



## DISCOURSE ANALYSIS IN ESL CLASSROOMS: HOW STUDENT-TEACHER TALK IMPACTS LEARNING

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### ABSTRACT

The present study aims to understand the problem that many Indian students face in communicating in English fluently and accurately. The study delved into the question of student-teacher interactions in ESL classrooms at elementary level. The analysis of the classroom discourse revealed that one-way communication prevailed in one of the classrooms with the teacher leading the discussions and the students listening and then either repeating after the teacher or replying in small sentences. Code switching was also examined and it was seen that in the classroom where the teacher frequently engaged in code-switching, the spoken English of the students was not upto grade level.

**KEYWORDS :** Discourse Analysis, English As Second Language, Elementary Education, Code Switching, English Language Learning

### I. INTRODUCTION: STUDENT-TEACHER TALK

English is taught as second language in India and English is introduced to learners at an early grade. From grade one, English is taught as a subject in all schools and is used as a medium of instruction in many others. Formal education speeds up the acquisition of the target language and enables the learners to attain higher levels of proficiency. Keeping this view in mind, the Indian learners of English have had exposure to the language for many years. Fluency and accuracy, thus, should not be an inconceivable feat for Indian users of English. However, it is often observed that many learners cannot speak and write fluently and accurately in the target language. It becomes important to understand the root cause of the problem presented.

According to Rod Ellis (1992), second language learning is a highly interactive process and in a second language learning classroom, "the quality of this interaction is thought to have a considerable influence on learning" (Ellis, 1985). Classroom interaction, between the teacher and the learners and amongst the learners, defines successful language learning. The interaction contextualizes learning experiences while active participation in classroom discourse engages learners in the learning process. If the communication in the classroom is teacher-dominated or one-way, learning of language can be greatly impacted. The discourse between the teacher and students and among students themselves is vital for ESL as it contextualizes learning experiences through active participation in classroom by learners.

Discourse analysis is the study of relationship between language use and its social context. It encompasses spoken interaction and written texts; and within written texts the grammatical structures, phonology and semiotic systems. A distinctive feature of classroom discourse is the teacher's control of the interaction in the classroom. A large body of research proves the unequal role of participants in classroom communication, with the teacher dominating the discussion and turn-taking. Teachers tend to limit speaking opportunities for their students by asking close ended questions, which invite yes or no type answers. These questions restrict the opportunities for student talk and also disrupt logical conventions of talk. These questions are largely display questions to which the teacher knows the answer. These questions intend to elicit particular language structures or vocabulary and are mostly short and do not engage students in higher-level thinking.

Questioning is one of the most common techniques used by

teachers of ESL and in some classrooms, over half of class-time is taken up with question-and-answer exchanges (Gall 1984). Therefore, teachers need to understand that they need to support learning by proper use of questions. Referential questions are questions which the teacher does not know the answer to. Most questions in a real-life context are referential questions. There is a greater effort involved in answering referential questions and it involves triggering a higher level of thinking among learners. Asking such type of questions also requires a greater effort on the part of the teacher, who is required to pay attention to the meaning of the answer given.

Apart from questioning techniques, the teacher must seek to play the role of a mediator for enabling social interactions between the learners. A meaningful interaction among students helps in developing a positive social emotional relationship among them, which in turn, supports their cognitive development. According to the socio-cultural theory, learning and cognitive development takes place due to social interaction between the learners. Discourse analysis looks into the nature of such interactions.

### II. METHOD OF THE STUDY

Teacher's control of classroom discourse has been a subject of study for many years. Research available proves the unequal role of participants in classroom communication, with the teacher dominating the discussion and turn-taking. Code-switching is another common practice in a second language classroom. Code switching is the alternating use of two or more languages in a single conversation. The teacher often resorts to mother tongue or local language for numerous social and educational purposes. It may be done for explanation or expressing emotions or giving meaning of a word or giving instructions. Although code switching can support the learning of a second language, too much use of it can impede the learning of L2. The researcher studied the student-teacher talk in ESL classrooms and also took into account the code-switching practices existing in them.

For the present study, ESL students of Grade 7 and their teachers were selected from two co-educational schools of Bangalore; one government-aided and one private. A total of 20 classes were observed and recorded for assigning time for teacher talk and student talk. The class in government school comprised 80 students, while the private school had a class of 19 students. Teachers from both the schools were female and English was their second language. The data was collected both qualitatively and quantitatively. The data collection techniques included structured classroom observation, field

notes, close ended questionnaire and interview schedule. The close ended questions allowed to generate numerical data from the observations. Classroom discourse was analysed at a 30-second time interval. The data was classified into student talk and teacher talk. Episodes of introduction to the lesson, questioning, summarizing, interaction between learners, feedback etc. were timed and analysed.

