Exploring the Impact of Classroom Interactional Discourse on Preparatory Students' Oral Production of the Target Language

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ABSTRACT

The current qualitative study aims at discovering the classroom interactional discourse of an English grammar lesson for students at a preparatory level and its impact on students' oral production of the target language. The ethnographic observation method is employed and a high quality audio-tape recorder is used to gather and analyse the research data. The findings indicate that the "initiation- response- feedback" (IRF) structure is a predominant element during the classroom interactional discourse, and students' poor oral production during the classroom spoken discourse, as revealed by this study, is attributed to the negative impact of this element among other factors such as the type of teachers' questions and students' responses. The study provides some recommendations about the best instructional practices that can be used in the classroom to enhance students' richer oral production of the target language.

Key words: Classroom Discourse, Discourse Analysis, Conversation Analysis, Interaction Analysis, IFR Structure, ZPD

INTRODUCTION

Background and Statement of the Problem

The term "classroom discourse" refers to the language used by teachers and students for communication in the classroom context. The classroom discourse, according to Lin (2007), differs in its structure and function from the discourse used in other environments due to the distinctive roles played and activities practiced in classrooms. For example, teachers in the classroom generally initiate the spoken discourse by asking questions and nominating interactants, and students have to respond to teachers' initiation, and teachers, then, give feedback on students' responses. This structure is considered essential by many researchers to achieve effective language learning in classrooms (e.g., Liu, 2008; Lyle, 2008; Myhill, 2006; Nassaji & Wells, 2000; O'Connor & Michaels, 2007; Wilen, 2004). Moreover, teachers in the classroom have the right to direct, monitor and/or manage the language produced by students, and these functions may or may not be found in other spoken discourses (Lin, 2007).

Historically, literature showed that classroom discourse analysis was first used by linguists not by applied researchers in education as shown in the work done by Sinclair and Couthard (1975) in which the researchers provided a primary model to study the classroom discourse by focusing on the organization of linguistics rather than on teaching and learning strategies (Edwards & Westgate 1994). More recently, the classroom discourse has been shifted from linguistics to education, and

researchers started to focus on the forces shaping teachers' instruction (Markee 2005). In this respect, research showed ample studies on the classroom patterns that govern conversational interaction and their impact on students' outcome in different contexts (e.g., Cazden & Beck, 2003; Hogan, Nastasi & Pressely, 2000; Meyer & Turner, 2002; Nathan & Knuth, 2003; Nolen, 2007; Turner & Patrick, 2004; Webb et al., 2008; Webb, Nemer & Ing, 2006). However, and to the best of the researcher's knowledge, no studies were reported in the literature to explore classroom interactional discourses used by second language (L2) teachers in the UAE context and their impact on students' oral production of the target language.

Research Purpose, Significance and Question

Two types of interaction happen during classroom spoken discourse; teacher-student and student-student interaction; however, the focus, in the literature, is always given to those that talk about teacher-student interaction as being the basis of learning process (e.g., Hall & Verplaetse, 2000; Hall & Walsh, 2002; Jarvis & Robinson, 1997; Van Lier, 1996; Walsh, 2006). The researcher of the current study aims at analyzing the language as produced by teachers and students during an English grammar lesson for students at a preparatory level to know what actually happens during the classroom spoken discourse. By doing so, the researcher expects to yield insight into the current interactional practices in the UAE context and their influence on students' oral production of the target language,

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which will lead to some significant recommendations about the best interactional practices that can be applied by language teachers in the classroom to enhance longer practices of target language by students. This way, teachers can guarantee full interaction during classroom activities in an orderly manner, a matter which results in language acquisition (Molinari, Mameli & Gnisci, 2013). To reach the above goal, the researcher of this paper puts forward the following research question:

> What insights can the results of classroom discourse analysis bring to bear on the best instructional practices by language teachers to enhance students' oral production of the target language?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Theoretical Framework

