

A descriptive study of teacher talk

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1 ► Review of the literature

Studies on Teacher Talk deal with “the language that teachers address to L2 learners” (Ellis, 1985: 145), that is, they deal with the input addressed to the SL learner by the teacher. Teacher Talk is both related to INPUT and INTERACTION, and belongs to what is known as “classroom research process” which also includes Interactional and Discourse Analysis Studies.

Special relevance for our research have those studies which focus on the modifications taking place on the input directed at the learner. The concept of “modified input” refers to three linguistic registers: *motherese* (the simplified speech used by mothers when talking to their children in order to sustain communication); *foreigner talk* (the modified speech used by native speakers when addressing learners in order to facilitate understanding); and *teacher talk* (the modified speech used by teachers when addressing classroom learners).

A good review of research done on motherese appears in Ellis (1985). He summarizes the major findings of Snow and Ferguson (1977) and Waterson and Snow (1988). Most of this research is concerned with showing that motherese is not “degenerate”, but contains a series of formal properties in comparison with adult speech. Foreigner talk research is also revised in Ellis (1985) and

Larsen-Freeman (1991). Long (1981; cfr. Ellis, op. cit) established the distinction between input or formal features and interactional or conversational features of TT. Most authors point out a basic difference between FT and the other two: under certain conditions, certain ungrammatical adjustments can appear in FT, while they are very rare in the other two registers (op. cit. 130).

109

Input research moves from natural to classroom settings in order to deal with Teacher Talk. A good review of TT studies is found in Ellis (1985) and Mitchell (1985). As in the case of FT, we can distinguish 2 types of modifications: formal and interactional adjustments, as can be seen in table 1.

FORMAL ADJUSTMENTS	INTERACTIONAL ADJUSTMENTS
Shorter utterances	Repetition
Less propositional and syntactic complexity	Prompting
More restricted range of vocabulary	Prodding
More accurate standard pronunciation.	Expansions
No ungrammatical speech modifications	Tutorial or display questions ¹
	Comprehension check
	Topic development
	Explanations
	Anaphoric reference

TABLE 1. Formal and interactional adjustments in TT (adapted from Ellis: 1985 and Mitchell: 1985)

¹ Contrary to the generalized view that display questions are preferred to referential questions. Van Lier (1988: 233) states that “the display- versus-referential distinction, seemingly so basic, may turn out to be irrelevant when more basic interactional issues are considered. It is for this reason that I have consistently warned against studies which isolate superficially identifiable features for quantitative treatment”. Both types of questions are claimed by Van Lier to have the aim of eliciting language from the learner.

The analysis of interactional characteristics implies looking at speech by both participants in a conversation. This consideration leads us to review other kinds of studies which focus on interaction or discourse features.

Within the first approach, we can mention Flanders (1970) Allwright (1980) and, specially, Van Lier (1980). A major issue in his investigation is concerned with teacher control. Four basic aspects are under the teacher control: turn-taking ("the systematic nature of speaker change in different settings" (op. cit. p.94)), topic, activity and repair (a more general term than correction). Lörcher and Schulze (1988) introduce the concept of politeness as a learning goal, which, in their opinion, is seldom practiced in teacher-dominated lessons.

The other type of studies conducted on "classroom talk" receive the name of discourse analysis. As has been pointed out by Ellis (1985:146), these studies have focused "on one particular type the three-phase discourse which is prevalent in teacher-centred classrooms". A great deal of research of this kind was conducted at the University of Birmingham: Sinclair and Coulthard (1975) devised a descriptive apparatus of classroom discourse which provides us with useful categories for classifying teacher talk interactional or discourse features.

110

2 ► Statement of purpose

The research task undertaken in this study aims at describing the features that typically characterize

Teacher Talk. Our aim can be more clearly expressed in the form of four research questions: (1) Can we find evidence for the existence of TT as a special register?; (2) and if so, does this evidence, i.e. the features which characterize it, support previous findings on the subject?; (3) Does TT exhibit internal variation?; (4) To what extent does TT resemble FT?

3 ► Method

The three teachers selected for the study were female, aged between 24 and 31. Subjects A and B are Spanish and teach at the E.O.I of La Coruña (4th year) and in a secondary school (Instituto de Bachillerato de Padrón; 2nd year). Subject C is a native teacher at the University of Santiago de Compostela (1st year). The pupils' level of proficiency ranges from intermediate (for A and B) to low advanced (for C).

