

The Power of Teaching Discourse: A Case Study of the Students at West Virginia State University

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Abstract

Language, which reflects a civilization, is unique for human beings. Teaching discourse also plays an important role in the classroom. This paper intends to answer this research question through analysis of a questionnaire survey and three video clips: How does English function in university classes? With the assistance of Professor Barbara Ladner for her questionnaire distribution at West Virginia State University, the questionnaire was designed to survey the students at West Virginia State University. The result shows that English used in a class does the same function as a kind of teaching discourse. Teachers are suggested to employ proper strategies in vocabulary and expression to make the class effective and efficient. Additionally, three teaching video clips were explored for the investigation of teaching discourse, which shows that a well-structured teaching discourse can help a teacher conduct a successful class.

Keywords: teaching discourse, speech analysis, the power of language

1. Introduction

Teaching Discourse, Teaching Language, or Teacher Talk refers to the language the teachers employ when they instruct certain contents on a certain occasion at a certain time (Håkansson, 1986). Teaching discourse is not chatting or random talking but a kind of educational utterance with a specific aim that can inspire and enlighten students. Teacher discourse can be divided into different categories. For example, types of teacher discourse can include the teaching of knowledge, responses to students' questions, organization of teaching, and classroom management (Cullen, 2002). Meanwhile, according to Liu (2006), the types of teacher discourse include class discourse, instructing discourse, interactive discourse, and responsive discourse. Interactive discourse (language use) is the talking, answering, and discussing between teachers and students; responsive discourse is the evaluating action when teachers instruct students to do exercises. English as a teaching discourse in English classes in non-English countries are characterized by double functions, acceptance, periodicity, and repetition (Liu, 2006). These features help English serve the teaching contents and teaching objectives (Liu, 2006). Teaching's nature, contents, objects, and environment determine the characters of English in that context. As a kind of language, Teaching English (Teacher Talk in English) is different from other regular languages in terms of its functions.

Teaching Discourse (teacher's talk) is a special language used by teachers to communicate and interact with learners in the classroom (Tsui, 2008). In general, teacher discourse is related to the classroom environment, including repetition, paraphrasing for clarity, and interactions with learners such as questioning, answering, feedback, and evaluation. Foreign language teachers' classroom discourse research began in the 1950s (Tsui, 2008). Then several representative researchers such as Michael H. Long (1983), and Nunan (1991) analyzed teachers' classroom discourse from various perspectives and used various research methods, and achieved many results. For example, Long (1983) proposed for the first time the role of teachers' discourse in promoting second language acquisition. Nunan (1991) discovered that teacher discourse plays a crucial role in classroom organization and learners' language acquisition and even has a decisive role in the success or failure of classroom teaching. Furthermore, Demo (2001) conducted discourse analysis for language teachers; Walsh (2006) investigated classroom discourse and Walsh (2013) studied classroom discourse and teacher development. In China, English is a foreign language rather than a second language. Classrooms are the main source of English language learning in most places and even the only source in some places in China. Teachers' discourse is the main target language input of language

learners. Because of this, many scholars and researchers in China have done much research on the discourse of English classroom teachers.

The ability of college teachers can be divided into two parts, teachers' teaching ability and their language competence (Malamah–Thomas, 1987). Teachers' teaching ability means teachers' competence in their teaching career, which includes abilities in arranging classes, preparing classes, managing classes, and evaluating the students. This kind of ability influences the efficiency of learners' acquisition in the second language or foreign language class. Language class aims at improving learners' language competence. This ability of teachers can be enhanced with language ability. Teachers' competence can be expressed by language ability.

Most of the researches mentioned above addressed the situation of English as a teaching language in non-English-speaking countries. In that regard, certain questions intrigue us, for example: How is English processed if the class happens in English classes at a university in America, an English-speaking country? What kind of teacher ability do the students expect? What kind of language ability do students anticipate from teachers in class?

