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The Effect of Classroom Discourse on Developing EFL Learners' Discourse Competence

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Abstract

This article investigates the impact of classroom discourse (teacher talk, teacher questions and interactional processes) on developing EFL learners' discourse competence. Three EFL Middle School teachers participated in this study. They were selected according to the non-probability convenience sampling method as they were willing and available during the study. According to their administrative files, they have approximately the same age and the same experience. Classroom observation was chosen as a data collection tool to enable the researcher to describe activities as they happen in the classroom, to watch behavioral patterns of people in certain situations and to obtain authentic and objective information about the discourse used in the classroom. The findings showed that classroom discourse has a negative influence on learners' discourse competence due to the following factors: dominance of teacher talk, use of display questions more than referential questions, and over-reliance on the IRF interactional patterns.

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Introduction

Ever since the emergence of communicative approaches to L2 teaching, the main pedagogical goal has been to develop learners' communicative competence (i.e., the ability to use the linguistic system in effective and appropriate ways). Thus, a greater emphasis has been placed not only on developing learners' linguistic knowledge but on the other competencies required for appropriate and native-like language use. Among these competencies, discourse competence, which refers to how to combine grammatical forms and meanings to achieve a unified set of spoken or written texts, has been recognized to be at the core of the knowledge required to use the language adequately and appropriately and in different contexts.

EFL learners often lack appropriate language behavior in various contexts. They are often unable to take up long turns when conversing with others and have difficulties in producing coherent and cohesive pieces of writing. Such low performance may be due to the fact that a classroom has its apparent institutional limitations and, therefore, is not an ideal communicative setting even if it often provides opportunities for relevant L2 communication. In fact, the language that occurs in the classroom may not promote equal interactions between teachers and learners as it is usually characterized by teacher-learners superficial language exchanges. It may also be due to the fact that it is the teacher who does most of the talk and who has the right to participate in all exchanges and to initiate exchanges. This usually results in the learners' use of shorter responses, incoherent and incohesive utterances and sentences.

Learners' low discourse competence may be affected by educational, psychological and sociological factors. However, little is said in the literature about the correlation between classroom discourse and the development of learners' discourse competence. Research has shown that the face-to-face classroom talk between teachers and learners may enhance learners' discourse competence. In fact, it is believed that the interactional processes that occur in the classroom may help learners' increase their language repertoirs and shape both the form and the content of the target language. Put differently, the classroom can provide opportunities for relevant L2 communication as teachers tend to subject their learners to massive exposure to communication patterns typical of natural discourse and provide them with relevant opportunities to practice these patterns. However, the talk in the classroom may be dominated by the teachers who often pay little attention to the development of discourse competence compared to the attention paid to the linguistic aspects of the target language such as grammar, pronunciation and vocabulary. Despite the fact that the teacher talk along with teacher's questioning is considered as a powerful tool and an indispensable factor to enhance students' communicative competence, including discourse competence, it is often considered in-cohesive to have a negative effect on

learners' output as it controls and limits their communicative moves and discourse features (Brazil, 1995b)

Teachers, therefore, need to develop their students' discourse competence in the target language. In this regard, their teaching goals should be to foster the students' ability to use textually appropriate stretches of speech and sentences. These goals allude to the importance of producing quality classroom language in EFL classrooms. Hence, this study aims at shedding some light on classroom discourse and its effect on learners' ability to use English in longer stretches of discourse. More specifically, this study will be based on the following objectives: a) to shed light on the aspects of teacher talk and whether they can develop or undermine learners' discourse competence, and b) to investigate the interactional patterns in the classroom and how they can affect learners' receptive and productive repertoire in the target language. It is within this perspective that this article raises the following research question:

To what extent can classroom discourse affect the development of learners' discourse competence?

