The Teacher-Student Communication Pattern: A Need to Follow?

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Abstract

This study is intended to investigate the teacher-student communication patterns in an upper-intermediate English class. There are major questions in this study; (a) what the nature of interaction is in a foreign language classroom, (b) what the characteristics of teacher-student turn taking are, (c) what type of feedback is taken by the teacher, (d) how the teacher's competence and performance are. The participants of the study are female adult students and a female teacher majoring English literature at MA level that has had five years of teaching experience. Five partial sessions of the class are recorded, transcribed, and analyzed. According to the findings, the type of discourse is teacher-initiated one and the question type is both WH-questions and questions with auxiliaries. The way of student's reply is brief and limited to one teacher-student turn-taking. The type of interaction is based on the questions posed by the teacher and long interaction such as discussing, debating, and challenging could rarely be seen in the classroom in question. The type of feedback depending on the skill and tasks dealt with, ranging from recast to direct correction. The teacher's competence and performance are satisfactory with correct pronunciation and near native accent.

Keywords: adjacency pairs, discourse, feedback, interactional talk, transactional talk, turn-taking.

1. Introduction

Discourse analysis is the construing of language use by members of a speech community. It involves looking at both language form and functions and includes the study of both spoken interaction and written texts. It identifies linguistic features that characterize different styles as well as social and cultural factors that aid in our interpretation and understanding of different texts and types of talk. The discourse analysis of written texts may include a study of topic development and cohesion across the sentences, while an analysis of spoken language might focus on these aspects plus turn-taking practices, opening and closing sequences of social encounters, or narrative structure.

The study of discourse has developed in a variety of disciplines— sociolinguistics, anthropology, sociology, and social psychology. Thus discourse analysis takes different theoretical perspectives and analytic approaches: speech act theory, interactional sociolinguistics, ethnography of communication, pragmatics, conversation analysis, and variation analysis (Demo, 2001). Although each approach emphasizes different aspects of language use, they all view language as social interaction. It provides examples of how teachers can improve their teaching practices by investigating actual language use both in and out of the classroom, and how students can learn language through exposure to different types of discourse.

Demo (2001) believed that "even with the most communicative approaches, the second language classroom is limited in its ability to develop learners' communicative competence in the target language" (p. 1). It might be due to different reasons such as the restricted number of contact hours with the language, minimal opportunities or lack of opportunities for interacting with native speakers, and limited exposure to the variety of functions, genres, speech events, and discourse types that occur outside the classroom. Classroom research is one way for teachers to monitor both the quantity and quality of students' output. Nassaji and Wells (2001) believed that in the classroom, the dominant mode of interaction is not 'casual conversation', since most talk between teacher and students has a pedagogical purpose. In teacher-whole-class interaction, in particular, it is almost always teachers who initiate sequences.

Gillies and Boyle (2008) believed that cooperative learning classroom are the best type of class in which interaction an be seen and its success lies in helping students to see the value of the process, learning to develop authentic learning rather than repetition, and achieve quality outcomes.

Erton (2000) asserted that "every single utterance is valid and has a function in language in particular circumstances since it is produced for a purpose if considered in appropriate context. Thus, the importance for focusing on functional interpretation of language in context in a teaching situation is the focus on emphasis." (p. 210) Classroom can be considered the best place where the functional aspect of language is seen in the interaction between teacher and students. The discourse used in this interaction is of great importance too.

Bannink and Van Dam (2006) believed that "in some sense everything that happens between the bells that signal the beginning and the end of a lesson at school is 'the lesson'. Even if not part of a focused learning activity in the narrow sense of the term, whatever happens can at least be reported as having occurred during the lesson." (p. 285) Interruptions and embeddings create structural rather than sequential transition points in an ongoing discourse. Therefore, the discourse analysis is a challenge with its own complexity.

