

Reviewing Different Aspects of Classroom Discourse

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Abstracts

Among different types of discourse, classroom discourse is a special type of discourse that occurs between teacher and students and among the students in classrooms (Nunan,1993). Classroom discourse largely consists of explanations, instructions, descriptions and arguments. Due to the importance of classroom discourse in educational setting, this study attempts to review different aspects of classroom discourse. The results of this study shows that the type of students' and teachers' discourse, the types of questions and the patterns of classroom discourse can be different in different classrooms and in various learning situations. Besides, the results of previous studies showed that IRF (Initiation-Response-Feedback) is a typical pattern of classroom discourse.

Keywords: *classroom, discourse, patterns, questions, language*

1. Introduction

Among different types of discourse, classroom discourse is a special type of discourse that occurs between teacher and students and among the students in classrooms (Nunan ,1993).Classroom discourse largely consists of explanations, instructions, descriptions and arguments .Furthermore, the form and function of classroom discourse is often different from other types of discourse used in other situations because of the specific social roles of teachers and students as well as the kind of activities which they perform there. Due to the importance of classroom discourse in educational setting, this study attempts to review different aspects of classroom discourse.

2. Classroom Discourse

Kramersch (1985; as cited in Ellis, 1990, p.86) considers classroom discourse as composed of “a continuum extending from pedagogic to natural discourse poles”. Pedagogic discourse occurs when teacher and their students fulfill their institutional roles, tasks are about the exchange and reception of information controlled by the teacher, additionally, knowledge as product and accuracy are emphasized. Furthermore, a pedagogic discourse has its own special components. Mehan (1979; as cited in Ellis, 1990) presented three structural components of a pedagogic discourse including an opening phase where the students are prepared for learning a lesson, an instructional phase which is about the exchange of information between teacher and students,

and a closing phase where students are reminded of the main points of a lesson. Natural discourse, on the other hand, occurs when more fluid roles are established through interaction, the equal participation and negotiation of meaning are focused in the tasks, besides, and the interactional process and fluency are emphasized. Therefore, the interaction between the participants of a classroom moves between the two poles of this continuum.

3. Classroom discourse in traditional and non-traditional classes

In classroom context, teachers and learners play different roles. In traditional classes, the teachers are dominate, talk more than the students, control topics and allocation of turns, usually ask closed questions, and judge the acceptability of the students' responses (Skidmore, 2000). Therefore, in traditional classroom, teachers have a great deal of control over the kinds of interactions in the classroom. Besides, teachers make a number of decisions which are mostly made in advance (e.g., lesson planning). However, in nontraditional classes, students talk more; besides, students' self-selection and students' topic expansion are observed more frequently in nontraditional compared to traditional classes (Skidmore, 2000). It is concluded that in nontraditional classes, the dominance of the teachers is somewhat mitigated by giving students opportunity to participate actively in classroom discourse. Bakhtin (1981; as cited in Skidmore, 2000, p.284) called traditional classroom discourse as 'authoritative discourse' and nontraditional classroom discourse as 'internally persuasive discourse'.

4. Typical pattern of Classroom Discourse

Classroom interaction between teacher and learners includes different patterns depending on a variety of factors such as teaching style, topic of conversation, and L2 proficiency level of students. Among these patterns, IRF (Initiation-Response-Feedback) is a typical pattern of classroom discourse which is proposed by Sinclair and Coulthard (1975); in this structure, the teacher initiates asking a question to check a learner's knowledge, the learner answers the question, and the teacher gives feedback (Richards et al., 1992). Thus, in this pattern, the teacher is responsible for carrying out the first (initiation) turn as well as the third (feedback) turn of the exchange. Besides, the students are carrying out the second turn (response). Moreover, in this type of interaction, the teacher's and the students' roles are predetermined. The teacher act as an expert who guides or directs the interaction and the student plays a role based on the teacher's decisions about who participates, when and how much interaction should take place between the teacher and the student. Therefore, the amount and type of interaction, input, or learning that can take place in the classroom are controlled by the teacher (Hall & Walsh, 2002). The following example is the typical classroom discourse sequences (Sinclair & Coulthard, 1975):

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

S: Paris. (Response)

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

5.Types of language used in EFL classroom

Generally, different types of language can be used in EFL classrooms. McTear (1975, as cited in Ellis, 1994) stated that four types of language can be used in EFL classroom including: mechanical (i.e. no exchange of meaning is occurred), meaningful (i.e. the contextualization of meaning is focused but no new information is conveyed), pseudo-communication (i.e. new information is conveyed but the language which is used in the classroom is not like a language which occurs outside the classroom), and real communication (i.e. spontaneous speech resulting from the exchange of opinions, jokes, classroom management, etc. is involved).

