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Is Teacher Talk Pernicious to Students? A Discourse Analysis of Teacher Talk

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Abstract

Many communicative teachers consider teacher talk as an obstacle that restricts students' learning opportunities. This paper analyzes teacher talk's quality and quantity within the framework of the communicative approach. The primary purpose is to raise teachers' awareness of the effectiveness or pitfalls of their talk in classrooms. The focus of the analysis consists of a typewritten script of an audio-taped lesson of the communication which took place during classroom interactions. Teacher talk was benchmarked in terms of its alignment or congruence with some authors' pedagogical recommendation and language learning theories. The finding indicated that the teacher was not successful to create genuine or authentic communication. The talk was repetitive and monotonous and it followed the IRF sequence which allowed the teacher more turns and talk. The teacher talk was not consonant with theories of second language acquisition, i.e. interactionist, functionalist and cognitive perspectives. The talk was hurtful and stressful and it could block the learning opportunities.

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1. Introduction

Although language teachers do diverse activities and tasks in their classrooms, their use of language is broadly

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similar. Whatever they do or teach, they resort to their talk; that is, teacher talk. When they organize activities; control unruly behavior or assign homework, they talk to their students. To put it in a nutshell, as Mercer (2001), points out, '...all of aspects of teacher's responsibility are reflected in their use of language as principal tool of their responsibilities'.

Therefore, it is essential that teachers prioritize the quality of their talk rather than quantity of their utterances. In the lines bellow, we recount a short story which is relevant here and it depicts the possible consequence of what we say:

A Group of Frogs

A group of frogs were traveling through the woods, and two of them fell into a deep pit when the other frogs saw how deep the pit was, they told the two frogs that they were as good as dead. The two frogs ignored the comments and try to jump up out of the pit with all their might. The other frogs kept telling to stop, that they were as good as dead. Finally, one the frogs took head to what the other frogs were saying and gave up. He fell down and died. The other frog continued to jump as hard as he could. Once again, the crowd of frogs yelled at him to stop pain and just die. He jumped even harder and finally made it out. When he got out, the other frogs said, "Did you not hear us?" The frog explained to them that he was deaf. He thought they were encouraging him the entire time.

This simple story contains a powerful lesson. Your encouraging words can lift someone up and help him or her make it through the day. Your destructive words can cause deep wounds; they may be the weapons that destroy someone's desire to continue trying - or even their life. So, be careful of what you say!

2. Previous research on teacher talk

Studies on teacher talk attracted the researchers' attention as early as the mid1980s. Research findings from (1) "caretaker speech" studies in first language development (Snow, 1972) and (2) "foreigner talk" research (Ferguson, 1975) brought about many studies on teacher talk. Teacher talk studies began to evolve partly because of Krashen and Terrell (1983), who argued that teacher talk is a vital source of comprehensible input in the second/foreign language classroom.

2.1 Descriptive studies

Weche and Ready (1985) conducted a well-known descriptive study which it was an attempt to discover and describe the common features of teacher talk whether in second or foreign language classroom. They studied discourse of classroom lectures in a Canadian university. They compared psychology class lectures presented (in English and French) to first language speakers with those to second language speakers. They found significant differences, whether the lectures were given in English or French, between (1) classes composed of first language speaker students and (2) those consisting of second language speaker students in the following five aspects of teacher talk: (a) speech rate, (b) the number and duration of pauses, (c) frequency of tensed verbs and number of S nodes (= clauses) and T units (= a principal clause plus all related dependent clauses), (d) percentage of imperative sentences and self-repetition, and (e) amount of non-verbal information use (such as gestures, facial expressions, pictures, and visual aids).

