

The Nature of Supportive Teacher Talk in Communicative EFL Classrooms

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ABSTRACT

The potential roles of teachers' positive verbal behaviors or supportive teacher talk in the communicative language classroom at the university level were investigated in this paper. Supportive teacher talk was observed from the transcriptions of three 90-minute class video recordings from three different teachers. The data was categorized into type and function of supportive teacher talk based on Sugita and Takeuchi's (2006) six categories of verbal encouragements with the two extra factors of teacher classroom behaviors according to Beaman and Wheldall (2000). The findings indicate that supportive teacher talk is mostly used for instructional purposes such as giving concrete praise for a right answer or expected behaviors. All observed teachers directed their praise more towards a whole class as opposed to individual students, implying that teachers deploy praise to exercise their teaching principles as determined by curricular goals.

INTRODUCTION

Although a variety of aspects have been studied in English Discussion Class (EDC), a small-size communicative language course for first year university students (ranging from simple classroom activities to analyzing gender roles), little research has been concerned on teacher talk and behavior. Looking at how teachers in such a course talk to their students will fill a gap in an otherwise thoroughly examined curriculum, as well as better inform future research into this area.

Broderick (2010; 2012) found that direct positive feedback on student performance is more effective than indirect feedback for increasing the usage of target language among students in both the short and long term, and that this can also have a positive effect on students' attitude towards learning. However, such praise and encourage can also have some opposite effects, such as lowering motivation to improve (Broderick, 2012).

Sugita and Takeuchi (2006) examined the use of verbal encouragements in actual English as a foreign language (EFL) classrooms in Japan through the analysis of video-observations of verbal encouragements by teachers in schools ranging from elementary to university level. In their study, the term 'encouragement' is defined as "the linguistic expressions from teachers to students in classrooms intended to elicit students' positive participation in English class and to create a classroom atmosphere which can stimulate their willingness to learn English in every activity" (pp. 60-61). Table 1 shows six categories that Sugita and Takeuchi created to classify verbal encouragements in their study (p. 61).

Table 1. Classification of verbal encouragements used in Sugita and Takeuchi's study

Category	Definition
Encouragement-1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Remarks for building self-confidence. (e.g., Come on, you can do it.) - Remarks for inviting students' positive participation. - Remarks for reducing anxiety. (e.g., Don't worry. Never

	mind.)
Encouragement-2	- Simple praise with no concrete reference to students' performance. (e.g., Very good.)
Encouragement-3	- Detailed praise with concrete reference to students' performance. (e.g., Your pronunciation is very good.)
Encouragement-4	- Remarks for showing understanding of a students' answer. (e.g., I understand.) - Remarks for showing agreement with a student's opinion. (e.g., I agree with you.)
Encouragement-5	- Remarks for acknowledging a right answer. (e.g., Exactly, Okay.)
Encouragement-6	- Remarks for helping students in difficult conditions. (e.g., 1. Give examples to the students having problems with their tasks or activities. 2. Whisper answers to students who are getting nervous. 3. Start to say the beginning of answers to the students who are not understanding.)

Sugita and Takeuchi's study indicates that university teachers used Encouragement-5 most frequently in their classes, and the encouragements tended to direct at individuals than at the whole class (p. 63). Since their study was conducted in conventional large-size classroom settings, the comparison between their results and the results from this study might provide an interesting insight into the potential roles of teachers' praise or supportive teacher talk in a small-size communicative language classroom such as EDC.

