Speech Patterns in Chinese English Classroom: A Case Study

Huanlei Deng[*]

Nanfang College, Guangzhou, Guangzhou, Guangdong, 510970, China
denghl@nfu.edu.cn
*Corresponding author

Keywords: Speech Acts, English Classroom, Classroom Discourse, IRF

Abstract: This essay analyses the speech patterns in a junior high school English classrooms. With the tripartite structure of initiation-response-feedback, one of the most popular analytical tools of analysing classroom discourse, a comprehensive analysis is conducted to determine the characteristics of Chinese English classrooms. It turns out that the teacher dominates the classroom.

1. Introduction and Literature Review

This essay analyses the practice of a junior high school English classroom in China in the hope of identifying its speech patterns using Malcom's system of categorizing speech acts[1]. The classroom transcript discussed in this essay is taken from a master thesis written by a graduate from Nanjing Normal University [2]. The author of the thesis was studying the teacher talk in a junior high school English classroom. Altogether, 6 classes in Grade 7 in Nanjing Yu Ying Foreign Languages School were audio-recorded and transcribed in the original research, and one example of the lesson transcription is provided at the end of the thesis. The transcriber has divided the class transcript into 5 transactions according to the different activities they belong to. In the interest of the space of this essay, only transaction 3 and transaction 4 will be discussed below.

As Mehan put it, classroom lessons have a sequential organization[3]. The teacher and students take turns in producing classroom speeches. There are many methods of analysing a classroom discourse. One of the most popular analytical tools is the tripartite structure of initiation-response-feedback/follow-up structure (henceforth IRF) proposed by Sinclair and Coulthard, who have also described the speech act as "the minimal unit in the sociolinguistic hierarchy of classroom discourse"[4]. By analysing the verbal behaviours of the teacher and students, linguistic routine or pattern are derived and an overview of a classroom discourse surfaces. Malcom classifies all speech acts according to their functions and identifies 7 fundamental speech act categories[5]. He further develops these categories into 125 subcategories. This essay classifies each speech act in the transcription into these subcategories, and discusses the speech pattern of this particular class.

2. Data Analysis

The main body of the lesson is coded under Malcom's speech act category[4]. The data is then

drawn for discrete counting and analysis. As can be seen from Table 1 and Table 2, the teacher employed all 6 speech act types and altogether produced 110 speech acts, while students mainly employed 2 types of acts: bidding and replying and as a whole produced 49 speech acts. The disproportionate allocation of speech acts indicates that this was a teacher-fronted classroom. The teacher was beyond doubt in the dominant position, carrying the class forward. And we may reasonably speculate that the teacher strictly followed the IRF structure in taking up two-third of the talking opportunities and contributed the most to classroom talk. Students are only allowed to participate and contribute to the class when the floor is opened by the teacher.

Table 1: Counting of 7 Fundamental Speech Acts on Teacher's Part Occurred in the Transcription

Teacher's Speech Acts	
Type of Act	Times occurred
Eliciting Acts	43
Nominating Acts	14
Replying Acts	1
Acknowledging Acts	30
Informing Acts	9
Directing Acts	13
Overall	110

Table 2: Counting of 7 Fundamental Speech Acts of Students' Parts Occurred in the Transcription

Students' Speech Acts	
Type of Act	Times occurred
Eliciting Acts	1
Bidding Acts	10
Replying Acts	34
Acknowledging Acts	1
Informing Acts	3
Directing Acts	0
Overall	49

It is also worth pointing out that although the class is more monologic than dialogic, the teacher has made efforts to encourage more students to participate in the class and to give their opinions. The teacher employed all 6 speech-act categories, with a strong preference for eliciting (43 times), acknowledging (30 times), and nominating (14 times). We can also see from Table 3 that the teacher employed a wide range of different forms of eliciting acts and acknowledging acts, placing great emphasis on the initiation and feedback. The teacher has used variable linguistic forms to express request or commands, but this is more often singled way, for students' responses were brief. The speech acts of students are mostly limited to replying (34 times) and bidding (10 times). Students seldom performed eliciting acts or acknowledging acts, indicating that they did't proactively post questions or making comments to their teacher.

