TEACHER TALK IN VOCATIONAL HIGH SCHOOL CONTEXT "DOES IT MATTER?"

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Abstract: The research was conducted as a pilot observation study focusing on three aspects of teacher talk in a secondary level L2 of a vocational high school class. The relevance of the investigation lays in the fact that teaching ESP in Indonesia is gaining more and more important. Teacher talk has widely been investigated in EFL classrooms but little is known about the characteristics of teacher and student talk in the ESP context. Firstly, the investigation aims to shed light on the ratio of teacher talk to student talk, and secondly, it aims to gain an insight into the role of the mother-tongue in the teaching process. The findings indicate that the amount of teacher and student talk in the ESP classroom is similar to empirical data obtained in L2 EFL settings. The use of the mother-tongue was perceived to be exaggerated and in some instances unjustified. It is believed that the results of the study will enable ESP teachers to plan their classroom talk more consciously and obtain a more critical stance when analysing their own talk.

Keywords: classroom observation, teacher talk, ESP, the use of the mother-tongue

1 INTRODUCTION

Foreign language learning classroom is a goldmine of research opportunities, and it offers a wide variety of investigation focusing on teachers and students alike. Teacher talk is a widely researched area which is partly because of its important role in language teaching and partly to the various fields opens up for researchers. This observation is embedded in a secondary education ESP context, exactly at a vocational high school level. ESP is gaining more and more important in Indonesia due to the demand of the market in the use of English as a mean of communication. English as a foreign language has gained its important role to prepare graduates with the ability to use English when they have to compete in the markets, where they have to deal with the job opportunity.

1.1 Teacher Talk

Teacher Talk (TT) is the language typically used by foreign language teachers in the process of teaching. Allwright and Bailey claim that talk is one of the foremost ways that the teachers deliver information to the learners. In addition, it is also the primary means of controlling "learner behaviour". (1991, p. 139). Studying the instructor's classroom speech has been in the focus of attention for several reasons. Firstly, teacher talk is the major source of comprehensible target language input in the instructed language learning environment, thus it plays an fundamental role not only in the organisation of the classroom but also in the processes of acquisition (Nunan, 1991, p. 189). Secondly, empirical data obtained in EFL settings suggest that teachers dominate classroom speech; on average teacher talk accounts for between one half and three quarters of the talking done in foreign language classrooms (Allwright, &Bailey, 1991). In the major part of the language lesson, teachers dominate classroom speech by using the I–R–F framework (teacher's initiation – student's reply – teacher's feedback/follow-up) which results in twice as many teacher utterances as students'. Teachers' classroom speech has generated several research areas during the past 40 years. In the beginning researchers were primarily concerned with the differences of teachers' classroom talk and common place or ordinary talk, i.e. any talk that occurs naturally outside the language classroom.

Chaudron (1988) points out that the primary approach of these studies was to describe the characteristics of L2 teachers talk and reveal what distinguished it from speech to L2 learners in non-instructional settings. The main goal of this research has been to determine

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what makes teacher talk an aid to learning (Chaudron, 1988, p. 8). As a result, several further fields of research have opened up, such as describing and quantifying the features of teacher speech, for instance the speech rate, syntax, vocabulary, pragmatic functions (Chaudron, 1988), the amount of teacher talk (Bellack, 1966; Legaretta, 1977), rate of speech (Griffiths, 1990), modification in syntax (Pica, & Long, 1986, in Ellis, 1994) and modification in vocabulary (Henzl, 1979). Further research fields include the investigation of error-treatment (Fanselow, 1977; Nunan, 1989a), functional distribution (Bialystok et al., 1978, in Ellis, 1994), and the degree of communicativeness (Thornbury, 1996). Codes-witching (Romaine, 1989), turn-taking (Allwright, 1980, in Ellis, 1994; Seliger, 1977) and classroom interaction (Leo van Lier, 1988) were also investigated while the three-part framework of classroom interaction, i.e., initiation – reply – evaluation/feedback was analysed by Mehan (1979).

