Classroom Interaction and Thinking Skills Development Through Teacher-Talks

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ABSTRACT

This research was a micro-analytical study of interaction and thinking skills development through teacher-talks in a Thai class learning English as a foreign language. The research method applied conversation analysis to analyze a corpus of 16 English lessons. The main new knowledge that contributed to the existing work on social interaction in the context of the language classroom was the understanding of the process through which teacher-talks develop classroom interaction and students' thinking skills. These processes are: (1) structuring successive sequences through questions; (2) structuring turn-taking pattern; and (3) code-switching in teacher questioning.

Keywords: teacher-talks, teacher questions, conversation analysis, classroom interaction

บทคัดย่อ

บทความวิจัยนี้เป็นการวิเคราะห์เชิงราย ละเอียด เพื่อศึกษาปฏิสัมพันธ์และการพัฒนาทักษะ ความคิดผ่านการสนทนาของผู้สอนในห้องเรียน ภาษาอังกฤษเป็นภาษาต่างประเทศโดยมีวิธีวิจัย ประยุกต์ใช้การวิเคราะห์การสนทนาเพื่อวิเคราะห์การ สนทนาที่ได้บันทึกมาจากชั้นเรียนภาษาอังกฤษเป็น ภาษาต่างประเทศในประเทศไทยจำนวน 16 ครั้ง การ ค้นพบที่สำคัญต่อการศึกษาปฏิสัมพันธ์ทางสังคมใน บริบทของห้องเรียนภาษาอังกฤษเป็นภาษาต่าง ประเทศคือความเข้าใจในกระบวนการที่การสนทนา ของครูผู้สอนช่วยพัฒนาปฏิสัมพันธ์ในห้องเรียนและ ทักษะความคิดของนักเรียน กระบวนการดังกล่าว ประกอบด้วย (๑) การถามคำถามอย่างต่อเนื่อง (๒) การกระจายการตอบคำถาม และ (๓) การใช้สอง ภาษาในการถามคำถาม

คำสำคัญ: การสนทนาของครูผู้สอน การถามคำถาม การวิเคราะห์การสนทนา ปฏิสัมพันธ์ในชั้นเรียน

INTRODUCTION

This research aimed to argue that rather than focusing on the evaluation of different ideas of language pedagogy and patterns of interaction in order to find the best method of teaching English as a foreign language in a particular context, English educators should aim to understand the specific educational traditions within which they are working in order to find appropriate pedagogies for those traditions. In the context of Thai classrooms teaching and learning English as a foreign language, it is interesting that the teacher has sole responsibility for managing the seemingly conflicting influences on EFL teaching and learning. These influences are the traditional background of English language teaching (ELT) in Thailand, the

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new school curriculum which has resulted from the school reform project, and the Thai culture itself (Jantrasakul, 2004).

The Office of the Basic Education Commission (OBEC), Thai Ministry of Education, set out the National Education Curriculum for 2001–2010, adopting globally-disseminated educational practices such as school-based management, parental involvement, and cooperative learning (The Office of the Basic Education Commission [OBEC], 2002). The decentralized Thai curriculum includes lessons that emphasize thinking skills, a learner-centered approach, and school-based standards designed to suit the needs of students and their communities (Foley, 2005, p. 225). The purpose of the new educational curriculum is to counteract rote learning and to foster the development of active learners who can think creatively and be responsible for their own learning (Jantrasakul, 2004, p. 2). However, limited language proficiency and teaching and learning skills may be some of the major obstacles for both teachers and students in fully developing meaningful and thinking skills-based interaction in English. The list of communicative outcomes to be achieved by students at different age levels may be impractical and unrealistic for some of the language classrooms. It was the researcher's interest in this situation in EFL education in Thailand which led to the development of the main research question—'How do Thai EFL teachers actually interact with students to develop thinking skills?'

LITERATURE REVIEW

Cultural bases of interaction practices in English language teaching

This section provides a critical review of the cultural practices of classroom interaction in a second- and foreign-language classroom, which have changed according to the changes in theories of language and language learning. The traditional teaching methodology, from the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries is known as the Grammar Translation Method. This method according to Richard and Rodgers (2001) is associated with the goal of developing students' ability to analyze grammatical rules and to apply this knowledge to the translation of sentences and texts into and from English, rather than in order to develop an ability to speak in English.