The figures shown in Figure 1 give clues to the teacher's meticulous class design and strong personal style. Among the 43 times and 10 types of eliciting acts performed by the teacher, linked eliciting and conjoined eliciting are most often used. This means that the teacher emphasized the coherence of the discourse and his control over it, and did not gloss over the questions he had raised before without carefully attending to it. Nominating acts and acknowledging acts are also prominent in the chart. The teacher consciously evoked the students' responses and gave his feedback or evaluation, therefore fulfilling a complete IRF circuit. The main role of students in this part is to fill in the gap of "response" in each circle, which explains the large proportion of replying acts and

bidding acts as is shown in Figure 2. The reoccurrence of this structure contributes to an active classroom atmosphere, for students' participation is invited and welcomed, although in a rigid way.

Table 3: Sub-categories of Speech Acts Occurred in the Transcription

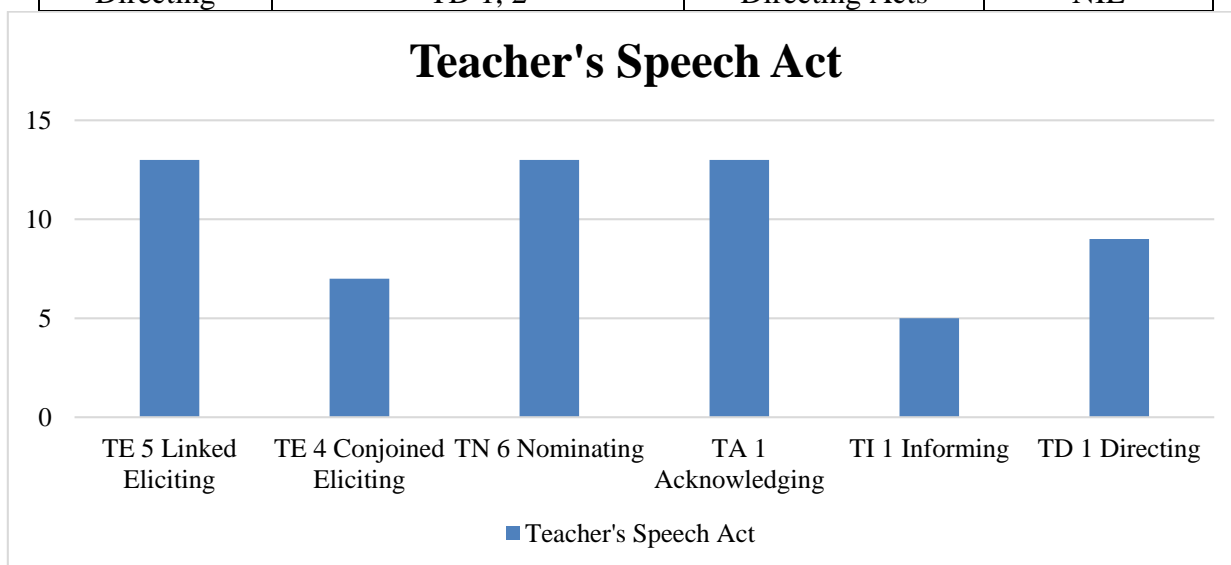| Teacher's Speech Acts		Students' Speech Acts	
Type of Act	Codes occurred	Type of Act	Codes occurred
Eliciting	TE 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 8, 9, 10, 14	Eliciting Acts	CE 1
Nominating	TN 3, 6	Bidding Acts	CB 1
Replying	TR 1	Reply Acts	CR 1, 9, 15
Acknowledging	TA 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7	Acknowledging Acts	CA 1
Informing	TI 1, 3, 8	Informing Acts	CI 1, 6
Directing	TD 1, 2	Directing Acts	NIL