2. Research Aims

To discover the answers to the above questions, a questionnaire was made considering the following aspects:

1. Whether passionate (inspirational) language is more effective than “neutral” or objective language? This question is related to the “level” of vocabulary used by the teacher. This question asks: does “challenging” or slightly unfamiliar vocabulary help students learn?
2. Whether students learn better from the correction of “errors” or the praise of successful performance (or are both required?)
3. Which method is more effective, “lecturing” or eliciting important course content from students through questions and discussion?

Answers to the above questions will be listed in the later parts of this paper.

3. Survey Participants

For this research, 160 university students were chosen arbitrarily at West Virginia State University (WVSU) in America on January 1, 2017. WVSU is a public and historically black university founded in 1891 in Institute, West Virginia. This research concerns 24 majors (English, criminal justice, computer science, psychology, economics, sports study, business advertisement, business accounting, biology, sociology, business finance, math, education, chemistry, management, engineering, act education, communication, international relation, social work, etc.) of students including undergraduates and postgraduates at WVSU. A questionnaire was devised for them, including nine questions in total about successful teaching discourse. These questions include eight multiple-choice questions, and one open-ended question (see Appendix 1).

4. Data Analysis

Table1: Results of Questions 1-8 for the questionnaire

Questions	a		b		c		Total
	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage	
Q1 Importance	104	65.00%	56	35.00%	0	0.00%	160
Q2 Satisfaction	26	16.46%	44	27.85%	88	55.70%	158
Q3 New Vocabulary	131	81.88%	24	15.00%	5	3.13%	160
Q4 Specific Words	137	85.63%	8	5.00%	15	9.38%	160
Q5 Passion	153	95.63%	7	4.38%	0	0.00%	160
Q6 Correction	131	81.88%	21	13.13%	8	5.00%	160
Q7 Encouragement	118	74.21%	15	9.43%	26	16.35%	159
Q8 Methodology	38	24%	14	9%	108	68%	160

Q9. *How does the language teachers use help and/or hinder your learning?*

The answers by students to this question indicate that the teaching language of teachers is expected to be of enough strengths, which include strengths in quality, strategy, pronunciation, intonation, and vocabulary. The keywords in students' answers are as follows:

Table 2: Results of Question 9

Aspects of language strengths		Description
Strong language	Quality	Passionate Open-minded
	Strategy	Repetition Communicative Constructive criticism Topic
	Pronunciation and intonation	Proper rhythm Not Too Fast
	Vocabulary	General A familiar, detailed, moderate amount of new Specific Low complex, clearly defined, in-depth, predictable used

5. Findings

5.1 The importance of teaching language in a university class

Table 1 and Table 2 indicate that a majority of the participants of this research emphasized the importance of teaching discourse in class, but they were not so satisfied with teachers' ability to use language appropriately in class. Therefore, teachers have more room to improve themselves to meet students' demands in their language ability. This result shows teachers' language ability should meet students' high demands. Hence teachers should have a good mastery of the course they teach so that they can instruct professionally.

5.2 The importance of teachers' strong discourse in teaching

From the results of Q3 and Q4, it can be concluded that using passionate or inspirational language may be more effective than using neutral or objective language. Most participants hope and welcome more challenges to deepen their understanding of the learning material. For example, they hope teachers employ more specific words to help them understand the terms better. From the result of Q6 and Q7, we can conclude that students may learn better from the correction of errors or praise of successful performance. Meanwhile, they hope teachers could correct their errors through discourse. They need to get more improvement with teachers' help. Most teachers offer help with correctness, but the help is not adequate.

The results of Q8 show that most students believed that they could learn better through a mix of lectures and discussions. A minority of students prefer lectures or discussions. It is expected that teachers should be good at employing adequate methods to explain the learning material. Teachers are expected to do more interaction and activities with students. Therefore, they could correct their mistakes while listening and watching the students, giving them adequate attention. Teachers should be good at not only lecturing in class but also controlling the class in discussion. Lectures and discussions are expected to utilize different ways to present the course and train the students, requiring teachers to have good knowledge of the course and students. The desired lecture has one kind of interaction between students and teachers, which focuses on presenting and answering students' questions.

