A Case Study on EFL Classroom Discourse

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Abstract

The main aim of the present study is to get a deeper understanding of EFL classroom discourse. The author then tries to reveal the current state of the process of EFL (English as a Foreign Language) classroom discourse in Shokouh English Language Institute in Astara, Iran. In order to achieve this goal, the paper describes and analyzes the data from the aspects of the amount of teacher talk (TT), the structure of classroom discourse, and the type of questions employed by teachers. It is found that the teacher talk exceeds students talk; IRF (initiation, response, and feedback) discourse structure is frequently used though more complex structures such as the IR \([I_1R_1 ... I_nR_n]\) F structure and the IR\(_1\)F\(_1\)R\(_2\)F\(_2\) ... R\(_n\)F\(_n\) structure are sometimes used, too; and display questions outnumbered referential ones. It is, therefore, concluded that the students generally play a passive role in EFL classroom discourse, especially in teacher-student interaction, while it is essential to increase students’ contribution in classroom discourse and interaction. On the basis of data analysis, the author offers some tentative suggestions such as minimizing the quantity of teacher talk, replacing IRF structure with more complex structures, and using more referential questions in order to provide students with more opportunities to participate in classroom activities to improve their classroom interactional communicative skills.

Keywords: Classroom discourse, IRF pattern, EFL classroom, teacher talk, students talk.
Introduction

The primary goal of language is communication which is an outward extension of thought, linking one idea to another. Classroom discourse refers to the language teachers and students use to communicate with each other in the classroom. In fact, the fulfillment of teaching depends mostly on the teacher-student interaction within the actual classroom. The language-of-the-classroom is a negotiated system of meaning and a set of conventions for the conveyance of information and knowledge within a particular classroom. This transaction requires the negotiation of meaning through interaction known as discourse (Widdowson, 1984: 100).

The term 'the language classroom' is used in this paper to refer to a classroom which is primarily concerned with the development of a foreign language, here English, since it is neither the native language nor the official language in the country.

Classroom discourse which is often different in form and function from the language used in other situations has special features including unequal power relationships, turn-taking at speaking, patterns of interaction, etc. with the emphasis being on the close observation of the specific behaviors of participants in interaction.

Discourse analysis (DA) and conversation analysis (CA) are the most influential theoretical frameworks and analytical instruments. Discourse analysis aims to analyze the total picture of natural communication, examining the structural features in the unit of discourse. The present research aims at displaying interactional features in EFL classroom discourse from the perspectives of both DA and CA to provide some pedagogical implications to foreign language learning and teaching.

Literature Review

Foreign and second language acquisition (F/SLA) can be studied, investigated, and analyzed from different perspectives. Language teachers' insights about many aspects of classroom interaction, such as turn-taking, adjacency pair, conversation repair, interruption, conversation openings and closings, topic organization, and questioning patterns need to be expanded. For example, teachers should unveil the turn-taking system of classroom interaction in order to help learners map out invisible rules of behavior in teacher-students interaction. As a whole, what makes classroom interaction happen is a key question interesting to researchers and practitioners in classroom discourse and other related fields such as conversation analysis, discourse analysis, and so on.

Previous Studies

Zellig Harris is the first person who used the term ‘discourse’. Although his paper with the title ‘Discourse Analysis’ was a far cry from the discourse analysis which is used nowadays, thereafter, discourse-based analysis came on the research agenda in the late 1960s. Many scholars such as Sinclair, Coulthard, Sacks, Halliday, and Van Dijk have done useful research on discourse from different perspectives.

The studies on discourse led to the significance of classroom discourse which was recognized increasingly and more and more researchers started to focus their studies on classroom discourse with a focus on the interaction between teachers and students. Bellack and his colleagues (1966)
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) studied the patterns of teacher interaction and those of students talk, revealing the impact of teacher talk on students' learning.

Other scholars also studied classroom discourse from various points of view. Kramsch (1985) viewed classroom discourse along a continuum extending from pedagogic to natural talk poles. Nunan (1993) maintained that classroom discourse as a distinctive type of discourse has features including unequal relationships in turn taking, nominating topics, etc.

**Amount of Teacher Talk**

In a teacher-centered teaching mode, the amount of TT is much more than that of student talk (ST) while a student-centered teaching mode emphasizes the time allotted for students' talk, claiming that students need enough time to practice the foreign language that is essential for the development of their communicative competence. Although TT is of great importance, it does not mean the more the better, rather the balance of TT and ST seems very crucial.

Nevertheless, Hakansson (1986) believed that the amount and quality of TT does affect classroom teaching. Nunan (1991) pointed out that the amount of time allotted to teachers and students should be appropriate so that students could produce output. Harmer (1998) believed that there should be a balance between TT and ST in order to increase students' productions. As a result, teachers need to moderate their control over class through increasing students' opportunities in class activity participation such as role play, repetition, discussion, and the like.

**IRF Structure**

Sinclair and Coulthard (1992) found that the teacher-controlled classroom discourse has a rigid pattern where teachers and students speak according to highly structured sequences known as IRF structure. They described teacher-student interaction, based on a hierarchy of discourse units, that is, lesson-transaction-exchange-move-act, with the act being the smallest meaningful element of discourse, and the lesson being the largest one.