1. Review of literature

1.1. Discourse

Discourse generally denotes written and spoken communication in connected texts. For Flowerdew (2013:1), discourse is both the language in its contexts of use and also the language above the level of the sentence. This means that language as discourse should be seen in context and in longer stretches of sentences because knowing the language is not only the knowledge of grammar and vocabulary as it also includes how to participate in a conversation and how to produce a written text adequately. However, from a linguistics perspective, the term is more complex and has been defined differently. According to Celce-Murcia & Olshtain (2000:4), discourse is "an instance of spoken or written language that has describable internal relationships of form and meaning that relate coherently to an external communicative function". In the light of this, discourse is a complete meaningful unit conveying a complete message and can denote larger units such as paragraphs, conversations and interviews because they are linguistic performances complete in themselves.

1.2. Discourse competence

Discourse competence is referred to as the ability to understand and express oneself in a given language. Canale's (1983:335) revised definition of discourse competence views it as "the mastery of how to combine and interpret meanings and forms to achieve a unified text in different modes". Claiming that discourse competence is central to the other competencies where each competence intersects and interacts with it, Celce-Murcia et al (1995:13) define discourse competence as "the selection, sequencing, and arrangement of words, structures, sentences and utterances to achieve a unified spoken or written text." This means that the core of discourse competence is the ability to produce unified spoken or written

texts. For Shrum & Glisan (2010:13), discourse competence "refers to the way in which language elements, such as words and phrases, are arranged into utterances in order to express a coherent idea on a particular topic". Put differently, discourse competence is the ability to select, sequence and arrange words, structures and utterances into coherently organized text. This means that this competence involves the combination of utterances into coherent discourse and the mastery of different types of spoken and written units of language.

1.3. Aspects of discourse competence

1.3.1. Cohesion

Cohesion is most closely associated with linguistic/grammatical competence as it accounts for how lexical and grammatical markers signal textual co-reference in written and oral discourse (Celce-Murcia et al, 1995: 23). According to Hoey (1996:3), cohesion is described as "the way certain words or grammatical features of a sentence can connect that sentence to its predecessors and successors in a text". For Halliday and Hasan (1976:4), "cohesion occurs where the *interpretation* of some elements in the discourse is dependent on that of another". Thus, for Halliday and Hasan, cohesion is a fundamental element that is created when a specific lexical item in a text must be interpreted through reference to a previous item in the text. This, according to them (ibid), can be achieved only through 'cohesive ties' that bind the text together. Halliday & Hasan (1976) divide these cohesive ties into 5 groups: conjunction, reference, substitution, ellipsis and lexical cohesion. Reference is a semantic relation which can be exophoric or endophoric (within this class either as an anaphoric or cataphoric reference). Grammatical cohesion comprises morphological categories (tense, verbal voice, verbal mood, definiteness, recurrence with a shift in parts of speech). Some syntactic categories can also express grammatical cohesion (recurrence of a sentence pattern, recursiveness, junction, punctuation marks). Lexical cohesion involves many types of lexical replacements (repetition, synonymy, antonymy, hyponymy and others). It is clear from the above division that cohesion belongs to the sphere of formal analysis which concerns 'the use of various cohesive ties to explicitly link together all the propositions in the text' (Celce-Murcia & Olshtain, 2000: 7).

1.3.2. Coherence

According to Halliday and Hasan (1976), coherence is the logical flow of ideas, connectivity of the surface text evidenced by the presence of cohesive devices. However, by putting much emphasis on the fact that coherence can be brought by the formal markers (i.e., cohesive ties), they failed to elaborate how context consistency influences the choice of these cohesive markers. Halliday and Hasan's (1976) theoretical work was criticized for neglecting the 'functional role played by utterances in context' and also for restricting its meaning to isolated sentences, overlooking the realization of such a potential contextually (Widdowson, 1976). Many other researchers such as Widdowson, 1975, 1979; Coulthard, 1977;

Sinclair & Coulthard, 1975) suggest that in order for discourse to be understood as an instance of language use, it should be approached beyond its formal side. More importantly, they emphasize the relationship of the propositions to each other. According to them, meaning, realized in propositional relationships, drives the text. In the same vein, Widdowson (1979a) cited in Brown & Yule (1983:228) suggests that it is only by recognizing the action performed by each of the utterances within the conventional sequencing of such actions that we can accept this sequence as coherent. We can conclude that a piece of language can be taken as discourse if it is necessarily coherent and to a lesser extent cohesive since cohesion is only a reflection of the underlying coherence of the text (Schiffrin, 1987). This being so, language users need to opt for both if they are to build their discourse competence.

