Teacher Talk at Three Colombian Higher Education Institutions

Discurso oral del docente en tres instituciones colombianas de educación superior

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This article reports the first part of a larger research project designed to investigate functions of language instructors' oral behaviors in the development of English as a foreign language (EFL) classes [**]. Through this applied classroom research we have investigated the processes of teaching and learning as they occur in our language classrooms. It is methodologically descriptive and experimental because it ranges from relatively simple observations to tightly controlled experiments. We pursue to identify how teacher talk is distributed in 15 foreign language classrooms. The database comprises transcripts of over 16 hours of interaction recording during 15 lessons in 15 general EFL classrooms at the post-secondary level. The functions of teacher talk are analyzed by gathering data using the FLint system instrument adapted from Moskowitz (1971). Findings reveal that teachers do most of the talking and the most frequent categories are gives information, asks questions, and gives directions. The study also demonstrates that oral teaching strategies in the classroom affect the participation process of students.

Key words: Discourse analysis-Education-Research, English-Teaching-Evaluation, Classroom-Evaluation, Educators-Teaching practice- Interaction.

Este artículo reporta la primera parte de un proyecto de investigación más extenso diseñado para investigar las funciones de las conductas orales de los profesores de lenguas en el desarrollo de clases de inglés como lengua extranjera. A través de esta investigación aplicada hemos indagado los procesos de enseñanza y aprendizaje como ocurren en nuestras aulas de lenguas. Esta investigación tiene metodología descriptiva y experimental porque empieza con observaciones relativamente simples y termina con control de variables en la etapa experimental. Indagamos para identificar cómo se distribuye el habla del profesor en 15 clases de lenguas extranjeras. La base de datos comprende transcripciones de más de 16 horas de interacción grabadas durante 15 clases de inglés general en el nivel universitario. Las funciones del habla del profesor se han analizado mediante la recolección de información usando el

instrumento FLint adaptado por Moskowitz (1971). Los hallazgos revelan que los profesores hablan más y que las categorías más frecuentes son dar información, hacer preguntas y dar direcciones. El estudio también demuestra que las estrategias orales de enseñanza en el aula de clases afectan el proceso de participación de los estudiantes.

Palabras claves: Análisis del discurso-Educación-Investigación, Inglés-Enseñanza-Evaluación, Aula-Evaluación, Formadores docentes-Práctica profesional-Interacción

INTRODUCTION

Learning a foreign language is a requirement for all of the under-graduate programs at the university. This obligation is not always welcome. Many students exhibit fear concerning the university demand, and there is anger from some who have failed in the attempt to learn a foreign language. These emotional worries (anxiety, aptitude, and motivation) coupled with the major program challenges at the university have many wondering how our foreign language programs can help students to achieve their goals. Most of our post secondary institutions admit that the ultimate aim of their foreign language programs has been to develop their students' communicative competence.

In the early 1980s, communicative language teaching 'fever' (Spada and Frohlich, 1995, pp. 2) reached its peak and is still being advocated by many published course books and curricula. It has developed from a form of sociolinguistic theory which has broadened the concept of the traditional understanding of the terms language and language use. This approach claims a growth in opportunities for language learners to use a second language for communication rather than studying it as an academic subject.

In recent years, not only communicative but cognitive approaches have attributed a main role to interactive features of classroom behaviors, such as turn-taking, questioning, negotiation of meaning, and feedback. Interaction is viewed as significant because it is argued that 1) only through interaction can the learner decompose the TL structures and derive meaning from classroom events, 2) interaction gives learners the opportunities to incorporate TL structures into their own speech, and 3) the meaningfulness for learners of classroom events of any kind, whether thought of as interactive or not, will depend on the extent to which communication has been jointly constructed between the teacher and the learners (Allwright, 1984 cited by Chaudron, 1988, pp.10). According to Richards & Lockhart (1994, pp. 138), the background of this view lies in the fact that second language learning is a highly interactive process. They add that for Ellis (1985) the quality of this interaction is thought to have a considerable influence on learning.

