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Analysis of Teacher Talk on the Basis of Relevance Theory¹

ANALYSE DU DISCOURS DE L'ENSEIGNANT SUR LA BASE DE LA THEORIE DE LA PERTINENCE

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Abstract: Teacher talk is usually viewed as one of the decisive factors of success or failure in classroom teaching. Based on the basic principles of Relevance Theory, the present thesis has focused on the teacher-student interaction in form of question-answer in language classrooms and tried to analyze teacher talk under the framework of Relevance Theory to prove that Relevance Theory is able to provide an explanation for teacher talk. This thesis proposes some pedagogical implications for successful teacher talk and teacher-student interaction in EFL context.

Keywords: teacher talk; teacher-student interaction; Relevance Theory

Résumé: Le discours de l'enseignant est généralement considéré comme l'un des facteurs décisifs de succès ou d'échec dans l'enseignement en classe. Basée sur des principes élémentaires de théorie de la pertinence, la présente thèse a mis l'accent sur l'interaction enseignant-élève sous forme de question-réponse dans les cours de langue et tenté d'analyser les discours de l'enseignant dans le cadre de la théorie de la pertinence afin de prouver que la théorie de la pertinence est capable de fournir une explication pour le discours de l'enseignant. Cette thèse propose quelques implications pédagogiques pour les discours de l'enseignant et de l'interaction enseignant-élève réussis dans le contexte de EFL.

Mots-clés: discours de l'enseignant; interaction enseignant-élève; théorie de la pertinence

1. INTRODUCTION

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1.1 Significance of the research

Relevance Theory is the foundation of cognitive pragmatics. It has been widely used to different areas, such as translation, stylistic explanation, grammar and discourse analysis. Although Relevance Theory is on communication and cognition, it is a general cognitive principle. Teacher talk in English classroom interaction is a form of communication, which can be studied from the cognitive perspective theoretically. The study of teacher talk under the framework of Relevance Theory is expected to widen the practical applications of Relevance Theory and to obtain some implications for EFL teachers to improve teacher-student interaction. It is of theoretic significance and practical significance.

1.2 Definition of teacher talk

What is teacher talk? The definition is very simple and self-evident. Teacher talk means that teachers address classroom language learners differently from the way that they address other kinds of classroom learners according to Ellis (1994). They make adjustments to both language form and language function in order to facilitate communication. These adjustments are referred to as “teacher talk”. Teacher talk is very important for both classroom teaching organization and students’ language learning in the process of foreign language learning and second language acquisition, because teacher talk is an instrument of implementing teaching plan.

1.3 Teacher’s feedback

Feedback is the response to efforts by the learner to communicate, which includes the notion of error correction. Feedback has been widely investigated in information theory and general communication research outside classroom or language learning context (Annett, 1969). It has been suggested that feedback plays a major role in helping learners to test hypotheses they have formed about the rule system of the target language (Ellis, 1985).

Behavioral psychologists were the first to recognize the power of feedback as a motivating influence. Feedback refers to the informative responses to what learners say or do, for example, a nod, smile, puzzled frown, or clarifying question are all useful feedback to learners.

Now we just want to talk about how teachers use teacher talk to make error correction on a student’s spoken language, including a response either to the content of what a student has produced or to the form of an utterance.

1.4 Error correction on content

There are some ways of error correction, such as:

- ① indicating an incorrect answer. The teacher indicates that a student’s answer is incorrect by saying “No” or “that’s not quite right”.
- ② Expanding or modifying a student’s answer. The teacher responds to a vague or incomplete answer by providing more information, or rephrasing the answer in the teacher’s own words.
- ③ Summarizing. The teacher gives a summary of what a student or group of students has said.
- ④ Criticizing. The teacher criticizes a student for the kind of response provided.

2. THEORY AND ANALYSIS

2.1 Key concepts of Relevance Theory

Sperber & Wilson (1986/1995) put forward the notion of relevance and two principles of relevance:

cognitive principle and communicative principle of Relevance Theory serving as the foundation for Relevance Theory. According to Sperber & Wilson, relevance is seen as a property of inputs to cognitive processes. It can be a property of stimuli, which are inputs to perceptual processes, or of assumptions, which are input to inferential processes. Sperber & Wilson (1986) proposed a fundamental assumption that human cognition is relevance-oriented. Every utterance starts out as a request for the hearer's attention. As a result, it creates an expectation of relevance. Relevance is defined in terms of contextual effect and processing effort.

