Excellent English Teachers' Classroom Strategies: A Case Study of Three College English Teachers in China

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Abstract

This paper reports a case study on excellent English teachers' classroom strategies. The study focused on teachers' classroom strategies in four aspects: interaction management, questioning, teacher's feedback and error treatment. Three instruments were used: an observation checklist, a questionnaire and an interview guide. The findings showed that the excellent teachers use some classroom strategies to stimulate students to speak at class in order to create an interactive classroom.

Key words: Language teaching; Classroom interaction; Teacher strategy

INTRODUCTION

The study on foreign language teachers' classroom strategies is neither the study on teaching methodology, nor the study on the teaching of grammar, vocabulary, listening, reading and so on. It focuses on the real classroom process --- classroom interaction, aiming at finding out what kinds of teacher's behaviors will contribute to students' language acquisition, so as to improve teaching efficiency (YANG Xueyan, 2003). The study is of great importance since the learning of English in China takes place mainly in classrooms and is usually done under the guidance and supervision of teachers. The interaction between teachers and students constitutes a most important part in all classroom activities.

The focus of the study is on classroom interaction, aiming at finding out what strategies the excellent English teachers employ to encourage students to speak at class.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Studies on the process of classroom language teaching and learning begin from 1960s, with the main researchers such as D. Allwright, R. Ellis, N. Flanders and so on (D. Allwright, & K. Bailey, 1991; C. Chaudron, 1988). Since 1990s, lots of researchers in the west carry out studies on teachers. Many findings come out on teacher's behaviors in classroom and classroom interaction. The development shows that more attention is focused on the actual classroom process.

Two kinds of approaches are mainly used in the studies of EFL classroom interactions (C. Chaudron, 1988): 1) Behavioral Category: behavioral category classifies behaviors of the teacher and students in terms of language skill acquisition consequences of the behaviors. It involves the use of a form or schedule consisting of a set of categories for coding specific classroom behaviors. 2) Discourse analysis: discourse analysis serves as a device for systematically describing the kinds of interactions that occur in language classrooms. The researchers aim to account for the joint contributions of teacher and students and describe all the data.

METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study was to identify what strategies the excellent teachers use to create an interactive classroom. The study focused on teachers' classroom strategies in four aspects: interaction management,

questioning, teacher's feedback and error treatment.

The main approach used in this study was to collect observation data from three college English teachers in their use of classroom strategies to enhance interaction in their classroom. In addition to the observations, students' questionnaire data and interview data were collected to investigate the ideal teacher's classroom behaviors to encourage them to speak English at class. By focusing questionnaires and interviews on the ideal teacher's behaviors, it was expected that some of the prior difficulties with observations could be overcome.

The subjects were three college English teachers who gave a demonstration class for different textbooks. The teachers are from three universities, and all of them were teaching English for non-English major students. The real classroom process was recorded in discs. They were chosen from several of the demonstration classes because their classes were highly interactive. The information of the three classes is showed in Table 1.

Questionnaires were conducted among 157 students majoring in biology, food processing and agronomy in Hebei Normal University of Science and Technology. 98 of them are freshmen, and 59 of them are sophomores. Interviews were also conducted among some of the students to investigate how they could be encouraged to speak at class.

Three data collection instruments were used in the study: Observation Checklist, Questionnaire on College English Teachers Classroom Strategies and the Student Interview Guide.

The Observation Checklist was designed to identify what strategies the excellent teachers employ to encourage students to speak English at class. It consists of 45 items of teacher's classroom strategies drawn from the literature review.

The questionnaire was designed to investigate the ideal teacher's classroom behaviors to motivate them to speak

Table 1
Basic Information of the Classes

	Number of Students	Time of the Lesson (min.)	Student Talk (min.)	Teacher Talk (min.)	Percentage of Student Talk
Teacher A	41	100	23	53	23
Teacher B	22	100	29	57	29
Teacher C	42	50	12	25	24

at class. It was stated in Chinese to avoid students' misunderstanding. It consists of four sections: interaction management, questioning strategies, teacher's feedback and error treatment. Each section is made up of two kinds of questionnaire: one is structural, in which students' attitudes are investigated by using Likert Scale; the other is open. Students' comments are encouraged to write here. Advice and suggestions were collected from experts and my colleagues. The questionnaire was modified several times and three pre-tests were done among 64 students before it was finally conducted.

Interview Guide was designed to investigate students' inner thoughts toward some of the classroom strategies. It consists of 10 questions.

