

LEARNERS' REACTIONS TO CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES

M.H. Kubrusly
(S.B.C.I. - Rio)

I. INTRODUCTION - BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

At the beginning of 1985 the Sociedade Brasileira de Cultura Inglesa Rio (SBCI - Rio) launched a research project with the ultimate aim of enhancing the teaching/learning process inside the institution.

The first step of the project was to define the area(s) to be investigated. It was felt that teachers should be involved in the project from the very beginning, i.e., the decision making stage. An activity to define research priorities was designed and piloted with two groups of teachers in two different branches of the SBCI. However teachers complained that the activity was too abstract and therefore difficult to tackle. A new activity was designed and on 25 July 85 a workshop open to all teachers interested was conducted by Dick Allwright in the SBCI. Unfortunately this workshop took place during the teachers' midyear break which made it virtually impossible for some teachers to attend. Twenty three teachers from eleven different branches were present. Although this group only represents about 10% of the SBCI's teachers it was considered significant as a random sample since teachers came on a self selection basis (all teachers were invited) and most branches were represented in the group. The workshop took a whole afternoon. Teachers discussed in small groups and then in a plenary the worrying areas inside the institution which should be addressed by classroom research. A list of research priorities was drawn and three words emerged as the most important ones: LEARNERS, MOTIVATION and MATERIALS. There was a consensus about the need to reach the learner during the research process. On a later meeting it was decided that learners' reactions to classroom activities be investigated. It was suggested that this would be more comprehensive than investigating their reactions to materials. It was also considered that at a first stage it would probably be easier for learners to react to classroom activities than to the materials themselves.

II. THE SETTING AND THE SUBJECTS OF THE STUDY

1. The Cultura in Rio

The Cultura in Rio is an organization exclusively devoted to the teaching of English as a Foreign Language. Over 25,000 learners attend classes in our

18 branches - 16 in Rio de Janeiro and 2 in Brasília. The bulk of our learners are teenagers attending secondary school. Around 380 teachers work at the Cultura. Each branch has a headteacher and a group of 12 teaching advisers are responsible for maintaining a uniform standard of teaching throughout the institution. There are courses for children (8-10), juniors (10-13) and adults (13 upwards) at the Cultura. The course for adults comprises Basic, Intermediate and Advanced levels whereas the other two only cover the Basic levels. The Basic course consists of 6 terms of 50 contact hours each whereas both the Intermediate and the Advanced courses consists of 4 terms of 65 contact hours each.

2. The Subjects of the Study

Data for this study were collected at the pre-intermediate level of the Cultura course. This level was chosen for two main reasons. First because these learners should be familiar with the activities to be investigated. At this level learners have already been exposed to 250 hours of English. The approach adopted inside the institution is the same and the books adopted in the Basic course are those of the Strategies series. At this level learners are covering Abbs, B. & Freebairn, I. Developing Strategies, Longman, 1980, which is the third book in the series and have already covered the first two ones. The techniques used in the classroom activities at this level are the same or similar to the ones used in the previous years. Therefore it was assumed that learners should be familiar with them. This was one of the reasons why this level was chosen to be investigated. The other reason was the number of learners attending pre-intermediate classes. The majority of our learners are in the elementary levels with a number of them attending the advanced classes. The pre-intermediate level represents a sort of cross section half way through the course with a significant number of learners.

Seven different classes in different branches were visited and a total of ninety subjects investigated. With one exception most groups consisted of teenagers attending secondary school - 85% of these learners are between 13 and 16 years of age. One of the groups visited however was an evening class where learners were young adults/adults (J.B.)

Table 1 gives a complete picture of the branches visited, the number of learners investigated and their age range.

III. DATA COLLECTION PROCEDURES

1. The Repertory Grid Technique

We started looking for a research tool which would be appropriate for our purposes.

Any research method which would overtly expose the learners to expressing their reactions to classroom activities was felt to be too crude. Questionnaires or interviews, by their very nature, did not seem appropriate since the mere choice of words could lead the learners in one direction.

As Nash (1973:21) suggests "if we want to know what attitudes a person holds we should make it our task to discover what these actually are, rather than, as is conventionally done, ask him to agree or disagree with a list of statements somehow held to form a 'scale'."

A careful search of the methods presently in use in educational research pointed to Kelly's Repertory Grid Technique (1955) as the most appropriate one to be used in this study. The background to the technique, how to elicit a grid and the different possibilities of analyses fall outside the scope of this study. The interested reader however is referred to the bibliography at the end of this work.

2. Classroom Activities

A comprehensive list of the activities that learners perform in class was drawn by teachers and teaching advisers. These activities cover nearly everything that happens during classtime. Nine activities which are more representative of the teaching/learning process inside the institution were selected to be used in the investigation. These activities are:

1. Listening for Information
2. Reading for Information
3. Reading - Interpretative Skills
4. Pair Work - Information Gap Exercises
5. Pair Work - Oral Drills
6. Writing - Paragraphs
7. Writing - Drills
8. Pair Work - Role Play/Simulations
9. Group Work - Discussions

3. Data Collection Procedures

Data collection took place in L1 (Portuguese) as the research technique is fairly complex and working in L2 (English) would add an extra strain to the whole process.