In addition, Beaman and Wheldall (2000) reviewed numerous studies dealing with "naturalistic observed use of teacher approval and disapproval" in terms of its natural or typical rates and effectiveness (pp. 431-432). Their review and analysis of the research literature on teacher classroom behavior shows that "teacher behavior may be a powerful influence on the behavior of both individual students and whole classes" and "such key teacher behaviors as contingent praise/approval and reprimand/disapproval may be systematically deployed by teachers so as to increase both academic and appropriate social behaviors and to decrease inappropriate behaviors" (p. 431). In other words, praise/approval is deployed by teachers for mainly two reasons: "instructional/academic" and "managerial/social" functions (p. 433). Taking into account these functional trends of praise deployment, it is worth investigating how language teachers in a communicative language classroom will employ the praise in terms of these two functions as well. Hence, in the current study, the researcher would like to define the term 'instructional praise' as the positive verbal expressions from teachers to students in classrooms for evaluative purposes based on curricular goals and target language use. The term 'managerial praise' is defined as the positive verbal expressions from teachers to students in classrooms for facilitating purposes such as affective encouragements and those that promote proper classroom behavior.

To sum up, not only the type of praise use but also the function of praise use will be explored in this study. In order to analyze teacher talk in EDC, the six categories of verbal encouragements as outlined in Sugita and Takeuchi (2006) are modified along with the two functions "instructional" and "managerial" according to Beaman and Wheldall (2000). The

present study’s classification of verbal encouragement is outlined in Table 2 below.

Table 2. Functions and Classification of verbal encouragements used in this study

Function	Category	Original Definition	Additional Definition
managerial	1	Remarks for building self-confidence, students’ participation, and reducing anxiety.	Remarks for encouraging students to complete their task.
	2	Remarks for showing understanding of a student’s answer and showing agreement with a student’s opinion.	
	3	Remarks for helping students in difficult conditions.	
instructional	4	Simple praise with no concrete reference to students’ performance.	
	5	Detailed praise with concrete reference to students’ performance.	
	6	Remarks for acknowledging a right answer.	Remarks for acknowledging a behavior that follows the classroom protocols

There are two additional definitions created and used in this study. For Category 1, an additional definition, remarks for encouraging students to complete their task, is included as the researcher found that teachers sometimes give intentional remarks for students to encourage them to keep talking or complete an assigned task (e.g. “Uh-huh” while a student was talking). For Category 6, an additional definition, remarks for an expected or helpful behavior, is included as the researcher found that teachers sometimes give positive remarks for students who followed classroom protocols when prompted (e.g. ‘Thank you!’ when a student moved to change partners) and for students who followed classroom protocols without prompting (e.g. ‘Thank you!’ when a student handed in a quiz).

METHOD

In order to investigate teachers’ praise and supportive teacher talk, the recordings of three teacher’s 90-minute class observation videos were observed. Although the possible variables, such as proficiency levels and particular content of the lesson, could have been considered in

this study, they are disregarded in order to focus purely on exploring the nature of praise use employed by the instructors as an initial investigation.

Thus, the following three video recordings were collected from three EDC instructors who have taught in the same the unified curriculum for more than two years. Video recording A was of a high-beginner class during the third of fourteen lessons in a semester; video recording B was of a intermediate class during the same lesson; and video recording C was of a high-intermediate class during lesson seven. Each video recording was transcribed by the researcher, and teachers' praise in the classroom was identified and categorized into type and function of praise in the charts below based on the six categories for verbal encouragements and two teacher behaviors as adapted from Sugita and Takeuchi (2006) and Beaman and Wheldall (2000), as outlined in Table 2 above.

RESULTS

In order to better analyze the trend of teachers' praise and teacher talk in EDC, the following Table was created.

Table 3. Average numbers and proportions of encouragements in three items

Category	1	2	3	4	5	6	total
Function	managerial			instructional			
For all	3.33 3.57%	4.33 4.64%	10.67 11.43%	10.33 11.07%	13.67 14.64%	13.33 14.29%	55.67 59.64%
For individual	7.00 7.50%	2.33 2.50%	10.00 10.71%	4.33 4.64%	7.67 8.21%	6.33 6.79%	37.67 40.36%
Total	10.33 11.07%	6.67 7.14%	20.67 22.14%	14.67 15.71%	21.33 22.86%	19.67 21.07%	93.33

Note. Figures after the third decimal fraction were omitted.

