

## **Using Classroom Language to Improve Students English Proficiency in EFL Classes**

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### **Abstract**

Language input has important effect on learner's acquisition of the target language. As Myanmar learners are learning English out of the English speaking community, they need exposure to language. So, one way to expose the English language to students, using classroom language in English is important. This study tries to find out the language acquisition (understanding of the teacher's language of instruction) of non-English specialization students. 74 students, 37 first year History specialization students and 37 third year Physics specialization students, were given the classroom language instructions and the study was made by collecting data in terms of pre-test, one-month teaching and post-test. Firstly, the pre-test was given to find out whether the students understood the classroom language or not. The results of the pre-test showed that they were not used to hearing the spoken language throughout their school life and they could not process the listening input immediately. After one-month teaching, the post-test was given to them and the results of the post-test indicated the significant improvement. In the pre-test, the science students obtained higher results than arts students. However, in the post-test, the results of both students are not quite different. This shows that exposure to the language plays an important role in acquiring a language despite their initial proficiency. The study proved that using classroom language in English can make an English class transformed into an active and interesting language class which can help students improve their language proficiency.

**Key words:** Classroom language, Proficiency, Acquisition

### **Introduction**

Many experts now believe that one way to learn a foreign language is by being exposed to it, i.e. by hearing and/ or reading it all around us, without studying it. Learners pick it up automatically, i.e. learn it without realizing, like children learn their first language. Myanmar learners are learning English out of the English speaking community. So teachers should give as much exposure as possible to students as well as learners should hear and read a wide variety of language that is suitable for them. Provided students understand it more or less, any exposure to English is a good thing for students. They need exposure to language both inside and outside the classroom. One way to expose the English language to students is using language of instruction: classroom language in English. If the teacher uses English to give instructions in class, it can be a way to expose English to students. They need to use language in the classroom to interact with classmates or the teacher. So using classroom language can be a way to help students to be familiar with listening to English. So this study was carried to find out how much effect the use of classroom language instruction has on developing the proficiency of non-English specialization students of Hinthada University and how much they have improved their listening skills after receiving classroom instruction for a period of time.

### **Literature Review**

According to Tsui Bik-may (1980), current theories of language input, interaction and second language acquisition have claimed that language input has important effect on learner's acquisition of the target language.

Krashen's Input Hypothesis (1980) stated that input which is modified and made comprehensible to the learner and contains structures which are a little beyond the learner's present level of proficiency is best for language acquisition. Researchers have also claimed

that the interaction that the acquirer is involved in has important effects on L<sub>2</sub> acquisition. Seliger (1977) argued that how actively the learner is involved in the language learning process is a determining factor. Hatch (1978a, 1978b) and Long (1981) have both pointed out the importance of examining interaction in understanding L<sub>2</sub> acquisition and in considering what is necessary and efficient in L<sub>2</sub> instruction.

Krashen (1980: 82) also stated that since the classroom is the place where comprehensible input and modified interaction are available, what goes on inside the language classroom is very important.

Several researchers on the role of formal instruction in L<sub>2</sub> acquisition have shown a high correlation between years of formal instruction and proficiency, suggesting that classroom instruction plays an important role. Krashen (1981) further suggested that it is plausible that the classroom can accomplish both acquisition and learning simultaneously.

### Methodology

This study tries to find out the language acquisition (understanding of the teacher's language of instruction) of non-English specialization students. To find out whether the teacher's language of instructions helps students listen to English and improve their language skills, a study was made with 74 students, 37 first year students specializing in History and 37 third year students specializing in Physics.

First, the most common instructions used in classrooms were listed. Then, a pre-test which consisted of a total of 36 language expressions used in classroom were given to 74 students. The teacher read out classroom language instructions to the whole class. Students were first asked to write down whether they understood the instructions or not. If they understood them, they were asked to write down the meaning of the expressions as they understood in Myanmar. After that, the data from two classes were collected and analyzed. Then, the teacher used classroom language while teaching English in class, sometimes explaining what these expressions mean in Myanmar. The study was conducted in the first semester of 2009-2010 Academic Year, and the students were exposed to the classroom language in English for about an hour a week and the total duration is about twelve hours.