After the researcher had been introduced to the learners and those had agreed on taking part in the project the researcher went on to explain the sort of activity they were going to be involved in, i.e., give their opinion on the classroom activities they perform. The next step was to define together with the learners the classroom activities they perform more often and list nine. These nine activities are the nine elements of the grid, i.e., the nine elements they are going to construe about.

It is important to mention that this list of activities was defined together with them and not imposed on them. In two instances learners claimed that they did not do Roleplays/Simulation (activity 8 - see above) in class. Therefore this activity was substituted for these two groups by grammar exercises which learners claimed to do in class. When the nine elements were defined the process of

construct elicitation was explained to them and six constructs were elicited following the usual procedures. Learners worked individually, at their own pace and left the room when they had finished.

IV. ANALYSIS OF THE DATA AND DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

1. Analysis of the Data

At a first stage of the analysis constructs were grouped according to meaning under super-ordinate categories. In many instances constructs were exactly the same (e.g. exciting x boring) and only had to be grouped together. For this particular stage the fact that the learners involved in this study are teenagers was very helpful as their vocabulary tend to be somehow limited and with plenty of slang. They tended to use similar words (constructs) if not exactly the same ones. Therefore grouping the constructs did not pose any extra problems. When the constructs were grouped under super-ordinate categories a list was drawn with the ones that were mentioned more often. Table 2 shows the list of these constructs and the number of times each construct was mentioned by each group.

After that a table was drawn for each group. These tables show the number of times each construct was mentioned and for each activity (numbered 1 to 9) to which pole of the construct it was allotted. We include one of these tables here to give an example. (see table 3).

2. Discussion of Results

In general terms learners' reactions to classroom activities tended to converge. There were no major discrepancies. We can say that in most cases learners perceived most classroom activities in a very positive way. Of course when we detail the analysis and consider each activity individually there are those which are not particularly popular, e.g., writing-drills. By the same token when we consider each group individually.

There are differences in opinion but we did not speculate on these differences. Variables not taken into account by this study, e.g. teaching style, age range, social and/or cultural background, differences between learners from the South and the North of Rio, to mention a few, might account for these differences.

In most cases learners made distinctions we would expect them to do, e.g. oral drills are less intellectually demanding than oral information gap exercises.

In a few cases the same learner rated the same activity in contradictory terms, e.g., exciting but not interesting. Unfortunately we did not have a chance of going back to these learners to ask them about this.

In some cases learners tend to perceive activities where the teacher is actively involved (not only monitoring) as more useful than those they perform with their peers, i.e., pair and group work. It is important to note however that this is only true of this construct, i.e., useful x not useful. For the other

constructs these activities have been perceived in a very positive way, i.e., interesting, exciting. etc. When presented with the tables with the results (like table 3), class teachers said that these results reflect very much what they expected, i.e., how they perceive their learners.

V. FURTHER STEPS

When presented with the results of the research teachers involved in the project suggested that a questionnaire should be now designed using the learners' constructs, i.e., their own words, to be used with a greater number of learners at this level since working with the Repertory Grid Technique is always limiting in terms of the number of subjects we can work with.

Another suggestion is that we use the same elements and the same constructs (those listed as the ones that were mentioned more often) and ask teachers to allot the elements to each pole of the construct. We can then compare learners' reactions to teachers' and see if they tend to converge or not.

At present one teacher in each cultural branch is developing small scale research projects using different research techniques. These projects only involve one of these teachers' classes. Most teachers are still trying to look into different aspects of learners' perceptions of their own learning process.

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TABLE I

BRANCH	DATE	TIME	AGE														over 30	number of sts. per branch	
			12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20-25	26-30	30						
Icaraí	19 Sept. 85	1:45p.m.		3	6	4	2												15
Jacarepeguá	9 Oct. 85	4:00p.m.		2	7	5	1	2							1				18
Copacabana	10 Oct. 85	2:45p.m.		5	2	5	1	1											14
Copacabana	11 Oct. 85	2:30p.m.				2	4						1						7
J. Botánico	22 Oct. 85	5:45p.m.			3	3	1					1	2	1	2				13
Icaraí	10 Oct. 85	2:45p.m.		2	6	4	1												13
Ilha	11 Oct. 85	2:30p.m.		1	2	2	2	1				1							10
NUMBER OS STUDENTS			1	14	26	25	22	3	1	1	1	4	2	2	2				90

TABLE 2

		NUMBER OF STUDENTS							
N.OF TIMES MENTIONED	CONSTRUCT	ICARAÍ	JAC.	COPA	COPA	J.B.	ICARAÍ	ILHA	TOTAL
		19/09	09/10	10/10	11/10	22/10	25/10	31/10	
	interesting	12	13	11	4	3	10	8	71
	easy	10	8	4	6	11	11	7	57
	dynamic	8	14	11	2	10	7	-	52
	useful	5	14	13	5	6	1	5	49
	exciting	12	-	9	5	-	7	9	42
	stimulating	-	4	6	2	8	13	4	37
	intellectually demanding	4	12	8	1	4	3	-	32
	pleasant	-	5	3	2	8	5	7	30
	important	3	5	8	1	-	7	3	27
	tiring	7	-	1	-	4	3	4	21
	relevant	-	-	-	2	3	-	6	11

TABLE 3

BRANCH Copacabana

DATE 10 Oct. 85

Nº OF STUDENTS 14