1.4. Classroom discourse

Among all kinds of studies, classroom discourse has been one of the most heated topics in both classroom research and L2 (second language) acquisition. The term refers to the language that teachers and students use to communicate with each other in the classroom.. According to Kramesch (1985 as cited in Ellis, 1990: 86) classroom discourse is "a continuum extending from pedagogic discourse (i.e., when teachers and students fulfill their institutional roles) to natural discourse (i.e., when teachers and students do more fluid roles established through interaction). Therefore, the main function of classroom discourse is to examine not only the language that is used in the classroom or other educational settings but also the ways in which knowledge is constructed and displayed or both during social interaction within the classroom. This implies that classroom discourse involves the learners' ability to use the language effectively and appropriately in "unrehearsed contexts" (Brown, 1994). This appropriate use of language can be enhanced through exposing the learners to communication patterns typical of natural discourse in the classroom and providing them with relevant opportunities to maximize their output.

1.4.1. Teachers' talk

Teacher talk (TT) is considered to be closely related to the success of students' foreign language acquisition. Teachers use the target language to 1) assign teaching activities, 2) give instructions and directions, 3) model the target language patterns and 4) give feedback on students' performances. According to Nunan (1991:189), teacher talk plays a crucial role in classroom discourse and in maximizing opportunities for learning. He (ibid) further adds that TT is important not only in terms of control and management but also in terms of language acquisition as "it is through speech that teachers either succeed or fail to implement their teaching plan". Similarly, Long (1996:45-46) argues that negotiation of meaning that triggers interactional adjustment by the teacher "facilitates acquisition because it connects input, internal learner capacities, particularly selective attention, and output in productive ways". According to Walsh (2002), the teacher talk can create

opportunities for student learning and participation through conscious or unconscious reconciliation between the pedagogical goals and their language use. This implies that teacher talk can do more for the learner than facilitating interaction; it can also be a powerful tool for, and an indisputable factor in shaping the students' communicative competence, including discourse competence.

However, research on classroom discourse has reported that teachers tend to dominate classroom talk. Allwright & Bailey (1984:139) claim that teachers perform between one half and three quarters of the talking performed in classrooms, while Chaudron (1988: 50) claims that it accounts "for approximately sixty percent of pedagogical moves". Many researchers including Alwright & Bailey (1984); Nunan (1991); Ellis (1994); Walsh (2011) argue that teachers taking most of the talk may influence the degree as well as the quantity of students' interaction in classroom. They (ibid) also argue that when teachers devote large amounts of time to explain and manage instruction, learners produce less output and interaction. In fact, when teacher talk dominates classroom discourse, learners may have fewer opportunities to produce the target language because it is the teacher who controls the language form to be used, the content of the interaction and the topics to be discussed. This control of the classroom talk, according to Cullen (2002), minimizes learners' talk and allows them little opportunity to develop their discourse competence.

1.4.2. Teachers' questions

Another important discourse aspect of teacher talk is the use of questioning and its effect on language proficiency. It is, in fact, assumed that through questioning, teacher talk helps to explicitly focus learner attention on syntactic forms, which in turn facilitates their development of knowledge and linguistic forms in the second or foreign language (Schmidt, 1994). Of all the types of questions that may be asked by the teacher, a particular distinction is made between 'display' and 'referential' questions (Chaudron, 1988). Researchers including Long and Sato,1983 ; Thornbury, 1996) claim that display questions help elicit learners' prior knowledge to know if the students understand the text and the words, and to enable them to display their knowledge. According to Brock (1986) display questions require short or even one-word answers and hence are less likely to get learners to produce large amounts of speech. Tsui (1995:52) claims that teachers who often ask display are likely to constrain the opportunities for negotiated interaction, learner output and language learning (Brock, 1986).

