

Language Anxiety in ESL classroom: Analysis of Turn-taking patterns in ESL Classroom Discourse

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Abstract. In this paper, the author focuses on the relationship between turn-taking patterns and foreign language anxiety in Chinese adult immigrants' ESL classroom discourses. Firstly, a series of articles concerning foreign language anxiety in ESL context are reviewed and ideas about turn-taking patterns' influences on second language learning are discussed. Secondly, a specific study is carried out to examine the actual influence of turn-taking patterns on the Chinese adult immigrant learners' foreign language anxiety. The author collected the data including classroom recordings and follow-up interviews from an ESL classroom at Chinatown in Philadelphia. The data of turn-taking patterns' influence on Chinese immigrants' language anxiety is discussed and analyzed in details. Finally, a brief conclusion and implication are drawn from the study.

Keywords: language anxiety, classroom discourse analysis, turn-taking patterns, ESL

1. Introduction

Second or foreign language learning experience may be special and challenging for language learners. I read a poem "Being Bilingual and Mute" from the Daily Pennsylvanian. "I silently seethed with the urge to say something, something but I kept silent", "silently...passively" (Henriquez, 2010, p.11). It is true that students may feel overwhelmed and anxious or keep silent when they are urged to speak a second or foreign language. Worde (1998) mentions that one third to one half learners have various levels of language anxiety. Language anxiety becomes salient in ESL classrooms and language anxiety also becomes an inhibiting factor for foreign language learners. Research on language anxiety focuses on different aspects of language outcomes. Studies from language anxiety vary from behavioral to psychodynamic (Zheng, 2008).

2. Literature Review

2.1 Language Anxiety Studies in ESL context

Liu & Jackson (2008) argue that language anxiety in classroom is correlated significantly with the self-perceived language proficiency. Learners of self-perceived low language proficiency tend to be more anxious in foreign language classroom. The finding of Pichette (2009)'s research is congruent with Liu & Jackson (2008)'s result that levels of anxiety between novice and more experienced foreign language learners are different.

On the contrary, Brown (2008) upholds that higher proficiency-level foreign language users are not inclined to be less anxious in ESL context. Brown (2008) argues that the major factors influenced the postgraduate students are low self-confidence, feeling of shame and feeling of inferiority. Moreover, Gregersen and Horwitz (2002) put that students' perfectionist tendencies will greatly influence their

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language anxiety in classroom. Evidence of the conclusion shows that anxious language learners in the classroom are not easily satisfied with their performance and accomplishments.

In addition to cognitive factors, language proficiency levels, Koul, Roy, Kaewkuekool and Ploisawaschai (2009) put forward that academic and superiority orientations were significantly and positively associated with foreign language anxiety while socio-cultural orientation is significantly and negatively associated with the foreign language anxiety.

2.2 Influence of Turn-Taking Patterns (Need for Study)

According to different researchers, adult foreign language anxiety may result from many types of affective factors, like language proficiency level (Pichette, 2009; Liu&Jackson 2008), psycho cognitive factors (Brown 2008), gender difference (Koul et al. 2009), and difference of goal orientation (Koul et al. 2009). Nonetheless, few researchers did study on correlation between foreign language anxiety and exchange structures/turn-taking patterns in the ESL classroom. Rymes (2009) mentions that taking turns, asking and answering questions, providing feedback and encouraging more thinking are essential elements of classroom discourse. Turn-taking patterns in the classroom do influence the interactional and communicational context of the classroom. Traditional turn-taking patterns in the classroom discourse include IRE (initiation-response-evaluation) and IRF (initiation-response-feedback). Nicholls (1993) also put that there exist two traditional turn-taking patterns in the ESL classroom discourse. One is Q-A-C (Question-Answer-Comment) which is similar to the pattern of IRE and the other is Q-CQ-A-C pattern (Question-Counter Question-Answer-Comment). She found that despite the fact that students can control or self-select the topic in the classroom discussion, the traditional exchange patterns remain stable in the classroom discourse. Rymes (2009) argues that traditional turn-taking patterns in the classroom, for some people, impede rather than facilitate participating learning events. Traditional turn-taking patterns in the ESL classroom generate an unequal teacher-fronted discourse in the classroom. Previously, Muller (1988) states that teacher is the only one who knows, the students are the ones who do not know and only teachers have the right to comment on the answer students produced, namely to do C-part of Q-A-C. All above dominated and traditional turn-taking patterns are potential to influence the learners' performance in ESL classroom. Lack of previous studies focused on language anxiety in ESL classroom and also few prior studies were carried out to look into the relationship between language anxiety and turn-taking patterns in ESL context. Hence, it is crucial to carry out a specific study to examine the relationship between turn-taking patterns in ESL context and foreign language anxiety in a certain ESL context.

