the provision of repetitive and unchallenging tasks and inactive student involvement.
1. Repetitive and Unchallenging Tasks

In this class, the most common task was reading comprehension in the I-R-E or lecture format. There were a number of interrelated instructional arrangements that contributed to and reinforced the sustenance of this repetitive and unchallenging task structuring. They were: singular task-type in most activity units; unitary classroom material; fixed seating arrangement; and repetitive grouping format. Each will be described below.

1) Singular Task Type in Most Activity Units

Task type varied little from activity to activity. Unless students made presentations or were engaged in occasional group work, they usually worked on reading comprehension. It seemed to be partly attributable to the teacher's unfamiliarity with the course content. In an interview, Linda said, "When I do lesson planning, I try not to go off from what the institute requires." Consequently, the teacher simply followed the institute's curriculum instead of tailoring her lesson plans based on students' needs and responses.

During the reading comprehension sessions, Linda imparted a lot of information rather than had them participate in the activity. Then some students voiced complaints as shown in the following interview excerpts:

Dohun:
During class, the teacher reads the whole article...Actually, she gave us homework to read a chapter...I want to skip the reading, just go over and summarize because homework is students' responsibility. I think just reading the whole chapter is waste of time.

Lita:
Our teacher depends on the textbook a lot. We always read the textbook... So, we don't have opportunities to talk. Now our teacher talks 95% of class time.

The students, as reflected above, perceived that much class time was spent on textbook reading, which did not have much communicative value. The researcher then cautiously asked Linda if there was any reason that she preferred reading comprehension to discussion as a classroom activity. For the question, Linda responded as follows:

When I just let them (students) do their reading at home and come back and do the discussion,
they either didn't read or they don't want to respond. And so I knew that if I put them in small groups, they wouldn't have much to say, and so then, I don't want to waste the time. I would rather work with them through the lesson, and give the information they need, and then, they can't turn around and say, "Well, you didn't tell me then."

The above remarks portrayed that although students' passivity was presumably a reason for the teacher to practice irresponsible teaching, the teacher-led instructional practice seemed to contribute to reinforcing students' inactive classroom participation. Likewise, as her espoused role as a teacher was "to give the information they [students] need," as stated above, Linda did not seem to place much value on students' exploratory learning.

This type of task structuring does not scaffold student learning. First, the task does not involve students' cognitive and affective engagement because there is no element of problem-solving or problem-posing (Gibbons, 2002; Hogan & Pressley, 1997). Second, the task is not sequenced in such a way that guides students along their ZPDs (Langer & Applebee, 1986; Nunan, 1999).

2) Unitary Classroom Material

There were few classroom materials other than the textbook. Consequently, classroom learning was seemingly confined. Linda's over-dependence on the textbook for classroom instruction appeared to derive from several sources. First, as a new teacher in this institute, she tried to adhere to the curriculum, which relied heavily on the textbook. In an interview with her, Linda told me, "The curriculum is based on the textbook, and I do my lesson plans based on the textbook. Because this is my first year as well teaching this course, I don't go off whatever they [the institute] require." Second, the teacher's epistemological stance, that is, viewing the teacher and the textbook as knowledge sources, apparently reinforced the monopoly of the textbook as classroom material.

Although a textbook is a valuable classroom material, when it is overused, it can not only bring boredom to students but also hamper the teacher's ability to engage in innovative and exploratory teaching (van Lier, 1996).

3) Fixed Seating Arrangement

The class, as often observed in traditional classrooms, sustained fixed seating arrangement since students were usually engaged in seatwork. That is, during class, while the teacher sat or stood in front of the class, students sat in rows, facing the teacher. This rigid seating arrangement, as reported in many studies, is not conducive to student learning because it does not foster active
interaction among class members (Holtrop, 1997; Mougel, 1998; Smagorinsky, 2002).

When students were asked to do group work on an occasional basis, they formed a circle and exchanged a lot of talk. As they sat in circles without overt intervention from the teacher, they were engaged in active discussion. The changed classroom dynamics during these moments indicated that these students might not necessarily be passive learners, as the teacher thought.

