LINGUISTICS MODIFICATIONS IN TEACHER TALK IN ENGLISH FOR MEDICAL PURPOSES CLASSROOM

*Omar Ali Al-Smadi, Baderaddin Yassin & Khaleel Bader Al Bataineh
1Al-Ghad International Colleges for Applied Medical Sciences, Al-Madinah Al-Munawrah, Saudi Arabia.
2Al-Ghad International Colleges for Applied Medical Sciences, Riyadh, Saudi Arabia.
3Irbid National University, Irbid, Jordan.

*Corresponding author: oalsmadi@gc.edu.sa

Received: 01 Jan 2020, Accepted: 25 May 2020

ABSTRACT
This study aims to investigate linguistics modification in teacher’s discourse in an English for medical purposes (EMP) classroom at one of the medical colleges in Saudi Arabia. Linguistic modification in teacher’s talk is essential part of classroom interaction as it facilitates students’ understanding by reducing complexity of syntactic structures and the use of familiar structures and words. Data in this study were collected through classroom observation and informal chats with the teacher. 15 classroom observations were carried out during the First Semester of the academic year 2019/2020. When necessary, informal chats with the teacher took place at the end of observation session to get further clarification of what had happened in the classroom. The teacher talk can be described as having high frequency of self-repetition, exaggerated pronunciation, slower rate of speech, avoiding contractions, use of short sentences and phrases, paraphrasing, avoiding idioms and unfamiliar words, and pausing were marked in teacher talk. Phonological, semantic and syntactic modifications in teacher talk ensured input comprehensibility, avoided confusion and encouraged classroom participation. This study concludes that linguistic modifications in teacher talk are necessary, ensure input comprehensibility and support students’ engagement in classroom interactions.

Keywords: Classroom interaction, discourse analysis, English for medical purposes, linguistic modification, teacher talk.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Teacher talk is considered the main source for the students’ input as English language is inadequately practiced outside classroom settings (Al-Smadi, Rashid, and Altamimi, 2020). According to Goh et.al. (2017), teacher talk is the largest chunk in teaching a foreign language, it is the birthplace of students input and it has direct inspiration on output. Teacher talk in classroom demonstrates certain adjustments to suit objectives and effectively involving participants in classroom interactions (Al-Smadi, Rashid, & Altamimi, 2020; Al-Smadi & Rashid 2019). According to Irmayani and Rachmajanti (2017), classroom teachers should allow and encourage student(s)-student(s) interaction, and teacher-student(s) interaction, and more repetition of target language to enrich the classroom language and interaction. Classroom teachers need to encourage and foster classroom spontaneous interactions, and nurture different patterns to classroom interaction (Lucero & Rouse, 2017). According to Al-Zahrani and Al-Bargi (2017), the teacher used a large number of questions as they are the main instruments for classroom evaluation and instruction. The use of questions engaged the students in classroom interactions. Also, they found that time constraints and the students’ level are responsible for high or low level of classroom interactions.

Linguistic Modification in teacher talk facilitate learning process and assist the students’ language acquisition through offering comprehensible input (Al-Smadi, Rashid, & Altamimi, 2020; Al-Smadi & Rashid 2019). Linguistics modifications in teacher talk are classified into three groups: first of all, phonological modifications such as more pauses and stress, slow delivery rate, exaggerated pronunciation, pauses and avoiding contraction. Secondly, semantic modifications such as avoiding conjunctions and pronouns, paraphrasing and avoiding idioms. Thirdly, syntactic modifications such as more simple sentences in comparison with compound and complex sentence type, less referential question in comparison with display questions, and avoiding tag questions (Ferguson, 1971; Henzl, 1979; Xuewen, 2006).

2.0 METHODOLOGY

This study aims to investigate the linguistic modifications in teacher discourse in an EMP class. The study data were collected during the First Semester of the academic years 2019/2020. Classroom observations and informal chats with the teacher were the source of data in this study. 15 classroom observations were carried out. When necessary, informal chat with the teacher was carried out after observation sessions to get further clarification of what had happened during the observation. The teacher who took part in this study is a native Arab and there were 17 male students aged from 18 to 25 in the observed classes.

The recorded data were all transcribed. The following codes were used in the transcription: (CO2, M15) refers to classroom observation number two, minute fifteen and (IC) refers to informal chats. Students’ names are replaced by (S1, S2, S3 etcetera) and the teacher’s name is replaced by (T).