The data were collected by tape-recording. Every teacher was given two tapes to record two fifteen-minute lessons. It was decided that the researcher would not be present during the recording in order to avoid the "observer effect" (the teacher's feeling of embarrassment due to the presence of the researcher). Only fifteen minutes of each lesson were used for the transcription. The following step was choosing the features the occurrence of which could be relevant for the study (those which appear in table 2)

INPUT ADJUSTMENTS		INTERACTIONAL ADJUSTMENTS		CODE-SWITCHING
Pronunciation	Careful pronunciation stress pauses exaggerated intonation	Questioning Strategies	confirmation checks comprehension checks clarification requests Display vs. referential questions	Amount Functional differences
Lexis	restricted vocabulary size analytic paraphrases and translation pronouns adject. and adverbs	Politeness in the classroom	repair types positive evaluation marks explicit politeness forms	
		Metacomunication		
Morphology	tenses (present-future vs. past)	Control	Soliciting Allocation	
		Here-and-now topics		
Syntax	utterance length well-formedness syntactic complexity use of contractions question types	repetition	Self-repetition other-repetition	

TABLE 2. Feature characterization of Teacher Talk

The results were expressed by means of statistical tables

except for some features which were only commented on.

4 ► Results

4.1 Input adjustments:

• LEXIS

Texts	1	2	3	4	5	6	Total
Translation	1	0	0	4	0	0	1
Paraphrase	0	4	0	0	6	0	10

TABLE 3. Use of translation and analytic paraphrases

Texts	1	2	3	4	5	6	Total
Adjectives and Adverbs	7	15	1	3	22	94	142

TABLE 4. Use of adjectives and adverbs

• MORPHOLOGY

Texts	1	2	3	4	5	6	Total
Present/future	44	57	8	34	137	153	333
Past	4	6	0	1	22	25	49

TABLE 5. Distribution of present/future vs past tenses

• SYNTAX

Texts	1	2	3	4	5	6	Total
Lines	4	14	0	24	77	80	199
%	2'08%	12'38%	0%	15'09%	43'7%	34'04	22'4

TABLE 6. Syntactic complexity

4.2 Interactional adjustments

• QUESTIONING STRATEGIES

Text	1	2	3	4	5	6	Total
Ner	3	3	5	1	2	2	16

TABLE 7. Confirmation checks

Texts	1	2	3	4	5	6	Total
Ner	12	0	5	10	15	15	67

TABLE 8. Comprehension checks

Texts	1	2	3	4	5	6	Total
Ner	2	8	0	0	2	6	18

TABLE 9. Clarification requests

Texts	1	2	3	4	5	6	Total
Display	3	1	9	3	17	20	53
Referential	7	31	1	3	13	25	80

TABLE 10. Occurrence of display and referential questions in the texts

• POLITENESS

	1	2	3	4	5	6	Total
Self	1	1	0	0	1	2	5
Other initiation- self repair	8	14	19	3	5	6	55
Other repair	2	16	9	6	1	2	36
self initiation/ other repair	0	6	1	1	0	0	8

112

TABLE 11. Repair types

Texts	1	2	3	4	5	6	Total
Ner	0	2	3	3	14	8	30

TABLE 12. Positive evaluation marks

• TEACHER CONTROL

Texts	1	2	3	4	5	6	Total
Ner	22	41	33	24	68	34	222
%	11'45	36'28%	24'4%	14'4%	38'6%	22'9%	100%

TABLE 13. Soliciting

Function/Texts	1	2	3	4	5	6	Total/ %
Nominations	8	10	13	7	6	1	45
Pupil Initiation	11	3	4	1	0	1	20

TABLE 14. Allocating

5 ► Discussion

As far as *input modifications* are concerned our results show that TT may be characterized by a series of typically occurring linguistic features.

Pronunciation modifications are quite remarkable. In general, the three teachers present a more careful pronunciation, as far as dialectal or slang features are concerned (with the exception of the use of *wanna* and *gonna* by teacher C). However, the Spanish teachers exhibit some relaxation in their pronunciation habits, making it resemble the Spanish phonological system ([r], initial [s] or [w]). It is teacher C who makes more use of stress and exaggerated intonation for emphasizing her words. This feature makes her speech similar to that addressed to children: it is unthinkable that an adult could be addressed in that way in a normal situation. It would be either ridiculous or insulting. Finally, many pauses occur in the teachers' speech. This has to be explained on pure didactic grounds (if we disconsider those pauses motivated by the teacher's need to take some time to think and mentally phrase his/her utterances).

