

Analysis of Teachers Talk in English Reading at Senior High School

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Abstract: Teacher discourse is an important tool for teachers' occupations. It goes without saying that teacher discourse is essential to students' learning process. This study is based on classroom observation, recording and questionnaire survey based on the case study, the use of qualitative and descriptive methods to determine the high school English teachers in English reading classes embodied in the functional discourse characteristics, especially teacher discourse, teacher feedback and teachers. It is hoped that through the study of teachers' discourse, we hope to reflect the present situation of language learning in Chinese English classroom objectively and truthfully, and provide useful teaching practice enlightenment for the majority of English teachers.

Keywords: Teachers Talk, English Reading, Senior High School

1. INTRODUCTION

Teacher discourse is the teacher in the organization and implementation of classroom teaching when the discourse is an important part of classroom teaching indispensable. In English classroom teaching, teacher discourse is more specific: it is not only teachers to explain language knowledge, organize classroom activities and implement the teaching plan of the tool, it is an important source of student language input. Therefore, the quality of English teachers' classroom discourse is an important factor to evaluate the teaching effect of teachers and students' learning effect. It is directly related to whether the various aspects of classroom teaching can be carried out smoothly. What is Anping said: English teacher's classroom teaching language directly affects the quality and level of education. Many foreign studies on teacher discourse have been fruitful. Mc Carthy in his book explains how English teachers infiltrate discourse analysis in classroom teaching, while Celce-Murcia and Olshtain teach teachers' language teaching from the perspective of discourse. However, by the language environment and classroom teaching and other factors of the constraints, for foreign research results, Chinese teachers can not copy, can only learn from. The empirical study on teachers' classroom discourse mainly focuses on the study of teachers' discourse in college classroom. The empirical study of secondary school classroom is mainly in the "teacher-centered" classroom, and the results show that the secondary school classroom

teaching to "teachers speak, students listen to" the main. In the context of the new curriculum reform, the author systematically studies and analyzes the discourse of teachers in high school English reading class with the identity of the first-line high school English teacher. At this point, the author's research results will be a strong complement to the study of domestic teacher discourse.

2 THE QUANTITY OF TEACHER TALK

Teacher Talk should carry enough information and knowledge for students to acquire, but it should not include too much for the students to perceive. Krashen's Comprehensible Input Hypothesis has said that the understanding of language input is the basic way of language acquisition. He has also put forward that the learners can improve their language levels by receiving "comprehensible input", which is defined as a formula "i+1". "i" represents the original language level of the learners, and "i+1" is the next stage of what and how much should be input to the learners. That means the comprehensible input should be a bit higher than the learners' present language level so that the learners' potential language ability can be activated and promoted. Just as Liu Runqing (1999) once said, "If the form of input has been clear to the learners, then this is not a good way of improving learners' language ability, but just a way of practicing certain grammatical rules which have been so familiar to the learners." That is to say, comprehensible input puts emphasis on that the meaning of the language input should be understandable to the learners, while the form or the function of the language input should exceed the learners' present language level. Otherwise, Krashen's Comprehensible Input Hypothesis is dichotomous variable, which means that the comprehensible input may be understood by learners, or maybe not.

Turn-taking means that during a conversation,

speakers can have continuous expression at any time which should be ended with a role shift between speakers and listeners or with a silence between them. The unit which can constitute a turn-taking can be a single word, a phrase, a sentence or a bigger language unit. At the beginning of the 1970s, American social scientists, H. Sacks, E.A. Schegloff and G. Jefferson (1974) gave rise to the theory of turn-taking based on their analysis of numerous real recorded materials. They pointed out that turn-taking refers to a process of speaking in turn and shifting their turns continuously between speakers and listeners. The basic pattern is A-B-A-B-A-B. Turn-taking is the language feature in the natural conversation and a basic speech exchange system as well. Fasold (2000) thinks that turn-taking is the core subject in conversational analysis and have attracted wide attention from the language field. The information of a turn-taking can be transmitted by means of both verbal behaviors and non-verbal behaviors. During a class, the most common turn-taking is usually controlled and organized by the teachers since they are the controllers and organizers. They have the definite power to decide who the next one to take the turn is. Turn-taking in classroom sometimes appears focusing on a certain topic, but sometimes with a shift or several shifts of topics. Please look at the next two excerpts from the transcription of teaching videos studied in this paper.

