TEACHER TALK IN AN ENGLISH FOR MEDICAL PURPOSES CLASSROOM

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ABSTRACT

This paper, which is part of a larger study investigating the discourse in an English for medical purpose (EMP) classroom, discusses the characteristics of teacher talk in the classroom. Teacher talk is of major importance to the students as it serves a major source of students’ language input and subsequently their output. Teacher talk affects students’ learning and performance. Classroom interaction is considered a complex process in which the students and the teachers are in a state of dynamic interactions. Therefore, poor management of classroom interaction affects learning process in several ways such as ineffective/inappropriate instructions by the teacher and failure to engage in meaning-making processes. The data in this study were obtained through an interview with the teacher who is currently teaching an EMP course in one of the medical colleges in the kingdom of Saudi Arabia. The course aims to prepare students to interact successfully in real-life situations as well as in medical contexts. The teacher talk in EMP classroom is simplified and modified to suit the level of the students. The teacher offered clarification in form of repetition and paraphrasing. The teacher modified his talk to ensure input comprehensibility, promote classroom interactions, expose authentic language to students and avoid confusion. Modifications in teacher talk were subject to students’ level and for achieving clarity of course content. This paper concludes that the teacher talk is modified and simplified to deliver comprehensible input in order to assist the learners’ language acquisition and facilitate learning process.

Keywords: Teacher talk, classroom interaction, classroom discourse, discourse analysis, English for medical purposes.


1.0 INTRODUCTION

In English as a foreign language classroom, English must be the endorsed language to deliver foreign language to the learner in order to make them competent in utilizing the language communicatively within classroom setting. English teachers’ talk is considered the main
source for the students’ input where there is limited exposure to English language outside the classroom context. Recent studies in classroom interaction and teacher talk within foreign language context affirm the importance of teacher talk in classroom interactions and that the teacher talk provides the students with a comprehensible input (Irmayani & Rachmajanti, 2017; Hollo & Wehby, 2017; Lucero & Rouse, 2017; Ginting, 2017; Winarti, 2017). Classroom interactions is an evidence of learning and active engagement of the students in the classroom (Al-Smadi & Rashid 2017).

Teacher talk influences the students’ comprehension of course material and affects the students’ behavior (Hollo & Wehby, 2017). Moreover, teachers modify their talk to account for different levels of the students in the classroom. Teacher talk is dominant and simple, avoiding complex structures and the use of figurative language. Teachers in classroom modify and simplify their talk to suit their objectives and effectively engage students with different levels of proficiency (Al-Smadi & Rashid 2017). Research has shown that most English classrooms are still teacher-dominant. Teacher talk dominated a large proportion of class time. 75% of classroom talk goes to the teacher whereas students talk time comprised less than 20% of the class time (Winarti, 2017; Irmayani & Rachmajanti, 2017; Behtash & Azarnia, 2015).

Teacher talk is crucial to behavior management in classroom. Teachers should manage students’ behavior and action such as the use of mobile phone and late arrivals to make classroom experience easier and smoother. Appropriate classroom management strategies ensure supported and organized learning. Teachers are advised to keep the students busy and engaged in practicing target language or else the students will keep the teacher busy handling their disruptive behaviors and actions (Yusuf & Wong, 2017).

Teachers’ interactions through their talk excite learners’ acquisition of target language (Ginting, 2017). Teacher talk in classroom interactions have several functions such as replies, explanations, commands, elicitation, corrections, confirmation checks and clarification. Teacher talk encourages and fosters classroom spontaneous interactions, and nurture different patterns of classroom interaction (Lucero & Rouse, 2017). Patterns of teacher talk includes but not limited to offering directions, encouraging and praising, asking questions, using students’ ideas, joking, echoing students talk, and correcting students without rejecting their answers (Winarti, 2017).

Teacher talk involves a large amount of questions as they are main instruments for classroom evaluation and instruction. The use of questions engages the students in classroom interactions and promote the amount and the quality of classroom interactions (Al-Zahrani & Al-Bargi, 2017). Teacher talk is used to offer feedback to the students’ answers with engaging probe which require to reasoning or justifying.