Although the above observation does not indicate that one type of seating format is better than the other, many classroom researchers suggest that the teachers can provide a better learning environment by employing a range of seating arrangements (Gibbons, 2002; Holtrop, 1997). In so doing, they should consider what the optimal seating format is for a given task.

4) Repetitive Grouping Format

Repetitive tasks also implicated the repetitive grouping format. Students usually worked individually in a whole-class format. Consequently, they did not have many opportunities to learn social and conversational skills through active interaction with their classmates (Gass, 1997). In other words, in this individual learning climate, students were given few chances to express their opinions, to disagree with each other, or to compete for turns in an unobtrusive way. In such a way, students had a limited source of input and output and thereby had difficulty improving their communicative proficiency. Similarly, earlier in the semester, when students were asked to work in groups, some of them did not know how to initiate talk. Although many variables might have come into play, such as personality, proficiency, and group dynamics, the lack of experience of working together with class members, as Gibbons (2002) explained, seemed to have caused difficulty in group talk.

Repetitive grouping format, as described above, appeared to restrict the effectiveness of classroom teaching and learning. Since Linda often engaged students in a receptive mode of learning, they did not have proper guidance in what to talk about and how to talk about it.

2. Inactive Student Involvement

In this class, there was a generally low level of student involvement in classroom activities. While the primary reason was that most activities were of receptive nature, the secondary one was that there was no listening task during presentations.

1) Receptive Learning

The fact that most of the classroom activities were framed in the I-R-E or lecture modes were
not conducive of student learning since turn-taking is predictable and student participation is minimal in these types of instruction (Barnes, 1995; Cadzen, 1988).

Nonetheless, some students showed improvements in their speaking ability as the semester progressed. To illustrate, Miwha, a very shy student who never spoke a word in public, started to talk voluntarily during class. The teacher was very pleased to see this and encouraged her to speak more. Then, gradually Miwha produced longer utterances. The teacher later told the researcher, "I see an improvement in Miwha. Now she speaks more comfortably and confidently." This illustrated that no matter what the learning climate is like in class, students' motivation might be another important element for successful learning. However, except a few students, the students' class participation was generally low.

2) No Listening Task during Presentations

During students' presentations, the teacher did not assign any listening task to the class. Therefore, it was easily noticeable that many students did not listen attentively. Once, for role-plays, when a group of students read out their dialog at their seat, some students who were audiences were busy writing up their own dialogue or looking around the class. Similarly, during interview reports - part of the individual presentations - some students were completely inattentive by worrying about their own speeches or chatting with their classmates. Seeing this, Linda called on some of the students, and asked them what they had listened to. None of them then was able to give answers. These incidences illustrate a need for more engaging task structuring by giving ownership to both the presenting and listening students.

The S Class

The ways in which Tom structured the tasks were engaging and facilitative of student learning. While there were many, the most prominent ones were provision of various engaging tasks and active student involvement.

1. Provision of Various Engaging Tasks

The teacher created a mediated learning environment by providing a variety of engaging tasks. This was promoted in a number of ways: variety of tasks in each activity unit, various classroom materials, conscious use of planned and spontaneous tasks, various spatial and seating arrangements, and diverse groupings.
1) Variety of Tasks in Each Activity Unit

In this class, there was the balanced inclusion of both regular (e.g., idiom activity) and thematic activities (e.g., persuasive speech) in the curriculum. Then a variety of sub-activities were arranged for each activity unit. When the researcher asked Tom how he planned the lessons, he responded, “Before the semester starts, I spread out the major projects for the semester. I then decide what to do for each class on a weekly basis. Yet, sometimes I make changes based on students’ responses.”

On the basis of long-term and short-term lesson planning, the teacher arranged the regular activity units to have some routine activities, which gave students a point of stability. Yet, as van Lier (1996) put forth, he alternated these activities from week to week to avoid boring the students and occasionally mixed them with new activities. For example, in the idiom activity, Tom assigned listening and reading comprehension as the routine activities, and interspersed them with planned and impromptu role-plays and interactive story writings.