By the mid-twentieth century, English teaching took the form of exposing students repeatedly to the natural target language and moved toward an extreme version of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT). The principal aim of CLT for Hymes (1972) is to develop not only knowledge of the language forms (i.e. grammatical competence) but also the ability to use language in various contexts in an appropriate, coherent, and strategic way (i.e. sociolinguistic, pragmatic, and strategic competence). Interaction practices are designed to reflect the characteristics of the type of regular second language (L2) conversation outside the classroom, such as the frequent use of referential questions (i.e. questions which require answers that contain information unknown by the teacher) to develop negotiation of meanings and an equal distribution of information between teachers and learners.

At the present time, thinking skills are seen as an essential part of education. Since information is easily obtained through the electronic network, it is the task of educators to develop the ability of students to analyze and use information wisely (Jacobs & Farrell, 2001, p. 8). EFL teachers are encouraged to use activities which go beyond just the information given, and to promote students' higher-order thinking skills, also known as critical and creative thinking skills (Paul, 1995). The teacher's role is more than that of a facilitator and fellow learner alongside the students, rather than that of a knowledge transmitter. The main advantage of the teacher as facilitator is the development of learners' skills in managing and taking care of their own learning.

Research studies on classroom interaction and thinking skills development

Morell (2007) analyzed EFL lecture discourse in university classrooms in Spain and found three main characteristics of teacher talk which occurred more regularly in highly interactive classrooms than in less interactive classrooms:

(1) The use of clear and slow speech with a primarily questioning tone,

(2) The use of questioning which relates to the topic of the lecture,

(3) The use of students' responses as a prompt.

Richards (2006) studied the structures of extreme CLT classroom interaction from different countries, which were similar to the interaction patterns found in normal conversation and found that: (a) teachers do not take control of the discourse, (b) teachers and students interact in a form of fellow conversationalist relationship rather than teacher–student, (c) all participants have equal rights of participation and opening of topics, and (d) there are unmarked students' latched turns, overlaps, and errors. The knowledge of CLT classroom interaction patterns can be applied to compare and discuss the behaviors in the Thai EFL classroom context.

The major limitation of the descriptive studies and the pre-assumptions of teacher-talk is that they fail to explain the process through which the functions of talks are executed and accomplished through classroom interaction. In addition, the existing conceptual frameworks developed on the basis of this descriptive formulation limit our ideas since they do not guarantee access to the multiple layers of meaning that participants might experience, and thus prevent us from understanding the multiple functions of talks. Detailed studies of classroom talk , on the other hand, suggest that functions of talk are not static and not directly linked to the language form, but are very complex and variable. To my knowledge, the limited relevant studies in the Thai EFL context justify the conduct of this study as there is a research gap in this area.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research approach

The present research aimed to examine the characteristics of classroom interaction from an emic perspective. Emic analysis is based on an examination of the understandings and orientations of the participants themselves, hence it allows the functions of teacher-talks to emerge from the classroom talk. Conversation analysis (CA) is applied as a detailed analysis of the transcribed data of talk occurring in natural situations. The main aims of CA are to characterize the orders of organization in 'talk-in-interaction', and to uncover the methods which interactants use to develop mutual understanding and achievement of these orders of organization in interaction. The function or meaning of the teacher's utterance is seen as a product of teacher and students co-constructing meaning through interaction. The process of constructing meaning is made available to the participants, and to us, in their turns at talk and in the ways in which they respond to the prior turns within sequences of action (Sack, Schegloff, & Jefferson, 1974). The focus is not only on 'what' functions are accomplished, but also on 'how' functions of the talk are accomplished through and in interaction.

The CA approach is advantageous in analyzing classroom interaction because it characterizes classroom interaction from an emic perspective, and it traces the developing process of interactional sequences. In addition, the results from CA studies provide data-based evidence which will help in understanding the actual functions of talks, and to understand the classroom activities, goals, and roles from the participants' perspective.

The expected outcomes go beyond an understanding of interactional organization, toward an understanding of the social facts of the institution that are accomplished in social interaction and the

implications of such understanding for the further development of professional practices.

Research data and method

According to Ten Have (1999, p. 48), the general outline for conducting CA projects involves at least the following four phases: (1) getting or making a recording of natural interaction; (2) transcribing the tapes, in whole or in part; (3) analyzing selected episodes; (4) reporting the research. The data collection process included observations and audiovisual recording of the Thai EFL classroom behavior.