Lexical adjustments include the following:

- (1) Reduced vocabulary size. Except for teacher C (probably, due to her being native).
- (2) Predominance of verbs and nouns over adjectives.
- (3) Significant use of analytic paraphrase and translation.

On a different level, the morphological, a salient feature is the *predominance of verbs marked for the present and/or future*. This has to do with the predominance of here-and-now topics that will be commented on later. The use of "Metalinguistic talk" also implies the use of present simple: its "universal" character makes it most appropriate for explaining how the language works.

At the syntactic level all authors agree on TT's exhibiting the following adjustments:

- (1) Overall shorter utterance (except, again, for subject C).
- (2) Reduced syntactic complexity

Turning now to *interactional adjustments*, one of the most remarkable features of TT is the use of certain *questioning strategies*: two assumptions are generally held:

- 1) "... whereas comprehension checks² are more frequent in the classroom, confirmation checks³ and requests for clarification⁴ are less so" (Ellis, 1985: 145).
- 2) "Teachers use a much higher proportion of 'display questions' than do non-teachers, who favour 'referential' questions" (Mitchell, 1985: 138 quoting Long and Sato, 1983).

The first assumption is born out by our results. It is true that as far as our corpus is concerned, we are in most cases before instances of one-way communication with little or hardly any feedback at all on the part of the pupils. Thus, the teacher may feel the need to check whether the learner is following him/her. It is precisely teacher C the one who utters more comprehension checks. This is significant because her turns are considerably longer than the rest of the teachers', so it is natural that she should feel the need for checking if pupils are "still" following her.

The second assumption mentioned above (the prevalence of display - or tutorial - over referential questions) is not confirmed by our data. They give out a result of 53 display questions versus 80 referential questions. It is noteworthy that display questions are bigger in number (or at least equal) in those texts in which conversation does not practically exist, that is, in those cases in which pupil's participation is reduced to responses to teacher's elicitation or directives⁵. Thus, we cannot say that the display vs. referential distinction has a bear on the establishment of TT interactional features (consideration, which is shared by Van Lier (1990: 223)). The teacher controls what kind of language is directly addressed to the L2 learners. There is no reason to say that display questions perform this function better than referential questions do. Therefore, the distinction in question can be mini-

² Attempts by the teacher to establish that the learner is following what he is saying (cfr. Ellis: 1985, 136).

³ These are used by the teacher to obtain confirmation that a learner's utterance has been correctly heard or understood (op. cit.).

⁴ Utterances designed to get the learner to clarify an utterance which has not been heard or understood (op. cit.).

⁵ *Elicitation* is an act the function of which is to request a linguistic response ... a *directive* is an act the function of which is to request a non-linguistic response ... (Sinclair et al, 1983:)

mized: what is at stake in each case is the purpose of eliciting as much output as possible (and, of course, providing input).

Another question under revision in this study is the already mentioned concept of *teacher control*. Part of the teacher's control over classroom activity is devoted to the organization of *repair* in the classroom. The term *repair* is taken to refer not only to "correction" (self-and other) but also to "sanctions or violations" of procedural rules, "problems of hearing and understanding the talk,helping, explaining and correction of errors" (Van Lier, 1990: 183).

We have studied the way in which repair⁶ is managed by the teacher. Different types of repair have been investigated. The more frequent one was *other-initiation/self repair*:

It occurs when problems of hearing or understanding the talk are in evidence ... and for procedural problems ... It also occurs frequently when linguistic and or subject matter problems need repairing and, rather than just doing the repair, an initiation is done in the form of prompting, cluing or helping (op. cit. p. 197)

114 Being such a comprehensive type, it is not surprising that it should be one of the most frequent types in the texts. Extract 1 provides us with an example of this:

Extract 1

131 P with a point

——>132 T a what?

133 P point, full stop

(text 6⁷)

The next one in frequency was *other repair* either occurring in the same (three examples) or in the next turn. Extracts 2 and 3 are examples of helping either in the same and in the following turn.

Extract 2

36 P3 hm eh ... hm, pocas, o sea ...

——> 37 T [not very many]

(Text 2)

Extract 3

80 P7 I would like to have a study of ballet

81 T sorry?

82 P7 a study

——> 83 T a studio

(Text 2)

The third repair type is *self initiation/other repair*. It usually occurs when "linguistic support is required in the face of a total linguistic breakdown". Sometimes repair is "overtly requested and readily obtained". In most cases it is the teacher the one who is addressed for help. Extract 4 is an example of breakdown in communication that needed repairing. P7 seems to have serious problems for communication and the teacher has to "repair" them in various occasions⁸:

Extract 4

99 P7 yes, but e:r ... e:r ((unint)) five hours and he ... ((unint)) e:r

100 ... and other three for ...

