

TEACHER TALK AND STUDENT LEARNING

Phạm Ngọc Khánh Ly, MA

Hoàng Văn Trang, MA

University of Languages and International Studies, Vietnam National University

Abstract

In spite of the essential role of teacher talk in student learning, preceding studies on teacher talk mostly placed their focus on the excessive amount of teacher talk and other features in classroom. Therefore, this study was conducted to investigate the impacts of teacher talk on student learning in the EFL context of Vietnam. Three teachers and thirteen students in University of Languages and International Studies-Vietnam National University participated in classroom observations and interviews. Qualitative content analysis was utilized to process the data. The results indicate that the most fundamental role of teacher talk is providing input for students. In addition, it can help improve the classroom atmosphere and students' inspiration in learning. Moreover, as suggested from students' suggestions and classroom observation, understanding students' facial expressions can be a reliable clue for teachers to adjust teacher talk pace and complexity to maximize their learning.

Introduction

A crucial issue when discussing teaching and learning in general and English Language Teaching (ELT) in particular is teacher talk as this has long been the most common channel of communication between teachers and students in classes, if not the only one. Previous studies have shown that teacher talk accounts for a large amount of class time (e.g. Musumeci, 1996; Walsh, 2002); but the literature seems to inadequately show how teacher talk affects students' learning. Therefore, this study is to investigate the influence of teacher talk in class on students' learning in the EFL environment in Vietnam, hoping to modestly contribute to the pertinent literature of teacher talk in ELT.

Literature Review

Teacher talk and student learning

Student learning in the current study is defined as their involvement in the lesson as Walsh (2002) has stated that "maximizing learner involvement is conducive to second language acquisition" (p.3).

Despite the unarguably important roles in students' learning in general and language learning in particular, the quality of teacher talk has been overlooked for long (Walsh, 2002). The focus seems to be merely placed on the "excessive" amount of teacher talk time and the need to reduce it, an approach which is both "simplistic" and "unrealistic" (Walsh, 2002, p.3). This is not to deny the volume of research focusing on this subject; nevertheless, the prevailing studies are mostly to describe a number of teacher talk feature (e.g., Clifton, 2006; Cullen, 2002). For example, Brazil and Sinclair (1982, as cited in Clifton, 2006) consider the IRF pattern (Initiation- Response- Feedback) as the most recognizable feature of classroom language in which teachers lead the interaction and restrict student talk. By means of the IRF formula, "the teacher controls who says what to whom and when" (Clifton, 2006, p.143). Similarly, Walsh (2002) has listed 10 features of teacher talk such as the dominance of teacher talk time, leading roles of teacher questions and teacher's control. Inceçay (2010), thus, has concluded that only an inadequate number of studies have discussed the relationship between teacher talk and language learning in the EFL environment.

Regarding the role of teacher talk, Nunan (1991) has pointed out the indispensable position of teacher talk in student's second language acquisition and classroom organization. To illustrate this, Sharpe (2008) observed two history classes in an Australia male school and spotted a certain number of teacher talk strategies which were able to develop students' skills and content knowledge. They include repeating, recasting, recontextualizing the language,

cued elicitation, and modifying questioning based on the theory of Systemic Functional Linguistic. This study can be of great usefulness to teachers because it does not mainly aim to testify which teacher talk strategies have been implemented, but also to investigate how much student learning has enhanced with those. The findings are one of the attempts to confirm that teachers' use of different discourse strategies has developed students' understanding of history inquiries. Walsh (2002), on the other hand, had a more reflective perspective to the influences of teacher talk on students' learning. He claimed that teacher talk has both constructive and obstructive impacts, which has been confirmed by Inceçay (2010). The two scholars, however, have different ideas about the categories of teacher talk strategies which produce the aforementioned contrasting effects. The reasons lie in, according to Inceçay's (2010) account, the different number of teachers and participants.

Methodology

Research questions

With an attempt to address those gaps in the literature, the current study seeks to answer the following questions:

1. How do teachers conceive the influence of teacher talk on students' learning?
2. What is the influence of teacher talk on students' learning as perceived by students?
3. What is the influence of teacher talk on student learning as observed in the research context?

Participants

Three teachers working in the Faculty of English Language Teacher Education, University of Languages and International Studies (ULIS), Hanoi, Vietnam participated in the study. All of them graduated from this institution. To be selected as an academic faculty staff, they were first required to have the distinction degree and then to pass the recruiting process which consisted of two rounds, namely, the writing test and the interview. This is to explain why these teachers are deemed to have a high English proficiency.

