

A Tentative Study of How to Improve the Effectiveness of Classroom Interaction

LU Yanfang^{1,*}

Abstract: The effectiveness of English learning and teaching is the ultimate goal of English education. Yet in China, English teaching is far from being effective. There is a lack of effective interaction between teacher and students in class. Using the framework of Conversation Analysis, this thesis summarizes four most frequently used classroom interaction models and their characteristics. Then it proposes some strategies on how to improve classroom interaction, they are: Clarification Requests, Confirmation Checks, Comprehension Checks, Conversational Adjustments, Partial, Exact, Expanded, and Total Self-Repetition, Partial, Complete, Expanded, and Total Other-Repetition.

Key words: Effectiveness; English teaching; Conversation Analysis

DOI: 10.3968/j.sll.1923156320110203.011

INTRODUCTION

Effective Instruction is defined as the one which is given in conformity with the objective laws of instruction, and which succeeds in efficiently promoting students' study and achieving instructional goals catering to the needs of both the society and students. (Li Hang 2008)

In China, English teaching is far from being effective. Most of the students have been learning English since junior middle school, but we can not find many fluent English speakers among them. Most of them are good at memorizing words, grammatical rules and sentence patterns, but they can't organize the sentences well when being asked to give a short speech on certain topic, some of them may even have pronunciation errors. Students are not only learning English from textbook, but also from interaction with teachers. But what we can see today is English teaching is still one-way direction with teachers speaking most of the time in class. Interaction between teacher and students should be improved. This thesis analyzes the structure of class interaction using the method of Conversation Analysis with an aim to find a teaching model in order to improve the effectiveness of English teaching.

1. CONVERSATION ANALYSIS

Since the late 1940's there has been a growing interest in studies of language interaction inside the classroom. The development of interactional linguistics owes a lot to the study of conversation analysis.

¹ College of Foreign Languages, Qufu Normal University, Shandong, China.

* Corresponding Author. Email: helen0743@sina.com

† Received April 4, 2011; accepted May 16, 2011.

(Dajin Lin, Chaoqun Xie, 2003) As early as 1970s, Harvey Sacks, Emanuel Schegloff, Jail Jefferson and other linguists advocated a dedicated study toward daily conversation. They proposed a new term: talk-in-interaction, which includes all the verbal communication in on-line interactional process. (Sacks *et al.* 1974). Their interests turned from psychological competence and the analysis of structure to a more open, socialized interactional action that is influenced a lot by time and space. They took into consideration the turn and the relationship between turns in a discourse sequence as well as the characteristics of turns. According to them, human being is not the passive carrier of language culture but the active participant. Though human activity was more or less controlled by social regularities and discipline as well as anticipation, it is unpredictable. So their speech act can influence directly the structure, development and result of the whole speech event. In other words, interaction participants should adjust their language and practice accordingly in daily life. That is to say, the participants continually construct and reconstruct their way of knowing the world and their own social identity. In this sense, language competence and language use have a dialectical relation: they can be the basis of each other and also they can influence each other. (Schegloff *et al.* 1996). In their study, they explored the rules and regularities in daily communication using a large quantity of real recorded material. Except for turns, they also took into consideration the characteristics of adjacency, the changing of topic and also preference structure etc. Soon this method was adopted by researchers in Great Britain, like Sinclair and Coulthard. They investigated daily conversation, group conversation, and classroom discourse and then, on the basis of this, they proposed a basic model of analyzing classroom discourse and constructed a descending unit from lesson to exchange, move and act. This model is very influential in the study of classroom teaching, because it took into consideration the whole process of classroom teaching.

Conversation analysis sees classroom interaction as “living interpersonal interaction” (Allwright 1984), according to them, teachers and students in classroom are all participants, each “move” of them can help to realize a kind of teaching function.