Teachers in classrooms may address whole class participants as an application of IRF model, teachers may also speak to an individual student for leading less guided exercises and finally speaking to members of a group for organizing acts and evoking self -initiated language and collaboration (Rashid, 2016). Classroom interaction drives teaching and learning processes. It gives students active part in classroom interactive discourse, for example, initiating, responding to and ending dialogues. Interactions in second or foreign language classroom control opportunities of learning which students receive (Al-Smadi & Rashid, 2017).
2.0 METHODOLOGY

This study is part of a larger study investigating the discourse in EMP classroom which aims to investigate the characteristics of teacher talk in EMP class. Data generation took place during the Semester One of the academic years 2017/2018. Teacher interview was the source of data obtained in this study. The teacher who took part in this study is teaching EMP course at one of medical colleges in the kingdom of Saudi Arabia. The course is offered to non-native students and it aims to prepare students to interact successfully in medical context. The teacher had 10 years of experience in teaching EMP course. The teacher was invited to take part in a semi-structured interview to gauge his views on teacher talk. All the recorded data were transcribed. The following code was used in the transcription: (TI) refers to teacher interview. The name of the teacher is replaced by (T).

3.0 FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The teacher involved in this study intentionally and unintentionally modified the linguistic characteristics of his talk. Remarks from the interviews show some explanations for such modifications. First of all, the teacher said he adjusted his language to match the level of material. Also, the teacher said he varies his linguistic modifications based on the students’ level. Moreover, the teacher said he wanted to make sure of the clarity and authenticity in his classroom talk. To achieve clarity in course material, the teacher stated that slowing delivery rate, using simple short sentences and using concept checking questions are helpful for running class activities for example. To achieve authenticity, the teacher made use of visual resources to make classroom talk authentic.

The teacher emphasized the role of self-repetition, paraphrasing and avoiding contraction and idioms. He also stressed the importance of slowing down his delivery rate, using simple short sentences and using nouns instead of pronouns. These characteristics of talk ensure input comprehensibility and facilitate students’ learning in classroom. The semi-structured interviews revolved around simplification, repetition and paraphrasing, clarification, planning, the amount of teacher talk and the modification in teacher’s talk.

3.1 Simplification

The teacher asserts that his talk is subject to the students’ level. Simplified talk is easier to digest and therefore can be used by the students in their talk as shown in the excerpt below.

Excerpt 3.1

If possible, balanced choices are needed. Essentially, simplified talk that is easy to digest and comprehend. I simplify my talk to suit the level of my students. I don’t speak ungrammatical language and I always assure correctness to expose the appropriate language to the students. However, in medical context, there are terms that the students have to know and use no matter how difficult they are.

(TI, 1).

Also, the teacher expressed that students have a lot of interesting ideas, but they face difficulties expressing them in target language due to lack of vocabulary in that context;
therefore, here comes the role of teacher to fulfill their needs and help them express their ideas. This is shown in the excerpt below.

Excerpt 3.2

Students need me as a teacher to help them talk by asking questions to elicit their ideas and support them with vocabulary to do so. In teaching, it is important to facilitate students’ interactions in any possible mean depending on the context.

(TI, 1).

The teacher offered opportunities to practice new language in several forms such as asking questions, pair and group activities, repetition etcetera. Students took part in classroom talk after the teacher post language needed for the topic under discussion. Interestingly, as the semester moves on, students were having more and more opportunities to talk due to the overall development in their levels.

3.2 Paraphrasing and repetition

Paraphrasing and repetition are important in classroom talk and interaction. Paraphrasing and repetition secure input comprehensibility, allow for linguistic variation and help the students’ recognition of important information which the teacher highlights. The importance of paraphrasing and repetition is shown in the excerpt below.

Excerpt 3.3

Paraphrasing is an important strategy in our talk. Paraphrasing ensure comprehension by restating unfamiliar word/s with more familiar one. In this case, the students understand the word/s and idea/s through the language which is familiar to them and it also allows for introducing new target language items. Repetition on the other hand is also very important strategy in teaching. Repetition secure comprehenasion and make sure every in the class hear and recognize what is said. Also, repetition is important for highlighting word/s or ideas which are important in lessons.