The most prevalent attributes of teacher talk are summarised by Chaudron (1988) who claims that teacher talk is characterised by a simplification of speech in terms of grammar and vocabulary, exaggerated pronunciation, a slower pace of talk, self-repetition, more frequent and longer pauses and the IRF framework. Even though the distinctive attention teacher talk has gained in classroom research in the past decades, little is known about what constitutes optimal teacher talk (Ellis, 1994). It is beyond the scope of this small-scale investigation to define optimal teacher talk; it merely aims to supplement studies investigating the characteristics of teacher and student talk. However, it is believed that the results may prove to be useful not only for EFL teachers but for the increasing community of ESP teachers as well.

1.2 The Use of the Mother-Tongue

On the basis of a few publications on teacher training and teacher development (Hubbard, Jones, Thornton, & Wheeler, 1983; Doff, 1988; Bowen, & Marks, 1994; Celce-Murcia, & McIntosh, 1979; Underwood, 1987; Edge, 1993), it appears that little attention has been devoted to the issue of using the mother

tongue in EFL/ESP settings. Atkinson (1987) made an attempt to fill in this research gap by conducting a study focusing on translation tasks in an EFL classroom. Drawing on the results of his investigation he describes a variety of applications of L1 use and maintains that there are several instances when the use of the mother tongue can be encouraged, though he warns against its excessive and inadvisable overuse as well. The appropriate proportion of the use of L1 and L2 is difficult to determine as it depends on factors such as the target language competence of the students, the teacher's ability to speak L1, or the type of tasks. Nowadays, there is a kind or regulation or demand that the general guidelines in many countries recommend that lessons be planned to be as monolingual as possible, communicating or delivering materials using the mother tongue only when difficulties arise (Butzkamm, 2003). Native teachers of English are at an advantage in conducting 'all-English classrooms' due to their presumed inability to speak L1. Being exposed to L2 speech exclusively during the English language lesson, however, may have disadvantages as well. The exclusive usage of L2 teacher talk may result in lengthy, complicated and incomprehensible explanations that add to teacher talking time. Consequently, some language learners will fail to get the message or the correct meaning of a word, they will be likely to lose the thread, feel frustrated and eventually give up any attempt at keeping up with the teacher.

1.3 The Use of the Mother-Tongue

Since the 1960s "the teaching of ESP has been seen as a separate activity within English Language Teaching (ELT), and ESP research as an identifiable component of applied linguistics research" (Dudley-Evans, & St John, 1998, p. 1). ESP has grown into a major field within ELT with reason, as it covers such significant subfields like English for Academic Purposes (EAP) or English for Occupational Purposes (EOP). In their definition Dudley- Evans and St John (1998, pp. 4-5) identify absolute and variable characteristics of ESP:

Absolute characteristics:

a. ESP is designed to meet specific needs of the learner;

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b. ESP makes use of the underlying methodology and activities of the disciplines it serves;
c. ESP is centred on the language (grammar, lexis, and register), skills, discourse and genres appropriate to these activities.

Variable characteristics:
a. ESP may be related to or designed for specific disciplines;
b. ESP may use, in specific teaching situations, a different methodology from that of general English;
c. ESP is likely to be designed for adult learners, either at a tertiary level institution or in a professional work situation. It could, however, be used for learners at secondary school level;
d. ESP is generally designed for intermediate or advanced students.
e. Most ESP courses assume basic knowledge of the language system, but it can be used with beginners.

1.4 The Textbook and Syllabus

The text book used at SMK Negeri 2 Jember is the book from the government which is similar to the one used for General English in Senior High School entitled "Bahasa Inggris untuk SMA/SMK" published by The Ministry of Culture and Education Republic of Indonesia. English apply in the text book is the general English. SMK is a vocational school. The text book should be also specific for the major of the study. However, the text book used is not specific for the major. As supplementary exercises, teacher provide tasks related to the major, such as having class project to create a poster, wall magazines or having conversations with contexts related to the major of study. Since the learner competence of English is not sufficient, most of them get difficulties in completing the tasks, they tend to be dependent mostly on the teacher. The syllabus applied in the school curriculum is also similar to those of Public general High school.

