

9 Helping Teachers Increase Student Talking Time

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1 INTRODUCTION

Studies of classroom discourse in ELT consistently show that teachers talk more than learners. In particular, most questions in the classroom are asked by teachers, these tend to be of the display type, and learners' responses to them tend to be short. Additionally, learners rarely ask questions themselves, Creating an awareness in teachers of effective questioning strategies is thus an important aspect of teacher development. In this study I want to examine the impact on the volume of learners' oral production in English lessons that a teacher development initiative focusing on questioning skills has. My hypothesis is that improved questioning skills among teachers can improve the volume of learners' oral contributions – particularly in terms of learner questions; the point of this study is to see if this is in fact the case.

2 TEACHER DEVELOPMENT AND CLASSROOM QUESTIONS

2.1 Student Talking Time

Dillon (1998) visited 27 classrooms in six schools. He found that questions accounted for over 60% of the teachers' talk and for less than 1% of the students' talk. Tsui (1995) also points out that studies conducted on classroom interaction have shown that student talk accounts for an average of less than thirty percent of the total talk in teacher-centred classrooms. She believes that learners not only learn to talk, but they also talk to learn. Harmer (2007) believes that the more teacher talk there is, the less chance there is for the learners to practise speaking. He thinks that it is the students who need the practice not the teacher, and therefore a good teacher will maximize student talking time (STT) and minimize teacher talking time (TTT). Together, the sources cited here indicate that creating opportunities for learners to participate orally – and to ask questions - in English lessons is important.

In order to encourage learners to ask questions, teachers need to systematically create space for this during lessons (Dillon, 1998). Wragg & Brown (2001) suggest that allowing learners to work in groups encourages them to ask more and better questions than when they work individually. Another idea I used here was the little teacher technique, which I experienced in a workshop I attended. It basically involves allowing a learner to take on the role of the teacher for a short time during a lesson. I had found this a useful way of encouraging my learners to ask questions (i.e. the 'teacher' asks questions to the rest of the class) and I encouraged the teachers I worked with in this study to try this technique out in their own classrooms.

2.2 Approaches to Teacher Development

A number of strategies for teacher professional development exist. Two that I used in this study were workshops and peer observation.

2.2.1 Workshops

Vela (2008) defines a workshop as sharing ideas, experience and expertise with colleagues. Most of the workshops I had attended as a teacher were approached in a top-down way – i.e. the workshop leader did not take participants' needs and experiences into account when designing and running the workshop. The workshops were also largely theoretical and not connected with what happens in classrooms. Current thinking in professional development though (e.g. Moon, 2001) advocates a more bottom-up approach to running workshops which is based on an understanding of teachers' needs and experiences. I tried to reflect these principles in designing the workshop I used in this study (see the appendix for the workshop outline). I also aimed to link the content of the workshop to practical issues in the classroom (in this case, encouraging learners to ask questions).

2.2.2 Peer observation

Peer observation is a process in which colleagues observe one another and discuss the lessons observed for the purpose of supporting each other's professional development. Peer observation has played an important role in my own professional development; it is also part of the system of professional development which teachers of English in state schools in Oman must engage in. Harmer (2007) agrees that peer observation is a way of sharing new techniques and I encouraged the teachers in this study to observe each other as a way of thinking about how they might enable their learners to ask more questions.

3 METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Questions

My main research question here was: can I increase students' talking time (STT) through questioning in Grade 4 classrooms using a Teacher Development Cycle? I broke this question down into three sub-questions.

1. Do teachers of English encourage Grade 4 learners to ask questions? In addressing this question I looked for evidence in the teachers' work of techniques which encouraged learners to ask questions, such as pair work, group work and the little teacher technique described earlier.
2. What is the quantity and quality of the language produced by learners? In considering this question I examined the percentage of STT and TTT in teachers' lessons. I also examined the type/token ratio in learners' utterances as this is a measure of the quality of their oral production. As Zhang (2000) says, "the higher the type-token ratio, the less word repetition there is and thus the higher lexical complexity the text has".
3. The third sub-question was: did the Teacher Development (TD) Cycle promote a wider range of questioning techniques and richer language by learners? In answering this question I compared the answers to the first two questions before and after the TD cycle.

3.2 Participants

The participants in this study were two Egyptian teachers in my school who were teaching Grade 4, where learners are around 10 years old. Teacher 1 had been teaching for six years. Teacher 2 had 16 years of experience in teaching. The curriculum taught in my school is English for Me (EFM).