The results of Q9 indicate that students hoped their teachers could have a strong discourse with good communication skills, and constructive criticism, which could help them learn. The strong discourse here means very convincing and effective words in students' expectations. Sometimes if teachers use terms that students are not familiar with firstly or they speak too fast, then that kind of discourse can hinder students' learning.

6. Discussion

Halliday's theory of pragmatics considers language expression as an approach to realizing humankind's communication and interaction (Halliday 1994; Maybin 1994; Halliday & Matthiessen 2004). The theory identifies three types of functions (meanings) of a language: Ideational, Interpersonal, and Textual. Among the three meanings, the first two are closely related to teaching and the relationship between teachers and students. Furthermore, the first one is conceptual (ideational) meaning, which is expressed by the acquired experience or logic. The second one (interpersonal meaning) is the practical meaning, relating to the relationship between the two parties (speakers) carrying out the communication.

Discourse analysis studies the construction in terms of the beginning, transition, and making an ending (Greatbatch, 1988). This paper elaborates on the power of the three teachers' discourse from different aspects (e.g. creating context, semantics, and vocabulary), in order to investigate how teachers encourage the students greatly and how the teachers make the class effective.

To investigate the power of teaching discourse, we audited classes with some distinguished professors at WVSU. With the permission of Professor Ladner, Professor Hilou, and Professor P, three clips of video were recorded, lasting for more than

10 minutes in total. The videos were transcribed with the help of Josh Means, a good friend of ours at WVSU (see Appendix 1 for the transcription).

Consequently, we analyzed the three clips obtained. Based on Halliday's theory, the discourse in Clip 1 contains the ideational meaning of reflective thinking, which can be expressed by relating to the acquired experience. The interpersonal meaning contained in this clip is reflective writing. To make clear the interpersonal meaning for the students the teacher laid some foundation and provided guidance. At the beginning of the clip, the teacher employed an "if" clause to create an interactive context between the teacher herself and the students. Then the teacher made a comparison between a science class and the teacher's own class to capture students' attention and define the class topic. Finally, the teacher turned to the key point by illustrating the role of reflective thinking and its different levels. The teacher followed the interactive principle to devise discourse on students' feet. She employed the interactive strategy to make the lead-in successful.

Clip 2 demonstrates the ideational function (meaning). According to the speech, as a quote from Plato says that those who tell the stories rule society, whoever holds the power can control the information diffusion, and getting information can be realized through communication. This discourse illustrates that meaning for students through common examples. The interpersonal meaning in this discourse is that communication can enhance trade, which is exemplified by transactions between China and the U.S. To attract students' attention, Professor H began with an information topic, using an "and" sentence. Then the topic was explored with an election example to indicate the importance of information on Facebook, which creates a very understandable context to exchange ideas. Election and Facebook are both very familiar and well-known examples for most students, so the professor's discourse is quite interactive and convincing. This leads the discourse smoothly to the information topic, trade transaction, through the sentence "Advances in communication enhance trade..." And the example of selling books to someone in Turkey makes a good foundation for the following topic, the trade between the U.S. and China. The discourse guides students step by step, transitioning freely and easily from very common life experiences to a major topic. This follows the gradual strategy in discourse analysis.

The ideational meaning in Clip 3 is what science was like in the Middle Age. By stating the definition of science in the Middle Age, this discourse shows the interpersonal meaning, and the thought about the universal theory. First, the "look at..." phrase leads the students to focus on the topic, which helps to create a typical class environment. Like telling a story, the discourse begins with the history of science, directing students to different historical figures and events, for example, three famous astronomers and astronomy in the 16th and 17th centuries, the enlightenment revolution. Next, the discourse turns to the mathematics topic, introducing the key subject of science, Arabic numerals that students are familiar with. This part of discourse was employed very delicately and ingeniously to transit the former part to the key part. Then the discourse states the science concept and Newton's book on science. Nevertheless, Aristotle's theories play the leading role. As it comes back to the universe topic mentioned at the beginning, the topic-centered discourse strategy is used. In the end, the discourse goes into Copernicus's theory and development of thought about the universe. Gradually every topic connects with others very closely, though on the surface they seem separate.

