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Classroom Observation: Teacher's Talk

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Abstract:
The existing study is a classroom-based research in English foreign language classroom for students of a secondary stage. The study focuses on the teacher trying to investigate her role as a facilitator of learning English as a foreign language. In particular, the study focuses on the teacher's talk (including how much the teacher talks and the kind of questions she asks). The setting of the study is a secondary school for girls in a rural area in Anbar province. The method used in collecting data is the class observation notes. The researcher attended three different classes to observe the class and to collect the data for the study. The main results of the study show that the kind and repetition of the questions asked by the teacher play an important role in the process of teaching and learning. In this observation it was concluded that the teacher's talk control the classroom with considerable participation from students. The teacher was doing her best to get the students involved in the class discussions by asking open-ended questions. Students were interactive with the teacher and they replied most of the questions asked by her, they were actually learning and they showed good reading and writing tasks and good interaction in the class.

Key Words: *Classroom, English foreign language classroom, teacher's talk*

1. Introduction

To know more than one language; two or more, provides people with many good opportunities in life. Those who master more than one language have better chance to know about cultures and being able to communicate with wider range of people. The acquisition of a language can be achieved by social interaction with those who speak the language or by learning the language in the classroom. Classroom is an essential place of language learning and acquisition. It provides the primary needs to learn and acquire the language as a second or foreign one. It is the unique source of knowledge for those who couldn't get real practice in the native countries of the target language. This gives the classroom high degree of importance and makes it as a target of many studies and researches to discover its advantages and to better describe it as a place of teaching and learning.

The research on second and foreign language classroom is carried out for the purpose of answering important questions about the learning and teaching of foreign language(s). Classroom research can be focused on teachers or on learners, or on the interaction between teachers and learners. The teacher of language classroom plays a very important role in the classroom and

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he/she is the most effective source of knowledge providing the students with what they really need to accomplish the learning and acquisition process.

Teacher-focused research examines such factors as the classroom decision-making processes of teachers, and what is referred to as teacher's talk. Teacher's talk encompasses the kinds of questions that teachers ask, the amount and type of talking that teachers do, the type of error correction and feedback that teachers provide, and the speech modifications teachers make when talking to language learners.

The existing study is a classroom-based research in English foreign language classroom for students of secondary stage. The study focuses on the teacher trying to investigate his/her role as a facilitator of learning English as a foreign language. In particular the study focuses on the teacher's talk (including how much the teacher talks and the kind of questions he/she asks).

2. Background

In the field of foreign language learning there is now little argument that one of the ideal conditions for learning is the provision of ample language input, whether it is oral or written (Mangubhai, 2001). Many studies were carried out on the classroom of language acquisition, like Long (1980), Bailey (1991), Cauldron (1988, 2001) and Spada & Lyster (1997). A primary objective has been to determine how classroom instruction affects the pace and nature of language acquisition. Data analysis in these studies has focused mainly on spoken language input, interaction, task structure, and negotiation. They want to explore how students learned English through their face-to-face interactions with teachers and students in the classroom.

Alison Mackey (2005) argues that "In recent years, much of language pedagogical research has shifted towards task-based learning and teaching, with its emphasis on promoting language development in a teacher-centered context, providing exposure to authentic language". Researchers seem to share the assumption that processes of language acquisition can be best traced through careful analysis of classroom talk. In other words, they presume that face-to-face interactions and spoken discourse are the focal analytical units of classroom language learning.

White (2001) argued that it is not the best plan for teachers to do all the talking, but they should draw out the class to tell what they know. It is a wise educator who seeks to call out the ability and powers of the student, instead of constantly endeavoring to impart instruction. He also states that there should be most faithful teachers, who strive to make the student understand their lessons, not by explaining everything themselves but by letting the students explain thoroughly every passage which they read. . . .To skim over the surface will do little good. Thoughtful investigation and earnest, taxing study are required to comprehend it"

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Kerry (1998) added that the teacher surrenders some of the control of the class as she/he becomes a facilitator, and the students take increased responsibility for not only what but also how they learn. Incorporating active learning in the language classroom, then, requires students to act. According to Jonassen (1999) the intellectual processes of reflection, analysis and interpretation undertaken by teachers to improve their teaching, in many ways reflect the learning processes expected of students, when these are seen as involving construction of meaning influenced by factors such as experience, cognition and context.

3. The Study

3.1 Participants

The participants in the study were a teacher and her students from a secondary school, levels one and two. They were from rural area in Anbar province, Iraq. The learners were studying English as a foreign language; they were all females aged between (13) and (14).The teacher was a local female in her thirties. She has ten years teaching experience, all of them as English language teacher.

