Intersubjectivity in Dialogic Teacher Talk in a Conservative Society: Recognising the role of the Sociocultural Context

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Abstract

Classroom discourse studies have addressed classroom talk, showing it to be the product and process of learning; these studies have examined the teacher's capability in managing the classroom talk, along with analysing the other innumerable variables in a classroom setting. However, these kinds of studies have yet to reach 'the beyond classroom setting' that looks at the sociocultural context, both inside and outside the classroom. The scope of the current study involves broader sociocultural aspects than the capability of teachers in influencing the quality of classroom talk. One of the most influential aspects in the classroom is the understanding of intersubjectivity in relation to how learning is constructed in a specific cultural group. Importantly, this understanding has implications for how talk can be potentially developed in its quality via a dialogic approach (dialogic talk). A most intriguing question is how dialogic talk can be construed positively in a conservative society where criticality, the teacher–learner interpersonal relationships and the typical learning particularities of students are vastly different from that of a more democratic society. This paper reports on a teacher talk (TT) study in the Saudi Arabian context, analysing the management of talk by teachers and looking at the emerging potential for how the talk could be improved in this context. This study uses the lens of the Vygotskyan sociocultural theory (VST) to understand the quality of talk and unravel the complexity of typical classroom talk in this particular learning context.

Keywords: Intersubjectivity, teacher talk, dialogic talk, sociocultural theory, criticality, conservative society

Introduction

In this era, teaching the English language seems to have shifted from trying to understand the complexity of a teaching context to rather being a discussion of generic teaching methodologies. There is no doubt that communicative language teaching is believed to have burgeoned in the past, where its massive application was promoted in any teaching context. It is unfortunate that communicative language teaching in Saudi classrooms does not result in similar outcomes as other teaching contexts, such as in Western contexts, where there are inexplicable sociocultural aspects influencing learning and outcomes for individual language development. Thus, a comprehensive discussion on the teacher's and learner's identity, attitude, perception and belief, learning strategies and other professional issues have been considered in recent research studies, indicating the sociocultural incursion into linguistics and language teaching (Johnson, 2006).

Better understanding the teaching context and praxis have been noted as a possible way to resolve the dilemma in English language teaching, which would result in in-depth concerns on the constructive professional identity of local teachers, regular and developed teacher training that is oriented toward practical teaching and, more importantly, minor components of teaching and learning activities such as classroom instruction and discourse (Kumaravadivelu, 1994). This direction has moved some topics to be associated with classroom discourse including, but not limited to, TT, communication strategies and scaffolding, all of which are strongly believed to have a great potency to improve the quality of learning (Anton, 1999; Cullen, 1998). In particular, classroom talk (teacher and learner talk) has stimulated research studies due in part to the multiple approaches and contexts taken toward this subject. One of the approaches is constructed through the Vygotskyan sociocultural theory, with scaffolding (Lantolf, 2006; Oguro, 2013), F-Move as teacher talk (Cullen, 2002), cultural aspects underlying a teaching context (Alexander, 2001) and a dialogic approach (Mercer, 2003; Wertsch, 2000). With these concepts in mind, the current study contributes to this sphere by looking at the sociocultural aspect in classrooms in Saudi context.

Objectives

The present paper investigates the typical nature of classroom talk (teacher and learner talk) in the context of English as a foreign language (EFL) teaching in Saudi Arabia. Because the classroom discourse is inextricably bound with the sociocultural spectrums of the users, the current study explored the emerging sociocultural relations shaping the talk in classroom teaching.

The importance of this study is to improve the quality of typical nature of classroom talk in this conservative teaching context. This effort is realistic by understanding how criticality, teacher-learner interpersonal relationship and learning particularities of student can be enhanced through intersubjectivity in the form of dialogic teaching.

The present study explicates the ways how students' learning and cognition can be undertaken simultaneously, and this process then leads to (attitudinal) development. In practice, dialogic teaching can promote more quality classroom interaction, namely strengthened teachers' interpersonal relationship in the form of intercultural and cultural awareness underlies teacher assistance/scaffolding, communication breakdown and errors can be shifted to promote learning, questioning and reasoning trigger higher cognitive abilities, and these gradually form newly-structured learning styles of students. Beyond the classroom culture, this study explores how such learning and cognition intervention can be integrated with other sociocultural aspects such as the ways how intersubjectivity must be appreciated in the family or even other students' sociocultural milieus. It has to be enacted positively and such ideal modification may accelerate attitudinal developments in which learning English is accompanied by inculcating values of open-mindedness and democracy.