2.2 Correlational studies

As one sub-area of second language acquisition research, teacher talk research attracted researchers' attention since 1980s. By the end of the 1980s, several studies started to utilize quantitative research methods based on statistical analyses. One of the quantitative research methods utilized then was the correlational (associational) research method. Tollefson (1988), for example, explored the degree of association between teachers' question types and students' response patterns in ESL(English as a second language) classes. Teachers' question types were divided into (1) display questions, which aim at testing students' target-language knowledge (e.g., "Are you a student?" "What day is today?"), and (2) referential questions, which intend to gain real information from students (e.g., "What would you like for lunch?" "Has anyone seen the eraser?"). The results showed that teachers' referential

questions have a strong correlation with students' creative responses, which often lead to further teacher-student interactions. On the other hand, teachers' display questions were apt to have a strong association with students' imitative responses, which usually do not lead to or facilitate further teacher-student interactions.

2.3 Experimental studies on teacher talk

In the early 1980s, experimental studies on teacher talk were few and far between. However, more articles about experimental teacher talk studies appeared in second language acquisition journals in the late 1980s. In the late 1990s and early 2000s, they became a mainstream research methodology for teacher talk research.

Chaudron & Richards (1986), for example, conducted their experimental study to investigate the effects of discourse markers in teacher talk on students' comprehension. The discourse markers included two different types: (1) "macro-markers," which signal the macro-structure of a lecture and (2) "micro-markers," which indicate links between sentences within the lecture or function as fillers. Discourse markers, such as "What I'm going to talk about today. ..." and "lets' go back to the beginning ...," are categorized as macro-markers while discourse markers, such as "well," "now," "so," and "you see," are micro-markers. Subjects had significantly better comprehension on the macro-marker version of the spoken lecture information than the baseline version. In contrast, the micro-marker version did not produce significantly better comprehension scores than the baseline version. Furthermore, Sueyoshi and Hardison (2005) conducted their experimental study to examine the effects of gestures and facial cues on listening comprehension of a videotaped lecture among ESL students. Results of a multiple-choice comprehension task revealed that the subjects who saw the audiovisual lecture attained significantly better listening comprehension scores than those who listened to the audio only.

2.4 Qualitative studies on teacher talk

In the 2000s, teacher talk researchers began to study qualitatively some affective factors (such as perceptions, feelings, and anxieties) students may experience when they are exposed to different types of teacher talk. For instance, Mackey, Gass, and McDonough (2000) videotaped task-based communicative interaction where a student and a native or near-native interviewer interacted with each other. While utilizing so-called stimulus recall and videotaping, they examined how language learners noticed/perceived error correction feedback conveyed in the interviewer's teacher talk. The analysis of the qualitative data showed that the students were relatively accurate in their perceptions about phonological, lexical, and semantic levels of error correction feedback. However, morphosyntactic level feedback was not noticed as such in general. Similar studies followed in the 2000s (e.g., Car Carpenter, Jeon, MacGregor, Mackey, 2006; Katayama, 2007).

3. Aim of the study

To what extent do teachers of EFL hinder or facilitate learner contributions by their use of language? How can teachers enhance the quantity and quality of learner output by more careful language use? In what ways do teachers deny learning opportunities by 'filling in the gaps' or 'smoothing over' learner contributions? Adopting the position that maximizing learner involvement is conducive to second language acquisition. The main purpose of this paper is to examine the ways in which teachers, through their choice of language, construct or obstruct learner participation in classroom communication.

4. Methodology

The main research method of this study is conversation analysis and unit of analysis in this method is speech turn. The goal of conversation analysis is to investigate what is being done by the speaker in each turn (McKay, 2006).

In order to assess and evaluate the efficacy and quality of teacher talk, a criterion or yardstick should be established. There are different effective language functions that several authors believe that instructors should use

in their lessons. These authors, having in mind a communicative approach for language teaching, recommend several speech acts that will favor students' learning. These experts' recommendations will be applied in the analysis of the transcript. Lightbown and Spada (2000, p. 122-3) recommend that teachers to use explicit correction, recast, metalinguistic feedback and negotiation of meaning.

