

# Action Study of Teacher's Language on EFL Classroom Interaction

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**Abstract**—From the perspective of the interactive theories and theories of second language acquisition, this paper explores the influence of the teachers' language upon the EFL classroom interaction. The action research in this paper is based on a small-scale research, which served as a means to find the problems occurring in the teachers' language in EFL classroom. We make a class observation 10 English teachers and 102 freshmen of non-English majors from HIT. The research results show that the teachers' language has a great influence on the students' language acquisition. In the end, a series of strategies for improving teachers' language are summarized.

**Index Terms**—teachers' language, interaction, language input, strategies

## I. INTRODUCTION

Teachers' language refers to the use of the language, the target language of learners adopted by the teacher (Karen E. Johnson, 1999). It plays an important role in English teaching. On the basis of SLA theory, the language used in classroom is the target language of the learners and the medium of teaching, through which interactions between teachers and learners will function. However, teachers' language is not only a carrier of teaching forms and methods, but also a most important part of the language situation for learners. Teachers' language should include both verbal and the indispensable non-verbal languages. The appropriate non-verbal language facilitates the interaction between teachers and students in class.

However, in practical EFL, teachers are not well aware of the importance of teacher's language in the classroom and the relation between teacher's language and learner's output.

For Chinese students who study English in China, they are short of sufficient target language environment. The communication between learners and teachers in the classroom is therefore an important part in improving students' communicative competence. It is without doubt that the main ingredients in communication, teacher's language, can facilitate or hinder the process of classroom teaching.

## II. SECOND LANGUAGE INPUT

### A. Language Input

It is agreed that input plays a critical role in language acquisition. As EFL teachers' language is the important part of the learners' input, it is necessary to discuss the language input.

Joy M. D Red (1998, p. 80-99) has stated that the input given to the learners has to be comprehensible for acquisition to happen. He defined it as "slight beyond the learner's current knowledge level". Jack C. Richards & Willy A. Renandya (2001) explained that comprehensible input means that "language directed to the learner that contains some new elements in it but this is nevertheless understood by the learner because of linguistic, paralinguistic, or situational cues, or world knowledge backup" p,124-130)

People who have dealt with language learners have recognized that not all input have the same impact on the learner. Some input can be taken in almost immediately and directly into output, such as EFL teachers' interactive language in the class.

The only place most second language learners are exposed to the second language is in the classroom. Like mother's language, EFL teachers usually use short, simple, grammatically correct sentences and general, high frequent vocabulary. They adjust their speech to reflect feedback from second language learners. If they recognize learners do not understand them, they repeat, rephrase or expand the intended messages.

### B. Interaction Approach

Interaction is the heart of communication. It is what we interpret in a context; we negotiate what we receive; we collaborate to accomplish certain purpose. Interaction is the collaborative exchange of thoughts, feelings or ideas

between two or more people resulting in a reciprocal effect on each other. Theories of communicative competence emphasize the importance of interaction. As Rodney H. Jones (2006) puts it: "Through interaction, students can increase their language store as they listen to or read authentic linguistic material, or even the output of their fellow students in discussions, students can use all they possess of the language – all they have learned or casually absorbed in real-life exchange. Even at an elementary stage, they learn in this way to exploit the elasticity of language" (p,269-299). And from the very beginning of language study, classroom should be interactive. "Interaction and interactive language constitutes a major role in EFL teaching, because a teachers' interactive language can keep an interaction going on smoothly in EFL classroom." (Rod Ellis & Gary Barkhuizen, 2005, p, 165-227)

### III. EMPIRICAL STUDY

Expert J. Mc. H. Sinclair & D. Brazil, (1982) states that the teacher plays multiple roles in communicative activities--as controller, as assessor, as organizer, as participant and resource. EFL classroom should be regarded as a speech community in which teachers' language plays a critical role in developing learners' communicative ability. Effective teachers' language contributes to effective learners' output. In this essay, a small scale action research project is carried out in classes of university students, attempting to explore the problems occurring in teachers' language and to seek some effective strategies and techniques to help create successful teacher-students interaction in real communication. The research aim is to investigate the features of the teacher's language so as to adjust the teaching in the classroom.