6.Types of questions used in classroom discourse

One of the important factors which can affect the classroom interactions is the questions which can be used by teachers. Questions can be used as devices for initiating discourse, although they can also serve a number of other functions. According to Ellis (1994), instructors can control the classroom discourse and involve in the first part of three-phase IRF exchange by asking various questions. Among different types of questions, display and referential questions are two common types of questions which can be asked in classrooms. Display Questions are a type of questions which are usually used for comprehension checks, confirmation checks or clarification requests (Long & Sato, 1983; Brock, 1986, as cited in Johnson & Johnson, 1998). However, referential questions are a type of questions which requires more thought and longer responses compared to display questions (Brown, 2001). Studies on teachers' questions indicates that display/closed questions are used more than referential/open questions in classrooms (Chaudron, 1988; Cullen, 1998; Ho, 2005; Nunan, 1987; Seedhouse, 1996; Tsui, 1985; Walsh, 2006; Yu, 2010).

An example of display question (Ellis, 1994, p. 588).

What's the opposite of 'up' in English?

An example of referential question (Ellis, 1994, p. 588).

Why didn't you do your homework?

Therefore, different types of questions play different roles in classroom context. Within a sociocultural theoretical perspective, McCormick and Donato (2000) suggest that teacher's questions should not be used as an elicitation device; rather, teacher's questions should take on the role of dynamic discursive devices that can be used to construct collaboration and scaffold

comprehension. Similarly, Hall (1995) as well as Hall and Verplaetse (2000) contend that teachers' questions should not be questions that elicit a translation of vocabulary; rather, they should be used in a context and they should engage students in interactions and producing language that will result in L2 learning.

7. Classroom Talk

Research focusing on classroom talk indicates that in a classroom context, different factors work together to influence the way in which meaning is socially constructed between teacher and learners. Studies regarding the nature of classroom talk in L2 classrooms have emphasized issues such as anxiety (Frantzen & Magnan, 2005; Young, 1992), students' perceptions of recasts (Morris & Tarone, 2003; Takahashi, 2007), equality and symmetry in dialogues (van Lier, 1998), students' motivations (Clement, Dornyei, & Noels, 1994), pedagogical concerns (Anton, 1999; Hall, 1995, 1998), theoretical perspectives (Kern, 2003; Mantero, 2006), and assessment techniques (Anton, 2003; Poehner, 2005; Poehner & Lantolf, 2005).

The common ground regarding these studies is that the language used between teacher and learners in a classroom context is basically different from the talk that occurs outside the classroom. Additionally, in classroom context, meaning is created through social interactions and talk is important to the way in which knowledge is constructed (Zuengler & Cole, 2005). Besides, in L2 classroom, language is both the mode of interaction as well as the goal of the learning activity and acquiring the L2 (Swain, 1997). Therefore, the language which is used in the classroom is not a simple tool for transfer of information, rather, it deals with the complicated social, cultural, political, cognitive, and linguistic processes and contexts which are parts of the meaning (Bloome, Power Carter, Morton Christian, Otto, & Shueart, 2005). Moreover, in the context of classroom teacher and learners mutually build knowledge and simultaneously create an appropriate context for learning. Additionally, during oral interactions in the classroom, teacher and learners establish their roles and relationships (Hall & Walsh, 2002) and they decide who says what, when and how.

8. Previous Studies

Since the 1960s and early 1970s, various studies on classroom discourse have been conducted and a large number of these studies were about the interaction between teachers and students. For example, Bellack and his colleagues (1966) were among scholars who early began to investigate classroom talk. They described classroom discourse in terms of a four-part framework: "1) structure, 2) solicit, 3) respond, and 4) react" (Bellack et. al, 1966; as cited in Allwright and Bailey, 1991, 98).

Moreover, Barnes (1978) recoded and interpreted the patterns of teacher's interactions together with the patterns of students' interactions in small group talk. Besides, Mehan (1978) studied on the interactions between instructors and students. In this regard, Mehan (1978)

contended that an I-R-E (initiation-response-evaluation) is the main interactional pattern that occurs in interaction between instructors and their students. Besides, according to Mehan(1985) , instructional discourse included sequences that occurred one after the other in interaction between instructor and learner.

Additionally, Mehan (1979) introduced a special type of I-R-E called an "Extended I-R-E Sequence". This type of sequence takes place when the teacher does not receive a suitable response from the student; therefore, the teacher continues to use a variety of strategies until students understand the questions and give the suitable response.

An example of basic I-R-E sequence (Mehan, 1979, p.53)

I Teacher: Urn why do you think that would be better than each child carrying his own?

R Student: Cause that's ah, that's a job for them.

E Teacher: Yes, it would be a job.