Senior (2008, p. 5) argues that building a good rapport is conducive to learning in communicative-oriented classrooms. To establish a good rapport we should:

- Remember students' names.
- Regard students favourably.
- Be inclusive (ask everyone).
- Reveal aspects of yourself.
- React positively to students' imitative.
- Be generous with your words and gestures.

Darn (2008) advises teachers to employ effective types of questions. He gives us the following pieces of advice:

- Minimize the use of yes/ no questions.
- Ask a balance of referential and display questions.
- Use open- ended questions to encourage opinions and discussion.
- Personalize question where possible

To Cullen (1988), there are some non-communicative teacher talk that we should avoid. These are: excessive use of display questions, form-focused feedback, echoing of students' responses and sequences of predictable IRF (p. 182).

Other researchers in the area of teacher talk have proposed the following guidelines and directions:

- Provide content feedback: focus on what is said, rather than how it is said (Thornbury, 1996, p. 282).
- Give wait time: it is the time teachers allow students to answer questions (Thornbury, 1996, p. 282).
- Use backchannelling: teachers sometimes provide feedback to students with short utterances such as *uhu* or *yeah* (Clifton, 2006, p. 144)
- praise, provide examples of the target language, joke, and to maintain a good atmosphere (Moon, 2000, p. 61).

5. Analysis and interpretation of teacher talk

For the purpose of analysis, some turns of the transcript were chosen. They are interesting to be commented on, either because of their harmful or helpful effects on learning and students' personality (see Appendix A).

In turn 3, the teacher was threatening and discouraging the student (I give zero this time). Intimidating either through expertise, or the threat of grades - are but some of the behaviors which prevent students from engaging in the active processes needed for significant learning to take place. Security, which is underscored by humanistic approach more than any other theory of learning, was not ensured by the teacher. He created an insecure and unfriendly atmosphere in the classroom.

In turn 8, even though he made explicit correction, not preferred type of correction, the teacher has used the situation to engage the student in communication (how long did he stay there). This is true or real communication. According to some language theories, for example, comprehensible input, comprehensible output and interaction hypotheses, real communication and negotiation of meaning maximize the opportunities of language acquisition.

In turn 12, the feedback to the students' responses is simply acknowledgements, that is to say, the answer is

acceptable or not. The follow up interaction including the reason for accuracy of the answer allow the learner to notice the language and discover the gap in their interlanguage.

In turn 12, the student knew the meaning word and he was able to use it in a meaningful sentence. However, his answer is not acceptable because he should have done it in the teacher's preference. He has to follow the teacher style of learning and he has to forget about his own style of learning. The student was supposed to memorize the definition of the words. To be more specific, memorization and rote learning was emphasized and meaningful was deemphasized and the teacher provided the student with metalinguistic feedback.

In turn 43, the teacher provides the students with explicit correction. This type of correction is problematic for two reasons. First, if the students are given the correct answer, rather being allowed to self-correct, they will not retain the correct form of the language. Second, correcting the students explicitly in front of other students- causes negative affective feelings in the learners. Moreover, self-correction encourages the students to take responsibility for their learning.

In turn 46, the student's question is turned down. It seems that the teacher did not like the question. The question is rejected although it was a real question about a real person and it is likely to lead to true communication. This practice is not aligned with the input and output theories which emphasize output and input facilitate communication and language learning. The worst thing that a teacher could do – has occurred in this turn. The teacher ordered the student to stop talking when he desires to communicate. This teacher practice can be compared to "mute botton" function. Mute botton can create crick in the learner if it is pressed incorrectly. The teacher can tone down or justify why the student should stop talking. The worst of all things, the teacher had no compunction about stifling the student. This elementary level group of student is just like columbine that should be treated delicately and unobtrusively.

In turn 49 and 50, the teacher and student's conflict reached its climax. They entered a bust-up. They are not talking to each other, but they are crossing swords with each other. This practice will interfere with the students' learning. Certainly, next time he is not going to participate in the classroom interaction which it is maintained to facilitate second language acquisition (Long, 1980).

