AN ANALYSIS OF TEACHER TALK AND TEACHING PRACTICES IN A PROCESS WRITING-BASED EFL COMPOSITION CLASS : A CASE STUDY

การวิเคราะห์การพูดและการสอนของครูผู้สอนการเขียนวิชาเรียงความภาษาอังกฤษเป็นภาษาต่างประเทศที่อิงการเขียนอย่างเป็นกระบวนการ:กรณีศึกษา

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บทคัดย่อ

การวิจัยเชิงกรณีศึกษานี้มีจุดประสงค์เพื่อศึกษาการพูดของครูและการสอนเรียงความภาษาอังกฤษในฐานะภาษาต่างประเทศที่เน้นการเขียนอย่างเป็นกระบวนการในชั้นเรียนระดับอุดมศึกษาของมหาวิทยาลัยของรัฐแห่งหนึ่ง ข้อมูลจาก 4 แหล่ง ได้แก่ การบันทึกภาพและเสียงในห้องเรียน การบันทึกเสียงระหว่างการประชุมกลุ่มย่อยระหว่างผู้เรียนและผู้ให้ข้อมูล การสัมภาษณ์อย่างไม่เป็นทางการระหว่างผู้วิจัยกับผู้ให้ข้อมูล และการจดบันทึกภาคสนาม แสดงผลการวิจัยทั้งสิ้น 3 ประเด็น คือ การพูดของผู้ให้ข้อมูลซึ่งเป็นผู้สอนสอดคล้องกับหลักการสอนเขียนที่เน้นกระบวนการ การพูดมีลักษณะของการเรียนการสอนที่ผู้สอนมีบทบาทหลัก และการพูดทั้งหมดสะท้อนทฤษฎีตรรกะของการสื่อความ 3 ลักษณะ ทั้งหมดนี้เป็นผลมาจากความเชื่อด้านการสอนเขียนที่ยึดว่าการเขียนเป็นกระบวนการ ถึงแม้งานวิจัยนี้มีข้อจำดัดคือเป็นเพียงกรณีศึกษา ผลการวิจัยมีส่วนในการเสนอแนะให้มีการศึกษาเชิงสัมพันธสารในบริบทอื่นๆ

คำสำคัญ การเขียนอย่างเป็นกระบวนการ การพูดของครู

Abstract

This study aims at uncovering teacher talk and teaching practices in a process writing-based EFL composition classroom at a state university in Bangkok. Data were derived from four sources including video-taped classroom interactions, audio-taped interactions during peer conferences, periodical informal interviews with the participant, and field-notes. Findings revealed that the participant's teacher talk and instructional practices (1) were consistently aligned with principles of process-writing approaches, (2) represented teacher-fronted classroom discourse, and (3) lay embedded within three characteristics of message design logics shaped by her beliefs in teaching composition. Though this study was situated within only one bounded case, it recommends that language classroom discourse in other contexts be studied extensively.

Keywords *: the process writing approach, teacher talk*

Classrooms are research sites that provide a large amount of information. Uncovered information reflects what is going on in education. As Breen (2001: 125) said, "[R]ecent classroom-based or classroom-oriented research explicitly seeks to describe what actually happens in a rather special situation". In terms of a special situation, each classroom is unique in itself. An English as a Foreign Language (EFL) composition class also shares the characteristics of being a special situation to be examined.

ESL Composition

In any composition classroom, the teacher generally decides upon (1) what to teach, (2) what his/her roles are, and (3) how to prepare students to be academic writers (Raimes. 2002: 308). Decisions on these issues are inevitably influenced by either "ideology" or "local conditions" of teaching writing. Teaching writing or composition can be roughly distinguished into product-oriented and process-oriented (Harmer. 2007). According to Harmer, an approach which aims toward the end product is totally different from one that values stages of crafting a piece of writing. A teacher who views the world of writing with process-writing lenses treats a classroom as a place for students to develop writing for writing's sake (Harmer, 2007). Major stages in process writing included (1) pre-writing, (2) planning and drafting, (3) rewriting and revising, (4) feedback, incubation, and revision, (5) editing and polishing, and (6) publishing (Ferris; & Hedgecock. 1998). In so doing, teaching practices

together with teacher talk evidenced in a classroom are shaped by the principles of process writing, or in other words, the principles dictate how and what a teacher says and teaches.

