Language Simplification: Does It Really Do More Good Than Harm?

Katsuichiro "Ken" Ohashi

ABSTRACT

Some instructors at the English Discussion Class (EDC) modify the way they talk with their students depending on the English proficiency of the classes they are teaching. When teaching students that seem to have a high proficiency, they might talk as though they are talking to a native English speaker. The same instructor might adjust their language and use simpler vocabulary and sentence structures in order to be more comprehensible when teaching students that seem to be struggling with the EDC program. I facilitated a reading club based on an article by Sato (2015) as an opportunity for instructors, including myself, to rethink of how we communicate with students in the classroom and to rethink if we are communicating with students in certain ways for the students' sake or for the sake of the instructor.

INTRODUCTION

During official faculty development sessions (FDs) at EDC and when instructors are discussing lesson plans in their team rooms, many instructors show their concerns toward students that find English as a challenge. What seems to be the three most occurring concerns are; the students' capability to produce discussion content on certain topics, the students' capability to understand the procedures of an activity in a lesson, and the students' capability to comprehend what the teacher or other students are saying. To help students generate content some teachers use picture prompts in their class activities. Some teachers model activities to show an example of how an activity is expected to be executed. Many teachers seem to simplify their language in terms of vocabulary and sentence structures to increase the students' understanding of what the instructor is saying. This simplification of language is known as *foreigner talk* (Ferguson, 1981). Many language teachers use foreigner talk in the classroom believing it serves the students' best interest, but depending on the aims of the lesson or the needs of the students, this might not always be the case. As an English instructor, there are a few things we should be concerned about.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The first concern is the appropriate level of language simplification. Vocabulary is one aspect of language that can be controlled by the speaker. Research shows that the information receiver needs to know 98% of the vocabulary being shared in order to comprehend the context adequately, whether it be in written form or spoken (Nation, 2006). This is a concern because language instructors do not necessarily know what vocabulary they can use to maintain their students' vocabulary coverage at 98%. If the student knows all the words the instructor uses they will not be learning new vocabulary due to lack of exposure. If students don't know more than 98% of the words being said, there is a chance the students will have a challenge in understanding what is being said to them.

The second concern is the simplification of sentence structure on behalf of the native language speaker and highly proficient language learner. Some researchers suggest that simplified input during interactions is beneficial for a second language learner's comprehension and language acquisition (Ellis et al., 1994). On the other hand, Long (1981) states that it is the interaction

itself and not the simplification of language that is allowing the low proficiency learners to comprehend and acquire new language forms. Even though the use of simplified sentence structures by the native language speaker and proficient language learners sounds beneficial for the low proficiency second language learner, there can be a downside.

A case study comparing the discourse between second language learners and native speakers with discourse between two second language learners was conducted by Sato (2015). The participants were eight Japanese university students and four native English speaking university students. Each participant conducted a similar task with two different partners. Once with a native English speaker and once with another Japanese participant. The task they performed was an information gap-fill activity. Each dyad was given a total of six pictures that complete a story along a single timeline. Each participant had to describe the three pictures in their possession to complete the correct sequence. Mean length of utterance (MLU), types and tokens of words, type token ratio (TTR), copula omission and the number of nouns and verbs used in the second language learners' utterance were examined. Sato inferred from the results that a second language learner could provide other second language learners with input that is comparable with a native English speaker in regards of quantity and complexity. It was also suggested that second language learners could produce longer and more complicated utterances when paired with another second language learner than with a native English speaker. Sato also suggests that second language learners make more errors when paired with native English speakers because they are influenced by the simplified language in the obligatory context native English speakers produce.

READING CLUB
After reading Sato's (2015) article, *Density and complexity of oral production in interaction: The interactionist approach and an alternative*, I started rethinking about how I talk to my students and what my students are taking away from my teacher talk. At the same time, I began wondering how other instructors talked to their students and how they thought their students are benefiting from it. I also wanted to see if this article might change the way other instructors thought about their teacher talk so I decided to host a reading club regarding this article.

INTENDED AUDIENCE
There were two types of people I had in mind when conducting this session for the reading club. The first intended group was EDC instructors that are aware that they modify their language in the classroom depending on the language proficiency of the classes they teach. The second group was instructors that are wondering if simplifying their language when talking with lower proficiency students is a good practice or not. Aside from these two groups of instructors I was also interested in what other instructors generally felt about teacher talk in the classroom.

