

Teacher vs. Student-centered Classroom Interaction at Isfahan University

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Abstract. The present study was carried on to investigate the degree of teacher vs. student-centered classroom interaction in ELT classes of the English Department of Isfahan University to see if the degree of teacher vs. student-centered classroom interaction is affected by different levels of education; B.A., M.A., Ph.D. The participants of the present study were teachers and students of 9 EFL classes in the Department of English of Isfahan University: three classes were selected at the B.A. level, three classes at the M.A. level, and three classes at the Ph.D. level. The courses under study were testing, methodology, and linguistics. In each of the classes under study a total of sixty minutes of classroom interaction was tape-recorded, thirty minutes of which was randomly chosen for the sake of the present study. The tape-recorded data were later analyzed based on Brown's Interaction Analysis System (BIAS). A Univariate Analysis of Variance and t-tests were run to see if the differences were meaningful. A post hoc Sheffe test was conducted to shed light on those differences. It was revealed that B.A. level classes were more teacher-centered than M.A. level classes, and M.A. level classes in their own turn were more teacher-centered than Ph.D. level ones confirming all but not the second hypothesis.

Key Words: Student-centered, Teacher-centered, Classroom interaction, Level of education

1. Introduction

Interpersonal interaction is thought of as a fundamental requirement of Second Language Acquisition (SLA). Many researchers have stated that language instruction requires the development of interactional competence and interaction is a fundamental element of language teaching for communication (Kramsch, 1986; Rivers, 1987; Ellis, 1988). The interactionist perspectives in SLA have considerably emphasized on the role of interaction in general, and meaning negotiation in particular, with respect to the conditions which are theoretically important for SLA.

Observations of many different classes both in content area subjects and in language instruction consistently, show that teachers typically do between one half and three quarters of the talking done in the classroom. Several research reports indicate that the teacher dominates the classroom discourse. Shehadeh (1999) investigated the role of NNS-NNS interaction and the role of self-initiation in providing opportunities for the production of comprehensible output. He investigated the ability of NNSs to modify their output toward comprehensibility in the context of NS-NNS and NNS-NNS interactions and the degree to which such modified comprehensible output was other or self initiated. The results showed that most repairs were self initiated and that NNS-NNS interactions produced more other initiations and other initiated modified comprehensible outputs. He claims that the frequencies of these modified comprehensible outputs support the importance of modification toward Gass & Varounis (1994) examined NS-NS, NS-NNS, and NNS-NNS conversations. They observed that negotiation of meaning is most prevalent among NNS-NNS pairs. Similarly, Shehadeh's study (1999) shows that a greater amount of extended negotiation work took place in NNS-NNS interactions than in NS-NNS interactions for the modified comprehensible outputs produced.

Taken all of the preceding discussion into account, the importance of classroom interaction in promoting students' second language acquisition seems to be crucial. As such, the present study aims at investigating second language classroom interaction regarding teacher vs. student-centeredness at different educational

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levels, that is, B.A., M.A., and Ph.D. to see if the degree of teacher vs. student-centered interaction varies from one educational level to another.

2. Methodology

This study sought answers to the following questions: 1) Do teachers show more initiating behavior than students during ELT class activities at different levels of education, that is, B.A., M.A., and Ph.D.? 2) Do students show more responding behavior than teachers during ELT class activities at different levels of education, that is, B.A., M.A., and Ph.D.? 3) Is there any period of silence or non-talk during ELT class time at different levels of education, that is, B.A., M.A., and Ph.D.? 4) Do the different levels of education, that is, B.A., M.A., and Ph.D. affect the degree of teacher vs. student-centered interaction in ELT classes? With regard to the research questions, the following four hypotheses were set forth: 1) Teachers show more initiating behavior than students during ELT class activities as one moves down from one level of education to another. 2) Students show more responding behavior than teachers during ELT class activities as one moves up from B.A. level, through M.A. level, to the Ph.D. level. 3) There are periods of silence or non-talk during class activities. 4) The ELT classroom interaction varies at different levels of education. In order to find answers to the above-mentioned questions the following methodology was used.

The participants of the present study were teachers and students in 9 EFL classes in the Department of English of Isfahan University which were observed and tape-recorded by the researcher. In each of the classes under study a total of sixty minutes of classroom interaction was tape-recorded; thirty minutes of which was randomly chosen for the sake of the present study. The tape-recorded data were later analyzed based on Brown's Interaction Analysis System (BIAS) (Brown, 1975). Brown's Interaction Analysis System (BIAS) (Brown, 1975) was used as the instrument of the present study. In order to implement the BIAS system, a tally sheet (see appendix 2) is used and marked every three seconds for the duration of the observation. Once the whole lesson has been coded in this way, percentages can be calculated for each of the categories noted. In order to determine the inter-rater reliability in the identification of different categories, a second rater tallied 10% of the data (totaling 54 minutes) which was chosen randomly.

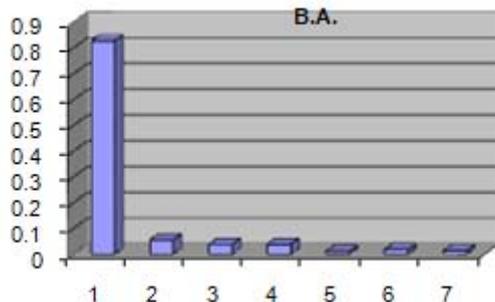
The percentage of time being spent in each category of BIAS was calculated. Percentages of teacher talk (categories 1-3), student talk (categories 3 & 5), and silence (category 6) as well as unclassifiable (category 7) were calculated. The frequency, the proportion, and the mean score of teacher talk vs. student talk were calculated and compared to see if there was a difference in the degree of teacher vs. student-centered ELT classes at different levels of education, that is, BA, MA, and PhD. A Univariate Analysis of Variance was run to see whether these differences were meaningful or not. A post hoc Sheffe test was further run in order to spot the differences, and to provide the researcher with more detailed information about those differences. In order to compare the mean of teachers vs. students talk, their initiating and responding behaviors in each of the three educational levels separate t-test were conducted.