In turns 52 and 53, the student was not able to answer but how did the teacher react in this case? He let student die (interactively and communicatively was dying). The teacher turned to another student who is strong and good at language. In this moment, a good teacher should not forget about "the kiss of life method". This is the responsibility of the teacher to resurrect his student. Keep in mind these students are at the elementary level of proficiency. Therefore, this is not the "growing season" to let them grow by themselves. As Pinter (2006) puts it, at the elementary level, the learners depend more on the teacher than advanced learners on their teachers.

In turn 59, the teacher should have modified or simplified the input but he did the opposite. In other words, he made it more complicated. According to learning theories of input and interaction, the input has to be made simple and comprehensible. If we forget about the learning theories, the common sense calls on us to abide by the "KISS principle", especially at the elementary level of proficiency.

In turn 60, the teacher himself answers the question. I refer to this type of answer as "the programmed answer". The programmed answer not only deprives the respondent of expressing his own thoughts by steering him toward the answers that the questioner expects, but also conveys the message that there is really little interest in what he thinks or says. While the reasons offered by those who make a practice of this pattern are usually altruistic (i.e., "Silence after the posing of a question is embarrassing to the student;" "I feel impelled to help out by suggesting clues"), one needs to ask oneself honestly: "Is it I or the student who is uncomfortable after a second or two of silence?"; "Do I have confidence in the students' ability to think about the question and formulate a response?"; and, more importantly, "Am I interested in what the student has to say, or in determining which of my

answers he prefers?" While programming can be an effective tool when one desires to guide students' thinking, suggest possibilities, or model logical thought processes, it is important to be aware of its limiting effect in opening up a wide variety of possible ideas. It is via the latter route that an instructor can demonstrate his interest in the students' ideas and himself model inquisitive learning behavior. A willingness to listen helps to create in the classroom a community of learners in place of an authoritative, superior-subordinate relationship between teacher and class.

In turn 63, teacher's statements have some presuppositions. First, everyone at this stage should know the lesson and understand the teacher talk. The teacher and the students talked too much about the point and everything should be clear by now. Another presupposition is that no one has the right to give a wrong answer.

In turn 64 and 65, the teacher is scolding the student for being silent and putting him under pressure for producing the language (Did you go to sleep). Although language production is thought to develop learners' linguistic abilities, students should be mentally and linguistically ready to produce the language. Some of learners become cognitively ready sooner than others. Therefore, some learners have right to remain silent until they become ready for language production. This teacher, according to filter hypothesis, will increase the level of anxiety and block the opportunities of learning (Krashen, 1981).

In turn 66 and 67, the teacher made a monkey of the student. This behavior will kill the students' motivation to participate in the future classroom interaction. One of the principle of student- centered approach to learning is sharing the responsibility for learning with the learners. We, as teachers should permit students to answer their peers' questions. What is the reaction of this teacher to cooperative and collaborative learning?

In turn 10, 27, 29, 30, 36, 41, and 53, one of the student (Hossein) has been called on seven times. The teacher is not inclusive in calling on students. Hossein has been called on more than anyone else whereas some students never found the opportunity to utter one sentence in the class hour. This way of distribution of turns is problematic. First, it is invidious and it can create jealousy among the students because one student is given the chance to outperform other students. In fact, he is given the opportunity to steal the show. Second, this way of calling on students-turns the classroom into a court in which one victim is cross-examined.

