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A Study of Teacher Talking Time and Student Talking Time Practices among ESL Instructors at an Intensive English Program

Cesar R. Bazo Quintana

Abstract

This study focuses on Teacher Talking Time (TTT) and Student Talking Time (STT) practices among ESL instructors at an Intensive English Program in a southeastern public research university. Based on a qualitative case study approach, the study demonstrates that participating ESL instructors were oriented more towards TTT practices while teaching their regular lessons. The study found disproportionate use of TTT. The study has helped participant ESL instructors become more aware of the behaviors that are conducive to both increased TTT and increased STT practices in their classes. This, in turn, can lead to improved teaching practices, which will benefit ESL students from enhanced instruction.

Key Words: Communicative language teaching, teacher talking time, student talking time, ESL

Background of the Study

Most adult English as a Second Language (ESL) and English as a Foreign (EFL) teachers around the world subscribe to the Communicative Approach (CA) or Communicative Language Teaching (CLT). This language teaching method is based on beliefs that learners will learn best if they participate in meaningful communication (Lightbrown & Spada, 2013). CLT advocates a methodology which emphasizes communication in the classroom, pair and group activities, and student involvement. In CLT, students learn by communicating, i.e. doing communication tasks with a limited role for explicit teaching and traditional practice exercises (Scrivener, 2005).

Due to the extended worldwide diffusion of CLT practices that emphasize classroom activities where learners communicate by completing real-life tasks by means of interaction with each other, the role of the teacher has dramatically changed. Language classrooms are no longer teacher-centered – that is to say, the teacher is no longer the controller of the learning environment who does most of the talking to the detriment of his/her students' participation. In CLT, instead of being the dominating authority in the classroom, the teacher facilitates the communicative process among all the learners and between the students and the various tasks, giving guidance and

advice when necessary (Zhenhui, 1999). Thus, present-day classrooms have become more student-centered.

One direct consequence of the development of CLT practices is the belief that the teacher's presence in the classroom should be reduced. According to research, TTT makes up to 70% of classroom language (Cook, 2000; Chaudron 1998). Hence, current ESL and EFL practitioners advocate the reduction of Teacher Talking Time (TTT) and the augmentation of Student Talking Time (STT) in adult classroom settings.

Framework of the Study

This study was developed to better understand the TTT and the STT practices among a group of adult ESL instructors at the Intensive English Program of a southeastern public research university. Two qualitative research instruments were used to gather data. A pre-research survey was administered to the teachers taking part in the investigation. The main objective when applying the survey was to raise the teachers' awareness regarding this issue. The second step included conducting class observations employing an observation instrument that focused explicitly on the teaching behaviors displayed by teachers during their classes. These behaviors were indicative of whether the instructors were leaning more towards TTT or STT practices while teaching their regular lessons. The data was analyzed and, finally, a post-observation meeting was arranged with all the teachers involved in this investigation to share the findings of the study and recommend possible courses of action in order to improve the balance of TTT and STT practices among them.

Findings based on the Pre-research Survey

According to the pre-research survey, one hundred percent of the respondents admitted that the average amount of time that they spend talking in class for a sixty minute class is between thirty and forty minutes. This translates into more than fifty percent of the total class time. In addition, one hundred percent of them added that the average amount of time that they should spend talking in class should be between ten and twenty minutes for a sixty minute class (around thirty percent of the total class time). Based on these results, it can be inferred that all the instructors that participated in this study feel that they are leaning more towards TTT practices in their classes. They realized that they should augment the amount of STT in their classes.

When asked about the factors that contributed to an increase in TTT, the instructors provided different answers. One of them stated that she felt she talked too much when she tried to reiterate a point, or if she got blank stares from her students. She added that it could be possible that she was over-explaining the lesson contents when her students actually did not need any further clarifications. Another instructor mentioned that her most

important role in class was to impart knowledge; hence, that explains the reason why she admits to spending too much time explaining things. She went on to say that she would like to increase her STT, but that it has been a challenge for her with the class that she is currently teaching. Based on these teachers' replies, it can be concluded that the instructors that participated in this study are conscious of the different factors that contribute to an increase in TTT practices in their classes.

