Teachers research teacher talk

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This article describes an in-service training project designed to raise trainees' awareness, through the analysis of transcriptions of teaching sequences, of the degree of communicativeness in their classroom interactions. The presence or absence of such features of communicative classroom talk as referential questions, feedback on content, wait time, and learner-initiated interaction, are used as 'bottom-up' markers of communicative, content-driven, teacher–student interaction. Trainees' analyses showed evidence of growing awareness of their non-communicative ritualized teaching behaviours, awareness that, at least in some cases, resulted in improved classroom practice.

Introduction

It has become something of a truism to suggest that self-styled 'communicative' teachers are seldom, if ever, communicative in practice. Using transcripts of classroom interactions, Nunan demonstrated nearly a decade ago that 'there is growing evidence that, in communicative classes, interactions may, in fact, not be very communicative after all' (Nunan, 1987: 144). This claim was echoed by Kumaravadivelu, also citing lesson transcripts: 'Even teachers who are committed to CLT can fail to create opportunities for genuine interaction in their classrooms' (Kumaravadivelu 1993: 13). Legutke and Thomas (1991: 8–9) are less circumspect:

> In spite of trendy jargon in textbooks and teachers' manuals, very little is actually communicated in the L2 classroom. The way it is structured does not seem to stimulate the wish of learners to say something, nor does it tap what they might have to say . . . Learners do not find room to speak as themselves, to use language in communicative encounters, to create text, to stimulate responses from fellow learners, or to find solutions to relevant problems.

In-service training

Unhappily, the above description accurately reflects the kinds of classes that are frequently observed on in-service training courses, such as those preparing for the RSA/Cambridge Diploma in TEFLA. If challenged, the teachers generally claim allegiance to a communicative methodology, adducing as evidence the essentially interactive nature of the lessons. But, while there is often considerable interaction between the learners in these classes, for the most part such canonical techniques as information-gap activities rarely do more than mediate exchanges of meaning at the most trivial level. Since there is seldom any real incentive to communicate, discernible engagement on the part of the learners is

minimal. Likewise, while group work is a commonly used participation structure, it is frequently conducted at the lowest possible level of involvement; there is often the feeling that the only real communication between the learners takes place during the break, or after class.

Eliciting

In these lessons there are often prolonged sequences of teacher-fronted eliciting of the classic IRF type (teacher initiates → student responds → teacher follows up/gives feedback):

[I] **T:** Um, a little bit of vocabulary. Let's look at the picture. What can you see?
[R] **S1:** Children.
[F] **T:** You can see some children. You can see a TV.

[I] What else can you see?
[R] **S2:** A sofa.
[F] **T:** A sofa.

[I] Or another word, same thing, different word.
[R] **S3:** Couch?
[F] **T:** Ah! Couch. A couch.

[I] Everybody: couch.
[R] **Ss:** Couch.
[F] **T:** Couch. OK?

(Diploma trainee's data)

While such sequences often give the illusion that classes are interactive, and that the learners are equal participants in the 'conversation', very little here is qualitatively different from the question-and-answer routines that typified methods thought to be much less 'communicative'. For example:

Teacher	**Pupils**
What's this?	It's a stone.
Is that the table or the floor?	It's the table.
Is that the window?	No, it isn't.
Is this a match?	No, it isn't.
What's that?	It's the wall.
etc.	etc.

(Palmer 1940, 1970: 23)

This basic mismatch between principle and practice has been attributed, among other things, to the constraints imposed by the grammatical syllabus, which, as Willis (1990) convincingly argues, is incompatible with a truly communicative methodology: where grammar is the agenda, whether overt or covert, then grammar rules. This grammar-driven conception of teaching is exacerbated by training programmes which place a high premium on achieving lesson aims. These aims are usually couched in terms of discrete pre-selected linguistic items, and their so-called 'achievement' is often at the expense of spontaneous, student-

generated interaction. Teaching materials may also be partly to blame. As Swan (1990: 94) observes: 'The tendency to get students to exchange unmotivating, imposed information can even go to the extreme where much of their 'communication' is about the behaviour of the fictional characters of their coursebooks'.

Yet, like it or not, we live and work with grammatical syllabuses, and with coursebooks whose characters may have only a slender relation to the world which our learners inhabit. The challenge, then, from a teacher training perspective, is this: how can teaching be made more truly communicative, regardless of the constraints within which most teachers work?