Related to the ESP, the register used in the text book should be in line with the discourse of the major being studied, but the text book did not have any specific register used for the related major. Therefore, I can assume that the book is not yet ESP book. It is still general English book. The activities provided in the book are also the common activities, such as dialogue completion, reading, and answering questions. The language used in the book is also the general English. Therefore, teachers are assigned to have supplementary activities to cover the major being studied, but in fact this still did not meet the goal.

1.5 The ESP Teacher

Describing the roles of the ESP teacher is a controversial issue (Hutchinson, & Waters, 1987). Dudley-Evans and St Jones (1998) state that apart from the main tasks of the general English teacher, i.e. controlling ongoing classroom activities, providing information about skills and language, organising pair- or group work, in other words 'acting as provider of input and activities', the ESP teacher fulfils the additional task of a 'facilitator or consultant'. This latter role describes the case when the teacher knows relatively little about the content or the skill that is being taught in the ESP class, and proceeds by pulling together and organising the information that the learners, and – if possible – their teachers[the real specialists of that content area] are able to provide. (Hutchinson, & Waters, 1987, pp. 149-150) Hutchinson and Waters (1987) make two important distinctions between general English teachers and ESP teachers. Firstly, they claim that in addition to the normal functions of a classroom teacher, the ESP teacher will have to deal with needs analysis, syllabus design, materials writing or adaptation and evaluation. As the second major distinction, they point out that the majority of ESP teachers have not been trained as such "i.e., they need to obtain a more thorough knowledge of a specific field which they have not been qualified in and are not completely familiar with. As a consequence of the above mentioned occasional but inevitable ill-preparation or lack of sufficient background knowledge, the ESP teacher is likely to face intimidating and face-threatening situations during the teaching process.

The term 'In-class Subject Knowledge Dilemma' devised by Wu and Badger (2009) aims to describe classroom events in which the ESP teacher's subject knowledge is challenged.

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Therefore, the phrase 'reluctant dwellers in a strange and unchartered land' coined and put forward by Hutchinson and Waters (1987, p. 158) to describe ESP teachers appears to be appropriate. Similarly to the above, it is vital to emphasize that teaching ESP at one of Vocational High Schools in Jember particularly requires that ESP teachers be in possession of more subject knowledge than their students. It means that, when the ESP teachers teach in a classroom, they need to assure that they know well about what they teach; not only the content area but also the subject area of what they are teaching. That is the skills involved in the English language learning. Thus, an essential role of the ESP teacher is of an 'explainer' of both and subject content knowledge whereby the amount of time spent on elaborate explanations of the content material may seriously increase the amount of teacher talk.

2 THE TEACHER

2.1 The Participating Teacher

We choose M. Yusuf Sururi; one of the permanent English teachers at State Vocational High School 2 in Jember (SMK Negeri 2 Jember); he teaches different levels of students at the vocational high school. He has been interviewed about his classroom talk. He is 40 years old and has been teaching English for approximately 15 years. He started his career teaching ESP at the tertiary level for almost 9 years and 6 years of teaching the secondary level at a state vocational high school.

2.2 The Participant and His Perceptions about His Own Teacher Talk

M. Yusuf Sururi took part in a semi-structured in-depth interview couples of meetings prior to observation carried out focusing on his classroom talk. He showed a definite interest in the way he communicated with his students, monitoring his own errors, the situations in which he drew on the mother-tongue and his amount of talk in class. He approached students having low or high language competence in a different way. With classes he made use of several tools: slower rate of speech, gradual complexity of input, simple sentences and instructions, a more basic

vocabulary and mother tongue as means of communication and interaction in the classroom.

