

A Case Study on College English Classroom Discourse

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ABSTRACT

Classroom discourse analysis is an aspect of classroom process research. It helps us understand how teachers use a language in classroom. Based on the data of discourse collected from English classroom in Three Gorges University in China, this paper attempts to reveal the features of discourse in College English classroom. The paper describes and analyzes the data from the aspects of the amount of teacher talk, the structures of classroom discourse and the questions of teacher. It finds out some features in the present College English classrooms, they are: teacher talk far exceeds students talk; IRF pattern dominates classroom discourse structure, and larger amount of displayed questions. On the basis of data analysis, the author offers some tentative suggestions for English teachers to encourage students to talk more in class.

Keywords: Classroom Discourse analysis, Teacher talk, Classroom discourse structure, Teachers' questions

INTRODUCTION

Classroom discourse, which includes the interactions between language learners and their teacher or other learners, has been one of the most discussed topics in both classroom research and L2 acquisition. It illustrates the joint contributions of teacher and students, rather than focusing only on the teacher's language. It is very important not only for teachers' classroom organization but also for students' language learning. Classroom discourse analysis is an aspect of classroom process research. According to Arthur (2008), the earliest systemic study of classroom discourse was reported in 1910 and stenographers were used to make a continuous record of teacher and student talking in high school classrooms. The first use of audiotape recorders in classrooms was reported in the 1930s, and during the 1960s, there was a rapid growth in the number of studies based on analysis of transcripts of classroom discourse. These early studies showed that the verbal interaction between teachers and students had an underlying structure that was much the same in all classrooms, at all grade levels, and in all countries. In China, due to the lack of English-speaking environment outside classroom, classroom discourse is regarded as a kind of model language and the main source of "input" for almost all the non-English major students in college. Students' successful learning outcomes, to some extent, result from the appropriate discourse in classroom instruction.

The present research is a case study and it inherits the previous researchers' rationale and methodology to describe and analyze classroom discourse based on the data collecting from College English classrooms in China Three Gorges University. The research tries to find out the features of College

English classroom discourse from the three aspects: the amount of teacher talk, the structure of classroom discourse, and the questions of teacher; the paper intends to offer some suggestions for managing classroom discourse.

BACKGROUND

Previous Studies

Since the 1960s and early 1970s, many studies on classroom discourse have been undertaken in the English-speaking countries. A great number of them have drawn much attention to interaction between teachers and students. Among those who early began to conceive classroom talk in terms of structure were Bellack and his colleagues (1966). They offered a simple description of classroom discourse involving a four-part framework: 1) structure, 2) solicit, 3) respond, and 4) react (cited in Allwright and Bailey, 1991, 98).

Barnes (1978) sought to record and discuss the pattern of teacher interaction and the patterns as well that could be applied in small group talk among students. His commentaries on the patterns of talk revealed ways in which teachers talk appeared to impact on students' learning, sometimes facilitating it, sometimes stifling it, while his other work most notably on students learning in small groups, also uncovered a great deal of ways students could usefully learn together as they collectively build some understanding in talk.

The concept of classroom discourse has undergone various interpretations. Edmondson (1985) believed that the classroom discourse provides "co-existing discourse words" depending on whether the participants are engaged in the act of trying to learn or trying to communicate. Nunan (1993) viewed classroom discourse as the distinctive type of discourse that occurs in classroom. In his opinion, special features of discourse include unequal relationships, which are marked by unequal opportunities for teachers and pupils to nominate topics, take turn at speaking, etc.

Kramsch (1985) considered classroom discourse as composed of a continuum extending from pedagogic to natural discourse poles. The interaction between group members in a classroom moves between the two poles of this continuum consisting of instructional roles. Xu Erqing and Ying Huilan (2002) analyzed the discourse pattern and communicative features in an English classroom teaching with New College English as textbook. Liu Jiarong and Jiang Yuhong (2004) investigated and described the discourse in oral English lessons. All the above studies definitely have significant influence on research of classroom discourse and language teaching.