3.0 ANALYSIS

After the utterances were transcribed, the utterances were thoroughly scrutinized for the purpose of identifying the occurrence of linguistic characteristics of teacher discourse. Linguistics modification in this study falls under three categories: phonological modification, syntactic modification and semantic modification.
3.1 Phonological modification
It is noticed that the teacher tends to speak slowly. His sentences were short and simple. It is also noticed that the teacher avoids contractions in most of his speech. Also, pauses were noticeably marked in his speech. The teacher tends to self-repeat most of utterances and questions and used more expressions like ‘yeah’ and ‘OK’ during talk for the purpose of making input comprehensible and therefore enable the student to use the target language in their talk. The following transcript illustrates the use of discourse markers yeah and ok as shown in the extract below.

Extract 3.1
1  T: Yeah yeah… During blood test…yeah, thanks S1. It could be a nurse,  
2  a lab specialist, or an intern, yeah… again anyone who is specialist, OK?  
(CO1, M20).

The teacher’s use of discourse marker here serves as confirmation for the input and comprehension check of understanding.

3.1.1 Pauses
The teacher’s pauses in this study fall into two types. The first one arises in the teacher’s act of organizing materials, thoughts, resources and activities. This type of pause is not subject to analysis as it refers to non-verbal behavior of teacher. The second type of pause is the linguistic pause. In this type, it is noted that the teacher is giving time to support students’ comprehension, tolerate modification in his talk and giving students enough time to think and talk. Pauses appeared mostly after asking questions rather than after declarative or imperative statements as illustrated in the transcript below.

Extract 3.2
1  T: Do you need help with anything else Denis? … What is the function of  
2  this question? … Request … or Offer…  
(CO8, M26).

The pauses are marked by three dots (…). The teacher paused three times to allow the students to think and answer. The teacher’s wait time was enough as the student was able to answer the question.

3.1.2 Rate of speech
It is noted that the teacher modified his speech rate to secure comprehension of his talk and give students more time to process input. It is noted that the teacher spoke slowly when addressing the whole class and he tended to increase the rate of speech when talking to individual students especially students with high-level proficiency.

3.1.3 Exaggerated pronunciation
The teacher frequently exaggerated enunciation of certain words in order to elicit students’ recognition and awareness of these words and enable students’ comprehension of these words. The teacher explained this in one of informal chats as an attempt to make his discourse easy to follow and understand. The teacher said: “I choose to stress key words more than I would typically do, with the purpose of making what I say more audible, clearer and perceived as key term that will be frequently used in classroom” (IC, 3).
3.1.4 Avoiding contraction

The teacher intentionally chose to avoid contractions like gonna instead of going to in order to make his speech clearer especially to those who are at low-level (IC, 5). Contractions are sometimes problematic to non-native speakers’ especially low level EFL learners because those students might be confused and might not be able to differentiate or comprehend the contraction in teacher talk.

3.2 Syntactic modification

Syntactic modifications refer to the teacher’s practice of simplifying his talk in terms of grammatical structure, length of utterances and type of statements etcetera.

3.2.1 Complex, compound and simple sentences

Complex and compound sentences are more difficult to students as they need in most cases, an interpretation of the relationship between clauses in a sentence. Therefore, simple sentences were more frequent and mainly used by the teacher and in most cases they are written on the board or on PowerPoint presentations. Simple short sentences are easier to be captured and comprehended by the students. The following table illustrates types of sentences and the frequency of each type.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Simple sentences</th>
<th>Compound sentences</th>
<th>Complex sentences</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1343</td>
<td>98.10%</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The teacher mainly used simple sentences in comparison to compound and complex sentences. This high percentage, 98.10%, is explained in relation to factors like students’ English level and the type of teaching materials and objectives. Simple short sentences are easier to comprehend and captured by everyone in class. Both compound and complex sentences are rarely used. However, compound sentences were more frequent than complex sentences.

Surprisingly, perfect tenses were not seen in teacher talk. Present simple, simple past and simple future and present progressive are the only tense type used by the teacher. The type of material does not focus on grammar use and accuracy. Therefore, the teacher chose to use simple tenses in his talk because these tenses are more frequent and all the students have prior knowledge about them (IC, 8). Also, simple present was seen the most frequent tense used by the teacher. Using these tenses in lessons were seen as a supportive tool for students to talk. The following table offers examples about tense types found in this study.

