



## TEACHER TALK IN EFL SPEAKING LESSONS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR LEARNER INVOLVEMENT: A CASE STUDY AT A FOREIGN ENGLISH CENTER IN THE MEKONG DELTA, VIETNAM

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### **Abstract:**

In English teaching classrooms, teacher talk plays as a communicative tool to help language learners to communicate effectively. Studies (Walsh, 2002; Xiao Yan, 2006; Cullen, 1998) have been carried out to investigate the essential role of teacher talk. This paper focuses on the purpose, frequency, and teacher talking time in speaking English language lessons. This study aimed at investigating features of teacher talk constructing and obstructing learner speaking involvement. The results show that teacher talk plays as an important role in language teaching including giving instruction and classroom management, however, the use of language in both L1 and L2 should be taken into consideration in order to maximize student learning involvement.

**Keywords:** teacher talk, learner involvement, speaking lessons

### **1. Introduction**

In foreign language learning, speaking is an interactive process of constructing meaning that involves producing and receiving and processing information which is a direct and useful form of communicating. In order to be successful in building classroom communication, an important thing to note is that teachers should be aware of their excessive TTT (teacher talking time). Many researchers (Sunderland, 2000; Walsh, 2002; Xiao Yan, 2006) and educators have attempted to conduct the roles of teacher talk in ELT classrooms. Just as Ellis (1985:143) points out: *“An alternative approach focused only on the language used by the teacher when addressing second language learners. It sought to tabulate the adjustments which occur in teacher talk.”* Similarly, in the words of Cook (2000:144), teacher talk is particularly important to language teaching since teachers pass on knowledge and skills, organize teaching activities and help students practice through teacher talk.

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Traditionally, in Vietnamese EFL classes, in English classrooms, teachers are responsible for managing the interaction which occurs and teachers' language is the object of the course. Both the organization of the classroom and the goal of teaching are achieved through teacher talk. Classroom language is the chief source of foreign language learning and in some places the only source. It functions not only as a major source of language learning but also as a tool by which a foreign language is taught. Since a better understanding of the use of teachers' language can undoubtedly help students improve their learning, and students can make better use of teacher talk to learn the target language, it is necessary to do some research on teacher talk from a both theoretical and practical perspective (Xiao-yan, 2006).

## 2. Research questions

- 1) What is the practice of teacher talk in EFL speaking classes in terms of frequency, talking time, code and purpose?
- 2) To what extent do teachers through teacher talk construct or obstruct learner English speaking involvement?

## 3. Research methodology

### 3.1 Research design

The study is defined as a descriptive, qualitative study as since it follows a qualitative design as most of the studies on teacher talk and classroom discourse. A descriptive qualitative method is employed in this study which tries to describe all phenomena that occurred in the classroom (Wasi'ah, 2016). Cullen (1998) argued that there is a need to analyze teacher's use of language from a qualitative rather than quantitative perspective. "Good" teacher talk does not necessarily mean "little" teacher talk; rather, effective teacher talk, "*facilitates learning and promotes communicative interaction*" (Cullen, 1998). The qualitative method, with audio recording, is adapted to investigate individual variables to be able to get more reliable information. Consequently, the researcher believes that a descriptive study with a combination of these methods – classroom observation and Conversation Analysis (Walsh, 2002) - is practical and most appropriate to gain the needed information in response to the research questions. The aim of CA is to offer a fine-grained and emic description of naturally occurring spoken data as a means of understanding "*talk as a basic and constitutive feature of human social life*" (Sidnell, 2010: 1). Essentially, the aim of choosing Conversation Analysis is to focus on the details of teacher talk, enabling us to examine the ways in which specific interactional features influenced the involvement of the learner in speaking English lessons.