Aspects of Classroom Discourse Analysis

Amount of Teacher Talk

The amount of teacher talk influences the classroom teaching. Many researchers have already done research on it. It is argued that the amount and quality of teacher talk is a decisive factor for classroom teacher and has great impact on L2 learning (Hakansson, 1986). Nunan (1991) claimed that the amount of teacher talk should be appropriate, so that students could get a chance to produce output. Harmer (1998) also found out that teacher talk occupied much more time than students talk. The balance of teacher talk and student talk is important in the EFL classroom, so that students can get more

opportunities to internalize English knowledge and improve their language competence in the way of learning English by using English.

IRF Structure

Sinclair and Coulthard (1975) developed a model of classroom discourse involving a series of ranks and levels arranged in hierarchical order. They found in the traditional native-speaker language school classroom, a structure of three-part exchanges: Initiation, Response, and Feedback, known as IRF. Teachers and pupils speak according to the very fixed perceptions of their roles and the talk could be seen to conform to highly structured sequences. According to them, the following is the typical classroom discourse sequences:

T: What's the capital of France? (Initiation)

S: Paris. (Response)

T: Yes, Paris. That's right. (Feedback)

These three moves, the teacher's initiation, the student's response and the teacher's feedback, consist of an exchange. Sinclair and Coulthard put forward that in teacher-student interactions, the response part of the exchange was typically followed by a third move on the teacher's part. This move consists of an evaluative commentary on the students' response, which they termed as feedback. This feedback move is a function of the teacher's power to control language and meaning since it signals what is to be viewed as relevant knowledge within the discourse. The I-R-F sequence has been widely accepted by the researchers as a useful category to analyze classroom discourse.

Teachers' Questions

Teachers use questions to manage classroom interaction. In some classrooms, over half of the class time is taken up by question-and-answer exchanges. Teachers' questions have been the focus of research attention for many years. Substantial research exists demonstrating that questions can assist learners in improving their linguistic ability. According to Ellis (1994), teachers control the classroom discourse and occupy the first part of ubiquitous three-phase IRF exchange by asking many questions. Questions typically serve as devices for initiating discourse centered on medium-orientated goals, although they can also serve a variety of other functions.

Many researchers make questions in different taxonomies. Barnes (1978) developed the earliest taxonomy, which distinguished four types of questions in classroom. The first type is Factual Questions (what), the second type is Reasoning Questions (how and why), the third type is Opening Questions that do not require any reasoning, and the fourth type is Social Questions that influence students' behavior by means of control or appeal. Kearsley (1976) offered an extensive taxonomy of question types based on conversational data. Long and Sato (1983) developed taxonomy of functions of teachers' questions which was adopted from Kearsley's taxonomy. According to the taxonomy, questions can be divided into two main types of questions: echoic questions and epistemic questions. Echoic questions are used to check whether students have understood information, while epistemic questions are used to stimulate to acquire information.

Although there are much different taxonomy to describe different types of questions, many classroom studies of teacher questions adopt the classification of display questions and referential questions.

Ellis (1994) classified the types of questions from a new angle and discuss display questions and referential questions. Display questions ask the respondents to provide or display knowledge or information already known by the questioner, e.g. “What’s the opposite of ‘up’ in English?” (Ellis, 1994, p. 587). Referential questions request information not known by the questioner. To some extent, “referential questions are genuinely information-seeking, while display questions ‘test’ the learners by eliciting already known information.” (Ellis, 1994, p. 587). Referential questions are more likely to elicit longer, more authentic responses than display questions, e.g. “Why didn’t you do your homework?” (Ellis, 1994, p. 587). Referential questions are to encourage diverse responses from students which are not short answers, and to engage them in higher-level thinking to provide their own information and ideas than to recollect the previously presented information.