With regard to the amount of teacher talk, he thought the proportion to be around 30 per cent (for the teacher) and 70 per cent (for the students) on average. He elaborated lengthily on the diverse causes which may result in excessive teacher talk. He admitted conducting his lessons differently before the examination periods – when the focus fell on practising exam tasks – or during the teaching of the professional material. Before the language exam, he primarily concentrated on discussing test scores and/or explaining mistakes and difficulties which usually resulted in excessive teacher talk. He believed that he tended to out-talk his students to avoid the awkward situation of silence. He claimed that silence often prevailed in classroom interaction if students needed to indulge in an unknown topic. The students' anxiety, shyness and reluctance to enter into communication could have possibly led to an inordinate amount of teacher talk. He admitted repeating the students' responses and also reacting to the students' answers, i.e., following the I–R–F framework. He partly put this practice down to the teaching circumstances. The traditional classroom seating arrangements were likely to generate more repetitions, while the students' reluctance to speak up or noisy classrooms entailed the same effect. Apart from translation and mediation tasks into L1, he expressed a firm commitment to applying L2 during the whole of the language lesson but his efforts fell through occasionally owing to time constraints, students' poor language competence and even poorer topic-related competence. He admitted using the mother tongue in a few further occasions: when fulfilling administrative or organisational duties or giving the Indonesian equivalent of technical vocabulary.

2.3 The Class

The observed students attend the second year of the senior high school level of a vocational school majoring at Audio Visual. They are between 15 and 17 years of age. At this phase of their studies all the students – 35 in total, but there were only 25 attending the observed class – possess a beginner to elementary level in 'general' English mastery

and have been studying English for four semesters. They have a 90- minute English lesson a week.

2.4 The Classroom Setting

The classroom featured the traditional desks and chairs arrangement, thus students were sitting behind each other in the majority of the cases. This particular seating arrangement prevents students from hearing each other well and hinders the casual and uninterrupted flow of interaction. Mr. Yusuf did not make any effort to rearrange the classroom into a U-shape which would have enabled the students and the teacher to hear each other better and be more involved in the classroom activities. Instead, he asked the students to move and turn around to have numbers of small groups for the classroom activities. Considering its dimension and its restricted layout even with the traditional classroom arrangement, it seemed impossible to easily arrange the desks and chairs into a U-shape without a considerable waste of teaching time. This may have been his reason for deciding to leave the room as it was. Mr. Yusuf move closer to his students most of the time and occasionally asked some students to interact and answer his questions, he sometimes also walked up and down along the desks to monitor students' tasks during group-work activities. Teacher-fronted activities outnumbered group - or pair-work activities. During the observation the main focus was laid on improving sentence building, writing practice and testing of new and already acquired material, as well as discussing the previous related topics.

2.5 Classroom Observation Process

Having gained permission from all the students of the class, the researcher observed and video recorded a 90-minute lesson focussing on the teacher. The lessons were recorded in the same classroom and the researcher assumed the role of a non-participant observer. Attending the class enabled the observer to devise, pilot and fine-tune an observation schedule which was to be used for the current, pilot study and in further research projects. Recording the lessons on video proved to be a very wise decision as it allowed the observer to review the material later to enhance the reliability of the analysis. The obtained video-recorded data resulted in easier

and faster data analysis. Since the observer used his own camcorder and had known afore that the quality of the video recorded material would be good enough to make both the teacher's and the students' utterances audible and thus transcribable. A separate audio recording of the classroom speech was unnecessary.

2.6 Data Collection and Analysis

As the aim was to find the teachers talk in the classroom during the teaching and learning process, data collection and analysis demanded several viewings of the relevant video material besides gathering data in class as well. During the observation process, the observer concentrated on collecting data by recording five 90-minute lessons with a video recorder and interview of the class teacher before the observation schedule. For practical reasons (operating the camcorder, adjusting the focus on the participant teacher as he moved within the class, the bulk of the analysis was decided to be done outside the classroom. In order to answer the research question, the recorded lessons were viewed anew, whereas the transcribed data came in handy in dissecting the teacher's questioning methods.

3 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 The Proportion of Teacher and Student Talk in the ESP Classroom

Contrary to expectations, the results obtained in the 90-minute lesson regarding the proportion of teacher talk are similar to the data supported by empirical studies – teacher talk accounts for between one half and three quarters of classroom talk (Allwright, & Bailey, 1991). The result of the observation shows that the teacher spent more time talking during the teaching and learning process. This was due to the inadequate language competent of the learners; they mostly possess a very limited capacity of English mastery. The teacher used mostly L1 in conveying the explanation and initiating interactions with the learners. It seemed obvious that the students had failed to prepare for the lesson, nevertheless, the teacher insisted on covering the material. This, however, resulted in excessive talk on his part and a rather lengthened elicitation process. Clearer conclusions could be drawn if classes of a few more teachers could be visited and if

observations could be conducted over a more extensive period.