A 'bottom-up' approach

Our approach, on Diploma courses, has been two-pronged. On the one hand (and beyond the scope of this article; see, for example, Thornbury 1995), we explore approaches to lesson design that foreground the learner's contribution to lesson content: this is the 'top-down' approach. The 'bottom-up' approach, on the other hand, aims to raise teachers' awareness of the discrete features of their classroom talk, through the recording, transcription, and analysis of lesson sequences. The assumption is that awareness is a prerequisite for change, and our philosophy is consistent with Burns' (1990: 57) contention that 'if CLT is to become more 'communicative' . . . teachers need to be encouraged to gain greater understanding of the interactional processes of their own classrooms'.

I should add that no original claims are being made here as to the value, from a training perspective, of the analysis of lesson transcripts. I am aware that this is already an established practice and has been promoted by Ramani (1987) and Nunan (1989), among others. My intention is simply to demonstrate the effectiveness and practicability of this training tool, for any trainer who might still be unconvinced, and to suggest how it can be integrated into existing programmes.

Features of communicative classroom talk

Our starting point is to establish a simple typology of communicative classroom discourse. (This can be done by having trainees participate in two mock 'mini-lessons', the one without, and the other with, the target discourse features; alternatively, video extracts could be shown and contrasted.)

Among the features that we feel are important to identify are the following:

Referential questions

Referential questions are genuine questions: those for which the teacher does not know the answer, rather than display questions, whose primary purpose is to allow the students to display their knowledge of language. This is probably one of the features of teacher talk that has been most thoroughly researched, and there is plenty of evidence (e.g. Long and Sato 1983) to suggest that the vast majority of questions teachers ask are display questions, whereas, in 'real life', of course, most questions are referential. Nunan (1989: 30) suggests that 'it is not inconceivable that

the effort involved in answering referential questions prompts a greater effort and depth of processing on the part of the learner'. I would go further, and argue that the effort involved in asking referential questions prompts a greater effort and depth of processing on the part of the teacher. Try conducting a lesson in which every question is referential! For teachers brought up in the 'elicit–standardize–drill' school, it can be a salutary experience. Referential questions touch parts beyond the reach of other types of question.

Content feedback

Feedback on content involves responding to the content of what learners are saying, rather than commenting solely on the form. After all, there is not much point in asking referential questions if no attention is paid to the meanings the learner is expressing. But ritualized responses, such as 'OK', irrespective of the message, anchor the classroom discourse firmly in the traditional IRF camp, and suggest that 'it doesn't matter what you say so long as you pronounce it properly'.

Wait time

'Wait time' is the time teachers allow students to answer questions, before, for example, asking another student, rephrasing the question, or even answering their own question themselves. Nunan (1991) quotes studies showing that when teachers are trained to wait three or four seconds, instead of the customary one, not only do more students respond, but there is an increase in the average length of their responses. The proportion of student-initiated questioning also increases. All of these adjustments would seem to be worthy objectives in a communicative classroom.

Student-initiated talk

If, as is argued by proponents of a communicative approach, acquisition is facilitated by the negotiation of meaning in interaction, it follows that learners should, at least some of the time, be asking the questions. A high proportion of student-initiated questions would suggest a healthy distribution of the 'ownership' of classroom discourse, which in turn would tend to promote more 'investment' on the part of the learner: 'A significant source of motivation and attention is lost when turn talking is predetermined rather than interactionally managed by the participants' (Van Lier 1988: 133). Slimani (1989) has also suggested that although there is usually much less learner-initiated than teacher-initiated content in classrooms, it is from the former, rather than the latter, that learners claim to have learned the most.

Ritualized behaviours

The above remarks do not imply that there is no place in the classroom for display questions, rapid-fire IRF sequences, teacher-initiated talk, and other examples of traditional classroom discourse. However, teachers can get into bad habits, and one of the functions of in-service training is to root out what Maingay (1988) calls 'ritualized behaviours'. The extracts from trainees' analyses quoted below demonstrate that awareness-raising, the first stage in de-ritualizing teaching, can be achieved using simple classroom research procedures.

Research project Having identified these features of communicative classroom talk, trainees are asked to record, transcribe, and analyse a segment of classroom talk (see Appendix for a suggested rubric). As preparation they are recommended to read Nunan (1987), Burns (1990), and Kumaravadivelu (1993). The finished analysis is submitted as an evaluated project; more important, though, is the spin-off into actual teaching practice, and the indications of increasing communicativeness in the classroom which, while not always immediate, are invariably rewarding.

