EXPLORATION OF TEACHER TALK IN SAUDI EFL SECONDARY SCHOOLS' CONTEXTS

Mohammed Alanazi[*1, 2] and **Jacquie Widin**[1]

[1]University of Technology Sydney, Sydney, AUSTRALIA
[2]Ministry of Education, Higher Education, SAUDI ARABIA
[*]*Corresponding author:* Mohammed.J.Alanazi@student.uts.edu.au

Abstract

This paper presents initial findings from a study of teacher talk (TT) in English Language secondary school classes in Saudi Arabia. The study focuses on the role of TT in English language lessons, it also investigates how TT is affected by cultural and educational factors and approaches to teaching and whether TT hinders or helps students' language outputs. The study takes a socio-cultural perspective draws on a framework developed by Cullen (2002). The data was gathered through classroom observations and recordings of 18 EFL secondary teachers in Hafr Albatin (a region in Saudi Arabia) and interviews with the teachers. This study has identified that the IRF (initiation, response, feedback) is a common sequence in Saudi EFL classroom; the analysis focuses on the F –move and uses Cullen's analytical approach to make a distinction between the discoursal and evaluative roles. This paper will present an overview of the way teacher talk takes place in the Saudi secondary classrooms and will show examples of where teacher talk promotes dialogue and in contrast, where teachers restrict opportunities for student output. The study makes some recommendations that may help teachers improve pedagogical talk in their classrooms also, and consequently improves students' conversational skills. Due to the need to develop high proficiency among students, this study supports the argument that TT is one of the key issues that help students developing high proficiency.

Keywords: *Teacher talk, F-moves discoursal function, F-moves evaluative function, Saudi Arabia English teaching context.*

INTRODUCTION

In an EFL context, it is rare to find 'learning without teaching' (Inceçay 2010), both are inextricably linked. One of the ways to investigate teaching is learning is through an analysis of Teacher Talk (TT). TT plays a crucial role in developing student language outputs and it potentially helps students develop high proficiency. Therefore, it is a topic that has been extensively investigated. Studies by, Gibbons (2002, 2009), Mercer (2002, 2008), Van Lier (2001) and several other researchers in the field have asserted that effective TT is essential for improving students' dialogic skills in foreign language classrooms.

Walsh (2002) further demonstrates that teachers' language use may construct or obstruct the learning process in classrooms. This aspect of TT is crucial for this study as the only opportunity for most Saudi EFL students to practise English is in their classrooms (Hamad, 2013; Khan, 2015; Liton, 2013). Very few studies incorporate the sociocultural aspects of TT, with this in mind, Cullen (2002) focuses specifically on the functions of the F-move implemented by the teacher. The F-move, usually

known as 'follow-up' or 'feedback' move, establishes the third part of the cycle Initiate-Response-Follow-up (IRF) in classroom exchanges (Sinclair & Brazil, 1985).

Studies of TT in the Saudi Arabian high school EFL context have not yet been conducted. A few studies that have been done on the role of dialogue or positive teacher talk reflects the need for more deep research in this field of TT as well as the dialogic interaction between a teacher and his students (Al-ghamdi 2015; Al-Otaibi 2004; Alanazi 2011). Therefore, this paper aims to fill in this gap in the literature through an exploration of teachers' language use in EFL secondary school classes in the Saudi context. This study uses Cullen's (2002) analytical framework, to focus specifically on the evaluative and discoursal functions of the F-move performed by teachers.

In the Saudi Arabia context, students do not regularly achieve the goals of what the education system hopes to meet in terms of spoken English language proficiency. This is especially true with regard to the fulfilment of the new 2030 vision. Currently Saudi Arabia is undergoing a huge political, economic, social and educational transformation. The educational transformation is clearly apparent by the increase in the number of students going overseas to The U.S, UK, Canada or Australia for overseas studies. This movement is regarded as innovative due to the reinforcement from the Saudi government's huge scholarship program (Ministry of education 2016). English language is increasingly used in business, economics and international relations. Therefore, in order to achieve the goals of education, EFL teaching now begins from 4th grade level in elementary schools.

EFL teachers in Saudi Arabia are generally Saudis who either hold at least a Bachelor degree in the English major or equivalent degrees from other countries. However, a minority of schools also employ non-Saudis English teachers from other countries such as Egypt. Arabic is the language of instruction for all subjects except English subject (Alresheed, 2008). English Language is taught as a foreign language across Saudi Arabia. English classrooms suffer from many constraints Al-Seghayer (2013, 2014) and students' oral skills are relatively weak due to a number of reasons such as low motivation, inadequate teaching aids, unqualified teachers and inappropriate teaching methods (Alresheed, 2008 & Fareh, 2010). In addition to that, some of constraints from students' perspective are lack of exposure to the English language and social-cultural barriers impacting particularities of TT and students' dialogic skills.

