

A Study on Classroom Discourse: Lesson Analysis

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Abstract: The purpose of this paper is to develop a sense of awareness of the problems that may occur in the classroom during the teaching-learning process. This sort of analysis may help teachers gain a different understanding of the language used in the classroom, of the kind of interaction they generate and of the changes the interaction produces on student participation and learning. Systematic observation of the classroom may help us draw conclusions which, in turn, will lead to changes in our teaching with the purpose of improving the process on the whole. Issues such as interaction in the classroom, the balance between teacher's talking time and students' talking time, making the input comprehensible for the students, the effects of anxiety on student response and participation are taken into consideration throughout the entire study.

Keywords: lesson analysis, Student Talking Time, Teacher Talking Time, comprehensible input, turn-taking, genuine interaction, giving feedback, student's anxiety.

I. INTRODUCTION

The first part of the paper discusses issues related to the nature of interaction in the classroom. Learning is the outcome of a common effort teacher-student. It tries to identify patterns of interaction between the teacher and the students and among the students themselves and also the way in which the nature of interaction influence the opportunities for language learning, if the chosen patterns were the appropriate ones to lead to creating learning opportunities.

The second part analyses the language used by the teacher, i.e. teacher talk. What is the percentage of teacher talking time vs. student talking time? What kind of questions does the teacher ask? Which of the teacher's questions generate genuine interaction? Is there a proper balance between 'real' communication and 'teacher talk'? These are few questions that the second part of the paper tries to give an answer to. The role of feedback in language learning and the treatment of errors are investigated. An issue of interest is whether the way in which correction is done is appropriate to the activity (promoting accuracy / fluency) or if there are any common errors. Concerning the role of feedback, the lesson was scrutinized to find out if the teacher makes use of the IRF sequence, how often it is used, what is the purpose and at what stages or if there is a variety of feedback.

The third part focuses on ways of making the input comprehensible for the learners. This discussion involves the devices the teacher uses in order to make the input comprehensible. Apart from the modification of input, the interaction between the teacher and the students is important, as it is widely acknowledged that making input comprehensible depends to a great extent on the student involvement in the negotiation of meaning. Due to the fact that the teacher's turn allocation system affects students learning, the way of allocating turns is also a topic of discussion.

The next part examines the effects of anxiety on student response and participation. Of particular interest was whether the teacher used any means of reducing students' anxiety in order to encourage them to engage in meaningful communication.

Conclusions on the effectiveness of the lesson as a whole are drawn in the last part of the paper. After discussions concerning teacher talk, interaction, comprehensible input, anxiety, it is interesting to notice to what extent the goals of the lesson were achieved, if the lesson derailed from its initial plan or if there is anything we can do to improve the lesson.

II. LESSON ANALYSIS

Grade: the 6th

Level: elementary (2nd year of study)

Hours per week: 2

Subject: “*What would you like to do?*”

- ask for and make suggestions with *shall, why don't we?, let's*
- express preferences with *would like / would prefer + infinitive with to* and *would rather + infinitive without to*
- vocabulary: leisure activities

Objectives:

- to make suggestions using *shall, why don't we ...?, let's*
- to express preferences using *would like / would prefer to* and *would rather*
- to use the new items of vocabulary in their own sentences

Aims of the lesson:

- to develop students' speaking skill
- to get the students express thoughts and personal opinions in English

1. Classroom interaction:

If we were to consider that students' expectations of the teacher are as important as the teacher's expectations in determining how a lesson proceeds, then, from the first look at the lesson's transcript, it is very clear that the teacher has a dominant role in the classroom and the students' role is a passive one. Interaction is most of the times initiated by the teacher and the students don't seem to be dissatisfied with that, this indicating that they expect the teacher to assume a dominant role. This attitude may be due to their low level of proficiency, which makes them very reliant on the teacher, but also to the fact that their whole learning experience takes place in a teacher-centred environment. Student's role is of answering teacher's questions and carrying out the teacher's instructions, so practically they follow the teacher's line of thinking bringing only minor contributions into the conversation. In the following conversation the student says she would like to go to the circus to see the animals and the clowns, although the circus was mentioned in the text only as an attraction for those who like acrobatics.

T Why would you like to go to a circus?

S6 For the animals.

T Ok, to see the animals. What kind of animals?

SS xx

T Why don't you go to the zoo? There are animals there too.

S ...

T What's the difference between the two?

S13 Clowns

T No. There are animals at the circus and there are animals at the circus too. What the difference between them?

