

Increasing Student Talk Time In The Esl Classroom: An Investigation of Teacher Talk Time and Student Talk Time

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Abstract

Creating an environment where learners are no longer dependent on the teacher is the main reflection of a learner centered classroom. In a language learning classroom, students learn the skills to read, write, listen and speak. The best way to learn and teach a foreign language is to use that language. The purpose of communicative language teaching approach is to communicate in the target language or to use it in communication. In the communication there must be interaction between teacher and student or student and student. According to my colleagues and my experience, though the door for classroom interaction is very open students' participation is very poor in some classes. This paper attempts to test this hypothesis and provides some systematically tested ways to increase the amount of Student Talk Time (STT) which leads to a learner centered approach.

Key words: teacher talk time, learner centered classroom, communicative approach

Introduction

It is often discussed that both teachers and students should participate actively in language classes. Especially, in communicative EFL classes students need ample opportunity to practice the target language so that the teacher should reduce the amount of their talk. Researching on the student and teacher talk time always produce new approach and insides to teach a language. Most teachers believe that the students have to receive as much opportunity to speak as is possible when learning English as a target language. This idea is especially true in the EFL classroom, where students don't live in an English-speaking country. In such cases, the students may only have the chance to practice English as a conversational tool during the lesson. But whatever the situation, it is true the more students speak in English, the better English speakers they become.

Purpose of the Study

A language teacher must design her/his lessons to make participation of all most all the students in a classroom so his/her lesson plan has to include a certain percentage for teacher talk time (TTT) and student talk time (STT) to teach each skill. In a learner centered classroom, TTT must not exceed the expected percentage. In some cases student involvement is not very privileged. So that, though they have more knowledge in structure they are unable to apply that in the real communication. Whether it is oral or written, communication is the main target of a language. This study tests the hypothesis that the students' participation is poor and collects students' attitudes towards increasing student talk time. Further it intends to bring together their views regarding classroom interaction methods.

Limitations of the Study

This study was conducted among the students of Faculty of Arts and Culture. According to the common view of the teaching faculty of the first year Arts students, those students who are divided into ten ability groups are very much forward and cooperative not only in elicitation but also in doing spoken activities. But the condition with other faculty students is questionable. I hope further research must be carried out comparing the percentage of student talk time of different faculty students to examine this situation.

Benefits resulting from the study

The analysis of the research shows that students have positive attitudes towards increasing STT which leads to a learner centered approach that most of the educators welcome. So the findings of the study open a new path to the curriculum designers, material producers, lesson planners, language trainers and teachers to integrate more STT in their lesson planning. This sort of research can inspire other language teachers to conduct research in their classrooms because it is considered to be an important tool for professional development. Contrary to what had been hypothesized, this research has revealed the positive attitudes of the learners towards increasing the amount of STT.

Literature Review

Teacher talk time (TTT) refers to how much the teacher talks during a lesson. However, this will vary according to the stage of the lesson. For example, the teacher needs to speak more when starting a new lesson. When he continues the same lesson next time he may speak less as students need ample opportunity to practice the new material. In a common view, the teacher must roughly limit his speaking to 20% to 30% of the class time allowing the students to make use of the language.

Allwright (1982, p. 10) said that teachers who ‘work’ too much in the classroom were not teaching successfully. He mentioned that a good language teacher is able to ‘get students to do more work’ in the classroom. Nunan, (1999, p. 209) also indicated that continuous teacher talk during the lessons did not develop students’ listening comprehension and communication skills. Nunan (2003, p. 55) proves the earlier fact, mentioning that “Research has repeatedly demonstrated that teachers do approximately 50 to 80 percent of the talking in classrooms.”

As far as a learner centered classroom concerned, to practice the target language Student Talk Time (STT) be supposed to be around 80% during the course of the lesson (Nunan, 1991). Consequently it is needed to incorporate the learner centered approach into the existing curricula in all disciplines not only in the international level but also in local context. In a foreign or second language classroom, for instance a teacher introduces a new lesson (even to make it more learner centered classroom teacher can give students the choice of selecting what they are going to learn) such as talking about the daily routine. To introduce the new vocabulary connected with the routine first teacher can elicit the vocabulary from the students then the teacher will focus on the form of making sentences with present simple tense in affirmation and negation.

To introduce a new grammar lesson teacher can spend 60 to 80 teacher talk time, whereas the next day she/he can get practice with the students to talk about their daily routine. This time, more than 60 to 80 percentages of talk would be done by students. It is reasonable for a teacher to allocate a different percentage of time to teach grammar, vocabulary, reading, spoken and listening activities. Nunan highlights it mentioning, “Of course, whether or not it is considered a good thing for teachers to spend 70 or 80 percent of class time talking will depend on the objectives of a lesson and where it fits into the overall scheme of the course or programme” (Nunan, 1991, p. 190).

It is notable to consider about what Nilton (2011) discusses regarding Nunan’s suggestion is very much suitable to present here. He explains that if the focus of the lesson is not conversational for example the lesson is to write an essay or description, a student may expect a period of TTT to lecture on the processes involved in the construction of a paragraph, then they will follow a silent period to employ the techniques they have learnt to construct a composition production.