By contrast, referential questions are questions that teachers do not know the answer and ask them to elicit lengthier and more complex responses from the students. They are used to foster students' skills of providing further information, giving opinions and explaining or clarifying items (Ellis, 1994:587). In other words, teachers ask referential questions for the purposes of genuine communication rather than testing the students' knowledge. In this regard,

students' responses to referential questions are often more meaningful, longer and subjective (Brock, 1986) and (Tsui, 1995). To investigate the effect of referential questions on ESL classroom discourse, Brock(1986) conducted a research study, the results of which showed that the students' responses in the treatment-group classes were significantly longer and syntactically more complex than those of the control group classes. This implies a positive correlation between asking referential questions and students' production of longer stretches of language.

1.4.3. Interactional patterns in the classroom.

In their work on the structure of classroom behavior, Sinclair & Coulthard (1975) have revealed a common instructional pattern with three sequences of discourse 'moves'(IRF), where I is teacher initiation, R is learner response and E/F is an optional evaluation or feedback by the teacher. This tightly-framed participation pattern is described by Cazden (1988:39) as "the most common pattern of classroom discourse at all grade levels". During this interaction sequence, the teacher often tightly controls the structure and content of classroom interaction, and initiates the discussion by posing questions. After the student has responded to the question, the teacher finishes the interaction sequence by giving feedback on the student's response. According to Hall and Walsh (2002:188), "In the IRE(F) pattern of interaction, the teacher plays the role of expert, whose primary instructional task is to elicit information from the students in order to ascertain whether they know the material."

However, these discourse moves have been criticized for limiting student participation to short brief answers and, thus, for being not conducive to more complex types of discourse. In the same vein, Van Lier (1996:156) posits that the strict IRF sequence undermines "the development of discourse skills including turn taking, planning ahead, negotiating and arguing". These criticisms have led many researchers to propose a reconceptualization of the Initiation-Response-Feedback/Evaluation, especially the third turn. For example, Nassaji & Wells (2000) found that the nature of the third turn in triadic dialogue was crucial to either restricting or stimulating pupil involvement in the discourse. Having spent extensive time in a number of science classroom, Wells (1993) observed that when teachers asked questions to students instead of closing down the sequence with a narrow evaluation of their responses, they encouraged students to elaborate, clarify, justify their opinions or make connections. This teacher-directed pattern of interaction enhanced the students' opportunities for producing extended discourse.

2.1. Method

The present study adopted a qualitative approach as the data were gathered through classroom observation. This research tool was chosen as "there is no substitute for direct observation as a way of finding out about language classroom" (Nunan, 1988: 76).

2.1.1. Setting

The study was conducted in three middle schools in Ghardaia where I was an Inspector of English and my duty was to supervise and guide the teachers there. One class of 4^{AM} in each school was chosen. The reason behind choosing the 4^{AM} level was that the students could interact easily with their teachers in acceptable English.

2.1.2. Participants

Three EFL Middle School teachers (two men and a woman) working in Ghardaia participated in this study. The teachers were selected according to the non-probability convenience sampling method which relies on 'available subjects- those who are close at hand or easily accessible' (Berg, 2009: 32). According to their administrative files, they had approximately the same age and the same experience. Teacher 1 (hereafter T1) is 22 years old, has an experience of 2 years and holds a license degree. Teacher 2 (hereafter, T2) is 23 years old, has an experience of 4 years and holds a license degree. Teacher 3 (hereafter T3) is 24 years old, has an experience of 3 years and hold a Magister degree.

2.3. Data collection instrument

The research instrument used in this study is classroom observation. This research tool was chosen because it is considered as a form of qualitative inquiry that enables the researcher to describe activities as they happen in the classroom and to collect linguistic as well as interactional data for later analysis (Mackey & Gass, 2005). According to Johnson & Christensen (2004), classroom observation can help the researcher to watch behavioral patterns of people in certain situations to obtain authentic and objective information about the phenomenon of interest. However, observing interactional processes as well as the language that occurs in the language classroom is a difficult task since interaction that involves more than one person and the language used may be performing many functions at the same time. It is for this reason that we observed each lesson and took field notes. The aim of these field notes is to capture the following aspects: the amount of the teacher talk, the types of questions used by the teachers and the interactional patterns. It should be noted here that when observing, we served as a non-participant observer in the classrooms to minimize the "observer effect" (Gass & Mackey, 2005:47) in the process of data collection. This means that we did not interpret the events but rather focused on capturing what was occurring without commenting or judging.