S6 Animalele-s dresate.

T Ok... there are trained animals and they play a lot of tricks, they play a lot of tricks. What do they do?

SS *Trucuri.*

T *Trucuri, fac tot felul de giumbuşlucuri. So, there are trained animals at the circus... what else? Why do we go to a circus?*

SS *Clowns*

The answers provided by the students to the teacher's questions are short and simple fact that could be the result of several causes. The reduced size of the answers is the first result of a class in which there is a clear imbalance between teacher talking time and student talking time. Details on exactly percentages of TTT and STT are given in the second part of this paper. Another reason for the shortness and simplicity of answers may be their reluctance to express their own opinions in the classroom. As they were accustomed to give correct answers to the teacher's questions and nothing more and this is still a common practice in teaching most subjects, it is at least curious to them to be expected to share their experiences, to express their personal feelings. The teacher is generally the authority in the classroom and they do not expect things to be different. This belief is proved by their lack of curiosity manifested in the absence of at least one question initiated by the students.

The dominant pattern of interaction is that of teacher question, student response and teacher feedback. Teacher talk is a very important component of this classroom interaction as it determines the topic of talk and also who talks. Most of the times feedback is given immediately after the students' response, so they know if they have provided the appropriate answer or if they have understood the teacher correctly. Whenever the teacher gives the students instructions, the students are asked to repeat or explain them again thus reassuring herself that they have understood what they have to do.

T *Ok, so a person who likes acrobatics would go to a ... to the circus. If you were to spend the night out, if you were to go out ... which event would you choose? Hmm? ... You want to go out ... tonight, let's say ... which event would you choose? I want you to write in your notebooks ... aaa ... three of those events ... in your preferred order. Petronela? What do we have to do?*

S6 *Ce trebuie să facem?*

SS *Să facem propoziții.*

T *Choose three of them ... choose*

S7 *Să alegem trei*

T *and rank them (uses gestures to explain) să le punem în ordine. În care ordine?*

S1 *În ordinea preferințelor noastre.*

2. Teacher talk:

The analysis of the transcript of the lesson confirms the initial assumption that the talking time is dominated by the teacher: the percentage of teacher talking time is of 76.78 %, while the percentage indicating student talking time is 23.22%. The result is not completely accurate because during the lesson it also happened that many students answered teacher's questions simultaneously or background answers could not be taken into consideration. Irrespective of all these inconveniences, the result shows a definite imbalance between TTT and STT.

Out of the 2833 words uttered by the teacher, 1054 were used to ask questions, i.e. 166 questions. This means that 37 percent of what the teacher said during the lesson were questions. It is indeed obvious that most of the classroom interaction was generated by the teacher's questions. The propose of asking these questions was mainly to check students' comprehension, to see whether they acquired the knowledge they had to acquire, to draw their attention or to move the lesson forward. Some of the questions were used as one of the lesson's objectives was to make suggestions using "Why don't we ...?" or "Shall we ...?" Thus, we can conclude that they practically were part of a drilling exercise. From the total of 166 questions only 31 were reasoning, asking the students to think and express their personal opinion. Apart from the pattern-questions they had to practice and the reasoning questions, the students were asked mainly factual questions. A closer look at the factual ones can split them into two types. Most of them required the students to recall things from the

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studied materials, so they were used to check either comprehension or knowledge. But among the factual questions there were also questions that were not directly connected with the text:

e.g. *Have you heard of "Parcul Retezat"?*

Mădălina, who's your best friend? Who would you like to go out with?

There are animals at the circus and there are animals at the circus too. What's the difference between them?

The major part of the questions used in the classroom involved display questions. They were part of the didactic discourse, but a few referential questions also arose during the whole lesson, especially when the students talked about their preferences. This type of questions was the one that generated genuine communication, but the balance is definitely in favour of teacher talk.

The explanations the teacher gave during the lesson were usually effective explanations as most of the students provided correct answers, followed the instructions etc. The way the teacher use explanations in her lesson is worth mentioning. Students are not simply provided with the explanation, but they are involved in the process of constructing meaning. e.g.

T Wildlife park? Hmm... a sort of a park, but not like our "Mihai Eminescu" Park ... aaa ... let me think of an example

SI În natură ... ceva

SS Yes ... it's not something very organised as in our "Mihai Eminescu" Park ... It's in the wild, what's wild?

SS Sălbăticie

T Aha ... Something like ... Have you heard of "Parcul Retezat"?