Nilton (2011) accepts that though he practices 60 to 80 percentages or 40 to 60 percentages of teacher talk time (TTT) respectively for elementary and intermediate levels when he teaches oral communication, these figures are beyond the adequate level TTT.

If there is more talk by the teacher, students become passive and their involvement in the classroom participation would be very less. This is what was experienced in the traditional chalk and talk method.

Students' use of the language must be further promoted for a high range of qualitative thought once they become capable to respond/ communicate in simple necessary discussions. They have to be able to communicate, critically observe, analyze, and practice with the new language in a successful learning environment.

Much research on TTT has focused on its quantity (amount) and/or quality (effectiveness). These studies have provided new insights into the ways EFL/ESL teachers teach in the classroom.

Learner Centered Approach

In the current era, the term 'learning' leads the term 'teaching'. It is not teaching a language alone it depends on learning and learning. That is why to increase the learning environment, learner centered approach (LCA) is needed to imply in learning and teaching a new language.

In a teacher centered classroom, teachers are working more. They ask the questions, they call on students, they add detail to their answers. They offer the examples. They organize the content. They do the preview and the review. On any given day, in most classes teachers are working much harder than students. Therefore it is observable that students develop sophisticated learning skills without the chance to practice and in most classrooms the teacher gets far more practice than the students. However, LCA engages students in the hard, messy work of learning.

Again it includes explicit skill instruction. In an LCA environment students are taught how to think, solve problems, evaluate evidence, analyze arguments and generate hypotheses which all these learning skills are essential to be familiar in a discipline. LCA encourages students to reflect on what they are learning and how they are learning it. Further it motivates students by giving them some control over learning processes. Research proves that students can learn from and with each other in collaboration in a classroom. Teachers experienced in LCA work to develop structures that promote shared commitments to learning. They see learning individually and collectively as the most important goal of any educational experience.

Understanding LCA will help to identify the area of the current study that a learner-centered approach involves less teacher talk and more opportunity for students to speak in the L2 classroom. The following trends in LCA elaborate that the amount of teacher talk and student talk time plays a key role in determining whether or not one's teaching methodology is in track with an LCA.

The best way to make students' participation is elicitation in the classroom in a learner centered approach lesson. Language learning is not like listening to constant lecture they have to involve in the classroom further students have inborn ability to acquire a language. They have knowledge and experiences of life and language which can contribute greatly to the learning process. When introducing new structure it is very important to elicit answers from students rather than pouring knowledge. Rutherford's explanation supports the same idea that the more learners contribute in the L2 classroom, the more they are likely to learn (Rutherford, 1987, p. 7). So, teachers must never underestimate the ability of their students. Through a lively discussion with the students the teacher will introduce a lesson appreciating their ability and correcting their erroneous understanding. According to the answers given to the 10th question of the survey, 40 students accepted that through open ended teacher questioning they can improve their communicative skill while 28 students chose that they can improve it through closed ended teacher questioning.

The focus of an LCA lesson is on learners' experience and interests. Therefore, when selecting a topic for a discussion it must be according to the students' interest. Nunan (1989) explains the same like if, however, teachers use the course book as an aid for the completion of tasks related to the students'

areas of interest and experience, the students are more likely to become involved in the lesson, thereby learning more (Nunan, 1989).

In learning a second language or a foreign language, paying much attention to the correctness ought to be avoided. Because in a learner centered approach, communication is the prime source not the accuracy. If a teacher constantly corrects the mistakes then the students will not be able to open their mouth further. Hence, the attempts of the students will be stopped. A good teacher will not interrupt the students when they are practicing, it is better to take a note on the mistakes of the whole class and give feedback correcting them without pointing out the particular student who did the mistakes at the end of the session. The above mentioned principles portray the process of learner centered approach.

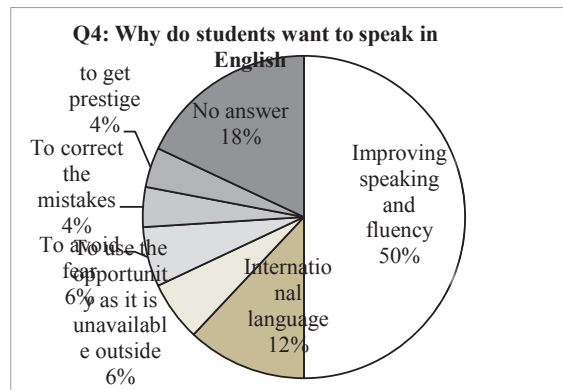
Method

To have a survey a questionnaire was distributed among fifty first year students of the Faculty of Arts and Culture who are following the second semester for the academic year 2011/2012. The models were selected among four hundred students consisting of both gender and multi ethnics. They are mixed ability students whose results in the last English Language examination have varieties of grades like A, B, C and D. They are in their early twenties. They were free to answer the questions. Though the students are unaware of the terms TTT and STT through the simple questions asked in the questionnaire they were able to answer them very easily.

