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Understanding Teacher Communication Skills

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Abstract

In this study, the researchers provide an analysis of teacher communication skills within the framework of the communicative language teaching using communicative approach. The aim is to determine English as Second Language (ESL) teachers' communication skills as displayed in their second language (L2) classrooms. This study explored the communication skills used by ESL secondary teachers. Data were collected from 18 class hours of video recordings. The study supports better quality teacher communication, with regard to classroom communication, communicative activities and teacher - student interaction.

Keywords: Communication skills; communicative language teaching; language and communication

1. Introduction

The introduction of the New Secondary School Integrated Curriculum (NSSIC) into Malaysian secondary schools has brought changes in the traditional classroom roles of teachers and students. For the teacher, the NSSIC requires a shift away from the traditional strategies of teacher-dominated and teacher-directed classes. Teachers are encouraged to develop a strategy of encouraging learners to take a more active role in their own learning. The main focus of the curriculum is on an integrated educational approach. The approach incorporates knowledge with skills and moral values. It also combines theory with practical training; curriculum with co-curriculum. The introduction

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of the New Secondary School Integrated Curriculum (NSSIC) into Malaysian secondary schools has brought changes in the traditional classroom roles of teachers and students. For the teacher, the NSSIC requires a shift away from the traditional strategies of teacher-dominated and teacher-directed classes. Teachers are encouraged to develop a strategy of encouraging learners to take a more active role in their own learning. The main focus of the curriculum is on an integrated educational approach. The approach incorporates knowledge with skills and moral values. It also combines theory with practical training, curriculum with co-curriculum. Within the NSSIC, the Communicative Approach (CA) to language teaching and learning advocates the teaching and learning of second languages to enable learners to communicate with other speakers of the second language (Brown & Rodgers, 2002). Since the early 1970's, language teaching methodology has been largely concerned with developing communicative competence, that is, knowing what to say, to whom, and how to say it, and communication strategies (Savignon, 2007). Theoretical and empirical investigations in the field of communicative language teaching (CLT) resulted in the development of several models of communicative competence (Canale, 1983; Bachman, 1990), which are currently used worldwide. The focus on the learner and the emphasis on communication made CLT highly popular among ESL teachers. The main principle underlying communicative language teaching is the notion of "communicative competence" which was originally defined by Hymes (1972) as the aspect of a person's language competence that enables him to convey and interpret messages as well as to negotiate meanings interpersonally within specific contexts.

From the above, it is clear that CA puts a lot of emphasis on speaking skills. This is in line with the hypothesis that teachers of a second language (L2) teach the target language more effectively through teaching and participating in meaningful classroom communication with students. This concept of language learning explains the emergence of Communicative Approaches to L2 teaching over the last decades, whose pedagogical goal is to develop learners' communicative competence, i.e., the ability to use the linguistic system in an effective and appropriate way. However, the implementation of a communicative methodology is not an easy task. Savignon (2007) identifies five components of a communicative curriculum for the 21st century and predicts confidently that CLT "will continue to be explored and adapted" (p. 27). In fact, it represents a challenge to language practitioners since it requires an understanding of the complex and integrated nature of the theoretical concept of communicative competence (Celce - Murcia & Olshtain, 2005). In Malaysia, attention has been directed to teaching materials based on the CA, whereas less attention has been paid to providing teachers with the necessary skills and understanding for teaching English.

Classroom communication includes face-to-face interactions and the communications necessary between the participants involved in the classroom to ensure that learning takes place (Kogut & Silver, 2009; Kazi et al, 2012). As Briscoe, Arriaza, and Henze (2009) suggest, it is within these face-to-face interactions that teachers use language to "communicate expectations of students, faculty, and parents; to discuss policies, praise people, propose changes in curriculum, indicate that they are listening, carry out disciplinary action, and for a host of other actions"(p. 16). That is one of the ways why classroom communication differs from normal communication in the community - the main purpose of communication in a classroom is to instruct and inform. In addition, communication in a classroom setting is unique because it has highly regulated patterns of communication between teachers and students, both of whom have a different status (the teacher has the higher status in the classroom if not in society as a whole). The higher status of the teacher allows him or her to conduct the class from beginning to end; he or she can choose the topic, decide how to divide the topic into smaller units, control who talks, and when and where they do so. Teachers, whether consciously or not, communicate (usually by using language) in order to orchestrate learning events in their classroom.