Cots (1996) assumed that "when we approach language as discourse is that communication cannot be explained as the simple transfer of preexisting meanings. Rather, a communicative event must be conceived as the locus where meanings are created through the negotiation of intentions and interpretations." (p. 81) Nunan (1993, cited in Cots, 1996) stated that 'verbal interaction is the result of the cooperative work of the speakers to make sure that their messages are being received in the way they were intended, and of the listeners to ensure that their interpretation coincides with the speakers' intentions.' (p. 82)

On the other hand, Morell (2007) studied the importance of lecture discourse in the classroom. He found out that lectures are more highly regarded if they allow for reciprocal discourse, especially for students of other languages who need help in understanding the content.

Bateson (1972, cited in Creider, 2009) introduced frames and stated that interactive frames are used by participants to understand what kind of interaction they are engaged in at any one time. Goffman (1981) showed, most interactions can be framed in a variety of ways. For instance, depending upon context, a question such as ―Do you have siblings? may be a request for information or a test of student ability in a new language. In either situation, participants understand the purpose of the question by understanding how the interaction itself is framed—in this case, as a conversation between acquaintances or as a student/teacher interchange (cited in Creider, 2009).

Demo (2001) proposed a four-part process of Record-View-Transcribe-Analyze by which second language teachers can use discourse analytic techniques to investigate the interaction patterns in their classrooms and to see how these patterns promote or hinder opportunities for learners to practice the target language. He believed that "this process allows language teachers to study their own teaching behavior—specifically, the frequency, distribution, and types of questions they use and their effect on students' responses." (p. 2)

2. Questioning

Long and Sato (1983, cited in Creider,2009) studied the kinds of questions found in a second language classroom, differentiating between *display* questions, where the teacher already knows the answer; and *referential* questions, which are more open-ended. Nunn (1999) suggested that 'the distinction between referential and display questions is not always appropriate in the classroom, and that in some contexts what would be called display questions can have important purposes, such as that of reconstructing textbook information.' (cited in Creider, 2009, p.94) However, the important notion here is that even questions that should be referential can be treated as display questions when teacher and students are working from an interactional frame that is more focused on language form than on content.

Another way of thinking about questions is in terms of the kinds of interactions they generate. The three-part *Initiation-Response-Feedback* (IRF) structure continues to be explored by

researchers and even by teachers. It was first described by Sinclair and Coulthard (1975) but it slightly changed by Mehan's (1979) discussion of *Initiation-Response-Evaluation* (IRE) sequences. In both cases, the teacher starts the interaction with a question, usually a display question. A student offers a brief response, and the teacher either provides feedback (IR*F*) or evaluates the student response (IR*E*). Some recent studies have explored how these two kinds of teacher-responses (evaluation and feedback) can affect teacher/student roles in the classroom. Thus, recent work on the IRE sequence in the second language classroom has explored the way that teacher discourse can affect teacher and student roles in the classroom.

McCarthy (1991) mentioned some forms and patterns of different types of talk and consider whether there are things that can be taught or practiced to assist language learning:

3. Adjacency pairs

The dependency of the pairs of utterances in talk is not unknown to language experts. There are many examples concerning this property of speech. One of them is that a question predicts an answer, and that an answer presupposes a question. Adjacency pairs are defined as pairs of utterances such as *greeting-greeting* and *apology-acceptance.* McCarthy (1991) stated that adjacency pairs are of different types; identical (*hello- hello),* and different second pair-part (*congratulations-thanks*).

4. Turn-taking

Turn-taking is one of the basic facts of conversation in which speakers and listeners change their roles in order to have a fruitful and normal interaction. The mechanism in turn-taking may vary between cultures and between languages. Kato (2000) stated that in ordinary conversation, it is very rare to see any allocation of turns in advance. Those involved in the interaction naturally take turns. Of course, there should be a set of rules that govern the turn-taking system, which is independent of various social contexts: (a) when the current speaker selects the next speaker, the next speaker has the right and, at the same time, is obliged to take the next turn; (b) if the current speaker does not select the next speaker, any one of the participants has the right to become the next speaker. This could be regarded as self-selection; and (c) if neither the current speaker nor any of the participants select the next speaker, the current speaker may resume his/her turn (cited in Kato, 2000).