### **3.2 Participants**

#### **a. Teacher participants**

Those involved in the study were five experienced teachers of EFL who have been working at a private language center in the Mekong Delta at the time this study was conducted. All of them graduated from Can Tho University. To be recruited as an English teacher, they were first required to have a distinction degree and then to pass the recruitment process which consisted of two rounds, namely, the writing test and the interview. This is to explain why these teachers are deemed to have high English proficiency. The participants were invited to have two 30-minute lessons recorded. They were free to choose the parts of the lessons to be recorded as long as it was a speaking lesson. A total of approximately 5 hours of recordings is then analyzed, using a Conversation Analysis (CA) protocol. Six classes were observed and teacher talk was audiotaped to examine its effect on students learning. Each class was observed for two 30-minute lessons.

#### **b. Student participants**

Up to 216 students studying in KET classes were involved in the recorded lessons. All the students are Vietnamese learners of English, aged from 19 to 22. They were assumed to be at a similar level of proficiency (i.e. intermediate). They had studied English for 7 years in secondary and high schools and for one year and two years respectively as university students by the time the present study was conducted. The average size of each class varied from 30-36 students' objectives (Capel, A., & Sharp, W. 2005), published by Cambridge University Press, and has been used at many foreign language centers as English non-major textbooks in the Mekong Delta. One of the main reasons for choosing these classes at the fundamental level was that the basic level was the most important step in conversational class. The focus of these classes was increasing oral fluency.

### **3.3 Data collection procedure**

This study used two main instruments to help the researcher in collecting the data. They were collected through two sources: classroom observations and audio-recordings. First, classes were observed and teacher talk was audio-taped to build up a database for describing the teacher talk and examining its effect on student learning. Each teacher was observed for two 30-minute lessons. The observer took notes of students to see how teacher talk influenced students' speaking involvement.

## **4. Findings**

### **4.1 The role of teacher talk in the language classroom**

The results from observations and audio-recordings show that teacher talk played various roles in all classrooms. Teacher talk served as means of giving instruction (for example, explaining, giving feedback, encouraging learners, etc.) and classroom management (controlling the activities, creating a learning environment, etc.). For

instance, in Extract 1, the teacher encouraged students' oral speaking and explained the rules of the game which they would play.

Extract 1:

T: *Where do you watch TV?*

S: *In my house, in the room*

T: *So, we have in the house. Can you play soccer in your room?*

S: *No.*

T: *No, so we have to go outside. Where do you play soccer? S: In the yard.*

T: *In the yard. stadium. where else? so we watch TV in our house and play soccer outside the house. so, I divide the class into two groups, the first is the inside group and the second one is the outside group. List all activities that you do inside and outside. After one minute, you 'll give me the answer. If you skip it, another chance will be given to another group and the winner will get candy. Ok?*

The extract shows that the teacher spent much time giving instructions and supporting students to involve in speaking activities. Although the focus has been on the quantity of teacher talk rather than the quality of teacher talk, it is indicated that the teacher was successful in praising and encouraging learner participation by taking part in the interaction and answering questions like "in my house" or "in the yard".

#### 4.2 Frequency and talking time

From the data collected, it becomes apparent that teachers talked most of the time and controlled all activities in the classroom, which required very little learners' participation. Students just inactively answered the questions with short terms "yes", "no", "watch TV", "in the yard" etc. There is evidence that teacher talk dominated classroom speech.

Extract 2:

T: *OK. So, class tell me some expressions you use when you give directions, opposite, remember? What else? You've learned on Friday, right? What else? You forget? Did you study on Friday? (Thứ sáu lớp có học chỉ đường không?)*

S: *Yes.*

T: *Last Wednesday?*

S: *Yes*

T: *Opposite, what else? Some expressions you use when giving directions. Go... S: Go straight*

T: *Go straight ahead, what else. I've just reviewed what you've learned already. What else?*

S: *Go...*

In the extract, teacher talked most of the time since it was also indicated in Walsh (2002) study. It shows that teacher spent more time in teaching-learning process to ask

questions “what else?” “What did you learn on Friday?” and lecture. On the other hand, the data from the observation showed that students were too shy to involve in classroom interaction themselves, they need encouragement from the teacher.

