A Study of the Classroom Language of English Teachers

DEVIKAMANI MENON
University of Malaya

Background

The main problem facing teacher educators of pre-service TESL courses is that despite being on the receiving end of a great deal of knowledge on teaching methodology, many teachers are still ineffective in the classroom due to their inability to cope with the linguistic demands required to effectively carry out communicative activities in the classroom.

Importance of Teacher Language

A teacher's classroom language is crucial in stimulating and regulating the learning activities of pupils. However, there has been little emphasis in teacher education programmes on preparing teachers to use it effectively for teaching-learning activities and for fostering better inter-personal relations (Sjostrom, 1984). This may be partly because there is a need for research focusing mainly on the ESL teacher's use of various categories of language.

Aim of the Study

In order to meet the need for such research, this writer set out to study some samples of teacher language, using three sets of criteria:

- the writer's categories of metalanguage;
- Stubbs' metacommunicative functions (1976) and
- Bowers' categories of verbal behaviour in the language classroom (198b).

The main aim of this study was to compare both the quantity and quality of the classroom language used by two groups of teachers attending TESL courses - in-service teachers and pre-service teachers. This was to determine whether experience was a relevant variable influencing verbal behaviour among language teachers.

Collection of Data

In order to collect data the writer audio-taped the eight subjects of this study while they were involved in classroom teaching during the course of their teaching practice. Before each audio-taping session began, a small wireless microphone was attached to the subject in order to obtain a clear recording of teacher language, and the actual recording was done by an experienced technician.

Analysis of Data

A total of twenty-four lessons were taped and transcribed over a period of ten months. The corpus of data was then classified into 'moves' using three sets of categories namely the writer's categories as well as those of Stubbs and Bowers. Stubbs' and Bowers' systems of classification will be described in sections 7 and 8 later in this article.

The Writer's Categories

The term 'metalanguage' refers to 'language about language'. In this paper the term will be used to refer to seven categories of language, which this writer has created, which was used together with other categories to analyse the classroom language used by language teachers. The writer's categories are as follows:

- clarifying;
- exemplifying;

- prompting;
- checking progress;
- reminding;
- reprimanding and
- giving permission.

These categories were created when analysing teacher language during language activities which usually take place during the consolidation stage of language lessons, when the teacher acts as a catalyst who urges pupils to participate actively. Variations of the Writer's Categories In the course of data analysis, it was found that there were three variations of 'clarifying' moves, two variations of 'exemplifying' moves and two variations of 'prompting' moves. Table 1 illustrates these three categories, their subcategories as well as sample moves.

Variations of Clarifying Moves

As seen from Table 1, the three variations of 'clarifying' moves are 'problem-stimulated' clarifying, 'enquiry-stimulated' clarifying and 'concept stimulated' clarifying.

Before 'problem-stimulated' clarifying takes place, the teacher usually sets a task, presents her instructions and later discovers that some pupils are encountering problems and are unable to carry out the task set. This may be due to unclear instructions or poor listening skills among the pupils. In order to alleviate the pupils' problems, the teacher then retraces the various steps or re-explains instructions required in order to accomplish the task. This variation of clarifying was observed in the transcriptions of the teachers teaching low proficiency classes. Before 'enquiry-stimulated' clarifying takes place, a pupil makes an enquiry in the midst of a language activity - in order to clarify his or her doubts. The teacher then clarifies the pupil's doubts by giving the pupil an option or a suggestion which may not have been mentioned during the initial instructions to the whole class. It was observed that this variation of clarifying is brief and

TABLE 1

WRITER'S MAIN CATEGORIES AND SUB-CATEGORIES

Main Category	Sub Category	Sample Moves
Clarifying	Problem-stimulated clarifying	Tr.: "OK, wait, OK. This is Jalan Barat. So you just get down from the bus, OK? You just get down – you understand? You just get down from the bus. So you walk to Jalan Barat."
	Enquiry-stimulated clarifying	Pp.: "Teacher, want to copy A or not?" Tr.: "If you feel that you need to copy A, then you copy, OK?"
	Concept-stimulated clarifying	Tr.: "A carriage? Now, why is it called a 'carriage'? Comes from the word 'carry' isn't it? It is used for carrying things. That's why it is called a 'carriage'."
Exemplifying	Visually-oriented exemplifying	Tr.: "OK, for example, let's say" (writes on the blackboard). OK, let's say the instructions say: `You are at

		the house', so you mark `X' at the house" (marks `X' on the blackboard).
	Verbally-oriented exemplifying	Tr.: "OK, so when you describe a building, you have to mention all the important features, OK? For example, what's the building like? Whether it's a tall building, new building, old building – beautiful building and so on, OK?"
Prompting	Action-oriented prompting	Tr.: "OK, let's have Group Three. Are you ready? OK, Group Three, with your first – play. Come on, you have to do it at some time or other. Alright, Group Three, quickly."
	Cue-oriented prompting	"Ask them! Ask them – Is it...?' Er, OK, what, what is it? Is it an aeroplane? Ask them, ask them – Is it...?'"