In ESL composition theory, interaction represents part of the writing classroom experience. Along with interaction, teachers exercise authority. However, the teacher is not the sole expert (Delpit. 1997). According to Delpit, the teacher's authority as an expert decreases when, for instance, students from other cultural backgrounds explain their native culture such as songs and traditions. Afterward, the teacher recovers authority or becomes an expert again when explaining grammatical rules. In other words, both parties in a composition class take turn exercising power or authority.

The dynamics of interaction in ESL writing classrooms has been studied by a number of researchers. The characteristics of talk and participating roles were shown to be not constant. For example, Miller and Young (2004) investigated revision talk and found that the interactional sequence did not change over the four months of their ethnographic research. Colby and Stapleton (2006) examined how pre-service teachers perceived teaching writing, and found that pre-service teachers implemented teaching practices in a highly individualistic manner. Similarly, Yu (2008) examined situated writing processes of three ESL courses and found that the implementation of process-oriented approaches was influenced by teachers' pedagogical beliefs and understanding of writing instruction.

Teacher Talk

Teachers talk and teaching practices affect class structure. In a language classroom, teacher talk varies depending upon the format of each lesson. Teacher talk both reflects and shapes classroom discourse, and in the meantime, it affects the learning environment. As Nystrand, Gamoran, and Carbonaro (1998: 5) suggest, teachers take and exercise a number of roles through teacher talk. They note that "the role of one (e.g., teacher) entails the role of the other (e.g., student)." According to Nystrand et al., teacher talk in the form of authentic questions benefits students' writing development.

Carrying on teacher talk, teachers "construct and enact authority" (Lutz; & Fuller. 2007: 202). Authority in the classroom, as Lutz and Fuller asserted, is seen as either exercising power and control or minimizing power. The latter is also regarded as decentralizing authority. Brunner (Lutz; & Fuller. 2007: 203; citing Brunner. 1991) wondered how much a teacher "should establish, construct, and exercise authority in her writing class?"

Teacher talk is a broad term used to cover a teacher's utterances in all types of events in the classroom. The scope of teacher talk ranges from instructional explanations to verbal speech used to manage the classroom. For instance, the findings in Jansem's (2008) study revealed that ESL teachers used questions as a major aspect of teacher talk. Other studies uncovered teacher talk through questions, comments, instructions, and teaching practices to maintain classroom rapport (Cullen. 2002; Hestenes, Cassidy, and Niemeyer Hestenes (2004). Teacher talk which is part of classroom interaction also relates to student writing. As Hudelson (1988) concluded from many research studies, the classroom environment significantly affected the way second language learners write and develop writing ability. Relevant to Hudelson's study, teacher talk played a significant role when students in a composition class perceived it as useful during teacher-led discussions.

A large amount of research indicates that the three-part sequence – teacher initiation, student response, and teacher evaluation/follow-up (IRE) dominates classroom discourse. However, the proportion of each element varies depending upon whether a class tends to be traditional or non-traditional (Cazden. 1986). For example, in a literacy classroom in an inner city school, teachers allocated about 77% of all turns, and elicitation was the predominant function Destefano, Pepinsky, and Sanders (1982). Other functions included giving direction, re-initiation, and information. Teacher talk was studied in detail to uncover how mathematics teachers manipulate verbal interactions (Forrest. 2008). Forrest analyzed data based on message design logic in communication, and found that teachers employed conventional design logic to shape a desired response from students, expressive design logic to insist on previously stated ideas, and rhetorical message design logic in discussion and negotiation. Three differing schemes of teacher talk resulted from the teachers' beliefs in the notion of teaching and learning. More recently, a study on teachers' linguistic choice in Israel indicated that EFL teachers' personal pedagogical beliefs strongly influenced teacher talk. Beliefs and assumptions regarding the goals of language programs were also underlying factors resulted in the teachers' language choice (Inbar-Lourie. 2010.).

To date, research has demonstrated that teacher talk in naturalistic classrooms matters but varies depending upon specific environments and teachers. Due to the association between EFL process-based composition and teacher explained above, there is a scope for further research in the field of language teaching. In addition, research on conversations and teacher talk in natural settings of EFL composition classrooms is scarce. Hence, this study on teacher talk and teaching practices

in a process-based EFL composition was conducted to reveal how a teacher employed teacher talk while teaching writing. In addition, teacher talk was a source for revealing teaching practices in a process writing classroom that can add tangible instructional methods to the field of teaching composition.