ORGANIZATION, LAYOUT, AND MATERIALS
On the day of the event, a classroom was set up somewhat similar to a regular EDC lesson. Desks were set facing each other in clusters of four so the participants could face each other while they discussed. The materials required for this reading club session were a hardcopy of Sato's (2015) article, a whiteboard, whiteboard markers, and a timer.

PROCEDURES
This project was conducted as part of the reflective professional development task, which EDC instructors that are in their third term or longer conduct as part of their professional development. The session was conducted in a similar fashion as an official EDC FD. I stood in the front facilitating discussions while the six EDC instructors that attended sat in two groups of three. Five

discussion questions were displayed on the whiteboard; "How would you define *foreigner talk*?", "Do you grade your language depending on your perspectives of the student's English level?", "What do you think your students get out of your teacher talk during class?", "What is the value of peer interaction in L2 development?", and "What is the value of EDC?" Each group was given time to discuss one or more of the questions for two to three minutes at a time. After each small group discussion, ideas were shared with everyone. Only three of the questions were covered because all the participants had many ideas to contribute on each topic. The questions covered were; "How would you define *foreigner talk*?", "Do you grade your language depending on your perspectives of the student's English level?", "What do you think your students get out of your teacher talk during class?" The session lasted 45-minutes.

DISCUSSION

I started the session by confirming some definitions used in Sato's (2015) article. The opening discussion question was, "How would you define *foreigner talk*?" After confirming everyone had the same understanding that foreigner talk was simplified language used by native speakers of a language and highly proficient second language learners when talking to non-proficient second language learners I introduced how Sato (2015) explains its similarities to *caregiver talk*. Caregiver talk is the way parents talk to children.

The second discussion question, "Do you grade your language depending on your perspectives of the student's English level?", raised some very interesting points. All the participants answered that they simplified their language in one way or another depending on the classes they teach. However, when I asked how the participants knew that the level of simplification they applied was appropriate for the class' level, no one was able to provide a logical explanation.

One important aspect of EDC that was brought up by one of the participants, while on this question, was due to the time constrains EDC instructors experience during lessons, there is little luxury for repeating things for the students' comprehension sake. And because of this EDC instructors need to communicate in different ways depending on the stage of the lesson. Foreigner talk is one way, but *teacher talk* and *coaching talk* were other ways. Teacher talk was referred to the way EDC instructors talk during function presentations and feedback. There is overlap between foreigner talk and teacher talk within the EDC context. Coaching talk referred to instructions given in simplified language for activities that students experience multiple times during the semester, such as quizzes and fluency. For the quiz an instructor might say, "Write your name. Three minutes. Start!" Instead of "You have three minutes to complete the quiz. Make sure you write your full name and students number along with today's date and my name. Now begin." All the participants seemed to agree that different communication strategies can be useful for different stages of the lesson. All the participants agreed that when they use foreigner talk during their teacher talk, it was for time saving purposes especially during the function presentation stage of the lesson.

When discussing the question, "What do you think your students get out of your teacher talk during class?", some of the comments pointed toward the use of function phrases, and examples of how to improve their discussions. I pointed out one of the results from Sato's (2015) research that second language learners picked up the simplified language that the native English speakers used in their interactions. If this uptake of language is permanent, it can mean that our intentions to save time in class can have a negative effect on the students' development of English. I suggested that it might be a good idea not to simplify our language when providing content feedback so the students can be exposed to English that native and highly proficient language

learners use when talking with each other. Many of the teachers seemed comfortable with this idea.

CONCLUSION

EDC instructors follow a densely packed lesson plan under a unified curriculum that leaves little luxury for repeating oneself. For this reason, time management is an issue every instructor faces. Simplifying language is one method commonly used by native speakers and highly proficient second language learners when communicating with second language learners with low-proficiency as a means to assist with comprehension. Some researchers have inferred that there are benefits for the use of simplified language in regards of the second language learners' comprehension (Ellis et al., 1981; Long, 1981) while other have suggested that there are negative effects of simplified language when examined from the perspective of native speaker language being copied by second language learners (Sato, 2015). From my personal experience, I have found that speaking to students as I would with a native English speaker does not influence my time management in the EDC classroom even with low proficiency classes. It might be time for EDC instructors to rethink the way they communicate with their students and ask if they are communicating with their students the way they do for the students' sake or for their own sake.

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