3.1. Results

This study sheds light on the factors that determine or hinder learners' ability to use English in longer stretches of discourse. More specifically, it has the following objectives:

✓ to investigate teacher talk and teacher questions and their effect on learners' discourse competence.

✓ to examine the interactional exchanges between the teachers and students and their effect on learners' ability to produce coherent stretches of language.

To achieve these purposes, the data from three observed classes (2.30 hours) were

audio-taped and field notes were taken to analyze instances of teacher talk, teacher questions and interactional exchanges between the teacher and students.

The data collected in the observed classrooms show that teacher talked more than their students as shown in the following table:

3.1.1. Teacher talk

Proportion %	8	10	8	9.33
OAT (min)	4	5	4	8
Proportion %	22	26	30	29.33
STT (min)	11	13	15	13
Proportion %	70	64	62	64.67
TTT (min)	35	32	31	32
	Teacher 1	Teacher 2	Teacher 3	Means

Table 1 **The amount of teacher talk time and students talk time**

* TTT: teacher talk time- STT: students talk time - OAT stands for other activities

The above table represents the amount of teacher talk calculated by timed analysis in the three classes in 50 minutes (one period of class), and their percentage in the total class time. The results show that the teachers talked in the target language more than the students. Hence, teachers talked 32 minutes in one session while students talked only 13 minutes in one session. This means that teacher talk dominates the observed classrooms. Common features of TT in the observed classrooms were that teachers devoted more time in explaining and giving instruction and assisting their students in doing tasks than in helping their students use the language communicatively. Teachers tended to use their directions and instructions through the use of repetition and through adjusting their language to make their students understand. In addition, their talk was characterized by commonly used words and simpler grammatical structures as well as short sentences. The exchanges between the three teachers and their students seemed to be artificial and unnatural due to the overuse of certain words and sentences such as "OK", "Have you understood?", "Who can answer this?" Therefore, the three teachers were observed not only to monopolize classroom talking time standards but also to speak at unnaturally slow rate and also to simplify and adjust the language they use. This results in the fact that the language provided to the students seemed to be lexically poor and void of discourse features. Put differently, the teachers seemed to use a language that was beyond native-like standards. As a consequence of this, the students seemed to have limited extensive exposure to the target language that could not be qualified as a prerequisite for developing their discourse competence.

3.1.2. Teacher questions

The classroom observation provided us

with useful information about the teachers' practices and behaviour concerning questioning in the language classroom. The three teachers used different questions for different purposes as part of their teacher talk. In fact, a common feature of the three classrooms was that frequently repeated questions were dominant in the classroom and that students provided single-word or isolated and short sentences responses as replies to teacher prompts. In addition, most of the teachers' questions were asked to elicit information rather than to encourage involvement and engagement in communication. Moreover, the three teachers were seen to use more display questions than referential questions. The following table illustrates the teachers' use of the two types of questions:

Table 2 Types of questions used by teachers

	Total	Display questions		Referential questions	
		Number	proportion	Number	proportion
Teacher 1	23	16	69.56%	7	30.44%
Teacher 2	22	14	63.64%	8	36.36%
Teacher 3	21	9	42.85%	12	57.14%
Means	22	13	58.68%	9	41.31%

*Display questions: the teacher already knows the answer) - referential questions: the answer is not known in advance.