### 4.3 Language choice in teacher talk

Teachers talk two languages including both English and Vietnamese in the classroom. While there are certainly differences between the two classes in Extract 1 and 3, there are also similarities: both classes are similar size and the teachers’ aims are more or less similar, focusing on oral performances. Mother tongue is used twice during two periods of teaching. Teachers tried to explain and instruct in English to motivate students’ responses. For instance, in Extract 3, teacher helped student correct “Nuoc Park” by “Water Park” and encouraged them to speak English “Tell me in English”.

Extract 3:

T: *Where did you go?*

S: *I went to Nước Park*

T: *Nước Park? no, Water Park. What else? You went to amusement park and do some activities. What do you want to say?*

S: *Nhà văn hóa thiếu nhi*

From the extract, it showed that students also used both codes in speaking activity. Although students did not a particular word “Water Park”, they tried to pre-empt breakdown by adding their mother tongue “Nước Park” to complete the conversation. In other words, learners are active enough to possess the target language.

On the other hand, two teachers in Extracts 2 and 4 chose to use both codes switching in their classes. Although implementing both two codes ensured students’ understanding, it created a little students’ participation in purpose language.

Extract 4:

T: *Rồi bây giờ câu 2, mọi người suy nghĩ gì về câu 2? Câu này nói gì? It isn't really hot today. Câu này ý nói gì? S: Thời tiết*

T: *Thời tiết, Ok. Nhưng khi người ta hỏi câu hỏi thời tiết mình phải trả lời như thế nào, có phải câu hỏi hôm nay thời tiết như thế nào không? Phải không?*

S: *Không.*

This extract was collected from another class which the teacher was not succeed in supporting students to achieve their target language. Vietnamese was overused in English speaking class and this resulted in little English- speaking interaction.

#### 4.4 Features of teacher talk constructing learner speaking involvement

Five features which teachers through the use of language can construct learning opportunities through their use of language have been identified. These include Direct error correction, Content feedback, Checking for confirmation, Extended wait-time and Scaffolding.

##### a. Direct error correction

Many studies suggested that teachers should not give too much direct error correction in speaking performances in order to minimize interruption and create opportunities for student involvement. Four teachers in four extracts that researcher observed always give direct error correction when students made errors. Although this does not prove that their lesson is not successful, it requires very little learners' participation.

Extract 5:

T: *Go to the park. ok this one?*

S: *Play a badminton*

T: *No, play badminton not play a badminton* S: *Play dog?* T: *Play what?*

S: *Chơi với chó*

T: *Play with dog. Ok (laughed loudly) now this group.*

The teacher in this extract was succeeds very well in giving direct error correction without interrupting oral fluency. Since student made very common mistakes such as "play a badminton", correction "play badminton" should be directly in order to help learner have good grounding in English grammatical point.

##### b. Content feedback

The teacher's use of language was found similar to the "real world" language which students can apply into the real-life communication. The classroom atmosphere was created through teachers' feedback implementing his/her sense of humor. This can promote students learning and oral speaking fluency (see Extract 5).

##### c. Checking for confirmation

According to previous research (Musumeci, 1996, for example) confirmation checks and requests for clarification are to be encouraged not only from teacher to learners, but more importantly, from learners to teacher. Many studies also claimed that checking for confirmation is likely to create contribution and maximize learning potential. It was found that teachers in this study succeeds very well in achieving it and the contribution is allowed to proceed with maximum students' involvement in oral activities.