Bellack and his colleagues began to conceive any lesson in more ordered and hierarchal terms. They recognized four units of analysis to which Bellack gave the names: *game*, *sub-game*, *cycle* and *move*. Sinclair and Coulthard(1975), borrowing from Halliday’s(1961)theory of scale and category grammar, developed a model of classroom discourse involving a series of ranks and levels arranged in a hierarchical order. They are in descending order: *Lesson*, *Transaction*, *Exchange*, *Move* and *Act*. In practice, Sinclair and Coulthard were to be remembered most for the particular study of *move*. In their study, *move* is divided into three parts: the so-called *Initiation*, *Response*, *Feedback* move, known as the *IRF*, or sometimes, following a similar description in Mehan’s work as the *Initiation*, *Response*, *Evaluation* move, the *IRE*.

So aiming to promote teaching, conversation analysis has the following characteristics: 1) it does not differentiate the discourse between teacher and students, so it is easier to know the overall process of interaction; 2) it draws conclusion through analyzing discourse material, so it is objective; 3) it relates language form with its function, so its application in practice is theoretically and systemically increased.

2. THE ANALYSIS OF THE STRUCTURES OF CLASSROOM DISCOURSE

On the basis of Conversation Analysis, the author will analyze discourses in class using the structures concluded by Yue’er Li and Hongya Fan. (Yue’er Li, Hongya Fan 2002).

2.1 IRF: Initiation-Response-Feedback

In this structure, the teacher asks a question, the student answers it, and then the teacher gives feedback. e.g.

- T What is your favorite season? (initiation)
S Summer. (response)
T OK. (feedback)

IRF is a basic discourse pattern, and it is basic because in instructional phase, especially in a teacher-centered class, almost every discourse structure has these three elements. For the third part of this structure there are two names: *feedback* or *evaluation*, but both of them are in follow-up move. There is no difference between them because their functions are the same. The teacher gives evaluation or feedback according to the students' answer: for the correct answer, the teacher gives a positive evaluation, and for the incorrect one, the teacher gives a negative evaluation or withholds it for strategic reasons.

T Do you know what the date today is?

S It is thanks-giving day.

T Right.

In IRF interaction, the teacher is the instructor of the teaching plan and at the same time he also arranges the class activities. According to Barnes (1976), IRF interaction has a close relationship with "transmission mode of education". In this mode, the teacher reinforces his authority in classroom while transmitting their knowledge. Burton(1981) concluded: it is generally thought that teaching process is a process in which information is transmitted from teacher to students, and this transmission happens only in a certain mode in which teacher has a dominant function while the students have a cooperative function. They just receive the knowledge passively. There is little chance for them to exercise their communicative ability. In a word, the more control the teacher gives to the class content and form, the more frequently the IRF appears.

2.2 IRFR: Initiation-Response-Feedback-Response

Sometimes, after the teacher has given feedback, especially when the teacher has corrected the mistake in the students' response and given correct answer, or when the teacher is emphasizing the new information, the students intend to imitate or repeat what the teacher has said. Under this kind of circumstances, IRFR structure happens in the classroom. e.g.

T What is the meaning of "beyond our imagination"? (initiation)

Ss It means "cannot be imagined". (response)

T Yes, it means cannot be imagined (feedback)

Ss Cannot be imagined. (response)

Or:

T What is the meaning of "ditto"? (initiation)

Ss As well as. (response)

T No, it means "the same with". (feedback)

Ss The same with. (response)

This kind of structure appears frequently in English classrooms. Here is another example:

T: *What do you do every morning?* (initiation)

S: *I clean my teeth.* (response)

T: *You clean your teeth every morning.* (feedback)

S: *I clean my teeth every morning.* (response)

In this kind of structure, the last part is usually repetition and imitation. In SLA *repeat* and *imitation* are regarded as a kind of learning strategy, and its application can help to leave a strong impression to the students of the new information and help the students enter the communicative process as soon as possible.