The conceptual framework of this study relies on the social-cultural learning and the importance of interaction as the centre of learning by (Vygotsky, 1978). Children learn from the interaction with the society as well as the cultural interactions, whether with their peers or with the help of others they may learn more. Therefore, Vygotsky brings the role of the social cultural interactions and the assistance that children experience to support learning. He indicates that social interaction represents a critical role in the process of cognitive development. This research has drawn on studies that have investigated TT, in particular Cullens' (2002) analytical framework which focuses on the follow- up (F) move to see how TT limits or encourages students' dialogic skills and also to see how students would respond to different moves.

METHODS

A total of 18 secondary schools EFL teachers participated in this research. They hold Saudi Arabia or Egypt nationalities, and teach the English Language in the Hafr Albatin province. They have similar linguistic backgrounds, but their experiences and qualifications are different. The participants' ages are between 24 to 57 years old. Students attend classrooms where English is taught as a foreign language. None of the students have any contact or exposure with English language communities; this means students' exposure to the English Language is solely in the classroom. Forty five-minutes lectures of the 18 teachers were audio-recorded.

This study employed a qualitative case study approach. This method was chosen as this study is an exploratory study, and emerging themes resulted from the thematic data analysis (Yin, 1994; Ryan & Bernard, 2003). For the purposes of this research, the collected data were analysed by means of discourse analysis.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

There are three main foci in this study, namely 1) the role of TT, 2) the impact of socio-cultural educational approaches on TT, 3) whether TT hinders or helps students' language outputs. These three foci are elaborated systematically and discussed in detail in this section.

The first is the role of TT in English language lessons as outlined by Cullen (2002) with F-Moves (discoursal or evaluative). Drawing upon the data, there were three major types of TT identified in the lessons: F-Move Discoursal Repetition, F-Move Evaluative, and F-Move Discoursal Elaboration (see Table 1 below).

Table 1. Identified TTs in English language lessons.

No.	Types of TT	Frequency
1.	F-Move Discoursal Repetition	110
2.	F-Move Evaluative	65
3.	F-Move Discoursal Elaboration	39

The transcriptions representing three types of TT are as follows:

Extract 1:

41	T: I am fifteen years old, ha	S:	I like football
42	T: I like football, ha	S:	I am Saudi
43	T: I am Saudi	S:	I am from Saudi Arabia
44	T: I am from Saudi Arabia	S:	I study…
45	T: I study well now, if you have a lot of money and want to travel. Which country do you want to travel to?	S:	Dubai
46	T: Very good, Dubai		

Extract 1 exemplifies the TT is identified as F-Move Discoursal Repetition. The teacher kept continuously repeated what the student said. There was no evaluative role in the interaction, and the teacher seemed to use this type of TT merely to control teacher-learner interaction.

Extract 2:

180	T: I am study English. Is it right?	S1:	No
		S2:	No
181	T: Is it right?	S1:	No
182	T: I am what?	S:	Studying
183	T: Again, again	S:	I am studying English
184	T: Yeah		

Extract 2 shows the TT is identified as F-Move Evaluative. The teacher expects the correct language expression from the student in this interaction. This is indicated by the three confirmatory questions checking whether the expression is correct or not. The interaction focuses on a grammar structure, namely the Present Continuous Tense.

Extract 3:

221	T: … What should you do to be a good man? Student 1?	S1:	Be polite
222	T: To be polite. What you do to be polite?	S1:	Excuse (meant forgive people)
223	T: … How can you be polite? What is the meaning of being polite? Respect others perhaps. Student 2?	S2:	Help
224	T: Help who?	S2:	Other people
225	T: Excellent. Help others.	S3:	Give them flower…

Extract 3 illustrates the TT is identified as F-Move Discoursal Elaboration. The teacher repeats what the student says, and develops the ideas of talk simultaneously. The teacher engages the students in the conversation. The students also take part into the interaction without being afraid of making errors as there is no evaluative function in this TT.

From data analysis in these three extracts, TT plays three major roles in second language lessons: 1) control teacher-learner interaction, 2) manage classroom interaction by linguistic demonstration, and 3) promoting dialogic talk. These three roles are indicated in the three extracts, which are situated in larger and more encompassing sociocultural contexts.

Secondly, predominant speech habit and freedom of student voices are the most influential cultural aspects impacting the nature of TT. Both are entrenched in Saudi culture within the family unit. Students are accustomed to being passive, and only take on roles as listeners. Parents rarely ask for their children's opinions due to parental speech domination. Since teachers are regarded as representing parents at schools, the same phenomenon is likely to impact on TT as shown in the following extracts.