Table 2 shows the frequency and types of questions used by the three teachers. The quantitative analysis revealed that the three teachers used 66 questions in total. Accordingly, T1 used 23 questions, T2 used 22 questions, and T3 used 21 questions in recorded lessons. This implies that T1 and T2 used more display questions than referential questions whereas T3 asked referential questions (n=12) more frequently that display questions (n=9). On average, there is a priority of display questions (57.09%) over referential questions (41.31%) in the three classrooms. In addition, the main concern of the teachers (especially TI and T2) seemed to elicit grammatically correct responses from their learners rather than to encourage genuine communication i.e. what Long and Sato (1983, cited in Ellis,1994:589) call 'emphasizing form over meaning and accuracy over communication'.

However, T3 seemed different from the other two teachers due to the fact that he was the only one who had carried out postgraduate studies. This may have helped him to have more expertise in teaching and be in good position to help his pupils to interact in the classroom and to use language adequately. The fact that T3 asked more referential questions seemed to have an effect on learners' responses. When responding to referential questions, T3's students in the third classroom were observed to create a flow of information more than the students of the other two classes and their responses were longer and syntactically more complex. Phrased

differently, the relatively high number of referential questions in the third classroom seemed to prompt a more refined and elaborated practice of the target language leading to natural communication between the teacher and his students. We also noticed that T1 and T2 asked questions with more focus on checking their students' background knowledge and to remind them of the things from previous lesson while T3 asked questions (mostly referential) that incite the students to express themselves and generate longer stretches of discourse.

3.1.3. Interactional processes

The results of the current study revealed that the interactional processes in the three classrooms reflected an IRF pattern that was proposed by Sinclair and Coulthard (1975). The total numbers of interactions between the teachers and the pupils were 135 which were composed of 50 initiations, 65 pupils' responses and 20 teachers' feedback. An example of an exchange of IRF in each of the three classrooms is given below:

- Teacher 1: What is the opposite of short? (Initiation)

Student: Short. (Response)
Teacher 1: Good. (Feedback)

- Teacher 2: Give me an example with the verb "go" in the past. (Initiation)

Student: I went to school yesterday. (Response)
Teacher 2: Very good (Feedback)

- Teacher 3: Do you like English? (Initiation)

Student: I like it very much. (Response)
Teacher 3: OK.(Feedback)

From the three exchanges above, it can be noticed that in line 1 the teacher always initiates the interaction. It was observed in the three classrooms that the teachers' initiation occurred because the students were usually passive and waited for the teachers to start the conversation. Line 2 is the pupils' responses. These responses were not only verbal but also non-verbal. Sometimes, the pupils used only their heads to answer the teacher's questions. In addition, more than one student provided a response for the teacher's question. Line three is the teacher's feedback or evaluation. Sometimes, this feedback did not occur because the students did not provide an answer to the teacher's question or statement. It should be noted that after providing the feedback, none of the three teachers proceeded with a follow-up move to complete the exchange of information by confirming or disconfirming the pupils' responses.

It is important to note that even though the students in the three observed classrooms took an acceptable amount of time using the language (22%, 26%, and 30% of the total classroom talk), their talk was characterized by unclear and intelligible speech, frequently stigmatized by their agreement with the teachers through nodding their heads or using backchannels responses such as yes, no, OK and so on. In addition, the students seemed to have problems in managing their speech in a smooth and natural way because of their overuse of conjunctions such as *and*, *but*, and *so* and of the neglect of conjunctions such as such as *consequently*, *although*, *on the other hand*

etc. The students' inability to form a coherent discourse might be also due to the fact that they used anaphoric reference successfully in the classroom, possibly due the positive transfer of first language, but they rarely used the other types of references (exophoric and cataphoric references). Observing students' speech allowed us to find out that their talk seldom included aspects of lexical cohesion such as reiteration, relexicalization, and the use of collocations. It was also void of other discourse devices such as ellipsis, substitution and discourse markers.

