EFFECTIVE TEACHER TALK: DISCOURSE ANALYSIS IN THE FIELD OF SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION[1]

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In this article, the author provides an analysis of Teacher Talking Time (TTT) within the framework of the communicative approach. The aim is to raise teachers' awareness of the effectiveness of their talk in their language classrooms. The focus of the analysis consists of a typewritten script of an audio-taped lesson which will examine the quality of the communication which takes place during classroom interactions. The criteria that will determine whether the teacher's speech acts promote learning in the students lie in several authors' categorizations of functional language. These language functions will be identified and assessed in terms of their pedagogical effects in the students' learning.

INTRODUCTION: DECONSTRUCTING NEGATIVE TTT BELIEFS

Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) spread the belief that communication should be emphasized in the classroom, stressing, therefore, the importance of teacher-student interaction as an authentic and meaningful way to promote learning. In this respect, a shift from teacher-centered classes to student-centered classes took place, and consequently, the teacher's weight in the classroom had no choice but to be drastically reduced.

From then onwards, Teacher Talking Time (TTT) was considered as an obstacle that hindered students' learning, an obstacle that restricted students' opportunities to use the target language, that caused boredom and monotony and that prevented students from taking initiative and learning in a responsible and autonomous way (Darn, 2007).

Nevertheless, research in recent years has proved that TTT might not be so detrimental for students; in fact, it has other positive effects that could be exploited, hence it is essential that teachers become aware of its benefits. As Cullen highlights, some of the advantages of teacher talk are *"the valuable source of comprehensible input for the learner"* or *"the kind of questions teachers ask, [which] can significantly affect the quantity and quality of student interaction in the lesson"* (Cullen, 1998: 179-180). Moon also emphasizes that teacher talk *"increases the amount of exposure pupils get to English"* and that it *"provides real reasons for using English to communicate, e.g., in giving instructions, getting information from pupils"* (Moon, 2000: 63).

It is therefore arguable that it is necessary to value the importance of the teacher's discourse, to become aware of its benefits and to encourage teachers to analyze their talk in order to examine to what extent their utterances could promote learning. In this respect, it is essential to be self-critical and analyze the effectiveness (or lack thereof) of teachers' talk, focusing on its quality rather than quantity: *"Bearing in mind the nature*

of the communicative classroom, teachers should perhaps be aware of the quality of their TTT and how it is used, rather than trying to reduce it to a bare minimum" (Darn, 2007).

Therefore, this article represents an opportunity to raise teachers' awareness of the effectiveness of their talk in their language classrooms. Through the analysis of a lesson tapescript, we will observe the degree of communicativeness that takes place in the classroom interactions. With that aim in mind, we will focus on different communicative language functions, which will become the criteria to reflect upon the efficiency of teachers' language and to see whether it promotes communication and boosts language learning.

CATEGORISATION OF TEACHERS' LANGUAGE: OBSERVATION SCHEMES

The criteria that will determine the effectiveness of teacher talk will consist of the different effective language functions that several authors believe instructors should use in their lessons. These authors, having in mind a communicative approach for language teaching, recommend several *speech* acts that will favour students' learning. Here there are the categories that will be applied in the analysis of the transcript:

Categorization according to Lightbown and Spada (2000):

- **Explicit correction**: This happens when the teacher provides the student with the correct form (Lightbown and Spada, 2000: 122).
- **Recasts**: "involve the teacher's reformulation of all or part of a student's utterance, minus the error" (Lightbown and Spada, 2000: 122)
- **Metalinguistic feedback**: This happens when the teacher offers comments containing any kind of metalangnage regarding the "nature of the error" (Lightbown and Spada, 2000: 122, 123).
- **Elicitation**: This refers to the different techniques that teachers use to elicit the correct form from the students, like eliciting the completion of the students' utterance, eliciting reformulation, etc (Lightbown and Spada, 2000: 123).
- **Repetition**: "refers to the teachers' repetition of the student's erroneous utterance" (Lightbown and Spada, 2000:123).

Other:

- **Negotiation of meaning**: teachers and students work to understand what the other speaker is trying to say (Lightbown and Spada, 2000:114).

Categorization according to Senior (2008): Developing rapport to maintain a good atmosphere.

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' initiatives.
- Be generous with your words and gestures.

(Senior, 2008: 5)

Categorization according to Cullen (1998):

Non-communicative features of teacher talk:

- Excessive use of display questions, form-focused feedback, echoing of students' responses, sequences of predictable IRF (Cullen, 1998: 182).

Categorization according to Bradshaw (2005): Giving good instructions

Giving instructions in English, "*provides an opportunity for children to acquire language naturally in an authentic, purposeful context*" (Bradshaw, 2005: 23)

Tips: use simple vocabulary and structures, break the instructions into short sentences, make it obvious that you are about to give instructions, always use a demonstration wherever possible, check understanding (Bradshaw, 2005: 24).

