Classroom Culture in EFL Classrooms in Kabul University

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Abstract- In this paper, the author describes and analysis the classroom culture in EFL classrooms in Kabul University in Afghanistan. He suggests some points on creating safe learning environment in his classrooms. He also discusses the influences of some of the internal and external factors on the life of his classrooms and subsequently on teaching and learning process. He then states the implications of classroom analysis for the teacher education. He believes thinking more carefully and analyzing classrooms can give him and his colleagues valuable opportunity to think about and reflect upon his/her teaching practices as teachers. This might help him and his colleagues find better alternatives for teaching practices and providing learning opportunities for learners.

Index Terms- Classroom culture, Kabul University, Safe learning environment, and Teacher Education

I. INTRODUCTION

II. This paper analyses classroom culture in EFL classrooms in Kabul University in Afghanistan. As teachers in this context, we usually complain about students do not come to classrooms on time, or do not participate in the lesson enough. We typically blame the students and external factors for this. We do not examine the real causes of these problems to devise solutions and make our classrooms better learning and teaching environment. I will first describe a typical EFL classroom in this context to see how the internal aspects of classrooms life e.g. use of time, space, students' engagement and participation in the learning process are managed and what influences they have on our classroom learning atmosphere. I will discuss some issues for creating a safe learning environment in our classrooms. I will also discuss the external factors which influence our classrooms and finally I will write their implications for teacher education.

II.   IDENTIFY, RESEARCH AND COLLECT IDEA

1. Classrooms at Kabul University Context

I am an EFL teacher in the English language department at Kabul University in Afghanistan. This department has two English language teaching programs – for students of the English language department itself who take a

four-year English course to become EFL teachers at secondary and high schools, and the university wide program in which students take two years English lessons as a subject as part of their course requirements. I teach at both programs of the department, usually at the former one in which students are trained to teach English language learners, aged 12 to 18 years. They take different kinds of courses such as phonology, morphology, grammar, syntax, literature, speaking, reading, writing, methodology and so on. What follows is a description of a typical class.

1.1 The EFL Classroom in Kabul University

Table 1: A Grammar Lesson

It is 8:20am and a teacher enters the classroom (the lesson starts at 8:00 am). There are 45 students, aged 19 - 27 in the register but still only about 35 of them are present in the classroom. The chairs are arranged in six rows and there is a little space in the middle of the class dividing the rows into two parts. The teacher greets the students and waits for the rest of them to arrive. After the arrival of a few more students, but not all, which takes about 10 minutes, the teacher sitting on his chair at the front-stage of the classroom, asks students to open their books. He asks them which page they study today. The students tell the page and he says: "ok today we study the full sentence patterns". Students tell him they had three exercises as homework and would like to go through them to check if they have done them correctly. The teacher, now standing in front of the board and holding his handout, says: "good, they are ok. There is no need to go through them". He then reads instruction of the new exercise and writes a sentence '*The man whom I met yesterday drives his car fast.*' on the board. He asks the students to identify full pattern of the sentence. After a few minutes of silence in class, one student sitting in front row says "*sir fast is an adjective*". The teacher laughs and says: no, that is not right. Students also laugh loudly. The teacher tells other students to identify the full pattern of the sentence but students do not answer, especially those sitting at the back of the classroom and talking with each other as the teacher usually cannot see or do not pay attention to them. He then explains the sentence himself and tells students to copy it in their notebooks. He tells the student sitting in the front row near him to read the first sentence of the exercise. The student tries, but she cannot answer so the teacher asks the next student to do it and the lesson continues like this till they finish three or four exercises. He then says it is enough for today and if you have questions, you can ask now. Only a few students ask questions. He stops the lesson and starts talking with students, sitting in front of him, about daily affairs (usually in Dari – the official language of the country) for about 10 minutes. He then leaves the class 10 minutes early.

1. 2 Use of Time, Space and Students' engagement and Participation

Though the description in this classroom is not a transcript, I believe it indicates how teachers and students use the time and space - the two important elements of classroom life which as Wright (2005: 16) states, define the basis of formal education. It also shows students' engagement and participation during the lessons. I will first analyze this classroom in terms of time use because I believe as Wright (2005: 71) points out, that the way teachers allocate time for different classroom learning and teaching tasks is one of the temporal factors to consider in understanding classroom life.