In turns 1, 57, 59, 61, and 67, the teacher used idioms. If you take a cursory look at these turns, you can clearly see that the students were not able to understand these idiomatic expressions. It seems that they were too much beyond the current level of the learners' knowledge. This language can raise the affective filter which blocks the absorption of input (Krashen & Terrel, 1983). One possible reason of using idioms at this elementary level of the students is that the teacher might want to expose the students to idiomatic expressions and lexical units that are underscored by proponents of lexically-based approach of teaching. Another explanation is that the teacher displays and flaunts his knowledge of idioms by using language above the students' head. Unfortunately, some teachers intentionally use difficult, abstruse and esoteric words and expressions that are beyond the students' level of proficiency because they think that using difficult and complex language can convince students and colleagues to accept him as a highly proficient or knowledgeable teacher. This group of teachers have a strong belief in the old proverb which says: If you've got it, flaunt it! It seems that they know what's good for them in their foreign language context! This is a bitter truth which persists in the foreign context of language teaching.

It would be mistaken to suggest that small-scale studies such as the above-mentioned ones can provide sufficient evidence for the harmful or beneficial effects of teacher talk. We need many more studies to determine the efficiency and efficacy of teacher talk. There are different useful language functions and utterances that are seen as promoting the students' learning but further studies are needed to determine which of these functions in different contexts and how teacher talk duration and types might lead to students' learning opportunity in communicative-oriented classrooms.

6. Conclusion

This study investigated teacher talk in the classroom interactions. The finding indicated that the teacher was not successful to create genuine or authentic communication and the class was anything but bona fide communication. Nearly all of the questions are all display questions. The feedback to the students' responses is simply acknowledgement, that is to say, the answer is acceptable or not. The talk follows the IRF sequence allowing the teacher more turns and talk. This routine and monotonous sequence will stultify the most vibrant and enthusiastic students and make them more and more uncooperative. In such context, they often begin to talk to each other, flip through the book or even fall asleep in the class.

The teacher followed Audiolingual Method in his classroom. He taught the new grammatical point as follows: first he presented the sentence 'Ali watched TV yesterday.' And then he gave the students some examples in the hope that students can deduce the grammar rules of the past tense. In the last stage, he made the students to produce the language in the controlled exercises. The teacher attempted to show what the past tense signifies and how students can use the rule to develop sentences. In other words, the language was taught as system and how this grammatical system works. But these sentences and this system have little communicative significance in real life situations? When we teach language as a communication system, it is important to distinguish between two different kinds of meaning, one of which refers to the explicit meanings that language items have as elements of the language system, and the other is that part of meaning that the language items have when they are actually put to use in acts of communication. The first kind of meaning is refereed as significance, and the second kind as value. During the communicative class, it is the value rather than significance that should be taught. What the students are concerned about is the value, because they can find the significance in text books and dictionaries.

Concerning the choice of words and their motivating role, it should be mention that our choice of words is important. Just like advertising words can persuade us to buy products. Teacher's utterances can shape students' attitudes, feelings, and thoughts and it can motivate or hinder interaction among teachers and students. Teacher language plays a vital a role in classroom. As teachers or educators, we must continually ask ourselves how we can use language for our ultimate purpose: to support students' development and learning.

Regarding classroom security and stressed-reduced atmosphere, teacher talk plays an important role in this regard, therefore, teachers should try to understand what language would be more efficient in creating an environment in which students feel more comfortable and more confident and become more involved in interactive activities in the language classroom. Particularly, more positive commenting and encouraging languages should be employed by teachers

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APPENDIX A: script of the audio-taped lesson

- 1 T: Ok, guys. **Let's get down to the main business**. For homework I asked you to write the definition and some sentences for the new words of lesson 7. Now let me see who should answer my question. Ok, Ibrahim, you come here. Now define the word 'trip'.
- 2 S1: I'm sorry sir. I'm not ready.
- 3 T: why you aren't ready for the lesson?. You were always busy and lazy like this. It is no use coming to this class. I give you zero this time. You are status is not so good.
- 4 T: Amir Rezae, you come here. What is the meaning of 'trip'
- 5 S2: means travel to place, especially a short one for pleasure. I think has other meaning
- 6 T: no that meaning is not used in this lesson. Can you make a sentence with trip?
- 7 S2: My brother trip to Tehran last week.
- 8 T: Your brother took trip to Tehran last week. How long did he stay there?
- 9 S2: 3 days. excellent . Go and sit
- 10 T: You Hossein, define 'vacation'
- 11 S3: I know it. For example, Schools and banks are close in Fridays.
- 12 S4: No not acceptable. I told you to memorize the definition of the words. You are not working hard as I expect you. you should have known that on is used