The interactional and communicational theory is highly emphasized as the theory of language in which language is considered a tool to facilitate communication and interaction among individuals. To create a full interaction, some language patterns should be applied including moves, speech acts and turn-takings. In the classroom, these patterns should be applied within a broader exchange structure called "initiation- response- feedback/follow-up" (IRF) structure to create and promote classroom interaction. According to this theory, the interactional language is verbally or non-verbally produced and normally functioned to initiate, respond or evaluate the spoken discourse. Moreover, the socio-cultural theory as suggested by Vygotsky (1978) is emphasized as the theory of language learning, in which learning happens if fundamentally shaped, culturally framed and discursively patterned by interaction. In the classroom, students should be fully involved and completely engaged in practicing the target language within the zone of proximal development (ZPD) to learn or acquire the desired language. The term "ZPD" means that students, during their full involvement or engagement, should be scaffolded by teachers or expert students to a level which is slightly above their current level. This theory takes into account the social and cultural factors of the spoken language during scaffolding and/or interaction.

Approaches of Classroom Discourse Analysis

The interaction analysis approach

The interaction analysis (IA) approach, as rooted in behavioral psychology, is used to observe and analyze any linguistic behavior as occurs in the classroom. This approach is deemed an effective and objective approach by Chaudron (1988) among others to understand the nature of classroom discourses. Chaudron (1988) continues to say that, the adoption of observation techniques as research methods and using checklists or real-time coding systems as research instruments can help researchers observe and analyze the linguistic behaviors as occur during classroom spoken discourses. To put it differently, researchers, who want to observe and analyze the linguistic behaviors of classroom spoken discourses, have to design their instruments before going to the classroom to suit what they search for.

Despite its success in giving insight into our understanding of what happens during classroom spoken discourses, IA approach is criticized for two main reasons: firstly, it is argued by Nunan (1989) that IA does not give a full picture of all classroom behaviors as it focuses only on what can be observed and measured. Secondly, and according to Walsh (2006) and Nunan and Bailey (2009), researchers who go to classrooms with prior checklists or categories do not pay attention to any linguistic behaviors not included in such checklists or categories. In other words, the use of such instruments blinds researchers' eyes from observing all naturally occurring linguistic behaviors. Therefore, it is concluded that IA is unable to observe all linguistic behaviors in classrooms, and then, it is unable to describe what actually happens during classroom spoken discourses.

The discourse analysis approach

The discourse analysis (DA) approach is used to analyze the structural properties and functional objectives of classroom discourses. This approach is deemed the best by Sinclair and Coulthard (1975), among other earliest exponents of DA approach, to understand the nature of classroom discourse. According to Sinclair and Coulthard (1975), the "initiation- response- feedback/follow-up (IRF) structure always governs any classroom discourse, and various combinations of this structure constitute all classroom spoken discourses. The feedback/follow-up turn is sometimes called the evaluation turn as mentioned in Mehan's work (1979) or the comment turn as mentioned in Markee's work (2005). Moreover, this IRF structure, and according to van Lier (1996) and Chaudron (1988), allows for two turns by teachers and one turn by students in every exchange. In other words, and in order to enhance effective classroom discourses/conversations, teachers' talk should constitute two-thirds of classroom discourses. Furthermore, and in order to understand what actually happens during classroom discourse, researchers should go to the class with some preconceived or fixed IRF structures (Markee, 2005).

Despite its success in expanding our conceptions and perceptions about classroom discourse and its contribution to disclosing some strategies to enhance L2 learning such as different question strategies as suggested in many works (e.g. Brock, 1986; Tsui, 1985; Yang, 2010), and repair strategies as suggested in other works (e.g., Cullen, 2002; Jarvis & Robinson, 1997), DA approach is criticized for two main reasons: firstly, it is argued by many researchers (e.g. Lee, 2007; Nassaji & Wells, 2000; Wells, 1993) that IRF is not accurate in terms of sequence. They contend that the third turn is not always follow- up or feedback, but rather it depends on the previous turn. Secondly, the use of rigid structures in observing classroom discourses blinds researchers from observing some naturally occurring interactional events such as interruptions and overlaps which are very common in classroom spoken discourses as asserted by Edwards and Westgate (1994). Therefore, it is concluded that DA is unable to observe all interactional events in the classroom context, and then it is unable to describe what actually happens during classroom spoken discourses.