3. Data analysis

3.1 Research Questions

1. Do turn-taking patterns initiated by teachers have impact on adult learners' foreign language anxiety?
2. Do various turn-taking (I-R/Q-A, I-R-E/Q-A-C, I-R-F,) patterns have different influences on adult learners' language anxiety?
3. Is there any different level of language anxiety between teacher-student conversation and student-student conversation in adult ESL classroom?

3.2 Research Methodology

Subjects: For the present study, there are 15 Chinese adult immigrants' learners at a Chinatown's church school in Philadelphia and 2 ESL teachers in this school. All the learners are at intermediate level of English proficiency from the same ESL classroom. Their ages range from 25 to 54 years old. Participants were exposed to English language learning course once a week (on Sundays). Each section lasts for 2 hours and half. English teachers are both UPenn Master TESOL students. They have been co-teaching in this ESL classroom for two semesters. Usually each teacher instructs half a section of each week's course.

Data Collection Instruments: For this study, students' performance, interaction and discussion in the classroom discourse were recorded and follow-up interviews of students were also recorded.

Research Procedure: The author observed total two-week courses of ESL class in the church school and interviewed several students after the observation. **1.** Before the first week's class, I asked two teachers to

send me the recordings of the previous classes for reference. By close listening to the recordings, IR and IRE turn-taking patterns frequently showed up in the recordings of previous several courses. **2.** I observed the first week's class in person and also recorded the classroom discourse. Students and teachers were informed of my attendance in advance, but the purpose of observation was not disclosed to both teachers and students. The day before the class, I asked the teachers to utilize feedback (IRF) instead of purely using evaluation (IRE) in order to observe the difference of learners' performance in the classroom. **3.** In the second week course, I also asked teachers to adjust their usual teaching method. Teachers were required to leave more time for students to discuss a certain topic in dyads or triads. The author was to observe the difference between teacher-student conversation and student-student conversation. **4.** After the two weeks' observation, I interviewed several students about their experiences in the foregoing two weeks' courses. To facilitate the understanding, I interviewed students in Chinese. And also all the conversations were recorded for analysis.

Data Analysis: This is a qualitative study. The analytical framework for the research is turn-taking patterns of language and action. Firstly, before the first week's class, I collected the recordings from the previous classes of the same class I observed. The turn-taking patterns in the classroom predominately embrace IR /Q-A and IRE/Q-A-C. For example:

IR/Q-A pattern:

I/Q (Teacher A): Where is our church school?

R/A (Student 1): It is on the 10th and Vine Street.

IRE/Q-A-C pattern:

I/Q (Teacher A): What does "intersection" mean?

R/A (Student 2): It means the crossing of two streets.

E/C (Teacher A): Very good.

In the recordings, students did not give the instant response directly after the questions. After a while, one or two voices came up answering the teachers' questions.

Secondly, in the first-week course I observed, I asked the teachers to also incorporate IRF pattern into the classroom. At the very beginning of the class, the traditional two patterns (IR and IRE) still remained in the classroom discourse. Later in the class, teachers drew upon IRF (Initiation-Response-Feedback) instead of IRE to explore their difference on students' answers. Here is one example of the IRF pattern in the classroom:

I (Teacher B): What does "occupation" mean?

R (Student 3): It means job.

F (Teacher A): Good. Could you tell us what your occupation is?

Student 3 had no idea to express his job in English. He said in Chinese, "I deliver food for a Chinese restaurant." After several turn-taking patterns like that, students felt stressful to answer the questions. Even some active students were gradually not inclined to answer teachers' questions. Thirdly, in the second-week course, it was almost at the end of the spring semester of the church school. I asked teachers to let students dominate the class. They can judge what they want to talk in the classroom. Students were assigned to discuss in dyads or triads to choose a topic to free talk in English. In the class, in spite of the factor that they usually used simple sentence patterns or vocabulary, all the students actively participated in the discussion. They talked about their summer plan, job, and life in U.S, etc. For instance:

Student 4: What is your summer plan?

Student 5: uh....I will go back to China to see my parents.

Student 4: How long will you be in China?

Student 5: 3-4 weeks. And I also want to go to see Expo.

Student 4: Oh! You will go to Shanghai. Do you buy the ticket?