3.2   The Use of Mother-Tongue

The results have revealed that the use of the mother-tongue is a substantial element in the classroom, and it is used as a resort not only in cases of clarifying technical terms or issues on the major, but in several additional cases when its use did not seem justified. Investigation of the lesson transcripts shows that Mr. Yusuf reverted to L1 regularly when introducing and explaining a task when reacting to individual student's comments, or when setting homework tasks. Outlining the requirements of the forthcoming language exam was also done in *Bahasa Indonesia* which seems understandable considering the lack of genuine information and the excess of false information that the students had concerning this matter, as well as the various preconceptions that the students had previously had about the language exam.

4   CONCLUSIONS

Several conclusions may be drawn on completing the analysis. First of all, teachers should be encouraged to take part in classroom observation studies either as an observer or a participant. Having the opportunity to look inside classrooms through recorded material and/or as an observer is a unique experience which can inevitably yield constructive and valuable comments and advice on one's methodology and classroom management. Consultation with the observer and/or taking part in a retrospective interview may contribute to a greater understanding of each other's routines and may lead to abandoning long-standing, inefficient practices. Regarding the amount of teacher talk in the ESP classroom, the investigation did not bring forward any surprising results. Additional and more extended observations should be conducted with the participation of many more teachers to see if there is a significant difference between the results obtained in the ESP classroom and those of the EFL setting. Having a more extensive database and statistical data analysis could verify or challenge for further research. The salient role of the mother-tongue has proved to be a surprising finding of the analysis. The mother tongue was used at the majority points of

the lessons. A retrospective interview following the observation process might have yielded revealing results and would have given the opportunity for Mr. Yusuf to defend his practice. Unfortunately, owing to reasons beyond the observer's control the retrospective interview could not be conducted. Nevertheless, it is thought that there is room for improvement for Mr. Yusuf in his usage of L1 and L2. The study may, therefore, be helpful in raising his awareness to the issue. The results regarding Mr. Yusuf's questioning technique brought similar results as data found in academic literature. Unfortunately, it is impossible to draw comprehensive conclusions on the mean length of students' responses on the grounds of the present analysis. Still, it seems obvious that the teacher's questioning technique did not encourage the students to produce extended responses which fact is represented in the low score of the average word count of students' answers.

To sum up, classroom observation has proved to be a privileged event despite the lengthy observation process, and the time-consuming data analysis. Being present in a 90 minutes lesson as an observer, enabled the researcher to find several further areas of investigation which had not been as salient outside class as inside it. The above investigation introduced just one teacher and the results of only a 90- minute lesson. It would be unwise to draw far-reaching conclusions and generalisations from the results of the three research questions that the study purported to investigate. Therefore, this study warrants further research on analysing the practices of many more participants and the recorded observation of many more lessons in the ESP context followed by retrospective interviews with the participants in order to be able to arrive at more comprehensive conclusions. Furthermore, the investigation of other factors (e.g., the teacher's L2 competence, personality, communication skills and competences in teaching methodology) would enhance our understanding of why teachers make certain decisions in the language classroom and to what extent these factors may influence one's teaching practice and thus the obtained results.

In the course of the observation sessions and the data analysis further research areas have opened up. The recorded data will make it possible for her to focus on a number of further aspects of teacher talk:

a. The clarity of the teacher's questions and instructions;

b. Question posing: Does the teacher pose the question first and then select and call on a student to respond?

c. Pause: Does the teacher allow sufficient time between posing the question and calling on a student to answer?

d. Wait time: Does the teacher give the student enough time to answer the question before calling on someone else? Are the students given equal time to respond?

e. The type-token ratio of teacher talk

f. Part of the list above was suggested by Celce-Murcia and McIntosh (1979).

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