2.3 IR [I1 R1 (I2 R2)] F structure

In this kind of structure, after the students have given response to the teacher's initiation, the teacher may not give feedback immediately to the students' incorrect or mistake answer, instead he may go on with initiating and give the student another chance. After repeating these steps for several times, at last, the teacher gives his feedback. e.g.

T: How do you answer if I ask "Do you mind opening the window"? (initiation)

S: Never mind. (response)

T: Is that correct? (initiation)

S: Not mind. (response)

T: Here you should say "of course not", that is to say "I do not mind". (feedback)

This kind of structure also appears frequently in English classroom, in the observation of the English class, including intensive reading and oral English. In three universities in Shandong Province, the researcher finds out that this structure appears more frequently now than the above two. This shows that there are more interactions between teacher and students now than before. For the incorrect answer the teacher intends not to give the correct answer immediately instead he tries to give the students more hints in order to help them give the correct answer by themselves. In this way the students have more chance to participate in the teaching process.

2.4 IR1F1 / R2F2 Structure

That means after the teacher's question, one or some students may give the response, and then the teacher gives feedback. But if at the time the teacher doesn't turn to another topic, there may be other students who give response to the teacher's initial question, and then the teacher gives feedback for another time. We can call this structure *post-cooperative* structure. e.g.

T: So you mean you attended English corner yesterday evening? What new words did you learn when you spoke to the sophomore? (initiation)

S1: Charming. (response 1)

T: Yeah, charming. (feedback 1)

S2: Host. (response 2)

S3: Victim. (response 3)

T: Good, so you have learned "charming, host and victim". (feedback 2)

In today's English class, maybe because the teachers have been influenced by the new term "interaction", we can notice more "open questions". To this kind of question there are usually not definite answers and the students can give answers to their own will. In this way they can have more chance to interact in the class actively.

2.5 Some Major Findings

In the above, the thesis has presented four kinds of classroom discourse structure with the last two are the variations of the basic form IRF. From the analysis of classroom discourse and the observation of class activities, the author has the following major findings:

- a) The less control the teacher gives to the teaching, the higher frequency the last two structures appear, because in this way, the students have more chance of participation. In other words, if the teacher pays more attention to the students' communicative competence, and if the students can be more active in the class, there will be more interaction in the classroom.
- b) The whole teaching process has a strong Chinese color including both the topic of an oral English class and the class model. The topic is usually about the hot issues that happened around them and the conversation in class reflects a typical Chinese way of thinking.

- c) In intensive reading classes, the teachers are trying to change the traditional teaching model. That is to say, the class process is no longer the monologue of the teacher, and there is more interaction between teacher and students. In this way, the students' interest is promoted.
- d) (4) The content of the interaction should be interesting to the students. That is to say, it can stimulate the students' internal motivation and make the students enjoy themselves in the process. In other words, only if language becomes the media for relevant information in which the students are interested, can it greatly attract the students' attention and interest. Activities of this kind are: students-centered cooperative activities, content-centered activities, activities combining language with culture, activities aiming to promote the students' communicative competence and test devised to cultivate the students' interactive skills.

3. SOME STRATEGIES FOR IMPROVING CLASSROOM INTERACTION

3.1 Clarification Requests

Clarification requests are those utterances made by the listener to clarify what the speaker has said, which include statements such as "I don't understand", wh-questions, yes/no questions, and tag questions. e.g.

S I think Zhao Wei is a **victim**, we should forgive her.

T A what?

S A victim.

T Good, I think it's good for you to use this word.

Sometimes in a classroom environment, the teacher and the students can not hear clearly each other, or sometimes the students can not catch what the teacher means due to the unfamiliarity with a new word. So under this kind of situation, clarification request is adopted.

3.2 Confirmation Checks

Confirmation checks were those utterances made by the listener to confirm that the preceding utterance had been heard and understood correctly, but they include repetition of all or part of the utterance accompanied by rising intonation.. e.g.

(In an oral English class, a student talked about how she came to the university)

S My family is very poor, my uncle gave me money to go to the university.

