



Study on Teachers' Discourse in College English Class

CHEN Xinxin^{[a],*}

^[a]Foreign Language Department, Qiqihar Medical University, Qiqihar, China.

*Corresponding author.

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Abstract

Teachers' discourse plays an important role in teachers' class management and students' language acquisition. It is not only the source of the target language, but also the means of class organization. Whether the teachers' discourse can be properly used is directly related to the quality of teaching effect. Based on the audio records of 6 college English teachers and their interviews in teaching and research activities, the author makes a research on the amount of teachers' discourse, the way of questioning, the language adjustment, the way of feedback as well as a detailed investigation and analysis of the teachers' use of their native language in order to preliminarily explore the use of college English teachers' discourse in class.

Key words: English teachers; Teachers' discourse in classroom; College English

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INTRODUCTION

Austin, an analytical philosopher of the Oxford school, first proposed speech act theory when he gave a series of lectures called How to Do Things with Words at

Harvard University in 1955 (Austin, 1962). And it was later modified and developed by Searle (1965) and Grice (1975). This theory suggests that human language is not simply a combination of sound and meaning, but that language can produce behavior. When the speaker says something that the listener can understand intelligibly, his words actually bring about behavioral consequences (Searle, 1976). Teachers' discourse, also known as teacher-style language or teaching language, refers to a language used by teachers in the teaching process. In other words, teachers' discourse is the language used by English teachers in organizing instruction and managing the class, which is quite essential. The proficiency and mastery of teachers' discourse will affect and even determine the success of college English teaching. In general, there are three types of common teachers' discourse: language adjustment, teachers' questions and teachers' feedback. What's more, the use of the teachers' native language can be observed in English classes. Therefore, in order to adjust to the reform of college English teaching and establish a student-centered English classroom, the author's discussion on teachers' discourse includes the use of native language and the amount of teachers' discourse.

Based on Krashen's input hypothesis and Long's interaction hypothesis, the author adopted the natural survey method to study the amount of teachers' discourse, teachers' questions, language adjustment, teachers' feedback and the use of native language in college English classroom.

TEACHERS' DISCOURSE

The Amount of Teachers' Discourse

According to a survey conducted by the National Research Center of Foreign Language Education on College English teachers of more than 40 colleges and universities across the country in 2002, it was found that most of the time

the classroom was teacher-centered with few classroom activities. Over a dozen years, in order to understand the actual situation, the author recorded 6 English lessons of 6 college students and sorted out the records after class. The amount of teachers' and students' discourse is as follows:

The amount of teachers' discourse in 6 classes was 27,23,24,21,26,25 respectively, and the amount of students' discourse was 12,13,16,14,11,13. There are 45 minutes for each class, and the remaining time is for students to think and do exercises as well as other non-verbal activities.

The survey results show that these English classes are still teacher-centered, and teachers spend more time talking in class than students do. However, in addition to taking notes in the classroom, students usually feel free to express their own opinions on the familiar topics in the text, such as the cultural symbols of China and the United States, the fast food culture of the United States and why Chinese people like fast food more and more. When teachers analyze the cultural background, syntactic structure and discourse structure of the texts, they are also willing to cooperate and interact with teachers. In order to improve comprehensive English application skills such as listening, speaking, reading and writing, teachers should give students the opportunity to use the language in class.

The Way of Questioning

According to Long and Sato(1983), display and referential questions are the most widely acceptable categories of questions (Long, 1983). Based on the preliminary statistics of the classroom records, the author found out that display questions are 11, 9, 12, 13, 8, 14 and referential questions are 2, 3, 3, 1, 6, 4 respectively. Display questions raised by teachers in class are much more than reference questions.