Table 2: Tense type
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of tense</th>
<th>Example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Simple present</td>
<td>Nancy works on the children ward.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Simple past</td>
<td>The patient presented to ER at 11 pm.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Simple future</td>
<td>The nurse will take your temperature now.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Present progressive</td>
<td>I am studying for my bachelor in nursing.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3.2.2 Imperatives

It is found that the use of the imperative in teacher talk is less than other forms of language such as declaratives or questions. The teacher’s use of imperatives appeared in most cases when teacher gave instructions to students in doing exercises and when students are working in groups. What is fascinating in the findings is that the teacher used polite imperative forms. The following transcript illustrates the use of the polite imperative.

Extract 3.3

1. Let’s work in this exercise in pairs.

(CO2, M17).

Polite imperatives imply that the teacher is not using a hierarchical power relationship, but rather a kinship and closeness relationship with his student. This idea will be further discussed in Chapter Six about identity.

The following table shows the frequency of declaratives, imperatives and interrogatives.

Table 3: Declaratives, imperatives and interrogatives

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Declaratives</th>
<th>Imperatives</th>
<th>Interrogatives</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1369</td>
<td>64.91%</td>
<td>167</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
As shown in the above table, imperatives were the least common, while declaratives and interrogatives were more used by the teacher.

3.2.3 Passive voice

Passive voice was only used 37 times in transcript. The percentage is 0.14%. The use of the Passive requires the student to focus on action more than the doer and in certain cases the doer is not even spoken. This makes it difficult for students to interpret and understand passive statements. Also, as medical English language learners, students need to be familiar with the name of different personnel and jobs in their work place i.e. doer of action is important in this context as it relate to objects, names or description etcetera. Considering the following passive statements in talk: *The patient was presented to ER; the patient was advised to walk every day; a lot of work is carried out during the shift.* The doer of the action is not mentioned in the previous statements despite the fact they are key terms: paramedic in first sentence, physician in second statement, and practice nurses in the third statement. Medical terms are more important than the structure of sentence (IC, 7).

3.2.4 Type of phrases

Noun phrases were more frequent than other types of phrases such as verb, adverb, adjective or prepositional phrases. The following table shows the number of frequency among type of phrases.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Noun phrase</th>
<th>Verb phrase</th>
<th>Adjective phrase</th>
<th>Adverb phrase</th>
<th>Prepositional phrase</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>#</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>692</td>
<td>36.90%</td>
<td>570</td>
<td>30.4%</td>
<td>210</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>313</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As shown in this table, noun phrases are dominant among other categories. Verb phrases were also more frequent than adjective, adverb and prepositional phrases. Prepositional phrases were more frequent than adverb phrases and adjective phrases. The differences here can be explained in relation to difficulty and familiarity of phrases. Noun phrases are easier to comprehend and use than adverbial phrases for example. Also, the content of course incorporates more noun phrases than other forms of phrases.
3.2.5 Question tags

Surprisingly, question-tags were absent in teacher talk despite the fact that they offer ordinary and common forms of language. In this manner, the teacher avoided using tags as questioning tool and as comprehension checks. In an informal chat with the teacher, he justified this as related to difficulties students might face using or comprehending tags and that tags are not commonly used in the medical context. The teacher said: “I don’t want students to mix tag questions with other forms of questions, tag questions are most common in informal talk and it does not relate to our objectives” (IC, 9).

3.3 Semantic modification

Semantic modifications refer to the teacher’s practice of simplifying his talk in terms of vocabulary, pronouns, and unfamiliar words etcetera for the sake of providing comprehensible input.

3.3.1 Paraphrasing and repetition

The teacher tends to self-repeat and paraphrase his talk. Self-repetition and paraphrasing secure input comprehensibility. The following transcript illustrates the use of self-repetition and paraphrasing.

Extract 3.4

3. loss of brain function, OK?

(CO5, M16).

The teacher repeated the word concussion four times and appropriate to the context when he linked it to the word brain and head (line 2). Also, the teacher used Ok four times as a comprehension checker (line 4) and as a confirmation checker (line 1).