The conversation analysis approach

The conversation analysis (CA) approach is an idea first developed by Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson (1974) to explore the sequential organization of classroom discourses. Unlike IA and DA, The CA approach describes classroom discourse as fluid exchanges of turns between teachers and students, and such exchanges are governed by previous turns and social micro-contexts (Heritage, 2004). This approach, according to Seedhouse (2004) and Markee (2005), puts the accent on the naturally occurring interactional events in the classroom. Putting it simply, it insists on analyzing classroom discourses from recorded data rather than from the data elicited from prior categories or checklists as suggested by the IA approach or from fixed structures as suggested by the DA approach. Given that it covers the limitations of the previous two approaches, it is regarded the best and the most recognized approach by researchers in the field to describe what actually happens during classroom spoken discourses (Markee, 2005). Therefore, this approach is used by the researcher of this paper to analyze the classroom discourse under investigation to find an answer to the research question represented in exploring the best instructional practices that can be applied by language teachers in L2 classrooms to enhance students' longer and richer production of the target language.

METHODOLOGY

Research Approach and Methods

The researcher of this paper adopts the qualitative research approach, and uses the observation method for the purpose of gathering the data of the current research. The qualitative research approach is defined by Creswell (2009) as an approach used by researchers to accurately describe a phenomenon by collecting data of a non-numerical type. Among various qualitative methods, the observation method is chosen because the current study requires a behaviourist focus, and the behaviourist focus is best investigated, according to Fetterman (2010), Wolcott (2008) and Creswell (2009), by the observation method.

Context: School/Participants/Teachers/Materials

The data is collected from a TESOL class at a private school located in Sharjah Emirates, UAE. The students of the class, 7th graders, age between 13 and 14 years old and study English as a second language for almost 8 years, and therefore, it is expected from them to have an adequate knowledge base to participate in the study. The class, which gathers students from different nationalities and has a total of 15 students, is randomly chosen to be observed by the researcher of this paper. The students of this class along with the class teacher constitute the main participants of the present study. To add more information about the class teacher, he is a non-native English speaker, holding the Egyptian nationality and teaching English as a second language for almost 13 years. He also has IELTS certificate with a score of 7.0 out of 9.0 on the IELTS scale test, and therefore, it is expected from him to be able to teach the attended lesson efficiently, a matter which enhances the reliability of the present research results.

The attended lesson, which talks about the use of English –ing forms as subjects and as objects, and after prepositions, is taken from the students' English textbook, "*Bridge to Success*" by Arnold, Law, McKenzie and Smith (2015-2016), unit (4), p. 35. The class period is forty-five minutes, and hence, the whole recorded data is anticipated to last for 45 minutes a maximum. However, and because of the time limit, a short recorded data of some interactional events as considered significant by the researcher and peer-reviewed by an external reviewer to avoid subjectivity is transcribed into text.

Instruments and Data Recording

Wolcott (1994) recommends four strategies for ethnographic observation, and one of which is to observe and record everything in the class. However, it is contended by Grbich (1999) that it is impossible for researchers to be able to observe and record everything at one time unless they use audio-tape recorders or video-recording devices as research instruments. The researcher of this study decides to use an audio-tape recorder to fully cover all interactional events as naturally take place during the classroom spoken discourse.

Although the researcher is aware that, recording teachers' gestures and postures is important as they play a vital part in controlling the classroom spoken language, and such gestures and postures can be recorded by only using video-recording devices, he is unable to use such video-recording devices as research instruments because the class teacher is afraid of the misuse of video-recorded data. Therefore, the researcher decides to dispel the teacher's concerns and worries and go to the class with an audio-tape recorder, and at the same time and as a way to catch non-verbal interactional events, he decides to write notes about the most significant non-verbal interactional events. In this respect, the researcher is aware that this procedure is not the best to catch non-verbal interactional events as naturally occur during the classroom discourse, but he sees that this procedure is better than nothing at all. In addition, a diagram of students' seating positions and names are drawn to facilitate the retrieval of all verbal and non-verbal interactional events as naturally occur during the discourse.