For the thematic activities, each activity unit was carefully planned, with its sub-activities functioning as independent activity units. To illustrate, persuasive speech, the major thematic activity in this class, covered various contents such as how to choose a topic, audience analysis, outlining, demonstration speech, and impromptu speech.

In Tom’s task structuring practices, it was also noteworthy that he sequenced the tasks to be progressively challenging. For example, when the teacher engaged students in the outlining activity, he first gave direct instruction and engaged them in a comprehension task. Tom then asked students to create an outline based on the comprehension quiz that they had just worked on. After this, he told them to exchange the sheet with another group and take the quiz. This time, he stressed that students should direct their questions to the original group. During these activities, some groups of students – especially the academically poor students – had a hard time generating the outline. However, while discussing with their group members and reading the other group’s outline, the students seemed to feel easier in carrying out the task.

In this challenging learning environment with a variety of activities, most students enjoyed their class participation. Yet in the beginning of the semester, the students, except a few active ones, were not very participative, which made the teacher feel frustrated. Gradually they became more interactive. However, some students did not show any improvement at all because all of their concern was to have a high score for the TOEFL. For instance, Sumio, a student who planned to enter an American college, told the researcher, “I am not interested in speaking. All I need is a TOEFL score.” This indicated that teaching and learning are reciprocal in which no matter how strategic the teacher is, he or she cannot facilitate student learning unless the students respond.
2) Various Sources of Classroom Materials

In classroom activities, Tom used a variety of materials from textbooks to teacher- and student-generated materials. In so doing, while considering the nature of activities, he tried to strike a balance between the textbooks and other materials. To illustrate, for the idiom activity, the teacher used the textbook for idiom comprehension. In contrast, for planned, impromptu role-plays and idiom story-writing activities, he rarely used the textbook and instead had students construct their own texts through guided support. For idiom quizzes, he used both teacher- and student-generated materials.

In general, Tom preferred to use his own classroom materials, and thereby expended a great deal of time creating the materials. In particular, for Crossroads Café (a weekly video-viewing activity), while watching a series of episodes in the video lab after class, he created all of the lesson materials for previewing, viewing and post-viewing activities.

In an interview, Tom said, "I search for a variety of materials, anything to make the class more interesting so it is not monotonous." His effort did not stop here. For the materials that he created, the teacher was also attentive of their visual effect, as reflected in the following statement, "I change the type, I change the font, and then I type it myself. Just because I don't know, I think it is more interesting to look at."

Students evidently recognized the teacher's endeavor as the following interview statements illustrate:

Youri:
I love this class. It is different from other classes. Our teacher uses a lot of different classroom materials. Have you also noticed this? Tom changes the font of the activity sheets. We know he works very hard.

Asante:
When we have idiom quizzes, he [the teacher] does not use the textbook but makes questions himself. For the quiz, he reads the story aloud and asks us to find idioms and write their meaning. Since he gives the quiz in a story format, it is more interesting and easier to understand how idioms are used in context.

Tom's material arrangement resonates with van Lier's (1996) claim, "The truth of the matter is that about 99 percent of teaching is making the students feel interested in the material" (p.12).
3) Conscious Use of Planned and Spontaneous Tasks

Another way that Tom infused the element of 'variety' in task structuring was by designing both planned and unplanned presentation activities. While students were usually given time to plan for role-plays and presentations, they sometimes had spontaneous performance. Tom deliberately planned these to help students "to stand on their own two feet." In other words, he assisted them in building up the ability to speak up in many contingent situations that they would face in real life.

One day, for an impromptu role-play, without any advance notice, Tom called up a small group of students to the front of the classroom, and had them act out instantaneously. For this activity, students showed various responses.

Minji:
I hated it. I was very very nervous in front of people.

Hiro:
It was so fun. I really loved it. I like spontaneous things.

Chul:
I was nervous but I liked it. I think Tom asked us to do the impromptu role-play to give us practice opportunity.