The teacher was a female Thai teacher of English. The students were 37 Thai students in Mattayom 2. Mattayom 2 is the Thai system of standard education which is equal to Grade 8 in the Western educational system. There were 25 female and 12 male students, all around 14 to 15 years old. Although the students had been learning English since they were five years old, their English proficiency was still very low. The reason this school was chosen for the study was because it is one of the public schools in the government project of school reform which is required to promote communicative activities in foreign language classrooms. The teacher was proposed by the school principal. The instruction was mostly grammar and vocabulary oriented.

During the data collection process, the teacher and students were asked for permission to record the teaching lessons. Recorded data were transcribed using transcription conventions (Atkinson & Heritage, 1984) (see Appendix), and analyzed in detail to describe the process through which interaction as well as thinking skills were developed.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

The structure of successive sequences through questions

It was clearly evident from the corpus of the classroom interaction that the teacher used display questions to extend interaction sequences. Display questions seek answers in which the information is already known by the teacher: e.g. when a teacher asks students "What is your teacher's name?". The sequence starts with the teacher using a display question to elicit the students' knowledge about the meaning of the vocabulary in the first question sequence. After the students have shown their knowledge of the meaning through their response to the question, the teacher provides follow-up and elaborates on the response by making a connection to a new display question. There is evidence of a connection in the string of questions, which shows that if the students know the meaning of the vocabulary in the former question, they will be able to provide the answer for the later question. An example of this is shown in Extract 1, which comes from the teaching of question-answer forms in English.

In line 1, the teacher uses a display question to elicit the students' knowledge about the types of question starting with 'w', and the students answer 'where' in line 2. In line 3, the teacher provides follow-up by repeating the students' answer and then starts the next question which elicits the students' knowledge about the equivalent meaning of 'where' in the first language (L1). In lines 4-5, the students reply by giving the word in L1. In line 6, the teacher repeats the students' answer and starts the next question. She uses the word 'where' for which the equivalent L1 word was asked before, to construct a question sentence, "Where are you?" The students have successfully given the meaning of 'where' in L1, implying that those students who responded to the prompt knew what the term 'where' meant; however, this does not ensure that they understand the meaning of the question "Where are you?" After a silence in line 7, the teacher repeats the question in line 8. After a few seconds' silence in line 9, the students reply in line 10, giving the name of the province they live in, which is 'Nakhon Ratchasima'. Now, the response shows that they understand the meaning of "Where are you?"

It is important that teachers are able to assess their students in terms of what they know or do not know. By assessing the students' current level of knowledge, the teacher does not have to test the students' understanding of every English word that is taught or used in the classroom. In line 11, the teacher prompts the students to answer in more specific detail. The students make a repair by answering with the name of the town they live in - 'Pakchong' in line 13. The teacher provides a positive evaluation of the students' response by saying "OK good" to indicate that the response is correct and to complete the sequence of connected questions.

1. T: *aì àraj ìːk* [dʌb.|̩ .ju:

         (*What else?* W)

2. Ss: [Where::=

3. T: →   =Where (.) where *plæː wâː*

         (Where where *means-*)

4. S1:   *tʰîː* [*nǎj*

         (*Where*)

5. Ss: [*tʰîː* [*nǎj*

            (*Where*)

6. T: →   [*tʰîː nǎj* (.) Where are you?

              (*Where*)

7.   (2.0)

8. T: Where are you?

9.   (3.0)

10. Ss: Nakhon[Ratchasima

11. T: [Nakhon Ratchasima *mǣː tɔ̀ːp kʰæ̂ːp nɔ̀ːj dâj máj*

            (*Nakhon Ratchasima Can you narrow down the answer?*)

12.   (2.0)

13. S1:   Pakchong=

14. T: =Pakchong [Nakhon Ratchasima

15. Ss: [Nakhon Ratchasima

16. T: OK good

Extract 1 Teaching of question-answer forms in English

Extract 2 shows the teacher using both meaning and grammar to connect sequences of questions. In Extract 2, the teacher first elicits the students' knowledge about the meaning of 'where' in line 1. After the students' knowledge of what 'where' means is realized through some groups of students' responses in lines 2 and 3, she produces a form of 'where' question in line 4, "Where were you born?" Although it is in the form of a question, the students understand it as initiating a repeat after her, so they repeat the sentence in line 5. The teacher

starts the new question in line 6, by asking in L1 for the L1 meaning of the question "Where were you born?" The question successfully assesses the students' knowledge about the meaning through the students' response in line 7. The teacher then uses the students' knowledge of the meaning to begin to elicit their knowledge about English grammar. In line 8, the teacher elicits the students' knowledge about how to answer the question "Where were you born?" For this question, the teacher may have an answer in mind, which can be seen from the way she

1. T: →   Where *kʰûn tôn wâː* where *plæː wâː àraj*

      (Where *starts with* where *what does it mean*?)