Ethical, Behavioral, Attitude and Other Issues

According to Israel and Hay (2008), all ethical considerations should be considered by researchers before conducting any scholar paper to enhance research accountability and integrity. To ensure this, the participants' privacy is highly respected, gathering of harmful information is totally avoided, all necessary permissions from the schools' principal and the class teacher are obtained, and the main purpose of the study is explicitly explained whenever the researcher is asked to do so. The researcher is also keen on handling all possible behavioural inhibitions that may constrain the natural interaction between the class teacher and his students and among students as a result of using audio-tape recorders or because the researcher may be deemed a strange person breaking into the class. To handle this, and before bringing along the audio-tape recorder to the classroom, the teacher decides to pay a visit to the class a day before the observation to introduce himself

to the class and the class teacher, to explain the purpose of his observation and the benefit of using an audio-tape record-er for the completion of the current research and to make all necessary arrangements with the participants. Furthermore, and to make sure that the classroom interaction is naturally flowed, the first 10 minutes of the recoded data are ignored as enough time for the participants to forget about the audio-tape recorder and the presence of the observer, a matter which en-hances their natural talk during the classroom interaction.

DATA ANALYSIS OF THE SPOKEN DISCOURSE

The recorded data is transcribed into texts and arranged into five columns as shown in Table 1 and 2 below. This tran-

Table 1. Data analysis of the spoken discourse
(Excerpt 1)

Participants	Exchange types	Moves	Acts	Utterance
Teacher	Initiation	1	Starting	Let's look at the next activity.
		2	Starting	Ok (…) let's say we have three words: Ali – like – soldier (imagining an activity)
		3	Starting	Ali – like − soldier
		4	Directing	Could you put them in a question? Ermmm (.)
		5	Nominating	Ibrahim
Ibrahim	Response	6	Replying	Emm. Yes. (…) Does Ali like being a soldier?
Teacher	Feedback	7	Accepting	Yes.
		8	Evaluating	That's right
Teacher	Initiation	9	Nominating and directing	Ibrahim, ask Mohamed (…) erm if he likes being a student.
Ibrahim	Response	10	Replying	Emm does (.)
Teacher	Re-initiation of replying act	11	Correcting and scaffolding	Do
Ibrahim	Response	12	Acknowledging	Ah! Sorry.
		13	Replying	Do you, do you like err a sol (…) being a soldier.
Mohamed	Re-response of replying act	14	Replying	[ ] I (…) err I (…) err don't like (…) err err a soldier
		15	Replying	I (…) err (…) I err (.)
Ibrahim, Mahmoud, Abdullah	Re-initiation of replying act	16	Correcting and scaffolding	[ ] do you like being a student.
Mohamed	Response	17	Replying	I like err (.)
Teacher	Re-initiation of replying act	18	Correcting and scaffolding	Being!
Mohamed	Response	19	Replying	Yes, I like being (…) err a learner (…) err English.
Teacher	Re-initiation of replying act	20	Correcting	I like learning English.
Mohamed	Response	21	Repeating	I like learning English.
Teacher	Feedback	22	Evaluating	Um. Hm. Good.
Teacher	Initiation	23	Starting	Let's look at the next one.
		24	Starting	That's a nice one.
		25	Directing and nominating	What's the answer to that, Omar?
		26	Directing and nominating	What is Ali good at? Omar.
Omar	Response	27	Replying	What erm ah what is err
Saeed	Feedback	28	Evaluating	[ ] no
	Re-initiation of replying act	29	Prompting	The answer
Omar	Response	30	Replying	Ali is (…) erm good at singing.
Teacher	Feedback	31	Evaluating	yes
		32	Confirming	Yes, he is good at singing.