Teachers' display problems are far more than referential problems, which indicates that our English classroom has not really changed to student-centered college English classroom teaching. Through conversations with other teachers and discussions in teaching and research activities, there are two main reasons for this phenomenon: Firstly, teachers rely too much on textbooks in class. In the teaching process, teachers closely focus on the limited content of textbooks and complete all the contents stipulated in the teaching syllabus according to the schedule, often inclined to put forward display questions with definite answers. Then, under the effective control of teachers, students complete the learning of each information point and language point one by one. Secondly, teachers are not confident about their English proficiency. Most English teachers are advanced English learners whose English proficiency has not reached the level of free expression. The answers of referential questions are open and it is often the case that teachers do not know how to express some answers or can not find English expressions corresponding to students' answers. Therefore, some teachers in the class reduce the

amount of referential questions to avoid embarrassment. In order to establish a student-centered classroom model, teachers should use more referential questions than display ones to encourage students to explain and expand problems as well as make students think hard in class. In this way, students can concentrate on the classes, increase the chances of language practice and cultivate their independent learning ability.

The Language Adjustment

During the lecture, we found that basically teachers can use the target language for teaching. When students cannot understand the target language, teachers can generally adjust the language according to the teaching content and students' learning level. College English is usually taught in a large class, with 70 or 80 teachers who usually speak loudly and slowly, pause for a long time, and repeat some words beyond the syllabus. At the same time, linking and reductions are used less often than in face-to-face conversations. In terms of vocabulary, common expressions and teaching idioms are often used to replace uncommon idioms and abstract words. Words such as "pay attention to" and "underline" are often repeated in the classroom. Meanwhile, teachers also employ some teaching words that are rarely used, such as "suffix", "infinitive", "gerund", etc. In terms of syntax, short and simple imperative sentences and declarative sentences are widely used when teachers are managing classes and organizing activities. In addition to using audio language, teachers will also use non-verbal factors such as body language and gestures to explain the teaching content intuitively.

In class, it is also found that English teachers do not pay attention to the conversation turn-taking, which is the basic element of discourse process. One incoming word and one outgoing word can be regarded as a turn. In the English classes under investigation, the initiative of the turn-taking is basically in the hands of the teachers, and the students' abilities to support the conversation are very weak. The teachers' discourse in class is like a speech showing the teacher's language ability rather than a dialogue with frequent turns. The teacher talks too much, while the students can only respond with "yes" and "no". At the same time, teachers seldom use modal words in their discourse, and under their influence, students can not skillfully use these words in the dialogues. Therefore, English teachers should give discourse power to students appropriately, make students become the main body of the class, and pay attention to the turn-taking in order to make English teaching lively and interesting and improve students' interest in English learning, so that they can get more language knowledge from the class.

The Way of Feedback

Through listening records, 6 English teachers are able to give feedback on students' answers. In most cases, they

will use positive feedback, such as praise, repetition or comments, and use negative feedback less often in the actual class. Positive feedback can make students know that they have completed the task, thus enhance their confidence in learning English, create the classroom atmosphere, and motivate students to interact with teachers actively. Negative feedback, such as correcting students' mistakes eagerly, ignoring and interrupting students' answers will make students feel that their learning outcomes has not been respected and they are in a passive position in class, which will result in insufficient confidence and interest in learning. Shu Dingfang and Zhuang Zhixiang (2002) argued that positive feedback was helpful to student's language acquisition rather than negative feedback, since it could encourage and motivate students (Shu, 2002). But general, mechanical feedback can not produce good results. When stating the answers or summarizing the evaluation, teachers can get better results if they can quote students' language. Teachers can indirectly point out students' mistakes in order to improve their English proficiency. However, due to the obvious differences in students' English basis, personality and gender, teachers should treat students differently in specific situations.

CONCLUSION

English teachers are not only the providers of information to explain language phenomena and difficulties, but also

the guides, assessors and supporters of the class. Teachers should use appropriate language to guide students to think independently, encourage students to find problems and organize efficient classroom activities. Language learning cannot be separated from the language environment, especially the real context. Therefore, teachers should optimize their classroom discourse according to the teaching content and students' specific situations. Through their discourse, teachers create a good language learning environment for students, provide comprehensive language input, increase students' chances to use language, cultivate their independent learning ability, and eliminate students' sense of tension, anxiety and frustration in language learning. Optimizing and improving teachers' discourse should be one of the persistent career goals of English teachers.

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