T You mean your uncle supports you?

S Yeah.

In this example, the confirmation check is given by the teacher, because she wants to make sure if she has just heard it correctly or not. In other situations, the strategy may be adopted by the students. e.g.:

(in an intensive reading class, after the instructional phase, the teacher asks if the students have any question, one of the students asks a question)

S Excuse me, just now you talked about the usage of 'could have done', you mean it can be used to indicate a kind of supposition that is contrary to the reality. Is that right?

T Yeah, that's the point.

Usually, during the teaching process, the strategy is rarely adopted by the students, because sometimes in most of today's English class the students are not encouraged to interrupt the teacher and ask questions. That is why we say that the students are receiving knowledge passively.

3.3 Comprehension Checks

Comprehension checks were those utterances made by the speaker to check whether a preceding utterance had been correctly understood by the listener and consisted primarily of questions, either tag questions, repetition with rising intonation, or questions such as “Do you understand?”. Based on the observation of the researcher, in Chinese English classroom, this kind of question is most often asked by the teacher. e.g.

(On a thanks-giving day, the teacher is giving the students some words to cheer them up)

T Let bygones be by gone, you know, there are always ups and downs, you know **ups**?

Ss Yeah.

T You know **downs**?

Ss Yeah.

Sometimes the teacher asks these questions although he knows that the students understand what he said. He just wants to emphasize what he said, to leave the students a strong impression.

Another example:

(In an oral English class, teacher and students are talking about Zhao Wei, a very famous film star in China. She is criticized by the media because she wears Japanese national flag in the public)

T *Whatever she wears, it will affect her fans, cuz she is very popular.* You know? Facts speak louder than words. ***Do you understand the meaning of this sentence?***

Here the teacher asks this question to check if the students have understood what she said.

3.4 Conversational Adjustments (Combination of the Above Three)

This consisted of the combined use of the strategies described above. e.g.

T What is your favorite season?

S Spring.

T If you want to write an article of spring what would you like to write?

S Sunshine,

T What?

S Sunshine……seaside……

T You love spring?

S Yeah.

T Why?

S Cuz spring is the beginning of the year.

T Good, spring to the year is just like morning to the day. Right?

Ss Yeah.

In this example, we can find meaning negotiation strategies we have talked about above. In real life, language use is colorful and complicated just like life itself, so we can not use only one strategy to deal with all kinds of situations. So it is natural for us to use the combination of these strategies.

3.5 Partial, Exact, Expanded, and Total Self-Repetition

This consisted of the speaker’s partial and exact repetitions of lexical items from their own preceding utterances within five speaking turns. e.g. (in an oral English class, teacher and students are talking about Zhaowei, a very popular film star in China at the time)

S Zhaowei is a very good actress, I think we should forgive her, (T: You mean we should forgive her?) yes, we should forgive her, we should forgive what she did.

Here, in this example, there is also an expanded form of the speaker's own utterances.

When a student is answering the teacher's question or when he or she is giving a speech, he or she often repeats what he or she has just said due to the nervousness. If the teacher can notice this atmosphere, he should try to relax the student and try to give the student a relaxing situation.

3.6 Partial, Complete, Expanded, and Total Other-Repetition.

These include partial and exact repetitions of lexical items from an interlocutor's preceding utterances within five speaking turns. They also include expansions of the other's utterances. e.g. (*Also in the oral English class, the students and the teacher are talking about Zhaowei, a famous film star in China*)

SI think she is 无辜的, she has apologized for it.

T You know the word 'victim'?

S Victim.

T Yeah, she is just a victim.

Another example:

T What new words did you learn when you spoke to the sophomore?

S Charming, host.

T Good, charming, host.

In an English class, this strategy is most often adopted by the students especially during the instructional phase, and the students often do this unconsciously, sometimes because they do not hear clearly what the teacher said or sometimes because they just hear a new word. They repeat it just because they want to remember it.