5. Interactional and transactional talk

McCarthy (1991) defined transactional talk as " it is for getting business done n the world, i.e. in order to produce some change in the situation that pertains." (p. 136) It can be in the form of telling somebody something that they need to know, to get someone to do something, and many other forms. On the other hand, he elaborated on the functions of interactional talk "its primary functions are the lubrication of the social wheels, establishing roles and relationships with another person prior to transactional talk, confirming and consolidating relationships, and expressing solidarity." (p.136)

Dorr-Bremme (1990) found out that "when contextualization cues are enacted by a person who is recognized as the leader of the activity at hand, such as a classroom teacher, they can function as direct, immediate means of regulating the flow and content of discourse." (p. 398) The cues can serve to indicate who has the floor, what topics of talk are relevant to the official agenda now, and what ways of listening are appropriate at the moment. The cues can function in these ways even when they are unexplained, implicit, and subtle.

6. Feedback

There has been considerable interest in the relationship between types of corrective feedback and their efficacy. Lyster and Ranta (1997) investigated types of corrective feedback and their relationship to learner uptake in a primary French immersion classroom. The researchers classified feedback into six types: explicit correction, recasts, clarification requests, meta-linguistic feedback,

elicitation, and repetition. Lyster and Ranta also categorized learner uptake, a student utterance following the teacher's feedback, into two types: repair and need-repair, or in other words, successful and unsuccessful responses.

The results revealed that the most frequent type of feedback was the recast, the teacher's reformulation of all or part of a student's ill-formed utterance, without the error. The recast accounted for about half the total feedback, and led to the least uptake (31% of the time). In addition, the recast never led to student-generated repair; the learner merely repeated what the teacher had said. In contrast, elicitation and meta-linguistic feedback, providing the correct form explicitly by indicating that what the student said is incorrect and giving grammatical meta-language that refers to the nature of the error, were less frequent (14% and 8% of the time, respectively), and were found to be effective in that they encouraged learners to generate repair (45% and 46% of the time, respectively). Lyster and Ranta (1997) explained that the low rate of uptake following the recast was accounted for by the fact that the teachers also used repetition of well-formed utterances to confirm and develop students' statements. As a result, students had to figure out whether the teacher was concerned about form or meaning, and sometimes failed to recognize the recast as corrective feedback. Lyster and Ranta concluded that corrective feedback can lead to learner uptake when there is "negotiation of form, the provision of corrective feedback that encourages self-repair involving accuracy and precision" and when cues are given to make students aware of the necessity of repair of ill-formed utterances (p. 42).

7. Method

Participants

There were fifteen female language learners in this study. They have already passed intermediate levels and they were studying in an upper-intermediate level. Some have already had the class with this teacher and for others this is the first experience with this teacher. There was no stress or debilitative anxiety in the classroom. Therefore, students could freely utter their opinions and points of view.

Procedure

At the outset of this study, five partial sessions of upper intermediate English classrooms were recorded with an MP4 recorder. Next, the recordings were listened carefully and the desired notions were transcribed for further study. The transcript made it easier to identify the types of questions in the data and to focus on specific questions and student responses. Finally, the transcript was studied and analyzed based on the criteria made for this research.

The criteria were such as the actual classroom interaction, turn taking role in the classroom, teacher's pronunciation, the type of feedback presented by the teacher, and so on.

8. Data collection and analysis

Five sessions of the classroom interactions were taped using a digital MP4 recorder. Because the teacher moved around quite a bit, she was sometimes loud and sometimes quiet. The interactive part of the recorded tape was transcribed and analyzed based on the criteria leveled by the researcher such as turn-taking, feedback, performance and competence of the teacher.