According to Farrell (2009), teachers use communication in the classrooms in order to accomplish three things: to elicit relevant knowledge from students, to respond to things that students say and to describe the classroom experiences that they share with students. It is hoped that by looking at the classroom communication, teachers' communication skills will be identified and teachers will become more aware of their communication skills and communication patterns that currently exist in their classrooms and will be able to evaluate whether these patterns provide opportunities for their students to learn. By focusing on more than one features of communication skills that they use when teaching, teachers would be able to practice and monitor their use of communication skills not only as essential input for their students but also to achieve more effective teaching when conducting a lesson. Furthermore, there are no studies that examine how teachers' classroom language or communication skills contribute to their ESL classroom communication in their teaching contexts. In this study, teachers' talk and language, or using Bleach's

term, communication skills are viewed within the contexts in which what and how they are used, and as contributing to the integration of teachers' language as oral communication skills as "a hierarchy of decisions and automated actions used as an integrated whole, the lower ones depending on higher ones" (Bygate, 2003, p. 116). For this study, several features of communication skills, including gaining students' attentions; giving instructions, managing errors; explaining; teachers' language; and nonverbal communication skills were explored.

2. Methodology

2.1. Design

Second language classroom research is the kind of research that is carried out in language classrooms for the purpose of answering important questions about the learning and teaching of foreign languages (Johnson, 2009; Nunan & Bailey, 2009). This kind of research derives its data from either genuine foreign language classrooms, specifically for the purpose of language learning and teaching, or in experimental laboratory settings that are set up for the purpose of research. Classroom research can focus on teachers or on learners, or on the interaction between teachers and learners (Brown & Rodgers, 2002). Learner-focused research looks at, for example, the learners' learning style and strategies, the interaction between learners and the effect of this interaction on learner language development. Research that focuses on teachers usually examines such factors as the teachers' classroom decision-making processes, and what is referred to as 'teacher talk'. Teacher talk consists of the kinds of questions that teachers ask, the amount and type of talking that teachers do, the type of feedback that teachers give, and the speech modifications teachers make when talking to their students. This study focuses on communication skills.   Within the contexts of qualitative and second language classroom research described above, this study adopts an interpretive approach, since the aim is to come "to grips with how reality is seen through the teachers' eyes; how the teachers construe reality, view their world and make sense of it" (Blaikie, 1995, p.36). The interpretive researcher begins with the individual and attempts to make sense of the individual's interpretations of the world around him or her.

2.2. Data collection

The main data collection method employed in this study is observations. Classroom observational data are collected at two Malaysian secondary schools situated in Kedah and Perlis. Two teachers gave their "consent" to be observed in their classroom teachings that are conducted in the present study because the researcher has obtained the permission from those in authority to do so. A series of non-participant observations were carried out in 2011. The non-participant observations were focused on the teachers' use of communication skills such as abilities to initiate, maintain and facilitate discussion, their willingness to respond to questions and ask questions themselves. In this study, the teachers' communications skills were the focus of the research. Therefore, the data from the observed lessons were analysed to identify what communication skills the teachers used, based on the communication skills taxonomies suggested by Bowers (1980) and Bleach (2000). The data analysis of observation transcripts was centred on the taxonomy which was developed from two existing sets of categories: communication skills and non-verbal communication.

3. Findings and discussions

3.1. Analysis of teachers' communication skills

From the analysis of classroom data and field notes transcriptions, it is deemed necessary to look more closely at each of the teachers' actual use of communication skills in order to better understand how teachers communicate with their students. The skills were discussed according to Bygate's (2003, p.116) definition of skills as "a hierarchy of decisions and automated actions used as an integrated whole, the lower ones depending on higher ones". All the video recorded lessons were transcribed and categorized chronologically into classroom episodes. There were 18 classroom episodes within 12 weeks. Each episode involved communication between the teachers and individual

students, and perhaps can be described as 'teacher-led discussion'. The following is an overview of both teachers' communication skills when teaching English lessons. Clearly, what is important to an understanding of communication is the notion of communication skills use: how Teachers *A* and *B* used their communication skills to communicate with their students and conduct the lessons. The most frequent lessons being conducted were grammar lessons. Other lessons involved reciting poems, reviewing MUET writing strategies, discussing novel and writing a composition. Both teachers used different communication skills and communication strategies when conducting the lessons. The findings have shown different English lessons had an impact on the greater use of communication skills of both teachers.

