Teacher Talk in Classroom Discourse: A Case Study

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Abstract: This study investigated the aspects of teacher talk, as a phenomenon chiefly and inseparably occurring in classroom discourse, in three consecutive one hour and a half session EFL classrooms. The attempt in this study is made to explore the quality and realization of teacher talk in language classroom. The book based on which English is instructed in “Interchange 3” written by Richards, Hull, and Proctor (2005). The researcher attended 10 sessions in the class, consisting of 15 male and female students of 18 to 32 years of age, recording teacher’s and learners’ voice. It was found that the teacher tried to be as understandable as she could to the learners by speaking, naturally, more slowly preventing learners from being demotivated or anxious about their low proficiency. It was also seen that the teacher abstained from making her class tedious by sufficient amounts of joking and laughing in the classroom. However, the teacher talk occurring in the classroom discourse studied was seen to have suffered from two major problems: inappropriate feedback, or focus on form, and lack of sufficient contextualization. However, it appears that the instructor of the class under study was not familiar with different types of corrective feedback, since she appeared to have been exclusively using the explicit correction method of providing correct feedback. Besides, the instructor appears to have strictly adhered to directly asking the questions in the book, without providing language learners with the relevant context or the background.

Index Terms: discourse analysis, EFL classroom, teacher talk

1. INTRODUCTION

Discourse is the extension of grammar beyond the sentence level, and it reflects importance of the context over structure. It deals with language organization beyond the level of sentence and states that meaning is negotiated through interaction (Hamidi & Montazeri, 2014). Discourse competence is therefore, the ability to link sentences in stretches of discourse and to make “a meaningful whole out of a series of utterances” (Brown, 2001, p. 380). Classroom discourse can encompass a variety of issues taking place in language classroom. It can include the context in which the second language is instructed, the activities that language learners do, and teachers’ and learners’ engagement in classroom activities and, thereby, pave the way for numbers of classroom-related studies. Classroom process research, for instance, is aimed at subjecting the teaching-learning behaviors that take place in a classroom to careful observation with a view to describing what takes place as thoroughly as possible (Ellis, 2008). Classroom research process considers language lessons as socially constructed events and attempts to discern how these events take place.
2. REVIEW OF THE RELATED LITERATURE

Classroom discourse, as Kida (2005) explains, deals with what occurs in language classroom. Classroom discourse is a certain type of discourse that takes place in language classroom, and discourse in the language classroom is a matter of oral use of the second language in classroom (Behnam & Pouriran, 2009). According to Behnam and Pouriran (2009), features of classroom discourse include: “unequal power of relationships, turn taking and speaking, patterns of interaction, etc.” (p. 118). They maintain that classroom discourse is often different in form and function from the language that is used in other situation for particular social roles which language teachers and language learners have in the classroom. Clark and Clark (2008) introduce classroom discourse as a complex sociocultural activity in which there is an integral process of meaning-making in the creation of language learners’ social identity.

Teacher talk is a chief phenomenon, or the inseparable phenomenon, occurring in classroom discourse. As Ellis (2008) asserts, language teachers address classroom language learners differently from the way they address other types of classroom learners. Teachers make adjustments to both language form and language function so as to facilitate communication, which is termed teacher talk. Likewise, Richards and Schmidt (1985) define teacher talk as “the variety of language sometimes used by teachers when they are in the process of teaching” (p. 543). In trying to communicate with language learners, the teachers often tend to simplify their speech, which gives it a number of the characteristics of foreigner talk.

Teacher talk is the talk which is adapted to the second language learners’ proficiency so as to ensure that input is comprehensible (Ellis, 2003). Teacher talk, as argued by Ellis (2003), involves modifications at all linguistic levels, phonological, grammatical, lexical, and discoursal. It is performed as a skill below the level of consciousness, which means that teachers are not usually aware that they are engaged in the adaptation of the way they speak (Ellis, 2003). Teacher talk, like all skills, is subject to individual variation, “with some teachers highly skilled at pitching their talk at the student’s level and others much less so” (Ellis, 2003, p. 272). Ellis (2003) further claims that teacher talk is of paramount importance to the pre-task phase of communicational teaching project. He cites Prabhu (1987) that in classroom, the language teacher controls the complexity of his or her language in the same way as an adult does in speaking to a child, refraining from or paraphrasing what he or she assumes to be too difficult, repeating statements, and speaking slowly when there appears to be understanding difficulties.

