

The impact of teacher's verbal interaction in the classroom on Iranian student's proficiency level

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Abstract

The observational study was conducted to see the impact of teachers' verbal behavior on academic achievement of learners. The main objective of the proposed study was to investigate the effect of the nature of teachers' classroom verbal interaction on Iranian EFL learners' proficiency level. Samples of 10 female teachers, teaching at intermediate levels, together with their 150 adult students in EFL classes were observed and their lessons were audio-taped. The classes were single gender. The data were analyzed in detail based on the observation scheme proposed by Frohlich and Spada (1984). The impact of teachers' classroom verbal interaction in the form of Teacher-Student talk showed different effects on pupils' achievements. Concerning the effect of teachers' verbal interaction, the results revealed that the existing differences between teachers' verbal interaction cause the difference between students' proficiency level.

Keywords: discourse analysis, verbal interaction, proficiency level, EFL

1. Introduction

Talking and listening take a long proportion of time in the classroom. Language is the medium, through which teaching and learning take place. Therefore, education may be seen as a form of verbal communication. In any classroom interaction, the emphasis on communication can be placed on the teacher, the students and the communicative process itself. In this case, any kinds of communication even verbal or non-verbal especially through teachers to students leave a lasting positive impression on students' academic performance (Fulmer & Turner, 2014; McHugh, Horner, Colditz & Wallace, 2013) ^[17]. Alexander (2009) ^[2] mentioned, "Teacher student communication plays a big part in the success of classroom interaction. Although some experts say that as much as 93% of interpersonal communication is non- verbal, the teacher's stock in trade is verbal communication, and paying attention to how teacher talk is structured is necessary for verbal communication with students to work effectively" (p.43).

According to Jocus (2012, p.1) ^[12] "classroom discourse refers to all types of talk that one may find within a classroom or other educational setting". Many researches tell us that the foundation of creativity, deeper understanding and students' achievement comes from classroom interaction. As Barbara Johnston (2008) ^[13] mentioned, "to discourse analysts, discourse usually means actual instance of communicative action in the medium of language" (p.45). Canale (1983) ^[5] defines communication as the exchange and negotiation of both verbal and non-verbal information. In this regard, Roy (2008) ^[19] stated that verbal communication refers to those abilities which we use in spoken or written interactions for different purposes.

In the classroom, students have a unique opportunity to interact with teachers and students and to learn as a result of these interactions. A good learning environment thrives on these interpersonal interactions. Through modeling and encouragement, a teacher can help create a classroom that is vibrantly interactive, while students feel at ease to share their ideas and brainstorm together; therefore, in the classroom, no

matter the age of the students, a healthy interaction between students and teacher, and between students themselves, is vital. This becomes truer as the students get older; students with more life experience have much of value to add to the lesson and should be encouraged to interact with the group to offer their skills and knowledge. Moreover, when students interact with the teacher and other students, they are more open and able to understand the material for themselves. A productive classroom with good interactions is a classroom where learning is happening.

Although discourse analysis of classroom interactions has gained much attention in recent years, few pieces of research have been conducted in this field. Going over the studies regarding this analysis one can easily notice the scarcity of such research especially in the Iranian context. In addition, reviewing the related literature indicates that most of the studies done following the ESL classroom interactions and very few studies have intended to study EFL classroom interactions.

However, teachers have received several years of formal English instruction, in EFL context where English language is considered a foreign language the process of teaching and learning is difficult and misleading in most cases. As such, in an effort to reveal the importance of interrelation, the present study is designed to examine whether students' learning and their learning development is closely linked to the quality of classroom discourse according to the analysis of teachers' verbal interaction.

2. Review of Literature

In management of classroom, strong communication skills are essential. Teachers should brush up on their classroom communication skills to effectively put impact on their students' learning. Although the majority of classroom communication is nonverbal, strong verbal communication is significant as well. Al-Madani (2015) ^[3] investigated the relationship between teachers' effective communication and students' academic achievement at the Northern Border University, Saudi Arabia.

The results indicated that, academic achievements can be increased through providing friendly atmosphere and mutual understanding maintained by their faculty members; however, the findings could not confirm the impact of teachers' verbal communication on the students' academic achievement.

Flanders in 1970 had several studies on classroom interaction analysis. He proposed the oldest and the best known scheme in the field of general education. His model (Flanders Interaction Analysis Categories) proposed different observation schemes which were very much useful for understanding classroom aims and events, particularly in terms of verbal behaviors of teachers and students. Zhang (2008) conducted a study to reveal the interrelation between classroom discourse and student learning. He mentioned, "We can conclude that the quality of student learning is closely associated with the quality of classroom discourse. Thus If we can improve the quality of classroom discourse, we can certainly increase the quality of student learning."

