EFL CLASSROOM DISCOURSE

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Abstract

Research results in the part pointed out that second language (L2) learning would not simply extrapolate from first language (L1) acquisition or from general learning theories. Therefore, teachers need to understand ways students learn L2 as well as the nature of the classroom that leads to effective learning of instructional contents. The present study aimed to explore different types of discourses in an EFL classroom, occurring as a result of teacher-centered interactions in class. The data revealed that the teacher mainly asked question and gave feedback to students' answers. That is, interaction generated in the EFL classroom was predominantly a teacher-centered question-answer-feedback interaction during which knowledge was displayed and evaluated. Instead, classroom interaction should be a dynamic process involving cooperation between the teacher and students to ensure acquisition of optimal input he or she needs to provide as well as the kinds of interaction he or she needs to generate.

Background

Since the emphasis of second language (L2) learning is shifted from linguistic forms to communicative approach, there has been an increasing attempt in research on teaching and learning from instruction, student behaviors in classrooms and learning outcomes. Consequently, various personality traits, attitudinal and cognitive factors as well as individual or social influences which are thought to affect classroom behaviors have been the focus of instructional research. Recent research into second language acquisition has been based on the assumption that a person learns a second language because he needs to communicate in the language (Chaudron, 1993; Gardner, 2001; Gardner & MacIntyre, 1993; Well, 1994). However, does it mean that using L2 to communicate in a variety of contexts is a more effective way for L2 learners to master the L2 rule system than learning L2 from a direct instruction? Or does it mean that learners of L2 can pick up the language if they have a chance to use the language to communicate in the classroom?

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One of the observable trends in the field of L2 instruction is the promotion of discourse skills among learners. This trend is also associated with the development of "communicative competence." The concept of communicative competence, which has become so influential in language teaching in the past decade, has resulted in a new emphasis on the nature of interaction and the rules in a discourse" (Kramsch, 1981, p.81). Hymes (1972) defines 'communicative competence' as the speaker's ability to produce appropriate utterances, not only grammatical competence (or implicit and explicit knowledge of the rules of grammar) but also contextual or socio-linguistic competence (knowledge of the rules of language use). Based on this definition, kramsch (1981) identifies the three major aspects of communicative competence as: 1). a grammatical competence necessary to make oneself understood (locutionary acts), 2). a pragmatic competence (illocutionary acts), 3). a discursive competence (conversational acts).

Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson's (1974) found that conversational mechanisms involve social interactions in EFL classroom. They further identified the components of 'natural discourse' as follows:

1. Turn taking: is one of the most important strategies of conversation. There is an underlying rule in most cultures that at least and not more than one party talks at a time. Speakers have a range of possibilities for controlling the next turn. Silence between turns creates a problem and participants feel that a silence is attributable usually to some intended next speakers. This puts a pressure not on the previous speaker to continue but on potential next speakers to take the turn. There is a low tolerance of silence between turns.
2. Moves: the basic unit in conversation. Conversation is structured by four major combinations of moves.
   a. Chaining: Question → Answer →Question → Answer
   b. Insertion: an insertion sequence suggests to the speaker "If you can answer this one, I can answer yours." The purpose is for clarification not for changing the topic.
   c. Side sequence: a request for clarification that temporarily interrupts the flow of conversation.
   d. Tying: Utterances are not isolated but tied to proceeding utterances. Tying ensures a cohesive exchange and shows that the speaker has understood previous utterances.
3. Topic: A conversation that is progressing well drifts imperceptibly from one topic to another. In addition, speakers must constantly choose what is suitable to 'tell' in the course of a conversation. When speakers have nothing to say, they have to use their turn to produce markers like 'all right,' 'ok,' 'so' or 'well and inform their participants. (Based on Kramsh's explanation)

