

Classroom English: Giving Instructions and Classifying

Ella Wulandari
Universitas Negeri Yogyakarta
wulandari.ella@uny.ac.id

Abstract

In using English as a medium of instruction in classroom, teacher's use of classroom English is of great importance. Not only it ensures the smooth flow of teaching and learning process, it makes language learning opportunities available to the students, especially if the medium is not the mother tongue of students. This paper presents two language functions – giving instructions and classifying and how they should be performed in classroom in reference to learners' level and age.

While the demand of establishing international standard schools has faded away with the coming of Curriculum 2013, many schools still find it necessary and important to equip their teachers with classroom English for its potential of making students exposed and thus learn English through content subjects. This results in schools' need of training in classroom English, designed specifically for teaching particular subjects. The challenges to this training are at least twofold: teacher's proficiency in classroom English functions and expressions and teacher's familiarity with English technical terms or registers dominant in their specific subjects. This paper discusses two classroom English functions and their expressions i.e. giving instructions and clarifying.

Classroom English is part of classroom teacher talk especially largely performed when a teacher is a) presenting, clarifying, checking, modelling new or revised language, b) setting up activities or giving instructions and feedback, c) providing language input, and d) establishing rapport by chatting (Gower *et al*, 1995). Gower *et al* argue that in a language classroom or in an immersion class – where English is used to learn another subject, a well-planned and –suited teacher talk can bring some advantages. First, teacher talk is needed for good classroom management – to give clear instructions, to tell the students what to expect, to call on students by name, and so forth. Teacher talk also makes authentic listening practices and language model available to students, which will benefit their language acquisition. Providing authentic exposure or model in the target language is particularly a goal of immersion class.

According to Hughes (1990), when English is not the subject being taught but is the medium of instruction or classroom language, English use is not limited to opening and closing a lesson but also involves managing learning procedures including the methodology of delivering or presenting materials, tests and class practices. Such procedures have to do with teacher's ability to give verbal instructions that are effective but motivating at the same time to ensure a smooth learning process in the class. Similarly, Spratt *et al* (2005) argue that classroom English should be used appropriately in that it should best suit the learners and the situation. It means that the language teacher uses in the classroom must be adjusted to the classroom function it performs and for the specific level and age of learners. Gower *et al* (1995, p.34) add that teacher can adapt the way she speaks by adjusting her vocabulary, use of structures and the speed of delivery to the level of the students, and using pauses more if necessary while keeping the constructions and the natural linking of words.

To ensure the appropriacy of language use for instructions in the classroom, Spratt *et al* (2005, p.135) propose the following guidelines. First, teacher needs to grade her language to suit the language level and age of the learners. To them, grading language means 'choosing to use classroom language that is at the right level for learners to understand – that is at or below the language level of the learners'. They further illustrate that teachers should not use too formal language with primary learners or babyish one with older learners. Gower *et al* (1995, p.35) add that 'the words and structures should generally be *below* the level of language being taught in language class. In particular, Gower *et al* provide tips of avoiding unnecessary and unhelpful teacher talk by avoiding the followings: jargon such as 'concept checking', 'eliciting' and other 'teacher language', describing teacher's intention but focus on indicating a major change of activity students should or will have, running commentaries on the lesson e.g. *I didn't explain that very well, did I?*, using ten words where one will do, using words at all where a gesture, mime, an object or a picture can convey the meaning quickly and unambiguously, and repeating teacher's or echoing student's words.

Secondly, teacher needs to sequence her use of language appropriately or to use language in a logical order to provide learners with learning opportunities. Spratt *et al* emphasize the importance of sequencing language appropriately for explanations and instructions, for example: 'Listen. Work with a partner.' rather than 'Work with a partner. Listen.' Finally, verbal instructions can provide learners with necessary exposure in English through which their English acquisition is enhanced. Supporting, Spratt *et al* state that

'learners can learn classroom language just by hearing it again and again' so teacher can 'build [classroom] phrases to suit the learners' level and age'. In short, teacher's classroom language should use the right degree of formality, be well graded and sequenced, and clear. Given these, Hughes points out that teacher's skill in giving effective and efficient verbal instructions is crucial and thus should be part of planning and evaluating of teacher's class management.

Instructing means telling learners what to do at different stages of the lesson and usually takes the form of imperative like 'Open your books at page 15' (Spratt *et al*, 2005, p.134). Imperatives work best with young learners or learners who are beginner in English. Instruction is usually followed with explanation that tells learners how to do an activity, how to organize a project they are doing, the meaning of vocabulary of why a correction is needed. Spratt *et al* give an example of explanation expressions about a project in a class, 'We'll put the project work on the walls so you need to make sure that everything is easy to read and that it looks wonderful'.

In giving instructions, teacher needs to keep the following in mind, in order to make her instructions effective (Gower, *et al*, 1995, pp.40-41).

First attract the student's attention. Teacher should make sure that everyone is listening and watching and should not give out any handouts which may distract the students' attention before she needs to.

