

The Analysis of Teacher Talk in "Learner-centered" Teaching Mode

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Abstract—Being main teaching media and major source of comprehensive target language input, teacher talk plays an important role in learners' second-language acquisition. Under the trend of "learner-centered" teaching mode, some researchers think that the best teacher talk means less. But the author holds that, in Chinese second language classroom, it is not advisable to lay too much stress on the formal students' participation, which requires the teacher to say as little as possible and the student to say as much as possible. The emphasis should be put on how to raise teacher talk's quality.

Keywords—Comprehensive language input, "learner-centered" teaching mode, teacher talk, teacher talk's quality.

I. INTRODUCTION

NOWADAYS "learner-centered" teaching mode has become more and more popular, but the author thinks that it should still be organized and guided by the teacher. It is teachers who choose and arrange all kinds of "learner-centered" class activities. As Dulay [1] said, "Teaching a second language means creating for students a part of or their entire new language environment. The entire responsibility for creating the language environment falls on the teacher who is teaching a language that is not used in the community." That shows the great role teacher talk plays in second language acquisition.

Even under the trend of "learner-centered" teaching mode, it doesn't mean that the best teacher talk means less. At the 33th IATEFL international conference, Steven Walsh made the speech of "Asking the right questions: teacher talk and learner output". He thinks that teacher talk is important for target language acquisition of EFL language learners [2]. In order to produce the best effect of teacher talk, the emphasis should be laid on the quality of teacher talk not quantity.

II. TEACHER TALK

Teacher talk (TT) refers to the talk the teacher says to learners in the second language learning classroom. Steven Walsh pointed out that EFL classroom teaching is different from other classroom teaching [2]. In EFL classroom, language is not only the objective of learning but also the medium of teaching. So, the proper use of teacher talk will have a positive or negative effect on language learners' language output. Through the analysis of features of teacher talk and "Input Hypothesis", we illustrate the point further more.

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A. Features of Teacher Talk

Chaudron summarized the research result of teacher talk in second language learning classroom, pointing out the following features of teacher talk [3].

- 1) The speed of teacher talk seems slower;
- 2) More frequency of pause showing speakers' thinking or conceiving and with longer time;
- 3) Clearer and more understandable pronunciation;
- 4) Easier chosen vocabulary;
- 5) With lower subordinate degree (less use of subordinate clause);
- 6) More narrative sentences or declarative sentences than interrogative sentences;
- 7) More frequency of teachers' self-repetition.

Osborne also thought teacher talk is evidently modified language in the aspects of pronunciation, vocabulary, syntax and discourse [4].

Those features obviously indicate that teacher talk has changed into a kind of simplified code with the aim of providing maximum "comprehensible input" for language learners so that teachers and students can maintain an unobstructed channel of communication.

B. Roles of Teacher Talk

According to Krashen's "Input Hypothesis", learners can acquire foreign language unless they get comprehensible input as much as possible [5]. In other words, the only way of acquiring language is to obtain comprehensible input. Comprehensible input can be formulated as "i + 1". "i" shows the present level of learners while "1" shows the language knowledge which is a little more than learners' present level. If learners can be exposed to plenty of "i + 1" in the process of acquisition, they can insensibly acquire new language knowledge while understanding information. So, the key factor for second language acquisition is comprehensible input. In the second language classroom teaching, teacher talk (TT) is the largest, the most reliable source of learners' "input". So time limited teacher talk (TT) is very important in the classroom teaching. If "comprehensible" teacher talk as input is enough in the classroom, that is to say, teachers can adjust their talk to learners' present or a little higher level, learners can learn faster and better.

III. THE IMPORTANCE OF TEACHER TALK UNDER "LEARNER-CENTERED" TEACHING MODE

"Learner-centered" teaching mode is different from traditional teaching mode in which the teacher will try to explain the stuffs as detailed as possible and learners seldom

have the chance of speaking. Still under the trend of "learner-centered" teaching mode in which the perceiving subjects are learners and teachers are guiders, we can't neglect the role of teachers and teacher talk is very important for learners' language acquisition.

Nunan thought the importance of teacher talk is reflected not only in the classroom organization but in the process of learners' language acquisition [6]. For the former aspect, teacher talk directly decides whether the teaching program implemented by the teacher is successful or not; for the latter aspect, teacher talk may be the main language input exposed to learners. American scholar Wong Fillmore investigated that for those non English speaking immigrant students who entered American primary school, school (especially classroom) is the only place for them to be exposed to a large amount of English [7]. Classroom is the ideal place for them to acquire language because they can get continuous and direct target language input from teachers and English speaking classmates. If in a large target language environment (like America), language acquisition needs to be conducted in the classroom, classroom is indispensable for Chinese students who are in the Chinese speaking environment. So teacher talk plays an important role in Chinese language teaching classroom even under "learner-centered" teaching mode.