This study indicates that most English classes are still teacher-centered and Teacher Talk still takes a larger proportion than Student Talk and other activities. However, compared to the results given by previous researchers, the proportion of Student Talk and class activities has greatly increased. In this part, the quantity of Teacher Talk has been studied from two points of view: time period and percentage of Teacher Talk, Student Talk and other activities.

We can see that in a class, Teacher Talk has taken a proportion of 36%~69% while Student Talk only 7%~43% and the other activities 5%~38%. The quantity of Teacher Talk is obviously more than that of Student Talk and other activities. Teacher Talk still plays a dominant role in class, and teachers have the absolute power to control the whole class. These teaching videos show two completely different situations of students' participation. In the classes where Teacher Talk occupies a relative larger proportion, students' participation is often encouraging. In this kind of classes, the atmosphere seems rather relaxed and active, and students tend to concentrate their attention to give their response to the teachers' questions as fast as possible. Therefore, students in such kind of classes show strong interest in lesson and can have more communication with

their teachers so that the teaching effect is better. However, in the classes where Teacher Talk takes up a relative smaller proportion, students' participation seems rather passive and the atmosphere is loose. Students can hardly focus their attention on what the teachers have said and a few of them may whisper to their classmates. Therefore, there is less communication between the teacher and the student and the teaching effect cannot be so satisfactory. According to the study, teacher-centered classes take up a larger proportion than student-centered class and are still preferred by teachers most of time.

3 ADJUSTMENTS OF TEACHER TALK

According to the study, eighteen of the teachers speak at an obviously slower speed than the natural one, especially when they give some questions but there seems to be no response. They slow down the speed in order that the students can follow them easily. However, one of the teachers speaks too slowly probably because of his own talk habits. In his class, the atmosphere comparatively seems a little dreary and loose. Students' concentration tends to be easily distracted and teaching effect is not as good as expected.

As for pronunciation, teachers in class often speak much clearer than usual. They use more stressed sounds in words, phrases and sentences to attract students' attention. According to the response of the students in this study, they are active during the whole class and they seem to be very interested in what the teachers are saying. Sometimes especially when class atmosphere is not so active, they also use exaggerated intonation to create a fresh and colorful auditory sense. They also pronounce fewer acronyms in order to avoid ambiguity. For example, they say "we will" instead of "we' ll" or "we have" instead of "we' ve" .

This study shows that teachers prefer to choose simple and short words and sometimes they prefer to explain something difficult with the help of body language. As for sentence structure, they usually choose the short and simple expressions in a standard and regular order which are easily understood. They use more declarative sentences and imperative sentences rather than interrogative sentences. But compared to the previous researches, more interrogative sentences are used. In order to encourage the students to get involved in class and improve their understanding, teachers often ask a lot of questions sometimes just to arouse their interest and attract their attention.

Another obvious feature can be showed in this study that teachers always repeat certain words, phrases or structures which are important in their opinions to make sense easily to their students and put emphasis on certain language points. In the two excerpts above, the teacher repeats a word for many times, actually, she often does. For example, in excerpt 2, when the

teacher tries to explain the new word “district”, she lists many examples in relation to palaces which all her students are familiar with, and actually they are the different districts in Qingdao. When she gives the different places, she is just repeating the word “district” again and again. And then she leads them to read after her for twice. So the students must have memorized this word very well after they have listened to and practiced it for so many times. So repetition sometimes is necessary in English teaching. In a word, the common features of Teacher Talk that have been introduced above are necessary in class, but they should be adopted in a proper way to make an active effect on classroom. Otherwise, it might have the opposite effect.