3.3 Data Collection

3.3.1 Baseline Data

Before running the TD cycle, I collected some baseline data about the classroom discourse of the two teachers in this study. I observed a lesson taught by each teacher and made a video recording of it. I transcribed two minutes from each lesson and compared the proportion of STT and TTT in these. This provided a baseline against which I could compare the teachers' classroom discourse after the TD intervention. In these initial observations I also collected data about the techniques the teachers used to promote learner oral contributions (I used an observation sheet) and about the complexity of learners' utterances (this information came from the video recording of the lesson). I also interviewed the two teachers once to examine their opinions about their learners' oral contributions in class.

3.3.2 Teacher Development Cycle

The TD cycle consisted of a workshop and peer observations. I planned the workshop (which was attended by some other teachers in addition to the two participating in this study) according to teachers' needs, with activities that help teachers reflect on their experiences and which provide them with practical ideas they can use in their classrooms. To enhance deep learning, teachers were given opportunities in the workshop to adapt a section from their course book to provide more opportunities for learners to ask questions; they were also asked to micro teach a short segment of their adapted lesson to one another.

The peer observation part of the TD cycle involved the participants of this study visiting other teachers' classrooms to observe and possibly learn from their questioning techniques.

3.3.3 Impact Data

One month after the TD cycle I repeated the procedures used in collecting the baseline data: I observed one lesson from each of the teachers, video recorded these and analyzed them for evidence of techniques to promote learner questions. I also examined learners' utterances, in terms of both quantity and complexity. Both teachers were once again interviewed.

4 FINDINGS

4.1 Baseline Data

Prior to the TD cycle, the observations showed that neither of the teachers created opportunities for their learners to ask questions. In the initial interviews, too, the teachers showed little awareness of the contribution learners could make to classroom discourse. When I asked them to review the transcripts of their lessons and to comment on what they noticed, the lack of learner contributions generally and questions specifically was not something they noticed.

In terms of the distribution of talk in the baseline lessons, for Teacher 1 around 65% of the talk was TTT and 18% STT, while for Teacher 2 the figure was just over 40% for TTT and 12.9% for STT. In the interviews, Teacher 2 did not feel these figures were surprising. In response to the question 'Do you think it is enough for Grade 4 learners to produce this amount of language?' she said "It is normal, because they still cannot produce long sentences". Teacher 1 seemed more aware of a possible problem here. Her answer to the same question was: "No, I think they need to produce more language".

The complexity of learners' utterances was measured through type-token ratios. Table 1 summarizes the figures from the first observations.

Table 1: Type-token ratios in learners' utterances in first observations

	Teacher 1	Teacher 2
Tokens	21	20
Types	9	9
Type-token ratio	0.4	0.4

4.2 Impact of TD Cycle

4.2.1 Opportunities for Learners to Ask Questions

In the second observed lesson with Teacher 1, she introduced some techniques to promote learner questions. She used the little teacher technique and the pair work technique demonstrated in the workshop, and she added two other techniques herself. In the little teacher activity, two learners had the chance to take on the role

of teachers and to ask questions to the class, such as 'What day's today?'. In the interview after the TD I asked Teacher 1 if she had noticed any changes in learners' oral responses during lessons. She noted that "They like being mini teachers to be like the teacher to be free and choose their peer who answer. They like the atmosphere".

Teacher 1 also used a pair work activity in which a learner mimes an action and asks the question 'What am I doing?', which the second learner must answer. This activity gave learners room to ask questions and to interact with each other.

A strategy Teacher 1 used was to mime actions instead of asking questions, then the learners had to say what the question was. Here is an example from her lesson:

The teacher puts the big book page on the board and mimes asking a question.

Class: What can you see?

T: Yes, what can you see in the picture Ahmad?

L1: Tree.

T: Yes, very good.

Teacher mimes asking another question.

Class: What else?

Another technique that Teacher 1 used was to ask learners to prepare referential questions at home and then to send them off to ask those questions to learners in other Grade 4 classes the next day.

I will now focus on Teacher 2. In her second observation this teacher used the little teacher technique as well as group work to create opportunities for learners to ask questions. In this case, the learners seem to find the little teacher activity difficult and the learner who was pretending to be the teacher needed help from other learners and from the teachers in order to produce any questions. In terms of group work, Teacher 2 adapted an activity from the course book which required learners to produce sentences individually and she asked the learners to produce the sentence in groups. The activity created some interaction though again the learners seemed to find it difficult. The activity too did not seem to encourage the learners to ask any questions.