According to Krashen (1977, 1982, and 1985), language acquisition takes place through comprehension. He hypothesized that when students understand a message in the language containing a structure that is one step in advance of that learner's current level of competence, then that structure will be acquired. Long (1980, 1981, 1983) supplemented that this strict view that comprehensible input leads to acquisition with the additional notion that native speaker's speech (NS) to nonnative (NNS) is most effective for acquisition when it contains "modified interaction". These interactive features consist of ways of negotiating comprehensibility and meaning. Long suggests, in fact, that interactive modifications are more important for acquisition

than modification of NS speech that only results in simplified target language (TL) syntax and morphology.

Research in second/foreign language classrooms has established that teachers tend to do most of the talking (about 60% of the moves), mostly as soliciting and reacting moves (Bellack et al., 1966 and Dunkin & Biddle, 1974). Legarreta (1977) investigated five bilingual education kindergarten classrooms representing two program types (Concurrent Translation and Alternate Days). The Flanders observational system was used to code segments of teacher talk and student talk. She found that students accounted for only 11% to 30%, and teachers for an average of 77% of total amount of talk. Gaies (1977) tape-recorded a group of teachers-in-training talking in two different situations: 1) with their peers, and 2) with their own students in practice teaching assignments. He found a considerable modification of teacher talk in the classroom with their learners. Long and Sato (1983) analyzed transcripts of six elementary adult ESL classes comparing the teachers' speech to the learners. This was an experimental study of native speakers and non-native speakers interacting in pairs called 'dyads'. They concluded that the learners have little opportunity to communicate in the target language or to hear it used for communicative purposes by others. Later, Ramírez et al. (1986) conducted a longitudinal study between three instructional programs considering functions of teacher talk. They found explanations to be the most dominant category of teacher talk (60% to 80%). This category includes explanations of concepts, names for things, and grammar.

Cohen and Fass (2001) conducted an action research project with nine teacher-researchers in Medellín, Colombia regarding the teaching, learning, and assessment of speaking. They argued that the EFL students do not necessarily speak very much English in class. They have not much opportunity to practice using the language inside the classroom and they are also reluctant to participate. They realized that although teachers wanted to add an oral component to their classes in an attempt to adopt a communicative style of teaching, they lacked the knowledge to do it.

The teaching of oral language in the post secondary-level English as a foreign language classroom in Colombia is a challenging task. Teachers are generally non-native English speakers who are frequently not fluent enough in English and therefore not confident in their use of the language: Even those teachers who are compelled to the communicative language teaching (CLT) fail to create genuine communication in their classrooms. Many higher institutions in Colombia indeed offer General English programs. Usually, the main goal of these foreign language programs is to develop the linguistic competence to improve communications and science.

The review of the literature offers theoretical reasons as to why the teachers talk in a language classroom and difficulties surrounding the interaction between teachers and students in classrooms. Long (1983) suggested one of those reasons. He stated that the transmission model of education–the idea that the teacher's task as the knower is to convey information to the learners, leaves the learner little opportunity to practice genuine communicative uses of language or to negotiate for meaning. Talk is one of the major ways that teachers have to convey information to learners, and it is also one of the primary means of controlling learner behavior.

The role of input is a major issue in second language research. The term input is taken from

information processing and is deemed as oral/ written data which learners are exposed to. It is impossible to conceive second language acquisition without input in some form or other. Long (1983) argued that access to comprehensible input and opportunities to use the target language for communicative purposes were probably the minimum requirements for successful classroom second language acquisition. Swain (1985) and Montgomery & Eisenstein (1985) carried out studies that supported the idea that opportunities to practice language were important for acquisition.

In the early 1980s, it was commonly felt that traditional approaches to second language instruction–which focused on the presentation and practice of discrete grammar items reinforced by rote- learning with immediate and constant error correction had not been successful. Instruction, therefore, must adopt more contextualized meaning based on spontaneous language use, which would permit learners to communicate their ideas. This was quickly interpreted by many as support for exclusively meaning-based instruction even though the research actually provided evidence that a combination of form-based and meaning-based instruction is beneficial (Doughty & Williams, 1998).