According to Krashen' theory, I made an action research as follows:

Step1: Problem identification (the problems found in the teachers' language in classroom)

Step2: Methodology:

Classroom observation, students' perception and questionnaire

Step3: Data and analysis

Step4: Reflection

#### A. Problem Identification

The teachers observed are 10 university teachers teaching English courses in Harbin Institute Technology. These teachers give English classes in the first semester to freshmen. Four of them are young female teachers, four are male teachers, two are old teachers. From the investigation, the problems are found as follows:

1. Many teachers are found to occupy most of the time in classroom by introducing, explaining, telling and giving-- a real kind of monologue. As a result, less time is given to the students to interact with teachers and their classmates.

2. Many of teachers' language lack meaningful interaction between teachers' language and learner output.

3. Most teachers have been accustomed to the traditional way of teaching foreign languages, in which teachers are regarded as an authority who dominant the whole of the class and indulge themselves in being the center of attention. They try to put everything into students heads and pay scant notice of the feelings and the recreations of the students. The teacher's language can be in this way:

I'll first introduce the background of.....

I'll tell you something about.....

I'll give you the central idea of.....

I'll.....

I'll.....

While students are just an ignorant audience. Therefore in such a class language situation, many disadvantageous aspects for learners may arise.

4. No attention is paid to the influence of teacher talk on learners' output. Why does it happen? Because most language teachers overlook students' need. They put much stress on the research of the teaching methodology and the content of teaching, especially on the quality of the teaching language itself, the language style, the proper choice of words, the proper speed of the language they are using and the teacher talk time in classroom, etc. They think that they are careful in choice of teaching methods and content will be helpful to effective learner output. But they fail.

5. The disadvantages in teachers' language also lie in teachers lacking of good mastering of the target language. As a result, learners will not enjoy themselves in native-like and beautiful language--the target language.

In our observation we find that due to the lack of correct use of words, good pronunciation, intonation, proper style of their speech and fluency presentation of a complete idea, the language some teachers presented in classroom seriously spoil the language situation for students, which in the end will lead to the failure of learner output.

6. More display questions are asked instead of referential ones, by which teachers' language is confined to a form of questions and answers. And in most cases, teachers are usually impatient to give answers to the questions, which turns out to produce a coercive output. In this case, the teachers can perhaps keep the classroom teaching continual and smooth, but they could possibly deprive the learners of their opportunities to catch the main point of the questions or to find out blocks in their understanding.

Therefore, the teachers and learners in classroom communication are not equal, with teachers' language dominant the whole class instead of being a participant or assessor. As a result, the classroom communication is rather limited,

without negotiation for meanings in the teaching stuff.

As a result, this way of teaching way severely frustrated students' initiative and restrain the development of students' potential and creativity and accordingly, their communicative competence cannot be developed. This can be proved by the following students' questionnaires.

#### B. Data Collection and Analysis of the Students' Questionnaires

##### 1. Participants

The subjects who participated in this research are 104 freshmen in Harbin Institute Technology. The students ranged from 19-20 years of age.

##### 2. Sources of the Questionnaire Items

The questionnaire items were derived from the following major sources as follows: Questioning in English Classroom, Treatment of Errors, Interaction Teaching Method. In the columns, options are the choices in each item.

##### 3. Brief description of the Content of the Questionnaire

The questionnaire consists of 11 items. The questions can be roughly grouped into 3 categories: questioning in English classroom, treatment of errors, interaction teaching method. Figures presented here are the results for each item beginning with questioning in English classroom

TABLE 1  
QUESTIONING IN ENGLISH CLASSROOM

Item 2	students							
Options	A	%	B	%	C	%	D	%
Item 1	volunteer	12.5	According to the name list	20	At random	40	Combina-tion	27.5
Item 2	1-3seconds	10	4-6 seconds	30	7-9 seconds	52.5	Above 10 seconds	12.5
Item 3	100%	5	80%	25	50%	60	2%	10
Item 4	Display questions	42.5	Referencial questions	57.5				
Item 5	NO wish	22.5	Fully agree	57.5	Wish to be asked about what I can answer	20		

Items:

- Which kind of questioning do you like?
- The time for thinking
- The proportion of displaying question and referential question
- Which kind of questions do you like?
- Do you like to be questioned frequently, which is helpful to your English study?