The present study will follow the classification of display questions and referential questions. Teachers’ questions in teacher-student interaction constitute an important part of classroom discourse, and the proper use of questions is beneficial to students’ English learning.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This part is concerned with the research methods to explore classroom discourse. In what follows, the author will state the research questions of the present study, and then present the participants and introduce the instruments adopted in the research. Finally, the author will describe and analyze the data in order to draw the conclusions to the study.

Research Questions

This research focuses on the following questions:

1. What is the amount of teacher talk in 45 minutes (one period of class) of College English classrooms in Three Gorges University (CTGU)?
2. What types of discourse structures can be found in College English classrooms at CTGU?
3. How frequently are display questions and referential questions used by teachers in College English classroom at CTGU?

Participants

The author randomly chose four teachers lecturing on College English for non-English majors at CTGU and their students as the participants. There were four classes, with 50 students in each class. The teachers and students shared the same L1 background, that is, they are all Chinese. The four teachers had similar education and teaching background with master degree and more than 5 years’ English teaching experience, and had sufficient preparation for their work.

The participating students were 100 freshmen and 100 sophomores from different majors, such as Application Technology of Computer, Chemical Engineering, Mathematics, Tourism Management, Journalism, etc. All of them have received at least 6 years’ English education. In other words, they had possessed the integrated competence to use the English language.

Instruments

Audio-recording and classroom observation were the major instruments for the present study. MP3 recorder was used to collect discourse data from the four College English classrooms. The English classes of the four classrooms were audio-recorded and then transcribed for analysis. Besides, in order to make up the potential limitations lying therein, the author attended the four classes, observing the classroom teaching and learning processes. The author didn't intervene the natural classroom teaching and learning process and the verbal behavior of both teachers and students, and she just observed the classroom activities and took field notes to facilitate data transcription and analysis.

Data Collection

The data were collected over a span of roughly two months from March to May in 2011. Each class was audio-recorded and observed three times. The textbook for the students is New Horizon College English. The teachers were informed of the author's research, but not of the purpose of the research. The lessons were not specially prepared for the research and all the lessons were recorded under a natural classroom environment. Through the time of two months, enough data were obtained based on classroom observation and audio-recording of classroom discourse.

Research Procedure

After the investigation, all the discourses of the teachers and their students were transcribed and calculated from the three aspects: the amount of teacher talk, the types of discourse structure, the uses of teachers' questions. The process of data collecting, transcribing and calculating is exhausting, as it needs patience and great care. All the items (of three times of audio-recording of each class) concerning the above three aspects were counted to get the means and average percentages of the items for each class. The means and average percentages of the items of the four classes were finally calculated and analyzed.

RESEARCH RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

RESEARCH RESULTS

RESULT OF THE AMOUNT OF TEACHER TALK

Table 1 is the amount of teacher talk in College English classrooms of the four classes, showing teacher talk time, student talk time and other activities time (such as listening to audio materials, watching movies, etc., where neither teachers nor students need to talk) in 45 minutes (one period of class), and their percentages in the total class time.

Table 1. Amount of Teacher Talk

Classes	Teacher Talk Time (min)	Proportion (%)	Student Talk Time (min)	Proportion (%)	Other Activities Time (min)	Proportion
Class 1	31	68.89	11	24.44	3	6.67
Class 2	30	66.67	8	17.78	7	15.55
Class 3	28	62.23	15	33.33	2	4.44
Class 4	35	77.78	5	11.11	5	11.11
Means	31	68.89	9.75	21.66	4.25	9.44

Table 1 shows that the amount of teacher talk time greatly surpasses that of student talk time. In these four classes, the mean of teacher talk time in 45 minutes (one period of time) is 31 minutes while student talk time is only 9.75 minutes. The percentage of teacher talk time is larger than that of student talk time. Teacher talk still dominates College English classroom.