Through three-year tracking, observing and recording the condition of English acquisition in the second language class for those low English level primary students who have immigrated America with their parents, Wong Fillmore found that successful language learning class was teacher-centered class activity [7]. Those classes which excessively depend on students' learner autonomy belong to the most unsuccessful class. The reason for this phenomenon is easy to be found. For those low level second language learners, two conditions are needed for their learner autonomy in the class: One is that they should possess certain sociability to guarantee their communication with teachers or high level students; the other is that there are enough high level students who would like to communicate with them in the class. But the fact is there are few classes, if any, among 40 classes she investigated, which have the two conditions. For second language class in China, can two conditions exist together? It is possible in some key universities, but it is difficult for the two conditions to exist together in most ordinary colleges in China. When there are few students who can speak fluent English in class, it does not facilitate their English development to encourage them to discuss with each other. On the other hand, it will be just the opposite to what one wishes if too much intercommunication among students is depended on in such classes (like pair work, group discussion). That is to say, learners will form ragescent interlanguage features by receiving long-time "junk input data" [8]. These interlanguage features are deep-rooted for learners' future study and they are hard to be corrected.

The author also tested among the classes she taught. When asked to discuss within a group or communicate with partner, low level students incline to communicate in Chinese or draw answering outline by pen respectively. When the teacher insist English should be used to speak within a group, most students'

speaking can only be regarded as "junk input" from the aspect of pronunciation and vocabulary to the aspect of grammar. The author doesn't think that this kind of communication can provide useful language input and output chances for learners so as to better acquire target language.

IV. THE WAYS TO IMPROVE THE QUALITY OF TEACHER TALK

A. Adjusting Teacher Talk to be Equal to or a Little Higher than Students' Level

In the limited classroom teaching, teachers should adjust their talk to the learners' present level or a little higher than their present level as far as possible so as to let students gain comprehensible input of teacher talk as far as possible. In order to achieve this point, firstly teachers should improve their own oral English, presentation skill and communicative skills, paying attention to information validity of their discourse content. Secondly teachers should get comprehensive understanding and grasping of students' real condition of vocabulary, grammar knowledge and listening ability, paying close attention to students' potential restrict. Following information theory and differential treatment in education, teachers choose proper and suitable teacher talk.

If there is too much easy input in teacher talk, learners will chronically depend on teachers' simplifying everything they meet. Gradually, they will become lazy. What is input in their brain is just simplified input so that it is impossible for them to make any progress. On the other hand, if too much complex input is included in teacher talk, learners will feel difficult to understand and fail to follow the teacher. Gradually, they maybe lose heart in acquiring language and give up learning. So, proper teacher talk is needed to help learners make progress in their language acquisition.

B. Creating Relaxing and Lively "Dialogical Relationship"

In order to promote the uptaking of teaching content, teachers must treat students' affective factors as important as teaching content, creating a relaxing and lively "Dialogical Relationship". Learners can get satisfaction from pleasure of communication, desire to show off and self-affirmation. So, teachers should master and embody enthusiastic, considerate and polite dialogue principle.

Firstly, teacher talk should always convey a kind of enthusiasm, revealing naturally teachers' inner interest and concern and creating an atmosphere of mutual acceptance and devoting.

Secondly, teachers should realize every language learners who speak in English wants to be noticed, affirmed and praised. So, teachers should not interrupt learners' utterance easily, but listen to him or her attentively, quietly and patiently. If learners come across expression difficulty, teachers should help them to continue their talk by guiding questions, hint, new vocabulary and concept instead of taking the place of students and finishing communication.

People will acquire a language by continuously applying it, so teachers can't take the place of learners in acquiring a language. They can only lead learners, help learners construct

confidence in their learning ability. Teachers should be ready to encourage and evaluate learners while learners should depend on their own action to understand and acquire language.

Besides, politeness is the basis of equal dialogue. Communication can be carried on smoothly by respecting the partner. Teachers should respect the speaking chances for learners, leaving them enough imaginable room and feedback time. Especially for those inferior learners, they need more time for considering after they are given a task by the teacher.

C. Adjusting to "Appropriate Sound"

American psychologists points out that rough, sharp or lowering sound is not pleasant to hear, thus leading to teaching failure. The sound of the teacher decides whether their talk is accepted or rejected by the learner. Appropriate sound should be clear tone quality, moderate volume and rich and real intonation. That authoritative tone of lowering voice deliberately and stretching tone or impatient tone of shrieking will make learners feel bored and disgusted. That flat, rigid and unchangeable tone will make learners sleepy easily. The performance tone like poetry reading will break the real relaxing utterance atmosphere and rationality of discourse content because of excessive devoted emotion ingredient. So, teacher talk should be spoken in measured tones, rising and falling in cadence according to the discourse content. The highest state is to convey a kind of pleasant temperament by means of its own characteristics, rendering a kind of attractive atmosphere in order to improve the style of content and listeners' interest.

V. CONCLUSION

So, as for the problem of teacher talk, Chinese college English class shouldn't pursue excessively pro forma students' participation, cutting the quantity of teacher talk down, but adopt corresponding measures according to the difference of learner group and individual. Teacher talk should put much emphasis on its quality instead of quantity.

In order to create the best efficiency of teacher talk, teachers should present briefly and succinctly and try to improve the effect of lecture and practice. Optimum is a relative concept, as a researcher and teacher of foreign language teaching, we are responsible to find out all possibilities and try to study and realize those possibilities maximumly.

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