4 WAYS OF QUESTIONING

Questioning is a very common way for teachers to use in language learning class, which can be used to check what kind of strategies and what kind of pedagogical practice the teachers implement in class, which is a good way of improving classroom interaction. In this part, ways of questioning in Teacher Talk are studied from two aspects: contents of questions and ways of answers. Only five of them have asked more display questions than referential questions. Four of them have asked balanced number of display questions and referential questions. The rest of seventeen teachers have asked more referential questions than display questions. This result seems quite different with that in the previous researches. However, this is the tendency of asking questions which has been proposed by many English educators. They say that there should be more referential questions than display questions in class, for referential questions are helpful for language learners to produce more language input in class and promote their language acquisition. Meanwhile, some of the experts have their different opinions towards this point. They say the choice of questioning style depends on many factors. For example, there are different types of classes, including speaking class, listening class, reading class, writing class and grammar class, etc. According to different types of classes, the choice should be different. For a grammar class whose main purpose is to explain, demonstrate and practice certain language points and patterns, display questions may be more helpful and effective for learners to practice. The other factor is the students' level of learning language. For those students who have a lower level of studying language, it is more difficult for them to organize their own opinions and express them fluently in a limited time period. And in China's traditional class which often consists of more than forty students, it is unpractical for teachers to wait for a longer time so that most often they will just get an incoherent and incomplete answer. For teachers, they have to keep balance when asking students to answer questions. They cannot just

ask the high-level students to answer questions. Therefore, display questions are also needed in this situation. Moreover, display questions play a great role in keeping the classes steady. The answers to display questions are often short and easy so that most of the students can give the answers easily and fast, which can also avoid the distraction of the students. Therefore, referential questions and display questions have their both advantages and disadvantages.

Besides the encouraging point discussed above, there is still something to be mentioned. The teaching videos in this study are given by the elite and experienced teachers. Their classes may consist of many excellent students in a certain high school which can not completely represent the common situation in a class as usual. So they behave actively in class just because they are observed and they want to make a good performance. However, generally speaking, most of the classes are composed of different levels of students who tend to behave differently in class. For teachers, they should consider all kinds of students so that ways of asking questions should also be altered according to different situations and different students. If they choose volunteers every time, the lower-level students will lose their chance for practice. If they nominate students too many times, students will be passive again. Some teachers also adopt self-answering way sometimes when they want to save time, which is harmful to students' initiative and independence.

It is not difficult for us to draw a conclusion that most of the teachers prefer to apply positive feedbacks instead of negative feedbacks. It has been mentioned that teachers' feedbacks in class play an important role in helping the learners to test the hypotheses that they have formed about the rules and system of the target language. Their feedbacks may restrict or facilitate the students' participation in class and language use. In those teaching videos observed in this paper, most of the teachers' feedbacks are positive, which is helpful to encourage students and stimulate their motivation of expressing themselves. Maybe some people will think the teacher has repeated too much. But in the whole process of class, it is reasonable and necessary. And it can be referred to another way of positive feedback. On one hand, the repetition can attract other students' attention and the next students can offer a different answer. On the other hand the teacher's repetition can supply another opportunity for students to think more about the question, which is crucial for developing students' cognitive ability because every student tries to show the best side in front of others and that can stimulate their positivity. We should pay more attention to one point, that is to say, after the repetition there are still positive comments such as

“Yeah”, “Very good” and “Yes”. If the teacher’s feedbacks just contain the repeating without those positive comments, it cannot be called “a positive feedback” actually. The two examples above tell us that teachers should adopt positive feedbacks in class, sometimes in different ways. Positive feedbacks can not only encourage students to pick up their speech and give them enough confidence to share their opinions in front of others, but also supply information with an assured response for students to check whether their answers are accepted and proper. Some teachers like to correct students’ mistakes at once. Whether the language mistakes should be corrected immediately at once or not and under what circumstance they should be pointed out in time are still two contentious matters. They need more data and further study to support. But one point is definite that to interrupt Student Talk when they want to share a free talk is very harmful for improving their communicative and expressive abilities.

5 CONCLUSION

Teacher Talk is a main way of language input. As an indispensable part of classroom teaching, Teacher Talk applies to the whole process of teaching, served as both comprehensible input and information resource of the target language, just as Nunan said “Teacher Talk is not only a tool to teach knowledge, but also an essential source of input”. Secondly, Teacher Talk is a thread embodying teaching methodology and helps complete teaching plan. We can put it in a more detailed way according to the classification of Teacher Talk from the perspective of language teaching. Teacher Talk plays an important part in introducing teaching plans and purposes,

instructing new lessons, explaining language points, organizing interactive activities in classes, keeping class in order and getting feedbacks, etc.

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