SS (confused)

T We go there to admire nature ... not for a walk as in a park in the city.

When teaching the new subject (making suggestions using *Why don't we ...?*), the teacher starts from the text they previously discussed to make the connection with the new information. The discussion runs smoothly from some events happening in the city to their preferences, their interests and finally to that role play when they have to invite their best friend out.

Feedback plays an important role in the classroom, affecting students' learning. The kind of feedback is given in this lesson is a positive one. Although the range of words she uses to praise children is rather restricted, she is most of the times enthusiastic in appreciating their contributions. The negative feedback is generally avoided, the teacher trying to withhold feedback until a correct answer is given. Generally the correct answer is not given by the teacher, rather the other students are involved in order to get to an acceptable answer. In the first part of the lesson corrective feedback is not used very often because the purpose of the activity is to get the students to communicate. The teacher uses recast i.e. she repeats what the student said but in the correct form. She does not make specific remarks on their errors at this stage of the lesson, but the situation changes later when the students have to group the activities under given verbs. The activity is now focused on accuracy, thus the mistakes are not overlooked. But feedback is not given in a negative manner. Usually the teacher tries to make the student to provide the correct answer or the other students are involved if the first one fails to do so.

3. Input and interaction:

During the lesson the language used by the teacher is appropriate to the students' level of understanding. Short, uncomplicated sentences are used in order to facilitate comprehension. Whenever the students look confused and they seem not to have understood the teacher's questions, instructions or explanations the teacher uses repetition or modified sentences.

T So... in our text ... our text describes five events that take place in Liverpool. What are those five events?

SS ... Liverpool ... Summer Pops Series ...

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- T *But what's the event? ... Sorin?*
- S2 *Summer ... xx ... orchestra*
- T *Ok. That's the name of the event, but what's the event? I don't want you to tell me the name, I want you to tell me the event. If we want to go out one evening, we go to a ...*
- S3 *classical...*
- T *classical what?*
- S4 *orchestra*
- T *No. That's a classical orchestra performing a ...*
- SS *xx*
- T *... performing a ... What?*
- S4 *concert ...*
- T *Ok, a concert. What kind of concert? Edi?*
- S5 *Classical*
- T *Ok.*

Modifications are used in order to facilitate understanding, in order to make the input comprehensible, but also to make the answer easier for the student to give although this does not give the student the chance to produce long answers.

- T *No ... hmm ... why would you go to a festival?*
- ...
- T *So, we would go to a festival because we'd like to ...*
- SS *Have fun*
- T *Have fun. Ok.*

Clues are also offered to prevent or to repair communication breakdowns. Confirmation checks are used by the teacher when the students' answers are not clear enough, but not by the students. Clarification requests are also rare and most of the times the students use their mother tongue to express them. This behaviour is common to most of the students in this class and not only. They keep silent if they do not understand what is said to them, but they do not ask for clarification. They might be afraid to be laughed at by their peers or they may have had unpleasant experiences when these requests were interpreted as stupidity. Due to the fact that the class is monolingual, they immediately make use of their mother tongue when they have trouble understanding the language. Sometimes mother tongue is used to give answers. This is a good thing because it proves that they have understood the question, but they do not master the language needed to provide an answer. Comprehension checks are used by the teacher as part of the process of understanding students' input.

In allocating turns the teacher uses many approaches. Personal solicits come either after general solicits which results in many students volunteering for the answer or after general solicits when no student volunteers to take turn. As the teacher is familiar with this classroom she also uses personal solicits to activate shy students who do not have the courage to volunteer although they know the answer. The teacher also uses solicits to keep the students focused because some of them are very energetic and the only way to discipline them is to keep them involved in whatever happens in the classroom. A closer look at the transcript shows that most of the students participated more or less in the lesson. Out of the 22 students in the class, 18 of them offered distinct answers more than once, and their contribution is even more consistent as some of the answers were coral and could not be allocated to specific students. The teacher also directed turns at students who did not volunteer for the answer and it was clear that they did not have an answer. But the way the discussion goes and the way feedback is provided makes the student willing to participate more. The student is given positive feedback although he did not utter a word because he shows that he has understood the question by nodding. Due to the fact that the student's results are not great, every little success is praised in order to rebuild his self-confidence.