Categorization according to Darn (2008): Asking questions

"*Every question demands a response (except in the case of requests and suggestions) so that questions inevitably generate communication*". (Darn, 2008)

Types of questions:

- **Display questions**: These questions elicit learners' knowledge and check comprehension. They normally focus on the form of language.
- **Referential questions**: These questions try to elicit information from learners: giving an opinion, explaining or clarifying. They normally focus on content.

(Darn, 2008).

Effective questioning:

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

(Darn, 2008)

Other:

- Ending/starting an activity/ lesson.
- Moving to the next stage of the lesson.
- Content feedback: focus on what is said, rather than how it is said (Thornbury, 1996: 282).
- Wait time: "*it is the time teachers allow students to answer questions*" (Thornbury, 1996: 282).
- To control/discipline, to praise, to provide examples of the target language, to joke, to maintain a good atmosphere... (Moon, 2000: 61).
- Use of backchannelling: Teachers sometimes provide feedback to students with short utterances such as *uhu* or *yeah* (Clifton, 2006: 144).

OVERVIEW OF THE GROUP AND SCHOOL

The recording that will be analyzed took place on 20th May, 2009 in a private language school for adults in Granada. The class that was recorded was a First Certificate preparation lesson of 5 students, though the day of the recording only 2 of them were present. They were adult students, and their level of English was intermediate (B1-B2).

The teaching objectives for that class were:

- To revise vocabulary and phrasal verbs (homework correction: information gap activities).
- To revise the structure and content of the *Writing test* in the examination.
- To do some speaking practice by using controversial sentences and promoting discussion.

Classes normally took place three times a week, two hours per class. Since there were very few students, they could benefit from having many chances to use English in class.

As far as the teaching is concerned, the instructor always spoke English to the students and they were able to follow the lesson correctly. Language was adapted to students' knowledge to make them understand every word of the target language.

Finally, concerning the way the teaching was organized during the first part of the class (homework correction and analysis of writing activities), it followed the traditional pattern of the initiation-response-follow up (IRF) scheme. However, in the second part of the lesson, speaking practice, pace changes and more opportunities were given to the students to talk and take initiative.

ANALYSIS OF TEACHER TALK

The class recorded was a 2-hour lesson with several stages: during the first part of the lesson, the teacher and the students revised some vocabulary and phrasal verbs while correcting homework. The second part of the lesson consisted of a revision of the Cambridge *Writing test* structure, and finally, the last stage of the lesson was devoted to speaking practice by promoting conversation with controversial sentences.

For this analysis, some extracts will be chosen of those moments which are especially interesting to be commented on, either because of the effectiveness of the teacher's talk or because they represent examples where another approach could be followed.

Assets

Generally speaking, the teacher's language was effective on many occasions, but there were also other aspects that could be modified for a better use of the teaching time.

First of all, let us comment on those positive sequences that could be taken as a model for *how to behave* in the language classroom: in this lesson, the teacher's language is above all clear and direct. That is, learners always understand the teacher; he also creates a friendly atmosphere in class giving positive feedback to the students, introducing jokes and making sure students understand every word of the target language, using non-verbal communication, promoting interaction and eliciting students' oral production, and adapting speaking speed and vocabulary to the students' understanding.

Regarding the *questions* the teacher asks the learners, it could be said that there is a balance between display questions and referential questions. Whereas during the first part of the lesson, the teacher mainly uses display questions related to specific vocabulary in order to check the students' understanding or elicit information, in the second part of the lesson the teacher promotes referential or open-ended questions. In the former case, it is very useful for learners to focus on specific vocabulary because this helps them understand everything that happens in the class, apart from learning new vocabulary. In this respect, the teacher emphasizes accuracy. On the other hand, during the second part of the lesson –the speaking practice–, the teacher attempts to stimulate the learners' talk by asking the students their opinion and by adding questions to encourage expanded answers.

Here there are some examples:

T: do you remember how to call people who spend the whole day in front of the computer? [Display questions: eliciting/asking for information]

S1: alcoholic computers...

T: not alcoholic... [Laughs] Do you remember the word? What's this? [Correction]

S2: potato

T: what do we call people who are all day in front of the TV?

S2: ...

T: coach potato, sofa potato...

.....

T: what do you think? Do you agree? [Referential/ open-ended questions]

S2: I agree with the statement... lawyers in general... I think it is difficult to take the people in prison, but if people are justice... I would like, it's my opinion, the capital punishment... maybe in the future criminals and terrorists...

T: and what kind of capital punishment?

S2: all their lives

T: but that is a 'life-sentence'! [Negotiation of meaning/correction]

S2: yes, life-sentence

Another aspect that should be highlighted in this lesson is the quality of *instructions*. It can be observed that the teacher provides very short and concise instructions, which make the students understand exactly what they have to do:

T: Here there is an example of a letter, I am going to read it and you have to tell me if it is formal or informal.

One of the strongest points in the teacher's performance is the importance he provides to checking understanding. He is constantly ensuring that the students understand every single word of the target language. He normally asks if they know or remember specific vocabulary, which reinforces language accuracy. The positive effect of this technique is that students feel confident if they understand everything that happens in the class:

T: Any problems with homework?

T: Do you know 'duty free'? Do you know 'banned'?