Extract 6:

T: *What did you study on last Friday, right? So, I wanna check.... a handsome guy, yes,*

*I'm looking for a bookstore Can you tell me where it is? Phuong Nam, I'm new, I don't know how to get there. Can you tell me the way there?*

*S1: It's far.*

*T: How to get there? Can you help me? Yeah, we're at the gate A from Can Tho University. How to get there? how to get to Phuong Nam bookstore.*

*S1: You turn right.*

*T: Turn right, Ok. I'm following you. Where? What's next? Turn right, we're at the gate A of Can Tho University. Ok? S1: You turn right, go straight ahead.*

*T: Turn right, go straight ahead. Yeah? S1: Yeah, until you see the first traffic light.*

In Extract 6, confirmation checking from the teacher offered more contribution from learner's responses. For instance, this student confidently gave directions to Phuong Nam bookstore "It's far" "You turn right" etc. From the observation, this boy was a little shy at the beginning but he was more and more eager until finishing the conversation. As the results, checking for confirmation does serve to maintain the flow and are more likely to maximize learning speaking potential.

#### **d. Extended wait-time**

Extended *wait-time* considered the time allowed by teachers to answer a question (see, for example, Nunan, 1991), not only increases the number of learner responses, but also results in more complex answers and leads to an increase in learner/learner interaction. Students managed their own turn-taking without teacher's intervention. For instance, (see Extract 1) teacher explained rules of the games. Students were divided into two groups, after discussing students took turn to say indoor or outdoor activities. If one student missed their turn, the group would lose the game. In fact, it is true that the classroom context like this one where the stated aim is to increase oral involvement.

#### **e. Scaffolding**

Scaffolding involves more than simply error correction. Teacher tried to feed students missing words when they were struggling to find out the right language to express their ideas. According to Walsh (2002) and LiLi (2013), this is called "*filling the gaps*". In some cases, teacher intervened too much and too early (see Extract 6), however, it is evident from the extract that students are actively engaged in constructing classroom discourse which encouraged them to participate in conversation. (See Extract 5).

### **4.5 Features of teacher talk obstructing learner speaking involvement**

Turn completion, teacher echo and teacher interruptions have been identified as features of teach talk that can afflict space for learning (Walsh, 2002). However, two of the features could be found in the study were turn completion and teacher interruptions.

### **a. Turn completion**

According to Walsh (2002) *completing student turns* is not the same at all as *scaffolding*, where learners are given linguistic support. In the classroom, it limits the frequency and quality of student contributions, and minimizes learning opportunities as learners are not put in a position where they have to clarify and reformulate their contribution in order to make meaning clear. The example of the extract (see Extract 7), indicated that one turn immediately follows another without allowing time for their responses because there is another student waiting and she needs to turn to the next stage of the lesson.

Extract 7:

T: *number 6 How much is it? 7 Have you ever been to America?*

*Câu này không sai nhưng hơi gượng ép, vậy phải sửa lại như thế nào?*

*Have you ever been to any countries?*

*8 Have you ever read detective story?*

*câu này hơi thiếu chúng ta có thể sửa lại là have you been read any good book recently?*

*vì trong câu trả lời là the best one nên đặt như vậy sẽ hợp lý hơn.*

*Cô sẽ cho lớp hoạt động một tí.*

*Stand up! Make two lines, quickly. I'll explain how to play, I read one word, you'll use the ball to touch the word.*

From the extract, it is indicated that teacher had to jump over the next sentence without checking for confirmation. She moved to another activity very quickly and did not allow much time for students to involve in speaking interaction.

### **b. Teacher interruptions**

There is evident that teachers have interrupted students with too much filling gaps and caused the learner to forget what she was saying (see Extract 7). The drawbacks of teacher interruptions have been proved by many researchers. For instance, Walsh (2002) stated that the teacher has interrupted the learner 'mid-flow' which unwittingly results in breakdown and causes the learner to lose what she was saying. Waiting for students to finish their turn can create opportunity for their language learning.

## **5. Conclusions and Implications**

This study has examined the teacher talk and the classroom interaction as it occurred between teacher and students in four EFL speaking classrooms at a Foreign English Center in the Mekong Delta. Based on the fundamental principle of classroom research and the features of teacher talk, the author first illustrates the main issues of the current English-speaking teaching in Vietnam from the perspective of teacher talk. Thus, two questions of exploration are initiated. All steps of investigation and case study are centered on the two questions of exploration, with close consultation of a great deal instruments, and other literary references.