Objectives

Because of the need for research along with a clear line of inquiry described in the prior sections, the aims of this study included:

1. Identifying teacher talk in an EFL composition classroom

2. Investigating the implementation of process-writing instruction in a tertiary level EFL composition class

Theoretical Framework

This study was informed by an interplay of classroom discourse analysis (Cazden. 1986; Christie. 2005), the constructivist approach to communication (Delia, O'Keefe, and O'keefe. 1982), classroom communication (Cooper; & Simons, 2002), and social interaction for student learning (Vygotsky. 1978). In any classroom, in general, communication appears to fall into one of five types : students' limited roles to speak, information rich messages, emphasis on students' competency development, socialization, and talk as an evaluative tool. In a language classroom in particular, teacher talk embedded in classroom discourse represents eight major functions – attracting or showing attention, controlling the amount of speech, checking or confirming understanding, summarizing, defining, editing, correcting, and specifying a topic (Cazden. 1986). As Cazden noted, "[T]o talk about classroom discourse is to talk about inter-individual communication" that affects student learning. Classroom discourse analysis is done on the premise that language is a social phenomenon (Christie. 2005). Concurrently, student learning takes place in the circumstances of social interaction (Vygostsky. 1978). The meeting point of these theories guided all stages of this study.

Context of the Study

The Department of Western Languages at a state university in Bangkok offers a B.A. in English and Literature, a B.A. in French, a B.Ed. in English, and minors in French and German. In terms of the B.A. in English and Literature, the department recruits around 100 students per year. These students are required to take at least three courses in writing and composition. Composition instructors have academic freedom to design the content and teaching methods as long as they are aligned with the course syllabus. When this study was being conducted, only two instructors adopted and advocated process-based writing. One of them voluntarily participated in this study.

An analytical case study of classroom discourse was utilized as a research method to develop an in-depth analysis of a single case. This only single case was a veteran EFL lecturer with a doctorate in English from a state university in the U.S. Her accumulated teaching experience was over 30 years, both in Thailand and in the U.S. Her expertise included composition, translation, linguistics, and EFL pedagogy. Prior to data collection, the participant explicitly expressed willingness both to teach composition and to be observed.

Data Sources and Analysis

To address teacher talk and teaching practices in an EFL composition class viewed as a single-case research setting, data were derived from (a) video-taped classroom interactions, (b) audio-taped interactions during peer conferences, and (c) periodical interviews with the participant in her and the author's offices. Five lessons of three hours each were observed in naturalistic environments, with the author's role as non-participant observer. While videotaping the ongoing teaching and learning activities, the author took notes to captures significant incidents related to teaching and learning.

In data analysis, classroom discourse analysis (Christie. 2005) as well as open coding (Strauss; & Corbin. 1990) were employed. At the completion of data collection, the author transcribed the audio-and-video recorded interaction followed by coding the participant's teacher talk. Open coding was utilized during this stage. Similar labels yielded by the open codes were grouped again through axial coding to conceptualize characteristics of teacher talk.

Findings

The participant mainly used Thai as the medium of instruction, as she explained, to minimize misunderstanding. She believed that this composition course aimed at developing students' writing skill. Hence, the choice of language to be used for classroom communication in a composition class in which both the teacher and students use the same mother tongue should not be restricted to just the target language. The analysis of teacher talk in this study; therefore, was based on the meaning of the participant's speech translated into English by the author. Informal unstructured interviews were also utilized to ensure that the translation was agreed with the participant.

The findings from this classroom discourse case study analysis can be divided into three related sets of patterns. Firstly, the participant's teacher talk with an emphasis on process-based composition instruction was consistently aligned with all assumptions of the theory. Secondly, based on the structure of turn allocation, her teacher talk represented teacher-fronted classroom discourse. Multi-roles of her teacher talk included initiating verbal interaction, assessing students' understanding, and facilitating their learning. Thirdly, examined through the lens of communication theory together with the content plus intended meaning, the teacher talk employed covered all three characteristics of message design logic, varying them depending upon circumstances, especially considering the phase and focus of the writing process. What and how she manipulated teacher talk was strongly influenced by both her belief in theory and judgment on what EFL college students were supposed to do during and after learning composition.

Teacher talk via process-based composition instruction

In relation to teacher talk aligned with the characteristics of process-based writing, the participant explicitly conveyed her beliefs in this paradigm to students through her verbal messages. Embedded in her utterances were functions of teacher talk influenced by lesson phases. The following transcript represents her discursive teacher talk during each stage of writing, as concluded by Ferris and Hedgecock (1998) as well as functions of teacher talk (Cazden. 1986).