2. Ss1:   *tʰîː nǎj=*

      (*Where*)

3. Ss2:   *=tʰîː nǎj*

      (*Where*)

4. T: →   Where were you born?

5. Ss: Where were you born?

6. T: →   *plæː wâː*

      (*It means-*)

7. Ss: *kʰun kɤ̀ːt tʰîːnǎj*

      (*Where were you born?*)

8. T: →   *àːːː kʰun kɤ̀ːt tʰîː nǎj an níː tɔ̀ːp pen àraj*

      (*Yes, where were you born. What should the answer be?*)

9. S1:   *tɕaŋwàt=*

      (*A province.*)

10. T: *=tɕaŋwàt pen roːŋ pʰájaːbaːn kɔ̂ː jîŋ diː ná (.) pal̀ːktɕʰɔ̂ːŋ naːnaː* hospital

      (*A province, a hospital is more accurate. Pakchong NaNa Hospital*)

11. Ss: hospi[tal

12. T: [Pakchong Nakhon Ratchasima

Extract 2 Teaching of question-answer forms in English (continuation)

repeats the students' answer and guides the students to what the answer should be in line 10. The data show that the teacher systematically sequences the questions. Instead of directly asking "Where were you born?" and telling them how to answer this question, the teacher makes sure that the students know the meaning of the question before she asks for an answer to it.

The structure of question sequences is completed when the answer to the main question is achieved. Successive sequences of questions have the effect of activating the collective thinking process (Schegloff, 2007), in which the previous answers are used as information resources for the student cohort to collect and use to find appropriate answers to the next questions. However, it should be noted that the students do not so much answer the main question, but answer the contingent questions and collect bits of information to answer the main question. The answer to the main question may not come directly from the students' knowledge but from the interactional resources provided by the teacher during the interaction, such as the eliciting of bits of information.

The results also show that the teacher uses many questions which seek factual information which could be known or unknown by the teacher. As shown in Extract 2, 'closed questions', such as, "Where were you born?" is an example of factual question. While evaluation-seeking questions can develop high-order thinking skills, factual information seeking only develop low-order thinking skills. However, Brock (1986) suggested that, although there is a preponderance of teachers' questions which relate to the low cognitive level, teachers can be trained to increase the frequency of use of questions which tend to develop higher cognitive levels.

The procedure of turn-taking

The other notable pattern of interaction is the pattern of turn-taking using *membership categorization devices* (Sacks, 1992) to refer to the whole class as a recipient of the question. The teacher structures the question in such a way to direct it to the whole class by using a non-specific recipient reference form such as 'you' or 'students'. The categorization of the whole class as 'students', which is shown in line 1 of Extract 3, implicitly refers to the relevant roles and activities of the individual students as members of that category, all of whom have equal rights and opportunities to provide the response. However, it also treats the whole class of students as a single unit of thought when actually different students have different levels of thinking skills.

The teacher should try to use different basic procedures of turn-taking. One of these procedures is *individual nomination*, or the allocation of turns to specific individuals or a specific group of students,

1.	T:	Students are you happy?
2.	Ss:	Ye::s
3.	T:	Do you have lunch?
4.	Ss:	(2.0)
5.	T:	Do you have lunch?
6.	S1:	N[o
7.	Ss:	[no

Extract 3 The teacher's use of membership categirization devices

i.e. teachers call out specific names when asking questions. The teacher can also use *invitation to bid* and *invitation to reply* (Mehan, 1979), in order to open the floor for the students to bid for reply. These procedures of turn allocation can help the teacher to test individual students' knowledge and level of thinking skills.