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- T *Ok ... hmm ... Marius, who's your friend? Who's your best friend?*
- S15 ...
- T *Do you have any friends in the classroom?*
- S6 **Cine-i prietenul tău?**
- T *Someone you would go out with. Hmm?*
- S15 *Edi*
- T *Ok. Ask Edi, make him a suggestion ... Why don't we go... I don't know. Where would you like to go Marius? Where would you like to go? Nu-ți place nimic de-acolo?*
- SSS xxx
- S15 xxx
- T *Louder, I can't hear you.*
- S15 *go to a concert.*
- T *Ok. So, ask Edi. Why don't we go to a ...*
- S15 *Why don't we go to a concert?*
- S5 ...
- T *Edi, what do you think about it?*
- S5 ...
- T *Hmm? Do you like his proposition?*
- SSS xxx
- T *Would you like it? Would you like to go to a concert?*
- S5 *(nodding)*
- T *Ok. So you would like to go to a concert.*

4. Student talk:

Their shyness is also a result of the fact that English has been part of the curriculum only for two years and their pronunciation is still clumsy and not all of them are willing to take risks because they might be laughed at. Praising their efforts is a way of making them overcome their fears and become more active.

Although most of the students participated in the lesson, the feeling that persists is that their involvement is limited, that they are not active enough. Their participation is not satisfactory because the initiative is almost always the teacher's and not theirs. The lack of initiative is definitely due to their low proficiency. They often prove that they understood what they were told, they know the answer, but they do not know how to say it in English. Because the class is a monolingual one they sometimes give answers in Romanian to questions asked in English. This may be a beneficial thing for their self-confidence, but it does not have to become a common practice. If we allow them to use the native language too often, they might start to use it even if they could come to an answer with some efforts, just because it is easier.

III. CONCLUSION

In terms of learning objectives most of the students were able at the end of the lesson to make suggestions and give an appropriate answer. The new items of vocabulary were used in their own sentences although they still prove some difficulties in finding the right words that collocate with them: "go to shopping" or "go to swimming". The function of the given structures was understood, but they definitely need more practice in order to internalize it.

By analysing the nature of the interaction in the classroom it is very clear that the teacher has a dominant role in the classroom and the students' role is a passive one. Students accept with no dissatisfaction the teacher's dominant role

partly due to their low proficiency and partly due to the fact that their entire learning environment is a teacher-centred one. The fact that Ss' answers are short and simple could be explained by their reluctance to express their own opinions as a result of the teacher being perceived as the authority in the classroom. The teacher is always the one who determines the topic of a discussion and also who is going to talk.

The analysis of the lesson's transcript confirms the initial assumption that there is clearly an imbalance between TTT and STT. Moreover, almost 40 percent of what the teacher uttered during the lesson was questions emphasizing the teacher's role as a classroom interaction initiator. Out of the whole amount of the questions that the teacher asked only a few were referential questions, therefore the type that generated genuine communication. The way the teacher explains in the classroom is a worth mentioning due to the fact that she does not only provide the explanations, but she involves the students in the process of constructing meaning. The kind of feedback is given in this lesson is a positive one appreciating Ss' contributions. The negative feedback is generally avoided, the teacher trying to withhold feedback until a correct answer is given.

The language used by the teacher throughout the lesson is appropriate to the students' level of understanding thus facilitating comprehension. Whenever the students seem not to have understood the teacher's questions, instructions or explanations, repetition or modified sentences are used therefore making the input comprehensible. In order to prevent communication breakdowns, clues are used. When Ss' answers are not clear, the teacher uses confirmation checks. The fact that students rarely request for clarification might be due to them being afraid to be laughed at by their peers. Mother tongue is also used by students when encountering a problem in understanding the language.

A range of approaches are applied in allocating turns. Personal and general solicits are employed whether Ss volunteer or not in order to involve all students in the lesson, to activate shy students, to discipline very energetic Ss or to keep them interested all the activities. In order to rebuild self-confidence, positive feedback is given throughout the lesson praising every little success.

Positive feedback is at the same time a way of making Ss overcome their fears and become more active. Due to their low proficiency they are reluctant to taking risks therefore their participation is limited. Mother tongue is used to give answers to questions in English. Although the students might benefit from this because being able to participate helps them build their self-confidence, the teacher needs to make sure that there is a good balance otherwise the students will always choose the easier path in expressing themselves.

The present analysis leads to the conclusion that the lesson can definitely be improved. The interaction pattern needs to be changed in order to give the students more chances to participate in genuine communication. In order to increase the likelihood of creating learning opportunities the teacher should re-evaluate her way of asking questions. Reducing teacher talking time and increasing student talking time should become an important goal in the future.

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