Another research by Kouicem (2010)^[14] was conducted on the Effect of Classroom Interaction on Developing the Learner's Speaking Skill. The findings illustrated that both learners and teachers have enough knowledge about classroom interaction; therefore, optimizing classroom communication through providing the opportunity to receive comprehensible input and feedback and also providing regular interaction with others, can have a positive impact on learners' speaking qualities and capacities.

Several studies have been conducted by scholars (e.g; Alexander, 2000^[1]; Cazden, 2001^[6]; McCarthy, 1991^[16]; Nystrand, 1997^[18]; Barnes, 1992^[4]; and etc) about the relationship between students' learning development and classroom discourse (the language that teacher and learners use to communicate with each other in the classroom). The findings are somehow the same. That is, generally, the quality of classroom interaction especially teachers talk can optimize the quality of students' achievement, since it has direct effect on students' learning. As Van den Branden (2000)^[20] pointed out, collective negotiation is stronger than pair negotiation. He also mentioned that, L2 as well as L1 can benefit from whole class discussion.

Inamullah, Naseer ud din and Hussain (2008)^[11] explored teacher-student verbal interaction patterns at the tertiary level of education and the results were concluded that, "more than two-thirds of classroom time was devoted to talking. Thus, talk method dominated in classes. More than two-thirds of the classroom talking time was devoted to teachers talking at the tertiary level with the teachers playing the dominant role. More than two-thirds of the teachers' talking time was devoted to direct talk, which showed the direct role of the teacher and indirect role of students at the tertiary level.

Fraser (1994) states that classroom quality plays a significant role in students' learning. He believes that the quality of classroom talks, climate, environment, atmosphere, or tone can increase or decrease students' learning. Levy, Wubbels, Den Brok, and Brekelmens (2003)^[15] pointed out that the learning environments are dependent on the students' perceptions and the researchers' understanding of the environment. Their study in African-American schools also showed that male students thought that their male teachers were more helpful, friendly, and understanding than their female teachers.

Similarly, Wang, Haetel, and Walberg (1993)^[21] asserted, "It has been observed that type of classroom communications and

interactions have a significant impact on students' outcome." Based on the studies of Good and Brophy (2000)^[10] teacher's classroom verbal behaviors affect students' achievement. In line with the reviewed literature, the present study is trying to answer the following research question:

1. Is there any relationship between Iranian EFL learners' proficiency level and the nature of the teachers' verbal interactions in the classrooms?

3. Methodology

3.1. Design of the Study

In the present study, the inter-relational research model consisting of proficiency test and observation scheme was applied. At first each class was observed once a time, then at the end of the term a uniform proficiency test was given. Finally each characteristic of verbal interaction which was observed, was compared with the mean score of proficiency test for each class.

3.2. Participants and Sampling

The participants in this study were 150 female students who were learning English in different private language institutes in Shiraz and also 10 female English teachers who were working in those institutes. Most of the teachers have been working for more than four years and holding BA or MA degrees in different English majors, i.e. Teaching English as Foreign Language (TEFL), English Literature, Translation and General Linguistics; including 6 bachelors and 4 masters. The teacher participants' age ranged from 25 to 35 years. All student participants were adult, EFL learners, intermediate, and varied in terms of age (ranged from 20 to 40) and linguistic background. All the participants including teachers and students shared the same mother tongue (Persian).

3.3. Instrument of the Study

In order to accomplish the objectives of this study, the following instruments were employed:

- a. The Classroom Orientation of Language Teaching (COLT) scheme proposed by Frohlich and Spada (1984)^[9] was used to elicit the effect of classroom discourse on students' learning. COLT scheme consists of two parts: Part A describes classroom instruction in terms of the types of activities that take place in terms of five major parameters: Activity, Participant Organization, Content, Student Modality, and Materials; Part B describes the verbal interactions which take place within activities. Since the objective of this study was based on the teachers' classroom verbal interaction, just part B of the COLT scheme was used.
- b. Since the entire sample institutes used the same source (Touchstone series), the second instrument used in the present study for checking the performance of the learners was one standard test chosen from Touchstone Cambridge test craft (level 3). The test contained 5 sections including 44 grammar, 27 vocabulary, 13 conversation strategy, 7 listening, and 9 reading questions with total of 100 items and 120 minutes time allotted for the participants to copy their answers onto the answer sheets. The reliability of this test was estimated as .83 using Cronbach's alpha. As comparing the impact of teacher/student verbal interaction with every individual student based on their final exam was too time consuming, the average of final exam scores for

each class was computed and used as a measure of proficiency test in this study.

