Speaking skills in the academic context

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The major Spoken forms

Seminars

Tutorials

Lectures

Workshops

Importance of Seminar Participation for Academic Success

- [F]aculty believe that the behaviors most responsible for impeding international students' academic success are: (a) their lack of **participation in classroom discussions**, (b) their lack of **participation in debate with classmates or instructors**, and (c) their failure to **ask for clarification** of issues . . . that are unclear (Tompson & Tompson, 1996).

- These are seminar-style habits
- Improving seminar performance -> improving (international) student experience

Problems regarding definition ...

What makes a seminar different from a *lecture* or a *workshop*?

Think of these differences in terms of

1. Interaction
2. Your pedagogical role

The role and purpose of a seminar in an academic programme

- Amplification/consolidation of a certain aspect of the degree programme
- Students may have an *experience* of learning and constructing knowledge through the seminar form
- Students become practised in using the discourses of their academic community
- Interactions and conversations pedagogically effective for developing positions and gaining critical thinking skills

Socratic tradition

"Writing, Phaedrus, has this strange quality, and is very like painting; for the creatures of painting stand like living beings, but if one asks them a question, they preserve a solemn silence. And so it is with written words"

(Phaedrus 274c-275b)

- Importance of dialogue and speaking for the learning process and the development of knowledge.
- The tradition of Socrates also emphasises that students should have the *experience* of learning. This distinguishes – in Socratic terms – knowledge from belief.

Thinking as speaking; the socio-cultural tradition

"*Experience teaches us that thought does not express itself in words, but rather realizes itself in them*" (Vygotsky 1986, p.251).

Vygotsky's proposition that speaking is not an expression of thought but a *completion of thinking.*

Presentation – providing/instructing; more and varied interaction usually in the form of Q&A session.

Debate – binary oppositions. (can be carried out in the form of a role-play or simulation)

Discussion – defending, developing and consolidating positions

Dialogue – cooperative, participants work together to come to some shared understanding

All types of interaction take place and may be chosen in accordance with the following:

- Student experience and participation in their academic community
- Curricular/programme objectives
- Familiarity with this type of learning

The students & communities of practice

- Learning viewed as situated activity has as its central defining characteristic a process that we call *legitimate peripheral participation*. By this we mean to draw attention to the point that learners inevitably participate in communities of practitioners and that the mastery of knowledge and skill requires newcomers to move toward full participation in the sociocultural practices of a community. "Legitimate peripheral participation" provides a way to speak about the relations between newcomers and old-timers, and about activities, identities, artifacts, and communities of knowledge and practice. It concerns the process by which newcomers become part of a community of practice. A person's intentions to learn are engaged and the meaning of learning is configured through the process of becoming a full participant in a sociocultural practice. This social process includes, indeed it subsumes, the learning of knowledgeable skills. (p. 29)

(Lave & Wenger, 1991)