Table 2. Data analysis of the spoken discourse
(Excerpt 2)

Participants	Exchange types	Moves	Acts	Utterance
Teacher	Initiation	33	Starting	Does anyone remember Rashid?
		34	Starting	Do not look at the book.
		35	Directing and nominating	Does he like eating food, Saeed?
		36	Giving a clue	He eats a lot.
Saeed	Response	37	Replying	He likes (…) err eat
Mohamed	Re-initiation of replying act	38	Correcting and scaffolding	[ ] eating
Saeed	Response	39	Replying	He likes eating food.
Teacher	Feedback	40	Evaluating	Very good. Yes.
Teacher	Initiation	41	Directing	Say it again.
		42	Confirming	He likes eating food.
Saeed	Response	43	Repeating	He likes eating food.
Teacher	Feedback	44	Evaluating	That's right.
Teacher	Initiation	45	Starting	So, what is important for Rashid?
All students	Response	46	Replying	[ ] Eating
Teacher	Re-initiation of replying act	47	Accepting and scaffolding	Yes. Eating is (.)
All students	Response	48	Replying	Important for Rashid
Teacher	Feedback	49	Evaluating	That is right

scription system is invented by the researcher of the present study to ease referring to the spoken discourse when necessary. To explain the two tables below, the second column of each table (Exchange types) refers to the structure of the utterance (IRF structure). Each utterance is given a number as shown in the third column (Moves). The fourth column refers to the functions and objectives of the utterance. In the fifth column, the symbol [] refers to an overlap or interruption during the discourse, the symbol (…) refers to a pause that is shorter than 3 seconds, the symbol (.) refers to a pause that is longer than 3 seconds, and fillers (e.g. err, emm, erm) are transcribed as uttered.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The above data analysis has led to some interesting results about what actually happens during the classroom discourse in the UAE milieu. First and above all, it showed that some interactive sequences of several exchanges and particularly IRF exchanges were produced during the classroom spoken discourse (typically in the moves from 1 through 8), which, to some extent, promoted students to orally practice the target language. Adding to this, the results showed that the teacher used the informal discussion in the class as he related the subject matter of the lesson to students' life, and this was noticed clearly in the move (9). The result of this action was a flow of language oral production by students as in the moves (10 & 12 & 13 & 14 & 15 & 16 & 17 & 19). These results agreed with the work of Richards and Rodgers (2001) among others who claimed that the alteration of teachers' role from being a knowledge provider to heading an informal discussion creates a friendly and interesting atmosphere

for language learning in general and oral language development in particular. However, this action was criticized by those who advocated the idea that the classroom language is different from real-world language (e.g. Lin, 2007; Liu, 2008), and therefore, this action may not be considered appropriate or acceptable in the classroom.

Moreover, full participation and involvement in the classroom were noticed in the moves (4 & 5 & 9 & 25 & 26 & 33 & 35 & 45) as a result of the strategy used by the teacher in asking questions and nominating students to answer the questions in agreement with the work of Seedhouse (2004) who indicated that the use of question-answer technique in the classroom pushes students to interact and practice their language. However, these questions were identified as mostly initiated by the teacher as in the moves (4 & 25 & 26 ….etc.) and featured as close-ended questions as in the moves (4 & 33 & 35…etc.), which hindered students from providing rich answers, as such questions generally seek one word answer or just confirmation (Çakır & Cengiz, 2016). Adding to this, students with close-ended questions are not required to think creatively and provide rationales for their thoughts, and this affects adversely on students' higher-order thinking as well (Lee, Kinzie & Whittaker, 2012).