Research Question

Considering all the above, the current study strived to answer the following: 1) What sociocultural relations can potentially shape the nature of TT in the classroom teaching context? 2) How can these sociocultural relations be understood to improve the quality of TT?

Theory

Language and culture are two inseparable components that construct human interaction. They do not only constitute symbols and letters, but also underlie heuristic values, which indicate the development of human cognition in a particular society (Vygotsky, 1978). Through the systemic functional linguistics theory, language is invariably placed side by side with culture because of the contextual and situational varieties that may impact language use in the way a language component can be appropriated or not (Halliday, 1978; Kramsch, 1998). In addition, the development of language itself has been interrelated with the advancement of human cognition, and there exists a cultural-historic approach that is able to show a trajectory of language development within a specific society (Cole & Engeström, 1993; Cross, 2010; Van Lier, 2006). This sociocultural perspective explains the depth of language development that

has enabled scientific studies, allowing them to capture minor aspects in a language teaching context.

TT, as a nexus of learning and development, has always been central for the quality of learning in English classroom discourse; teacher–learner interactions are deemed one of the biggest potential determinants in ensuring learning takes place in classroom teaching (Scott, 1998; Sinclair & Coulthard, 1975; Thornbury, 1996). Formerly, studies have employed the perspectives of teaching and learning theories, where the emphasis was on the way an instruction was modified and managed for stimulating interaction – (direct/indirect) corrective feedback, recast and meaning negotiation (Mackey & Philp, 1998; Mackey & Polio, 2009; Pica, 1994, 1996). The foci have subsequently focused on components of classroom interactions, such as teachers' questionings, turn-takings, awareness and perceptions toward the talk that may have affected the expected nature of ideal learning (Chin, 2006; Hernández Méndez, Cruz, & del Rosario, 2012; Walsh, 2002).

However, the aspects of sociocultural relations that potentially impact the quality of TT have yet to be covered because the paradigm of research has shifted toward analysing classroom interactions more comprehensively, mostly because the ways to improve the quality of classroom talk do not meet the demand for high quality in the classroom teaching. The outcomes exclusively encompass the portion and obstruction and construction of classroom talk (Scott, 1998; Walsh, 2002). In the meantime, the incursion of the sociocultural theory has been developed to the point that it has gradually caught the attention of scholars, being recognised as a cultural product (Alexander, 2008). This teacher–learner talk needs to be purposively designed to achieve the ideal situation where teachers' and learners' understandings of high-quality talk is met, educational activities that enhance both learning and development are promoted, and cultural intervention in regulating talk is conducted (Mercer & Howe, 2012; Mercer & Littleton, 2007). All these aspects lead to further analyse talk in the view of dialogic teaching.

Methodology

The current study is qualitative in nature and uses a constructivist-subjectivist paradigm in the form of a case study. This means that all the escalating phenomena are dialectically analysed and validated using other data methods (Dezin & Lincoln, 2013). The data were collected using two research methods: classroom observation and teacher interview. Both methods used audio recording to record the nature of TT. The recordings were used to capture teachers' understanding about sociocultural elements and how to manage talk respectably in a classroom teaching.

The current research offers a qualitative discussion of the modes of EFL classrooms in the Saudi context, which is in line with a discourse analysis of TT. The researcher analysed the follow-up moves in 27 EFL classes using Cullen's (2002) F-Move model, such as F-Moves for reformulation, elaboration, comment, repetition and evaluation. The discourse and evaluative teaching strategies were examined to determine the influence of TT in the development of dialogue skills in EFL classrooms in Saudi Arabia. The justification for applying the F-move model to the Saudi EFL context was to establish the degree of teacher involvement and analyse how it contributes or discourages the flow of classroom interactions. The researcher relied on the interpretation of data collected in the audio-recordings and observations of the 27 EFL classes and separate semi-structured interviews with 18 EFL teachers.

A discourse analysis approach was used in the analysis on the recorded transcriptions of the TT data and student responses. The qualitative approach included an analysis of the different types of F-moves, such as discourse questions, evaluative questions, feedback, declarative statements and other TT aspects. To describe and explain the TT, which constitutes form, purpose and impact, an appropriate discourse analysis model was adopted. The analysis strategy (thematic analysis) concerned descriptive data that aided in describing the nature of a phenomenon, as well as its relation to or influence of another phenomenon. The discourse analysis also was used as a methodological approach because the principal focus of the current research lies in a wider web of contextual influences of TT on the development of students' dialogic skills (Fisher, 2011).