7. Limitations

The reflection of teaching in this paper mainly focuses on the implementation of teaching activities and correcting errors, and the review of their interactions with students is relatively limited, especially teachers' discourse about evaluating their students' performance. It is discovered that teachers should strengthen their ability to reflect on their evaluation of student's classroom performance. By identifying which type of language use for evaluating students' performance that students are more likely to accept and which class evaluation language they dislike the most, teachers can use classroom evaluation language that is more suitable for students in the future, increase the interaction in the classroom between the teacher and students, and improve classroom efficiency.

In terms of the questionnaire survey and statistical analysis, this research on teacher talk style (in English) and teacher's classroom evaluation language have certain limitations. First, the case study was conducted through a small sample, which means that the overall number of college English teachers invited was not as sufficient as expected. Although it is representative to a certain extent, its results may not reflect the overall situation of the country. The review of the discourse of a limited number of teachers may not reflect the thoughts and opinions of all teachers having different teaching styles. Finally, due to the limitations of the author's ability, the questionnaire questions may not exactly match the research questions.

Furthermore, the correlation between teaching style and teachers' classroom evaluation language was not studied in depth. The study was of short duration, so if possible, a longer survey period can be used to obtain more reliable data. As for the teachers surveyed, the selection of male English teachers and female English teachers should be as balanced as possible. More importantly, further research should also invite more teachers as research subjects to make the results more representative. Besides, research tools should be better designed to improve their reliability and validity.

8. Conclusion

Teaching discourse is a crucial skill for a teacher to master in any class at any time. The teaching discourse in English plays a similar vital important role in class in English-speaking countries and non-English-speaking countries. Regardless of the major or course a teacher teach, a convincing and effective teaching discourse is an indispensable tool to be employed. The stronger the teacher's class discourse is, the more efficient the class quality can be. Additionally, a teaching discourse that is topic-centered and coherent in context is a strong one that can make a class effective.

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Appendix 1: The Questionnaire and Transcription of Three Video Clips

Questions 1-8 for the questionnaire

- Q1. Is applying good teaching discourse important to the success of a class?
A) Yes. B) Don't know C) No
- Q2. Are you satisfied with your major teacher's ability to use language appropriate to the class?
A) Satisfied B) Don't know C) Dissatisfied
- Q3. A teacher who uses the vocabulary of the course that is somewhat new to me
A) Challenges me to deepen my understanding of the material
B) Confuses me and makes it harder for me to learn new concepts
C) Makes the course content less interesting to me
- Q4. When the teacher uses specific vocabulary words from the lesson or course unit,
A) It helps me understand the terms better
B) It makes the key concepts less accessible
C) It makes it harder for me to keep up with the lecture or discussion
- Q5. A teacher who shows passion for a subject or opinion
A) Inspires me to form and express my position on course material
B) Makes me afraid to express a position that differs from the teacher's
C) Embarrasses me
- Q6. Teachers who mostly correct mistakes
A) Help me know what needs improvement
B) Make it hard for me to know what the correct answer or method is

- C) Discourage me in my studies
Q7. Teachers who mostly encourage what is good or correct in my work
A) Help me to build on successes
B) Make it hard for me to know what, if anything, needs to be corrected
C) Encourage me to keep trying
Q8. I learn best when the teacher
A) Explain course material through lectures
B) Gets the students to express course concepts through discussion
C) Uses a mix of lectures and discussion
Q9. How does the language teachers use help and/or hinder your learning?

