An Investigation into the Teacher Talk and Questions in English as a Foreign Language Classrooms

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Abstract

In the present study, the quantity and quality of teacher talk and highly used question types in EFL classrooms were investigated. For this purpose, 3 English teachers working at a foundation university participated in the study. Data were gathered from the video recording of three different classes including 60 English as foreign language learners. Conversation Analysis was used to analyze the data. The findings of the study revealed that teacher talk takes most of the class time and teachers employ mostly display questions rather than referential questions in the language learning process. Even though teacher talk is essential in the teaching and instruction process, there should be a balance between teacher talk time and student talk time by encouraging students to participate in the learning process more actively and asking more referential questions, which can promote a more interactive classroom atmosphere.

Keywords: conversation analysis; EFL classroom; interaction; teacher questions; teacher talk

1. Introduction

Teacher talk (TT) is regarded as the main source of input for English as foreign language (EFL) learners (Gebhard, 2000; Nunan, 1991; Nunan & Lamb, 1996) as it is mostly the teacher who organizes how interaction can happen in the classroom (Cook, 2000). Nunan (1991) also points out that "Teachers play an important role in shaping classroom discourse and in maximizing learning opportunities, 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 the classroom because it is through speech that teachers either succeed or fail to implement their teaching plan" (p. 189).

Furthermore, English, the medium of instruction in EFL classrooms, is both the 'vehicle and object of instruction' (Long & Sato, 1983, p. 9), therefore, both quality and quantity of TT in the classroom are essential. It is also believed that TT has a significant effect on promoting classroom interaction by providing comprehensible input to learners (Hollo & Wehby, 2017; Irmayani & Rachmajanti, 2017; Winarti, 2017). Since teachers are the ones facilitating the learning process, appropriate and efficient use of TT can provide an effective classroom atmosphere for learners to learn the target language by offering interactive and communicative opportunities, which make learners, have competence in using the language. Indeed, classroom interaction is the key to effective learning and participation of learners into the learning process actively (Al-Smadi & Rashid, 2017), which is highly affected by TT (Putri, 2015).

On the other hand, Hollo and Wehby (2017) assert that TT not only affects learners' understanding of the materials and activities used in the lesson but also their attitudes and behaviors to the class and learning. Therefore, the way teachers talk in the classroom is essential in determining how much the classroom atmosphere is effective. It also affects the way learners respond to the activities in the classroom. It is undeniable that an effective learning environment including interaction can occur when learners comprehend what their teacher says and asks. Therefore, teachers are expected to organize their talk according to levels of the target learners in order to encourage them to participate in the class activities actively (Al-Smadi & Rashid, 2017). According to Ginting (2017), the way the teacher talks in the classroom can encourage learners to study for learning the target language by motivating and engaging them in the learning process. In fact, TT has many functions like replying, explaining, giving instructions, elicitation, making corrections, giving feedback, clarifying, and confirming to create an effective and interactive learning environment.

Furthermore, although TT is regarded as a significant input in the classroom, it does not mean that the more the teacher talks, the better the learning, and teaching becomes. In this respect, Nunan (1991) underlines the importance of student talk which is an integral part of the learning process. As Van Lier (2001) asserts an effective classroom means creating an environment in which the students can participate in learning activities actively by maximizing their use of the language. Therefore, studies concerning TT have focused on the quality or effectiveness and quantity or amount of TT which refers to teacher talk time (TTT) (Davies, 2011; Nunan, 1999; Van Lier, 2001). It has been found that presence of too much TT in the classrooms have decreased the effectiveness of teaching and learning (Allwright, 1981; Paul, 2003), opportunities for communication (Ross, 1992), decrease time allocated for students to talk and interact with each other (Xiao-Yan, 2006). On the other hand, Nunan (1991) claims that TT is the main source of input for language learners in the classroom, so without input (TT), there will be no learning. However, quality (effectiveness) of TT is much more important than its quantity (Paul, 2003; Van Lier, 2001). In this respect, Nunan (1991) recommends some principles to take into consideration in deciding the convenience of TT: "The point in a lesson in which talking occurs; What prompts the teacher talk: whether it is planned or spontaneous, and, if spontaneous, whether the ensuing digression is helpful or not; and the value of the talk is potentially useful input for acquisition" (p. 190). Hence, one of the main focuses of this study will be on both the quality and quantity of TT in EFL classes.