Prewriting:

> If I say that you have to write something to convince other people, what do you think of first? Okay, get a piece of paper I am passing. Write anything. It may relate to what you plan to write, or may not, up to you. Don't forget. This is called free writing or writing freely.

Planning & Drafting:

> In this essay, recommend an object, any object of your choice. You have to make judgment and provide reasons and support to back it up. Be aware of your knowledge. Do you know what you are going to write about? In the first draft, make sure that you demonstrate knowledge and sound reasons.

Rewriting & Revising:

> In your second draft, focus on coherence and unity. Okay, look at the handout I have just passed to you. Let's talk about topic sentence again. In the exercise, write the topic sentence of all 4 paragraphs. Then, get back to your essay. Does it have the topic sentence? To revise is to rewrite, to write better. Don't worry about grammar. Too specific? Too general?

Feedback, Incubation, & Revision:

> Why do we need peer review? Fun to read, but is it a good essay?... How about you? What do you think? Is it a tourist destination? Help each other to react

Editing:

> So we need to adjust it What both your peer and I presented or shared was just ideas or we call it peer response. It's you who can consider all recommendations and make it a better essay.

Publishing:

> Okay, for your final draft, put it in your folder or binder. See? It has been rewritten. I never expect a perfect essay. I would like to see your improvement displayed in the final draft in your folder.

Discussing why she strictly advocated process writing, the participant expressed her reason that she valued both the principles and process of this method. Based on her justification, all stages helped equip students with writing skills. Compared to process writing, the participant viewed other approaches that emphasize 'product' as 'one-time-writing-as-an-end'. That each student writes an essay and the teacher grades it with feedback provided based on grammatical errors does not benefit writing improvement. Without specific sequential steps, students could not envision what writing really

was. Shaped by her strong belief in process writing, her teaching including teacher talk played an important role in guiding students to be aware of each stage of writing. As she confirmed in a casual conversation with the author, forcing students to produce did not develop writing because they would not know what good writing was. To enable them even to begin to be writers, one cannot limit writing to a knowledge of English grammar. Instead, students should be led through a journey of learning how to write by experiencing the *specific steps* of writing as a process.

Teacher-fronted classroom discourse

Regarding turn allocation, the participant usually controlled conversational discourse. Verbal exchanges predominantly started with her initiation to either elicit verbal responses or direct students to her explanation. Students tended to be accustomed to the pattern of Initiation-Response-Feedback. Questions posed by the participant can be considered either a *compass* or *Socratic tool.* She controlled the movement of classroom interaction via questions that concurrently function as a tool to challenge students to be engaged with ongoing issues as in the following excerpt:

T: Why do we call it an opinion essay?
S: Tell opinions
T: How is it different from the writer's point of view?
SS: (unintelligible)
T: What topic tends to be an opinion essay?
S: We can argue.
T: Yes. How about when we talk about controversial issues? Can you explain?

Asked why she maintained her explicit roles in both conducting class and students' revision, the participant claimed that students were not used to process writing. Some of them realized that their essays needed improvement, but they struggled. She believed that her assistance and direct guidelines via questions supported students in generating ideas to both write and provide feedback to peers.

Teacher talk in the form of three characteristics of message design logics

How the participant interacted with students not only reflected her advocacy of a process-writing approach but also displayed how she manipulated communication theory in her *teacher talk.* All three types of verbal communication, namely expressive, conventional, and rhetorical message

design logic, were evident in her verbal communication. For example, when reacting to an immediate situation, she spoke from her immediate thoughts to draw students' attention to the current moment of teaching and learning, on the spot. Utterances of this type expressed her own ideas, not students', with a focus on what was going on at that particular moment. This type of message did not invite students' verbal response or initiation. For example, when some students seemed confused by why she was going to reduce the number of essays and what they had to do with the second draft peer conference, she said:

> We won't have enough time. Now, form groups. Don't forget to focus on content, ideas, and detail, but not grammar yet. Quickly, we have got to compete with time.

However, when the participant viewed a context as a crucial moment for student learning, she manipulated her talk with an underlying assumption that students would cooperate. Principles of process writing came into play although the teacher still acted as an initiator and students as subordinates. Conventional talk can be viewed as instructional verbal messages. Controlling students' focus on process writing, the participant's utterances in the forms of questions were predominant. In doing this, students' responses were desired as illustrated in the following excerpt.

T: When writing a recommendation essay, choose an object of your choice. What is an object?