Extract 4:
MAM (Initials stand for the participant teacher): *'I think students also are affected by their families, especially their father's authority or parental domination. This is the main authority I guess even though teachers' authority is limited only inside the classroom'.*

Reduction of teacher-centeredness unfortunately cannot be used as a way to stimulate more student participation in classroom verbal discourse. This finding is affected the interplay between TT and Teacher Role in classroom teaching. These teachers have to prioritise employing teacher authority role over TT due to technical issues, including unconducive learning environment and disturbing student behaviour. Gradually, these situations raise some misconceptions from teachers in realising TT in their teaching contexts even though they realise the significance of TT in English language learning.

Extract 5:
SAB (Initials stand for the participant teacher): *'The students' behaviour also affects and is affected by the teacher talk especially for teacher authority because a teacher needs to deliver a lesson within a particular time so he needs to be aware of that. Also, the authority should not prevent from humour and good atmosphere for learning. The teacher should give chances for students to talk and participate with a low level of authority'.*

Evident in the narratives is the implication that the teachers are forced to choose to implement either TT or teacher authority. The dynamics of these two interacting constructs occurs on a daily basis. A shared-role of teacher authority can be the solution; yet attention must be paid to managing classroom verbal discourse simultaneously. Otherwise, the classroom will not benefit from arbitrary and unorganised interactions.

Thirdly, TT hinders or helps depending on how learners can notice the potential gap between their current capacity level and the target level (Negueruela, 2008). TT is not the only means of increasing the portion of verbal discourse from teachers or teacher talking time (TTT), but also one must consider the quality of TT and inferential questions, feedback on content or form, and the amount of waiting time (Thornbury, 1996).

From the whole nature of TT in this study, TT is not the most significant due to the lack of teachers' interactional awareness of TT along with the nature of feedback and inferential questions. Nevertheless, these instances of TT have admittedly encouraged learners' participation into classroom interaction.

The proportion of F-Move Discoursal Repetition is apparently the most prevalent compared to the other types. It is also known as teacher echo when it amplifies positive student contribution, whereas the negative version interrupts the flow of discourse (Walsh, 2002). One the one hand, the former was highly appreciated because the TT accentuates learners' contributions. On the other hand, such repetitions could hinder learning potential because it could restrict learners' further

involvement. In many instances, the rationales for performing this type of TT are unclear. Some learners are not aware that TT is a kind of facilitative means to promote more student talk.

Similarly F-Move Evaluative does not optimise its function on facilitating dialogic interaction, but on modelling ideal language production. Its function is beneficial to learners in focused-on-form via displaying the error and showcasing the corrected expression. However, the teachers do not succeed in maintaining the flow of conversation, developing the ideas, and leading to learner uptake (Gass & Mackey, 2006). It is due to the nature of form-focused feedback that places more attention on form instead of meaning. Meaning-focused feedback is less valued in F-Move Evaluative than form-focused feedback.

In contrast with the previous two types of F-Moves, F-Move Discoursal Elaboration works meaningfully within teacher-learner interaction. One of the most salient features is the presence of inferential questions leading to TT. Inferential questions require learners to think more creatively because responses are not expected and unpredictable (Nunan & Richards, 1990). These questions steer authentic classroom interaction in target language settings and questions actually occurred at F-Move Discoursal Repetition, but only to a minor degree. Another positive feature is that this TT has no evaluative role and tends to be error-tolerant, which is constructive for learners in this specific teaching context.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, there are three major types of TT identified and analysed in this study. Despite the lack of teachers' interactional awareness of ZPD with feedback and inferential questions, TT encourages learners' participation. However, there are still some areas for improvement, particularly in setting up a positive environment in the English teaching classroom and calling for TT with strengthened interactional awareness among these teachers via professional teacher education.

REFERENCES

Alanazi, S. (2011). *The responsibility of secondary school teachers in the development of educational dialogue skills of students in the region of Hafr al-Batin from the perspective of principals and teachers*. Unpublished Master's thesis. Imam Mohammed Bin Saud University, Riyadh.

Al-Ghamdi, M. (2015). *Questioning constructs or de- ters students' talk in EFL classrooms: analysis of Saudi English classrooms*. Retrieved from academia: http://www.academia.edu/4659596/QUESTIONING_CONSTRUCTS_OR_DE_TERS_STUDENTS_TALK_IN_EFL_CLASS_ROOMS_ANALYSIS_OF_SAUDI_ENGLISH_CLASSROOMS

Al-Otaibi, S. (2004). *The effect of positive teacher talk on students' performance, interaction & attitudes: A case study of female students at the college of languages & translation at King Saud University*. Unpublished master thesis, King Saud University. Riyadh, Saudi Arabia.