9. Discussion

The researcher found very interesting notions after transcribing the desired sections of the recorded text. In the process of teacher questioning, student answering and what follows up, there seems to be a questioning cycle which usually starts with a question by the teacher and an answer by the student followed by the feedback by the teacher. Hicks (1995) and Wells (1993) proposed this triadic dialog and which is a form of teacher-student communication pattern in talking. In this study the same pattern was governing the atmosphere of the classroom.

Feedback in the classroom in question was seldom seen regarding the students mistakes. The mistakes in conversation or when the student was telling a story or giving her ideas were totally tolerated. The students received an appreciation for their participation in the classroom interaction.

Excerpt 1:
T: ok, have you ever heard any stories about animals helping people?
S: Yes.
T: could you tell us?
S: A snake that secure the person that, I think it was injury? Was injured and ……….
T: good, anyone else?

As shown in the interaction between student and teacher, the cycle of a teacher question, a student reply, and teacher follow up is repeated here. The other important issue which can be inferred from this excerpt is that the teacher ignores the mistakes of the student and gives just a thankful utterance at the end of the story. However, this tolerance of mistakes is not seen when students want to learn the meaning of the new words from the book. They are immediately stopped and corrected by the teacher. The correction can be due to the pronunciation mistakes, meaning misinterpretation, and the appropriate function in which the word or expression is used. The following excerpt indicates this type of correction.

Excerpt 2:
T: Anything else?
S: Sheep out.
T: Sheep out or ship out.
S: Ship out.
T: if you say sheep it is an animal.
S: No ship out.

When students were asked to read the passage, the teacher listened to their pronunciation and corrected the mispronunciations of the students on the spot. Some students preferred to pronounce the difficult words or the words they could not enunciate it correctly in a questioning intonation. Then teacher pronounce the word and the student repeated the correct form.

Excerpt 3:
S: (reading a text) In September 1985 an earthquake devastated? (student checks the pronunciation with the teacher in a question)
T: devastated.

There was an issue in the discourse between the teacher and student which was very intriguing and attracted the attention of the researcher and that was motivation which was given by the teacher in every interaction between her and her students. Even if the response by the student was not satisfactory, she tended to thank for the risk the student has taken to answer the question.

Excerpt 4:
T: Any other stories?
S: Teacher, once there was a man that he had a very bad disease that any doctor couldn't help him………
T: Thank you very much.

Concerning the issue of adjacency pairs it could be seen that the teacher-student interaction was as proposed by McCarthy both identical and different pair-part. When teacher asked a question, the reply was direct to that question; therefore, it was identical. However, sometimes students could not provide a right answer for the teacher's question. Then the teacher thanked her and repeated her question for the other learner. In this instance of interaction and discourse different pair-part was followed by the teacher.

Excerpt 5:
T: Leila, What is meant by slang?
S: I think informal language, and.(student could not finish giving the definition of slang)
T: Anything else?

Throughout the recorded sessions of the class, the pronunciation and intonation of the teacher were carefully studied and the researcher could be convinced that it was at a satisfactory level of proficiency. This was very beneficial and useful for the students to consider it as a model of learning. As it is usually expressed by the scholars, the type of exposure to language plays an important role in language classrooms.

10. Conclusion

McCarthy (1991) said that "discourse analysis is *not* a method for teaching languages; it is a way of describing and understanding how language is used." (p.2) The study was intended to find out the extent to which a well-trained teacher considers the type of interaction and feedback needed for the classroom context. Tang (2008) claimed that even from the brief content analysis carried out on the teacher-students' discourse the trainee teachers *are* making connections between their instruction in text analysis and their lives as teachers and readers outside the classroom walls. Even from the brief content analysis that the researcher has carried out on the teacher-students' interaction, useful findings could be detected. The experienced teacher could well understand the importance of interaction in the class discourse and the motivation needed to initiate and continue interaction in that context.

From the extracts presented above, the researcher could see that a critical awareness about language and an interest in everyday texts are being developed in majority of the students. It is suggested that while experts are training the teachers, they should teach them the type and degree of interaction and how they are to tune in their discourse with their students.

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