Table 3 shows four major findings that can be generalized from this study. The first finding is that Encouragement-5, detailed praise with concrete reference to students' performance, is used most among the teachers observed (e.g. "And you said, 'because,' and you put a reason. That's really great because that's today's function"). This shows that EDC teachers are more conscious about giving more supportive, concrete feedback when monitoring students' performance in the classroom.

The second finding is that Encouragement-2, remarks for showing understanding of a students' answer and showing agreement with a student's opinion, is the least used way to praise students among the sample pool. Factoring in that all actual instances of Encouragement-2 follow either a student' remark about difficulty (e.g. "Yeah, repeating is important" after the first fluency task in Video Recording A) or students' attempts at using the target phrases (e.g. "We've got a lot of new language today" in Video Recording B), it might be reasonable to say that most EDC teachers attend to students' remarks or struggles only when students are obviously struggling with the material.

The third finding is about the preferable purpose when giving praise. The total number of

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each functional sub-category, 59.64% for instructional encouragements and 40.36% for managerial encouragements, indicates that the observed teachers tend to give more praise for instructional purposes. This orientation towards using praise more for academic purposes implies that EDC teachers are actually able to use their teacher talk time for teaching rather than for managing classroom business.

The last finding is about a preferred audience of praise in EDC. Table 3 indicates that EDC teachers prefer to direct praise more towards a whole class than individual students, which is contrary to some previous studies of encouragement finding that praise towards individuals is preferred by students in language classrooms (Broderick, 2010 and 2012; Sugita & Takeuchi, 2006).

DISCUSSION

The following Tables below show the raw data of the observed deployment of praise in EDC, taking into account the fact that each teaching classroom context is unique (Cullen, 1998). When comparing and contrasting these three video recording items, two factors are important to be noted. One is the differing proficiency level in each video, from high-beginner to high-intermediate. As mentioned earlier, groups of different proficiency levels might require a different approach by their teachers. Another factor is the difference in observation period, as one recording was made four weeks later in the semester than the other two, and therefore the different objectives and conditions of the lessons. Two videos (Video Recording A and B) were taken during lesson three, which was relatively at the beginning of the semester when a teacher was still establishing academic and social protocols in the classroom, while Video Recording C was taken during lesson seven, during mid-semester when most of these protocols had been set by teachers. By taking into account the two factors above, the following results can be observed and analyzed from each video.

Table 4. Average numbers and proportions of encouragements observed in Video Recording A (Lesson 3, high beginner)

Category	1	2	3	4	5	6	total
Function	managerial			instructional			
For all	6	2	16	15	11	9	59
	5.26%	1.75%	14.04%	13.16%	9.65%	7.89%	51.75%
For individual	4	2	19	14	11	5	55
	3.51%	1.75%	16.67%	12.28%	9.65%	4.39%	48.25%
Total	10	4	35	29	22	14	114
	8.77%	3.51%	30.70%	25.44%	19.30%	12.28%	

Note. Figures after the third decimal fraction were omitted.

Table 4 indicates that teacher A used Encouragement-3 and -4 more frequently than others. Considering the first proficiency level factor, it can be presumed that lower level teachers feel the need for praise or supportive teacher talk, which helps students to express themselves as in Encouragement-3, followed by a simple praise as in Encouragement-4, rather than a longer praise with concrete examples as in Encouragement-5. In addition, considering the highest

number of total encouragements, 114, among the three teachers, it is assumed that the lower level teachers deploy more praise than higher level teachers.

Table 5. Average numbers and proportions of encouragements observed in Video Recording B (Lesson 3, intermediate)

Category	1	2	3	4	5	6	total
Function	managerial			instructional			
For all	2 2.27%	6 6.82%	4 4.55%	10 11.36%	15 17.05%	14 15.91%	51 57.95%
For individual	13 14.77%	5 5.68%	7 7.95%	3 3.41%	2 2.27%	7 7.95%	37 42.05%
Total	15 17.05%	11 12.50%	11 12.50%	13 14.77%	17 19.32%	21 23.86%	88

Note. Figures after the third decimal fraction were omitted.