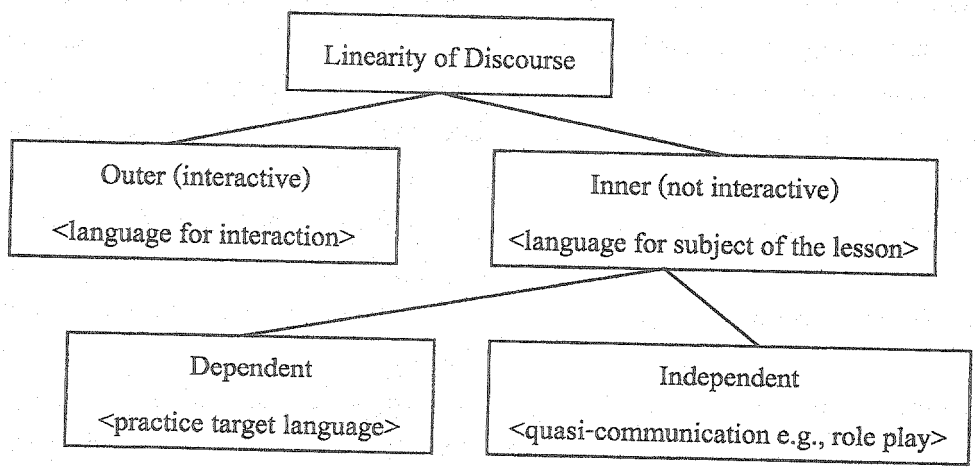
However, some studies of the sociolinguistic rules of classroom discourse have pointed out that utterances in the classroom serve functions different from those in social discourse. For example, Tsui (1987) pointed out that in the classroom discourse, the shared assumptions between the speaker and the hearer are much well-defined. The teacher is the figure of the authority and scholar who transmits information to the students. Students' performance has to be evaluated by the teacher. When asked a question, a student has to answer the question. A refusal to do so would be out of order and is likely to have a negative evaluation by the teacher. Sinclair and Coulthard (1975) explain that the traditional pattern for teacher/students interaction is T-P-T, T-P-T. The teachers use their 'reserved right to talk again after their first question has been answered. While doing this, they perform two moves, first comment then question. Usually in the classroom, teachers' responses to students' replies could also be evaluation of those replies; questions are sometimes being asked to check students' knowledge. (Kramsch, 1981: 16) notes that "moves occurred in classroom discourse in certain cycles patterns or combinations which we designated teaching cycles. A typical teaching cycle begins either with a structuring or soliciting move, ... continues with a responding move by the student addressed and ends with an evaluative reaction by the teacher." Tsui (1987) also described in her paper "...in classroom discourse, however, the 'initiating move' of an exchange is often not negotiable and the 'follow-up move' evaluates the 'responding move'..." (p.337). Students in the EFL classroom usually practice formal linguistic items in their exchanges and this is not the case in a natural social discourse. Apart from the functional differences, other researchers argue that a large amount of interactions or exchanges in the EFL classroom are the same as the social discourse. Widdowson (1978) refers to this identical part of exchange as 'natural' and that of the different part as 'pedagogically processed' and 'contrived.'

So far, most of the classroom discourse studies have been done based on the segmental output data collected by the participant or non-participant observations (Gardner, 2001; Gardner & MacIntyre, 1993; Well, 1994). However, a segment of the product cannot be the only tool to access the classroom process or measure of classroom success, since other variables may have played a decisive role as well, such as individual effort and aptitude of learners, social and cultural factors, exposure unrelated to the classroom and so on. The classroom researchers cannot take isolated utterances categorize them, add them up and compare them in a straightforward manner. The utterances have to be studied in the context of their production. Classroom researchers doing on-the-spot coding with checklists cannot go beyond the immediately preceding and following utterances.

In order to make a systematic analysis of the data, an objective descriptive tool is necessary so that the remarks made on the data will not be too arbitrary. So far many systems of classroom observation have been proposed. The followings are examples of analysis systems.