functional when compared to 'problem-stimulated' clarifying. This is because 'enquiry-stimulated' clarifying involves an individual pupil pin-pointing a particular problem. As such, the teacher knows exactly what to say, unlike the case of 'problem-stimulated' clarifying, whereby the teacher seems to be mentally groping to cover all the possible areas of doubt.

When using 'concept-stimulated' clarifying, the teacher clarifies relatively difficult concepts by comparing them with related ones, such as explaining a derivative by tracing the root word. Unlike 'problem- stimulated' clarifying, this variation is not stimulated by the pupils' inability to carry out any task. Also, unlike 'enquiry-stimulated' clarifying, it is not stimulated by the pupils' direct enquiries. It is actually stimulated by the teacher's own assumption that a certain concept being mentioned may be too difficult for the pupils' understanding.

Variations of Exemplifying Moves

As observed in Table 1, the two variations of 'exemplifying' moves are 'visually-oriented' exemplifying and 'verbally-oriented' exemplifying.

Sometimes when a teacher sets a task for a low proficiency class, she may need to demonstrate the task by either referring to visual material, such as maps and diagrams, or by actually drawing on the blackboard. In such classes, verbal instructions may not be sufficient as pupils' listening proficiency may be too low.

However, the second variation of 'exemplifying' does not require the use of visual aids, unlike visually-oriented' exemplifying. Instead, the teacher uses concrete verbal examples in order to illustrate a more abstract concept. In the sample moves in Table 1, more than one verbal example has been given, perhaps in order to further aid the understanding of the pupils through repetition and reinforcement.

Variations of Prompting Moves

As observed from Table 1, the two variations of 'prompting' moves are 'action-oriented' prompting and 'cue-oriented' prompting.

'Action-oriented' prompting is used in order to 'incite to action' as defined by the Oxford English Dictionary. A teacher may use this to urge the members of a group to come forward and present a language activity such as mime, role play or language games.

On the other hand, 'cue-oriented' prompting is used for prompting low proficiency pupils to speak by either suggesting something to be said or by supplying the word that comes next, also referred to as a 'cue.

Both variations of 'prompting' moves are used by teachers in eliciting oral responses or activities from the pupils.

Stubbs' Categories

The second system of analysis is Stubbs' categories. The writer selected Stubbs' categories as they seem to represent many of the main functions of teacher language, especially during the set induction, presentation and development stages of English language lessons. During these stages, there are long stretches of uninterrupted discourse on the tapes, whereby the classroom discourse is mainly teacher-centred.

Stubbs' categories consist of the following:

- attracting or showing attention;
- controlling the amount of speech;
- checking or confirming understanding;
- summarizing;
- defining;
- editing;
- correcting and
- specifying topic.

Bowers' Categories

The third set of categories for analysing the data is Bowers' categories. These categories were directly derived from foreign language classroom data. Bowers was originally used for analysing every utterance in the language lesson, either by pupils or teachers. Here his categories have been selected for the sole analysis of teacher language as they are relevant for activity-based lessons. They are as shown in the following page:

- responding;
- sociating;
- organizing;
- directing;
- presenting;
- evaluating and
- eliciting.

Similarities and Differences In the Utilization of Teacher Language

In order to compare and contrast the relative importance of each category under each classification system, the researcher ranked the average percentages in order of importance for all the pre-service and in-service teachers as shown in Table 2.

Similarities between the Two Groups

Table 2 illustrates that the largest percentage in all three classification systems comprise the same categories for both the pre-service and in-service teachers. These are as follows:

Category	Pre-service	In-service
prompting	17%	16.3%
checking understanding	34%	28.7%
eliciting	30.6%	35.3%

The above observation seems to indicate that irrespective of experience, all teachers use more teacher language for asking questions than for doing anything else. Both 'checking understanding' and 'eliciting are categories of metalanguage that largely comprise questioning strategies.