Explaining, modifying and paraphrasing are strategies employed by the teacher to make his input clear and comprehensible. The teacher frequently simplified language and instructions by repeating and paraphrasing what might be considered hard to digest among students. This was done by choosing more familiar words to students, simpler grammatical formats, avoiding contractions and subordinations, shorter statements and limited choice of tenses. These strategies helped the teacher to be understood and minimized the questions that might arise as a result of students misunderstanding what they are requested to drill and practice (IC, 4).

It was also noted that the teacher frequently modified and restated questions instead of just repeating them. The teacher employed self-repetition, paraphrasing and pausing as techniques to modify questions. The teacher asked same and modified questions to several students to guarantee attention and the comprehension of questions being asked. The following transcript illustrates how the teacher restated the same question and ask several students when they were talking about symptoms.

Extract 3.5

1. T: What problem have the patient been having?
2. S1: Feel nauseous.
3. T: Excellent S1. Nauseous, Ok… S2 what’s been troubling the patient?
The teacher used various words for asking the same question in order to familiarize students with several questions which they can use to ask about the symptoms of patient (lines 1, 3, 6). Also, the teacher’s wait time was relatively short. The reason behind this is that the question was asked to several students and even sometimes to the whole class.

When students face difficulties in answering a question (which was noticed when no one volunteered to answer the question or when the answer to the question is incorrect), the teacher modified the question to make it more comprehensible. The following transcript illustrates question modification by the teacher.

Extract 3.6
1  T: What relieves the pain?
2  S13: Insomnia.
3  T: Let me ask the question again… What makes the patient better?
4  S13: Ice-packs.
5  T: Excellent S1. Give my high five. The word relieve means make better, Ok?
6  Relieve means make better.  

The teacher asked the same student to answer again after modifying his question (line 3); in this manner, he supported the student’s face by not rejecting the answer and established a good bond with him especially when he said give me high five (line 5). The teacher then reinforced the input through repetition (line 6).

3.3.2 Avoiding pronouns

It is found that all the referents used by teacher were easily interpretable by students. The teacher chose to avoid using pronouns when they refer to key words that he wishes to highlight and repeat for the sake of comprehensibility (IC6).

Extract 3.7
1  T: Grab bar is an example of mobility aids for the home. Grab bar gives
2  the patient something to hold on to.  

The teacher used the term grab bar twice. The teacher avoided using the pronoun it in second statement and chose to use the term again for emphasis.

To interpret pronouns, students need to remember what the teacher said earlier which may result in misunderstanding or a negative obstacle to comprehensibility. Therefore, the teacher avoided using pronouns and chose to spell out the noun instead. Also, homonyms such as (they’re, their and there) were also absent in teacher talk as they are likely to be misinterpreted or referred to and therefore lead to ambiguity and misunderstanding.
3.3.3 Conjunctions

It is found that the teacher avoids using conjunctions unless they are easy to digest. Working out the relationship between sentences such as cause and effect and the conclusion is not an easy job for students (IC, 8). However, conjunctions appeared in teacher talk to serve basic functions such as addition and alternatives. For example, *Is the patient married or single?* (CO2, M12); *Is the patient overweight or obese?* (CO3, M28) and *the patient is bleeding and nauseous* (CO4, M19).

It was easy for students to understand the function of conjunction *or* in questions which is associated to choice. Also, the conjunction *and* for addition in statements.

3.3.4 Avoiding idioms and unfamiliar words

The teacher in this study did not use idioms in his speech at all. Due to their nature, idioms are difficult to be understood among learners because the meaning is not literal in them. Also, the teacher did not use any proverb in his talk. Moreover, it was noted that the teacher used a few phrasal verbs in his talk such as *fill in, take out, switch in and switch off*.

The teacher explained this as ‘intentional’ because such words require cultural background and high level of language accuracy, proficiency and mastery (IC, 7).

3.3.5 Discourse markers

Discourse markers such as *now, anyway, great, finally, good, oh, well, just, ok* have been observed in teacher talk. The teacher used different discourse markers to express different functions in his talk. Discourse markers depend on a specific context and a specific teacher’s role such as in offering direction in the word *just*. The following transcripts illustrates various functions of the discourse marker *just*.