3.4. Data Collection Procedure

The aim of this research was to reveal the extent to which Iranian EFL learners' proficiency level could be improved based on the impact of teacher's interaction; therefore, the study was carried out at 10 private language institutes where Touchstone series is taught at adult level. The data were collected in the spring term of 2014. The data corpus was comprised of 10 audio-recorded lessons performed by institute teachers and students. Each class was visited once by the observer. The observation period per visit varied from (90) to (120) minutes, depending on the length of the lesson. The observation of the classroom procedure was recorded by the researcher in classrooms. At the end of the term, to find out and check the effect of teachers' verbal interaction on the academic performance of students, a standard test of Touchstone Cambridge was given to the students in all 10 private language institutes.

In order to see the relationship between Iranian EFL learners' proficiency level and the nature of the teachers' verbal interactions in the classrooms, COLT scheme and a proficiency test were implemented. In the COLT scheme, according to the audiotape recording of the class, coding was done after the lesson. Coding started at the beginning of each activity, lasted for one minute. During the one-minute coding periods, the frequency of occurrence of each category of the communicative features of teacher's interaction was recorded by the coder.2.5

3.5 Data Analysis Procedure

The Linear Regression was applied to see whether the variance in Iranian EFL learners' proficiency level were the result of variance in teachers' verbal interaction based on COLT scheme

or not. To do so, the average point of each classroom was compared with any features of COLT scheme.

4. Results

a. Target Language

According to Table 1, 98.5% of the variance in the students' final achievements is explained by the independent variable, namely, target language (L2).

Table 1: Model Summary for target language

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.992 ^a		.983	.90912

a. Predictors: (Constant), L2

Table 2, shows the relationship between EFL students' final achievements and target language through the significant level. The significant level for L2 was .000 which was lower than .05.

Table 2: ANOVA analysis of the relationship between EFL students' final achievements and target language

Model	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Regression	420.144	1	420.144	508.342	.000 ^b
Residual	6.612	8	.826		
Total	426.756	9			

a. Dependent Variable: Final

b. Predictors: (Constant), L2

Table 3, indicates the coefficients for the independent variables on dependent variables. In this regard, the Sig. for L2 was .000, which revealed its high coefficient with final achievements.

Table 3: Standard and non-standard table of coefficients for the independent variables

Model	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
	B	Std. Error	Beta		
(Constant)	31.695	2.469		12.838	.000
L2	1.121	.050	.992	22.546	.000

a. Dependent Variable: Final

Table 4, shows that 95.1% of the variance in the students' final achievements is explained by the combination of the

independent variables of the study, namely, Genuine, Pseudo, Unpredict, and Predict.

b. Information Gap

Table 4: Model Summary for Genuine, Pseudo Question, Unpredict and Predict Information

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.975 ^a	.951	.913	2.03623

a. Predictors: (Constant), Genuine, Pseudo, Unpredict, Predict

Based on the results of Table 5, the Sig. for information gap was 002 (p-value < 0.05).

Table 5: ANOVA analysis of the relationship between EFL students' final achievements and information gap

Model	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	
1	Regression	406.025	4	101.506	24.482	.002 ^b
	Residual	20.731	5	4.146		
	Total	426.756	9			

a. Dependent Variable: Final b. Predictors: (Constant), Genuine, Pseudo, Unpredict, Predict

Table 6, indicates to what extent dependent variables are affected by the independent variables. In this connection just Predict with Sig=.002 has great effect on students' outcomes.

Table 6: Standard and non-standard table of coefficients for the independent variables

Model	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.	
	B	Std. Error	Beta			
1	(Constant)	93.652	14.848	6.308	.001	
	Predict	-1.132	.190	-.899	-.002	
	Unpredict	.268	.183	.156	1.468	.202
	Pseudo	.375	.460	.119	.816	.451
	Genuine	.347	.433	.084	.802	.459
a. Dependent Variable: Final						

c. Sustained Speech

Table 7, illustrates that 55.8% of learners' final achievements variance is dependent to sustained and minimal.

Table 7: Model Summary for Sustained and Minimal

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.747 ^a	.558	.431	5.19325
a. Predictors: (Constant), Sustained, Minimal				

Table 8, shows that Sig. for sustained speech was .058 (p-value < 0.05).