4.1. Discussion

4.1.1. Teacher talk

This study aims at shedding some light on whether learners' ability to use English in longer stretches of discourse can be affected but classroom discourse (i.e. teacher talk, teacher questions and the interactional processes that occur in the classroom). As far as teacher talk is concerned, the findings of the study show that teacher talking time TTT ranges between 61 % and 70% of the classroom discourse. This is, in fact, a little bit higher than the findings of most research studies which indicate that teachers tend to make 60 % of the moves, mostly as soliciting and reacting (Chaudron, 1988:50). A possible reason that teachers devoted a large amount of the talk is that their objective was to impart knowledge to students rather than to develop their communication competence in general and their discourse competence in particular.

The dominance of teacher talk in language classrooms was the source of criticism for restricting learners' opportunities of language oral language production and classroom participation (i.e., influencing the extent to which students use the target language during the lessons). Hattie (2012: 73) argues that much teacher talk "reduces the opportunities for students to impose their own prior achievement, understanding, sequencing and questions". According to Chaudron (1988:52), when teachers devote a large amount of talk to explanations and management, learners will lose their opportunity to produce creative language". Moreover, relatively recent research (Riley, 1979; Nunan, 1991; Ellis, 1994) has also shown that the consequences of the classroom setting discourse being invested in the teacher (it is the teacher who has the right to participate in all exchanges, to initiate exchanges, to include and exclude other participants) makes the teacher talk more "conducive to classroom management than to L2 learning" (Mehan, 1979). Furthermore, the teacher's modifications and simplification of the syntactic patterns, vocabulary and phonological features, negatively influence the students' discourse (Chaudron, 1988). These research findings seem to concur with we found in the three observed classes. Indeed, the three teachers were found to have a full control of the classroom talk by providing a great deal of explanations, corrections and directives through the use of a more basic set of vocabulary, fewer idioms, collocations and function words. Due to this, the students' utterances were brief, reactionary, and less conversational.

Even though the third teacher's amount of

teacher talk in the classroom was lower than the other teachers (62 % against 70 % and 64% respectively), his students were unable to increase their talk in the classroom and their oral production was characterized by brief responses and reactions to the teachers' questions and directives. Phrased differently, the amount of teacher talk in the classroom being lower than the other two teachers did not result in elaborated use of language patterns (very few discourse markers, incoherent language, incorrect syntactic patterns, and simple vocabulary and phonological features). It is for this reason that many researchers including Chaudron, 1988; Nunan, 1991; Allwright and Bailey, 1984; Field, 2000) argue that the fact that teachers tend to dominate the classroom is not a problem in itself. The big problem is when quantity prevails over quality in TT. According to Chaudron (1988: 52), "'good' teacher talk does not necessarily mean 'little' teacher talk; rather, effective teacher talk is the one that 'facilitates learning and promotes communicative interaction".

4.1.2. Teachers' questions

This study has shown that a total of 66 questions were asked by the three observed teachers. The fact that the three teachers used a large amount of questions seems quite acceptable since questioning is considered as one of the main tools of classroom discourse (Qashoa, 2013). The results yielded that the number of display questions was higher that the referential questions in general. This is, in fact, consistent with the findings of research studies on the frequency of different types of questions in language classrooms. According to Llinares et al (2012:84), "display questions are more frequent than referential questions, and the quantity and quality of students' responses are directly related to the types of questions asked by the teacher". In the same vein, Long and Sato (1983) argue that ESL teachers used significantly more display questions than referential questions (70% against 30 %) in classrooms, compared to native speakers in conversations with nonnative speakers.

The reasons for the first two teachers (T1 and T2) asking more display questions compared to referential questions may stem from the nature of the study context as the teachers were teaching a middle school level and, thus, they had the tendency to ask more display questions to elicit answers from the young pupils and to involve them in the classroom interaction. It may also be due to the fact that teachers in middle schools were not aware of the types of questions and their functions and also to the fact that the teachers' main objective was to provide their pupils with grammatical and vocabulary knowledge (i.e., arming them with linguistic resources) in order to prepare them for more speaking opportunities. Another reason might be that the teachers' objective was to make them display whether they possess certain knowledge items or not. This seems consistent with Hall's (2016:491) claim that teachers' aim in asking display question is to "quickly check understanding and establish what they already know".