The procedure of code-switching in teacher question

The extracts show evidence of code-switching (CS) between English and Thai in the classroom interaction. Recently, many researchers have agreed that the use of CS in language classrooms is a good indication that the communicative resources of teacher and learner in the classroom are being broadened (Atkinson, 1993; Cook, 2001; Widdowson, 2003). Since language classrooms share specific features of a bilingual community, "teachers and learners exploit code contrasts to demarcate different types of discourse, to negotiate and renegotiate joint frames of reference and to exchange meanings on the spur of the moment" (Martin-Jones, 1995, p. 98). A teacher, especially a non-native speaker of English, often uses CS as a resource for constructing the meanings of an interaction (Simon, 2001). As shown in Extracts 1 and 2, the teacher switches codes to construct the meanings of a question and to extend the sequence of interaction.

Extract 4 shows evidence of the teacher's reformulation of the elicitation by switching language and providing clues to prompt student response. In line 3, the teacher elicits the students' knowledge about the equivalent L1 meaning of 'have dinner'. The elicitation is conducted in Thai, followed by the equivalent meaning in L2. After three seconds of silence, the teacher elicits the students' knowledge of the meaning again. However, the elicitation in

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1. T: Have <u>din</u>ner

2. Ss: Have <u>din</u>ner

3. T: *mǎ:j kʰwa:m wâ: àraj* what does it mean?

          (*What does it mean?* What does it mean?)

4. Ss: (3.0)

5. T: Have dinner *plæ: wâ: àraj (.) mǔ:an kàp* have breakfast have lunch *plæ: wâ:*

          (Have dinner *what does it mean? It is similar to* have breakfast,

          have lunch. *It means-*)

6.   (2.0)

7. T: *a:hǎ:n*

          (*Meal*)

8. Ss: *Jen=*

          (*Evening*)

9. T: *=a:hǎ:n jen* that's right

          (*Evening meal*, that's right)

Extract 4 The teacher's code-switching

line 5 is reformulated by using L1 as the language of communication, while L2 is embedded in the Thai sentence. This new elicitation in line 5 is used to refer to the phrase that the students are asked to interpret in L1 (have dinner), and some examples of similar phrases (have breakfast, have lunch). In line 7 the teacher adds more information: '*aːhăːn*' (meal) to help the students to provide the remainder of the phrase, which may be the part of the answer she wants to elicit from the students the most. The students realise that the word '*aːhăːn*' (meal) is provided to prompt them to answer with the rest of the expression, which is 'jen' (evening) in line 8, and this answer is followed by the teacher's positive feedback in line 9.

The extended sequencing of connected questions and the switch of codes are designed by the teacher to facilitate the students' provision of answers. The students finally collect all the interrelated bits of information when the structure of connected question sequences ends. Competencies which are used to accomplish the extended sequences of questions are not simply the students' ability to provide appropriate responses, but also the collective thinking skills of the student which are encouraged through the teacher's switch of codes. Too much code-switching may undermine students learning and acquiring L2, as they may depend too much on the teacher's L1.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATION

This ethnographic study of sequential structures of teacher-talk in the Thai EFL classroom provides empirical findings about the interrelationship between patterns of teacher-talks and thinking skills development. The teacher-talk in this classroom context only develop lower-order thinking skills of knowledge recall and information given. EFL teachers should be trained to develop successive sequences of interaction which can evidently develop the students' collective thinking process. They should also pay more attention to language

discourses which develop the thinking skills of individual learners, such as evaluation-seeking questions and different procedures of turn allocation. Through the detailed analysis of evolving sequences of interaction, we can understand the complex features of classroom interaction which are the products of the collaborative work between the teacher and the students to develop a common understanding of classroom teaching and learning. Yet, there are many possible reasons behind classroom behavior which cannot be discovered through the analysis of interaction. Future research may overcome this limitation by using CA in conjunction with other research methods, such as asking subjects to keep journals, interviews with the teacher or students, or showing the video recording of the interaction to the students and asking them to reflect on what they did and why they did it. This method of triangulation would help the researcher to obtain the participants' perspectives and to verify the researcher's interpretation.

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APPENDIX
TRANSCRIPT NOTATION

T	Teacher
Ss	More than one student
S1	Single student
::	lengthening of the preceding sound.
(.)	micro-pause
(2.0)	number in parentheses indicates seconds of silence
?	rising intonation
=	the second speaker followed the first speaker without discernible silence between them
[ ]	point of overlap

Thai transcription

tʰɑj	International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) with Phonemic Tones (Phonemic transcription, 1998).
(*Thai*)	English translations