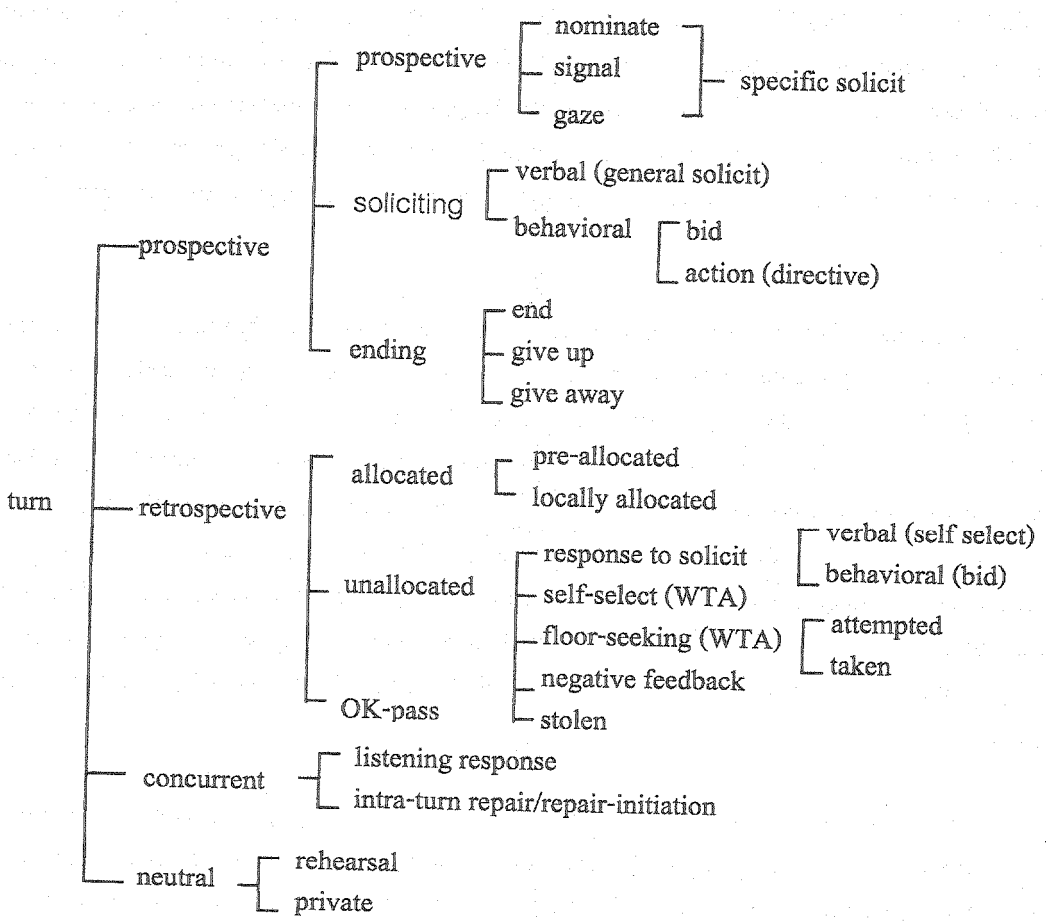
Wells (1981) distinguishes between two different uses of language in an EFL classroom: language as the medium of instruction and language as the subject matter of the lesson.

Figure 1: Different uses of the language in an EFL classroom



van Lier (1988) identifies that learners and teachers engage in and option for speaking that are available to them. He also constructed his coding system as follows:

Figure 2: van Lier's classroom discourse coding system



WTA = When Turn Available

WTNA + When Turn Not Available

Ellis (1988) claimed that students will learn most successfully when they are given ample opportunities to interact in conversations characterized by the following eight conditions: quantity of intake, a need to communicate, independent control of the propositional content, adherence to the here-and-now principle, the performance of a range of speech acts, an input rich in directives, an input rich in extending utterances and uninhibited practice. Based on the above conditions, his classroom discourse coding system tried to see how different types of classroom interaction were successful in providing an input that met the eight conditions.