1.2.1 Use of Classroom Time

**Table 2: The use of time in this classroom**

The teacher and students both use the time. For example:

- The teacher enters the class at 8: 20 a.m. (though the lesson starts at 8:00 a.m.) and waits for students to arrive;

- He explains the lesson for a while and asks students to copy it;

- He spends some time marking students in the register and talking about daily affairs (in Dari) and then leaves the class 10 minutes early;

- The students also use the classroom time by reminding the teacher about their homework, answering his questions and also asking their own questions;

- They also use the time to do the exercises.

There seems to be no purposeful use of time in this classroom e. g. teacher's coming late, talking about daily affairs in L1 and leaving the classroom earlier indicate that the teacher might not have a lesson plan in which time is effectively allocated to each learning and teaching activity. We see that though Wright (2005: 11) in his description of the classrooms says that there is a purposive sequence of activity through time in the lessons and of progression from one type of activity to another and students and teachers are busy doing various things, it seems that in the Afghan classroom this important quality is missing.

1. 2. 2 Use of Classroom Space

The very common type of use of classroom space (seating arrangement) is in six rows where there is a little space in the middle of the classroom separating the rows from each other. This can be illustrated as follows:
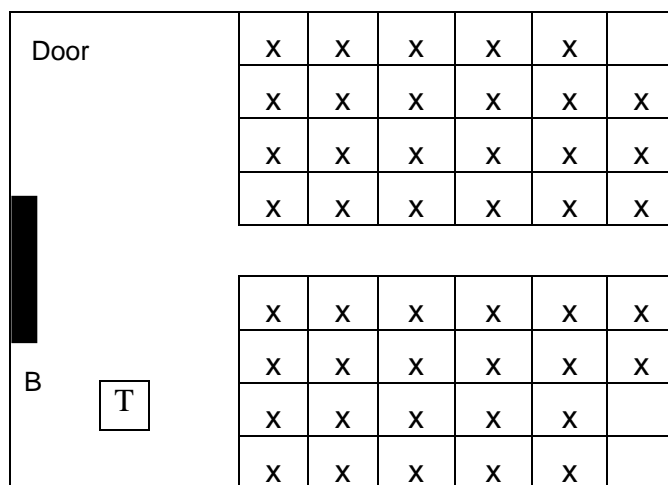
Key: T = Teacher   x = Student   B = Board

As this arrangement shows the teacher sits or stands at the front-stage of the classroom because from here he can easily access the board and face students. Students who usually work hard sit in the front rows to receive more teacher's attention and others prefer sitting in the rows at the back of the classroom, perhaps to escape teacher's attention and questions.

These uses of classroom space as Shamim (1996a: 125) states, show that the teacher usually manages his class from the center of the front of the room where he has easy access to the board. He can face students sitting in the front rows, but can also keep an eye on students sitting in the two wings on the left-and right-hand side in the front two or three rows. It might, however, be impossible for him to see the students sitting at the back of the classroom. The teacher usually remains in the front position, he asks students in the front rows to do the exercises and he talks with them. Thus, the front of the class as Shamim (1996a: 125, 128) states, lies within the surveillance zone of teacher and the back is outside his attention zone. Most of the students sitting at the back-stage of the class as Wright (2005: 313) points out are either ignored or receive very little teacher's attention.

1. 2. 3 Students' engagement

Table 3: Teacher's activity and its effects

The teacher plays different activities in this classroom and engages students in them. He, for instance:

- greets with students;
- explains the new lesson;
- laughs at students' answers;
- talks with students about daily affairs.

We see that these activities might have different effects on the teaching and learning process and on students in the classroom. I discuss some of their effects below.