Despite these mixed responses, the students agreed that they really learned how to speak in public through this series of planned and unplanned presentation opportunities.

Later, students were given more chances to deliver impromptu speeches during the persuasive speech sessions. Although they had little time to prepare, most of their speeches were well organized. The teacher commented on the students' speeches as follows:

Now I see some improvements. They [the students] talk more naturally. In the beginning of the semester, I could tell how nervous they were; some students stuttered and some fidgeted. Now they look more poised and confident.

Through a series of practice opportunities and the teacher's assistance, most students seemed to have a better control of how to speak in various situations.

Spontaneous talk is one of the activities that Nunan (1999) recommends for students to improve their communication skills. In most classrooms, presentations tend to be planned activities. In this class, Tom tried to provide students with a purposeful learning opportunity (e.g.,
impromptu speech), since they will often need to produce spontaneous speeches when they go to college.

4) Various Seating and Spatial Arrangements

Variety in classroom activities involved various seating and spatial arrangements as well. Tom usually introduced several activities in each class. Because each activity required different grouping, students' seats tended to change from activity to activity. They sat in circles during group work, and sat in rows when watching their classmates' presentations. Sometimes when the teacher saw students sit in rows, he suggested them to sit in circles so that they could talk to one another.

Tom was also conscious of spatial arrangement. To illustrate, when students worked on mix-and-match activities, he suggested them to work on the floor because they needed to spread out many paper strips and put them in the right order. If students had not had such instruction from their teacher, they might have had a hard time carrying out the task at their small desks.

Various spatial and seating arrangements, as illustrated above, mediated students' task-taking process. Amidst of many classrooms' reality that has rigid seating arrangement, classroom researchers warn that it tends to set up a climate that discourages active interaction among class members (Smagorinsky, 2002). Yet this does not mean that one type of seating is better than the other. Instead, a scaffolding teacher puts forth efforts to arrange an optimal seating and spatial arrangement based on the nature of the activity.

5) Diverse Grouping Formats

When giving students tasks, the teacher put them in various grouping formats from individual to pair, small and large groups. In grouping, while taking into consideration students' gender, native language, personality and proficiency level, Tom was very conscious of the personality factor. When personality conflicts recurred among some students, he tried not to put them in the same group again.

The teacher's grouping strategy was also characterized by its experimental nature. Sometimes he used the same ability grouping – that is, putting strong students in one group and weak students in the other group. On these occasions, Tom found that strong students completed their work fast but weak students rarely finished theirs. In mixed grouping, when he put a strong student with a weak one, work was done mostly by the strong student. Next time, the teacher then tried to mix an intermediate student with a weak student. Yet, since there was no guaranteed optimal grouping, he kept trying out various grouping strategies in succession.
The teacher’s grouping strategy, as noted above, did not always produce successful group work. However, as a number of ESL researchers suggested, it seemed that the more students worked with different groups of students, the better practice they would have for communicative competence through the increased opportunities for input, output and negotiation of meaning (Pica, 1987; Richard-Amato, 1996). In fact, in the beginning of the semester, some students complained that they could not understand what their group members talked – especially when they had an unfamiliar accent. Therefore, the researcher often observed that some students had to repeat what they said to their partner(s) and vice versa. When the students still could not understand, they looked up the dictionary or tried to explain using different vocabulary words. Later, Asante, a student from Congo, said, "Earlier in the semester, I had a difficulty understanding what Korean students said. But, now I used to it." Overall, diverse grouping format appeared to foster a favorable learning climate for communicative interaction.

2. Active Student Involvement

Tom had a firm belief that students should be at the center of learning. He put his belief into practice by involving students in collaborative learning, assigning them a listening task during presentations, and structuring the class materials for student engagement.