Table 1: Ellis' classroom discourse coding system

Types of classroom interaction	conditions							
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Core Goal								
A. Medium-oriented								
1). Grammar								
2). formulate								
B. Message-oriented								
C. Activity-oriented								
1). P-P								
2). P-T								
3). P-P (T)								
2. Framework Goals								
A. Teacher language (T-P)								
B. Pupil language (P-T)								
3. Social Goals								
Potentially facilitative								

Besides the above table, based on speech functions, Ellis (1988) constructed another checklist based on the following categories: command, question, statement, offer, acknowledge, responding statement, comply and replay.

In addition, Tsui (1987) constructed her Seven-Category System:

Tale 2: Tsui's seven-category system for classroom discourse analysis

	Move	Act	Sub-Categorization
Teacher Talk	Initiating	1. Elicit	A. Display Qs a) Factual Q b) Yes-No Q c) Reasoning Q. d) Explanation Q. B. Genuine Qs C. Re-stating Elicit
		2. Direct	
		3. Nominated	
		4. Inform	
		5. Recapitulate	
		6. Frame	
		7. Starter	
		8. Check	
	Respond	9. Evaluate	a). Encouraging/positive b). Negative
		10. Accept	
		11. Comment	
		12. Clue	
Pupil Talk	Respond	13. Reply	a). Restricted b). Expanded
		14. Apologize	
	Initiate	15. Request	
		16. Elicit	
		17. Interrupt	

The problem of identifying and distinguishing real, or communicative or natural language from mechanical or 'pseudo-communication' or 'contrived' language is a problem which faces all foreign language classroom analysts (Tsui, 1987). Descriptions of EFL classroom discourse should be able to reflect all different types of interaction. However, none of the above coding system could give a whole picture of an EFL classroom discourse or how they differ from a real social discourse. Wells' model is too restricted and leaves out much valuable information about EFL classroom discourse. van Lier's table is subjective. Different researchers could category sentences differently based on their own subjectivity. Ellis's model covered a broader view about EFL classroom discourse but lost much detail information, for example, every move or turn taking in the discourse. Sinclair and Couthard's or Tsui's categorization of utterances according to the function they perform in the discourse and their place in the structure of the discourse. The

identification of the categories based on linguistic criteria enables a more objective analysis of the data.

Objectives

The objectives of the study are as follows:

1. To study the EFL classroom discourse,
2. To investigate classroom interactions between the teacher and learners,
3. To identify the type of classroom interactions found
4. To explore the contexts that lead to classroom interaction

Method

The population of this study was adult Thai learners who were studying English as a foreign language at a language center in Bangkok in 2001. These learners studied in a general English course which aimed to:

(1) upgrade the general English language level of the learners, with special emphasis on pronunciation, appropriacy and grammatical accuracy,

(2) provide an enjoyable and productive experience of the target language and its culture, and

(3) develop the learners' confidence and ability to use English for both professional and personal purposes.

The participants in this study were selected by means of convenient sampling. That is, the language center, the teacher and the learners agreed to participate in the study. The teacher was female American native speaker who had about 6 years of teaching experience in Thailand. Of 10 learners in the group, six were female and four were male. All were university graduates and were working in different private companies. They did not know one another before entering the course. Since they paid a certain amount of money in order to enroll in the course, it was assumed that they had motivation to learn and use English.

The class met twice a week, two hours for each session held in the evening after work. The teacher claimed that the teaching method in this classroom was 'communicative approach.' Therefore, the learners were given chances to communicate. The researcher observed the class, made field notes, audiotape recorded all eight sessions over for four weeks.

Materials

The coding system used in the study was adapted from the previously stated coding system, especially Tsui's Seven-Category System which covered a great portion of the data in the study.