It was observed that both teachers nevertheless resorted to different types of communication skills when teaching different English lessons. For instance in teaching literature, Teacher *A* used language-based activities. These activities allow learners the opportunities to participate actively in the process of working out the interpretation of texts. In this way, students can test and discuss their ideas and hypotheses on other students before tackling what they consider intimidating questions from the teachers. It was found that different teachers used different approaches to literature. For example, Teacher *A*, used core vocabulary to talk about other words, to paraphrase and define them and to organise them in understanding the word "hysterical".

Teacher A   : The word that can describe these feelings … getting emotional … you scream for help …
                       you shout … you cry … right? You call it? "Hysterical". (writes on board)
Student   : Hysteria. (laughs.)
Teacher A   : Don't those people who are in that state … that you call "hysteria" … do what kind of
                       thing …? They will cry, shout, scream, right? Beat themselves, right? Hysterical.

Teacher *A* used the lexical choice approach in literary texts because it would assist students to understand the narrator's presentation of truth or fact-like phenomena, confidence and certainty and the narrator's expressions of attitude and opinion through the use of adjectives and adjuncts. Teacher *A* also seemed to use knowledge of transitivity approach in order to ask students to explore the style and ideas in literary texts. The following examples show the actor/agent is inaccurately or ambiguously defined.

Teacher A   : What do you think of the story? Why do you think it is very interesting? Do you know the
                       meaning of *The Lotus Eater*?

The question that could be raised is i.e what are referred to in the events, the themes and the characters and why have the readers not been told explicitly who these agents/actors are. The above example shows a lack of clarity or avoidance of explicating the circumstance, subject, cause, etc. of the above clauses. The suggestion is that these details have been avoided consciously and with a purpose. The student was lead to investigate the reasons of these acts and to speculate within reason about what had not been said.

Teacher A   : *"…nor shall death brag thou wand'rest in his shade"* what does that mean?
Student   : Even death cannot…
Teacher A   : Yah, even death… "death" here, capital "D"…The angel of death, alright? Not the death
                       death, the angel of death death, even death cannot take away your beauty, alright

The example shows that by assigning agency to inanimate or abstract objects, the writer is able to avoid pointing to the human agents responsible for these actions. Students should be directed by the teachers to ask why and speculate logically on the actual of these processes. In terms of Teacher *B*'s lesson on writing, there were effective directions and explanations in ensuring that writing strategies became meaningful for students. Teacher *B* used explanations, directions or instructions in order to help students see the aims of a task, and supported students' contributions by defining parameters of a task. The circumstances in which these directions were given were also important as the student's inattention could sometimes lead to confusion.

Furthermore, it is important to note that Teacher *B* encouraged questions and clarifications on the part of the students, so that they in turn, might define the task themselves. Such instances are given below.

Teacher B: Just look at the topic sentence … "Vandalism is a form of destructive expression of dissatisfaction."
               It is a definition on vandalism. Isn't it? Describing vandalism. We move on … "committed by

beings who bear a grudge or dissatisfaction against something in their lives …" Now this part of the sentence … what does it tell you?

In teaching guided composition, Teacher *B* used pictures to get students involved in the task. To prepare students for the guided composition, Teacher *B* went over each picture, getting students to describe the pictures and say various terms aloud, and reinforcing this with repetition and spelling. She made use of the pictures to stimulate students' interest in various terms she introduced. Each picture was useful in helping students to see the context within which the events were taking place. In this way, the students were able to view the story in its entirety and enrich their knowledge of vocabulary related to the concept. During her lesson, Teacher *B* focused on the vocabulary and ideas linked to each picture that she introduced. Evidence is given in the following illustration.

Teacher B   : Give me any kind of sentence about these two boys. Okay, you want number 4?
Student   : (laughs.)
Teacher B   : I'm now in second picture … not the fourth one … okay? Now, please see second picture. Okay, the second picture … what…? Okay, we name the boy – Ahmad and Nazrin, okay? So, Ahmad and Nazrin, these two boys …What happen to them?