When an input (for example, an utterance) is processed in a context of available assumptions, Sperber & Wilson (1995) argues that contextual effects can be achieved in the following three ways:

- ① Combining newly presented information with old information that is drawn from an existing representation of the world to yield to contextual implications.
- ② Strengthening existing assumptions
- ③ Contradicting existing assumptions

2.2 Relevance-based Account of Teacher Talk

2.2.1 The nature of teacher-student interaction

Classroom study is important in English teaching and learning because classroom is a place where interactions of various kinds take place, and it affords students opportunities to learn English. In most language classrooms, the interaction comes between teacher's questions and students' answers, that is, teacher-student interaction. Therefore, it is of great necessity to give a careful reconsideration of the nature of teacher-student interaction.

2.2.2 Factors that affect successful teacher-student interaction

2.2.2.1 Mutual manifestness of cognitive environments: the basis for teacher-student interaction

According to the Relevance Theory, communication (both linguistic and non-linguistic) is a kind of psychologically cognitive activity. Interpretation of this cognitive activity is a problem of understanding the cognitive environment of the teacher and the students. Successful communication between both parties lies in whether the communication participants' cognitive environment can be manifest and mutually manifest to each other.

2.2.2.2 Definition of cognitive environment

A cognitive environment of an individual is a set of facts that are manifest to him (Sperber & Wilson, 1986/1995:39). This definition suggests that the objective environment of communication constitutes the object of human cognition and the subjects in the communication constitute the subjects of cognitive activities. The objective factors in the cognitive environment are some concrete facts in the material world, which can be perceived by the subjects through cognitive activities.

According to Cognitive Theory (Garnham, 1985), human tend to form thinking representation based on information obtained from the cognitive environment. In the real world, people's cognitive schema is based on one's education, surroundings, personal experiences, occupation and one's own perspectives to the world.

When such cognitive schema—knowledge networks accumulated in the brain—was stimulated by new information, relevant cognitive environment is established and interpretation occurs within a certain cognitive scope. Just like what we have mentioned, the subjects of cognitive activities may vary from one to another in their understanding of the same communicative environment. That is why in communication, the students' interpretations towards the same information may vary greatly in accuracy.

The subjective factors that affect individual's cognition may be summarized as follows:

- ① Individuals vary in their status in communication.
- ② Individuals vary in their perceptual and cognitive abilities, or more specifically in their understanding and inference abilities.
- ③ Individuals vary in their memorization, which leads to the difference in their information storage that can be employed to facilitate understanding in communication.

Let's take an example as an illustration: A teacher plans to ask the students make a conversation on bargaining, in order to make teacher-student interaction successful, he tries to create shared cognitive environments about bargain(Zhu,2004):

T: Today, we're going to practice a conversation on the topic of "making bargains", Suppose we are going to do some shopping because it is time for season sales, well, first of all, before your group work, Let's talk about bargains, do you know what "bargain" is?

S1: It means to discuss prices.

S2: to cut down the prices.

T: Yes, bargain means that when you are buying something, you may discuss the prices with the shop assistants and cut down the prices to the possibly lowest. Well, can you tell me where the bargain usually happens. Well, I mean where shall we do bargains?

S3: At the shop.

(Silence)

T: Come on! Anything else?

S4: In the bazaar.

S5: In the market or supermarket

S6: shopping mall.

T: All right, Good! Jack, have you done some bargains?

S1: Yes, I have.

T: Then how do you make some bargains?

T: Okay, what do you think of bargain? Is bargain good or not?

You may discuss with your partners, or let's do some pair work, Ok?

Before the above conversation taking place, we can see that students' cognitive environments about "bargain" are not the same: some students believe that bargain takes in the mall, some in supermarket. This is due to their different personal experiences. The purpose of the teacher to carry out an interaction with students before students' group work is to enlarge students' cognitive environments of bargain and make them mutually manifest, so that they can finish the task-based activity successfully afterwards. By asking a series of questions, such as the possible places, their personal experiences etc. the students' cognitive environments about "bargains" become larger and closer, which forms a cognitive schema in students' mind. The richer the cognitive schema in students' mind, the more adequate the contextual effects will be achieved, and the less processing efforts the students have to spare to process the information, so that optimal relevance between the teacher and students would be achieved and have a very successful relevant classroom interaction.