Table 3: The coding system used in the present study

	Move	Act	Sub-Categorization
Teacher Talk	Initiating	Questions (Qs)	1. Display a. direct b. indirect 2. Genuine a. direct b. indirect 3. Checking
		Self-answered	
		Nominated	
		Inform	
		Repeat	
		Starter	
		Framing	
		Prompt	
		Ok-pass	
	Respond	Clue	
		Inform	
		Replay	
		Interruption	
		Reaction	
	Follow-up	Evaluate	1). Encouraging/positive 2). Negative
		Accept	
		Comment	
		Monitor	
		acknowledgement	
Student Talk	Initiating	Request	
		Interruption	
		Inform	
	Respond	Replay	
		Reaction	
	Follow-up	Acknowledgement	
		Comment	
		evaluate	Positive/negative

Remark: The definitions of the above terms can be found in the appendix section

Findings and discussion of finding

Based on the transcriptions she had, the researcher tried to remark every utterance in the classroom discourse in order to see all the different types of discourse in the class and also the differences between the EFL classroom discourse and social discourse. In order to address these two issues, the construction of a taxonomic analysis is necessary.

The most obvious rules of the discourse reflected in the structure of an exchange in this EFL classroom were an "initiating move" (I), a "responding move" (R) and a "follow-up move" (F). Most of the time, initiating moves were made by the teacher, followed by one or more students' responding moves and then the teacher would give a follow-up move. Usually, the teacher gave her negative or positive feelings about the responses and provided comments or evaluation in her follow-up moves. For example,

(I) T: What would you say to a new friend on the first day at work?

(R) S: Hello, I'm Pam. What's your name?

(F) T: Very good, now probably you will start making a small talk to that person, right? (positive feeling)

(F) T: For American, we usually say 'hi' rather than just smiling like Thais. (comment)

If students took the initiating moves, most of the time they were requests which would be followed by the teacher's responding move and students' follow-up move which indicated acknowledgement.

S: What should we do next?

T: Oh, check with your partner if your answers are the same.

S: Okay.

From my transcription, I found that most of the teacher's initiating moves were questions. The questions could be categorized as 'display Qs' (the teacher already had an answer in her mind), or 'genuine Q' (the teacher did not have her own answer prepared). Both display and genuine questions can be asked in a direct (a question form) or indirect way (not in a question form but required an answer from the students). Some of the initiating questions were 're-stating Qs (repeating the previous Q or simplify it) or 'checking Qs' (checking for understanding or comprehension).

Types of Questions	Examples
Display direct	What have we learned?
Display indirect	The lady was . . . (Ss: frightened)
Genuine Direct	Can anyone give examples?
Genuine Indirect	I don't know the Thai word for this. (The teacher started looking at students and waiting for an answer.)
Re-stating	Anything else you can say about this? Anything else?
Checking	Anybody has any questions?
	Are you following me?
	Do you understand?

In many occasions, the teacher answered her own questions right after posing those questions. The researcher call them as 'self-answered questions.' For example,

1. Now what is this 'who'? This is the relative pronoun. Is that correct? Relative pronoun. Why? Because they're related. It makes the relationships, the connection between the person and what's the definition the person is.
2. But where it comes from? It comes from moving like this.
3. Calm down. Never say that. What's the answer gonna be? I don't want to calm down.

Students' responses also differed. They could be self-selected or nominated by the teacher. In self-select responses, there could be a single student or two or more simultaneous turns called "schismic talk." Schismic talk usually happened when students tried to rehearse the linguistic form or phrase they learned before or just learned (Tsui, 1987).

1. T: So, if I say to A, let's do lunch. All I am saying to her is what?
   Ss: Let's have lunch.
   Have lunch today.
2. T: We can put here quesiton words. What are question words?
   Ss: What
   T: Yeah. 'What'
   Ss: When, how, who, why.