3.2 Method

The study is a classroom-based research conducted by two ways:

- **Class observation**: Observations carried out at three classes of secondary school students, two observations for level (2) and one for level (1). The observed classes were literature and reading and classes. The focus of class observations was on the teacher's talk focusing particularly on the questions asked by the teacher and the repetition of the same question. The observations also included the response of the students to the questions asked by the teacher.

- **Interviews**: The teacher and her students were interviewed by the researcher to get more explanations concerning the data collected from the observations.

3.3 Data Collection

Data was collected according to the form of classroom observation notes as follow:

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Class Observation Notes

First observation
Literature class
Instructor: (Iraqi female)
Observer: the researcher
Time and place: 5/12/2014 / secondary school
Time of the class: 45 mints
Number of students: 40

The instructor asks the observer to pay special attention to: The students' response to the teacher's questions

Time	Observation	Notes
11:20 am	Teacher's talk in the class was continuous from the beginning to the end of the class. The majority of her talk was questions to the students. She asked 24 questions within 40 minutes. She used confirmation expressions like (isn't it? Understand? And OK?	• The teacher repeats her question many times with average of 3 times to the same question. All the questions asked were related to the textbook used in class, they were 95% display questions. Referential questions rarely used in the class. • The teacher tries to make the class interactive by making her students involved in the class discussions using student-based answer class. • The strategy used by the teacher is to ask questions and waiting for answers from her students. She said that it is my own strategy to manage the class. • Students were active and they answered the majority of teacher's questions.

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Second Observation
Literature Class
Instructor: (Iraqi female)
Observer: the researcher
Time and place: 5/12/2014 / secondary school
Time of the class: 50 mints
Number of students: 36

Time	Observation	Notes
12:40 pm	Teacher's talk was also continuous form the beginning of the class until the end. The majority of her talk was questions to the students. She asked 23 questions within 40 minutes. She also uses the confirmation expressions like OK? Understand? And isn't it?	• The repetition each question was 3 times for the same question. • All the questions were related to the textbook used in the course. • The questions were 95% display questions. • The same strategy of the previous class used by the teacher which was to ask questions and to be waiting for her students to answer. • The majority of the questions were oral ones. • Written questions were very little in the class. • Students were active and answered most of the questions.

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Third Observation

Reading Class
Instructor: (Iraqi female)
Observer: the researcher
Time and place: 5/12/2014 / secondary school
Time of the class: 45 mints
Number of students: 38

Time	Observation	Notes
2:10 pm	Teacher's talk in this class is a little less than other classes according to the nature of the class. She asked 13 questions most of them of the type of (yes, no) questions.	• The class much more depends on negotiation. • The same repetition of questions occurs in this class, 3 times for each question. • All questions related to the textbook used in the class and they were 95% of display questions. • The teacher used the same strategy by asking questions and waiting for students' answers trying to make it interactive class. • The students were active and more than 90% of the questions received answers from the students.

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3.4 Immediate Post-Observation Questions

1. I asked the teacher about her impression of such classes; she responded that it is very difficult to teach English in such areas. One of the problems they face that most of students don't have any experience of exposure to English language. She said that she don't assume that the students understand the questions that is why she repeat the same question many times. Regarding the questions in the class I asked her what kind of questions you always ask. She said that she frequently use display questions and very little use of referential questions.

2. I also asked her about the very little code-switching she used in the class, she responded that sometimes she feel herself obliged to use cod-switching in spite of she believes that it is not good to use such thing in English Language classroom as the class should be pure in English language. The teacher said if you noted most of questions I asked were open-ended questions to give students more chance to participate in class discussions, and I always avoid yes, No questions as they don't allow students to feel freely to answer.

3. I also asked the students why they don't answer some of the questions and they 70% replied that they feel shy to participate in the class, 20% replied that they don't know the answer, and 10% said that they don't understand the questions.

4. Analysis

I observed a teacher and her students in classroom after classroom. I spent entire day with them waiting for taking notes of their interaction in the classroom. The classes observed were a group of 40, 36, and 38 students. During the observation of the three classes we noticed that the first class similar to the third one in the strategy used by the teacher and the level of students' response. At the beginning, the instructor reminded the class of the rules, and then she began talking about the subject of the class with questions about that subject, mostly open-ended questions, accompanied by the explanations. This went on for about forty minutes and included general comprehension questions such as 'do you understand?' isn't it? and 'are you okay?' as well as specific questions about the subject.