1) Collaborative Learning

In most classroom activities, students worked together in groups for a common task. Although there were some occasions when they worked alone, they soon got together with their team members for the activity. In classroom activities, the teacher wanted students to “use the people around them to get information.” As such, when putting students in groups, he always encouraged them to get help from one another. During a whole-class discussion, when some students were not able to give an answer, he deliberately asked them, “Can your team members help you?” Also, when the teacher involved students in group work, he stressed, “Work with your group mates.” At times, some students copied the answer from their group members. However, it was not considered cheating in this classroom. As long as students worked together with their group members, he did not take issue with such incidences.

However, despite the teacher’s deliberate effort to foster a collaborative learning climate, there were times when students did not collaborate. In order to minimize such incidences, Tom sometimes gave them specific requirements. For instance, when students did role-play, he told them, “Each member should use 5 idioms.” On another occasion (1) in which students worked on their collaborative project, the mini-movie, the teacher specifically noted in the instruction
sheet that:

(1)

3. *Each member* of the team must contribute to the creative process (main idea development, character development, story line, etc.
4. *Each member* of the team must be assigned a character in the short story, and must appear in the movie.

... [italics are mine]

In the guidelines, as shown above, the teacher stressed that "each member" should be accountable for the collaborative project. By assigning a specific role to each student, as Rebecca put forth (1997), Tom tried to promote positive interdependence among the students.

As the teacher tried, there was a high level of positive interdependence among students, but it was not like this in the beginning of the semester. Most students were not used to working with different classmates; especially, some expressed strong discomfort of working with one another. Yet, as the semester progressed, they seemed to figure out what to avoid, what to talk, and how to respond in their conversations. This way, students were apprenticed to be better communicators through collaborative learning.

2) Listening Task during Presentations

In this class, as in the A class, there were a number of presentation activities. In any kind of presentations, when a student delivered a speech, the teacher assigned the rest of the students a listening task. This was, as stated during an interview, "to make sure that everyone is listening and paying attention."

For the listening task, Tom usually asked students to listen for main points and had them type up the report and bring it up in the next class session. For role-plays, after each group acted them out, he usually had a follow-up listening session. The following (2) was a typical way in which the teacher involved students in the activity (T and S stand for teacher and student, respectively):)

(2)

01 T: [after one group's acting out, he comments] Very nice....What was the main idea?
02 S: Go to the movies.

03 T: Okay, ...go to the movie. Okay. Yasu. Give me one idiom that you’ve heard.

04 Y: Right away.

05 T: Who said and how?

07 Y: Sumin.

08 T: Sumin said how and why?

09 Y: You have to go right away.

10 T: You have to go right away... Very good.

The questions that the teacher asks students, such as “What was the main idea?” (01), “Give me one idiom that you’ve heard” (03) and “Who said and how” (05), demand students’ active listening of their peers’ role-playing. In this way, Tom engages the students in the activity.

Students admitted that a listening activity forced them to listen; however, some students mentioned that they would listen anyway. In an interview, Asante, one of the best students, said, “I know why our teacher asks us to listen. However, personally, I will listen whether I have a listening task or not.” Overall, there was no doubt that the listening task urged students’ active listening.

3) Material Structuring

Tom also promoted student engagement through material structuring (Oxford, 1997). That is, when students worked on the textbook or the worksheet, sometimes he deliberately had them work with one material. In this way, he bound them to work together. In particular, in the Crossroads Café activity, the teacher often handed out one worksheet to each pair. Then, although it was not always the case, he observed that students became more engaged.

V. CONCLUSION

There were considerable differences in the ways in which Linda and Tom structured classroom tasks. In particular, the differences were more notable in the nature and type of task and the level of student involvement.

In the A class, Linda mostly engaged students in unchallenging and repetitive activities by repeatedly assigning them reading comprehension in the I-R-E and lecture format. Furthermore, she sought minimal student participation by involving them in receptive learning during reading
comprehension activities and giving them no listening task during presentations. This way, the teacher-led task structuring served as unmediated organizational framework that constrained students’ communicative interaction.

In contrast, in the S class, Tom involved students in various challenging activities, from reading comprehension, planned and spontaneous speeches to formal presentations in various grouping formats. He also promoted active student participation by putting them in collaborative learning, assigning them a listening task during presentations, and doing material structuring. Through this student-oriented task structuring, Tom framed supportive organizational framework where students could have active communicative interaction with their teacher and peers.