Table 5 shows that teacher B used Encouragement-6 more frequently than others. Considering the second timing factor, it can be said that teachers in the beginning of the semester tend to deploy Encouragement-6 out of the need for establishing academic and social protocols in the classroom. Also, the number of total encouragements, 88, fits the assumption that teachers of intermediate levels use fewer encouragements than those of lower levels but more than those of higher ones. In other words, the amount of encouragement from the teacher seems, as one might expect, to be inversely proportionate to the proficiency level of the students.

Table 6. Average numbers and proportions of encouragements observed in Video Recording C (Lesson 7, high intermediate)

Category	1	2	3	4	5	6	total
Function	managerial			instructional			
For all	2 2.41%	5 6.02%	12 14.46%	6 7.23%	15 18.07%	17 20.48%	57 68.67%
For individual	4 4.82%	0 0.00%	4 4.82%	1 1.20%	10 12.05%	7 8.43%	26 31.33%
Total	6 7.23%	5 6.02%	16 19.28%	7 8.43%	25 30.12%	24 28.92%	83

Note. Figures after the third decimal fraction were omitted.

Table 6 indicates that teacher C used Encouragement-5 and Encouragement-6 more frequently than others. This implies that higher-level teachers can give more concrete praise as well as respond more to students' behaviors or remarks that fit the classroom protocols set in the earlier semester. The fewest number of total encouragements, 83, follows the proficiency-related

assumption made above. Nevertheless, another interesting number in this video is the audience ratio of praise. Almost 70% of praise was directed towards the whole class, rather than any individuals. It would seem also that teachers in higher level classes direct praise more towards a whole class, rather than individuals whereas teachers in lower level classes are more likely to direct praise towards an individual. However, this difference could also be attributed to teaching style alone, as the sample size was no large enough to observe multiple levels for each teacher.

CONCLUSION

While Cullen (1998) admits that interest in teacher talk in the era of communicative language teaching has “shifted away from a concern with quantity towards a concern with quality” (p. 179), he argues that it is important to consider the local context when understanding the characteristics of teacher talk in communicative classrooms since the notion of ‘communicative teacher talk’ emerges from “the teacher’s dual role as instructor as well as interlocutor” with their established definition of what’s ‘communicative’ within the context of the classroom (p. 185). Considering this claim, this study attempted to identify and generalize what is observable within EDC to get a better understanding of how language teachers actually attempt to support students’ communicative language learning through their teacher talk.

Even though this is a preliminary study with a small sample of teacher talk, the results illuminate fascinating aspects of supportive teacher talk in EDC. Factoring in major preferences observed from the video: the most preferred type of praise, Encouragement-5, the preferred function of praise, ‘instructional’ purposes, and the preferred audience of praise, a whole class, it can be said that supportive teacher talk is served as signaling roles like a traffic light by language teachers to advance a lesson by sharing achievement or difficulty with students. Interestingly, these green light signals are reflected on EDC teachers’ teaching principles in EDC, a teacher being a guide for all students to achieve goals of the course, while these yellow or red light signals are serving as a reminder of important skills in the course such as ‘emphasizing team efforts rather than individuals’. In a sense, studying supportive teacher talk is an interesting way of observing how an orientation of a course is defined and facilitated verbally by the teachers within the context of the course, as Cullen (1998) has pointed out.

It would be interesting to see whether the trends observed in this study are stemming from course-specific, teacher-specific, or group-specific factors. Future studies could collect more data to better control for the variables discussed above and narrow down just what factors determine what types of praise teachers give in a small, communicative EFL classroom, as well as how such praise is given.

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