Furthermore, the use of various questions, which are one of the main tools to assess learners' understanding, stimulate their attention and create an interactive and communicative learning environment, is a substantial function of TT. In this respect, Al-Zahrani and Al-Bargi (2017) underline the importance of questions by claiming they make learning more interactive by enhancing the quality of interactions in the classroom. Besides, questions are regarded as the major signs determining the quality and success of the teaching and learning process (Boyd, 2015; Kim, 2015; Sedova, Sedlacek & Svaricek, 2016). Teachers can employ questions for many purposes such as to correct or confirm (Myhill, 2006); expand or limit (Burbules, 1993); broaden and approve (Haneda & Wells, 2010) the learner's answers and way of

thinking in the classroom discourse. Therefore, questions can help both learners and teachers in conducting and forming an effective and efficient learning process (Boyd, 2015).

According to Nunan (1991), there are two types of teacher questions, which are display questions, and referential questions. Display questions are the ones whose answers are known already by the teacher and they are used to elicit the information or specific structures. However, the answers of referential questions are not known by the teacher (Richards & Schmidt, 2002; Wright, 2016). In other words, display questions are employed by the teacher when talking to the whole class to take the short or mechanical answers (Erlinda & Dewi, 2016); and to see if learners have understood the topics of the course (Boyd & Rubin, 2002) while referential questions are employed to guide learners in exploring a piece of new information (Erlinda & Dewi, 2016). According to Long and Sato (1983) who were the first to propose these questions to second language learning, found that display questions are used much more than referential question while addressing the whole class in a language classroom.

To give an example for each question type;

> **Question 1:** What color is it? (Display question)
> **Answer:** It is yellow.
> **Question 2:** What did you do at the weekend? (Referential question)

Some of the studies investigating the amount of TQs used in EFL classes show that teachers tend to use more referential questions rather than display ones (Fitriani & Amilia, 2017; Hetzelein, 2016; Omari, 2018; Qashoa 2013; Vebriyanto, 2015), which prove that the use of referential questions is much more appropriate for communicative language teaching (CLT) (Richards & Schmidt, 2002; Wright, 2016). Therefore, the present study also focuses on the frequency and the type of questions EFL teachers use in their classes.

2. Research Methodology

The main purpose of this study was to analyze and investigate teacher talk time (TTT) and the frequency of teacher question types in EFL classes. To reach the aim of the study, descriptive and qualitative methods, which are required to understand the nature of the classroom talk (Mercer, 2010) were used.

The participants of the study were three (one male, two females) English instructors who worked at the School of Foreign Languages of a foundation university in Turkey. They had a bachelor level degree in English language teaching and have 3-5 years of experience in teaching English. They were teaching English from A1 level to B2 level, which is taught as integrative not as separate skills, to the students who were freshmen who have to finish English preparatory class to pass to their departments (i.e., Engineering, Political Sciences, and Logistics). In each class, there were 20 students (60 students in total). Their age ranges from 18 to 25 and their mother tongue is Turkish.

The teachers videotaped their classes (45 minutes) by a video camera voluntarily on the request of the researcher in the mid of the fall semester in the 2019-2020 academic year, which corresponds to the A2 level of English (Pre-intermediate), which means the students have already completed A1 (Elementary). Since the lessons cover four basic skills (i.e., listening, speaking, reading, and writing), they did not focus on just one skill alone.