Long (1981) clarifies that input and interaction are considered two distinguishable phenomena; the examination of one cannot be made with the absence of the other. If the interaction consists of mainly the teacher's questions and students' answers, the input will inevitably consist of the linguistic forms of questions. Moreover, modified interaction will probably have more comprehensible input. When examining the data in the study, we can conclude the following characteristics of the existing classroom discourse as follows:

1. Teacher talk took up the major portion of all talks.
2. More than half of teacher talk was teacher-initiate.
3. Only a little amount of student-initiate and most of which consists of requests.
4. The acts which took up a high percentage of talk in this class were 'questions,' 'replay' and 'accept.'

These findings show that the teacher-student interaction was predominantly that of the teacher asking questions and the students giving answers which were then accepted by the teacher. Almost all exchanges were initiated by the teacher, using display questions. In many occasions, these display questions were modified. Sometimes, the teacher asked genuine questions but she expected the students to give an answer which agreed with what she had in mind. Therefore, it is not difficult to find that the output of these students in the teacher-led discourse consisted of mostly 'student responses' which were restricted to replies of a word or a phrase of a recitation of a sentences from the text book or blackboard. Because 'display questions' do not invite learners to respond at length, even less to initiate new topics and sustain interaction (Tsui, 1987).

The input provided by the teacher was mainly of questions and feedback to students' answer. In the teacher's questions, direct questions an their restatement took up a very significant portion. Checking question took a lesser part in the teacher talk and even lesser for the genuine questions. This is one of the main differences between the natural social discourse and an EFL classroom discourse. In contrast, in a natural setting, participants ask more genuine questions, not much display questions. Therefore, students need the skills to respond to genuine questions in the real world.

How much input will become 'intake' depends heavily on its comprehensibility made by the modification of input (Krashen, 1981). The modification can be in the form of linguistic simplification, such as lexical substitution, substitution of yes-no for wh-questions, decomposition or repetition. There were two major types of modification in the data of this study, repetition and simplification. Repetition means keeping the same linguistic form and simply repeating the same question again (with or without slower the speed). Simplifications mean that the teacher rephrased the question so that it became linguistically less demanding. From the researcher's observation, when the teacher simplified her question, she could elicit more responses from the students and the interaction would be richer. There was no direct evidence to support the idea that the consistent simplifications could facilitate better L2 acquisition in the long run but it did provide more comprehensible input and had an immediate effects on the students.

Besides the above questions types of initiations, the teacher also used other types of initiations which never happened in student talk. Self-answer question was like the teacher's monopoly. With her authority and the role of a scholar and information provider, she assumed that students did not understand the given information. So, she answered the questions by herself after asking the questions. Although the self-answer initiation had a question form linguistically, it was not a real question which requested an answer from others. The nominating and framing moves in this classroom revealed the teacher's right of controlling the next speaker and the learning process. The teacher also used the prompt move to slow down the path and encourage students to talk more; and the okay-pass to move on.

In the 'respond' and 'follow-up' moves, the teacher again shows her superior right. As a scholar, she provided right information, gave clues, interrupted and evaluated student talk. The number of the teacher's acts also inform readers that she probably controlled the talk most of the time. It is obviously found that the interaction generated in this EFL classroom was predominantly a teacher-centered, question-answer-feedback interaction during which knowledge was displayed and evaluated. Even though the teacher knew a lot of theories about how to improve L2 acquisition and tried to imitate the kind of native speaker (NS)- non-native speaker (NNS) conversation outside the classroom, it was still able to conclude that the EFL classroom could not be the same as natural conversation. The real NS-NNS conversation outside the classroom contains a much richer variety of interaction pattern. The message is the major concern in social discourse and display questions seldom occur. However, this does not mean that the classroom instruction is of no use. It just needs some improvements.

Compared with the teacher-led discourse, the group discussion had more participants taking turns in the discourse. The size or length of each turn was almost equal for each turn. There were less questions, less repetitions and more interruptions in group discussion. In the teacher-lead discussion, the teacher often interrupted and had the floor back to her most of the time. There were little interruptions between one student to another in the teacher-lead discussion. However, students interrupted each other very often in the group discussion.