Trainee comments As an indication of the kinds of insights the trainees reached, here is a selection of their comments, grouped according to the four features of communicative classroom talk described above:

Referential questions

> My display questions prompted much shorter and less complex answers than my referential questions . . . Perhaps it suggests that my teaching style is too elicitation-focused.
>
> From this extract I have also noticed that I only used nominated questions on weaker students, who, I think, may have trouble with the concepts, while the majority of open questions were answered by stronger students. By limiting weaker students to concept [checking] questions only, I may be reinforcing their insecurities by implying that I think they don't understand.

Content feedback

> At various points I am only reacting to how and not what is being said . . .When I ask the question 'Do you listen to his music?' the student responds 'I preferred him in the past. It like me more' and I get her to correct herself. She then corrects herself voluntarily: 'I liked it more, than the actual . . . er . . . present music'. I am so pleased with this I practically shout 'Very good!'. However, I do not respond to *what* she is saying, the obvious next question being 'Why did you like his music better in the past?'.
>
> 'OK' was used, overused, and abused. I used it as feedback, to punctuate my sentences, to signpost between stages. This is very annoying, but I find my use of echoing much more worrying. I used 'echo' to model, remodel, I even echo myself, especially if students don't come up with the answer immediately.

Wait time

> One thing I think I have improved on and I felt listening to the tape, is giving students sufficient waiting time and therefore them having enough time to formulate an answer or a question. This I have brought into my teaching since starting the Diploma and I have noticed beneficial results for the students, including spontaneous interaction between students, and [between] me and the students.

Student-initiated talk

I gave the students absolutely no space to do anything other than what I wanted. Throughout the tapescript, it was the teacher versus 'them' . . . I was the complete authority—ignoring some students' contributions in my rush to accomplish set aims. There was no interaction between the students; I only allowed time for this in the free practice at the end of the lesson, therefore the lesson was very divided. First the teacher does all the talking, then you're on your own.

Metaphors

Significant, perhaps, are the metaphors that the trainees use in describing their somewhat mechanical, even bullying, style of teaching. Some examples:

'I chose to bulldoze through most remarks . . . '
'The same objectives could have been achieved in a less robotic fashion . . . '

'It seems that I was ploughing students through the furrows my lesson was following . . . '

From a training point of view, the metaphors they use offer an insight into trainee teachers' self-images, which in turn are an important locus for change: without adjustments at the level of image, the effects of training may only be superficial (see Thornbury 1991).

Transcripts

Finally, here are transcripts of two lesson extracts, along with their accompanying (edited) commentaries:

Extract 1

[An upper intermediate class has just read three texts about the musician Phil Collins for comprehension purposes.]

T: OK, look at the last text on the sheet that Cathy gave you, OK? . . . What's it about . . . the last text?
S1: The last text . . .
T: Who's it about?
S2: It's about Phil Collins' life.
T: Yeah. It's about Phil Collins . . . erm . . . what does Phil Collins do?
S2: . . . singer.
S1: . . . plays drums I think.
T: He's a singer and he . . . ?
S3: Plays drums.
T: He's a singer and he plays the drums so he's a . . . ?
S4: Drummer, he's a drummer.
T: OK. Does he sing well? Does he sing well? Is he a good singer?
Ss: Yes. (laughter)
S5: No.
T: You think so? . . . Yeah, but you don't?
S5: No.
T: Is he a good drummer? . . . Does he play the drums well?
Ss: Yes. Yes.

T: Do you think that when he was a child he used to practise a lot? Did he practise a lot?
Ss: Yes.
T: OK, where did he practise?
Ss: At home.
T: Did he practise a lot? . . . Did he practise a lot?
Ss: Yes . . . yes.
T: How do you know? . . . How do you know? . . . How do you know?
S1: We read it before.
S4: Because he's very good.
T: So what does it say in the text?
S6: Always playing drums.
T: Yeah . . . again!
S6: He was always playing the drums.
T: He was always playing the drums, OK? He was always playing the drums . . . Everybody . . . say it.
Ss: He was always playing the drums.
S2: Everyday.
S5: All the days . . . all the time.
T: Everyday . . . all the time yeah . . . always . . . good . . .