Literature Review

The focus of the current study is a minor component of classroom talk that emphasises TT; it has a great amount of potential to improve the quality of learning for students. Hence, TT must be goal oriented, designed and directed to its utmost optimisation so that it can accelerate learning. Then, learning can be appropriated by individuals, who then proceed to use it for language and cognitive development (Hawkins, 2004). In this regard, the connection between talk and learning is mediated by regulation – a transitioning process of learning from a state of adult or expert assistance to self-capability or independence (Thornbury, 1996). The assistance here is interpreted as belonging to the role of a teacher in scaffolding or structuring his or her instruction (Donato, 1994; Hammond & Gibbons, 2005). In classroom teaching, scaffolding is actualised in TT. In other words, talk can essentially function as a product of learning opportunities and the process of learning.

Out of the many aspects of classroom talk, the current study selectively chooses the move of feedback in talk because the position of feedback is to determine to what

extent the talk can stimulate both interlanguage development and cognitive development (Steiner & Mahn, 1996). This means that classroom interactions do not only facilitate declarative and practical knowledge that lead to a certain level of proficiency, but also higher order thinking in expressing criticality that is embedded in language expression through the use of the target language (Mercer & Littleton, 2007; Negueruela, 2008).

Several ground-breaking studies related to F-Moves (the moves of feedback) as questionings (referential or non-referential) and correction were implemented by Cullen (2002). With the sociocultural theory, the feedback was subsequently deemed a part of scaffolding (Walqui, 2006). Because the sociocultural perspective understands these components as being integral parts of pedagogy and culture, the analysis of F-Moves was coterminous with cultural and situational of teaching contexts (Alexander, 2008; Mercer, 2003), including the awareness of teachers toward students' learning strategies and contexts, along with complexities beyond the classroom (Kumaravadivelu, 1994). Traversing classroom contexts, talk was subsequently discussed to find the core causes of why limited practices kept existing in the repertoire of teacher and learner interactions (Teo, 2016).

A few studies in the Saudi context have been undertaken, yet little interest is given here to the incorporation of influential sociocultural aspects into a holistic view of the nature of TT in classroom discourse. In analysing their effectiveness toward student learning opportunities, corrective feedback and elicitation techniques have gained more concern over other components of TT (Alqahtani & Al-enzi, 2011; Alsubaie, 2015; Faqeih, 2012; Gitsaki & Althobaiti, 2011). In addition to this, student attitudes and performance, including willingness to communicate in response to TT, have been studied, but the discussion was restricted to the traits of individual learners (Al-Otaibi, 2004; Mahdi, 2014; Turjoman, 2016).

Findings

Critical Feedback and Questioning in Talk

In the transcription of the audio-recordings of the observations, the nature of TT was analysed by emerging F-Moves and typical questionings or corrections. The following extracts of teacher–learner interactions indicate these analyses. Because of space limitations, only representatives of these recordings are used:

Extract 1:		Lines
T. Talaat	*: Ok, people used to…. ha? ((waited for response))*	*23*
S. Ahmed	*: People used to ride a camel.*	*24*
T. Talaat	*: People used to ride a camel **in the...?** ((elicited response))*	*25*

S. Ahmed	*: In the past ((directly responded to the teacher)).*	*26*
T. Talaat	*: **Now?***	*27*
S. Ahmed	*: Now they use car.*	*28*
T. Talaat	*: Very good, <u>now they use car</u>. Live, **people in the past?***	
	Khalid?	*29*
S. Khalid	*: People used to live in the dessert.*	*30*
T. Talaat	*: Very good, <u>people used to live in the dessert.</u> **Where?***	*31*
All students	*: Tent*	*32*
T. Talaat	*: In the tent.*	*33*

It is evident that the nature of the feedback move in the above extract was predominated by F-Move repetitions (See the underlined sections in lines 25, 29 and 31). In addition, the questionings were in the form of F-Move elaborations, with referential questioning or a question referring to the prescribed text or topic being talked about (See bold lines 25, 27, 29 and 31).