101 T five hours a week

(Text 2)

Both evaluation and repair have some bearing on the concept of politeness. Lörcher and Schulze (1988) claim that many teachers are hardly aware of the important role politeness plays in situations of language outside the classroom... The empirical data show that even the teachers hardly use any explicit politeness forms in their utterances. (Lörcher, 1988: 194). To what extent is this true? Our analysis shows significant results on this concern. It may be surprising that the native teacher (C) does not use any explicit politeness forms and in the whole text they amount to only 13. On the other hand, table 23 analyses the occurrence of positive-evaluation forms (words such as *good, perfect, fine...*etc). In this case, it is the native teacher who exhibits the biggest number of those forms.

Nevertheless, politeness is not only violated by the absence of specific forms but also by the presence of certain repair strategies and evaluation forms. In many cases, the way repair and evaluation are carried out is of a very impolite nature. It is done in a way that would be felt as threatening or insulting in

⁶ For repair types see Van Lier (1988:183 and ff)

⁷ **Texts 1 and 2** belong to **Teacher A** (4th year E.O.I.). The first one refers to a lesson which deals with conditionals, and the second one deals with a reading comprehension (multiple choice exercise). **Texts 3 and 4** belong to **Teacher B** (2nd year B.U.P.). The former refers to a lesson concerned with conditionals; the latter is another grammar lesson concerned with different ways of expressing future. Finally, **Texts 5 and 6** belong to **Teacher C** (the native one) and refer to a song comprehension and a reading practice lesson, respectively. For the notation system used for transcribing these texts, see Van Lier (1990).

natural conversation, where self-repair is normally preferred to other-repair (just the contrary to what classroom discourse shows). As an instance of this “threatening character” the following extracts are given:

Extract 5

14 P ((unint.))

——>15 T I can’t hear you. you are making me nervous. what?

(Text 6)

Extract 6

100 T you can’t use if with otherwise... .. they are not

101 compatible e:r... you have to begin with the imperative, don’t

102 you?

(Text 1)

The violation of the politeness principle is at its extreme manifestation when it is not the teacher who directly evaluates but he seeks the other pupils’ evaluation. This is a usual strategy of subject B and we think that it is extremely face-threatening for the pupil as he/she is exposed to an embarrassing other-evaluation or correction:

Extract 7

149 P5 I can’t work out how to use the camera. it’s quite easy, I

150 will show you

——>151 T is she right

152 PP yes

Extract 8

——>171 T too much sweets, is it right?

172 PP too many.

Text 4

Therefore, one more feature can be attributed to TT: lack of politeness forms and use of strategies of a face-threatening character. The reasons for this are clearly stated by Lörscher (op. cit.):

1. The ritualization of classroom communication.
2. The prevalence of formal and didactic aspects over purely interactional ones. We have introduced these two aspects of TT as pertaining to what is known as “teacher control”. Furthermore, there are other two aspects that are under the teacher’s control: control over topic and activity (table 26) and control over who says what, to whom and when. The first type has been termed soliciting (Van Lier, 1990). It refers to control over topics and activities. The three subjects show a similar

behaviour on this respect. But special attention should be drawn to the high number of directives appearing in text 5. This is a typically one-to-many class, i.e., she addresses the whole class at the same time. When she concentrates on pronunciation she makes pupils repeat her words. This implies the appearance of a good many directives (26).

Extract 9

107 T that sounds British. let’s speak like Americans. say

108 passionate

109 PP passionate

213 T (...) everybody say believe

214 PP believe

215 T belief

216 PP belief

(Text 5)

Allocating control is exerted over who speaks and when. Nominations are verbal forms to allocate the next speaker. They are typical of this register. Their low percentage of occurrence is due to the fact that many nominations are non-verbal. Pupil-initiation is not very prominent due to the fact that classrooms exhibit a typical one-way form of communication where pupils are given few opportunities to speak. Nevertheless, Text 1 is the only one to exhibit more pupil- than teacher-initiated moves, which means that communication there is not subject to the fixed rules typical of most classes (see Van Lier, 1990).