Teachers's comments

Virtually all the questions are display questions, which accounts for the tiny amount of 'real' communication and student talking-time. Most of the questions are about something both the teacher and the students have already read. The only examples that could possibly be construed as being 'real' questions are 'Is he a good singer?' and 'Is he a good drummer?'. Both require a personal opinion. However, the text clearly considers Phil Collins to be a good singer and drummer and so, in view of the type of questioning going on in the lesson, the students' most natural reaction will be to come up with the opinion of the text rather than to give their own . . . There are a couple of moments when [real communication] threatens to break out, but these are ruthlessly snuffed out by the teacher. The point when students begin to differ in their opinions over the musical talents of Phil Collins is not allowed to develop, but it could have lead to some more authentic interaction between the students. [. . .] There is one occasion when the teacher asks for information about the text and then continues by asking 'How do you know?'. The teacher is expecting the phrase from the text, but instead gets 'we read it before'. This could be said to be real communication, because the student is perhaps tired of the display questions, and so decides not to play the game any more.

Extract 2

[An elementary class has been working on the language of making suggestions]

S1: What about go to mountains?
T: What about . . . ?

S1: What about going to mountains, we can do 'barrancking'. [Ss laugh]
T: What's 'barrancking'?
S2: Is a sport.
T: Yes, but what do you do exactly?
S3: You have a river, a small river and . . . [gestures]
T: Goes down?
S3: Yes, as a cataract.
T: OK, a waterfall [writes it on board]. What's a waterfall, Manual? Can you give me an example? A famous waterfall. [draws]
S1: Like Niagara?
T: OK. So what do you do with the waterfall?
S4: You go down.
T: What? In a boat?
S4: No, no, with a . . . *¿Como se dice cuerda?*
S3: Cord.
T: No, rope, a cord is smaller, like at the window, look. [points]
S4: Rope, rope, you go down rope in waterfall.
S2: You wear? black clothes . . . / ɪ speʃl kləʊðez /
T: / speʃl kləʊz / Repeat [student repeats] . . . [. . .] This sounds dangerous, is it dangerous?
Ss: No, no.
S3: Is in summer, no much water.
T: Sorry?
S3: *Poco . . . poco . . .* little water, river is not strong.
T: OK . . . and you have done this? What's it called in Spanish?
S4: *Barranquismo.* In English?
T: I don't know. I'll have to ask somebody.
S2: It is good, you come? *¿Como es dìu?* Let's go together.
T: I don't think so. [laughs]
S4: Yes, yes, you come, we can go in summer.
T: Well, in the summer, not now, it's too cold.
Ss: No, no.

Teacher's comments

I chose this particular extract to transcribe because I feel it is an example of genuine interaction between myself and the students, and in particular because I consider it a breakthrough point with this class. Being an elementary class . . . the students, up till this point, had displayed reluctance in initiating discussions, asking me questions, etc., probably due to insecurity about their language ability and, in terms of classroom dynamics, the lack of any one particular student who is prepared to act as a catalyst and 'break the ice' . . .

During the class . . . a genuine 'information gap' occurred, as the students tried to explain a sport I am completely unfamiliar with. Consequently, insecurities were forgotten as the students enthusiastically attempted to communicate the concept, and they surprised themselves (when I replayed the tape) with the volume of language produced . . .

> In general I tend not to interact enough with students, having believed that the students should be encouraged to work with each other as much as possible and the teacher should take a back seat role. I still believe that this is a good idea, in the right circumstances—group/pair work, etc.—but I think I have underestimated the value of interaction with the only native speaker the students have access to—their teacher.

I hope it is apparent from Extract 2 that these assignments are not always exercises in self-mortification. And that, by raising awareness as to what constitutes truly communicative classroom discourse, breakthroughs in this area are possible. It should be emphasized, however, that, as in all things, change in teaching behaviours is neither painless nor linear. Reducing an over-reliance on IRF sequences can leave many teachers feeling disempowered and 'un-teacherlike'. The washback effect of institutionalized teaching assessment schemes means that change is sometimes short-lived. Nor do adjustments to teacher talk have much long-term effect if the teacher is not committed to the belief that student-centredness is more than a matter of providing pair and group work, and getting the students to ask the questions. The training programme must also address the larger concern of the learner's personal investment in the language learning process. Although that concern is beyond the scope of this article, it can be said that the critical examination of classroom discourse offers a convenient tool for the further exploration of these issues.

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