Extract 2:		Lines
T. Morsi	*: My family, ok what is the first thing that comes*	*125*
to your mind	*when we say the word "my family", ha?*	
S. Yaseen	*: Mother*	*126*
T. Morsi	*: Good, <u>mother</u>. **What else?***	*127*
S. Abdullah	*: Brother and sister*	*128*
T. Morsi	*: <u>Brother and sister</u>, ha. **What else?***	*129*
S. Thamer	*: Grandfather.*	*130*
T. Morsi	*: <u>A grandfather</u>, yes. Who can write grandfather?*	*131*

It is clear that the feedback moves in TT were repetitions (underlined) and the interactions were maintained by the F-Move elaboration with referential strategies (bold). At the end of interaction, the teacher did not continue to expose more deep knowledge and information through the flow of conversation and dismissed this opportunity.

It seems that this portion of the talk was quite balanced, yet the role of the feedback move was not optimised to stimulate higher order thinking, even though the interaction had been elaborated on. This trend triggers a quandary because most TT is shaped accordingly, enticing more curiosity regarding this phenomenon. The next subsection serves to present another finding, namely teacher–learner interpersonal relationships.

Teacher and Learner Interpersonal Relationships

Teacher and learner interpersonal relationships can be interpreted in how the teachers have strengthened awareness toward students' sociocultural learning contexts and how these contexts can positively contribute to English language learning. In other words, the more teachers acknowledge the sociocultural learning context of learners, the more they can connect the lesson with the students' cultural backgrounds. Teachers are required to create this ideal relationship, which demands a heightened level of awareness in modifying the classroom culture. This can only be constructed by a positive teacher–learner interpersonal relationship. The following extracts from teacher interviews show this phenomenon.

Extract 3:

Mr. Omran stated the following in his interview:

As you know, here in our province, we usually <u>do not have appropriate circumstances to practice the language</u>, except in some hospitals with nurses or doctors. In this province, <u>we do not have any possibilities to have real communication with members of other societies</u>, but there are other ways that might help. For example, Twitter or any modern social-media communication applications. I usually talk to students about new technology and how they can benefit from using it.

It is palpable from this claim that the teacher has a comprehensive understanding of the learning context of students and proposes solutions for tackling this issue.

Extract 4:

Mr. Emad mentioned the following in his statement:

I think the teacher' authority plays a key role here as <u>it limits learning opportunities inside the classroom</u>. If he is flexible with students' (errors), their talks increase, and the teacher authority will decrease accordingly. On the other hand, if <u>he imposes the authority</u>, I think <u>the student talk will decrease</u>.

It is evident that the teacher's understanding of the learner's sociocultural background impacts the learning atmosphere on the micro level. In this case, when the teacher overvalues the mistakes in the students' language production, there will be less learning because the students will be less active. This finding accentuates the teachers' understanding about the students' sociocultural background and how it is stuck on surface level.

Student Learning Particularities

Learning particularities are the uniqueness of an individual learning style, which may vary from one student to another. Given that the current study stresses the nexus between pedagogy and culture, the present study was keen on exploring the typical learning particularities of students in a Saudi context, especially in responding TT or managing their own talk. This is illustrated by the following extracts:

Extract 5:   Lines
T. Farhan   : Yes, Student Abdulaziz?   *233*
  S. Abdulaziz   : Hair cut   *231*
  T. Farhan   : I had…I had…   *232*
  S. Abdulaziz   : My hair cut   *233*
  *T. Farhan   : Yes, I had…**I had what?***   *234*
  S. Abdulaziz   : Hair cut.   *235*
  S. Nawaf   : I had …my hair   *236*
  *T. Farhan   : **Yes?***   *237*
  S. Abdulaziz   : I had my hair   *238*
  S. Nawaf   : I had my hair cut last week   *239*
  T. Farhan   : Yes, cut.   *240*

It is clear from the above extract that the interaction was predominated by metalinguistic knowledge rather than meaning making of the target language (See lines 235, 236, 238 and 239). As an implication, the direction was to shape the classroom talk, not producing authentic classroom interactions.

Extract 6:   Lines
 T. Adel   : After leaving secondary school. After finishing studying   *15*
at this school? What are you going to do? Not today, but at the end of
the year. What are you going to do?
  S. Rashed   : University   *16*
  T. Adel   : You will join to university   *17*
  S. Rashed   : Yeah   *18*
  T. Adel   : Ok. What is the difference between life in secondary school *19*
    and university? Are they the same?
  Ss (all)   : No.   *20*
  T. Adel   : In your opinion, can you tell me (pointing to Student Rashed)
21
    Can you show that to me? What is the difference between

university life and social life?
       S. Rashed   : <u>*Teacher in school, doctor in university*</u>.   *22*

From the preceding extract, the students tended to use chunky language expressions and, frequently, incomplete sentences. In fact, the teachers tried on this occasion to (F-Move) reformulate the question to ease the student so that the expected expression could be more complex. This occurs in many occasions in the data of classroom talk.

