# EFL (English as a Foreign Language) Classroom Discourse Analysis of a Vocational College and Some Reflections

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The application of classroom discourse analysis of foreign language teaching and learning can reveal much about how teachers perform in their teaching practice and how to make improvement. In this paper, the author tries to reveal the present state of EFL (English as a foreign language) classrooms in a vocational college from the angle of classroom discourse analysis, especially the aspect of TT (teacher talk), and provides some suggestions.

*Keywords:* EFL (English as a foreign language) classroom, discourse analysis, student-centered

## Introduction

Student-centered, instead teacher-centered, has been a repeatedly highlighted concept in the field of education for a long time. It has been stipulated in the current "CECR" (College English Curriculum Requirements) issued by the Ministry of Education of China in 2004 that EFL (English as a foreign language) teaching in the college should replace the traditional teacher-dominated didactic practice by a new mode featured with student-centeredness which puts more emphasis on developing students' autonomous learning abilities and improving their language communicative competence. However, since vocational colleges, different from undergraduate colleges, have their own characteristics in some respects, thus, how and to what degree this notion is carried out in vocational colleges in China is worth investigating. In this paper, the author tries to reveal the present state of EFL classrooms from the angle of classroom discourse analysis and provides some suggestions.

## Some Basic Ideas of Classroom Discourse Analysis

The process of English teaching and learning in the classroom is very complicated, because it involves various factors. It has aroused interests and attentions of scholars' from different disciplines, such as linguistics, pedagogy, psychology and sociology. Among all kinds of studies, classroom discourse has been one of the most heated topics in both classroom research and L2 (second language) acquisition. The term refers to the language that teachers and students use to communicate with each other in the classroom. Talking and conversation are the media through which most teaching takes place. In other words, the fulfillment of teaching to a large degree depends on teacher-student interaction in the actual classroom teaching practice. Therefore, TT (teacher talk), which occupies a special place in the target language classroom, is closely related to the success of students' foreign language acquisition. Teachers use target language to assign teaching activities and as the principle means for giving instructions and directions, modeling target language patterns and giving

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feedback on students' performances. Just as what Nunan (1991) pointed out that,

> Teachers play an important role in shaping classroom discourse and in maximizing opportunities for learning, and TT is of crucial importance, not only for the organization of the classroom but also for the processes of L2 acquisitions. It is important for the organization and management of classroom because it is through speech that teachers either succeed or fail to implement their teaching plan. (p. 189)

TT is of great importance, nevertheless, it does not mean the more the better especially under the current notion of teaching and learning. As a result, by a close study of TT which including its quantity, quality, form, etc., we can find out what is really going on in the EFL classrooms, whether they are student-centered or not.

## Research Design and Data Analysis

### Research Design

The participants in the study were three English teachers of a vocational college in Zhejiang Province. The students from the three classes were freshmen of various non-English majors. The classes recorded were intensive English reading classes.

Based on Nunan (1988, p. 76), "There is no substitute for direct observation as a way of finding out about language classroom". The classes were observed and recorded by the author and there was 80 minutes' (two periods) recording for each class. The teachers and students involved were not informed of the purpose of the research beforehand. The lessons were not specially prepared and the recording was taken under a natural classroom environment.

### Data Analysis

**The quantity of TT.** Time proportion by TT and ST (student talk) is a distinct factor differentiating a student-centered teaching mode from a teacher-centered one. The former emphasizes the time of activities allotted for students' practice. Students are assumed to have enough time to talk in the class, so as to practice the target language and improve their communicative competence. While the findings in the study show that the actual time proportion in EFL classrooms in the vocational college is quite different from the notion, as it is shown in Table 1.

Table 1

*Time Proportion of Teacher and ST in EFL Classrooms*

|  | TT (%) | ST (%) | Other time (%) |
|---|---|---|---|
| Class one | 70.2 | 16.3 | 13.5 |
| Class two | 82.6 | 8.9 | 8.5 |
| Class three | 66.8 | 15.6 | 17.6 |

From Table 1, we can see that there is an obvious similarity among the three classes being observed, i.e., the quantity of TT greatly surpassed the quantity of ST, which shows that TT still dominates the interaction between teacher and students in the present EFL classroom in the vocational college and neither meets the requirements of the student-centered teaching notion.

**IRF (initiation-response-feedback) structure in classroom discourse.** As far as the structure of interaction between teacher and students in the classroom is concerned, Sinclair and Coulthard (1975) found that the language of traditional teacher-controlled classrooms is in a rigid pattern, where teachers and students speak according to very fixed perceptions of their roles and where the talk could be seen to conform to highly

structured sequences. The exchange consists of three moves: the teacher's initiation, the student's response and the teacher's feedback, known as IRF. Table 2 is the results of IRF structure in classroom discourse of our study.