An example of extended I-R-E sequence (Mehan, 1979, p. 55)

I Teacher: See the...

R Student.1: Tractors.

E Teacher: the, yes, tractors, it says mmmr....

R Student 1: Tractors.

E Teacher: It, it, but it is a tractor, but the word I wrote here, I didn't write tractor. But

I wrote a word that, another name for tractor that starts with "mim."

R Student 2: Mmmmmm.

E Teacher: It starts with "mm" Patricia. yes.

I Teacher: I called the tractor a "mmm..."

R Student 3: Machine.

E Teacher: Machine, Rafael, good, I called it a machine.

Furthermore, Kramsch(1985) analyzed the interaction of teacher and students in a variety of activities along a continuum that extends from instructional to natural discourse. In this study, Kramsch(1985) offered some suggestions for broadening and diversifying the classroom discourse options which can result in improving the social context of the language learning experience.

Additionally, different researchers such as Wells(1993), Nystrand (1997), Hall (1998), van Lier(1998), Nassaji and Wells(2000), and Cazden (2001) analysed classroom discourse to investigate interaction patterns between instructors and their students. Generally, these scholars thoroughly studied on IRE (initiation-response-evaluation) interaction pattern which were used in classrooms.

Beside, Kraker (2000) studied on teacher-student discourse from a sociocultural perspective. In this study, different discourse patterns across academic domains were observed. Furthermore, in this study, teacher's discourse consisted of prompts (e.g. verbal prompts, request explanation/extension/clarification, recall questions), feedback (e.g. direct statements, correction), cognitive structuring (e.g. expanding /elaborating / reconceptualizing, rephrasing, task organization) and students discourse included demonstrating metacognition (e.g. selecting, organizing, categorizing information), monitoring own performance, extending an answer, responding with a content question, making comment about the task , repeating a previously stated answer, assisting/ correcting peer.

Additionally, Mantero (2002) explored whole-class discussions between instructor and students in a Spanish literature classroom at the college level. In this study, the results of classroom discourse analysis revealed that the teacher and students involved in discourse that was fairly scripted. In this class, students never asked a question in whole-class discussions, the teacher dominated classroom talk, and the teacher's questions did not result in extended discourse between teacher and students.

Besides, Donato and Brooks (2004) investigated facets of oral discourse between instructor and students in a L2 literature context at the college level. For this purpose, they transcribed the discussions which occurred between instructor and students in an advanced literature course. The results of this study showed that the instructor mostly used an IRE interaction pattern .Additionally, in this study, students hardly had chances to speak in turns longer than a single sentence and the students had not adequate opportunities to participate actively in the literary discussions.

Hsiao(2005) explored the teacher-student communicative patterns in an English class. The participants of this study were junior high school students and an English teacher. The results of this study indicated that IRE (initiation-response-evaluation) is the dominant discourse pattern in this classroom.

Moreover, Zyzik and Polio (2008) studied on the discourse between instructors and students in upper-level Spanish literature classrooms. The results of this study which were in line with the findings of the Mantero (2002) and Donato and Brooks (2004) studies indicated that the teachers dominated whole-class discussions and the students rarely had opportunities to participate in meaningful discourse.

Additionally, Liu and Le (2012) analyzed classroom discourse of four English classrooms in Three Gorges University in China. The results of this analysis revealed that in these classes teachers talked more than the students, IRF pattern was the dominant classroom discourse structure, and a large number of display questions were used in these classes by teachers.

It is concluded that a large number of studies has been conducted on classroom discourse, which comprises the interactions between students and their teacher or other students. Moreover, the results of the previous studies showed that the verbal interaction between teachers and students in classrooms had an underlying structure such as IRF or other types of pattern. Therefore, the type of students' and teachers' discourse can be different in different classrooms and in various learning situations.

9. Conclusion

Generally, it is difficult to generalize about classroom discourse because each class has its own special culture (Alexander, 2001). Furthermore, schools, teachers and students can be different within different contexts. Additionally, the type of students' and teachers' discourse, the patterns of talk in classroom, instructional conversations, politeness strategies, turn taking patterns, topic management, and the power and solidarity issues can be different in different settings.

Therefore, the differences exist in various contexts; the important point is that teachers should make their students aware of these differences, and enhance their awareness of how discourse works to make teaching-learning experience more effective and involve the students in real life communication. For this purpose, students need more than mastery of linguistic form of language. They need to develop their communicative competence besides their linguistic competence; they need to be aware of contextual variations; and they need to increase their awareness of how they should negotiate meaning. Therefore, it can be influential to talk in the classroom about language use and provide a variety of situations for negotiation of meaning. For example, teachers can ask referential questions and conduct classroom discussions.

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