Use simple language and short expressions. Teacher should use short instructions which are appropriate to the situation where the students accept her authority. Students usually also realize that a firm directive manner is necessary in order to make activities efficient and to avoid confusion and uncertainty.

Be consistent. Being consistent is especially important with low-level classes. Teacher should use the same set of words for the same instruction because people seem to learn a language more easily if they can perceive regularities and patterns (Gower, *et al*, *ibid*, p.126).

Use visuals or written clues. Teacher can support instructions with visual clues wherever possible like using real objects, pictures, gesture and mime. Teacher can even give

instruction written on cards or pieces of paper especially if she wants the students to do different things (as in a roleplay) or if it is important that the students do not know the instructions given to their partner (like in an information-gap activity).

Demonstrate. If possible, teacher can show the students what to do – give a demonstration or an example. Gower *et al* state that it is frequent that showing what to do is more effective than telling what to do. Teacher can demonstrate a speaking activity by playing both parts herself (and move position to show that she is two people, by playing one part and choosing a strong student to play the other part, or by asking two strong students to do (part of) the activity in front of the class. Meanwhile, giving an example on board works best with written work.

Break the instructions down. When an activity requires a series of steps, each of which takes different instruction, teacher should give simple instructions in segments and check the students' understanding as she goes along, rather than giving out all the instructions in one go. Alternatively, teacher can give only some of the instructions and allow time for them to be carried out before moving on to the next step. For example, where different grouping should be made before doing a roleplay, it is wise for teacher to give the instructions and make the required grouping first before going on to assign roles and tell the students what to do and say in the roleplay.

Target your instructions. Sometimes, teacher need to direct her instructions to particular group of students when the instructions do not concern the whole class. To do this, teacher can assign each student a number, a letter or some kind of symbol first and direct the instructions to the specified number, letter or symbol.

Be decisive. Teacher should use a signal, like the words *Right or Listen*, which students will learn to recognize as a cue for instruction. It is too, important, to make sure that the students know when to begin an activity, by for example using expressions like *Everyone. Start!* or *Go!* - perhaps accompanied by a downward hand gesture or a clap of the hands.

Those key guidelines of giving instructions should however come with teacher's attempts to check if her instructions have been clearly understood. To do so, teacher can do the following things. Before a roleplay, teacher should check each student with the role

assigned to them. For example, by saying this, *Shop assistants, hands up. Now, customers, hands up.* When doing an information-gap activity, teacher should also check that the students really understand what NOT to do for example by asking one of the students, *Sandra, are you going to show Dewi your picture?.* Or, before doing a dictation activity, teacher can check if they have understood what to do, for instance by saying, *Do you write after the first reading or the second reading?.* Above all, taking those precautions should too be supported with teaching the students some expressions that show that they do not understand like *Sorry. I don't understand.* or *Can you say that again, please?.*

Concerning instructions giving, Hughes (p.9) categorizes four abilities teacher should have when it comes to giving instructions for different purposes and with different ways. They are:

Abilities (Teacher should be able to:)	Sample phrases
Give appropriate instructions related to recurrent classroom activities e.g. using textbooks, blackboard work, group work.	<i>Open your books at page 73.</i> <i>Come out and write it on the board.</i> <i>Listen to the tape, please.</i> <i>Get into groups of four.</i> <i>Finish this off at home.</i> <i>Let's sing a song.</i>
Control the pupils' behaviour by means of commands, requests, and suggestions. Usage should correspond to native-speaker usage.	<i>Could you try the next one.</i> <i>I would like you to write this down.</i> <i>Would you mind switching the lights on.</i> <i>It might be an idea to leave this till next time.</i>
Vary the form of instructions in order to show the range of possibilities in the foreign language.	<i>Everybody please.</i> <i>All together now.</i> <i>The whole class, please.</i> <i>I want you all to join in.</i>
Offer the pupils alternatives e.g. different working methods, groups, or themes.	<i>Who would like to read?</i> <i>Which topic will your group report on?</i> <i>Do you want to answer question 6?</i>

Meanwhile, Hughes & Moate (2007, p.59) offer a series of steps to give instructions along with sample phrases. When giving instructions, they say teacher should:

1. First get students' full attention

Please listen to the instructions.

Listen so that you know what to do.

I hope everyone is paying attention/listening now.

You need to pay attention to what is being said now.

It is important that I have your full attention now, please.

Listen up!

2. Repeat the instructions (if necessary)

I'll just review the instructions.

Let me recap what you have to do (before you begin).

I'll go over/through the instructions again/one more time.

3. Check if they understand the instructions

Did everyone catch/get that?

Has everyone got that?

Were the instructions clear/Was that clear?

Do you all understand what you have to do?

To check, teacher can also ask a student to repeat the instructions. Hughes & Moate argue that 'it confirms that they have understood what they are supposed to do and provides another opportunity for the students to hear the instructions. Some useful expressions to do that are:

Please repeat the instructions for me, Celine.