In classroom, most students prefer to be questioned at random, together with 52.5% of the students would like to have 7-9 seconds to think. Majority (57.5%) favored referential questions which can inspire the students interests and motivation in their English study. For the question if you like to be questioned, 57.5% of the students prefer to be questioned frequently and believe it is which is helpful to their English study.

TABLE 2  
TREATMENT FOR ERRORS

Item	students							
Options	A	%	B	%	C	%	D	%
Item 1	Correct definitely	30	Clarify the demand	5	Provide the clue advice and Information	50	induction	5
Item 2	Not correct	5	Correct Unconsciously	95				
Item 3	Severe criticism, Pointing out the errors	0	The attitude different from ordinary with the critical language	5	No severe Response, unconsciously Correct, Encouragement	25	Kind attitude, unconscious correction, Encouragement	70

Items:

- To the students' errors in the classroom, the teachers should
- The teacher should correct the errors
- The teachers' emotional feedback to the students' errors in answering a question

As for the treatment of errors, half of the students wish that the teacher provide clues, relevant advice and information. With the oral errors, unconsciously correction is more acceptable. An overwhelmingly 95% of the students favored it. In addition, the teacher's attitudes towards the students error is crucial, therefore 70% of the students appreciate kind attitude, by correcting unconsciously and encouragingly, because the emotional factors such as the

attitude to error treatment is exceedingly sensitive in the classroom which will exert great influence on the students' English study.

TABLE 3  
INTERACTION TEACHING METHOD

items	students					
	A	%	B	%	C	%
Item 1	Give the opportunity to express, inspire the interests	87.5	No benefit to English study	10	No need at all	2.5
Item 2	Teacher centered, teacher explain, students take notes	32.5	Student-centered, and students can participate actively, with teacher adjusting his teaching to the response of the students	62.5		
Item 3	Promote the atmosphere in the classroom	90	Teaching is simple, a piece of chalk and a book is enough	5	No need. It is Distraction to study.	5

- Activities such as group work, interesting topic discussion, guess work and telling stories
- The relationship between teacher and students
- Teachers' language should include verbal and non-verbal language

From the table, we can see that 62.5% of the student, a comparatively high percentage, would like to agree that student-centered teaching method, through which students can participated in the teaching activities freely, and the teacher can adjust his teaching method to the need of the students. Obviously, 87.5% of the students believed the activities such as group work, interesting topic discussion, guessing, and story telling are most efficient method to inspire the students' motivation in English study. Moreover, majority of students, 90% favored that teacher's language should be both verbal and non-verbal, which can promote the atmosphere of the classroom.

In short, the interactive language will be one of the best teachers' talk in college English study. Both teachers and students can benefit from interactive language in English classroom.

#### IV. SUMMARY AND CONCLUDING DISCUSSION

##### A. *Suggestions for Improving Teacher's Questions*

As is well known that questioning is one of the most common techniques used by teachers. In some classrooms over half of class time is taken up by wit question-and-answer exchanges. There are several reasons why questions are so commonly used in teaching.

- .They stimulate and maintain students' interest.
- .They encourage a teacher to think and focus on the content of the lesson.
- .They enable a teacher to clarify what a student has said.
- .They enable a teacher to elicit particular structures or vocabulary items.
- .They enable teachers to check students' understanding.
- .They encourage student participation in a lesson.

However, in many classrooms, students have fewer opportunities to ask questions on their own although they may be given the opportunity to answer questions. Even when teachers give student opportunities to ask and answer questions, they may address their questions to only a few students in the class--those lying within their action zone.

Questions can be clarified into referential questions and display ones. More referential questions should be put forth in classroom instead of display ones or monologues. Referential questions can help negotiate meaning in the communication between teachers and learners, in which learners are given more opportunities to communicate and interact with each other, share ideas among themselves, get inspirations from each other and combine wisdom in problem solving tasks so as to make themselves understood. Thus the language classroom is made to be a speech community in which teachers are equal participants as well as advisors, helpers and organizers. As methodologist (Dick Allwright, 1991) expresses, "One of the major objectives of language teaching programs is to prepare the students for meaningful interaction, make them able to understand natural speaking form" (p,119-151). Referential questions will not only arouse students' interests but also help to develop their output and improve their communicative ability.