METHODOLOGY

This study involves not only the use of a set of categories for coding a specific classroom behavior (teacher talk), but also note-taking and questionnaires suggested by interaction analysis and ethnography research traditions (Chaudron, 1988). As Nunan (1989, pp. 76) states, there is no substitute for the priority of direct observation as a way of finding out about language classrooms to describe how language teachers bring about classroom lessons.

Participants

The study was conducted over a period of six months in three private post secondary institutions in Bucaramanga, Colombia. The non-participant observations took place in fifteen EFL classes of an average of 15 students. All of the teachers being observed were non-native speakers with an average of 11 years of experience. Most of them have a master's degree either in ESOL or in Education. The students were from different undergraduate programs and their average age was eighteen years old.

The fifteen instructors were provided with an overview of the study which notified them of the research goals and procedures as well as their rights as volunteers so that they could make an informed decision as to whether they wanted to participate in the study. These classes were mainly conducted in English. L1 was rarely used.

Instrumentation

The categories used to code the data in the present study were adapted from The Foreign Language of Interaction Analysis -the FLint system instrument developed by Moskowitz in 1971 (Chaudron, 1988). Only the part of the teacher talk categories suggested by Moskowitz (see appendix) was adopted here. These categories include a teacher's acceptance of feelings, praise, encouragement, acceptance or use of students' ideas, repetition of student response verbatim, use of questions, giving information, correction, directions, pattern drills, and critics of student behavior or student response.

A questionnaire using open-ended format was used to gather descriptive data from the fifteen instructors. It includes information about education background, attitudes, opinions, characteristics, and definitions.

Procedure

During observations of 25 hours of classroom interaction, observers wrote field notes to capture specific contextual and paralinguistic features. Data was gathered by using an audio tape recorder. Recordings were transcribed verbatim and then coded according to the FLint instrument. Although the FLint system was developed as one of the schemes for real-time observation (Holland and Shortall, 1996), it was adapted to be used after the audio-taped record here in order to be sensitive to the whole class atmosphere. Of the 25 hours of recorded interaction, auxiliary researchers transcribed 16 hours, which constitute the present study database. These 16 hours contain lessons from different levels, instructors, and undergraduate programs.

RESULTS

The database is composed of a total of 9,272 teacher utterances. From the whole utterances, 719 were inaudible or incomprehensible. Of the twelve categories of teacher talk, *gives information* (31.61%), *asks questions* (25.62%), and *gives directions* (15,83) were used the most frequently. These categories accounted for 73.06% of the teacher utterances, thus leaving

little opportunity for use of other teacher talk categories (see Table 1).

The first data collected confirmed that teachers do speak in class more than a half of the time. Class observations showed that teachers devoted large amounts of time to explanations, drills or drill-like questioning, and class management. Hence, learners have less opportunity to evaluate input and to produce creative target language. In some cases, students may want to speak out, but feel inhibited in doing so. Student utterances are generally one or two-word phrases long.

If one of the main aims of CLT is to give students confidence in expressing themselves orally, the emphasis should be, therefore, on spoken fluency rather than on spoken accuracy. This should encourage students to be confident and creative in their spoken English. It is desirable that teachers find time to talk and to listen to their students in ways that encourage them to think more deeply and respond using longer utterances. Students often find it difficult to provide a fast spoken reply to a question without time to process an answer. Adding just a few seconds at the end of a question gives students the time they need to arrive at deep answers.

TABLE 1
DISTRIBUTION OF TEACHER UTTERANCES (N= 8553)

Teacher talk categories	*N*	%
Deals with feelings	41	0,48
Praises or encourages	510	5,97
Jokes	56	0,65
Uses ideas of students	56	0,65
Repeats student response	580	6,80
verbatim	2191	25,62
Asks questions	2704	31,61
Gives information	217	2,54
Corrects without rejection	1354	15,83
Gives directions	776	9,07
Directs pattern drills	56	0,65
Criticizes student behavior	12	0,13
Criticizes student response		

Nunan (1989) quotes studies that show that, when teachers are trained to wait 3 or 4 seconds, instead of the conventional one, there is not only a decrease in the failure of students to respond, but there is an increase in average length of students' responses. Moreover, the proportion of student initiated questioning increases. All of these adjustments would seem to be worthy objectives in a communicative classroom.