Transcription of Teaching Video Clips

Clip 1

... If you are a social sciences major, you may be asked to do a reflection paper, to show how you feel, so that you don't project that onto those that you are helping. In a science course, you may be asked how you feel about your research, and it will be less subjective, and more reflective of your process. In this class, we will focus on personal reflection. Any kind of reflective thinking is a personal or informed response to experienced events. It is the processing stage. Even in science, you are having to think of your role as an investigator in the process. You revisit some experiences or results. Then you look at your assumptions or added values. At the highest level, which you may not get to in this paper, is to justify actions, find a deeper meaning, or evaluate how you could do better next time. Here in this paper, we want you to examine your assumptions, rather than just letting the event sit on its own. Reflective writing in this class is thinking to explore what you've learned and what the experience meant. It's a path to self-knowledge. It helps you to reinforce your writing skills. Some things that it is not is that it is not just telling the story or conveying what happened. It has to be deeper, to your reflection on it. It is not a straightforward comment on a simple problem you solved. The basic level of reflection is the description or document of an event. The next level is doing an analysis or context to think about the implications and generalize the various stages of the events or cause-and-effect relationships. The next level is looking at its relation to other things such as your expectations. That level can get you to understand what could have gone differently. This leads you to identify alternatives. You can discuss your perceptions and observations, questions that you had, problems where you concluded, or alternative interpretations. For example, a soldier told his superior officer that he would not salute him in training because he might accidentally salute him when in the warzone, and therefore the enemy could identify who is the superior officer and kill him, and then which would jeopardize the whole battalion. For the superior officer, it was a display of disrespect but for the soldier, it was a safety protocol. This demonstrates that when we reflect we can see different perspectives. — Professor Ladner

Clip 2

... And information went one way. Those who have power were able to diffuse information. Right now you can diffuse your information. That is one of the most important occurrences in human history. There was an election, in Gambia, and even though the candidate lost, he said he will stay in power. People who have access to Facebook were able to challenge this candidate. The information takes power from the most powerful. In 3 days, they ran him from power, and he left the country. Advances in communication enhance trade, banking, and international services in general. Trade transactions can be completed at a lightning speed, and money exchanged in real-time. You could sell your books to someone in Turkey and have the money in your account in minutes. Theoretically, there are two countries. One country is technology based and the other is manufacturing-based (cars, etc.). The U.S. is a technologically advanced country. The U.S. has technologically intensive products, which require knowledge. On the other hand, China is labor-intensive. The product is clothing, tools, and many other things. The U.S. can produce more efficiently with more technology, while China can produce more efficiently with manufacturing. There will be certain points of production where the U.S. or China would not be able to produce efficiently. However, suppose these countries engage in trade. Each country has a specialization, which means each country focuses on goods and services that they are good at (the U.S. is technological-based output, and China manufacturing-based goods). These countries can work together and keep a certain amount of production and export what is not necessary. — Professor Hailou

Clip 3

... Look at the three major astronomers in the 16th and 17th centuries. Also, the impact of a revolution. This is known as the enlightenment period, which is very important. Copernicus, Galileo, and Isaac Newton are astronomers. This will show us how the people in the Middle Ages thought about the universe. Some important concepts were in mathematics, such as the concept of zero and Arabic numerals. The Europeans learned from the Arabs, and that is why they called them Arabic

numerals, even though they come from India. Science was called natural philosophy. Science, the word, was popularized in the 19th century. Science was different than technology, and now we see technology as science. Newton 1687 published a very important book called *Mathematical Principles of Natural Philosophy* (Science). In those days, medieval science accepted Aristotle's theories of the universe, and they were regarded as true. The implication was that everything was created and that there were five basic elements. Everything was made of heavenly substance. So everyone believed that this was truthful. Later the scientific revolution gave theories that this was incorrect. Theories of evolution, Copernicus's theory that the sun was the center of the universe, and more. By 1500 many Europeans knew that the Earth was round knowledgeable people know the Earth was round. That is why Columbus sailed westward. That was in 1492. But then, they did not know that the Earth orbited the Sun. — Professor P

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