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AN ANALYSIS OF TEACHER TALK VERSUS STUDENTS TALK DURING THE CLASSROOM INTERACTION

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ABSTRACT

The present study investigated two aspects of classroom interaction: the amount of teacher talk versus that of the students talk and the frequency of display questions as compared with referential questions posed by the teacher. To fulfill this, five pre-intermediate EFL classes taking an integrative course in two language institutes were observed and voice-recorded. Thereafter, the obtained recordings were transcribed and subsequently analyzed. The analysis of the recordings revealed that the amount of talk by the teacher significantly surpassed that of the students, which is a drawback in any educational EFL milieu, and that display questions significantly outnumbered the referential ones – a further shortcoming leading to language practice rather than language use and negotiation of meaning, which are the ultimate purposes of language learning

Keywords: classroom interaction, display questions, referential questions

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Since Vygotsky's discussion of the importance of social interaction in learning (1962, 1978), there has been evidence of renewed interest in the nature of classroom talk and signs of willingness to reassess the pedagogic value of interaction patterns between students and teachers in the language classroom as learning a language in the classroom is mostly a consequence of the exposure of the learner to the linguistic environment manifested in the interaction between the participants, namely the teacher and the students, in that context. Such interaction has been defined as a process whereby two or more people engage in reciprocal action (Celce-Murcia, 1987).

During the past few decades, there has been a growing interest in studies on language interaction inside the classroom – hence the proliferation of such studies. Hatch (1978) emphasizes the role of interaction in second language acquisition. Tsui (1995) discusses classroom interaction and its effects on participation and learning. Research in language classrooms, however, has established that teachers tend to do most of the classroom talk. Teacher talk makes up over 70 percent of the total talk (Cook, 2000; Chaudron, 1988). The more the teacher talks in the classroom, the less the chances will be for the students to participate in the classroom interactions. As a result, teacher-initiated talk will dominate the

classroom, allowing little opportunity for extended student talk. In such an environment, students have little opportunity to develop their language proficiency.

One dominant feature of teacher-initiated talk is the type of questions posed by the teacher. Richard and Lockhart (1996) concluded that teachers' questions play a crucial role in language acquisition. It is one of the common techniques used by teachers. Teachers' questions can keep the learners participating in the classroom discourse. A simple way to classify teacher's questions is to categorize them into two types: display questions and referential questions. Display questions attempt to elicit information already known by the teacher. They focus on the recollection of previously presented information while referential questions request information not known by the teacher - responses to the latter questions often involve judgment about facts that are not clear or a statement of values. Display questions potential to generate sustained communication in the classroom is minimal. The reason is that they entail limited, predetermined answers almost always readily answered by the learners. When a learner supplies the correct answer, others are deprived from contributing to the discussion and pushing it further forward (Özcan 2010; Shomossi 1997; and Temiz's 2012).

Referential questions, on the other hand, make students think actively and provide their own information and ideas based on their own knowledge and experience rather than recollect the previously presented information. Hence, the present study was conducted to shed some light on the amount of teacher talk compared with that of the students on the one hand, and on the other, to determine the frequency of the teacher's display questions employment versus his employment of referential questions in two language institutes in Kerman, Iran.

Method

The present research, quasi-experimental in design, aimed to explore the quality of classroom interaction in 5 EFL pre-intermediate classes taking an integrative course in 2 language institutes in Kerman, Iran. The study was delimited to two

specific aspects of classroom interaction: the amount of the teacher talk as compared with that of the students and the ratio of display questions to the referential ones posed by the teacher.

Participants

The participants were selected through convenient sampling. Accordingly, 126 pre-intermediate students (all male) aged between 15 and 33 along with their five teachers from 2 language institutes formed the participants of the study. They all shared the same mother tongue - Persian. The classes were held for 90 minutes in the afternoon three times a week. None of the students had ever been to an English speaking country prior to the study, nor had any of them ever had the experience of learning another foreign/second language learning/acquisition. The two language institutes were opted due to the ease of access.

Instrumentation

To make up for the sound quality issues arising from classroom acoustics low quality, three smart phones were used to record interactions in each classroom, each being placed in a different location in order cover even the slightest instance of classroom interaction. The second instrument used was chi square the which was run through SPSS to find out if there was a significant difference between the amount of teacher talk and the students talk on the one hand, and on the other to see how significantly the teacher's display questions number differed from that of his referential ones.

Procedure

The data for this study were collected through recording the voices of both the teachers and the students for 3 consecutive sessions. Some 60 minutes of the whole class time was recorded in each session - the actual time on task. The teachers and the students involved were not informed of the purpose of the research objectives beforehand so that the data collected might be as genuine as possible. Thus the lessons were not specially prepared, and the recordings were carried out under as natural a classroom environment as possible.

Data Analysis

The data obtained through recordings were first transcribed and then analyzed employing SPSS to determine the amount of the teacher talk as compared with that of the students talk as well as the frequency of the teachers' display questions in comparison with their referential ones. Then the information resulted from descriptive statistics was further analyzed applying chi square test.