3. Results and Discussions

The investigation of the first research question revealed that at all of the three educational levels teachers showed more initiating behavior than the students. Teachers showed the most initiating behavior at the B.A. level classes, they showed less initiating behavior at the M.A. level classes. At the Ph.D. level classes teachers had the least initiating behavior. In other words, as one moves up from one level of education to another, from the B.A. level, through the M.A. level to the Ph.D. level, teachers' initiating behavior decreases (Figure 1). The differences were significant at 5% level of significance. Quite the reverse was true of students' initiating behavior. They showed the most initiating behavior at the Ph.D. level classes, less initiating behavior at the M.A. level classes, and still the least at the B.A. level classes(Figure 1). Again the difference was significant at %5 level of significance. That students' initiating behavior increased from the B.A. level, through the M.A. level, to the Ph.D. level, is in line with Seliger's 1983 study in which he showed that there seemed to be a relationship between learners' participation patterns and their progress in mastering English, the higher students' command of English, the more initiating behavior they show in language classes. Students at the Ph.D. classes are more skillful than those at the M.A. level, and students at

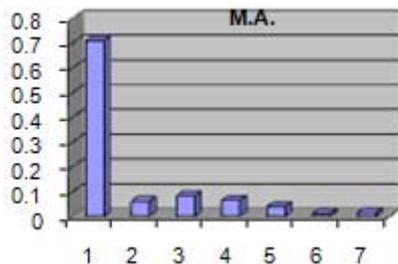
the M.A.level in their own turns are more skillful than those at B.A. level. Therefore, the initiating behavior follows this pattern.

Figure 1: Bar Graph for BIAS Categories at B.A.



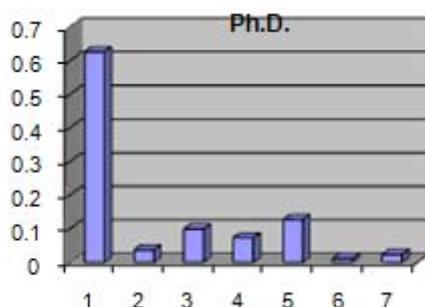
The results obtained from the investigation of the second research question, addressed in this study, also revealed that students showed the most responding behavior at the Ph.D. level classes. At the M.A.level classes, students showed less responding behavior, and at the B.A. level classes, they showed still less responding behavior (Figure 2). However, since the means were close to each other, the difference was not significant at 5% level of significance. The differences in mean of responding behavior, tends to support Seliger (1983) who claimed that the more proficient learners have a bigger share of classroom discourse than less proficient ones. In all of the three levels teachers showed more responding behavior than the students; this is in opposition with Bellack et al. (1996), and Dunkin and Biddles (1974) study in which the students uttered the most of the responding moves.

Figure 2: Bar Graph for BIAS Categories at M.A.



The answer to the third question indicated that the B.A. level classes had got the most frequency of silence. The M.A. level classes had got the least period of silence and the Ph.D. level classes were in between (Figure 3). However, the difference was not significant at 5% level of significance. Possibly, one justification for the high frequency of silence at the B.A. level classes is that when teachers stop talking, students do not take the turn due to their low proficiency in the language.

Figure 3: Bar Graph for BIAS Categories at Ph.D.

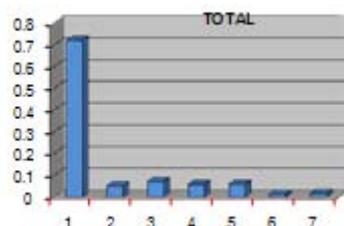


Finally, the investigation of the last research question in the study revealed that teachers had the most of the talking at the B.A. level classes. At the Ph.D. level classes they had the least frequency of talking. Teacher talk at the M.A. classes was somehow in between. Quite the reverse was true of the students' talk.

They talked most at the Ph.D. level classes, less at the M.A. level classes and still the least at the BA-level classes (Figure 4). Any way, in all of the three levels teacher talk was much more than the student talk. The differences were significant at 5% level of significance. This provides support for a number of studies such as Musemeci's (1996), Flanders' (1985), Coulthard's (1985), Tsui's 1995, Bellack et al.'s (1996), and Dunkin as well as Biddle's (1974), and Legarreta's (1997) study in which teachers dominated the classroom discourse and students had a little portion of it.

The results obtained from the four research questions addressed in this study all point out to the fact that though interaction has long been recognized as a fundamental element in learners' language development, today's classrooms in Iran have remained teacher-centered.

Figure 4: Bar Graph for the Total of BIAS Categories



4. Conclusion

The results obtained from the four research questions addressed in this study all point out to the fact that though interaction has long been recognized as a fundamental element in learners' language development, today's classrooms in Iran, particularly those in universities, have remained teacher-centered. As a concluding note, it can be stated that although it was revealed that ELT classes at BA level were more teacher centered than MA classes and MA classes in their own turn were more teacher centered than PhD classes, any generalization based on the results of the present study should be made cautiously.

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