While analyzing the data of the study, the class recordings (3 classes with 45 min.) were transcribed by the researcher, and then the process of organization and categorization of data was conducted. Additionally, conversation analysis (CA) which is used in classroom research extensively is utilized. Indeed, CA requires an in-depth and demanding analysis process to interpret the data, which involves a detailed transcription process in analyzing the data (Mercer, 2010). While analyzing the data, Nunan (1991) suggestions in TT quality and classification of TQs (display and referential questions) were taken as the basis.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. Analysis of Teacher Talk

Table 1. The Proportion of Teacher and Students Talk Time

	TT (%)	ST (%)	Other activities (%)
Class 1	55.5	35.5	9.0
Class 2	66.6	25.2	8.2
Class 3	62.2	28.4	9.4

Source: Author's Own Work

Based on the classroom videotapes, the amount or quantity of teacher talk and students talk time in each class (45 min.) was analyzed. Table 1 displays that in 3 different classes the time allocated to teachers, students, and other activities is so close to each other. Approximately, in each class, while a range of 55 to 67 percent of the class time was devoted to teacher talk, around 25 to 36 percent was given to students. Also, 8 to 10 percent of class time was separated for other activities such as brainstorming to get the ideas of students about a specific topic, giving some time to think about the answer to a question asked, and exchanging ideas within groups or pairs. Therefore, it is clear from the results that the amount of TT in these classes exceeded the amount of student talk (ST) in these three classes.

Studies also found that the time allocated for teachers in language classrooms is much more than the time given to students (Ahmad, Shakir & Arshad, 2020; Azhar, Iqbal & Khan, 2019). While Ahmad et al. (2020) reported that the amount of TT was found 81 percent, which is almost four times higher than ST, Azhar et al. (2019) found out that TT takes 62 to 72 percent of the class time. According to Nunan (2003), TT covers ranging from 50 to 80 percent of the class time.

However, whether this amount of TT is facilitative for language learning and teaching is the main question. Although there are views supporting TT in class as it is believed that TT is the main language input for students, necessary to fulfill the teaching goals and classroom management (Nunan, 1991), and the mediator to promote an interactive environment in the language learning process (Wasi'ah, 2016), allocating too much TT is not the optimum approach in teaching. Studies provide those teachers who take too much time in the classroom are not able to achieve an effective learning environment (Allwright, 1981), the use of too much TT hinders the development of students' communicative skills (Nunan, 1999; Ross, 1992) by providing fewer opportunities for language practice (Paul, 2003) and making them passive (Huriyah & Agustiani, 2018). Besides, Kostadinovska-Stojchevska and Popovikj (2019) assert that as learners depend on teachers' decisions too much in the teacher-dominated classroom, their autonomy development is restricted. Hence, to provide a fruitful language learning and teaching process promoting the active involvement of learners, the time allocated to teachers should be decreased by accepting teachers as the starter of learning activities (Klein, 1986) and the mediator in the classrooms (Larsen-Freeman, 2000).

3.2 Teacher Questions (TQ)

Table 2. Frequency of Display and Referential Questions

Classes	Display Questions		Referential Questions	
	Number	Proportion (%)	Number	Proportion (%)
Class 1	17	68	8	32
Class 2	13	76	5	29
Class 3	16	72	6	27
Total	46	72	19	29

Source: Author's Own Work

The frequency of the questions asked by the teacher is presented in Table 2. The questions are categorized as display and referential questions as suggested by Nunan (1991). As shown in Table 2, the frequency of display questions (72%) is much more than referential questions (29%) in the classrooms.

The questions asked by teachers in classrooms constitute one of the most important elements of teacher talk in a classroom context (Nunan, 1991). The types of questions teachers utilized in teaching are believed to have a significant effect on learners' active involvement in the language learning process (Richard & Lockhart, 1996). Besides, questions are essential to make the target language much more comprehensible for learners (Harmer, 2000). However, it can be seen from the results that in these three classes teachers preferred to use display questions (of which answers are already known by the teacher) more than referential questions, which encourage learners to produce their own knowledge. When referential questions are asked, learners can have the opportunity to think more actively and provide their own thoughts or information deriving from their knowledge. Moreover, the use of referential questions is found as much more appropriate for communicative language teaching (CLT) (Richards & Schmidt, 2002; Wright, 2016). Therefore, these questions are generally preferred especially in interactive and communicative classrooms.