Results

Table 1: Time Proportion of Teacher talk as compared with students' talk

	TT (%)	ST (%)	Other (%)
Class one	47	15	38
Class two	40	16	44
Class three	46	20	34
Class four	42	18	40
Class five	49	16	35
Total	44	18	38

Table 2: Frequency of Display Questions versus Referential Questions

	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage
Class one	78	76	25	24
Class two	69	83	14	17
Class three	50	82	11	18
Class four	65	79	17	21
Class five	32	55	26	45
Total	58.8	75	18.6	25

Table 3: Chi-Square Test Frequencies

	Class	DQcount	RQcount
Chi-Square	.000 ^a	.000 ^a	.000 ^a
df	4	4	4
Asymp. Sig.	1	1	1

a. 5 cells (100.0%) have expected frequencies less than 5. The minimum expected cell frequency is 1.0. As table 3 suggests, the number of the two types of questions is equal to 1 which is less than 5. Therefore, there is a significant relationship between the two types.

Table 4: Test Statistics^a

	RQcount - DQcount	ST - TT
Z	-2.023 ^b	-2.032 ^b
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	0.043	0.042

a. Wilcoxon Signed Ranks Test

b. Based on positive ranks.

Since the asymptotic significance levels for the two relationships are .043 and .042, respectively which are both less than 0.5, there is a significant relationship there.

Table 5: One-Sample Kolmogorov-Smirnov Test

		TT	ST
N		5	5
Normal Parameters ^{a,b}	Mean	44.8	17
	Std. Deviation	3.70135	2
Most Extreme Differences	Absolute	0.227	0.291
	Positive	0.175	0.291
	Negative	-0.227	-0.159
Test Statistic		0.227	0.291
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)		.200 ^{c,d}	.191 ^c

a. Test distribution is Normal.

b. Calculated from data.

c. Lilliefors Significance Correction.

d. This is a lower bound of the true significance.

According to the above table, the difference between the number of display questions and that of the referential questions is significant, i.e. asymptotic significance of the two equals .200 and 0.19, respectively.

Table 6: One-Sample Kolmogorov-Smirnov Test

		DQcount	RQcount
N		5	5
Normal Parameters ^{a,b}	Mean	58.4	18.6
	Std. Deviation	17.55847	6.65582
Most Extreme Differences	Absolute	0.246	0.232
	Positive	0.158	0.195
	Negative	-0.246	-0.232
Test Statistic		0.246	0.232
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)		.200 ^{c,d}	.200 ^{c,d}

a. Test distribution is Normal.

b. Calculated from data.

c. Lilliefors Significance Correction.

d. This is a lower bound of the true significance.

According to the above table, the difference between the number of display questions and that

of the referential questions is significant, i.e. asymptotic significance of the two equals 2.00 .

Discussion and conclusion

As the analysis of the data reveals, the amount of teacher talk in the classroom significantly exceeds that of the students (table 3). This finding is in line with what Cook (2000) and Chaudron (1988) claim. They say that teacher talk makes up over 70 percent of the total talk. The amount of time taken up by the teacher talk as compared with that of the students is a distinct factor differentiating a teacher-centered approach from a learner-centered one. Teacher-centered orientation is a signpost of more traditional approaches to language teaching where the chances for learner involvement and thus improvement are rather rare- the perennial problem from which a considerable bulk of EFL pedagogy in Iran suffers as the present case study reveals.

Another hallmark of traditional approaches to language teaching is their emphasis on practice to the exclusion of any communication and negotiation of meaning. As table 2 demonstrates, a great amount of discrepancy between the total number of display questions and referential questions is ubiquitous in all 5 classes, the frequency of display questions far surpassing that of referential questions. Then what naturally follows and prevails such classes is practice not communication which, as its requirements, presupposes the presence of gap, choice, and feedback which are lacking in practice activities (Dell Hymes (1975).

Considering the significant role of input (Krashen, 1985) and taking into account the fact that almost the only source of comprehensible live input for Iranian EFL students is the teacher talk, one might enthusiastically embrace the results of the data analysis of the present study. However, one also has to bear in mind that in classrooms where teacher talk dominates, students are rather made deprived of opportunities to engage in interaction and thus of comprehensible output which according to Swain (1985) is a necessary factor and condition for the learner's language development and improvement. Thus what is

needed is a shift from a teacher-centered classroom environment to a classroom environment where the teacher does some scaffolding, hence paving the way for the learner's involvement, interaction, and thus language development. Harmer (2000) states that best lessons are the ones where student talk is maximized. Getting Students to speak is a vital part of a teacher's responsibility.

Concerning the issue of the frequency of display questions versus referential questions, as the data analysis reveals, the abundance of display questions may pinpoint the fact that the classes are exercise-oriented rather than communication-oriented. Long and Sato (1983) believe that preference of display questions to referential questions by the teacher is the result of their emphasis on form and accuracy rather than meaning and communication. According to Hymes (ibid) any act of communication entails at least three requirements: gap, choice, and feedback, which display questions often lack. Thus another shift appears to be in order: a shift from a focus on form to a focus on meaning, from accuracy to fluency, and from students-as-subjects to students-as-interlocutors.

The present study focused on just two aspects of classroom interaction: the amount of teacher/learner talk and the sort of questions (display or referential) posed by the teacher. However, there are a host of other factors pertaining to classroom interaction such as role relationship, teacher/ learner status, cultural issues, and myriads of other factors which need to be delved into by further research.

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