Another and quite different feature is that concerning **topics**. They are in fact here-and-now topics. This is true as long as most topics are either related to the organization of the lesson or to metalinguistic activities. Only text 2 exhibits different results due to its remarkable conversational character.

Finally, only an aspect rests to conclude our description of TT: *codeswitching*. In general, teachers use the target language for those parts of the lesson which are ritualized. On the contrary, the native language is preferred for long explanations of a grammatical issue and also after pupils’ utterances in the native or the foreign language. A typical pattern in our texts could be the following: brief explanation of a grammatical issue in the target language + longer explanation in the pupils’ native language. This pattern is didactically motivated. The teacher aims at giving a clear view of how the target language works

and considers this can be best achieved by using the pupils' native language.⁸

However, this is only true of teacher B and teacher A in Text 1. In both cases they are dealing with grammar and correction of exercises. But as soon as two-way communication plays a role in classroom discourse, the use of English increases. Teacher C does not use the pupil's L1/L2 at all, except in an aside (see Text 5), where she uses Spanish, perhaps because it is easier for her to avoid switching to Spanish/Galician.

6 ► Conclusion

Certain conclusions can be drawn from this research. First, it is clear that TT is a special register having specific linguistic and interactional features. Second, our findings on the subject support previous research on TT. However there is an aspect mentioned in the literature that was not born out by our results: the prevalence of display vs. referential questions. This disagreement may point out to the need of viewing TT as a more complex phenomenon than it has been usually considered. Third, it has been stated that FT and TT are completely different registers, even though in some circumstances they may look very similar. The reason for stating this difference is not only the fact that different features appear in each case, but also that even when the same feature appears it is assumed to do it in a different degree. In this respect, it must be said that our study presents an important limitation: the lack of baseline data for comparing TT in the classroom with the teachers' speech outside it. Finally, certain variation has been assumed to exist. This is determined by the type of topic treated or the activity carried out, but also and to a great extent by the teacher's native language.

It would be very interesting to conduct further research on the aspect of politeness in the teacher's speech. A study on how the students' motivation determines the teacher's adjustments in his speech could also throw light on the question of internal variation.

7 ► Appendix one

1. List of difficult words and idiomatic expressions appearing in the text.
 - presence of mind; make up a decision, to follow the instructions, lyrics
 - loan, betray, stand in the cold, release, run uphill, face a moment of truth, put on weight, start off, lose weight, digress off, in a bad light, that's ballony, go on holidays, a run-on sentence, tooth decay, make up one's mind,
2. List of specific classroom -vocabulary items:
 - transformations, correct, conditionals, tense, verb, imperative, future, past, present, subject, preposition, conjunction, connector, zero type, sentence, clause, phrase, plural, singular, collective nouns, countable, uncountable, example, regular/irregular, participle, formal, composition, grammar, hard "t", error, spelling, translate, paragraph, final exam, essays, style, digression, topic sentence, comma, full stop, development, summarize, next, meaning, agree, understandetc
3. List of grammatical errors:
 - Text 2: make an exercise
 - Text 4: Have you a copy then?
 - Text 5: We listen the songs.
 - List of conventions used: (see Van Lier, 1988)
 - T: teacher
 - P1, P2, etc: identified pupil
 - P: unidentified pupil
 - PP: several or all pupils simultaneously
 - /yes/yah//ok// overlapping or simultaneously listening, responses brief comments, etc
 - a) Turn continues below, at the next identical symbol
 - b) If inserted at the end of one speaker's turn and at the beginning of the next speaker's adjacent turn, it indicates that there is no gap at all between the two turns. pause; three periods, approximately, one second. These periods are separated from the preceding word by a space.
 - ? rising intonation
 - ! strong emphasis with falling intonation
 - Ok.now.well, etc a period unseparated from the

⁸ Mitchell (1985: 140) cites Guthrie (1984: 334) as claiming that "even during an English arts lesson, a bilingual primary school teacher used the children's L1 at times to ensure comprehension.

preceding word indicates falling final intonation.
, a comma indicates low-rising intonation, suggesting continuation.
e:r one or more colons indicate lengthening of the preceding sound
underlining type indicates marked prominence through pitch or amplitude
... (radio) single brackets indicate unclear or probable item.
((unint)) double brackets indicate (a stretch of) unintelligible (approximate length indicated), or comments about the transcript, including non-verbal actions.
[si:m] square brackets indicate phonetic transcription.

8 ► Bibliography

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