Another similarity observed in Table 2 is in the ranking of categories under the writer s classification criteria. Though the actual percentages differ, the 7 categories have been ranked in the same order of importance for both the preservice as well as the in-service teachers. This may indicate that certain categories of metalanguage identified by the

TABLE 2

RANKING OF CATEGORIES IN ORDER OF IMPORTANCE USING THE WRITER'S STUBBS' AND BOWERS' CLASSIFICATION SYSTEMS

Pre-service Teachers			In-service Teachers		
Writer's	Stubbs'	Bowers'	Writer's	Stubbs'	Bowers'
1. Prompting 17%	1. Checking under-standing 34%	1. Eliciting 30.6%	1. Prompting 16.3%	1. Checking under-standing 28.7%	1. Eliciting 35.3%
2. Clarifying 5.8%	2. Editing 14.2%	2. Directing 21%	2. Clarifying 8.7%	2. Editing. 20%	2. Organi-zing 23.8%
3. Checking Progress 3.8%	3. Attracting Attention 5%	3.Presenting 19.8%	3. Checking Progress 6%	3. Attracting Attention 5.5%	3. Directing 15.2%
4. Exempli-fying 1.9%	4. Correc-ting 4.8%	4. Organi-zing 14.4%	4. Exempli-fying 6%	4. Control-ling 3.7%	4. Respon-ding 12.5%
5. Reminding 1%	5.Control-ling speech 4.5%	5. Respon-ding 7.9%	5. Reminding 0.4%	5. Speci-fying topic 2.9%	5. Presen-ting 6.9%
6. Repri-manding 0.8%	6. Speci-fying topic 3%	6.Evalua-ting 4.5%	6. Repri-manding 0%	6. Summari-zing 2.7%	6. Evalua-ting 3.7%
7. Giving permission 0.6%	7. Defining 2.1%	7. Sociating 1.8%	7. Giving permission 0%	7. Correc-ting 1.9%	7. Sociating 2.6%
	8. Summari-zing 1.6%			8. Defining 1.6%	

It is also significant that for both groups of teachers, 'reminding, 'reprimanding and 'giving permission were given relatively low priority, compared to 'prompting, 'clarifying and 'checking progress. This indicates that the latter are more essential for language teaching than the former. In fact, the former need not be used at all, as indicated by the fact that none of the in-service teachers have utilised 'reprimanding and 'giving permission moves. Hence, such moves may be considered optional in a language class, writer are essential for all teachers irrespective of experience. For example, the percentages for prompting and exemplifying are almost identical for both groups of teachers.

Differences between the Two Groups

There appears to be significant differences in the ranking of 'organizing, 'directing, 'presenting, 'correcting and 'summarizing.

Organizing

'Organizing ranks fourth for the pre-service teachers, but second for the in-service teachers. The difference in percentage is also significant: for the in-service teachers it is almost double (23.8%) that of the pre-service teachers (14.4%). This reflects the relatively high priority given to organizing moves by the in-service teachers. Perhaps the in-service teachers conduct more language activities that require organizing skills than the pre-service teachers do. It could also be due to the fact that the in-service teachers are more proficient than the pre-service teachers.

Directing and Presenting

On the other hand, the pre-service teachers seem to exhibit more 'directing and 'presenting moves compared to the in-service teachers. 'Directing ranks second and 'presenting ranks third for the pre-service teachers, but for the in-service teachers 'directing only ranks third while 'presenting ranks fifth. There were also significant differences in the percentages attributed to these two types of moves. For the pre-service teachers, the percentage of teacher language attributed to 'presenting is 19.8%, but for the in-service teachers it is only 6.9%. Similarly, the percentage for 'directing moves is 21% for the pre-service teachers but it is only 15.2% for the in-service teachers.

This seems to indicate that the pre-service teachers tend to use language that involves the direct presentation of the lesson content, and verbal control of pupil language or behaviour. A possible reason for this could be that the pre service teachers tend to have stereo-typed notions about how a teacher should teach. They tend to spend more time giving information rather than inducing their pupils to utilise the target language.

Correcting

Another difference was seen in the priority accorded to correcting moves by the two groups of teachers. Correcting ranks fourth for the pre-service teachers but only seventh for the in-service teachers. Moreover, pre-service teachers utilised 4.8% of teacher language for correcting while pre-service teachers only utilised 1.9% for this category. Perhaps this indicates that the pre-service teachers are more critical and evaluative of their pupils' language behaviour than the in-service teachers.

Perhaps the in-service teachers, being more experienced, are more selective in using 'correcting moves compared to the less experienced pre-service teachers who tend to correct all the errors made by their pupils.

Summarizing

'Summarizing' ranks sixth for the in-service teachers, but only eighth for the pre-service ones. This reflects the fact that experienced teachers give more priority for 'summarizing' moves than inexperienced teachers. Like 'organizing', 'summarizing' represents a category of metalanguage that pre-service teachers need to utilise more in order to better organise the lesson content.