Where are your students?
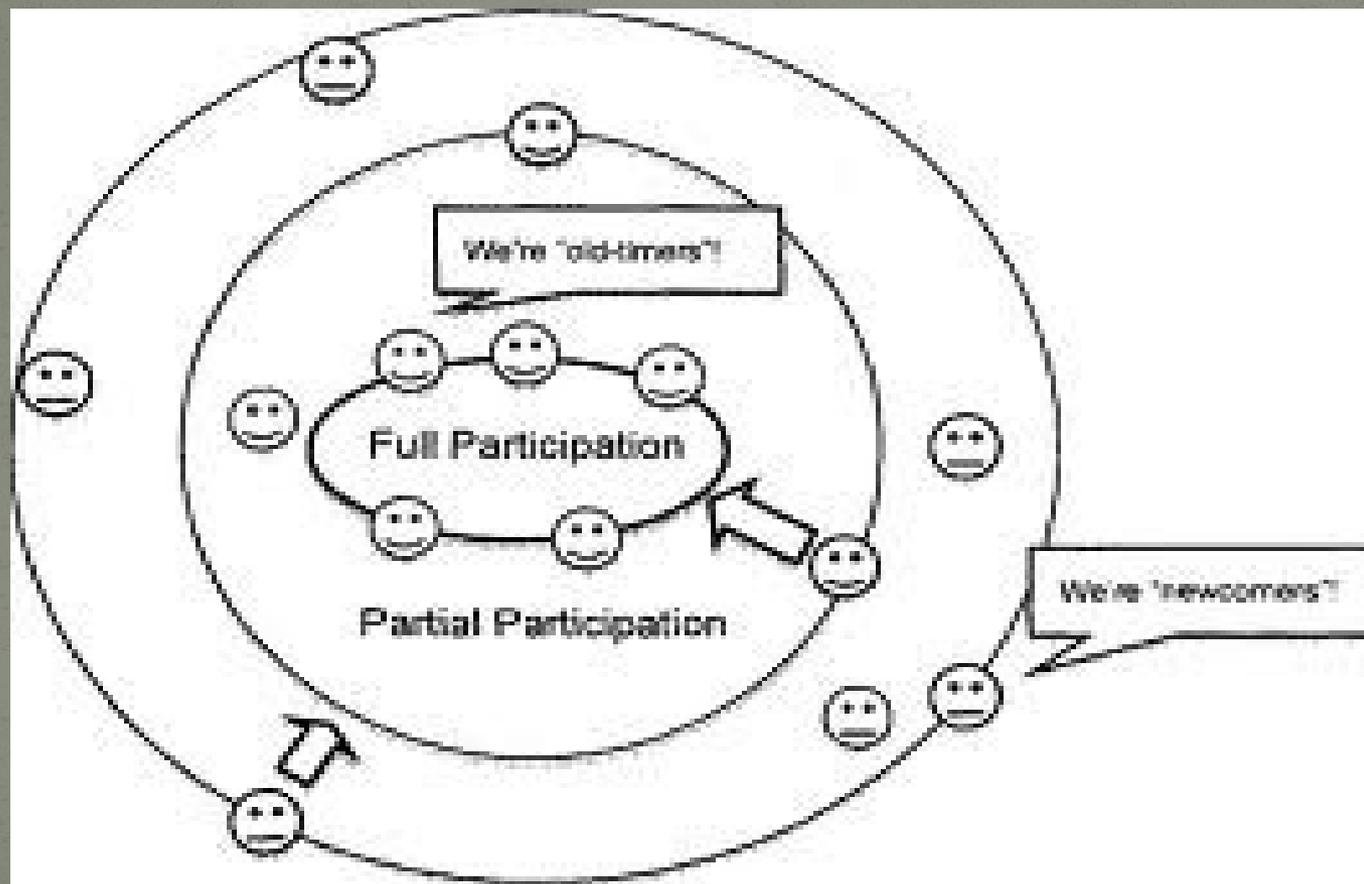
Curricular/programme objectives What object do you want students to gain?

My own examples from language pedagogy discipline:
1) 3 major traditions of language teaching approaches
2) Communicative competence as a measurement of language competence.

Interactions

How would you describe these types of interaction? Which of them take place in a seminar?

- Presentation
- Dialogue
- Debate
- Discussion

Example one:

- Before the seminar – readings on the history of language teaching
- During seminar – students read short summaries of 3 mainstream approaches
- Role-play ; students are researchers on language teaching approaches. I am the head of a language school and want to know the best approach etc etc.
- Approaches briefly organised in a historical context
- Students put the new object to work by: using the approaches to describe their practice/ a coursebook/their own language learning experiences

Example two

- Pre seminar readings on position of grammar in language teaching.
- Question – discuss; "what would you teach a class of beginners?" what factors help you to decide what to teach?
- Students discuss in groups
- Students and teacher discuss as a whole class
- Teacher leads students through questioning until students arrive at an awareness of language competences other than grammatical competence

Reasons for choices

Example one: "freshman" students (legitimate peripheral participants)

The object is key area in the curriculum – they must have a clear understanding of the 3 mainstream approaches

Example two: students in their third term (participants)

Object is an important area of the curriculum but will be repeated and consolidated in a lecture and seminar on assessment.

Your pedagogical role on your programme

Provider   **Scaffolder**   **Problematizer**

Your pedagogical role in the following academic forums

Lecture/presentation – provider

Seminar discussion or debate – scaffolder

Socratic seminar or workshop - problematizer

How to get students to critically engage .....

A "critical thinking" community of practice?

Therefore, need to bring them into the practice *in steps*.

One example:

Wingperson and speaker approach:

An inner circle where the dialogue takes place and two wing-people on the outer circle to support their "speaker" in the inner circle. These roles swap during the course of the seminar

(For reference, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YDP75I1b5D0)

Fishbowl technique

Learning by performing

Learning by watching

How would you employ this with your students?

Questioning techniques

Why might the following opening questions be ineffective in a seminar or workshop?

- So what does language mean in the modern context? (to linguists)
- Do we always have to teach grammar? (to language pedagogists)
- What do you think of young people getting married? (to literature students reading Romeo and Juliet)

Effective opening questions

Name three characteristics that all languages have.

How important are the following in organising a lesson – the 4 skills, grammar, vocabulary …..

In what ways does the Friar err in his advice to Romeo? In what ways does he succeed?"

Narrow the topic. Allow for choice.

Mediated feedback

Explicitly asking students to perform and then review micro-section of their practice. Can be done a) by peer feedback on the section and/or b) recordings of each and review.

References

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