On the other hand, the use of too many display questions in the classrooms is claimed not effective as they require low cognitive thinking (Sedova et al., 2016) and short and basic answers (Vrikki, Wheatley, Howe, Hennessy & Mercer, 2019). To respond to a display question, learners are not required to use higher thinking levels, but just recalling the information given before is enough. Therefore, these questions are criticized for requiring short answers such as "yes" or "no" or short and specific statements (Vrikki et al., 2019).

When the present study was considered, the frequency of display questions was seen as not creating an active learning environment. However, there may be some other factors affecting teachers' question types such as the level of the students' linguistic competence, motivation. As far as observed in the video-tapes, the level of language and motivation in the classrooms were quite low. This may be a reason for using too many display questions rather than referential questions in the classrooms.

According to Liu and Zhu (2012), one of the most important things to do in order to increase the frequency of referential questions in the classroom is to give enough time to students to think and respond after asking a question, which is called as "wait-time" (p. 119). They emphasize the crucial part of "wait-time" in teacher talk time advocating that the more the teacher waits, the more the students respond well.

Moreover, Krashen and Terrell (1983) emphasize that teacher talk is a vital source of comprehensible input in the second/foreign language classroom. According to Krashen's (1985) comprehensible input (i+1) hypothesis, teacher talk should be a little beyond the learner's present level of knowledge. Input should be rich and comprehensible for learners. As a result, if the input given by the teacher is too simple, the students may think it is meaningless and boring. If the input is too difficult, the students may lose their enthusiasm towards learning. Both of the situations on input may decrease the motivation of students in the classroom depending on the comprehensibility of teacher talk. In this respect, teachers should provide more elaborated input, which can take the students' attention and make them participate in the process actively.

Hence, questions are seen as an essential input feature facilitating language development, since it is through questions that language learners are empowered to practice the target language especially in an EFL setting, which is generally the only environment where students are exposed to the language regularly (Brock, 1986). Therefore, teacher should direct more referential (open-ended) questions to encourage the students to provide longer and more comprehensible and personalized responses in the class.

4. Conclusion

The present study investigated two of the teachers talk patterns in three preparatory classes at a foundation university in Turkey. The results of the study revealed that despite the adaption of the communicative approach and classroom interaction, teacher talk highly dominates teaching and learning in class rather than student talk. Teachers take approximately 62 percent of class time while giving just 29 percent to the students. The rest of the time is allocated for the other activities. Therefore, the results show that these classrooms are so teacher-dominated and most of the classroom activities are lacking in real communication. In addition, most of the questions asked by the teachers are display questions (72%), which prevent the students from personalizing and internalizing the target language. However, in an interactive learning environment, it is expected to be used more referential questions inviting learners to participate in the process actively by employing higher thinking levels.

In this respect, teachers are required to offer more opportunities, which help the students, improve their communicative competence by increasing their target language output. It seems that the best way to promote an efficient teaching and learning environment in classrooms is to establish a cooperative system between teachers and students by finding a balance between teacher talk time and students talk time. In contrast to the traditional classrooms, in student-centered classrooms, teachers should provide more space for students to practice communicating in the target language. In that sense, student talk time is very significant to learn and use the target language properly, and students should have more chances to experiment with and personalize the language.

On the other hand, teacher talk (TT) is essential in promoting interaction in the classroom by providing comprehensible input to learners. Because teachers are responsible for facilitating the learning process, efficient use of TT at an appropriate level can create an effective classroom atmosphere for learners to learn the target language by offering interactive and communicative opportunities, which make them competent in using the language. Indeed, classroom interaction is the key to effective learning and participation of learners into the learning process actively, which is highly affected by TT. Therefore, this study suggests that there should be a balance between TT and ST. More studies should be conducted to raise awareness among teachers since the best way in teaching English presumably is to create a cooperative atmosphere between teachers and students.

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