(TI, 1).

3.3 Clarification

The teacher stated that linguistic modifications were used for providing students with comprehensible talk. The teacher modified his talk to suit the students’ level and make sure of input comprehensibility. The teacher used various strategies such as lowering the pace of talk and repetition to clarify the input and make sure everyone understands as show in the excerpt below.

Excerpt 3.4

Usually, I don’t do it consciously. However, when I use a new medical term, I always clarify it earlier or subsequently. I just slow down, pause, repeat and give time for the student to think and ask questions.

(TI, 1).
3.4 Planning

The teacher maximized the role of planning in achieving personal and academic objectives. Planning what is going to be said helps overcoming students’ demotivation and shows that the teacher is expert and well-informed. The importance of lessons’ planning is shown in the excerpt below.

Excerpt 3.5

I draw a map in my head of how the class should be. I plan exercises, jokes, questions, materials and I also anticipate what difficulties students might have during the lesson and most importantly what kind of language I am going to use in class which reflects on students’ understanding and learning. This will help me know where I am and where the students are. However, I am flexible to deal with anything that might happen during the lesson.

(TI, 1).

It can be noted from what the teacher stated here and from what I observed in classroom that the teacher is experienced and realistic. He knows what to do and how best to do them. Teaching the same course for three years made it easier for the teacher to fascinate students and inspire their achievement of personal as well as academic goals. Based on students’ level the teacher varies his talk and choice of word to suit the classroom discourse.

3.5 Amount of talk

Despite the fact that the teacher highlighted the importance of learners centered approach in classroom and how effective it is in developing students’ independent learning and their language level; the teacher knew that he spoke most of time during class. The teacher’s view on the amount of talk is shown in the excerpt below.

Excerpt 3.6

It is important to provide students with an input which results at later stages in students’ independent learning and their ability to use target language. Students consider teacher talk as standard and model. However, at this stage, students have no prior knowledge about kind of language that is used in medical field. So that, I need to support and equip them with this kind of language. This results in taking the highest amount of talk in classroom. However, once the input is there in classroom, I make sure that everyone in class uses and practice the language in most realistic and appropriate way.

(TI, 1).

Overall, the teacher knows that he speaks most of time and he assure students’ talk in several manners such as responding to questions, talking about personal experience regarding some topics and working in pairs and groups. Opportunities to speak and interact using target language is highly dependent on students’ level.
3.6 Modifying talk

The teacher talked about the role of planning about what is going to be said in classroom and how best to say it in ways achieving clarity and comprehension. Also, the modification he made to his talk in forms of paraphrasing, repetition, exaggeration of talk, use of simple sentences, clear and simple instruction, modeling and pace of delivery rate. All these features of teacher talk facilitate the teacher job in classroom in achieving clarity and providing students with an input which they can use and aid the development of their language abilities. The importance of speech modification is shown in the excerpt below.

Excerpt 3.7

As I said previously, planning ahead my talk and my lesson facilitate my work. Also, the type of material decides to a great extent what I am going to do with it and how I can make it easier and more comprehensible.

(TI, 1).

It can be seen that the teacher is determined to elevate the students’ level. Modifications in teacher’s talk is made to make input easier and comprehensible and therefore being used by the students during interaction.

4.0 CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the teacher talk is found to be the source of knowledge to the students. It is the source of language input and it has direct inspiration on outcomes. Teacher talk plays an important role in classroom interaction. Teachers initiate, guide, monitor and feedback interaction among students. Classroom interaction energies teaching and learning process. The teacher employed several strategies to communicate meaning to and with the students such as repetition, paraphrasing, simplification and modelling. The teacher modified and simplified his talk to offer a comprehensible input and to suit the level of the students. These modifications are seen as positive strategies to effectively secure students’ understanding and offering ways to initiate usage and practice of classroom talk.

REFERENCES