Data were collected over a span of roughly one month toward the end of the school year. Since the demonstration class was made on discs beforehand, observations were conducted by three different people respectively to ensure the credibility of the observation.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Interaction Management

Although everything happened in a classroom depends on the co-operation between the teacher and learners, it is usually considered normal for the teachers to "run the show" ---- to make many of the managerial decisions, about who should talk, to whom, on what topic, in what language and so on. According to D. Allwright and K.M. Bailey (1991, p.19), successful interaction in a classroom involves everybody managing at least five different things:

Who gets to speak? (participants' turn distribution)

What do they talk about? (topic)

What does each participant do with the various opportunities to speak? (task)

What sort of atmosphere is created? (tone)

What accent, dialect, or language is used? (code)

Table 2 shows what was observed in the excellent teachers' classrooms. Students' attitude toward interaction management is showed in Table 3.

Table 2

Checklist of Teachers' Classroom Strategies: Interaction Management

	Teachers' Classroom Strategies	Teacher A	Teacher B	Teacher C
Code	The teacher speaks English fluently.	√	√	√
	Speak Chinese occasionally.	√	√	×
Emotional strategies	Speak in a tone which is friendly.	√	√	√
	Maintain eye contact with the student answering.	√	√	√
	Use nonverbal gestures such as nodding, facial expressions, hand gestures etc.	√	√	√
	The position of the teacher in a classroom is flexible.	√	√	√
Managing strategies	Organize the students into groups or pairs.	√	√	√
	Choose topics which are related to students or the students are interested in.	√	√	√
	Use humors or jokes	√	√	×
	Encourage all the students to be involved in classroom activities by questioning	√	√	√

"√" stands for "the behavior was observed in the class".
"×" stands for "the behavior was not observed in the class".

Table 3
Questionnaire Results: Classroom Interaction

No.	Item Description	5	4	3	2	1	M
4	The teacher would speak in a tone which is friendly.	76.8	23.2	0	0	0	4.77
3	The teacher would let students feel free to ask or answer questions.	68.4	26.5	1.9	3.2	0	4.6
6	The teacher would use non-verbal gestures such as nodding, facial expressions, hand gestures etc.	63.2	34.2	1.9	0.6	0	4.6
10	The teacher would use humors or jokes.	62.6	30.3	3.9	3.2	0	4.52
7	The teacher would choose topics which are related to students or the students are interested in.	55.5	40.0	3.9	0.6	0	4.5
2	The teacher would speak English fluently.	53.5	43.2	0	2.6	0.6	4.46
5	The teacher would maintain eye contact with the student answering.	47.7	43.2	7.1	1.9	0	4.37
1	The teacher would organize the students into groups or pairs.	21.3	67.8	5.2	4.5	1.3	4.03
11	The teacher would encourage all the students to be involved in classroom activities by questioning.	25.2	59.4	6.4	8.4	0.6	4.00
8	The position of the teacher in a classroom is flexible. He would not stand in front of the blackboard all the time.	30.3	54.2	4.5	3.2	1.3	3.90
9	The teacher would explain the text by himself, leaving less opportunities for students to speak..	4.5	12.3	15.5	51.6	16.1	2.37

5= strongly agree
4 = agree
3 = don't know
2 = disagree
1 = strongly disagree
M = mean

Table 2 shows all the teachers had a good command of spoken English and they all used managing strategies and emotional strategies at their classes. This is in agreement with the ideal teacher's behaviors showed in the questionnaire (See Table 3).

Teacher's language proficiency is a factor of teacher-student interaction, because teacher is not only a "manager", but also a "model" in a classroom (Prodromou 1991). He will set a good example for the students to follow. Questionnaire also shows that 96.7% of the students hope their ideal teacher would speak English fluently.

The use of managing strategies helps to create more opportunities for the students to speak at class. The teacher should design more problem-solving tasks, two–way information gap tasks and pair or group work, for these tasks encourage more speaking turns, oral output and negotiation of meaning.

Emotional strategies can help to create a good atmosphere in the classroom to improve classroom interaction. Interaction is also an affective, temperamental matter, not merely a question of someone saying something to someone. Without mutual respect, the building of confidence, and the creating of many opportunities, classrooms will remain quiet places with

inhibited students who dare not try to express themselves (Rivers, 2000). Interactive language teaching requires a high degree of indirect leadership, along with emotional maturity, perceptiveness, and sensitivity to the feelings of others (Rivers, 2000). The emotional strategies and managing strategies will help create an interactive classroom so that students will "lose their fear of embarrassment" and be "anxious to show what they can do, to propose and participate in activities" (Rivers, 2000). Interview shows that students hope their classroom is a place where they feel it is safe to speak.