After using these expressions for about one month, the same test was given to the students again as a post-test and the test results were analyzed again. The test sheet given as the pre-test and the post-test is shown in Appendix B.

When analyzing the data, the results were rated into two main groups: (A) do not understand and (B) understand. If students did not understand the instruction, they did not need to continue to answer the question. If students chose (B) understand, they were asked to write down in Myanmar how they understand the expressions in the pre-test. The meanings of the expressions were rated in three different groups: (1) correct (2) partially correct and (3) totally wrong. For example, if the teacher read out the instruction, "Repeat after me", students have to write down the meaning of the expression in Myanmar. Then their translations were analyzed in terms of three categories. If they wrote "တူတူနုခါ သုအုတ်တူ ခေ" it was put into group (1) correct, "တူတူနုခါ သုအု ဖ နုပု ခေ" into group (2) partially correct and "တူတူနုတူခါ နုပုခေ" into group (3) totally wrong, respectively.

### Results and Discussion

In this section the results of the pre-test score of two groups of students (first year History students and third year Physics students) will be presented first and then, it will be

followed by the post-test score of them. Finally, the comparison between the pre-test and post-test score of the two groups will be analysed and discussed.

### Results of the Pre-tests

The analysis of the pre-test reveals that the score of the correct answers of science students (36.4%) is more than double score of the arts students (16.6 %) (See table 1). Though there is not much difference in the percentages of arts students and science students who chose “do not understand” (34.7% of arts students and 33.3% of science students), they did have differing rates of errors (23.6% of arts students and 13.1% of science students). On the most common errors, science students consistently scored lower error rates than arts students.

Table 1. The results of the pre-test of first year History students and third year Physics students

Specialization	Do not understand	%	Correct	%	Partially correct	%	Totally wrong	%
History	463	<b>34.7</b>	221	<b>16.6</b>	333	25.0	315	<b>23.6</b>
Physics	443	<b>33.3</b>	484	<b>36.4</b>	229	17.2	175	<b>13.1</b>

The items that more than 50% of the first year History students and the third year Physics students gave the answer “do not understand” can be seen in the following tables.

Table 2. The percentage of the first year History students who gave the answer “do not understand”

Sr. No.	Item	Classroom languages	%
1	17	Can you tell me what the answer is?	54%
2	21	How do you spell this word?	59%
3	11	We've seen this word in pervious lesson. Do you remember this word?	62%
4	14	What is the past tense of 'grow'?	70%
5	27	Then let's continue. Open your book at Page 31. Has everyone found it.?	70%
6	36	Will you stop talking and do your work?	70%
7	10	Read silently.	72%
8	35	I'll collect your books at the end of the class.	95%

Table 3. The percentage of the third year Physics students that gave the answer “do not understand”

Sr. No.	Item	Classroom languages	%
1	7	Let's have a look at some new words in the passage.	56%
2	13	What does 'they' in line '10' refer to?	57%
3	11	We've seen this word in previous lesson. Do you remember this word?	59%
4	8	I don't think you've seen this word before.	62%
5	6	Don't shout. Keep your voice low. Ready. Begin.	62%
6	29	Which word is the subject of the sentence?	64%
7	27	Then let's continue. Open your book at page 31. Has everyone found it?	70%
8	24	Don't forget to do your homework.	86%
9	35	I'll collect your books at the end of the class.	97%

As seen in the above tables, although they were taught in English, they could pay attention to the short sentences only. The language instructions given are simple, and almost all the words used in the instructions are common ones, students did not understand them. One of the difficulties may be that they did not catch the teacher's pronunciation. This shows

that they are not used to hearing the spoken language throughout their school life, they cannot process the listening input immediately. The next difficulty is that although they knew the meaning of each word, firstly they failed to memorize the words and didn't apply the clues in the context to write down the sentences. Moreover, they had to convert the teacher's instruction in English to Myanmar. As they failed to recognize the words in the sentence, it was difficult for students to be able to process the meaning of the sentences.