In the course of classroom teaching, teacher talk should occupy as less time as possible, leaving students more opportunities to apply what they have learnt to practical communication. Too much occupation of the time by teacher's talk would only frustrated students' initiative and restrain the development of students' language potential and creativity. Much attention of the textbook compiling should be put on the content in the form of referential questions. More topics for group discussion should be put forth. All these will definitely contribute a lot to the learner's participation and interaction. To our relief, it is good to see a textbook--New College English, is published by Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press.

Another important dimension of a teacher's questioning skills is wait-time, which is the length of time the teacher

waits after asking the questions. In our investigation, teachers often use a very short wait time (e.g. three second). Study finds that is rarely sufficient to enable students to respond. We find in our research that when wait-time is increased to three to five seconds, the amount of students' participation as well as the quality of that participation often increases.

### *B. Treatment for Errors*

In teaching students to speak English, teachers often find a lot of errors in their speech. How should these errors be dealt with properly? This is something many teachers are working at. Through investigation of real class situation and all the possible collections of errors in teaching work, we believed that a teacher's knowledge of the learning law, careful observation of the errors and proper attitudes toward the errors are very important in treating errors. Teachers should think that the errors students make in class should be neglected. Because all of the students want to speak a language well. They feel embarrassed when they make errors. However, they still need another's help (especially from teachers) in their language acquisition. But they always expect their errors to be corrected in an unconscious way.

In the classroom, teachers take an important role in offering encouragement and correcting the students' errors. They should be ready at all times to help the students. When students succeed in learning a language item, the teachers should express genuine delight and offer a word of praise because people are likely to continue a conversation when other people agree than when they disagree. If teachers place too much attention on errors and neglect the necessary encouragement, they will lose sight of value of the positive reinforcement of clear and free communication.

At the mechanical drill stage, the teachers' main work is to teach students certain structural patters. The students' errors at this stage are more likely to be a faulty knowledge of the rule or the form of the pattern. The teachers' language at this stage are expected to supply the students with correct forms.

At meaningful drill stage, errors are mostly caused by performance of slips of tongue. The teachers' language in correction should be supplied with the right form to get learners to self-monitor their speech. Alice Omaggio Hadley (1993) suggests that teachers should call attention to the errors by using gestures, such as a raised eyebrow, a headshake or by repeating or stressing the wrong forms so that the students can do the correction themselves.

At the communication stage, errors may not be as important as the message. They can be ignored except when the serious errors occur in the teaching point or those that interfere with communication. Teachers' language should lay emphasis on the message. It is believed that peer reaching is helpful at this stage, which is exactly the kind of communicative atmosphere learners want. Jean-Marc Dewaele (2003) emphasizes that the teachers should serve primarily as sources person, helping the students when they get stuck and supply their help.

As for the goal in teaching speaking, we believe it should aim at training the students' ability to communicate with other people. Anything that interferes with the work toward this goal and blocks the way to the success may be considered useless. Teachers must be aware of this learning law. They should strive to be clear-minded at every stage of teaching. They should try to develop their language that can work well at different stages. Only if they have realized the importance of the above things and applied them to their work, will they be, hopefully, doing a good job in the language teaching.

### *C. To Enhance Interaction between Teachers and Learners*

#### *1. Interactive Approach*

Through the interaction, students can increase their language store. In interaction, students can use all language they possess, expressing their real meaning important to them. At an elementary stage learners learn to exploit the elasticity of language to make the little they know go a long way. Their brains are dynamic, constantly interacting what they have learned with what they are learning, and the give and take of message exchanges enables them to retrieve and interrelate a great deal of what they have encountered. In a second language situation, interaction is essential to survive in the new language and culture. Thus they have experienced in creating messages from what they hear and in creating discourse that conveys their interaction.