Recommendations

The findings of this study seem to indicate that experience is a relevant variable influencing verbal behaviour among language teachers. This study also indicates that there should be a re-emphasis in all in-service and pre-service TESL courses on the utilization of effective instructional language which can be tailored to meet the specific needs of pupils from different proficiency levels, such as the different types of 'clarifying', 'exemplifying' and 'prompting' explained under the researcher's categories of metalanguage. Participants of TESL courses should also be trained to identify and utilise different categories of teacher language for different purposes in a language lesson.

Furthermore, there should be a re-emphasis on equipping TESL teachers with indirect ways of correcting and evaluating their pupils language performance. The researcher has established the fact that the pre-service teachers use a higher percentage of 'correcting' moves, compared to the in-service teachers. This does not mean that 'correcting' moves should not be utilised at all. It merely means that the quantity of direct correcting should be reduced and its quality should be improved. Correcting should be more indirect rather than direct.

This study has also provided some suggestions on analysing the language of teachers in classrooms. Teacher educators may use them to analyse and evaluate the classroom language of their student teachers. Such data can be used for discussion purposes, especially during lectures in English language proficiency or during the post-observation stage of clinical supervision.

References

Arfah A. A. (1977), *Strategies for Communication between teachers and pupils in a rural Malaysian school*. Ph.D. Thesis, University of California at Berkeley.

Barnes, D. (1976), *From communication to curriculum*. Harmondsworth, Penguin Books.

Barnes, D. and Todd, F. (1969), *Language, the learner and the school*. Baltimore, Penguin Books.

Bowers, R. (1980), *Verbal behaviour in the language teaching classroom*. Ph.D. Thesis, University of Reading.

Bushman, J.H. (1972), 'Teacher observation systems: Some implications for English education'. *Research in the Teaching of English*, 6(1), 69-85.

Cazden, C. (1986), 'Classroom discourse'. Handbook of Research on Teaching, Third edition, American Educational Research Association, New York, Macmillan Publishers.

Chew S.M. (1983), 'Classroom interaction analysis: A study of a sample of Diploma of Education students in the classroom'. *Fikiran-fikiran Mengenai Pendidikan di Malaysia*, a special publication commemorating the 20th anniversary of Education Faculty, University of Malaya.

Delamare, T. (1986), 'On the supervision and evaluation of instruction'. *System*. 14(3), 327-333.

Gee, T. C. (1972), 'Students' responses to teacher comments'. *Research in the Teaching of English*. 6(2), 213-219.

Heath, S.B. (1978), *Teacher talk: Language in the classroom*. Washington, Centre for Applied Linguistics.

Mackay, W. (1965), *Language teaching analysis*. London, Longmans Ltd.

Mah S.W. (1983), *A study of discourse functions in reading comprehension lessons*. Unpublished M.Ed. dissertation, University of Malaya.

Malamah-Thomas, A. (1987), *Classroom interaction*. Oxford University Press.

Mischler, E.G. (1972), 'Implications of teacher strategies for language and cognition: Observations in first-grade classrooms', in C.B. Cazden, U.P. John & D. Hymes (eds.) *Functions of language in the classroom*. New York, Teachers College Press.

Moskowitz, G. (1967), 'The attitudes and teaching patterns of co-operating teachers and student teachers trained in interaction analysis', in E.J. Amidon & J.B. Hough (eds.), *Interaction analysis: Theory, research and application*. Reading, Mass., Addison-Wesley. Inc.

Samuel, M.S.G. (1982), *Questioning strategies in relation to social context and verbal interaction in communicational English lessons*. Unpublished M.Ed. dissertation, University of Malaya.

Sinclair, J. McH. and Coulthard, R.M. (1975), *Towards an analysis of classroom discourse*. Oxford University Press, Oxford.

Sjostrom, B.R. (1984), 'An application of a functional view of language to teacher preparation'. Paper presented at the National Council of Teachers of English conference, Columbus, Ohio,. (ED 251 799)

Smith, C.W. (1984) 'Verbal behaviour and classroom practice'. Paper presented at the International Conference on Thinking at Harvard University, Cambridge, Mass. (ED 260 077)

Stubbs, M. (1976), 'Keeping in touch: Some functions of teacher talk', in M. Stubbs and S. Delamont (eds) *Explorations in classroom observation*. John Wiley, London.

Stubbs, M. and Hillier, H. (eds.) (1983), *Language, schools and classrooms. A reader*. Methuen, London.

Willis, J. (1981), *Teaching English through English*. Longman, London.