Alresheed, S. (2008). EFL program of the secondary schools in Qassim region (Saudi Arabia): Problems, causes and solutions. *Newcastle University Journal*. Retrieved from http://faculty.mu.edu.sa/download.php?fid=42716

Al-Seghayer, K. (2014). The four most common constraints affecting English teaching in Saudi Arabia. *International Journal of English Linguistics*, *4*(5), 17-26.

Al-Seghayer, K. (2013). Teach us English but without its cultural values. *Saudi Gazette.* Retrieved from http://www.saudigazette.com.sa/index.cfm?method=home.regcon&contentid=20130129151084

Cullen, R. (2002). Supportive teacher talk: the importance of the F-move. *ELT Journal, 56*(2), 117-127.

Fareh, S. (2010). Challenges of teaching English in the Arab world: Why can't EFL programs deliver as expected?' *Procedia-Social and Behavioral Sciences*, *2*(2),3600-4.

Gass, S. M., & Mackey, A. (2006). Input, interaction and output: An overview. *AILA Review, 19*(1), 3-17.

Gibbons, P. (2002). Classroom talk: Creating contexts for language learning. In P. Gibbons (Ed.). *Scaffolding language, scaffolding learning: Teaching second language learners in the mainstream classroom* (pp. 14- 38). Portsmouth, N. H.: Heinemann.

Gibbons, P. (2009). English learners, academic literacy, and thinking. *Learning in the challenge zone.* Portsmouth, N. H.: Heinemann.

Hamad, M. (2013). Factors negatively affect speaking skills at Saudi colleges for girls in the south. *English Language Teaching, 6*(12), 87-97.

Inceçay, G. (2010). The role of teacher talk in young learners" language process. *Procedia Social and Behavioral Sciences*, *2*, 277–281.

Khan, M. R. (2015). Analyzing the relationship between L2 motivational selves and L2 achievement: A Saudi perspective. *International Journal of English Language Teaching*, *2*(1), 68-75.

Liton, H. A. (2013). EFL teachers' perceptions, evaluations and expectations of English language courses as EFL in Saudi universities. *International Journal of Instruction*, *6*(2), 19-34.

Mercer, N. (2002) Developing dialogues. In G. Wells & G. Claxton (Eds.). *Learning for life in the 21st century: Sociocultural perspectives on the future of education.* Oxford: Blackwell Publishing Ltd.

Mercer, N. (2008a). Developing dialogues. In G. Wells & G. Claxton (Eds.). *Learning for life in the 21st century: Sociocultural perspectives on the future of education*. Retrieved from http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/9780470753545.ch11/summary/

Mercer, N. (2008b) The seeds of time: Why classroom dialogue needs a temporal analysis. *The Journal of the Learning Sciences*, *17*(1), 33-59.

Negueruela, E. (2008). Revolutionary pedagogies: Learning that leads (to) second language development. In J. P. Lantolf & M. E. Poehner (Eds.). *Sociocultural theory and the teaching of second languages* (189-227). London: Equinox.

Nunan, D., & Richards, J. C. (1990). *Second language teacher education*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Ryan, G., & H. R. Bernard. (2003). Techniques to identify themes. *Field Methods*, *15*, 85–109

Saudi Arabia Ministry of Education. (2016). *General education policy*. Retrieved from http://www.moe.gov.sa/ar/news/Pages/ministerteachtrainlauncher.aspx

Saudi Arabia Ministry of Education. (2014). *Higher Education in Saudi Arabia*. Retrieved from http://www.moe.gov.sa/ar/studyaboard/King-salman-hstages/Pages/Schol-arships.aspx

Sinclair, J. M., & Brazil, D. (1985). *Teacher talk*. OPxford: Oxford University Press.

Thornbury, S. (1996). Teachers research teacher talk. *ELT journal, 50*(4), 279-289.

Van Lier, L. (2001). Constraints and resources in classroom talk: Issues of equality and symmetry. In C. N. Candlin & N. Mercer (Eds.). *English language teaching in its social context* (90-107). London: Routledge.

Vygotsky, L. S. (1978). *Mind in society: The development of higher psychological processes*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Walsh, S. (2002). Construction or obstruction: Teacher talk and learner involvement in the EFL classroom. *Language Teaching Research, 6*(1), 3-23.

Yin, R. K. (1994). *Case study research: Design and methods* (2nd ed.), Newbury Park, C. A.: Sage Publications.