III. RESULTS

STUDENT - TEACHER TALK IN PRIVATE SCHOOL

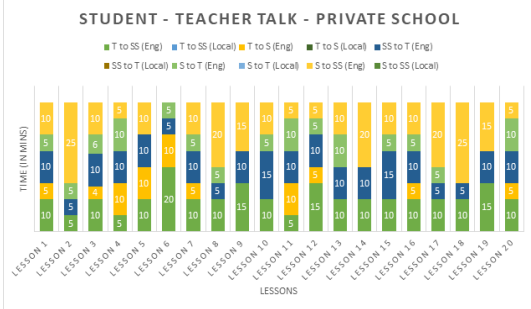


Figure 2.1

The results above show that the lessons conducted are largely teacher-centred. Figure (2.1) above shows the distribution of teacher talk and student talk in minutes, as recorded by the researcher. The categories include:

- Teacher to Students (in English)
- Teacher to Students (in Local language)
- Teacher to Student (in English)
- Teacher to Student (in Local language)
- Students to Teacher (in English)
- Students to Teacher (in Local language)
- Student to Teacher (in English)
- Student to Teacher (in Local language)
- Student to Students (in English)
- Student to Students (in Local language)

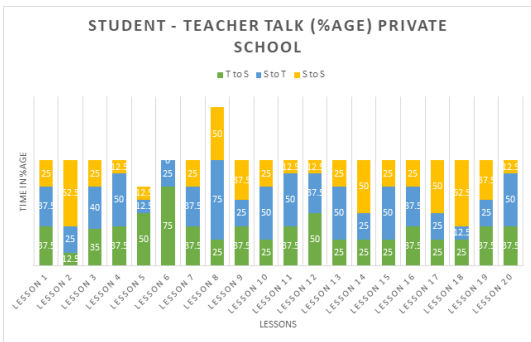


Figure 2.2

Figure (2.2) above shows the distribution of teacher talk and student talk in percentage of the total time, as recorded by the researcher.

The graph reflects that the student talk is more in the classroom in Private school, where the ratio of student and teacher talk seems to be 75:25 or 50:50 in some places. Students are given more chance to construct the knowledge in the classroom either through interaction with the teacher or with their peers. In 19 out of 20 classes, teacher talk is between the range of 25 and 50, which means the teacher gave more opportunities to students to speak in class. The students took turns in talking and were in control of the talk more than 50% of the time, often going up to 75% at times. The teacher led the class and continued the momentum of interaction through questions, feedback and summarization of answers, while the students came up with answers, explanations and supported

each other in coming up with answers. This talk also included guess work by students, questions posed to the teacher and peer learning among themselves.

Student - Teacher Talk in the Government Aided School

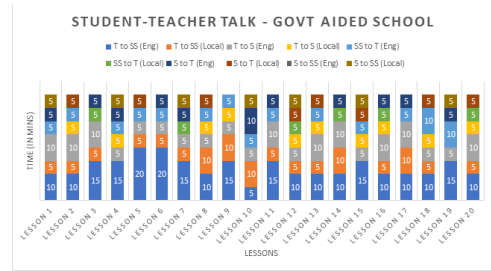


Figure 2.3

Figure (2.3) above shows the distribution of teacher talk and student talk in minutes, as recorded by the researcher.

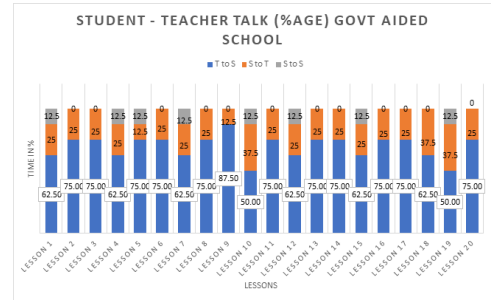


Figure 2.4

Figure (2.4) above shows the distribution of teacher talk and student talk in percentage of the total time, as recorded by the researcher.

By and large, the data shows that the classroom in the government aided school was teacher dominated, where the teacher often resorted to code-switching. In all 20 classes, teacher talk is between the range of 50 and 75, which means the teacher was in control of the talk more than 50% of the time, often going up to 75%. More than half of the class interaction time was taken up by the teacher. This talk mostly comprised introduction to lesson, summary of the lesson, questioning, giving instructions, providing feedback, supporting and assisting in sentence formation by students.

The classroom in the Private school was teacher led but dominated by student talk, whereas in the government aided school, the classroom was teacher led and dominated by teacher talk. In order to ensure meaningful interaction, a teacher must create opportunities for students to speak in class and support their learning. This is also crucial for contextual learning to take place. These components were missing in the classroom of School 2 (government aided school). Moreover, frequent code switching led to further interference in learning of the target language. Various studies have argued on the use of mother tongue while teaching of a new language. In India, classrooms mostly comprise of multilingual learners. Though switching language code can be beneficial in some cases but too much of the mother tongue hinders the second language learning.

I. CONCLUSION

The analysis of the classroom discourse shows that in the government aided school, one-way communication prevails in the lessons with the teacher dominating the talk. Students were either listening or repeating after the teacher, or responded in short sentences. If the students engaged in a

lesson, they were mainly asked questions based on comprehension or grammar and vocabulary, which would limit their scope of conversation. The qualitative data also indicates that the teacher relied on the textbook for most of the lessons, and hardly any teaching-learning material was used to support the learning. Teacher was primary source of language input and she often engaged in code switching in class, either for explaining the lesson or for giving instructions. As exposure to the language is crucial in second language learning, the impoverished input the students receive in class cannot surely result in proficiency in the target language. It was, in fact, observed that the students of the government school performed way worse than the students of the private school in spoken English, where, in private school the teacher a) did not engage in code switching and b) gave more opportunities to students to speak in class.

Furthermore, the teacher in the government aided school maintained a strict environment in class, did not employ any strategies to engage the whole class in the learning process and employed questions that did not invite participation or interaction from the students. The teacher rarely invited the students to articulate their opinions and explanations and the answers provided by the students were implied by the type of question asked.

The learning became passive and interaction was pushed back to a minimum in class. The classes in the private school showed better pedagogy and therefore better results, in terms of proficiency of the learners in the target language. There are many more factors that contribute to the difference between the two classes; this being the prime of all.

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