When asked to determine during which stage(s) of the lesson – warm-up, presentation, practice, production, and/or follow-up – they tend to talk more. One hundred percent of the respondents stated that they speak more during the warm-up and presentation stages. None of the respondents asserted that they talk more during the practice, production, and follow-up stages of the lesson. Based on these responses, it can be deduced that the amount of TTT increases dramatically during the initial stages of the class (warm-up and presentation). This is consistent with the theory that states that TTT is more recurrent in the classroom during the presentation of new material (Wajnryb, 1992).

The last pre-research survey question asked respondents what they could do during the stages that they tended to talk more in class to maximize their STT. One of the instructors expressed that she would make sure her students were actually completing the warm-up. She further stated that she would allow her students to ask and answer questions during the presentation. Another instructor mentioned that she would try to elicit answers from her students as well as have them ask questions to each other or to her during the warm-up and the presentation stages. Based on these responses, it can be concluded that the respondents agree that they need to take action in order to maximize the amount of STT present in their classes by trying out different teaching techniques.

The outcomes of the pre-research survey clearly indicate that this qualitative research instrument has certainly raised the instructors' awareness about the amount of TTT and STT present in their classes.

Reflections based on the Class Observations

The second part of this study consisted of conducting class observations employing a qualitative observation instrument that focused explicitly on the teaching behaviors displayed by teachers during their classes. These behaviors were indicative of whether the instructors were leaning more towards TTT or STT practices while teaching their regular lessons. As expected, based on the overall results of the pre-research survey stated before, the classes observed were predominantly teacher-centered. The classroom observations have helped to identify specific classroom practices that have contributed to an increase in TTT.

In the first class that was observed, the teacher exhibited more behaviors conducive to increased TTT than behaviors conducive to increased

STT. For example, on several occasions, the teacher posed questions and then answered them herself instead of encouraging her students to answer her questions. Furthermore, the teacher did not provide her students with enough wait time to respond to her questions. The teacher also summarized and paraphrased instead of giving her students opportunities to do so. When her students were expressing themselves orally, she completed her students' ideas instead of encouraging them to use complete utterances and to elaborate. It was also noticed that about forty percent of her students did not actively participate in the class. Finally, when students were asked to work on some sentence completion tasks, they did the work individually. To increase STT students could have worked in pairs or in small groups or at least compared their answers together. The teacher could have mingled around the class to check her students' work as well.

In the second class that was observed, the teacher also exhibited more behaviors conducive to increased TTT than behaviors conducive to increased STT. For instance, throughout the lesson, the teacher elicited very little from her students when presenting the new material. Furthermore, she did not give her students opportunities to summarize and/or paraphrase. She did not provide her students with sufficient wait time to respond the very few times she asked them questions. It was also noted that approximately fifty percent of her class did not consistently participate in the class. Finally, she did not promote any classroom tasks that could have been done by her students working in pairs or in small groups.

The reflections based on the classroom observations corroborate the results obtained from the analysis of the initial pre-research surveys. The teachers that were both surveyed and observed exhibited teaching behaviors that were oriented more towards TTT practices than STT practices while teaching their regular lessons.   Clearly, the classes observed were predominantly teacher centered. Both the pre-research survey and the classroom observations have helped to identify specific classroom practices that have contributed to an increase in TTT.

Post-observation Conference Results

The final phase of this study consisted of a post-observation meeting arranged with all the teachers involved in this investigation so as to share the findings of this study and recommend possible courses of action in order to improve the balance of TTT and STT practices among them.