The first teacher, Hoa (all names are pseudonyms for ethical reasons), has been teaching at ULIS for four years. Another participant, Mai, has 6-year teaching experience as a university English teacher. Lastly, Thanh has been working at ULIS for three years after her graduation. Thirteen students from the teachers' classes were also involved in the interviews. They were randomly selected and all well-informed about the study purposes.

Data collection instruments

Data for this study were collected through three sources: classroom observations, teacher interviews and student interviews. First, classes were observed and teacher talk was audiotaped to examine its effect on student learning. Each teacher was observed for two 50- minute lessons. The content of the lessons is Business English, and functioning as the backbone of the course is the Market Leader textbook (New Edition) at Pre-Intermediate level.

After observation, teachers were interviewed privately about their perceptions of the influence of teacher talk on students' learning. They were also requested to elicit the purposes of their talk in classroom.

Finally, student interviews were conducted for two-fold purposes. They were asked in groups of four or five how teacher talk has affected their English learning. More importantly, they can suggest how teacher talk should be improved or adjusted for better accommodating their needs.

Data analysis

The data were analyzed by means of qualitative content analysis, which means that the analysis procedure includes the five steps subsequently, namely, "transcribing", "coding for themes", "looking for patterns", "making interpretations", and "building theory" (Dornyei, 2007, p.246). After transcribing all the classroom audio files and interviews, I closely examined the transcripts, grouped the content, and made interpretations in response to the research questions as follows.

Findings

The influence of teacher talk on students' learning as perceived by teachers

All the participating teachers claim that their talk in classroom can function as the primary source of input for students. One teacher states that:

...I have the feeling that they (students) respect all what teachers say. They take it as the standard or something excellent. That means what we speak in class can be the model or orientation for students. They may learn both the right and wrong from teacher talk. Teacher talk does influence student learning.

(Thanh)

This role has also been mentioned in Mai's response under the notion of "modeling".

My students claim that what teachers give them is simply instructions, sometimes they cannot express their ideas in English, or they even don't know the right intonation. They need teachers to do the demo... like a model.

As a means of instruction, teacher talk can be both motivating and demotivating, depending on its complexities, amount and the teacher's language competence. Regarding the complex

level of teacher talk, Hoa speaks from her experience that either too simple or too complex teacher talk would be detrimental to student learning.

For example, if it's lower, students will be demotivated. Then if it's too hard, it will be useless. They won't benefit anything. If they cannot understand, they don't make any progress. (Hoa)

Another aspect of teacher talk, its amount, has been discovered to affect student learning through Mai's observation. However, this varies according to the skill on focus of the class.

If the teacher doesn't speak too much, students will not fall asleep. Reversely, if teacher talk dominates, it's most likely that students will get bored and fall asleep... This happens in my reading class. However, last semester I spoke English a lot in a speaking class, and students seemed very happy with that. (Mai)

As also revealed from teachers' responses, teachers' English competence also influences student learning. Hoa remarked that if teacher talk was attractive, students would be more facilitated. By "attractive" she meant the accuracy and native-like pronunciation. She conceived that students would be more motivated by their favour of the specific teacher, which eventually resulted in their interest in the subject. In contrast, "a teacher with low English proficiency may end up discouraging students", said Hoa.

Furthermore, all the participants got to the same point that teacher talk can only work well as a means of instruction if they combine it with timely adjustment; otherwise students would benefit nothing from it.

...Then if we have timely adjustment, students can even learn from it. That's very valuable. If teacher speaks fluently but never stops to check students' understanding, or they do not make it a source of input, it would sound like something fun but learners gain nothing from it. (Hoa)

Besides the above influences on students' academic performances, all the teachers agreed that teacher talk can help establish and develop a good rapport between students and teachers. These have been revealed through the following excerpts:

Interviewer: Besides giving instructions, what are the other purposes of your teacher talk?

Mai: Communication, interaction. Give explanation. Give advice or give answer.

Thanh: other than giving instructions, I make jokes or share experience with students through teacher talk.

Last but not least, teacher's register in their talk may somewhat affect students' acquisition. Thanh gives further explanation through her response:

Hoa: If teacher talk is too... formal, very distant, somewhat like a lecture, it wouldn't create a close relationship between students and teachers. Of course it depends on different groups of learners, teachers should not stick to one pattern only. I suppose teachers need to be very flexible about that.

