Calls for assistance

Tony Lynch

English Language Teaching Centre

University of Edinburgh

Calls for assistance

An analysis of students' requests for help in practical writing sessions during a pre-sessional English programme

History of this talk

- listening to students
- reading the research literature
- doing some classroom research
- reflection
- doing some more classroom research

Course Assistant (CA): Roles

- Additional native speaker in class
- Informal conversational partner in breaks
- Expert informant on studying at Edinburgh
- Insider on Scottish culture

SLA theory: Interaction with CAs

Students get the chance to

- <u>Hear</u> the CAs use more informal spoken English than in class (INPUT HYPOTHESIS)

- <u>Negotiate meaning</u> to clarify what the CA is saying and to practise turn-taking (INTERACTION HYPOTHESIS)

- <u>Stretch their interlanguage</u> when the CA doesn't understand and get feedback, including correction (OUTPUT HYPOTHESIS)

NNS/NNS interaction

Features **similar but more limited** opportunities for input, interaction and output

- *"The finding that learners are a somewhat limited source of modified input warrants some caution toward teachers' confidence in group work. It speaks well, however, for classrooms that are heterogeneous in their distribution of learner and NS interlocutors".*

    (Pica, Lincoln-Porter, Paninos and Linnell 1996: 80)

CA interaction study
(Lynch and Anderson 2003)

Data from 1996 pre-sessional:

- recordings of groups planning role-play (Scenario) in two classes - one taught by 'Gail' and 'Dennis'.

- students' responses to questionnaire about interaction with 'Helen' (CA).

Students' perceptions of CA

- Ts easier to understand than CA
- easier, or as easy, to speak to CA
- specific differences noted: CA's accent and speed of speaking
- Overall: interaction with CA of same or greater benefit, in all areas except <u>grammar</u>

Reflection

Divergence between EAP and degree

- class size

- relative brevity of reading texts

- lesson length

- assumed need for variety

EAP lesson structure

Four main elements:

- *teacher-led reading* introducing the teaching point
- task(s) in which students *analyse and discuss*
- task(s) in which they *produce*
- *feedback* by teacher and/or peers

Unintended effects of EAP

1. lessons relatively uniform
2. more supportive, but also more sheltered, environment than in academic department

Redesign for summer 2012

Four- session sequence:

- Preparation

- Lecture

- Practical

- Feedback

CA role in Practicals

- To respond to student queries and requests
- To comment but not to edit/proofread
- (For my research) To keep a log of points raised by students

Qs to CAs: Overall breakdown

- Task-related 407
- Programme-related 107
- Beyond the Programme 128

Total 642

Task-related Qs: Breakdown

- Process   98
- IT   93
- Meaning (in readings)   45
- Language (own)   67
- Writing   92
- Academic culture   12

                              Subtotal   407

Programme-related Qs: Breakdown

- HOW – routines of work; submission arrangements
- WHEN – scheduling
- WHERE – questions about actual or virtual locations
- WHICH –
- WHY - rationale for routines
- PERM - whether something was allowed
- SPROG – questions about ELTC Social Programme
- TEST – concerns about end-of-summer assessments

- HOW   38 (routines 29; submission 9)
- WHEN   18
- WHERE   13 (actual 7; virtual 6)
- WHICH   18
- WHY   3
- PERM   3
- SPROG   5
- TEST   9

Subtotal   107

Beyond the Programme

- University of Edinburgh   79
- The city of Edinburgh   22*
- Scotland   5
- UK   8
- meaning in (non-task) texts   5
- other   9

Subtotal   128

'Other'

- Can I use your PC to find my password?
- Did you find a blue pencil in the lab yesterday?
- **How do I improve my pronunciation?**
- If I move to that chair, is the air conditioning cold?
- My chair's broken. Can I swap it for a different one?
- This chair is too high
- Where is the toilet? (x3)

Implications

- Materials and tasks
- Role of CA (e-tutor)
- Feedback

Materials and tasks

- Linguistic accessibility
  - Make CAs aware of available online resources

- Clarity of task instructions
  - Make procedure at end of Lecture
  - Higher proportion of collaborative tasks?

Role of CA / e-tutor

- Likely range of Qs

- Especially Qs beyond current EAP course

- Training in filtering and forwarding

  - "Be prepared"

Feedback (online)

- Particular value in online learning
  - Timing, nature and clarity
  - Invitation to Ss to engage
- ODL learners likely to be more demanding
  - Need to provide prompt, authoritative and clear feedback – and relevant URLs
- Introduce more paired tasks?
- More feedback sessions

Summary

- Insights into what mattered to students
- CAs = chance to ask Qs that T might consider off the point
- Adjustments to materials, tasks, feedback for both f2f and online pre-sessionals

A.J.Lynch@ed.ac.uk

References

- Garcia Mayo M. and Pica T. 2000. Is the EFL environment a language learning environment? *Working Papers in Educational Linguistics* 16/1: 1-24.
- Lynch T. and Anderson K. 2003. Learner/non-teacher interactions: the contribution of a course assistant to EAP speaking classes. In J. Burton and C. Clennell (eds.) *Interaction and Language Learning*. TESOL Case Studies in Practice series. Alexandria, VA: TESOL. 7-22.
- Pica T., Lincoln-Porter F., Paninos D. and Linnell J. 1996. Language learners' interaction: how does it address the input, output and feedback needs of L2 learners? *TESOL Quarterly* 30/1: 59-84.