Making sense of not making sense: Novice English language teacher talk

Phiona Stanley[a,*], Marie Stevenson[b]

[a] School of Education, UNSW Sydney, Australia
[b] School of Education and Social Work, University of Sydney, Australia

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study critically examines the intelligibility of the teacher talk of novice native speaker English language teachers. It focuses on difficulties teachers face in adjusting their own English so that their learners can understand them. The paper uses two data sources: learners' perceptions of recorded teacher talk and analysis of the teacher talk itself. For the teacher talk analysis, the study develops an integrated framework based on key concepts from Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL). This analysis showed the complex interplay between different levels of meaning, as well as the roles played by both the immediate situational context and the broader cultural context. In particular, the analysis illustrated the crucial roles that both textual meaning (e.g. coherence and cohesion) and context play in the intelligibility of teacher talk. The broader implications of the study for research and teaching relating to intercultural discourse both inside and outside the classroom are discussed.

1. Introduction

The current study was inspired by a tour taken of the historic Port Arthur penal settlement in Tasmania, Australia. The tour guide, a speaker of Australian English, was explaining the history of the settlement to a group of tourists of mixed language backgrounds, and appeared to be unaware that his commentary was going over the heads of some. In a segment of the tour, the guide explains:

Now, what was situated there was the stockade, so to call it, of the barracks, and they had the hospital up the hill here. And in between the two, very conveniently located, was the flogging yard. Now I'll just talk briefly for a moment about flogging because it was a very important part of the culture here for the first, first half of the settlement only. This is because it was a military thing, flogging, and the military had been in charge here for some time and that's the way they treated their own men for discipline. Here in Port Arthur you could get a maximum of a hundred lashes. You were tied up to a wooden tripod there and stretched out like so, very tight on the back muscles. You were taken to with a cat of nine tails, a wooden-handled instrument, yay so long, with nine separate pieces of either hemp, rope or leather attached to it with little knots tied up inside each one

of those pieces. And generally speaking after, and after thirty or forty lashes you'd start to get bone exposed, and beyond that you'd start to get basically a quivering mess of jelly, there, on your back.

(Excerpt from Port Arthur tour commentary, recorded 5 Feb 2013)

In addition to his Australian accent, the tour guide's speech is full of specialized vocabulary, colloquialisms, and structural complexity. Reflection on this experience inspired the present study: if a tour guide working with international visitors seemingly had little awareness of how to 'grade' his own English for global listeners, might the same be true of teachers working with English language learners?

Teachers in English language classrooms, particularly novice teachers, may be unaware of how difficult their language use can be for their learners to understand. Even those who *are* aware of potential pitfalls may nevertheless find it challenging to adjust their language appropriately. The skill of 'language grading' is therefore taught on some English language teacher-education courses, and Thornbury and Watkins (2007) define language grading as 'the way teachers simplify their classroom language in the interests of intelligibility' (p. 207). They offer the following advice:

Adjusting your language for the level of the learners you are teaching can be very difficult but is a very important teaching skill. It is important that the models you give learners remain

* Corresponding author.
  E-mail address: phiona.stanley@unsw.edu.au (P. Stanley).

reasonably natural because learners will pick these up. The language which it is appropriate to use with a low level class will be significantly different from the language used with a higher class, although it should remain natural. It is not necessary that learners understand every word you say (p. 34).

This study investigates this issue of 'language grading' and examines the intelligibility of teacher talk of three trainee teachers teaching mixed nationality learners. The teachers were enrolled in a Cambridge Certificate in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (CELTA) course in Australia. This setting has been chosen because pre-service TESOL teacher education courses such as CELTA are an arena in which language grading skills are explicitly taught to novice teachers.

2. Teacher talk in the language classroom

Teacher talk is talk in which teachers engage in the classroom. It is sometimes also referred to as 'classroom discourse', a broader term that encompasses both teacher and student talk. Christie (2002) distinguishes two registers of teacher talk that are interwoven in patterned ways to form the fabric of classroom teaching: a regulative register (e.g. setting goals, giving instructions, sequencing tasks) and an instructional register (i.e. content being taught).

Whereas teacher talk in mainstream classrooms has been described as 'decontextualized, complex and cognitively demanding' (Schleppegrell, 2004, p. xi), teacher talk in language classrooms is generally characterized in terms of its simplification. Teachers 'grade' their language to take into account the language proficiency of their learners. These modifications have been described primarily in terms of formal categories, such as phonology, lexis and syntax. In terms of phonology, teachers make adjustments such as slowing their rate of speech and articulating more clearly by avoiding features of connected speech such as contractions, liaison and assimilation (Ivanova, 2011). Studies have also shown that teachers tend to use higher frequency vocabulary items, fewer pronouns and less complex syntactic structures (Saito & van Poeteren, 2012).