*Lesson*, the largest unit of classroom organization, is based on pedagogical evidence. *Transactions*, the second largest units, are expressed in terms of *exchanges*. And *exchanges*, significant units of discourse as defined by McCarthy (2002), in turn, are expressed in terms of *moves* and are marked always by *frames*. *Frames* are realized by words such as *good, right, OK*, etc. through which the students know that one transaction has ended and another is beginning, with a *focus*, telling them what the transaction is going to be about.

The structure of *exchanges* is expressed in terms of *moves*. The element of the structure is obviously defined as that of ‘teaching exchange’, which typically has three phases, involving an *initiation move*, a *response move*, and a *feedback move* (Ellis, 1994). For example:

T: *Ask Amin how old he is?* (Initiation)  
S: *How old are you?* (Response)  
T: *Good.* (Feedback)
This exchange is known as ‘IRF’ (initiation, response, and feedback). Moves are realized by means of different acts. The IRF structure occurs only in the classroom discourse which is teacher-controlled although Van Lier (1988) found that learners do sometimes initiate exchanges, at least in some classrooms. In spite of the fact that IRF exchanges tend to be the dominant structure in classroom discourse, some scholars have proved that other kinds of discourse model can also be found in classroom discourse.

**Teachers’ Questions**

One of the influential factors in creating classroom interactions is the types of the questions which are asked by teachers. Thus, teachers’ questions can keep learners participating in classroom discourse. Richard and Lockhart (1996) maintained that teachers’ questions are of vital importance in language acquisition. According to Ellis (1994), questions serve as devices to initiate discourse in ubiquitous three-phase IRF exchange.

Many researchers have classified teachers' questions differently. Barnes (1978) distinguished four types of classroom questions: 1) factual questions (what), 2) reasoning questions (why and how), 3) opening questions requiring no reasoning, and 4) social questions influencing students' behavior. Long and Sato (1983) divided teachers' questions, based on their functions, into two kinds: 1) echoic questions for checking students' information understanding and 2) epistemic questions for stimulating information acquisition.

Although there are other divisions, too, Ellis (1994) classified questions into the two types of display questions and referential questions adopted by many researchers. Display questions attempt to elicit information or knowledge already known by the teacher, e.g., "What's the opposite of 'up' in English?" (Ellis, 1994: 587). While referential questions request information not known by the teacher and are likely to elicit long answers through higher-level thinking, e.g., "Why didn't you do your homework?" (Ellis, 1994: 587). Based on many studies, referential questions make for more interaction and meaningful negotiation. According to Brown (2001: 171), referential questions demand more thought and generate longer responses. While display questions demand a single or short response.

The present study will adopt the classification of display questions and referential questions, focusing on what is going on in the classroom, especially on teachers’ questioning behavior – the type of questions they ask for a variety of purposes. Accordingly, teacher-learner interaction can be seen as a continuum between display and referential questions, with the role of a teacher in question asking being a crucial matter.

**Methodology**

This part is concerned with the research methods in order to collect, describe, and analyze EFL classroom discourse. First, the research questions will be stated. Then, the participants will be presented and the instruments adopted in the research introduced. Finally, the collected data will be described and analyzed to draw the conclusions to the study.

**Participants**

The participants are EFL learners studying English at 'Shokouh English Language Institute in Astara' (Guilan Province, Iran). The EFL learners from four classes at intermediate level were
chosen as convenient samples for the study. Four teachers (of both sexes) each with enough teaching experience were chosen for the study.

**Instrumentation**

The present research adopts classroom observation and audio-recording as its instruments. The audio-recorded data has several advantages such as the recoverability of certain features, playing and replaying, the possibility of checking, etc. all of which facilitate transcription.

Therefore, the conversation classes of the four classes were audio-recorded and then transcribed for analysis. The author also attended the four classes in order to make up the potential limitations without intervening the natural classroom teaching and learning processes.

**Data Collection**

The data were collected from 'Shokouh English Language Institute in Astara' (Guilan Province, Iran). The teachers were informed of the author's research, but not of the purpose of the research. Four EFL lessons were observed and audio-recorded under a natural classroom environment by the researcher who sat at the back of the class throughout the data collection period. Then the audio-recorded lessons were transcribed and checked over and over again by the observer for the accuracy of the transcriptions. Nevertheless, some parts of the recordings failed to be transcribed because of inaudibility.