Questioning Strategies

Questioning strategies are categorized into two groups: question-planning strategies and controlling strategies. "Questions typically serve as devices for initiating discourse centered on medium-orientated goals…"(Rod Ellis,1999, p.587). Efficient questioning can stimulate student to participate in classroom activities (Ur, 1996). Strategies employed by the three excellent teachers when questioning are showed in Table 4. Students' attitude toward questioning is showed in Table 5.

Table 4

Checklist of Teachers' Classroom Strategies: Questioning Strategies

	Teachers' Classroom Strategies	Teacher A	Teacher B	Teacher C
Question-Planning Strategies	Ask questions relevant to students.	√	√	√
	Ask open-ended questions.	√	√	√
	Ask follow-up questions.	√	√	√
	Ask for supporting data--- ask for evidence to support a particular point.	√	√	√
	Ask different types of questions.	√	√	√
Controlling Strategies	Phrase the question first, and then call on the student.	√	√	√
	Call on specific students to answer questions.	√	√	√
	Call student's name when asking a student to answer a question.	√	√	×
	Select students to respond randomly instead of following any set pattern when calling on students.	√	√	√
	Beware if the students who dominates in class by asking or answering all the questions.	√	√	√
	Give students enough time to think about before answering the question.	√	√	√
	Ask questions of the entire class and try to encourage all students to participate.	√	√	√
	Encourage students to consult with classmates before answering teacher.	√	√	√
	Encourage students to initiate questions.	√	√	×
	Move closer to students when asking questions.	√	√	√
	Nominate non-volunteers.	√	√	√
	Repeat the question when there is no response.	√	√	√
	Modify the question when it is not understood.	√	×	×

Table 5
Questionnaire Results: Questioning Strategies

No.	Item Description	5	4	3	2	1	M
17	The teacher would ask open-ended questions.	47.1	46.5	4.5	1.3	0.6	4.38
19	The teacher would ask different types of questions.	36.1	60.6	1.9	1.3	0	4.32
16	The teacher would give students enough wait time after asking a question.	23.2	70.3	1.9	3.2	1.3	4.11
20	The teacher would encourage students to initiate questions.	27.7	58.7	9.0	3.9	0.6	4.09
12	The teacher would phrase the question first, then call on the student.	12.3	71.0	7.7	7.7	1.3	3.85
18	The teacher would ask follow-up questions.	19.4	49.7	10.3	16.8	3.9	3.64
21	The teacher would move closer to students when asking questions.	11.6	53.5	18.1	16.1	0.6	3.59
13	The teacher would follow a set pattern when calling on students.	3.2	7.1	10.3	60.0	19.4	2.15
15	The teacher would look down at notes after asking a question.	0	1.9	9.0	45.8	43.2	1.70
14	The teacher would only ask those who are active at class to answer questions.	0	2.6	6.4	47.1	43.9	1.68

Table 4 shows all the three teachers used question-planning strategies and controlling strategies. As to item 21 in the questionnaire, students' attitude seems to be different. Although 65.1% of the students strongly agree or agree with the teacher's moving closer when questioning, 16.7% show their disagreement (See Table 5). Some students feel their relationship with the teacher would be more intimate when the teacher moves closer; while others feel it will add to their stress, and cause them to speak in lower voice. Interview shows that some students hope the teacher would step back after they invite them to answer a question.

Modification of questions was not observed in Teacher B and C's class. White and Lightbown (1984) point out that teachers will persist in asking questions by repeating or rephrasing them when the questions receive no response. Research shows there are different ways of modification of questions, such as "narrowing" by means of clues, rephrasing with alternative or "or-choice" questions (C. Chaudron 1988, p.129). Modification of questions was not noticeably observed in the three classes,

probably because these are demonstration classes and the teachers and students had made a good preparation for it.

Teacher's Feedback

Feedback is an inevitable constituent of classroom interaction (C. Chaudron 1988, p.133). It is a very complex phenomenon. Lots of research shows that positive feedback is more helpful to improve learners' behavior than negative feedback (Nunan 1991, p.104). Table 6 shows all the three teachers used a lot of positive strategies. Questionnaire shows the means of positive strategies are very high (see Table 7). Although questionnaire shows 80 per cent of the students strongly agree or agree with teacher's praise, some research showed simple and mechanic positive feedback such as "good", "very good" did not lead to good results (Brophy 1981, Nunan 1991). Interview shows students are not in favor of simple and mechanic, especially unreal praise. Neglecting is not observed in the classes. 94.2 per cent of the students disagree or strongly disagree with teachers' non-evaluation at class.