Again, giving feedback turns into one of the most effective speech acts of this teacher, since he is very clear and direct when providing feedback to a student:

T: OK, not bad, not bad...

T: yes, that's right!

T: yes, exactly

Regarding the creation of a friendly atmosphere, it can be observed that the teacher is very kind with the learners, he corrects them politely, and the students are willing to participate in the activities and conversations. Also, joking contributes to this target; students seem to be having a good time and they enjoy the class. That nice atmosphere is again reinforced when the teacher is inclusive in the treatment of all the learners, that is to say, he devotes equal attention to both students and on some occasions he calls on S1, who is normally shyer.

T: yes, at the end, what do you write at the end? It is a formal complaint, do you remember? [Checking understanding]

S2: mmmm [Backchannels]

T: yours... [Looking at S1: Being inclusive] [Eliciting]

S2: yours sincerely?

T: mmmm [Eliciting/Backchannels]

S2: yours faithfulness?

T: well, yours faithfully. [Recasts-Reformulation] If you know the name, Dear Mr.____: yours sincerely. Not with 'hugs and kisses, with love', not a good idea. [Joking]

S1 and S2: [laughs]. S2: yes, and three crosses xxx [Joking].

Finally, the teacher is also good at raising students' self confidence because he praises correct answers, encourages them to find specific words and motivates them when they succeed:

T: yes, that's right!

T: yes, exactly

T: very well, yes

Pitfalls

However, although the teacher has many positive and strong points, there are a couple of aspects that could be improved. The general impression of the lesson was that during the first stage, which was devoted to correcting activities, the rhythm was very monotonous and very little chance was given to the students to speak. Therefore, the general impression was that the teacher monopolizes conversation and correction.

T: do you know 'long-distance'?

S1 and S2: yes

T: do you know 'absent-minded'?

S1 and S2: yes

.....

T: so I am going to read the first one and you are going to tell me 'a), b) or c)' [teacher reads the text]

S1 and S2: E!

T: yes, two: 'I have always enjoyed working with animals', ok? So, a), b) c)?

S1: giving information...

T: ok, giving information is possible if you are asking something, if you are requesting something... and then part three...

Ways of improving this could be to encourage peer-assessment or even self-assessment providing an answer key, leaving, therefore, more time for other activities.

During the second part of the lesson –practice on *speaking*–, an important change could be observed in the pace of the teaching: students participated more often. Now, learners are very willing to speak and express their opinions, and they seem interested in the topics presented. However, although the teacher goes to great lengths to elicit students' production, we see that some questions demand short answers; subsequently, the activity seems to be again "teacher focused" and students do not really have the opportunity to provide long answers, which would be very beneficial for fluency, for instance.

T: Isabel, do you agree with the statement?

S1: no... I need the car to go everywhere... I need to take my dogs... and I can't in public transport.

T: you have six dogs?

S1: no, four

T: what happened to the other two?

S1: mmmm

T: you gave them away...

S1: yes

T: so they didn't die

S1: no

Finally, we can mention another aspect that could be improved: it is the way the teacher starts and ends the lesson. We observe that he is too direct to get into his planning:

T: Where's everybody today?

S2: I don't know

T: We normally have three more people (...) Any problems with homework? Let me read the answer... OK, so, number four, sorry number six, so a) [teacher reads the book's sentence]... do you know 'duty free'?[Checking understanding]

S1: yes

At the beginning, the teacher starts correcting homework, but this could be done after a short

warm-up activity or even a brief conversation to encourage personal involvement: Hello, how are you today? Did you enjoy your weekend? They are simple ways of introducing the class and initiating contact with students before delving into the real content of the lesson.

CONCLUSION

We, as teachers, need to be self-critical and reflect upon our own performance with students. Among all the different aspects that could be assessed, on this occasion the target of our analysis has been the language that teachers use with students, in order to examine the occasions on which teachers are successful and promote students' learning, and to reflect upon those occasions in which the language was not effective enough.

With respect to the analysis of the tapescript, we have observed that this teacher in particular is successful in creating a friendly atmosphere by encouraging students, praising good answers and even joking. His language is very clear and concise and his explanations are simple and straightforward, so that students understand him perfectly and are able to follow the class without problems. On the other hand, we have seen there could be other more effective ways to enrich the class, especially avoiding monotony in correcting homework, introducing new ways of starting or ending a lesson (with warm-up activities or personal involvement questions) and reducing the teacher's focused sequences through the use of more open-ended questions.

The recording of this lesson serves as a reference for other teachers that might feel identified with some of the utterances displayed and, therefore, helps them reflect upon their personal performance, raise self-awareness and improve their future teaching. Here, it could be interesting to recall Thornbury's words emphasizing the need to raise awareness and encourage change to make our classes more communicative: *"the assumption is that awareness is a prerequisite for change, and our philosophy is consistent with Burns' (1990: 57) contention that 'if CLT is to become more communicative (...) teachers need to be encouraged to gain greater understanding of the interactional processes of their own classrooms'"* (Thornbury, 1996: 281).

Notas

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