**Results And Discussions**

**The amount of teacher Talk**

Table 1 indicates the amount of teacher talk time, student talk time, and other activities talk time in four classes of Shokouh English Language Institute in 60 minutes and their percentages in the total class time.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Classes</th>
<th>Teacher Talk Time (min)</th>
<th>(%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Class 1</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>68.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Class 2</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Class 3</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>63.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Class 4</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>66.67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Means</td>
<td>39.5</td>
<td>65.83</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Classes</th>
<th>Student Talk Time (min)</th>
<th>(%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Class 1</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Class 2</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>23.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Class 3</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>26.67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Class 4</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>23.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Means</td>
<td>14.75</td>
<td>24.58</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Classes</th>
<th>Other Activities Time (min)</th>
<th>(%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Class 1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>6.67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Class 2</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>11.67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Class 3</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Class 4</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Means</td>
<td>5.75</td>
<td>9.83</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1. Amount of Teacher Talk
It is understood from Table 1 that the amount of teacher talk time surpasses that of student talk time. The mean of teacher talk time in 60 minutes is 39.5 minutes while that of student talk time is 14.75 minutes. The percentage of teacher talk time (65.83%) is larger than that of student talk time (24.58%). Therefore, teacher talk still dominates EFL classroom.

**Classroom discourse structure**

Table 2 presents the result of discourse structure analysis by means of Sinclair and Coulthard's model (IRF).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Classes</th>
<th>IRF Structure No.</th>
<th>IRF Structure (%)</th>
<th>Other Structures No.</th>
<th>Other Structures (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Class 1</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Class 2</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>73.08</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>26.92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Class 3</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>66.67</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>33.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Class 4</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>74.07</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>25.93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Means</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>70.59</td>
<td>7.5</td>
<td>29.41</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As indicated in table 2, IRF structure has a large proportion (70.59%). There are, however, discourse structures that are more complex than Sinclair and Coulthard’s Initiation-Response-Feedback (IRF) model, that is, variations of the IRF structure have also been documented (29.41%). Nonetheless, there still exists the rigid IRF structure.

**The uses of teacher's questions**

Table 3 shows the frequency of display and referential questions.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Classes</th>
<th>Frequency of Display Questions No.</th>
<th>Frequency of Display Questions (%)</th>
<th>Frequency of Referential Questions No.</th>
<th>Frequency of Referential Questions (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Class 1</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>52.38</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>47.62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Class 2</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>59.09</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>40.91</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
From table 3, we can see a predominance of referential questions over display questions in class 3, while display questions predominate referential questions in the rest of the classes. On average, there is a predominance of display questions (53.09%) over referential questions (46.91%), but the difference is not big.

Conclusion

Summary of the Findings

The overall aim of this research is to investigate, describe, and analyze classroom discourse which involves extremely complex processes. Thus, it is impossible to fully understand what is going on in the classroom by observing and analyzing a number of lessons. In spite of the fact that classroom discourse is a very dynamic and complicated phenomenon, several studies have been carried out on it with similar findings and results. Anyhow, the major findings of this study based on the audio-recordings are summarized as follows:

Amount of teacher talk

Based on the findings, teacher talk exceeds student talk. Most of the interaction in the EFL classroom is from the teacher to the students. Students rarely initiate the conversation with little student-student interaction. The teacher is the most active person in the classroom while the students are passive in learning, thus it will be a huge challenge for the teacher to encourage the students to participate in the classroom interaction.

IRF structure

Although the IRF discourse structure is frequently used in EFL classroom, it is not the only discourse structure. The other structures such as the IRFR, the IR [I₁R₁ ... IₙRₙ] F, and the IR₁F₁R₂F₂ ... RₙFₙ structures sometimes occur, too. Repairs and repetitions are frequently used by teachers and students to cope with various conversation problems. Teachers often interrupt students, however, Iranian EFL students seldom interrupt teachers.

Display and referential questions

Through the analysis of the audio-recordings, it was found that display questions outnumbered referential ones. Asking question in language classroom involves students in interactional communication. Although it would be dangerous to generalize that referential questions are most
useful for language learning, it is implied that they increase the amount of learner output with the conclusion that question asking behavior of the teacher can be an important tool in the language classrooms in order to increase students' participation in classroom interaction.

**Pedagogical Implications**

Based on the findings of the study, some suggestions for the improvement of classroom interactional communication seem fruitful.

**Balance teacher talk time and student talk time**

Since teacher talk can provide students with comprehensible input, it greatly affects classroom interaction. However, it does not mean poor student participation in classroom interaction; rather the teacher needs to create an appropriate classroom interactional environment so as to facilitate students’ performance in classroom interaction. Iranian EFL students have difficulty in turn-taking – how to jump into a conversation and maintain it. If they cope with this problem, they can start and remain involved in a conversation. As a result, teachers are desired to regulate their talks and increase their students' conversation skills.

**Use various forms of classroom discourse**

Teachers usually use IRF discourse structure in language classroom. Although it is appropriate to employ IRF pattern for some purposes, this pattern in teacher-student interaction contributes little to the development of students' communicative competence. Therefore, it is advisable to use other patterns and replace IRF structure with more complex structures.

**Ask more referential questions**

Although it seems that teachers can encourage language learners and provide them with comprehensible input through using display questions, it was observed that referential questions made more classroom interactions. Referential questions are likely to elicit more authentic responses than display questions. Therefore, teachers need to apply more referential questions.

The implications are drawn from four classes at 'Shokouh English Language Institute in Astara' (Guilan province, Iran). It is mainly a micro-analysis of the classroom discourse, so the results obtained in the present research leave much to be verified and improved. However, the pedagogical suggestions given by this study are hoped be useful to English teachers.
References