2.2.3 Contextual effect, processing effort, relevance and successful teacher-student interaction

According to Sperber and Wilson's Relevance Theory, relevance in conversation is gained by its contextual effects through processing effort. The content of the conversation is usually information

relevant, situation relevant or topic relevant in the context.

2.2.4 Contextual effect and conditions for relevance

Contextual effect is contextual implication. It can include information effect, interpersonal effect, humorous effect, etc. It is the result of the interaction between newly presented information and contextual assumptions (old information). Sperber and Wilson regard this process as “contextualization” through which the old context is constantly revised, supplemented and improved and thus constitutes the foundation of the next-step communication and inference. When the newly presented information interacts with the contextual assumptions, the new contextual effect will be further resulted in.

3. CONCLUSION

In order to improve the efficiency of classroom interaction, teachers must modify their speech to be more comprehensible. Therefore, teachers should consciously improve their questioning behavior.

3.1 Asking relevant questions

In EFL context, in order to make relevant questioning, teachers firstly should provide an information gap between the teacher and the students, and the gap can be related to a topic that is relevant to the learner’s lives, can stimulate their interests, and can require a level of thinking that stretches the students intellectually. Moreover, questions with information gap can provide a chance for students to discuss life issues, and can lead consideration of individuals’ own viewpoints. Secondly, optimal teacher’s talk focuses the acquirer on the message, not on the form. There may become difficult grammatical points in a material, but the number should be limited; otherwise, the learner’s attention may be shifted from the message to the form. As a result, the learner might get bored with the input. This requirement is very difficult to meet, for the students in a class quite differ from each other in terms of their goals, interests and backgrounds. Anyhow, the optimal teacher talk should not be grammatically sequenced. With a grammatical focus, teacher’s mind is focused on a particular structure, and not on communicating ideas. What is proposed here is that the goal, in the mind of a teacher, should be the message instead of the rules.

However, new information may also support and therefore strengthen old assumptions. Therefore, in order to facilitate the success of teacher-student interaction, each of the teachers’ questions in the classroom must be ostensive and teachers should clarify the purpose of asking such questions to students. When it is difficult for students to infer the meaning of the teacher’s questions, teachers should provide optimally relevant new information, which helps to stimulate students’ old information and yield to adequate contextual effects and in turn help the students to make inference.

3.2 Making effective error correction

First of all, teachers should not constantly correct learners’ errors. Errors should be regarded with greater tolerance as a completely normal phenomenon in the development of communicative skills. Constant error correction will cause disturbance to students’ inference process, which will hinder the acquisition of the learners. However, in general, correction helps students to clarify their understanding of the meaning and construction of language. It is a vital part of the teacher’s role, and something that the teacher is uniquely able to provide, but precisely because it involves pointing out students’ mistakes, we have to be careful when correcting since, if we do it in an insensitive way, we can upset our students and dent their confidence. Thus, a second suggestion concerning error correction is proposed, that is, teachers should make error correction that focuses on content rather than form, because correction of linguistic errors interrupts the learners’ attempt at creative speech, and focusing the learner on form rather than meaning intimidates and discourages the learner and interrupts interaction. On the other hand,

focusing the learners on meaning can facilitate classroom interaction. In addition, the teacher's job is to encourage self-correction as much as possible. Sometimes, however, students can't put mistakes right on their own, so we have to help them. The most effective way to guide students' self-correction is providing more relevant information to students so as to change or extend their cognitive environment and achieve more contextual effects with less processing effort of students.

In short, questioning and error correction are important aspects of teacher talk and here we need to monitor, not only what sort of questions should be asked, but also how to make effective error correction. Most EFL students learn English from their teachers in classrooms. So classroom study is essentially important in English teaching and learning. On the one hand, everything that happens in the classroom happens through a process of live person-to-person interaction. On the other hand, classroom is a place where interactions of various kinds take place, and it affords students opportunities to learn English. In most language classrooms, the interaction comes between teachers' asking questions and students' answering them, which is, therefore, a significant area for us to study.

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