Thus, teacher's flexibility in the register of their teacher talk is notable. Being too formal can hinder learning due to a distant atmosphere in the class.

The influence of teacher talk on students' learning as perceived by learners

There was a consensus among students that teacher talk is an indispensable source of input. They were mostly exposed with teachers' examples of intonation, vocabulary choice and fluency in speaking. Some students have reflected:

Teacher talk provides me with more vocabulary, know how to arrange words, and use the structures we don't find in the lesson. We can develop our vocabulary, sometimes there are words that cause us to brainstorm. It helps us in listening in the first place, then the analytical skills. (Anh)

We can learn the vocabulary, the intonation. When hearing to them, we may imitate to have the standard intonation. (My)

In respect to the appropriateness of teacher talk to their learning, almost all the students found the complexities and amount of teacher talk suitable for their understanding. A student even requested for more complex vocabulary from the teacher as they major in Business English; however, what seemed opposite was that she doubted if she could understand.

Interviewer: Do you find the teacher talk in reading class appropriate? I mean amount and complexities. Or your want the teacher to use more complex words, or more Vietnamese, less English... any suggestions?

Anh: I think I'm Ok with that, but if possible, can you add up the complexities? But it will be pretty hard for me to understand.

Binh: If teacher talk consists of words in our major, we can improve our memory and use them.

One last prominent influence of teacher talk is associated with the class atmosphere. As commented by the following students, they usually felt more excited about the lesson when teacher talk sounds energetic, loud, and fun.

The teacher's pronunciation is native-like. Her voice is loud, which stimulates our learning. We feel more excited... (Binh)

Teacher talk can make learning more fun with jokes. (Phuong)

The impacts of teacher talk on student learning as observed

Students' involvement witnessed was mainly manifested through their 'response' turn in the IRF pattern through which teachers have unwittingly restricted learners. Examples of this are not hard to pick out.

T: It seems to be what? TV. Looks like a TV. Is it a TV?

S: Yes.

T: Is it a TV and let's see, what's this? It is ...

S: Leaflet.

T: Leaflet. Ok, and what about in picture d? Is it the Internet? Is it a website?

S: Stadium.

T: No no, (picture) d, d. Đây là f (in Vietnamese which means that is for (picture) f).

(Mai)

Also, during the observation, the strategies facilitating student learning in Inceçay's (2010) and Walsh's (2002) works were recognized. Although others were manifested subtly in the lessons, the most common strategy in use in the classes was 'prompting' (Inceçay, 2010, p.277), or worded as 'scaffolding' in Walsh's paper (2002, p.13).

(The teacher was presenting the marketing mix, 4Ps, to students)

S: Uhm, place where to sell product.

T: Uh, where to sell product. And?

S: Customer service.

T: Service customer? Customer service? Customer and customer service. And then what else?

S: Promotion

T: Promotion. What does it mean by promotion? Promotions?

S: Giving special offers and free gifts

T: It means special offers and...and...

S: Free gifts

(Mai)

For the same purpose, Thanh, yet, switched to Vietnamese so as to prompt students to give the answers when there were conversation breakdowns in classroom. An instance of this is as follows.

(The teacher was introducing different parts of an essay.)

T: How about an essay? First, we have...?

S: A topic paragraph (Class laughing)

T: No, we don't call it a topic paragraph. You can say it is...

S: Introduction

T: Em có thể gọi nó theo hai cách. Thứ nhất là Introduction, we say Introduction or Introductory... Introductory gì? ...Gì em? (You can name it in two ways. First, Introduction. We say Introduction or Introductory... Introductory what? You?)

S: Sentence

T: Introduction là danh từ này, Introductory là tính từ, chúng tôi đãng sau nó phải có một danh từ nữa. (Introduction is a noun, Introductory is an adjective, which means it requires a nouns coming after it.)

S: Paragraph

T: Paragraph. Ok? Introductory paragraphs.

The second most common strategy was direct error correction. Teachers' correction right at the point student had deviations seemed effective, as indicated the observation data, to confirm the right information for them. Hoa can serve as a good example in correcting her students' deviant pronunciation:

(Students were playing a game competing to say as many words related to Finance as possible)

S: Bin

T: Huh?

S: Bin

T: Ah, bill

S: (in chorus) Bill. B. I. L. L

T: Uh huh, your tongue moves up this way, bill.