NOT in for the days of the week. We studied this point last semester

- 13 T: ok it's enough for asking questions. Next time I ask you again about the new words
 14 T: Now close your books. listen to me and repeat after me, alright
 15 T: Ali watched TV yesterday.
 16 Ss: Ali watched TV yesterday
 17 T: Did he watch TV yesterday? Yes, he did
 18 Ss: Did he watch TV yesterday? Yes, he did
 19 T: Ali wrote his homework yesterday.
 20 Ss: Ali wrote his homework yesterday.
 21 T: Did Ali write his home yesterday? Yes, he did
 22 Ss: Did he write his homework yesterday? Yes, he did
 23 T: Ali went to school by his bike yesterday.
 24 Ss: Ali went to school yesterday
 25 T: Did Ali go to park yesterday? No, he didn't
 26 Ss: Did Ali go to park yesterday? No, he didn't
 27 Now, Hossein, tell me. Did Ali watch TV yesterday?
 28 S(Hossein): Yes, he did
 29 T: Did he go to work?
 30 S(Hossein): yes. Oh, no no, he didn't
 31 T: Now everyone listen and repeat after me please.
 32 T: What did Ali do yesterday? He watched TV, He wrote his homework and then he
 Went to school
 33 Ss: What did Ali do yesterday? He watched TV, He wrote his homework and then he
 went to school
 34 T: How did Ali go to school? By his bike
 35 Ss: How did Ali go to school? By his bike
 36 Now, you, Hossein, ask me how did I go to School
 37 S(Hossein): How go to school yesterday?
 38 T: Hossein, be careful about the past tense . now you are talking about past event, ok.
 So you say.. What?
 39 S: How did you go to school?
 40 T: good, I took a taxi
 41 T: what about you, Hossein, how did you go to school?
 42 S(Hossein): I go by bus
 43 T: No no You went to school. So.. you have to say.
 44 S(Hossein): I.. I went to school
 45 T: Sharam, What about you? What did you do last night?
 46 S: last night, let me see, I.. watch football match with my brother. What Amir, your son
 did last night?
 47 T: You talk too much. Stop it ..sit down.
 48 S(Shahram): Sir, today... Very kind
 49 T: shut up . Sit down
 50 S: you you not me
 51 T: Shut up.. Now , Majid you re so silent today . Tell me what did your father do last
 Night?
 52 S (Majid) ... (SILENT)
 53 T: Ok, You Hossein, what did you your father do yesterday?
 54 S(Hossein): he went to work. He saw TV in the evening
 55 T: HE SAW TV in the evening. SAW(nodding head)
 56 S: He watched TY. What about you?
 57 T: **beats me.**
 58 Sorry sir. What's the meaning?
 59 T: beats me. It is an idiom .. it means.. **you got me there or search me**

- 60 S: sorry. I don't understand
- 61 T: oh, my God you are **slow on the uptake**. It means I don't know. Ok .. let me see,
Reza, What did you do yesterday? Went out, stayed at home ,watched TV, wrote your
homework
- 62 S: yes.. I went out..wached TV
- 63 T: we talk too much about how to talk about past events. We said many sentences like I
took a taxi- I went to school- I watched TV. Other examples.. I finished my homework I
walked to school. It is very easy. Everyone should know how to make use of this tense.
Everyone should understand my question now. Habib.. did you ride a bicycle yesterday?
- 64 S(Habib): ...(SILENT)
- 65 T: Did you go to sleep?.
- 66 S: Yes I did. I ride bicycle
- 67 T: Im asking Habib. Did I ask you? **You have a finger in every pie.**
- 68 S: Sorry what.. meaning?