The post-observation conferences with the instructors involved in this study were set on an amicable tone. Instructors were first asked to comment on the balance of TTT and STT practices in their classrooms. They all agreed that their classes were oriented towards TTT practices. They were then asked about the specific classroom practices that contributed to their excessive TTT. They almost unanimously mentioned the following behaviors:
- Not eliciting enough from students when presenting new language

- Summarizing and/or paraphrasing instead of having students do so
- Completing the students' ideas
- Posing questions and then answering them themselves instead of encouraging their students to do it
- Not providing enough wait time for students

The following possible courses of action to increase STT among the instructors that participated in this study were recommended during the post-observation conferences:

- Eliciting from students when presenting new language
- Giving students opportunities to summarize and/or paraphrase
- Encouraging students to use complete ideas and to elaborate
- Promoting students to answer their questions
- Providing students with enough wait time

Conclusions

The aim of this study was to examine how ESL instructors from the IEP at a southeastern public research university employed TTT and STT in their classrooms. The process of the research allowed them to gain more insight into TTT and STT practices in their classes so that they could balance their use of TTT and STT to include more STT communication tasks with a limited role for explicit teaching and traditional practice exercises (Scrivener, 2005). Based on a qualitative classroom case study employing a pre-research survey, class observations, and post-observation conferences, the research demonstrated that ESL instructors are leaning more towards TTT practices while teaching their regular lessons (Cook, 2000; Chaudron 1998). This study has helped ESL instructors become more aware of the behaviors that are conducive to both increased TTT and increased STT practices in their classes and to facilitate the communicative process among all the learners and between the students and the various tasks, giving guidance and advice when necessary (Zhenhui, 1999). This, in turn, can lead to improved teaching practices, which will benefit ESL students so that they participate more in meaningful communication (Lightbrown & Spada, 2013).

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Appendix A

Teacher Talk Time / Student Talk Time Pre-research Survey

Please take a few minutes to answer the following questions.

I. Select the amount of class time that applies to you within a sixty-minute class period.

	TIME IN MINUTES					
1 Average time I think I spend talking in class	0-10	10-20	20-30	30-40	40-50	50-60
2 Average time I think I should spend talking in class	0-10	10-20	20-30	30-40	40-50	50-60

Adapted from Warren-Price, 2003

Are there any differences between your answers for numbers 1 & 2? If so, what do you account that for?

_____
_____
_____

II. During which stage(s) of the lesson do you tend to talk more in class? Check the one(s) that apply.

Warm-up	**Presentation**	**Practice**	**Production**	**Follow-up**

What can you do during that specific stage(s) of the lesson to maximize your Student Talking Time?

_____
_____

Appendix B

Class Observation Form

#	Behaviors Conducive to Increased STT		#	Behaviors Conducive to Increased TTT
1	The teacher's explanations are concise and opportune.		1	The teacher gives long and unnecessary instructions or explanations.
2	The teacher elicits from students when presenting new language or when reviewing the previous class.		2	The teacher does not elicit from students enough when presenting new language or when reviewing the previous class.
3	The teacher encourages students to ask questions.		3	The teacher asks questions when there is an opportunity for students to do so.
4	The teacher gives students opportunities to summarize and/or paraphrase.		4	The teacher summarizes and/or paraphrases instead of giving students opportunities to do so.
5	The teacher only expresses opinions about facts and ideas that are relevant to the class.		5	The teacher gives opinions about facts and ideas that do not pertain to the class.
6	The teacher encourages students to use complete ideas and to elaborate.		6	The teacher completes students' ideas.
7	The teacher encourages students to add additional information to their classmates' responses.		7	The teacher adds additional information to students' responses.
8	The teacher encourages students to answer his/her questions as well as their classmates'.		8	The teacher poses questions and then answers them himself/herself.
9	The teacher has students do the wrap-up.		9	The teacher does not involve students in the wrap-up.
10	The teacher provides students enough wait time.		10	The teacher does not provide enough wait time for students.
11	The teacher refrains from unnecessarily repeating what he/she or the students have said.		11	The teacher unnecessarily repeats what he/she or the students have said.
12	The teacher encourages students to guess the meaning of words from the context.		12	The teacher defines all the new words for students.

Adapted from ICPNA, 2011