In terms of language complexities, Mai's language probably integrated the most technical terms as she was attempting to provide more background knowledge about the marketing mix for students in a reading class. Teacher talk, however, was not responded by students but tense on their faces. Here is an example:

Teacher: So are you clear about the marketing mix and the 4Cs? You know? Yeah, it's very clear in the text. But who can explain to me again what does it mean by product, by price, place and promotion? Who can please, and give me an example for this. You know a package? A package ...4Ps and marketing means that you choose a product or a brand and then explain the marketing mix of it. Who can? Now what does it mean by product? What? In marketing mix we have to consider four things. Ok? So what does it mean by product? Can you please?

(Class remained silent)

T: Come on. Can you see the word product here? Yeah, Ok. And then if you read the definition. You have to decide what product or service to sell in the first place. So product here means...? Nhat, please. Give me an example please.

S:.... (long pause). I'm thinking.

Long silence and inability to give the answer to teacher's questions occurred very frequently in this class. Teacher's use of English and technical terms did not seem to be effective in fostering students to get involved in the lesson. Seemingly realizing this, Mai switched to Vietnamese, still at a fast pace, to give more information. However, her class was responding very little. Not any technical term or uncommon words was spotted in Thanh's and Hoa's classes.

Discussion

There seems to be a congruence between the stated purposes of teacher talk and students' comments on the influences of teacher talk on their learning. In fact, it has been a reliable source of input for students given an EFL learning environment and an inspiration for them to study. Nevertheless, obstruction was still witnessed during the observed lessons. More specifically, the pervasive use of IRF presumably restricted student learning as Clifton (2006) has pointed out. According to Clifton (2006), students are disempowered through the IRF pattern in three ways. First, it is teachers who manipulate the topic, so usually they are merely able to give passive answers. Second, students are deprived of the "responsibility of assessing their output" (p. 143). Last, teachers dominated the communication by nominating which student to get involved. Interview data uncovered that teachers were aware of this; hence, hopefully, a considerable reduction in IRF use will soon be evident.

On the other hand, there existed a mismatch between teachers' perceptions and student' needs. Students wanted teacher talk to be more formal with more business technical terms because they are majoring in Business English. They felt like teachers are using the language as simply as students do. In contrast, teachers believed that they should avoid using jargons too frequently or lecturing formally in fear of a distant relationship and student boredom.

Findings of previous studies on the influences of teacher talk on student learning have been confirmed, for instance, Walsh's (2002) and Inceçay's (2010). However, other impacts did emerge in respect to rapport establishment and class atmosphere, which both indirectly relates to student learning.

Implications

Students' responses in interviews revealed their expectations of teacher talk to get them more engaged in learning and avoid class breakdowns. First, students insisted on formal and more complex teacher talk. Phuong explained in her response: "The register in business writing is formal. If teacher talk were a bit more formal, we could learn more from that. Perhaps the teacher is not much older than students, so... sometimes they speak like students. Second, to avoid the awkward silence sometimes happening in the class, students suggested some adjustments in the Vietnamese- English ratio and teacher talk pace. Indeed, they emphasized: "Teacher talk should be bilingual (both Vietnamese and English), so those who are from the rural areas cannot keep up with". There were, nevertheless, varied ideas about the most appropriate ratio of mother tongue and the target language, but most of the students agreed on 70-30 with 70% for English and 30% for Vietnamese. Another alternative can be: "The teacher can still use English, but simpler and more familiar with us" (Binh). Also, a

number of students complained on the pace: “Teachers should speak more clearly, some still speak a little bit fast”.

The above ideas have clearly suggested that students may be varied in their expectations of teacher talk complexity and pace. Therefore, the clue for teachers is their reactions as Binh confessed, “when we do not understand, our faces look dumb” or it is advisable that teachers should pay more attention to reading students’ facial expressions. Besides, other techniques to check students’ understanding can be used in combination so that teacher talk can accommodate student needs the best and as a result, boosting their learning outcomes.

Conclusion

This study did not aim to make any conclusions about the amount of teacher talk; instead, it was conducted in response to Walsh’s (2002) question: How can teachers enhance the quantity and quality of learner output by more careful language use?” (p.3). Data from classroom observation and interviews 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 of the IRF pattern has been observed to hinder student learning sometimes.

The most notable suggestion from students for the improvements in teacher talk is their flexibility and timely adjustment. By observing students’ facial expression, teachers can make changes to their talk, including the pace, word choice and the language code for students’ optimal learning.

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