Result of Types of Classroom Discourse Structure

By means of Sinclair and Coulthard's model (IRF), the result of discourse structure analysis is presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Types of Classroom Discourse Structure

Classes	IRF Structure		Other Structures	
	Number	Percentage (%)	Number	Percentage (%)
Class 1	15	71.43	6	28.57
Class 2	18	78.26	5	21.74
Class 3	20	80	5	20
Class 4	17	80.95	4	19.05
Means	17.5	77.66	5	22.34

In Sinclair and Coulthard's model (IRF), the teacher exerts the maximum amount of control over classroom discourse. Table 2 shows some features consistent with Sinclair and Coulthard's findings on language classroom discourse structure. IRF structure is observed to take a large proportion (77.66%). The following is a typical example of IRF structure found in one of the four classrooms.

T: What does "break down" mean here? (Initiation)

S: "Destroy". (Response)

T: Yes. It means “destroy” or “damage”. Thank you. (Feedback)

In this exchange, the teacher initiated a question, the student responded to it, and the teacher provided a feedback with confirmation.

Table 2 reflects that IRF structure is dominant in College English classrooms at CTGU. In IRF structure, the teacher has two turns, while the student has only one. It demonstrates that the opportunities for students to practice English are unsatisfactorily insufficient.

Result of the Uses of Teachers’ Questions

The frequencies of the two types of teachers’ questions (display question and referential question) are listed in Table 3.

Table 3. Frequency of Display Questions and Referential Questions

Classes	Frequency of Display Questions		Frequency of Referential Questions	
	Number	Percentage (%)	Number	Percentage (%)
Class 1	9	42.85	12	57.15
Class 2	16	69.56	7	30.44
Class 3	11	57.89	8	42.11
Class 4	6	37.5	10	62.5
Means	10.5	51.95	9.25	48.05

The data in Table 3 indicate that the uses of display questions and referential questions are different in the four classes. There is a predominance of referential questions over display questions in Class 1 and Class 4, while in Class 2 and Class 3, display questions are more frequently used than referential questions. The teachers gave display questions like “Linda, would you look at Paragraph 3? Can you tell me when they went to the party?”, “Who are older and more experienced, the writer or his friends?” and referential questions such as “What are the advantages and disadvantage of living in cities?”, “How do you look at making a bad decision?” On average, there is a priority of display questions (51.95%) over referential questions (48.05%), though the discrepancy is not big.

FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS OR RECOMMENDATIONS

According to Table 1, the average amount of teacher talk time is 31 minutes in 45 minutes (one period of time), which greatly surpasses that of student talk time (9.75 minutes). The reasons for such a situation are likely as follows:

1. Traditionally, teachers in China are supposed to play a dominant role in language classrooms. Quite some teachers are still holding that they know more about what they are teaching, and they are the absolute authority in classroom instruction. They talk much in class to explain language points or translate the whole text exhaustively. Students are always in a passive position in the teacher-oriented classrooms.

2. Teachers are monopolizing the ultimate responsibility to manage classroom interaction and to ensure the teaching process could proceed in an orderly way to the desired goal.

3. Student's language level, especially their oral English proficiency, limits their contribution to classroom discourse. To the author's observation in the four classes, the students are not used to speaking English in class due to the fact that they barely spoke English in the previous English classes. Even when the teachers give them chances to speak English, they may not make good use of the chances to improve their oral English.

Nunan (1991) once pointed that excessive teacher talk should be avoided to give students more opportunities to produce comprehensible output themselves. In fact, no one can give an exact answer to what amount of teacher talk during one period is proper for classroom interaction. However, there is one thing for sure that if teacher talk dominates the class, students will not be encouraged to contribute more to classroom interaction and to ensure the accurate use of English.

The data in Table 2 confirm the result in Table 1, that is, teachers talk much more than students in English class. The rigid IRF structure accounts for the predominant proportion of teacher talk in College English classrooms. An IRF structure consists of two teacher's turns and one student's turn, so it's no wonder that the teacher's turn is double the student's turn in one IRF exchange. The students have few chances to practice unless the teacher initiates a question which requires them to answer. They usually generate nothing but a few words or just read the original sentence (s) in the text as a reply, which contributes little to improving their linguistic and communicative competence. The frequent use of IRF structure constrains students to enjoy longer speaking turns and to practice English.