While it was evident that Tom was a highly strategic teacher whereas Linda was not, there seemed to be several factors that came into play in these teachers’ contrasting task structuring practices. Linda was a relatively inexperienced teacher who taught the A class for the first time. As a new teacher, she was not familiar with the course content and load, and therefore simply followed the institute’s curriculum that had a great use of textbook. Yet, her underlying epistemology seemingly played a more influential role in her teacher-led instructional practice. Linda, as reflected in an interview statement, served as an authority figure whose major responsibility was “to give information that students need.” The teacher’s product-oriented view also came into play. Since Linda placed primary emphasis on students’ mastery of presentation skills, she paid little attention to their learning process during day-to-day classroom activities.

On the other hand, Tom was a so-called master teacher in this institute who had taught the speaking class for about five semesters. As an innovative teacher, based on the institute’s curriculum, he had developed syllabus semester after semester and had created many classroom materials. Tom believed that as a facilitator, his major responsibility was to make materials interesting and have students participate in various activities. Furthermore, with the process-oriented view, he thought that every classroom activity - whether formal presentations or day-to-day classroom activities - should be a venue for student learning. Since he also believed that each individual student is the best source of learning, he framed collaborative learning climate so that students can learn from one another.

The findings that the teachers’ task structuring practices were closely interwoven with various elements – especially teaching experience, instructional epistemology, orientation, and situational contexts – have a number of implications. First, strategic lesson planning is strongly recommended for effective task structuring. In this study, despite the situational constraints, Linda could have practiced better task structuring by regularly updating her lesson plans. However, since she rarely involved students in interactive activities, she was not able to ascertain their ZPDs, and reflect them in lesson planning. On the other hand, Tom had both long-term and short-term lesson plans, and regularly updated them by engaging students in
various activities and identifying their cognitive and affective needs. Second, self-reflective instructional arrangement is suggested when considering the teachers' instructional epistemology and orientation played pervasive roles in their task structuring. For this, as in lesson planning, the teachers first should ascertain the course objectives and students' needs, and then examine if their task structuring practices reflect these. However, for an inexperienced teacher like Linda, the enrollment in a teacher development program might be a more effective means of intervention, especially when the findings show that effective task structuring consists of various elements. The same goes true for many Korean teachers who strive to practice communicative English teaching. They might join an English teachers' association where they can attend the regular meetings, workshops, and conferences. Through these opportunities, the teachers can observe the demonstrations and presentations of the experienced teachers and specialists on various pedagogic issues, as well as share their teaching expertise and difficulties and try to come up with a better instructional practice. If the teachers need a more structured pedagogic assistance, they might enroll in a graduate school where they can learn theories and practices of effective English language teaching.

While there should be several limitations to this study, the most limiting one seems to be the selection of the research participants. Linda was in a constraining situation, being inexperienced of teaching adult students and having taught this course for the first time. In this aspect, it may not have been fair to choose a participant who was evidently in a difficult situation to practice scaffolded task structuring. However, as many researchers understand, it was extremely difficult to find a teacher who was willing to allow a researcher to observe his or her class for one semester. Linda was very open and helped me complete my research study successfully. Despite this situational constraint, the analysis showed that Linda could have practiced more strategic task structuring if she had known how to.

This case study is transferable to ESL classrooms in a similar setting. Yet, the basics of task structuring practices seem to be applicable to many ESL and EFL classrooms that aim for communicative interaction. For future directions, it is suggested that a similar study be conducted in an EFL setting, particularly in Korea where many teachers have a dire need of strategic teaching. Another suggestion is action research be carried out for an inexperienced teacher like Linda. Some action research studies reported positive results of the researchers' intervention on improving novice teacher's instructional performance (e.g., Au, 1990). Lastly, it is hoped that the detailed description of the teachers' task structuring practice in this study can be of practical use to classroom teachers who strive for strategic task structuring.
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