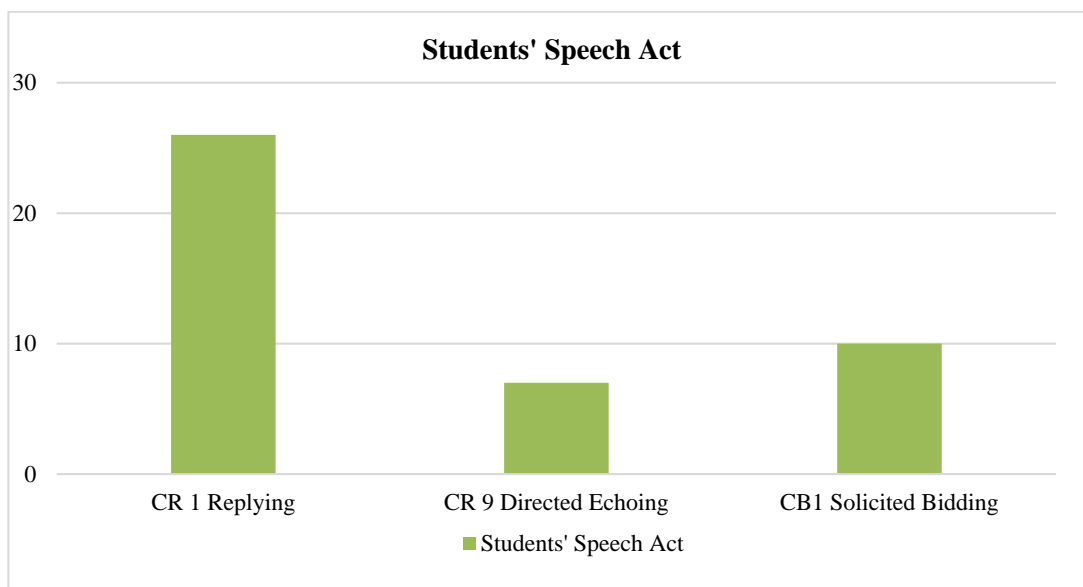Figure 1: Most Frequent Used Teacher's Speech Act Types

Figure 2: Most Frequent Used Students' Speech Act Types

3. Discussion

We now take a closer look at some of the speech acts of the class. To begin with, the teacher's nominations took different forms. It could be the direct calling of a particular student's name, a simple word "Yes?" with rising intonation, or a prolonged conjunction "And—". The variations of nominating acts to some extent lift students' the mental stress of being called. Once they get used to the teacher's talking style, they feel more at ease answering the questions. On top of that, direct imperatives were often uttered in the form of an interrogative. For example, "Can you read it again?" and "And show me more examples, can you?" These requests were in nature commands that could not be turned down. And they fall into the speech-act type of "directing". However, students could sense the mutual respect through these carefully weighted talks and in turn showed greater enthusiasm in participating in class.

We also notice that there is a high percentage of linked eliciting acts. When the teacher raised the question of "etiquette" and "culture and situation", utterances like "some more examples?" and "And something else?" kept showing up. Instead of rushing into the next round of the question panels, the teacher kept the floor opened for more students to bid. This worked out well as there were indeed more students involved and competed for chances to talk. Although the length of their answers was always limited to one to two sentences. However, when a student failed to produce desirable answers or produced flawed utterances, the teacher's handling of the situation greatly affected the student's opportunity and willingness to speak more. We compare the two extracts below:

Extract 1

T6: Who knows the answer? Ok, Simon.

S18: It means normal and pilot (polite) behaviour.

T6: Ok, yes. Can you hear something not very good in his answer? Can you read it again?

S18: It means normal and pilot (polite) behaviour.

T6: Ok, I think the word here (write polite on the blackboard), how to read it? Now read after me, polite.

Ss: Polite.

Extract 2

T6: How about you?

S19: Try to find topic sentences.

T6: Topic sentences? Do you think it's a topic sentence? Ok, now you may find sentences in our passages, right? But this time, that is, key words and key words can help us find the answer quickly. Remember it?