4.3 Quantity and Quality of Learner Language

4.3.1 STT & TTT

As noted earlier, in Teacher 1's first observation only 18% of classroom talk was STT. In the second observation that figure rose to 40%. For Teacher 2, the equivalent figure increased from 12.9% in the first observation to 41.6% after the TD cycle. In both cases, therefore STT increased, and TTT decreased.

22.3.2 Complexity of Learner's Utterances

Table 2 summarizes the analysis of type-token ratios for the two observations carried out after the TD cycle.

Table 2: Type-token ratios in learners' utterances after the TD cycle

	Before TDC		After TDC	
	T1	T2	T1	T2
Tokens	21	20	116	55
Types	9	9	65	29
Type-token ratio	0.4	0.4	0.6	0.5

Overall, there was a slight increase in the type-token ratios for learners in both classes following the TD cycle. This points to a slight increase in the complexity of learners' utterances. The improvement in the case of Teacher 1 was larger than it was for Teacher 2.

5 DISCUSSION

5.1 Teacher Development

Prior to the TD cycle, there was little evidence in either teacher's work of opportunities for learners to ask questions. This may have been because the teachers were not aware of their learners' language problems. It might also have been because their principles of teaching were determined by the way they had been taught when they were students at school. The teachers responded differently to the TD cycle; one implemented new ideas enthusiastically, adding her own to those suggested in the workshop. The other applied some ideas from the workshop but in a way that did not suggest much commitment. This is a good example of how teachers may respond differently to teacher development, depending on their existing beliefs and willingness to change, among other factors.

5.2 Learners' Language

Prior to the TD cycle, learner contributions in the teachers' classes were limited. In the month following the TD cycle, there were changes in both the proportion of STT in both teachers' lessons and in the complexity of learners' utterances, though the latter changes were modest. Overall, though, there was evidence here that attempts made by the teachers to give learners more opportunities to ask questions in English were altering the nature of the classroom discourse in ways which reduced the teacher's dominance.

5.3 Limitations

The findings of this study apply only to the teachers observed here. Another factor which must be kept in mind is that I was the Senior Teacher of the participants here and this may have affected their response to the TD cycle I set up. There is also always the danger that the teachers modified their behaviours for the observations; it is not possible to say whether the changes seen here were reflected more generally in their teaching.

6 CONCLUSION

This study suggests that teacher development which targets specific aspects of teachers' classroom practices can have an impact on changing these. The TD cycle implemented here created in teachers an awareness of their classroom discourse and of the lack of learner contributions to this. In response to the TD intervention the teachers showed an ability to modify their teaching and to encourage more oral contributions from learners. In this sense the study was successful and I hope it encourages readers to think about ways of promoting more oral production with their own learners of English.

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APPENDIX: WORKSHOP OUTLINE

Participants: Six teachers (they are Grade four teachers and the other teachers of English at my school)

Introduction: Welcome teachers and thank them for accepting my invitation to attend the workshop.

Activities

1. Give each group a short transcript that emphasizes the problem and ask them to look at it and make general observations.
2. First ask teachers to look at the transcript and I ask the question “Do pupils ask questions or initiate?”. Then in groups get them discuss to find out possible reasons for the problem. Third I listen to each of them and show empathy when needed. Fourth I show them transcripts of lessons that are taught by teachers at our school where learners use much more language. Finally I discuss with them some possible reasons that I got from the literature.
3. First, in groups the teachers discuss why we want to focus on getting pupils to ask questions. Second I listen to each teacher. Third I present the reasons I thought of and discuss any reason that has not been mentioned by the teachers. Fourth again in groups teachers think of the types of questions we want our students to ask. Finally we listen to teachers who like to share ideas.
4. First I ask each teacher to think of techniques that we can use to encourage learners to ask questions. Second they share their ideas with the group members and come up with a list of techniques. Then it is optional; we may listen to each of them if they like or one can represent each group to say what they have got. Finally I present what I prepared and discuss any technique that has not been mentioned by the teachers.
5. In pairs teachers adapt steps they choose in teacher’s book to make them more encouraging for pupils to ask questions (I go around to help each pair when needed). Then we listen to the adapted steps.
6. Each pair teaches their adapted step in five minutes.
7. Distribute the handout to teachers.
8. Distribute reaction slips then collect them.

Thank teachers for their participation and for the ideas they will share and encourage them to try some of the ideas if they like.