Some of these activities or events such as greeting and talking about daily affairs might show closeness of teacher-students' relationship while others as teacher's laughing at students' error might indicate the distance in their relationship rather than closeness. However, whether these events show close or distant relationship between the teacher and students might not be as important as their possible positive and negative influences on teaching and learning process. For example, *the teacher and students' laughing at one of the students' answer* indicates that there might not be a friendly and safe learning environment in the class whereas *teacher's talking about daily*

affairs with students might show a close relationship between the teacher and students. They may experience positive or negative emotions which might influence their engagement in the teaching and learning process.

1. 2. 4 Students' participation

Teachers and students create and contribute to classroom learning community by participating or not participating Wright (2005: 18). We see in the Afghan classroom that they both participate in the class interaction, though their level of participation is not equal. The teacher asks students about a new grammar structure. One of the students answers teacher's question. The answer is not right so the teacher himself explains the lesson. The teacher and students are also busy doing the exercises. It seems as Wright (2005: 11-12) states that the classroom is not a silent place and there is some talking of different types, although it appears that the teacher speaks most of the time. Young (1992: 80) states that reports show that the teacher talk constitutes about 75 % of the total talk or part of the interaction in most classrooms.

The other common type of interaction in our classrooms besides IRF is the lecture based – didactic model of teaching. In order to explore this model in our classrooms further let us look at another classroom and see how the interaction is going on.

Table 4: A Lesson on Morphology
A teacher, in his late forties, enters the classroom. Students stand up to show their respect to him. The teacher after a short greeting with students tells them to open their books. He writes title of the lesson "*Morpheme - Free and Bound Morphemes*" and some notes on the board. He talks and explains it for 20 - 25 minutes and then reads the information from book and explains it a little more for students who are sitting and listening to him. He then tells the students that now you can ask your questions. One student raises his hand for permission and the teacher lets him ask his question. He asks his question and the teacher answers. Two or three (out of 40) more students also ask questions and the teacher answers them and the rest of them keep silent. The teacher says the lesson is over and he starts marking students in the register. He then says goodbye and leaves the classroom. Students again stand up to show their respect to the teacher while he is leaving the classroom.

The example classroom demonstrates that the teacher starts the interaction by writing the title of the lesson on the board and gives a lecture on it in a didactic way. As van Lier (1996: 178) states, there is a delivery of information or directives from the teacher to students, in a one-way, long monologic format. Though Wright (2005: 369) states that teacher's talking (teacher monologue) in L2 is an important source of input in contexts where L2 is not heard frequently outside the classroom, we see that it affects students' participation and minimizes their talking time a great deal.

2. Creating a Safe Learning Environment

As we see in the Afghan EFL classrooms there seems be less productive use of class time and space and students' engagement and participation in the lesson. Thus to change the current situation in our classrooms it would be better to pay careful attention to these key elements of classroom life and create effective and safe learning environment for the teaching and learning process.

2.1 Use of Classroom Time and Space

In my context, I believe, in order to make our classrooms effective and safe learning places and provide more learning opportunities for students we need to pay attention to more efficient and purposeful use of class time and space because as Wright (2005: 55) states, management of time and space affects both classroom relationships and learning opportunity. Wright (2005: 61-2) also asserts that space and learning are linked and the configuration and use of classroom space has a strong influence on the quality of classroom activity and changing configuration can aid different teaching strategies.

2.2 Students' engagement

The events in our classrooms indicate students' engagement in the learning process and their relationship with teacher. It, however, seems that the focus of their engagement might not be on effective teaching and learning. It also appears that there may not be a safe learning environment in the classroom e.g. *the teacher and students' laughing at the error that one of the students made*. I think as teachers we need to engage students in learning activities effectively and create safe learning environment for them because Whitaker (1995) suggests that students need to be trusted, listened to, noticed, encouraged, develop, challenged intellectually, valued, informed and supported.

2.3 Students' participation

The teacher and students take part in the class interaction in our classrooms. However, we see that it is the teacher who has a dominant role in the interaction and takes most of the class talk because as Breen (2001: 310) asserts the teacher initiates, learners respond and the teacher follow up their responses by repetition, reformulation or evaluation. He (ibid: 311) further points out that teacher appears to have two-thirds of class talk than all the learners together have. van Lier (1996: 184) states that while this (IRF) may have advantages of control and efficiency the consequences are that students' level of participation and talking time are very limited.

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