From Table 3, we can find that the number of display questions used in the four classes is a little larger than that of referential questions. However, there is nearly a balance of uses between the two types of questions. Two teachers prefer to use display questions. They intend to help the students confirm their knowledge perhaps due to the students' low level and lacking of autonomous learning awareness. However, the other two teachers ask more referential questions, which concern interaction between teachers and students.

Through classroom observation, it is found that the purpose for teachers to ask display questions is usually to check students about the learnt knowledge. While teachers ask referential questions to let students practice more English and have more chances to participate in classroom interaction. When students are given more referential questions, they can be encouraged to provide obviously longer, syntactically more complex answers, and get more opportunities to give their own ideas.

CONCLUSION

Summary of the Findings

The present study describes and analyzes the features of College English classroom discourse of CTGU. The findings are as follows: Firstly, as to the amount of teacher talk, the study finds that teacher talk far exceeds student talk. Teacher talk still dominates College English classrooms at CTGU. Secondly, with regards to the types of discourse structures, IRF is frequently used. Under the rigid IRF pattern, there exist an unequal relationship and teacher talk predominance. Unequal power relationships are measured by unequal power opportunities for teachers and students to nominate topics and take turns speaking. Thirdly, in terms of teachers' questions, the teachers use more display questions than

referential questions. This is also another reason for the imbalance between teacher talk and student talk.

The findings show that the College English classrooms in CTGU are still teacher-oriented. In the classroom, the teacher is the most active person. It is the teacher who controls the subject matter, deciding whatever needed to be talked and orchestrating what the students should do, which, obviously, contradicts the current teaching concept of students-centeredness. On the whole, the findings of this study provide an empirical evidence for realizing the three aspects of English classroom discourse at CTGU. The findings also offer some suggestions to English teachers to improve classroom interaction by using appropriate discourse in their teaching.

Pedagogical Implications

Classroom discourse is important for the organization and management of the classroom. Based on the results and analysis of the data, some feasible suggestions for teachers in managing classroom communication are illustrated below:

Balancing teacher talk time and student talk time

The appropriate use of teacher talk greatly influences classroom interaction. On one hand, teacher talk should be adequate in order to provide students with enough comprehensible input of English. On the other hand, students should be encouraged to practice speaking English as much as possible. Therefore, teachers are desired to regulate their talks to moderate their control of the whole class, and provide students with more opportunities to increase their target language output to improve their target language proficiency.

Encouraging using different forms of classroom discourse

Teachers generally decide the patterns of classroom discourse, many of which are based on IRF sequence and characterized by display questions. One way to increase students' learning motivation in the classrooms is to allow the use of different discourse patterns. For example, students prefer cooperative learning, which is especially beneficial to establishing a supportive classroom atmosphere and promotes students' language skills. Compared with IRF structure, in cooperative learning, students have more opportunities to talk and share ideas with their group members. They usually tend to be more confident to speak if they have done some discussion with their peers.

In the classroom, sometimes it is appropriate to employ IRF structure, e.g. when the answers for some questions are already known or the teacher wants to give an evaluation. At other times, it is advisable to be more genuine and natural in communication, such as getting students to exchange ideas or information among them.

Asking more referential questions

Referential questions are thought more likely to elicit longer and more authentic responses than display questions; subsequently an increased use of referential questions by teachers may create discourse which can produce a flow of information from the students to the teacher, and may create a more quasi-normal speech. However, display questions require short or even one-word answers, which quite

improbably move students to produce large amounts of speech. Therefore, teachers should intentionally resort more to referential questions to encourage students to talk more.

The implications are drawn from four classrooms of College English at CTGU only, which, therefore, might be biased, but representative as they certainly are. The findings reflect the features of College English classroom discourse at CTGU. The present study has shed light on the three aspects of classroom discourse of College English, which are the amount of teacher talk, the types of classroom discourse and teachers' questions. And the pedagogical suggestions given by this study are hoped to be enlightening to English teachers.

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