In conclusion, the present paper has shown that there is a strong cause and effect relationship between lacking a critical sense of the feedback moves in TT, mediocre teacher understanding of the sociocultural background, and less constructive student learning, particularly in classroom talk. This relationship explains the minor quality of classroom interactions in the provision of learning opportunities for students. Classroom talk functioned partially by compromising its originality without a dialogic approach that might have degraded the value of the classroom interaction. Teachers were not quite aware of the potential of the talk, and consequently, classroom culture was not realised. The discussion of this argument is presented in the following sections.

Discussion

The current study found that there is a lack of understanding about the connection between culture, pedagogy, and teachers' interactional and cultural awareness in shaping classroom culture in classroom talk. This lack of understanding then leads to the absence of a dialogic approach.

In the globe, the discussion of intersubjectivity in classroom discourse was confined with situated practice and language classroom (Julé, 2004; Mori & Hayashi, 2006). Alexander (2008) and Teo (2016) claimed that the intervention must involve cultural modification. Similarly, there seems to be a deadlock of scientific development towards the topic in a conservative society, which quality classroom talk has invariably linked to the students' reluctance and lack of teacher professionalism (Hamouda, 2012; Kayi-Aydar, 2013). The dearth of criticality studies has been admitted in Saudi context (Alnofaie, 2013) and this study successfully unravels this complexity.

A close connection between culture and pedagogy is central at the macro level, which was neglected in the present study; this can be signified by less intense critical thinking when managing classroom talk. It was recognised that culture and pedagogy were disconnected in the way classroom teaching should have been interpreted as activities of human development. The most neglected part was intersubjectivity in the form of thoughtful interactions that could underpin talk that would trigger the restructuring of knowledge upon students. Once cultural aspects were disregarded, the

classroom talk did not function optimally in amplifying critical discussions. In fact, criticality can be promoted as long as teachers have augmented knowledge of students' sociocultural backgrounds, even if the teachers are only using a simple expression of language. The essence of criticality was not the content of information but deeply on the performance of dialogic approach.

The multiplier effect of this disconnection was teachers' lacking interactional awareness and not knowing the culture context. Interactional awareness is the incapability of teachers to maximise the significance of the talk. This can be multi-layered, starting from practical skills such as an elicitation of students' responses to conceptual teacher beliefs such as commitment to provide responsive, graduate and dialogic assistance when students face difficulties. At a deeper level, this awareness creates a positive interpersonal relationship where teachers may compromise insignificant errors and appreciate more learning opportunities. Teachers also acknowledge the challenges of learners not only in the classroom context, but also outside school, such as at home and with the students' parents. This interactional awareness gradually solidifies interpersonal communication and creates confidence within the learners, promoting the students' strategic learning.

Last but not least, all these ended up in the dominance of grammatical knowledge in the teachers' teaching process with less (accomplished) interaction. The students had negative implications when the orientation of learning was to understand a language system as content knowledge at the expense of language proficiency as operational knowledge. This situation truly corrupted ideal language learning and technical intervention and is likely the core problem in this teaching context.

Limitations

The current study only covered 27 EFL classes and conducted interviews on 18 teachers. This study was undertaken considering the primacy of the experiential and dialectical construction of specific local knowledge. The cumulative knowledge originating from both teachers and learners then interacts with the sociocultural relations that may vary across various Saudi contexts.

Recommendations

It is clear that the teachers in the current study were not familiar with dialogic teaching, and their professional identity may have been threatened by the absence of this skill. Because the current study adopted the sociocultural theory, this finding should be used to help with the implementation of teacher training or other professional development activities that can change the teachers' perspectives about language

teaching and how it is a cultural and pedagogical process. Capacity building should also focus on technical issues in managing classroom talk effectively.

Conclusion

The current study successfully answered two research questions, arguing that criticality, interpersonal teacher–learner relationships and students' learning particularities are three sociocultural relations that impact the nature of classroom talk (teacher and learner talks) in the teaching context. Concurrently, this study showed that there is a lack of understanding about the relationship between culture, pedagogy and teachers' intercultural and cultural awareness. This led to only a partial optimisation of classroom interactions because of the absence of a dialogic approach. It was found that the interactions occurred and were maintained, yet learning opportunities were minimum. A major reformation of educational interventions must be carried out to resolve this issue, and a larger, more holistic project in teaching is suggested to confirm these educational phenomena.

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