Analysis of the data

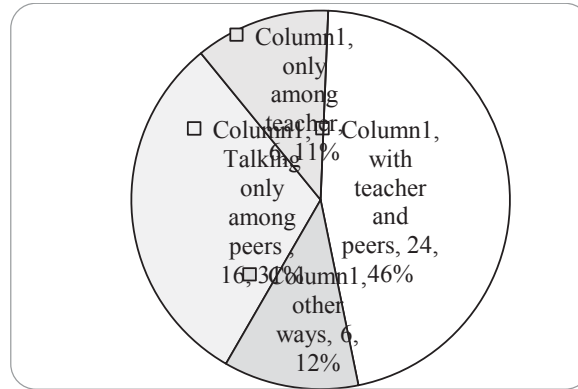
Thirty students; among those who have A+, A or A- grades like to improve their spoken skill while twenty-six students want to improve their writing skill and grammar. Ten students want to improve only grammar. Those who want to improve grammar or writing have lower grades for English language in the semester end examination.

For the third question “Do you like to talk in the English language classroom?” beside one, forty- nine students it means 98% of the students like to talk. It shows a very positive attitude of the students towards STT. Next question requires the reason being fond of talking. The following chart explains their needs to talk clearly.



(Figure 1- Reasons for why students need to speak in English)

As the figure one shows 50% of the students like to talk in the classroom as they can improve their spoken skill and get fluency in a second language. They like to talk with peers and the teacher some students hesitate to talk to the teacher.



(Figure 2- Students' attitudes towards interaction among peers and teacher)

Again figure two shows a positive attitude of students towards increasing interaction in the classroom. 46% of students like to interact both with teachers and their friends. 31% want to talk only among peers. They might be afraid of doing mistakes in front of teacher, getting a low grade, appearing stupid, did not do homework or do not know the correct answer. A few of them suggested having functions where students would be able to show their talents on stage.

Thirty-nine students responded that lecturers very often or often or sometimes give the opportunity to interact in the classroom while only one student responded that they never give chances. The above situation again elaborates that students also like to interact in the classroom, even the teacher encourages them to use it. Therefore, the motivation to have an interactive lesson is welcomed by both student and teacher. For the eleventh question “How effective is teacher student interaction in your ESL classroom?” 58% and 40% of the students expressed that it is very good and good respectively while only 2% of them commented that it is fair. As a whole we can come to a conclusion that students have a positive attitude towards increasing STT and they like to have a more learner centered approach in language acquisition with the support of their teachers.

Discussion

Language acquisition includes skills like listening, speaking, reading and writing if a learner wants to get familiar with a foreign or second language he must be good at in all these skills. So far in Sri Lankan education system only the writing and reading skills are tested in the G.C.E. Ordinary Level and Advanced Level examinations. The government is incorporating spoken activities in the text books and they are going to test it in the G. C.E. Ordinary Level in 2015 providing fifteen marks for oral. Therefore, many students not only from the Faculty of Arts and Culture but also from other faculties face problem in speaking. Though they scored good performance in structured grammar questions they score less marks in communicative based questions. As they have been trained to pass the written examination in the general examinations, they face many challenges in acquiring fluency in spoken.

University students become more aware to enhance their spoken ability. They know even though they get degrees in Tamil medium, they have to face any sort of interviews in English. As their responses to the fourth questions suggest, they like to use the opportunity to talk in English in English language teaching classrooms besides which they do not have chances to talk outside. In Sri Lanka despite the fact that English is considered as a second language the environment is limited only to the classroom. Therefore, many of the students prefer to exploit the opportunity in the ESL classroom fruitfully. So the need for concentrating on spoken variety is very important.

There are five important principles for teaching speaking. The first is to manage the classroom where all students want to participate reducing TTT and increasing STT. Then the learners' participation must

be high. The third is to provide communication opportunities with a variety of activities. Then let them talk what they want to talk about. Then encourage them to use their second language outside the classroom. Finally give appropriate feedback (Nunan, 2003).

Several speaking activities were introduced by scholars like Ur (2005), Harmer (2012) and Nunan (2003); among them this research highlights Ur's interaction patterns such as group work, pair work, individual work, closed-ended teacher questioning (IRF) open-ended teacher questioning, choral responses, collaboration, student initiates teacher answers, full-class interaction and self access. Further knee to knee conversation, face to face variation, tiny talks, show and tell the inventors' seminar, twenty questions, picture cards, acting from a script, play-scripts, acting out dialogues, communication games, prepared talk, questionnaires, role-play and Carol's quick quest are some other practices (Harmer, 2012).

Conclusion

The survey suggests that many students prefer to have much interaction in the classroom and they advocate it is very effective. As the current trend in education acknowledge learner centered approach, it is enhanced to increase the student talk time seeing that, it allows the teacher to restrict his speaking to vital areas of the lesson, students to speak more. Therefore, the students have more chances to experiment with and personalize the language and to rely on their skills. Further, they have added opportunity for interest and challenge. For that reasons it is clear that the class greatly benefits from limited talking by the teacher. Implying the activities recommended by the language scholars will facilitate to increase the student talk time.

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