Kumaravadivelu (2008) contends that according to learning-centered pedagogists, regulating input and teacher talk to provide challenging, comprehensible input is different from systematized, predetermined, linguistic input associated with learner- and language-centered pedagogies. The language that is, according to Kumaravadivelu (2008), employed in learning-centered tasks, is guided and constrained by the difficulty level of the task on hand only. According to learning-centered pedagogists, as reported by Kumaravadivelu (2008), for language development what is essential is teacher talk. He maintains that when we just speak to our students, if they understand, we are not giving a language lesson, “we may be giving the best possible language lesson since we will be supplying input for language acquisition” (Krashen & Terrell, 1983, cited in Kumaravadivelu, 2008, p. 149).

Besides, Ur (2012) states that the most common type of classroom interaction is Initiation-Response-Feedback (IRF). The teacher initiates an exchange, usually in question, and one of the language learners responds, the teacher provides feedback, initiates the next question, and so on. However, as he argues, there are alternative interaction patterns. The initiative does not have to be provided by the teacher, and the interaction may be between learners or the learners and the material. Teacher talk in this form, according to Ur (2012) can involve some kind of silent response, such as writing something down, but there exists no initiative on the part of the learner.
3. METHODOLOGY

The participants of the study were 15 male and female students ranging in age from eighteen to thirty-two and studying in an English language institute. These participants, forming a class, were studying the book ‘Interchange 3’ by Richards et al. (2005). The class was held two days a week, Saturdays and Wednesdays. The researcher attended the class for 10 sessions and recorded the teacher’s and learners’ talks all sessions. The only instrument applied in this study was an MP3 player recording the voice in the classroom.

4. ANALYSIS OF THE TEACHER TALK

Teacher talk modification

According to Larsen-Freeman (21991), the degree of modification of teacher talk varies according to proficiency of learners. Below is an example:

Audio: I was just about to leave when she started acting strange. Then she just passed out.

Teacher: Pass out means?

Students: ………MORDAN???

T: Means faint.

Ss: …………….. Faint???(They did not know the meaning of the word faint either)

T: For example, if I uhhhhm don’t eat for a long time, then suddenly I feel unconscious in the class and I fall down. It is called fainting.

In the example above, it can be seen that the teacher modifies her input based on language learners’ level of proficiency. She first uses a synonym. “faint”, to make the meaning of the phrase “pass out” understood, but she immediately understands that the synonym provided is beyond the learners’ lexical proficiency. Then she tries to make through the meaning of the phrase “Pass out” through an example which entails simpler phrases and gives the learners’ a context to decipher the meaning, although it is seen that the teacher is unprofessionally using a more complex word, “unconsciously”, in her example to make the meaning of a simpler phrase understood.

Functions of teacher talk

Teacher talk, according to Riggenbach (1992) has three main functions. First teacher talk constitutes input:

T: What is meant by pet peeves?

Ss: HEIVANE KHANEKI???

T: Pet peeve means something that really bothers you or annoys you. Ok? Something that really bothers or annoys you. Ok?

Pet peeves are the things that you really dislike.

T: Acquaintance means?

Ss: ………

T: Acquaintance means the person you are just familiar with, means he is not your friend. He is not your close friend, but you know him. You are just acquainted with that person he or she is your acquaintance. Yes? Yes or not?

Ss: Yes.

T: You know, you are my friends, because I know you, I know about your background or something. We are…. for a long time we are together. But sometimes I say hello to some of the people in the hall, yes? They are my acquaintance. I do not know their names. I just say hello. I just know them by face. So, I call them acquaintance. But you are my friends? Ok?

Ss: ………

It can be seen that the teacher is trying to provide the learners with sufficient amount of linguistic input, and she also appears to be complying with the principle of I+1 regarding input difficulty proposed by Krashen (1988). We can see that She tries to use some new words and phrases (familiar, bother, annoy, by face) to make learners learn them in context.

Second teacher talk sometimes shifts from focus on meaning to focus on form:
S: It depends to….
T: It depends on what?
Or
S: If I call someone and he does not come back my phone?
T: Call back.
Or
S: I do not know, VASAM ETEFAGH NAYOFTADE.
T: Ahha. It never happened to you.
Or
S: I speak the teacher don’t pay attention me
T: The teacher doesn’t pay attention to me. Teachers pay attention to their students.
Or
S: Boyfriends and girls don’t pay attention to your speech and… TAZAHOR CHI MISHE???
T: Pretend.
Or
S: Did you afraid from your uncle?
T: Where you afraid of your uncle?
Or
S: She shouldn’t any work.
T: She shouldn’t???
S: She shouldn’t do anything.
T: Should have PP.
S: Done anything???
Another S: Shouldn’t have done.
S: She shouldn’t have done anything.
T: She shouldn’t have done anything.