Could you tell me what the instructions were?

OK, Poppy, tell me, what are we doing, please?

What do you have to do next?

What's the next step, Feri?

4. Encourage students to ask (to check if they understand correctly)

Teacher can teach the following expressions to the students to monitor their own understanding of instructions.

What do we have to do?

What are we supposed to do?

Could you repeat the instructions, please?

I still don't understand/get it.

One more time, please.

5. Go over written instructions orally

Even if teacher provides the instructions in writing, it is worth going over the key points of the task orally, at least briefly.

You'll find all the instructions on this sheet.

I've written the instructions on the board.

Remember to check the instruction sheet.

Please follow the instructions I've given you.

In addition to giving day-to-day instructions, teacher's use of classroom English involves languages used to deal with academic or thinking skills like a) describing, classifying and comparing, b) defining and exemplifying, c) describing processes and effects, d) using statistics, e) explaining and hypothesizing, and f) thinking critically (Hughes & Moate, *ibid*, p. 143). When classifying, people divide ideas into categories in a logical way. The logical ordering however depends on the purpose in making the classification. One of the ways they do this is by looking for relationships among objects or ideas, and classifying them into groups according to their similarities and differences (Hamp-Lyons & Heasley, 1987). Hamp-Lyons & Heasley propose some types of logical ordering including spatial relationship, time order (oldest – newest), general to particular hierarchy, scale (of importance e.g. most important – least important), size (largest – smallest), comparison – contrast, linear and cyclical processes, and familiarity (best known – least known).

Some useful phrases like the following can be used to encourage students to make classification (Hughes & Moate, *ibid*, p.144).

How would you classify the different viewpoints?

How can we categorize these ideas under two or three headings?

Which group/category would you assign this example to?

Which heading would you place this piece of writing under?

Can we subdivide our examples into two groups?

What class/groups does this idea belong to?

What different categories/subgroups exist when we talk about wetlands?

While the following expressions can be useful to invite students to make comparison and contrast.

What are the difference/similarity between Spanish and Portugese?

What are the points of difference/similarity between Australia and New Zealand?

How does Art Deco differ from Art Nouveau?

In what way/respect is this different from her earlier novels?

To what extent is this similar to his other films?
How do they compare?
How does this compare/contrast with their earlier example?
Are these two things comparable?
What can you compare this with/to?
What would be a good comparison?
How can we distinguish/differentiate between the male and the female?
How can we distinguish/differentiate the male from the female?

To respond or make the classification, teacher can teach the students the following pattern of language use.

They can be	categorized classified/grouped divided/arranged	according to on the basis of depending on	size. whether there are side-effects or not.
-------------	---	---	--

The following grammar can also be taught to students to vary the way they classify things.

1. The use of ‘there’ and ‘the’

There are three types of X: A, B, and C.
 There are three kinds of X. These are A, B, and C.
 The three categories of X are/include A, B, and C.

2. Using ‘consist’ and ‘divide’

X consists of three categories. These are A, B, and C.
 X can be divided into three classes: A, B, and C.

3. A, B, and C are kinds/types/categories/classes of X.
4. The exhibition comprises three separate periods.
5. Each stanza is made up/composed of several verses.

In making comparison, teacher can use the following expressions.

If we compare these two events in detail, we’ll see that ...
If we compare this figure with last year’s, we’ll find that ...
A detailed comparison of the two events shows that ...
In comparison/compared with New Zealand, Australia is huge.
The films are similar in that they are both set in Russia.
The countries are different/dissimilar in that Latvia has a much larger Russian-speaking population.

Meanwhile, the degree of difference or similarity can also be taught to students to make a more precise classification.

Identical	<i>This is exactly/precisely/just the same as that.</i>
Very similar	<i>This is practically/more or less/almost/nearly the same as that. They are strikingly similar.</i>
Partly different	<i>This is not quite/exactly/precisely the same as that.</i>
Totally different	<i>This is completely/totally/entirely different from that. There's no similarity whatsoever. Let's list the main/key differences.</i>

To conclude, the two language functions teacher performs with her classroom language take various expressions which can be taught explicitly in a session dedicated to practice classroom languages with the students, or exposed to them implicitly by teacher's consistent or regular use of the expressions. The most important thing to bear in mind is that, teacher has to adjust their use of classroom language to the level and age of their learners so that its use can be very effective and provide language learning opportunities at the same time.

References

- Gower, R., Phillips, D., & Walters, S. 1995. *Teaching practice handbook*. UK: MacMillan Heinemann.
- Hamp-Lyons, L. & Heasley, B. 1987. *Study writing: a course in written English for academic and professional purposes*. Cambridge: CUP.
- Hughes, G.S. 1981. *A handbook of classroom English*. Oxford: OUP.
- Hughes, G.S. & Moate, J. 2007. *Practical classroom English*. Oxford: OUP.
- Spratt, M., Pulverness, A., & Williams, M. 2005. *The teaching knowledge test course*. Cambridge: CUP.