Table 2

*Proportion of IRF Structure in Classroom Discourse*

|  | IRF structure | | More complex structure | |
|  | Number | Proportion (%) | Number | Proportion (%) |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Class one | 32 | 62 | 20 | 38 |
| Class two | 42 | 74 | 15 | 26 |
| Class three | 21 | 51 | 19 | 49 |
| Total | 95 | 64 | 54 | 36 |

Table 2 demonstrates that the rigid IRF structure accounts for a predominant proportion in EFL classrooms in the vocational college, which is similar to the findings of Sinclair and Coulthard in the traditional language classroom. An IRF structure consists of two teacher's turns and one student's turn. The students generate nothing, but a few simple words to answer the teacher's questions. They have few chances to practice unless the teacher initiates a question which requires them to give an answer. Such rigid interaction patters turn out to limit opportunities for students to have longer speaking turns, thus, stand in their way of improving communicative competence.

**Display questions and referential questions.** Richard and Lockhart (1996) concluded that teachers' questions play a crucial role in language acquisition. It is one of the common techniques used by teachers. Teachers' questions can keep the learners participating in classroom discourse. A simple way to classify teacher's questions is to categorize them into two types, one is display question and the other is referential question. Display question attempts to elicit information already known by the teacher. It focuses on the recollection of previously presented information. While referential question requests information not known by the teacher, often the latter responses involve judgment about facts that are not clear or a statement of values. This kind of question can lead students to think actively and provide their own information and ideas based on their own knowledge and experience rather than recollect the previously presented information. The present study focuses on the two question types. The frequency of display questions and referential questions is presented in Table 3.

Table 3

*Frequency of Display Questions and Referential Questions*

|  | Display questions | | Referential questions | |
|  | Number | Proportion (%) | Number | Proportion (%) |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Class one | 48 | 69 | 22 | 31 |
| Class two | 52 | 74 | 18 | 26 |
| Class three | 30 | 60 | 20 | 40 |
| Total | 130 | 68 | 60 | 32 |

Taken as a whole, we can find out that the frequency of display questions is far overwhelming that of referential questions in our study. A great discrepancy between the total number of display questions and referential questions in each class can be seen. As a result, it can be concluded that the teachers prefer to ask display questions rather than referential questions. Nevertheless, many researchers advocate that referential questions increase the amount of learner output, and an increased use of referential questions by teachers may

create discourse which can produce a flow of information from the students and create a more qusai-normal speech. On the contrary, display questions cannot achieve this effect. Based on the research findings mentioned above, it is obvious that referential questions can improve students' output. Compared with the findings of our study, students in the EFL classrooms of the vocational school do not have much freedom to think actively and express their opinions based on their own understanding. Therefore, their assumed centeredness in the EFL classrooms has not been realized in actual practice.

## Implications

### Minimize the Quantity of TT

Our study indicates that in the EFL classrooms of the vocational college, TT is far exceeding ST. While student-centered teaching mode requires teachers to moderate their control of the class and offer more opportunities to the students, so as to increase their target language output and improve their communicative competence. Unlike the traditional mode of teaching which teachers are always busy preaching throughout the class, student-centered mode calls on teachers to keep their students busy with talking in class. To realize this, on the one hand, teachers should have the awareness of changing the role of the "dominating boss" to the "considerate organizer and coordinator". On the other hand, teachers should organize more classroom activities, such as role play, debate, presentation to arouse students' interests and enthusiasm.

### Replace IRF Structure With More Complex Structures

IRF structure used in teacher-student interaction contributes little to improving students' linguistic and communicative competence, because the language used in this turn shows that little creativity of the students and their possible longer utterances are limited by teacher's quick and short feedback. So teachers of the EFL classrooms in the vocational college under investigation should try to replace IRF structure with more complex structures. In this way, the students' ability to seek and maintain a turn and negotiate meanings is expected to be improved. Therefore, the student-centered notion can be better carried out and the students' communicative competence can be improved greatly.

### Use More Referential Questions

The result of study reveals that there is a priority of display questions over referential questions in the EFL classrooms. While, asking too many display questions cannot help students produce more natural discourse nor improve their real communicative abilities. Teachers should intentionally resort more to referential questions to encourage the students to provide significantly longer and syntactically more complex responses in the class.

## Conclusions

Based on the analysis of discourse samples of three EFL classrooms in a vocational college, the paper reveals some problems existing in the current English teaching processes and provides some suggestions to make improvement respectively.

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