CONCLUSION

A successful interactional teaching in a language class must take into consideration the relationship between input and output. Though teacher's input is influential to the students, we must remember that successful interactional teaching is constructed by teacher and students together, and the study of either side of the two can not tell the whole story of the teaching process. In this thesis, the author has made a tentative investigation of classroom teaching process. It has the following findings about the present-day language teaching:

1) The traditional teacher-centered teaching model is changing into student-centered model. This is an exciting phenomenon, because more and more people are paying attention to the important role that the students play in the classroom.

2) Because we are in a Chinese-speaking country, so the outer atmosphere of learning a foreign language is rather unfavorable, or in other words, language learning students in China lack a kind of learning atmosphere. This is a very important difficulty that Chinese students encounter when they are learning a foreign language.

3) Seeing the problem from the angle of the teacher, we can find another problem: most of the teachers in foreign language institutes in Chinese universities are natives of Chinese, and they grew up in China and Chinese is their mother tongue. Most of them have never been abroad, and how to train their students in their pronunciation and their way of speaking of English remains a question to most of the people. As a teacher of a foreign language institute in a normal university, the author hopes that in the future the focus of our study should not only rest on how to write academic articles, but also how to improve the quality of the teacher, because it is really embarrassing sometimes in the classroom when the pronunciation of a teacher is worse than his or her students.

4) Because our traditional teaching system does not encourage the students to speak out their own opinion during the teaching process, Chinese students intend to keep silent in the teaching process. In other words, they usually intend to listen more but speak less even when they are learning English. As we all know, this is a very bad habit in learning a foreign language. So there is a special phenomenon among Chinese students learning English: dumb English. The author thinks that this problem should be solved from the psychological aspect.

Because both time and materials are insufficient, the thesis only gives a superficial analysis of classroom discourse; its limitations need further discussions and improvement. For example, the analysis of classroom discourse in this thesis is qualitative, so it tends to bare a personal view. In the future, the study can be carried out using a quantitative method, the result of which will be more objective and convincing.

REFERENCES

- Allwright, R.L (1984). The importance of interaction in classroom language teaching. *Applied Linguistics*, 5(2), 156-171.
- Barnes, D. & F. Todd (1977). *Communication and learning in small groups*, (pp.63-64). London: Routledge Kogan Paul.
- Burton (1981). *Analyzing spoken discourse*. In Coulthard and Montgomery (eds.), 63.
- Dajin Lin, Chaoqun Xie (2003). Interactional linguistics: Developments and prospects. *Modern Foreign Language*, 26(4), 410-418.
- Halliday, M.A.K. (1961). *Categories of the theory of grammar word*, 17/3, (pp. 241-292). Reprinted in Kress, G. (ed.) 1976.
- Hang Li. (2008). The study of effective teaching and its inspiration to foreign language teaching, *Foreign Language World*, 1, 33-39
- Long, Michael, H, & Charlene, J. Sato (1983). Classroom foreign talk discourse: Forms and functions of teacher's questions, (pp. 268 – 285). In Selinger, H. W. and Long, M. H, eds. *Classroom: Originated research in second language acquisition*. Rowley, Mass: Newbury House.
- Sacks, H., E. A. Schegloff & G. Jeffersonl (1974). A simplest systematics for the organization of turn-taking for conversation. *Language*, 50, 696-735.
- Schegloff, E.A., E. Ochs & S.A. Thompson. (1996). Introduction, (pp. 1-51). In E. Ochs, E.A. Schegloff & S. Thompson (eds.). *Interaction and Grammar*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Sinclair, J. M. and M. Coulthard (1975). *Toward an analysis of discourse: The English used by teachers and pupils*, (pp.19-59). London: Oxford University Press.
- Yue'er Li, Hongya Fan (2002). *Discourse analysis*, (pp. 16-18). Shanghai: Shanghai Publishing House of Foreign Language Education.