Obviously, students' English level varies. How can a teacher guide and motivate less able students to engage more actively in interactive activities? Here the teacher's effective language is the key. Teachers are expected to follow the humanistic approach, treating students as whole persons, tolerating their errors, and trying to reduce stress to the minimum. Students, especially the less able students, will benefit from the friendly, easy atmosphere. Conversely, if a teacher is too rigorous, the psychological obstacle and stressful atmosphere will demotivate students, even inhibit their initiatives.

#### *2. Group Work*

Pair Work is a good way to change the traditional teachers' talk that dominates the class. Appropriate pair activity-design is part of teachers' interactive language. Pair work enables teachers to get students engaged in interactive communication within a short period of time, which will increase students' interests and willingness to participate. Students in pairs can take turns asking questions and giving opinions.

Group activities can also replace the dominant teachers' talk in class and provides a non-competitive atmosphere, a sense of involvement and a sense of equality. When students are comfortable with their peers instead of listening to teachers' introduction of the background knowledge, explanation of the text, they become more confident and take more risks. They learn more in groups where they have more opportunities for using English, discussing the target culture, and gaining additional perspectives on their own culture.

### 3. Intrinsic Motivation

"Given motivation, anyone can learn a language," (Tony Wright, 2005, p, 221-286). Motivation is one of the important factors in the learning. It involves the arousal and maintenance of curiosity. For many years, the motivation of students within the classroom has been the focus of applied research. Researchers have studied attempts to increase student on-task behaviors (Farch & Gersten, 1985. Lazarowitz Hertz, Vaird& Bowlden, 1988) and improvement of work quality (Andre & Thieman, 1988; Butler & Busab 1986; Marsh, 1984.)

Our research shows that teachers' interactive language can and do affect students' intrinsic motivation in a positive way. To some extent, teachers' language has to provoke interest and involvement in the subject even when students are not initially interested.

The appropriate choice of activities and linguistic content can turn a class around; besides, teachers' attitude to class participation, their verbal and non-verbal language, their relationship with students, their conscientiousness, humor and seriousness may also enhance learners' intrinsic motivation. And teachers' language and enthusiasm can inspire students' motivation as well.

## V. CONCLUSION

Expert Judith M. Lamie (2005) says, "The teacher plays multiple roles in communicative activities--as controller, as assessor, as organizer, as participant and resource" (p,225-228 ).Second language teaching classroom should be regarded as a speech community in which teacher language plays a very important role in developing learners' communicative ability. Effective teachers' language contributes effective learners' output. In addition, teachers' language embodies some teaching methodology. Good teacher's talk is beneficial. If teachers know how to talk to students, the students can hear language above their own productive level.

How to make the students more active, how to provide more input in the course of class, how to help students produce more output, how to feedback the students' errors, how to enhance students' intrinsic motivation?

Based on our investigation, some effective strategies to improve the EFL teachers' language are summarized.

Through this action research, the following view points are summarized:

Firstly, EFL teachers should not only learn some teaching theories but also practice them in their teaching process. Action research is a good means to encourage the teachers to conduct research including classroom experiments in their own classes. It breaks the tendency of laying more emphasis upon theory and less on practice. It helps teachers to solve the practical problems.

Secondly, the strategies for the teachers' language should centered on the students' need. In the action research, the observation of ten teachers and the questionnaire are designed to find problems and the need of the students in order to put forward the proper strategies. The proper use of some of the effective strategies and techniques is beneficial to the improvement in teaches' language.

Thirdly, it is necessary that teachers have a good command of the target language not only in theory but in applying it effectively. And good command of the target language can help learners to obtain effective input and output through communication. Much attention of the textbook compiling should be put on the content with more referential questions. More topics for group discussion should be put forth etc., which will contribute a lot to the learner participation and interaction.

The strategies mentioned above in this article for improving teachers' language are just concluded based on a small-scale research among the students in HIT. Whether these suggestions are suitable for the whole EFL learners still need to be proved through further studies, since the design of the survey and data analysis might be subjective (the action study is based on the teachers and students in HIT), and the factors like the students' educational background, their English level and majors, etc. are not included in this paper. These factors may influence the interaction between teacher and students anyway, and may be included in the further study in this topic.

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