The classroom data showed that Teacher *A and* Teacher *B* taught grammar items inductively, that is, they began by giving the students many examples of sentences containing the grammar items to be taught before they explained the rules to the students. With this approach, the teachers attempted to direct students' attention either consciously or subconsciously, to the formal grammar of the language while they were engaged in meaningful, communicative activities.

Both teachers also highlighted oral errors by directing students' attention to the sentence forms by which at the same time focusing on meanings. One way of doing so, the teachers repeated the students' errors with a stress or rising intonation while they were engaged in oral interaction with the teachers. By repeating and highlighting the error, the teachers had alerted the students to the error. The teachers should wait for either the students who made the error to self-correct or the other students to correct the error, failing which the teachers could provide the correct version. The extracts below illustrate this point.

Teacher B   : Okay. This … how many Ali do you have? *(points to the word "Ali")*
Student   : One.
Teacher   : Okay. "the boys" mean more than one … so … singular noun … will take apostrophe "s" to show possessive … okay. The second one … Whose bags are those? All right. Those are the men's bags. All right … m-e-n … apostrophe "s" … all right … "men" … singular or plural?
Student   : Singular.
Teacher   : What? … men?
Student   : Plural.
Teacher   : … men … if singular, how do you spell the word "man"?
Student   : m-a-n.

Teacher A   : No. 1 - Mr. and Mrs. Parker have one daughter and two sons. They have one girl and two…boys. Don't just simply say "boy".
Student   : Boy
Teacher   : Yes. Why do we use boys?
Students   : Two, two

Another important aspect of classroom observations that is important to note is teachers' gestures while teaching. For example, Teacher *A*'s gestures supported what she was saying, as when she acted out movements of characters while explaining events in *The Pearl*. Teacher *A* also used gestures with hands, the up and down movement, while reciting *"so long as man…"* up and down…up and down…". Gestures used by the teachers may be reinforced, as when the teachers nod their heads as someone is speaking. Teacher *B's* gestures might emphasise the important points as when she tapped something on a blackboard.

Teachers also used gestures to help them get across what they wanted to say, for example, Teacher *A* put his index finger to his lips to indicate silence. Teachers also liked to fold arms, stand still and wait until every student is quiet and attentive. It was found that both teachers liked to stand in front of the class when introducing lessons. This

position signifies the influence of a teacher-centred session whereas a less dominating position, like the sides or the back of the class, invites greater student participation. For instance, Teacher *B* walked to the back of the class when she asked her students to write the answer on the board. Teacher movement towards a student also conveys a message of interest. Teachers are found to be walking around the class while the students were assigned to do some works and moving towards the students in case they needed help with their work. It can be said that individual student got individual attention from their teachers. This approach gives opportunity for low achievers to seek for clarification in their work.

4. Conclusions

The findings indicated that the teachers communicated with the students starting with sociating, directing, giving instructions and summarizing but the most common communication skills used by the teachers in the classrooms were explaining, questioning and eliciting. Teachers in the investigated classrooms had used high preference of questioning skills. They posed questions in order to check students' understanding and promote student involvement. From the classroom observational data, it was found that the average of class time was taken up with teachers' questions and elicitation. The teachers used less communication skills of sociating skills in teaching. There were also important nonverbal communication skills used by the teachers. The following examples of nonverbal communication skills were observed in their teachings: the use of eye contact in order to get students to respond to questions they have asked and hold the attention of other students and encouraging them to listen when teaching. However, the teachers rarely made eye contact when presenting because they were reading their prepared notes. In addition, they were unfamiliar with the topics they had to present. Teachers' facial expressions which included giving a smile of acknowledgement or agreement could be seen while teaching. Furrowing of the eyebrows to show confusion, displaying nervousness, and shyness sometimes were obvious when teaching a new topic especially in literature. This may due to the level of expertise and their content knowledge or roles they hold, when teaching. Hand movements were most often used by the teachers to explain certain concepts like trying to remember (pointing to the head), and keep quiet (pointing to the lips). Hand movements mainly accompanied verbal utterances and could be explained by way of the teachers' effort to convey meanings to their students.

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