Table 5: Functions of discourse marker ‘just’.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Examples of discourse marker ‘just’</th>
<th>Function</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>You guys need to answer just five questions. Ok… Just five. (CO,3)</td>
<td>affirmation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Can you just switch off your mobile! (CO, 1).</td>
<td>Permission</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>This is just awesome.</td>
<td>Appraisal</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The teacher used the word *just* in the previous examples to serve different functions in his talk such as affirmation, permission, and appraisal. Such diverse use for the same word might cause ambiguity to students especially those at weak level. However, the teacher’s non-verbal actions such as using thumb and index fingers to express that something is little or using fingers to indicate the number made the context clear and less problematic to all levels of students.

The following transcript illustrates the use of *oh* and *finally*.

Extract 3.8

1  S20: I am marry next week
2  T: Oh… is that true?
3  S20: Yes… welcome teacher to dinner
4  T: Finally ha….

(CO2, M45).

In this example, the use of *oh* (line 2) serves the function of exclamation. Also, the word *finally* (line 4) indicates that something happened after waiting for a long time.

It is worth mentioning here that linguistic modification was noted to be a lot at the beginning of the lesson to familiarize students with intended target language. Students need to know the required language to use and practice. As the lesson moves on, modifications tend to decrease as a result of students’ comprehension of language. The teacher expressed in one of informal chats that he will do whatever it takes to make sure students understand. The teacher said, “I pause, repeat, simplify and drill to guarantee that I am making myself clear and students are following what has been done or intended” (IC, 7).

4.0 DISCUSSION

The teacher talk influenced students’ learning and the teacher modified his talk at phonological level, syntactic level and semantic level. These modifications in teacher talk were seen as effective strategies that have positive impact on students’ comprehension as reflected in the students’ turns during classroom interaction. The findings entail that students benefit more from teacher’s adjustments in his talk. Input modification secured comprehension and construction of knowledge. This finding aligns with Ferguson (1975), Henzl (1979), Xuewen (2006), Hollo and Wehby (2017), and Al-Zahrani and Al-Bargi (2017), in which they claim that modification in teacher talk results in students’ comprehension and construction of meaning. Although each of these studies was conducted in different context and different time, the similarity in findings in those studies regarding input modification entails the importance of offering comprehensible input to the students. In all those studies, the teacher/s was the main source of target language input. Therefore, input modification was necessary to accommodate students’ cognition and comprehension of target language. Input modification influences language learning as it facilitates comprehension for the students and makes the input easier and more orderly for the sake of target language learning.
Input modification occurred at phonological, semantic and syntactic levels. The most common and recurrent forms in the teacher’s modification were at phonological level and semantic level. Phonological modifications enabled the recognition of target language and offered time for the students to comprehend and resonate target language with previously learned material. Semantic modification such as simplification and elaboration establish a context for the realization of target language in authentic situations, which enhances the students’ comprehension and enables the students to link target language to real life situations. Failure to provide comprehensible input to the students’ results in failure to achieve course objectives and students’ personal goals as well as miscommunication at the workplace which may cause therapeutic mismanagement and threaten the quality of life.

The linguistics modifications in this study are similar to modifications identified by Henzl (1979), Ferguson (1975), Xuewen (2006), Winarti (2017), Lucero and Rouse (2017), Al-Zahrani and Al-Bargi (2017), and Irmayani and Rachmajanti (2017). Even though these studies differ from this study in things like the use of pronouns, type of tense, conjunctions and idioms, strategies for modifying talk, and the amount of modification, they all prove that teachers modified their talk in order to accommodate students’ understanding and interactional goals.

5.0 CONCLUSION

Teacher talk can be described as having a high frequency of self-repetition, exaggerated pronunciation, slower rate of speech, avoiding contractions, use of short sentences and phrases, paraphrasing, avoiding idioms and unfamiliar words, and pausing. The linguistics modification in teacher talk were compared with those identified by Henzel (1979); Ferguson (1975); and more recently Winarti (2017). Findings were found to be similar with those studies. However, differences were seen in the type of tense used, types of questions and the proportion of each type of questions, the use of pronouns instead of nouns, tag questions, passive voice and the percentage of self-repetition.

The linguistics adjustments in teacher talk was examined to find out the reasons behind modifying talk. Ensuring input comprehensibility, avoiding confusion and encouraging participation were seen to account for linguistics adjustments in teacher talk. Krashen (1982) states that the main characteristics of the good teacher is in his ability to make input comprehensible to non-native learners.

REFERENCES