S: Purpose

T: That is 'objective'. Objective in this sense doesn't mean an object like a pen or pencil, but recommendation of anything such as a place or a film.

S: Is abstract okay?

T: Example, please.

S: Feeling, emotion (unintelligible)

T: Is it easy to write about feelings? Writing about a concrete thing is easier, isn't it? We need to judge or make judgment.

SS: Compare?

T: It could be. In some paragraphs, we may need to compare to make judgment, so we need reasons to support our standpoints.

In addition to employing teacher talk to express her own thoughts and eliciting students' responses in a cooperative manner, the participant occasionally opened the floor to discussion. This

created some measure of peer negotiation. For example, while taking part in a peer conference as a moderator, the participant tried to promote *democratic/open discussions* as in the following excerpt:

T: I don't worry about this, but I would like to hear more about this. (pointing to a line in the text). Does the tone sound weak? Is this the name? This first type of cruise destination.
S: It's a destination you reach if you take our cruise.
T: Oh, it's a kind of tourism. I'm looking at this 'eco-tourism'. What is it?
S: It's a tour route that includes activities to promote ecological conservation.
T: I don't mean it's not good. You are the writer of this.

Also, in a conference, she motivated students' free responses by saying "What did you change? Everything is up to you. You make your own decision. I can't assume anything. So, feel free to share your thoughts."

When asked why she let students find out answers for themselves and avoided telling them if their thoughts were right or wrong, the participant mentioned that both writers and peer could see points that she overlooked. Although logical ideas were expected, at times students struggled. Open discussion guided by her genuine motivational teacher talk facilitated students' thinking and reasoning manipulation. To her, peer conference is a critical phase of process writing. This not only improved writing but also generated deeper thinking. At the very least, students had a chance to realize whether or not their essays lacked coherence. She stated that she occasionally did not understand students' underlying reasoning while students did among themselves. Her viewpoints implicitly uncovered her 'authority' that varied depending upon the scenario at that particular moment of instruction. Note that during peer conference, teacher talk became more open-ended, maintaining the process writing goal orientation, rather than when managing the class environment and situating tasks for students.

Discussion

The findings from this case study can be divided into three interrelated points: teacher talk aligned with process-writing stages, teacher-fronted classroom discourse, and all three types of

message design logics. Teacher talk evident in this study conforms to what Raimes (2002) pointed out that a teacher's instruction results from a decision on her roles, content, and approaches to shaping academic writers. Also, focused forms and functions of teacher talk in naturalistic environments in this study varied, depending on phases of the writing process. This finding suggests that the implementation of process writing instruction can be seen through how a teacher verbally interacts with students. Though the participant who advocated the process approach to teaching writing predominantly controls the interactional discourse, her role decreased during the revision phase. In other words, she managed her power from exercising to minimizing it instead of being a sole source of power (Delpit, 1997; Lutz; & Fuller. 2007). Note that principles of each phase of process writing instructional practice influenced the varying degree of power a teacher exercised. This practice resulted in how the teacher communicated with her students through three types of speech classified into expressive, conventional, and rhetorical message design logic (Forrest. 2008). Message design logics were rhythmically employed based on the participant's realization of both students' roles and the particular moment of teaching and learning activities. While expressive speeches played an important role for managerial talk during transition, conventional teacher talk was used with an emphasis on the direct application of writing theory to practice. Rhetorical message design logic existed in both teacher-led discussions and peer conference facilitated by the participant. This finding is in accordance with a recent study in ways that teachers have of varying characteristics of classroom communication styles (Forrest. 2008).

Cazden (1986) stated that during professor-led discussions, the Initiation-Response-Evaluation (IRE) sequence is directly used to control teacher-student communication. The participant tended to employ this sequence to ensure that students were engaged in their ongoing writing tasks. Initiation was mainly in the form of questioning that resulted in a question-answer adjacency pair (Markee. 2000).

Of particular importance to this study was the implementation of composition instruction in a particular EFL class. An instructor who was the only case in this study delivered instruction shaped by her perception of process writing. In doing this, her epistemological beliefs and conceptions of writing instruction played the crucial part (Cheng, Chan, Tang, & Cheng, 2009).

Because this study was situated within an EFL composition course, the findings were restricted to this case only. Similar studies conducted in other research settings may yield different outcomes. Despite its limitation, the findings established in this study could lead to further studies on both interaction in language discourse and students' roles in writing classes in various contexts.

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