Table 8: ANOVA analysis of the relationship between EFL students' final achievements and sustained speech

Model	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	
1	Regression	237.967	2	118.984	4.412	.058 ^b
	Residual	188.789	7	26.970		
	Total	426.756	9			
a. Dependent Variable: Final b. Predictors: (Constant), Sustained, Minimal						

Based on the results of Table 9, in sustained speech group none of the elements has positive effect on students' final achievement.

Table 9: Standard and non-standard table of coefficients for the independent variables

Model	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.	
	B	Std. Error	Beta			
1	(Constant)	50.062	19.961	2.508	.041	
	Minimal	.171	.243	.337	.704	.504
	Sustained	.766	.362	1.012	2.115	.072
a. Dependent Variable: Final						

d. Incorporation of S. Utterances

Table 10, indicates the 98% relationship between students' outcomes and incorporation of students' utterances including:

Elaboration, Repetitions, Paraphrase, Expansion, No. incorp and Comment.

Table 10: Model Summary for Elaboration, Repetitions, Paraphrase, Expansion, No.incorp and Comment

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.990 ^a	.980	.939	1.70676
a. Predictors: (Constant), Elaboration, Repetitions, Paraphrase, Expansion, No.incorp, Comment				

Table 11, indicates that Sig. was .013 (less than p-value); therefore, the correlation between students' final achievements and incorporation of students' utterances was significant.

Table 11: ANOVA analysis of the relationship between EFL students' final achievements and incorporation of students' utterances

Model	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	
1	Regression	418.017	6	69.669	23.916	.013 ^b
	Residual	8.739	3	2.913		
	Total	426.756	9			
a. Dependent Variable: Final						
b. Predictors: (Constant), Elaboration, Repetitions, Paraphrase, Expansion, No.incorp, Comment						

According to Table 12, Repetitions, Comment and Expansion had great impact on learners' outcomes since their Sig.

were .044, .023 and .031 respectively.

Table 12: Standard and non-standard table of coefficients for the independent variables

Model	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.	
	B	Std. Error	Beta			
1	(Constant)	9.639	16.492		.584	.600
	No.incorp	.160	.403	.088	.397	.718
	Repetitions	.403	.120	.657	3.350	.044
	Paraphrase	.076	.185	.063	.414	.706
	Comment	.874	.202	1.114	4.335	.023
	Expansion	.660	.172	.607	3.841	.031
	Elaboration	.045	.252	.028	.179	.870
a. Dependent Variable: Final						

5. Discussion

The use of part B of the COLT observation scheme was aimed at describing the communicative features of the teachers' verbal behavior and also showed the relationship between it and pupils' proficiency level. The different classroom activities were recorded based on classroom interaction in order to establish the kind of interactions that generate most proficiency on behalf of the students and teachers. Looking at the results, it is revealed that the nature of teachers' verbal interaction has a great influence on the students' achievements. Moreover, considering the discourse acts in teacher-student talk, they were more evenly distributed than in student-teacher talk and student-student talk, suggesting that these were the teachers who took up the major proportion of all effective talk occurring in the classrooms.

Expectations about the distinguishing characteristics of each teacher were largely supported. The main exception was the EFL teachers who tended to spend much of class time on directing the students to do something, asking genuine questions as much as pseudo questions, speaking more in target language, giving predictable information than un-predictable information, giving sustained speech, incorporating with students' utterances by expansion, paraphrase, comment, and providing feedback to students achieved better students' performance in final exam. Generally, more similarities than differences were observed among the teachers in their classroom discourse. This result is in line with that of Dory (2005).

6. Conclusion

By using COLT observation scheme, in particular, the framework proposed by Frohlich and Spada (1984)^[19] applied to analysis of the classroom interaction on EFL context, this research has shown that:

Taking into account the impact of teacher verbal interaction on students' proficiency level in the entire classrooms observed, it was revealed that although the use of different discourse acts was conditioned by the context, the way the teacher talk can increase or decrease the pupils' achievements. The present study reveals that for the first and foremost, teachers should enforce an "English only" policy in the classroom by talking in target language most of the time. Beyond this, the challengeable information like predictable information can be a motor active for pupils' mind which causes more learning. Professional teachers are aware of the length of their sentences; that is, sustained teachers received more feedback from their students, although it was not statistically meaningful.

Another key part of classroom interaction is teacher feedback. In order to improve this, students must get feedback and correction. Participate on students' speech can create a good feedback; however, in some section -like expansion, repetitions, and comment- it works more powerfully than the others.

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