Table 6

Checklist of Teachers' Classroom Strategies: Teacher's Feedback

	Teachers' Classroom Strategies	Teacher A	Teacher B	Teacher C
Negative	Criticize a student for his incorrect answer.	×	×	×
Neglecting	Respond to students' answers in a non-evaluative manner.	×	×	×
Positive	Praise students for their correct answers.	√	√	√
	Acknowledge or praise the student with comments.	√	√	√
	Acknowledge or praise the student by repeating or quoting students' answer.	√	√	√
	Modify the idea by rephrasing it or conceptualizing.	√	√	√
	Summarize the student's idea.	√	√	√
	Repeat students' responses.	√	√	√
	Listen to the students.	√	√	√

Table 7
Questionnaire Results: Teacher' Feedback

No.	Item Description	5	4	3	2	1	M
28	The teacher would listen to the students with smile.	67.1	31.6	0	1.3	0	4.65
24	The teacher would praise or acknowledge the students with comments.	46.5	47.7	2.6	2.6	0.6	4.37
25	The teacher would summarize the student's idea.	26.5	63.2	5.2	5.2	0	4.11
23	The teacher would praise students for their correct answers.	20.0	60.0	10.3	7.7	1.9	3.88
26	The teacher would quote students' answer when summarizing.	15.5	55.4	17.4	10.4	1.3	3.74
27	The teacher would seldom praise or criticize students.	1.9	4.5	5.1	47.1	41.3	1.79
22	The teacher would respond to students' answers in a non-evaluative manner.	0.6	1.9	3.2	60.0	34.2	1.75

Error Treatment

Error treatment is usually considered one of the issues in feedback (Chaudron 1988, p.135). It is discussed as an independent part in the study because it plays a

very important role in classroom interaction. Teacher's strategies employed in the classes and students attitude toward error treatment are showed in Table 8 and Table 9.

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Table 8

Checklist of Teachers' Classroom Strategies: Error Treatment

Teachers' Classroom Strategies	Teacher A	Teacher B	Teacher C
Criticizing	×	×	×
Interrupting	√	×	×
Probing	×	×	√
Redirecting	×	×	√
Neglecting	√	√	√
Repeating with changes	√	√	√
Self-repair	×	×	√

Table 9
Questionnaire Results: Error Treatment

No.	Item Description	5	4	3	2	1	M
29	If a student do not understand the question, the teacher would use simple words to explain instead of asking another student.	54.8	41.9	2.6	0.6	0	4.51
25	The teacher would ask students to make self-repairs.	38.1	57.4	3.2	1.3	0	4.32
33	The teacher would repeat students' answer with changes.	21.3	61.3	3.8	13.0	0.6	3.90
32	The teacher would ignore unimportant oral mistakes.	9.0	41.3	13.5	36.2	6.5	3.30
30	If a student cannot answer a question correctly, the teacher would redirect it to another student.	3.2	47.1	14.2	27.2	7.6	3.10
34	The teacher would interrupt a student to correct his mistakes.	0	7.1	7.6	66.5	18.7	2.03
31	The teacher would point out the mistake and criticize the student.	1.3	9.0	5.9	57.4	26.5	2.01

Whether students' errors should be corrected or not is a controversial issue for a long time. Table 8 shows criticizing was not observed in all the three classes. As to student's oral errors, all the teachers used "neglecting". It is commonly considered ignorance of small errors will help build the self-confidence of student so as to encourage them to speak the target language. However, questionnaire and interview show that some students expect their teacher to correct their mistakes. This is in agreement with the research of Chenoweth et al (1983) and Willing (1988). Some of the strategies in error treatment were not observed in the classes possibly because they are demonstration classes.

In the classroom, teachers take an important role in offering encouragement and correcting the students' errors. When students succeed in learning a language item, the teachers should express genuine delight and offer a word of praise because "people are more likely to continue a conversation when other people agree than when disagree"(Rivers 2000, p.226). If the teachers place too much attention on errors and neglect the necessary encouragement, they will lose sight of value of the positive reinforcement of clear and free communication.

CONCLUSION

The research shows the three excellent English teachers use some of the same strategies at class to encourage the students to speak, so as to improve the classroom interaction. The result is generally in agreement with students' ideal teacher strategies showed in the questionnaire. From this we may conclude: excellent English teachers use some classroom strategies to stimulate students to speak at class in order to create an interactive classroom. What was found from this research may provide some theoretical and practical guidance to language teachers, especially young teachers, and help them know more about efficient classroom strategies to improve their teaching efficiency; it may also provide some insights into the subject matter and, though having its limitations, may serve as a basis for further research.

LIMITATIONS

1) Classroom teaching is a very complex process. It includes far more aspects than what was discussed in this article.

2) The classes observed in this research are three demonstration classes. It is inevitable that some demonstrative factors exist in the classes.

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