With regard to questioning (25,62%), findings of this study show that most of the questions these teachers ask are display questions. The primary purpose of display questions is to provide answers that are known and which are designed to elicit or display particular structures, while referential questions are those in naturalistic and classroom discourse that teachers do not know the answers to (Richards & Lockhart, 1994). There was little production observed from students of this study. Brock (1986) discovered that increasing the number of referential questions promoted students to provide significantly longer and syntactically more complex responses (cited in Nunan, 1991, pp. 194). Nunan also suggests that it is not inconceivable that the effort involved in answering referential questions prompts a greater effort and depth of processing on the part of the learner (Nunan, 1989, pp. 30). Asking students open-ended questions such as "What will happen next?" or "How did you do the homework?" is one of the best ways to foster more talk in our classroom.

CONCLUSIONS

The present study investigated the roles of teacher talk in the development of EFL classes. The classroom and questionnaire data suggest that EFL teachers, who are committed to be communicative teachers, are seldom, if ever communicative in practice. Nunan demonstrated more than a decade ago that there is growing evidence that in communicative classes,

interactions may not be very communicative (Nunan, 1987, pp. 144). In fact, basic instructional patterns of classroom observed were those in which the teachers talked a great deal, but the students got to say very little. Hence, the speaking skills among these EFL students are not well exercised and consequently underdeveloped.

Teaching cannot be defined apart from learning. Teaching is guiding and facilitating learning, enabling the learner to learn, setting the conditions for learning. Our understanding of how the learner learns has to determine our philosophy of education, our teaching styles, our approach, methods, and classroom techniques. Moreover, a theory of teaching in harmony with an integrated understanding of the learner and the foreign language to be learned (English) can point the way to successful procedures under the various constraints of the university context of teaching.

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APPENDIX: Foreign Language Interaction analysis (Flint) system
(Moskowitz, 1971, pp. 213)

			CATEGORY	DESCRIPTION
TEACHER TALK	**INDIRECT INFLUENCE**	1	DEALS WITH FEELINGS	In a non-threatening way, accepting, discussing, referring to, or communicating understanding of past, present, or future feelings of students.
		2	PRAISES OR ENCOURAGES	Praising, complimenting, telling students why what they have said or done is valued. Encouraging students to continue, trying to give them confidence. Confirming answers are correct.
		3	JOKES	Intentional joking, kidding, making puns, attempting to be humorous, providing the joking is not at anyone's expense. Unintentional humor is not included in this category.
		4	USES IDEAS OF STUDENTS	Clarifying, using, interpreting, summarizing the ideas of students. The ideas must be rephrased by the teacher but still recognized as being student contributions.
		5	REPEATS STUDENT RESPONSE VERBATIM	Repeating the exact words of students after they participate.
		6	ASKS QUESTIONS	Asking questions to which an answer is anticipated. Rhetorical questions are not included in this category.
	DIRECT INFLUENCE	7	GIVES INFORMATION	Giving information, facts, own opinion or ideas, lecturing, or asking rhetorical questions.
		8	CORRECTS WITHOUT REJECTION	Telling students who have made a mistake the correct response without using words or intonations which communicate criticism.
		9	GIVES DIRECTIONS	Giving directions, requests, or commands which students are expected to follow.
		10	DIRECTS PATTERN DRILLS	Giving statements which students are expected to repeat exactly, to make substitutions in (i.e., substitution drills), or to change from one form to another (i.e., transformation drills).
		11	CRITICIZES STUDENT BEHAVIOR	Rejecting the behavior of students; trying to change the non-acceptable behavior; communicating anger, displeasure, annoyance, dissatisfaction with what students are doing.
		12	CRITICIZES STUDENT RESPONSE	Telling the student his response is not correct or acceptable and communicating by words or intonation criticism, displeasure, annoyance, rejection.