Student 5: Yes. It is 300 RMB.....

And students took turns to ask and answer the questions in the class. I found that students in the classroom showed more strong willingness to communicate with fellow students. There were discrepancies of performance between the foregoing two weeks' courses. The students participated more actively in student-student conversation than in teacher-student conversation.

Finally, after the second-week course I selected some students to have interview with. To facilitate communication, I used Mandarin Chinese to talk to them. I asked adult immigrant learners about how they felt about the course; whether they were anxious and nervous in the ESL class; whether they felt nervous about the foregoing two weeks' courses; whether they felt anxious or nervous about the different turn-taking initiated by teachers or by students. Almost all the students I interviewed have different levels of anxiety in the language classroom. They were not accustomed to frequent turn-taking patterns (questions and answers) in the classroom. Sometimes they cannot follow up what the teachers were talking about and they mentioned that they were nervous to get negative evaluations. When being asked about the difference among no evaluation, direct evaluation and more feedback from teachers, students said that there is no much difference among these three patterns. A majority of students in the classroom are not inclined to answer teachers' questions. So they were usually passive in the classroom communication initiated by teachers. However, interviewees said that they felt comfortable in the second class because teachers did not join in the discussion. They can free-talk in the classroom. Students treated the two teachers as the authority in the classroom. They became nervous and tense when communicating with teachers.

4. Discussion of Results and Conclusion

Research Q1: Do turn-taking patterns initiated by teachers have impact on adult learners' foreign language anxiety? Most students in the classroom I observed performed unwillingness to participate in the classroom discussion initiated by the teachers. They feared to obtain the negative feedback from the teachers. They tended to keep silent even sometimes they knew the answers.

Research Q2: Do various turn-taking (I-R/Q-A, I-R-E/Q-A-C, I-R-F,) patterns have different influences on adult learners' language anxiety? The recordings I listened to before the two-week courses showed that there was not so much significant difference between I-R/Q-A and I-R-E/Q-A-C turn-taking patterns. Some adult learners feared to be negatively evaluated; they were inclined to passively absorb language knowledge in the classroom. In terms of I-R-F, teachers provided more feedback for students and develop students' more creative and expanded thinking. However, students treated these incentives or encouragements as the burden to force them to speak in the classroom. It did not create a positive communicational atmosphere for students' learning. Learners felt a little pressured by so many questions.

Research Q3: Is there any different level of language anxiety between teacher-student conversation and student-student conversation in adult ESL classroom? There is difference between teacher-student conversation and student-student conversation. In the second-week class, adult learners performed more actively in classroom discussion and communication. Also, in the interview, learners expressed that they felt comfortable in the peer discussion in the classroom, for they would not be assessed by teachers. Despite the fact that students did not show higher language proficiency when communicating with peers, it is true that students felt much less tense to communicate with fellow students.

In conclusion, turn-taking patterns initiated by teachers have an impact on adult Chinese learners' foreign language anxiety in this particular ESL context. But the influences among three traditional turn-taking patterns are not significantly different. Moreover, student-student conversations make learners less anxious in foreign language classroom compared with teacher-student conversations.

5. Implications

A brief study on the language anxiety in Chinese adult immigrants' ESL classroom cannot provide a complete picture for the relationship between language anxiety and turn-taking patterns in the ESL classroom. However, some implications can be elicited from my preliminary research.

From the study on Chinese adult immigrants' foreign language anxiety by analysis of turn-taking patterns, students are not accustomed to traditional turn-taking patterns, in which questions are usually initiated by teachers. Students feel anxious to provide the wrong answers and obtain negative feedback. It is necessary for the educational practitioners to adjust classroom teaching and learning activities in ESL classroom. Firstly, foreign language classroom should be student-oriented. In the classroom discourse I

analyzed, teachers usually dominate the classroom. Students feel overwhelmed because teacher dominates the topic of discussions and ask a series of questions. It is vital for teacher to let students dominate the classroom. Teachers can be facilitators to help students rather than authority to judge students' performance in the classroom. Secondly, learners should be exposed to more student-student communication. Teachers can organize the peer communication and small group discussion in the ESL classroom. In my case, students are adults who have achieved cognitive maturity. They have the ability to dominate the discussion by themselves. The task for the teacher is to observe and polish their language usage rather than dominate their free discussion.

Above all, it is indispensable for the teachers to create comfortable atmosphere for learners' language learning to reduce the language anxiety in the ESL classroom. Tailoring the fixed mode of language classroom turn-taking patterns may be a breakthrough for ESL educational development.

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