In Extract 1, the teacher spotted the mispronunciation of the word "polite". Instead of giving away the correct pronunciation right away, the teacher offered another opportunity for the student to try again. After the student had tried again, the teacher then corrected and stressed the pronunciation by writing it on the blackboard. In doing so, the impression and effects of acquiring new knowledge last. In Extract 2, when the student gave an answer that was different from what the teacher had in mind, the teacher employed informing acts instead of throwing back the question to more potential bidders. In this case, time had compelled the teacher to move on to the next topic, but by doing so he was actually robbing the chance of exploring the correct answers by the students themselves.

The teacher's impatience was also manifested in finishing up the students' sentences. Take a look at the extracts below.

Extract 3

S16: We think in Chinese restaurants people like to talk with their friends and family loudly, but in western countries, people in the restaurant always speak…

T6: In a low voice, right?

S16: Yes.

T6: Yes, great. And—

Extract 4

S22: In England, we should't ask about their own things.

T6: Yes, personal things, just like—

S22: Just like their age—

T6: Yes, ages, and salaries, income, money, right? Thank you.

When the student encountered difficulties in completing a whole sentence, the teacher came to aid. But a more considerable way here would be giving clues and inspiring answers from the student. The teacher interrupted and closed the floor. Another option would be extending the wait time and encouraging more talk turns for students.

Students employed a great proportion of replying and bidding acts. We can deduct from the transcript that there were students bidding before the teacher's nomination. A student might realize this purpose by an unheard solicited bidding of raising his hand, making direct eye contact with the teacher, or through other body gestures such sitting straight. Their active participation was crucial in constructing the speech patterns of the class.

4. Limitations and Implications

In conclusion, the speech pattern of the English classroom in Chinese Junior High School in this case follows the initiation-response-feedback/follow-up structure. And just like most classroom discourse, the teacher plays a central role[6]. The teacher is in a dominant position in the class but also managed to engage students into speaking. There are limitations to this essay. By simply counting the speech acts on both sides of classroom participants, the approach of analysing classroom efficiency is a bit simplistic[7]. For the lack of more hints in the transcript, there may be some other phenomenon left unnoticed in this essay. And the case study cannot represent the overall pattern of that of Chinese English classroom. There is a need to study more empirical facts and to provide a more in-depth analysis.

What can be implied from the analysis is that although the Chinese classroom employs the same speech pattern as that of a foreign English classroom[8], this pedagogy itself has limitations and needs revision to best suit the needs of different students. It is true that teachers are responsible for constructing a better learning environments for students[9], but what the teacher can do is to strategically step back and bring out the best performances in students. Other approaches to invite more productions from students are also available such as chatrooms[10].

References

[1] Malcolm, I. (1982). Speech events of the Aboriginal classroom. International Journal of the Sociology of Language, 36, 115-134.

[2] Wilson A. Towards an Integration of Content Analysis and Discourse Analysis: The Automatic Linkage of Key Relations in Text. 1993.

[3] Mehan, H. (1979). The structure of classroom lessons. Learning lessons: Social organization in the classroom. 35-80.

[4] Sinclair, J. and Coulthard, M. Towards an analysis of Discourse. 1975

[5] Malcolm, I. G. (1979). The West Australian aboriginal child and classroom interaction: A sociolinguistics approach. Journal of Pragmatics, 3, 305-320.

[6] Steve, W. (2006). Features of classroom discourse. Investigating classroom discourse. 3-15.

[7] Walsh, S. (2002). Construction or obstruction: teacher talk and learner involvement in the EFL classroom.

Language Teaching Research, 6(1), 3–23.

[8] Vaish, V. (2008). Interactional patterns in Singapore's English classrooms. Linguistics and Education, 19(4), 366-377.

[9] Xie, X. (2011). Turn allocation patterns and learning opportunities. ELT Journal, 65(3), 240-250.

[10] Hamano-Bunce, D. (2011). Talk or chat? Chatroom and spoken interaction in a language classroom. ELT Journal, 65, 426-436.