Table 4. The percentage of the first year History students that gave the totally correct answer

Sr. No.	Item	Classroom languages	%
1	31	Why are you late?	56%
2	33	There will be a tutorial next week.	70%

Regarding the score of the correct answers, as seen in Table 5, third year Physics students could give more correct answers than first year History students. Over 50% of the first year History students could give totally correct answers for 2 items whereas over 50% of the third year Physics students could give totally correct answers for 11 items.

Table 5. The percentage of the third year Physics students who gave totally correct answer

Sr. No.	Item	Classroom language	%
1	28	I'm going to teach you 'Interrogatives'.	51%
2	21	How do you spell this word?	65%
3	22	Class, today, I taught you lesson 2. We finished three paragraphs.	65%
4	25	Yesterday, we stopped at the end of the second paragraph on page 30. Am I right?	65%
5	10	Read silently.	68%
6	12	Tell me the meaning of this word.	70%
7	30	What's the negative form of 'went'?	70%
8	16	Who knows the correct answer?	84%
9	31	Why are you late?	84%
10	32	Please attend the class regularly.	92%
11	33	There will be a tutorial next week.	100%

Being third year science students, they were used to listening to some common words such as "spell", "meaning", "late", "correct answer" and "tutorial" and they could recognize those words correctly. So it can be said that the more exposure they get, the more they can improve their listening skills.

Table 6. The percentage of the first year History students who gave totally wrong answers

Sr. No.	Item	Classroom languages	%
1	3	I'm going to read the passage.	51%
2	9	Let's read through the paragraph again.	51%
3	8	I don't think you've seen this word before.	54%
4	4	Repeat after me.	59%
5	13	What does 'they' in line 10 refer to?	67%

As seen in the above table, although some of the first year History students said that they understood the instructions given, more than 50% of students gave totally wrong answers for items 3, 4, 8, 9, 13. It was found that the students did not understand the usages such as "going to", "repeat after me" and "don't think". They also left out the meaning of the word "refer" in their translation for item 13.

Table 7. The percentage of the third year Physics students who gave totally wrong answer

Sr. No.	Item	Classroom languages	%
1	20	Have you finished your exercises?	65%
2	4	Repeat after me.	76%



to 95.5%. In the post-test, only 0.97%, that is, only 1 or 2 students gave the totally wrong answers to items 2, 4, 5, 8, 9, 10, 11, 13, 14 and 16 though 23.6% gave the totally wrong answers in the pre-test. However, some students still could not interpret the instructions correctly. It was found that although they knew the meaning of individual words, they did not seem to be able to guess the meaning of the word appropriately in the context, however short and simple these sentences are. This indicates that students should be exposed to the spoken English that is used in the real life context.

33.3% of third year Physics students could not write down the answers in the pre-test. In the post-test, no students said that they did not understand. In the pre-test, 36.4% of the students could give the correct answers and 13.1% gave the totally wrong answers. However, the number of students who could give the correct answers rose to 97.5% and only 0.6%, i.e. only 1 or 2 students gave the totally wrong answers. No students could give the correct answers for item 13, 19 and 35 in the pre-test, but in the post-test, almost cent percent could give the correct sentences for item 13, 19, 35. Among those who could not give the correct answers, some students still could not recognize the meaning of the word “repeat”. Though the students knew the words, it is difficult for a few students to be able to process the rest of the sentence as they could not retain the information in their short-term memory. This means that students should be trained to be able to process the aural input automatically so that they could retain the meaning in their memory and can make sense of the words.

