

Teacher Talk in the Second Language Classroom

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The shift from a teacher-centred classroom to a learner-centred or learning-centred classroom does not imply that the role of the teacher has drastically reduced to that of a silent facilitator who leaves everything in the hands of the learners. The teacher has to interact with the learners at various points of the classroom transaction in order to engage them psychologically and emotionally in the learning process. If this interaction does not take place, the learners will be deprived of the contextually relevant teacher talk which has a lot of potential as a rich listening input for language acquisition. In this paper, I would like to present the various aspects of teacher talk in the context of facilitating second language acquisition.

What is Teacher Talk?

According to language pedagogues, teacher-centred classrooms are characterized by teachers over-talk. However, teacher talk is very different from this scenario. Teacher talk also does not refer to the countless questions the teacher may have to ask the children in order to elicit responses (free or fixed) from them. In the modular mode of classroom transaction, as conceived in Discourse Oriented Pedagogy (DOP), the nomenclature ‘teacher talk’ encompasses the oral narratives presented by the teacher as well as the dialogues that takes place between the teacher and the students at various points of classroom transaction.

Teacher Talk as a Rich Listening Input for the Learners

As has already been pointed out, interaction cannot merely be conceived as some questions that teachers need to ask the learners in order to elicit a response from them. It is fairly evident that classroom interaction at any point of transaction has common objectives as well as some specific objectives. Let us see what these are:

Common Objectives of Classroom Interaction

It is reasonable to assume that the common objectives of interaction include the following:

1. Sharing of ideas
2. Giving rich, authentic listening inputs
3. Embedding functional aspects of language in natural and authentic contexts
4. Maintaining a rapport with the learners
5. Dialoguing with the learners
6. Giving feedback to the learners for taking them to the next level of learning
7. Maintaining the continuity of the theme in all the modules of transaction

Only a few of these objectives are transparent enough to understand. However, given the fact that the nomenclatures people use in the world of teaching and learning can be notoriously ambiguous, some amount of opacity can be expected. Simply put, classroom interaction is not meant for just giving some information to

the learners; it is meant to encourage learners to think for themselves, and come out with their own ideas. Moreover, interaction should not just consist of posing questions one after the other; it should engage the learners meaningfully through dialogues and hence get an understanding of the different perspectives of the learners on the given theme.

Specific Objectives of Interaction

Apart from the common objectives we have enumerated earlier, each instance of interaction may also have specific objectives. Some of these objectives include:

Specific objectives of interactions based on the trigger

- Ascertaining learners' assumptions on the theme
- Establishing learners' perceptions on what has been watched
- Leading the learners to the theme / issue
- Making learners predict what they are going to listen to or read

Interaction at narrative gaps

- Triggering divergent thinking among learners
- Eliciting learners' perceptions on the theme
- Making predictions on what might follow
- Determining learners' reflections on what he / she has listened to
- Checking whether the central characters of the story have been emotionally registered (so that the learners can respond to a given situation from the point of view of the characters that they identify with)
- Analysing the situation critically (from the point of view of the various characters involved in it)

Interaction leading to individual reading

- Instilling the urge to read in learners

- Instilling confidence in the learners for undertaking the reading activity

Interaction during collaborative reading

- Ensuring that ideas are shared as per the instructions given to the learners
- Assessing the progress of group work
- Extending optimal support to those who need it
- Ensuring cooperation in team work
- Addressing the learning issues of children who are progressing at a slower pace

Interaction related to extrapolating the text with the help of analytical questions

- Registering multiple perspectives on the theme
- Identifying the point of view of the writer as well as the learners
- Instilling value systems
- Building tolerance

Interaction related to the presentation of teacher's version of the targeted discourse

- Giving feedback on what the children have written
- Highlighting the salient features of the discussion
- Providing additional inputs to the learners for refining their written work in terms of the targeted discourse features and language elements
- Providing a natural extension of the reading activity as the teacher's version of the written discourse provides a supplementary reading material related to the theme that is being dealt with

Interaction related to editing

- Sensitizing the learners to various kinds of errors
- Giving positive feedback to the learners on their writing

- Checking the learner's intuitions on grammaticality
- Building confidence in the learners to use the language

Teachers who have carried out the editing activity have reported that it is eagerly undertaken by most students.