4.1.3. Interactional processes

The results of the classroom observation have revealed that the three teachers' interactions with their pupils were characterized by 135 IRF moves between the teachers and the pupils. This seems consistent with Wray's (2002:9) claim that IRF is the most widely known of typical classroom interactional processes. In fact, the IRF is a pattern of interaction that is common in the language classroom where the teacher controls interaction patterns through initiating discussion and asking questions to students and through giving feedback to them. According to Wash (2006), the implementation of these moves (initiation, response, and feedback) in the classroom play a crucial role in creating opportunities for learner involvement and for enhancing their communicative competence.

However, the tight control of the patterns of communication through the IRF moves from the part of teachers seems to prevent students from producing long stretches of speech. The teachers' questions used to initiate the talk as well as their feedback clearly take a high percentage of the classroom and seem to influence the students' chance to use quality communicative exchanges. As a consequence of this, the students in the observed classrooms seemed to be unable to build up cohesive and coherent utterances since they produce isolated sentences. The IRF exchanges seemed to limit their opportunities to produce extended utterances and provide them with few occasions to negotiate meaning as well as to generate discourse. According to Berry (1981, cited in Ellis, 2012: 90), the prevalence of the IRF interactional exchanges in L2 classrooms is due to the fact that the teachers take on the role of both 'initiator' and 'primary knower'. Berry (ibid) further adds that "only when the teacher either abandons the role of 'primary knower' or allocates the initiating role to the students do the different discourse patterns occur. This seems in line with Kasper's (2001:518) claim that "the IRF routine is an unproductive interactional format for the learning of pragmatics and discourse".

Pedagogical implications

The findings of this research have shown that classroom discourse has a negative impact on learners' discourse competence. In fact, these findings revealed that the interactional processes, which were characterized by IRF moves as well as by the teachers producing most of the talk and using more display questions than referential, affected the way students produced cohesive and coherent stretches of utterances. In line with these findings, teachers should reflect on their own discursive practices behaviors in the classroom and pay attention to their talk in the classroom and its effect on the students' talk. They should try to replace IRF structure with more complex structures that help them produce creative language to improve their communicative interaction. They should also refrain from asking too many display questions and intentionally resort more to referential questions to encourage their students to provide

significantly longer and syntactically more complex and coherent utterances in the class. In fact, they should be aware of the fact that classroom discourse should create opportunities for genuine interaction in the language classroom rather than to center on a static interactional pattern where the interactions between the teachers and the students seem to be more like interrogations rather than real language. Therefore, teachers should provide students with more opportunities to interact with one another to make the classroom talk spontaneous, reciprocal and natural. To achieve this, they should moderate their control of the class and encourage their students to introduce topics of their own choice and take turns freely to produce coherent utterances so as to increase their target language output and improve their discourse competence.

Conclusion

This study investigated the impact of classroom discourse on the development of EFL learners' discourse competence. The findings revealed that a large amount of the talk in the classroom was dominated by the teachers whose objectives were to impart knowledge to students rather than to develop their communication competence in general and their discourse competence in particular. In addition, the teachers' talk was characterized by repetition, simple language, lack of discourse features and unnatural low rate of speech to help learners understand the language they use. The teachers' modifications seemed to influence the students' discourse negatively since their responses were brief, incoherent and void of discourse features. The findings also revealed that the teachers used significantly more display questions than referential questions (70% against 30 %) in classrooms with more focus on checking their students' background knowledge and to remind them of the things from previous lessons. The findings also revealed that there was a tendency from the part of the teachers to use the patterns of communication known as IRF moves (Initiation- Response-Feedback/evaluation) where the initiation of the teachers and their feedback take up a high proportion of the classroom talk. This pattern of communication seemed to prevent the students from building up cohesive and coherent utterances and generating discourse.

The study has inevitably two basic limitations. First, the findings cannot be generalized since only three teachers (each of the teachers was observed only once) participated in the research study. A second limitation is the time span in which the classroom observation was done. Indeed, the observation took two hours and a half, a short amount of time, considering the fact that language learning especially in the field of interactional processes is a complex and difficult process.

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