Table 10. The Overall Comparison of the results of Pre-tests and Post-tests of first year History students and third year Physics students

Specialization	Pre-test	Post-test
History	16.6 %	95.5 %
Physics	36.4 %	97.5 %

As seen in the above table, there is significant improvement in both groups of students. The science students obtained higher results than arts students in the pre-test (36.4% Vs 16.6%), however, in the post-test, the results of both students are not quite different. This shows that exposure to the language plays an important role in acquiring a language despite their initial proficiency.

As Physics specialization students are in the third year and they have been studying all the subjects except Myanmar in English since they were in Grade 10 and the first year History specialization students have been exposed to all the subjects except English only for a year as they have to study all subjects in Myanmar up to Grade 11. The exposure of science students to the English language is greater than arts students. This is one of the reasons that science students consistently scored lower error rates than first year History students.

There are still a few students, 0.9 % of History students and 0.6% of Physics students who could not provide the sentences well because they did not attend the class regularly though they took both tests. So it can be concluded that one of the reasons why the students did not understand the teacher’s instruction may be the lack of regular attendance.

As students are learning English in the non-English speaking community, some students were not motivated to take part in this study and they seemed to have negative attitude to the activity because the results of these tests will not be taken into account in their examination. Next, they are not familiar to this kind of listening activity. So, teacher’s instruction in English seemed to be funny for them. However, the students who attended the classes regularly enjoyed learning English. As they improved, they became active, motivated and interested in studying the English language. And their eagerness to study and to interact with teachers improved.

Lewis (2002) pointed out the teacher should create an atmosphere that helps students make use of the most of the opportunities for learning and practising the language. The results of the tests also suggested that teachers should give as much exposure as possible to students by giving classroom instructions in English.

### Conclusion

The analysis of this paper is of great value not only to the teachers but also to the students because the teachers will improve their speaking skills as well as the students improve their listening skill. In this study, the students were given the tests to know whether the teacher's language of instruction helps students listen to English and to improve their language skills. It was found that students were weak in listening skills and were not familiar with classroom instructions. So they were given one-month teaching, focusing on classroom language. After that they were given the same test to find out how much they had improved.

As students are learning English in the non-English speaking community, the teacher's input in the classroom is crucial. A teacher should make a class "maximally productive for language learning" (Richards & Renandya, 2002: 28). The results of the paper tend to suggest that whether a little or much English should be used as a medium also depends on whether the learners have a poor or good foundation of English. The teacher should be patient with those students whose English is poor. First of all, the teacher should make their students to be able to understand an English lesson taught in English and this could be done by familiarizing the students with classroom languages. Using classroom language in English can make English class transformed into an active and interesting language class which can help students improve their language proficiency. In this way, the teacher should create an English language speaking environment for their students to improve their language skills.

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**Appendix A****Expressions used in the class**

1. Be quiet. Stop talking, please.
2. Open your book and turn to page 10.
3. I'm going to read the passage.
4. Repeat after me.
5. You must now read on your own.
6. Don't shout. Keep your voice low. Ready? Begin.
7. Let's have a look at some new words in the passage.
8. I don't think you've seen this word before.
9. Let's read through the paragraph again.
10. Read silently.
11. We've seen this word in previous lesson. Do you remember this word?
12. Tell me the meaning of this word.
13. What does 'they' in line 10 refer to?
14. What's the past tense of 'grow'?
15. Say it again.
16. Who knows the correct answer?
17. Can you tell me what the answer is?
18. Now you must do your exercises on your own.
19. I want you to write down the answers in your books.
20. Have you finished your exercises?
21. How do you spell this word?
22. Class, today I taught you lesson 2. We finished three paragraphs.
23. Learn the spellings and meanings of those new words.
24. Don't forget to do your homework.
25. Yesterday we stopped at the end of the second paragraph on page 30. Am I right?
26. Then let's continue. Open your book at page 31. Has everyone found it?
27. Look at the blackboard and listen to my explanation
28. I'm going to teach you 'Interrogatives'.
29. Don't forget to put a question mark.
30. Which word is the subject of the sentence?
31. What's the negative form of 'went'?
32. Why are you late?
33. Please attend the class regularly.
34. There will be a tutorial next week.
35. If you don't come in time, I won't allow you to take the test.
36. I'll collect your books at the end of the class.
37. Will you stop talking and do your work?