Additionally, language features such as overlaps, interruption and unfinished talk were noticed in students' talk as in the moves (10 & 14 & 16 & 28 & 38…etc.), putting the accent on the natural features of the classroom language as argued by Seedhouse (2004) and Markee (2005) among others. It was also noticed that one of the reasons for the occurrence of natural talk in the classroom was the incomplete answers by students as in the moves (16 & 28 & 38), leading to the incomplete sequence of IRF structure. This supports

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the claim that such language features have to be taken into account by researchers when observing and analyzing classroom spoken discourses among other characteristics of classroom spoken discourses. Besides, the classroom discourse reflected the dominant role of the teacher; namely, the teacher was mostly the initiator, director, nominator and evaluator of the discourse as in the moves (4 & 5 & 8 & 9 & 22….etc.), while the students' role was mostly confined to responding to the teacher's questions as in the moves (6 & 30 & 46 & 48….etc.), leading to poor oral language production. This adds credit to the recent view towards L2 teaching and learning in which language learning and teaching should be student-centered to promote students' longer production of the target language (Richards & Rodgers, 2001).

Furthermore, it was noticed that the third turn of each exchange is not always a follow-up/feedback but it draws on the previous turn as in the moves (11 & 18 & 38….etc.). Along with the same lines, there is no feedback or follow-up for the initiation (9), and instead of that, rich answers are provided by students. This could be attributed to the authentic question initiated in the move (9) in congruent with previous research in which asking authentic questions that touch students' life motivates them to produce language longer (e.g. Firth & Wagner, 2007; Kessler, 1992; McCafferty, Jacobs & Iddings, 2006; Robitaille & Maldonado, 2015; Van Lier, 1996). Finally, the language functions in the feedback or evaluation turn were mostly confined to accepting or refusing the students' response as in the moves (7 & 8 & 31& 49), and this action is not considered proper to enhance students' oral production of the target language as in the work of Brophy (2004) in which the researcher argues that using words of praise and encouragement in the classroom motivates students to produce richer and longer responses.

CONCLUSIONS, LIMITATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on all above, the researcher concludes that the IRF exchange pattern still constitutes the basic unit of the classroom discourse. This agrees with the conclusion reached by Nassaji and Wells (2000) among others who contend that even if there are attempts by teachers to create new styles of interactions in the classroom setting, IRF exchange patterns remain the most prevailing discourse genre. It is also concluded that some of the reasons of students' poor oral production of the target language could be attributed to the dominant role of teachers in initiating, managing and evaluating the discourse allowing for teachers to speak two-thirds of the classroom discourse and to the type of close-ended questions used by teachers during the classroom interactional discourse. Moreover, it is concluded that students provide richer language when they are given opportunities to talk about things related to their own lives through various teaching techniques including asking authentic questions during classroom spoken discourses.

However, and although the research question is clearly answered, the results of this study should be interpreted with a considerable degree of caution for the following three reasons: firstly, and because of the limited time, short interactional events from one class were transcribed and used as the main data of the study, which was not enough to obtain reliable results and draw significant conclusions. Secondly, we are not certain that we can reach the same conclusions if the subject matter of the lesson is different (e.g. teaching new vocabularies instead of grammar). In order to generalize the results, the researcher has to observe different teaching subjects for students at different educational levels and at longer periods of time. Thirdly, the non-verbal communicative events, such as eye contact and teachers' posture changes, play a very important role in directing the classroom discourse. Unfortunately, the research instrument used by the research; the audio-tape recorder, does not help record these events, which are best recorded through the use of a video-recording device, but the researcher avoided this procedure to remove the participants' concerns towards the misuse of its data.

Therefore, this study may have to be replicated taking into account the above-mentioned limitation areas among other factors affecting the production of second language; such as, participants' social, linguistic and affective factors. Moreover, and to enhance effective instructional practices by language teachers in the UAE classroom settings, the following recommendations are provided. Firstly, teachers should increase students' turns during the spoken discourse by allowing them to initiate, and if possible evaluate, the discourse as the adopted IRF pattern allows for only one turn to be produced by students in every three exchange turns. Secondly, teachers are advised to replace the teacher-centered approach in which students are listeners most of time during the classroom discourse to the students-centered approach in which students are active interactants during the discourse. Ultimately, it is recommended by this study to use as much authentic and referential questions in the class as possible to allow for more practices of the target language on the part of students.

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