Or in one of the listening sections related to a dialog the teacher translates an English sentence into the learners’ native language:

Audio: I was about to leave…
T: Yeah? I was about to leave. TAZE MIKHASTAM BERAM….
Or
Audio: She called the police, but when they arrived, it turned out the neighbor’s kids….
T: Turned out means???
Ss: Children, neighbor’s kids.
T: Turned out means???
S: Put out the kids.
T: No. It turned out the neighbor’s kids. Turned out means appeared. INJOORI AZ AB DAR OOMAD KE…
S: INJOORI AZ AB DAR OOMAD? AHA MOSHAKHASA SHOD

It can be inferred that the teacher it not paying her sole attention to meaning, or comprehensible communication. She is trying to call the learner’s attention to correct form. For example, when the learner says: “It depends to”, the teacher immediately interrupts him and says: “It depends on”. And she translates her learner’s Farsi sentence into English. It can, therefore, be argued teacher talk at the level of focus on form can take the form of corrective feedback. The teacher exclusively prefers to use ‘explicit correction’, defined by sheen (2006) as the feedback that provides second language learner with the correct form and clear indication of what is being corrected. For instance, when the learner says “Come back my
call”, the teacher corrects him by saying “call me back”. It is worth mentioning that the teacher does not seem to be conversant with or aware of other types of corrective feedback.

The third function of teacher talk is to structure the context for learner language use.

T: We went to a friend’s house for dinner. The food was awful. We didn’t want to hurt his feeling. We didn’t say anything. I didn’t eat anything. What would you have done?

S: It’s really?

T: Yes.

S: What would you have done?

A.S: We, we, our

T: You should use would have, should have.

S: You could have tried from every food and….

A.S: Tell a lie. It is really good. Wow. Really delicious….

It can be seen that the teacher tried to put the learners in the context she was in and encourage them to put themselves in her shoes, based on the belief that context is a major contributor to meaningful communication. It should be mentioned that in the realm of teacher talk in classroom discourse, contextualization can chiefly be done through self-experience descriptions by the teacher and requiring learner’s judge or comment about what was done by the teacher in that context, or situation. Some other areas of classroom discourse like classroom context or classroom setting can be more efficient contributors to contextualization.

5. CONCLUSION

One of the worthiest points to mention about the teacher’s talk in the classroom discourse is her phonological modification, which is emphasized by Ellis (2003). The teacher attempted to keep her speaking pace at the same level as that of the learners. She tried to be as understandable as she could to the learners by speaking, naturally, more slowly. This could prevent learners from being demotivated or anxious about their low proficiency.

Another strong point to be mentioned about the studied teacher talk is the teacher attempt to abstain from making her class tedious by sufficient amounts of joking and laughing in the classroom. She sometimes used some personal stories to make the process of learning more interesting and less tedious. It is clear that this skilled use of teacher talk in the classroom provided language learners with a higher load of linguistic input which is the prerequisite to learning language.

The teacher talk occurring in the classroom discourse studied appears to be suffering from two major problems: inappropriate feedback, or focus on form, lack of sufficient contextualization. Regarding focus on form in speaking, we have to turn to the concept of corrective feedback as the major contributor to oral form-focused instruction. Feedback is defined by Brandet (2008) as the information provided for language learners related to some aspect of their linguistic production and is claimed by Fahim and Montazeri (2013) to give language learners information on the correctness of their linguistic production. Corrective feedback as stated by Lyster and Ranta (1997) can have such different forms as explicit correction, excessively and exclusively applied in the studied teacher talk, ask for repetition, clarification request, and metalinguistic feedback. However, it appears that the instructor of the class under study is not familiar with these types of corrective feedback, since she appeared to have been exclusively using the explicit correction method of providing correct feedback. Needless to say, providing learners with other, some times more effective, types of feedback can pave the way for a much more effective pedagogical accomplishment. There have been a number of studies verifying the varying degrees of the effectiveness of different types of corrective feedback in proportion to linguistic level and linguistic background of language learners, for example. The teacher could have created more consciousness raising by providing learners with metalinguistic feedback, for example, to reduce the possibility of the mistake’s, both phonological and grammatical, being repeated by the learner.

Another, aforementioned, criticism which can be cast upon the studied teacher talk is lack of sufficient contextuali-
zation. The teacher appears to have strictly adhering to directly asking the questions in the book, without providing language learners with the relevant context or the background. She could have encouraged the learners to talk more by activating the related language background and context required to answer the question. It is crystal-clear that a better background knowledge and a higher degree of motivation to talk, which are obtained by contextualization through a personal story or some beyond book information, for example, can be a considerable incentive to the formation of oral fluency in the learners.

REFERENCES