**Appendix B**

Roll No.....

Listen to the instructions and tick the answer that is true to you. If you understand the instruction, write down the instruction in Myanmar.

၃၁	၁	အဆာစား	မ	+		၄၃၁	၁	အဆာစား	မ	+	
	၂	အဆာစား	မ	+			၂	အဆာစား	မ	+	
၄၁	၁	အဆာစား	မ	+		၄၄၁	၁	အဆာစား	မ	+	
	၂	အဆာစား	မ	+			၂	အဆာစား	မ	+	
၅၁	၁	အဆာစား	မ	+		၄၅၁	၁	အဆာစား	မ	+	
	၂	အဆာစား	မ	+			၂	အဆာစား	မ	+	
၆၁	၁	အဆာစား	မ	+		၄၆၁	၁	အဆာစား	မ	+	
	၂	အဆာစား	မ	+			၂	အဆာစား	မ	+	
၇၁	၁	အဆာစား	မ	+		၄၇၁	၁	အဆာစား	မ	+	
	၂	အဆာစား	မ	+			၂	အဆာစား	မ	+	
၈၁	၁	အဆာစား	မ	+		၄၈၁	၁	အဆာစား	မ	+	
	၂	အဆာစား	မ	+			၂	အဆာစား	မ	+	
၉၁	၁	အဆာစား	မ	+		၄၉၁	၁	အဆာစား	မ	+	
	၂	အဆာစား	မ	+			၂	အဆာစား	မ	+	
၁၀၁	၁	အဆာစား	မ	+		၅၀၁	၁	အဆာစား	မ	+	
	၂	အဆာစား	မ	+			၂	အဆာစား	မ	+	
၁၁၁	၁	အဆာစား	မ	+		၅၁၁	၁	အဆာစား	မ	+	
	၂	အဆာစား	မ	+			၂	အဆာစား	မ	+	
၁၂၁	၁	အဆာစား	မ	+		၅၂၁	၁	အဆာစား	မ	+	
	၂	အဆာစား	မ	+			၂	အဆာစား	မ	+	
၁၃၁	၁	အဆာစား	မ	+		၅၃၁	၁	အဆာစား	မ	+	
	၂	အဆာစား	မ	+			၂	အဆာစား	မ	+	
၁၄၁	၁	အဆာစား	မ	+		၅၄၁	၁	အဆာစား	မ	+	
	၂	အဆာစား	မ	+			၂	အဆာစား	မ	+	
၁၅၁	၁	အဆာစား	မ	+		၅၅၁	၁	အဆာစား	မ	+	
	၂	အဆာစား	မ	+			၂	အဆာစား	မ	+	
၁၆၁	၁	အဆာစား	မ	+		၅၆၁	၁	အဆာစား	မ	+	
	၂	အဆာစား	မ	+			၂	အဆာစား	မ	+	
၁၇၁	၁	အဆာစား	မ	+		၅၇၁	၁	အဆာစား	မ	+	
	၂	အဆာစား	မ	+			၂	အဆာစား	မ	+	
၁၈၁	၁	အဆာစား	မ	+		၅၈၁	၁	အဆာစား	မ	+	
	၂	အဆာစား	မ	+			၂	အဆာစား	မ	+	
၁၉၁	၁	အဆာစား	မ	+		၅၉၁	၁	အဆာစား	မ	+	
	၂	အဆာစား	မ	+			၂	အဆာစား	မ	+	
၂၀၁	၁	အဆာစား	မ	+							
	၂	အဆာစား	မ	+							
၂၁၁	၁	အဆာစား	မ	+							
	၂	အဆာစား	မ	+							
၂၂၁	၁	အဆာစား	မ	+							
	၂	အဆာစား	မ	+							