After the data analysis of the outcomes acquired in the investigation and the case study, findings in several aspects are finally led to.

To begin with, teacher talk serves as a kind of communication-based in which the language that teacher address to students functions not only to set up such communicative activities in the classroom but also to develop students' language competence. More specifically, teacher talk in the current study categorized into two footings according to the role of teacher talk of their teacher talk roles in language classroom. They are instruction giving and classroom management. However, the frequency and the teacher talking time should be fitted with pedagogic purpose in order to enhance learner speaking involvement.

In addition, the current study revealed teacher talk is a lot more dominant than student reaction in teacher fronted-activities for presenting new vocabulary, structure and the information of the lesson whereas the existence of student speaking involvement are more centered in production and practice stages. In addition, the researcher found that teacher talk occurred in other stages of English-speaking classroom such as correcting error, checking for confirmation, questioning, providing the feedback, etc.

It was observed that the language which teacher used within the lesson including both English and Vietnamese. The teachers were speaking in Vietnamese (L1) for almost half of the recorded class time in class 2 and 4. Thus, it resulted in learners' little use of English (L2) while teacher used of language in class 1 and 3 required more target language from learners' interaction. Since there is less L1 appearing in teacher talk.

From the discussion upon the data on the fourth chapter, it could be concluded that that teacher talk performs seven interactional features in classroom interaction out of eight adapted from Walsh study. They are divided into two types which are constructing features and obstructing features. Direct error correction, content feedback, checking for confirmation, extended wait-time and scaffolding are considered constructing features of teacher talk which facilitate student learning opportunity. Related to pedagogic goal, turn completion and teacher interruption do allow less time for students to get involve in speaking interaction. Thus, there is mismatch between teachers' teaching aim with their language use.

To summarize, data from classroom observation and audio-recording have indicated that teacher talk does have influences on student learning in both ways, obstructively and constructively. It can be a model of the target language for students and a main source of motivation for them. However, the frequent use, talking time, purpose and language choice of the teacher talk has been observed to hinder student learning sometimes. The most notable suggestion from teachers for the improvements in teacher talk is their flexibility and timely adjustment. In addition, both construction and obstruction type of teacher talk occurred during the conducted research. Even the number of occurrences was not significant, obstruction type of teacher talk such as teacher echo was found in the transcription analysis. In spite of that, the overall teacher talk classification showed that the construction type was the most frequent of the teacher talk produced. Scaffolding was dominating the result. By producing this positive feature

of teacher talk, teacher succeeded to maintain the flow of interaction in the classroom by creating learning opportunities for students to get involve in speaking activities. Through the field notes taken during classroom observation, the teacher managed to show her ability in managing the classroom and developing a good relationship with the students. The three combinations of producing a constructive teacher talk, managing the classroom as a whole, and developing a good and supportive relationship with the teacher becomes the way for the teacher and students to have a good learning environment. Having a good environment of learning leads students to have more opportunities to learn which will have a good impact on their learning achievements.

The findings have shown that teacher talk does positively facilitate high learner involvement in classroom interaction. However, the issues of dominant teacher talk in speaking English classroom have been drawn in the current study as it was indicated in Walsh studies (2002, 2011). The implications of this study are that language teachers should raise considerable awareness of the language use in terms of frequency, talking time, code and purpose in order to increase students learning opportunity. In other words, the use and the management of teacher talk should be viewed as joint enterprise and not something which is the sole responsibility of teacher (LiLi, 2013). In addition, the study provides language teachers with practical example of interactional features which obstruct or construct learner speaking participation. Therefore, it is hoped that this study will facilitate the way for language teachers to research their teacher talk and to measure how positive their talk is within the interaction analysis model presented in the study.

### **Conflict of interest statement**

The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare. All co-authors have seen and agree with the contents of the manuscript and there is no financial interest to report. We certify that the submission is original work and is not under review at any other publication.

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