Interaction related to forming big books

- Addressing the heterogeneity of the class
- Providing a slot for creativity
- Checking the learner's affinity to the target language

Dialoguing

It is important that the teacher builds a dialogue with the learners. This can be done with the help of strategies such as the following:

Seeking confirmation (using positive, negative and same way tags)

- Reporting (Meena says that...)
- Using discourse markers (for expressing attitude, politeness, etc.)
- Agreeing or disagreeing with the speaker
- Seeking agreement or disagreement
- Stating one's opinion
- Using short responses
- Building on a certain response

Features of Teacher Talk

The general features of teacher talk include:

Using error-free language with well-formed constructions

- Using language that is comprehensible to all learners
- Being audible to the whole class
- Using dynamic, positive, pleasant and learner friendly language
- Using language that is free from expressions related to finding fault with the learners

- Drastically reducing the speed of articulation
- Maintaining articulatory features (such as pause, stress, tone, and tempo)
- Making sure that there is a dialogue between the teacher and the learners and not just one-sided talk from the teacher
- Using language that contains various discourse markers (such, as well, precisely, as a matter of fact, etc.) wherever these elements are required contextually
- Using language that contains linguistic elements such as tags, short responses, etc.
- Addressing higher order thinking skills

How do we Make Teacher Talk Comprehensible?

This is a billion dollar question. What the teacher says must be comprehensible to the learners. Imagine that the teacher has to present an oral narrative. There is no point in repeating something again and again thinking that repetition will enhance comprehension. How do we ensure comprehension? The following strategies may be useful to achieve this objective:

1. Breaking longer expressions into smaller ones. Let me illustrate this point with the help of a case. Consider the following story:

A dog, crossing a bridge over a stream with a piece of meat in his mouth, saw his own shadow in the water and took it for that of another dog, with a piece of meat double his own in size. He immediately let go of his own piece of meat, and fiercely attacked the other dog to get his larger piece from him. He thus lost both pieces—the one that he grasped at in the water, because it was a shadow, and his own, because the stream swept it away.

There are several sentences in the story which contain more than one idea. The first sentence, for example, contains the following ideas:

- There is a dog.
- It holds a piece of meat in his mouth.
- There is a bridge.
- There is a stream flowing under the bridge.
- The dog is crossing the bridge.
- It sees its own shadow in the water.
- The dog thinks that there is another dog with a piece of meat double the size of the one in his mouth.

It will be better to split the longer sentence into its component sentences. The shorter sentences will be more comprehensible to the learners.

2. Include images in the story

It is not enough to split long sentences into smaller ones. We have to ensure that we can create images in the listener's mind. What are the images to be created?

- The image of a dog with a piece of meat in its mouth (colour of the dog, its size, its greedy look, appearance of the piece of meat, etc.)
- An image of a bridge with a stream flowing under it (what is the bridge made of? The murmur of the stream, the bubbles floating on the surface, the shadow of the bridge and the dog, etc.)

3. Insert dialogues or self-talk wherever possible

- What do you think is going through the mind of the dog as it holds the piece of meat in its mouth?
- What do you think is going through the mind of the dog as it sees its shadow in the water?

4. Use familiar words wherever possible

There are several English words (the so-called 'loan words') in the children's repertoire of words that they may be using in their day-to-day communication without realizing that they are English words. In the

lower classes, words related to themes such as school, class, kitchen, road, etc., can be elicited from the children, and a spider gram or a word web of each theme may be created. These words can be activated by using them both as nouns and verbs in narratives and for interaction.

5. Use proper voice modulation

Prosodic features such as pauses, stress, pitch and tone contribute to effective oral communication. Spoken language will be comprehended in a better way if the teacher makes use of appropriate articulatory features.

6. Use of optimum gestures

Suitable gestures are an important component of communication, and contribute to better comprehension. However, the teacher must take care that she / he is not over-acting. Gestures must be optimized in terms of hand-eye coordination, postures and facial expressions.

Levels of Teacher Talk

There are various levels of teacher talk. Take for example, the teacher talk related to the trigger of drawing out the learner's perception of what she / he has understood. This talk is conducted for all levels of learners.

Now consider the following expressions:

What do you think the picture / clipping / photograph is about?

1. What ideas do you get when you look at this picture /clipping / photograph?
2. You have seen the clipping. What do you think about it? Why don't you share your thoughts with your friends?
3. What does the picture tell you?
4. The picture tells us something, doesn't it? What is that?
5. I was wondering whether someone could tell the whole class what the picture is about.

All these expressions are suitable for interacting with the learners depending on the trigger. But they are not at the same linguistic level. We cannot ask these questions as formulated here in classes 1 and 2. At the same time, children in these classes will have their own perceptions about the picture and we must know what these are. One way to accomplish this is to establish the details of the picture by eliciting them one after the other from the learners with the help of simple questions. This may be followed by a cluster of questions to take out from the learners what they think about the picture. Sometimes it may be necessary to ask questions using the code-switching strategy. In conclusion, what really matters is whether we are able to address the perceptions of the individual learners by invoking higher order thinking skills.

Conclusion

We have discussed in detail what teacher talk is and how it is manifested as different instances of interaction that are carried out in a constructivist classroom. It is essential that the teacher has a clear idea of the common objectives of interaction as well as the specific objectives of each instance of interaction. The specific objectives of any instance of interaction are decided based on the moment at which the interaction is taking place in the classroom transaction and the level of the learners.

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