Teacher talk in the language classroom has some similarities with other forms of modified talk such as caretaker talk (the register adults use when talking to children) and foreigner talk (the register that native-speakers use when talking to non-native speakers in situations outside the classroom). Despite its similarities to other forms of modified talk, however, it is generally recognized that language classroom discourse comprises a distinct genre with distinctive rhetorical features, such as the two registers identified above by Christie, and shaped by its social purpose (e.g. Hallett, 2000). Purposes of teacher talk in the language classroom that set it apart from other kinds of talk both inside and outside the classroom are its role in modeling the target language for learners and providing input that assists them in acquiring this language.

Theorization and research on teacher talk in English-language classrooms has historically been built on the notion of the native speaker (NS) teacher as the model of proficiency to which language learners should aspire (Doherty & Singh, 2008), and teachers are often instructed to avoid the kinds of ungrammatical modifications found in foreigner talk outside the classroom (e.g. Thornbury & Watkins, 2007). In addition, teachers being trained in communicative language teaching (CLT) are instructed to make use of context to illustrate meaning and to create opportunities for learners to negotiate meaning. The application of these instructional techniques in the classroom has consequences for the discourse structure, interaction patterns, and linguistic choices in the instructional register, thus adding to the challenges that trainee teachers face in grading their language.

Little attention has been given to the difficulties that teachers may have in juggling accuracy and intelligibility. Difficulties with language grading is an issue of importance for teacher training, and ultimately also has broader potential implications for communication in settings outside the classroom as well.

3. Theoretical perspectives

Broadly, we distinguish three theoretical perspectives in scholarship on teacher talk in the language classroom: the input perspective, the intelligibility perspective, and the interaction perspective. The input perspective views teacher talk in terms of whether it provides comprehensible input for the purpose of language acquisition; the intelligibility perspective views teacher talk in terms of whether it can be understood; and the interaction perspective views classroom interactions between teachers and students in terms of their broader social and pedagogical dimensions. The brief overview below focuses only on the first two perspectives, as these are most relevant to the current study, which focuses on teacher discourse only. For teacher talk research with an interactional perspective, see Thornbury (1996), Walsh (2002), and Gibbons (2003).

The input perspective, which dominated research in the 1980s, was strongly influenced by Krashen's (1982) input hypothesis on the development of learners' interlanguage. This hypothesis stated that for learners to develop from their current level of interlanguage (stage i) to a higher level (stage $i+1$) learners needed to be exposed to input that contains $i+1$. Krashen made a distinction between roughly tuned and finely tuned input, and emphasized that 'natural, communicative, roughly-tuned, comprehensible input' was preferable to 'finely-tuned input that aims directly at $i+1$.' Thus, Krashen believed that in order to comprehend the teacher, learners did not need to understand every word and that teachers could make use of contextual information and world knowledge to support comprehension. Apart from describing modifications that teachers make to their discourse, research carried out within this perspective has also examined areas such as whether input modifications lead to language acquisition (e.g. Loschky, 1994), the aspects of input modification most critical to comprehension (e.g. Parker & Chaudron, 1987) and factors affecting learners' attention to teacher talk (e.g. Wang, 2015).

The intelligibility perspective focuses on the extent to which speakers of different varieties of English, including NS varieties, can make themselves intelligible to listeners beyond their own language variety, including learners of English as a second (ESL) or foreign language (EFL). This perspective has its origins in World Englishes scholarship that examines the cross-varietal intelligibility of Englishes and the speech accommodation that takes place when speakers of different varieties of English communicate. Initially, this scholarship focused predominantly on pronunciation, and in particular, accent. However, the focus was broadened by scholars such as Smith (1992) and Nelson (2011), who developed a tripartite intelligibility framework. This framework distinguishes three aspects of intelligibility: intelligibility, comprehensibility, and interpretability. Somewhat confusingly, as well as referring to the superordinate term, intelligibility is also a category in the framework that refers to the decoding of the phonology of words and utterances, including recognizing boundaries, distinguishing combinations of sounds, and word and sentence stress patterns. This latter meaning of intelligibility is sometimes referred to as 'phonological intelligibility' (Berns, 2008). Comprehensibility refers to understanding propositional meaning, and interpretability refers to understanding speakers' communicative intentions, that is, the illocutionary force underlying utterances. The notion of interpretability encompasses semantics and speech acts, but does