Regarding general comprehension questions, most of the students did nod in response and a few answered 'yes' to these questions. And it was believed that they did, in fact, understand.

When asking specific questions unexpected something happened. When the teacher asked a question she usually waiting answers from the students who still with no response, but when she moved closer, looked specifically at a student, and repeated the question, the students usually tried to answer. I noted the teacher was paying much more attention to the students, moving closer to them and looking at specific students and trying to make a connection with them. Instead of asking questions with the feeling that they really weren't going to be answered anyway

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as before, the teacher made more effort to communicate the questions, repeating the questions many times and acted as if she expected to get responses. The students did respond voluntarily to the teacher's questions and participated in class discussions but they never asked the teacher questions. Thus the teacher received little oral feedback. The teacher said:

"Most of the students sit looking straight using minimal facial expressions, gestures and verbal utterances. What I want is for the students to be more interactive. I want the students to ask questions, give comments and to respond with nods and, with sounds of understanding. I want them to be interactive"

Because the students seemed understand the teacher's questions, they kept responding voluntarily for teacher's questions. Some students are taught to listen and not to ask the teacher in the class, those who have little or no experience in class interaction with the teacher, such as questioning or commenting or giving feedback. Students are usually taught to be quiet and respectfully listen to the teacher.

For reading class, the teacher talked about rules for a short time. Students then read the passage loudly in the class and explained a few difficult words and spent time talking about the text. The teacher said that the rules that she talked about are taken from the culture of teaching English in this country. Helgesen & Brown (1994) argues that:

"Each culture has different "rules" about how students should act in the classroom. In some countries, students are expected to listen and only the teacher should lecture or talk in class. But in English class it is good-and important-to answer the teacher's questions and interrupt with questions of your own. It means that you are interested and paying attention. In English, it is your job to ask questions if you don't understand"

The teacher reminded the students of the rules at the beginning of the class and encouraged them to become more active in the class. With the end of the teacher's talk two students asked questions, although the questions were not directly related to the subject but they were two questions were asked before the end of the class.

I noticed that the students interact with the teacher many times during the day, then I asked myself are the students were learning English? Are they learning how to write and to read in English? The answer was yes, because when the teacher asks them to read and write they can do good reading and writing. I tested their writing, it was good and grammatically correct and listened to their reading it was also not bad.

I noticed other things for example; when the students were listening to class while looking at a text or the board they pay more attention to the book. Students told me that they prefer to work with written forms. They found it an easier way to learn because the texts were reviewable while

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teacher and peer talk were not as they told me. The students seemed to ignore the spoken input from teachers to focus on written forms.

In this observation I concluded that the teacher talk control the classroom with considerable participation from the students. Studies of English language classroom in secondary classrooms (Nystrand, 1997) shown that the teacher control the most of the talking during classroom discussions. This reflects the trends in English language teaching in this country and also the learning strategy. According to Weinstein and Mayer (1986) learning strategies are "behaviors and thoughts that a learner engages in during learning which are intended to influence the learner's encoding process"

Finally, I found myself studying classroom-based foreign language acquisition in a setting where learners do face-to-face interaction. At the same time, interactions through writing and reading seemed to be preferred by these students in their acquisition processes.

5. CONCLUSION

During the observation of these three classes I noted that there are many things in the classroom of English foreign language need to be observed carefully, otherwise the observation process will be useless and getting nothing.

First I decide to focus on teacher's talk, especially the questions asked by the teacher, but when I entered the class and begin to write down the data many things from the learners attract my attention; like their behavior, participation, and learning.

In these observations which were focused on the teacher, the teacher was control the class discussions with participation from the students. She always doing her best to make the class interactive trying to get the students involved in the class discussions by asking them a lot using open-ended questions accompanied by comprehension questions.

Students were interactive with the teacher and they replied the majority of her questions, actually they were learning as they showed good reading and writing tasks. They were actually learned and their learning strategy reflects that they are active students as they do a good interaction in classroom with their teacher. When a question repeated by the teacher they reply voluntary, they still did not interrupt the teacher with a question, but they learn, I can say it is a setting of learning not acquisition.

General comprehension questions such as do you understand?' isn't it? And 'are you okay?' were continuous along the time of the classes with the repetition of questions. This reflects that the teacher don't assume that the students understand the questions. From the observations I get the idea that by teaching the students that class interaction with the English teacher is not only

acceptable, but useful and beneficial, it was believed that the students would become more interactive with the teacher in teacher-class interaction.

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