Another interesting phenomenon found in the group discussion is about the schismic talk. Schismic talk during whole-class activities is often regarded as disruptive since intelligibility is a requirement of most verbal interactions. In EFL classrooms, whenever centralized attention is required, one speaker speaks at any one time and many can speak at once only if they say the same thing or at least if the simultaneous talk remains intelligible (van Lier, 1988). In teacher-lead discussion, if there is a schismic talk, in order to keep the intelligibility the teacher would pick up one or two answers and ignored the others. For example,

T: No, a couch potato is a category of what?
SS: people
person
T: people, people, people, You see what I mean…

However, in the group discussion, the schismic talk went on and on for a longer period of time and thus caused a lot of misunderstandings. Although schismic talk is different from interruption, it would certainly result in more interruptions. Therefore, there were more interruptions in group discussion than in teacher-led discourse as I mentioned before. There was a type of interruption in the group discussion which differed from others. This type of interruption did not seek the stand. It aimed at helping other students, and returned the stand back to the speaker right away, for example,

S2: Yeah they think worth. But it still couldn't cover their
r r
S1: their cost
S2: the cost that they
S1: … So how can you get people to stay? Some people give
the ad ad
S2: advice
S1: advice that they should build a second new park. But …

If we follow Swain's (1985) principle of "comprehensible output" which claims that greater proficiency results from productivity in classroom, then the group discussion really can help L2 acquisition because based on my observation, students did speak more in their group than in the teacher-led discussion. Each turn was shorter in a group. That is, each member had more chance to speak out. Besides, more interruption in small group indicated that without the superior

authority (the teacher), students felt free to talk because they assumed every one in the group had equal ability and they should contribute the same. While in the teacher-led discussion, the teacher was the resource person, she knew more and of course she should speak more. Krashen (1981) also argues that the language that learners address to each other may come quite close to meeting "input-requirements" because it is "more natural and more usually understood." Even students who are homogeneous will have a different lexical knowledge of the target language which can be shared in interaction with other students. Besides, as Ellis (1988, 1990) pointed out, if students allowed to take the lead in the classroom discussion, they can adjust their own discourse contributions to provide an appropriate level of input. This idea was also supported by my observation.

However, the group work is not without its weakness. Ellis mentioned that in group discussion the students will not receive an input sufficiently rich in those L2 features they are ready to develop. If they are only exposed to the restricted language of other students, their interlanguage may pidginise. The study could not provide a direct support for this argument; however, from the observation of schismic talk, it was found that there were many mistakes without being corrected in the group discussion. There were also a lot of misunderstanding in it. Whether this disadvantage would affect L2 acquisition in the long run needs a further study.

There is a widely shared belief among teachers and students that the EFL classroom is a place for imparting knowledge about the target language and where the linguistic core of the lesson is the main concern. Krashen (1982) also indicated that a very inactive role of the students not only deprived them of a chance to put the target language into communicative use but also affected the quality of the input. As Tsui (1987) pointed out, meaningful communication should be pervasive in the classroom. The more important issue is how to exploit the classroom more fully so that this kind of meaningful communication becomes an essential part of language teaching and learning, not being treated as peripheral. Similar to NS-NNS conversation outside the classroom, classroom interaction should have a dynamic process which involves the co-operation of the teacher and the students so that optimal input will be obtained. Moreover, the teacher is not the only source of input. Students can raise questions, ask for explanation, and interrupt the discourse. While doing these, they are helping the teacher to tune the input to the right level, so the acquisition will occur. In other words, the EFL classroom can be an excellent place for L2 acquisition if the teacher is aware of what kinds of input he/she provides and what kind of interaction he/she generates in his/her classroom.

In this study the researcher has tried to offer more to the literature on EFL classroom discourse. However, the study does not really explain the cultural and psychological aspects of the EFL classroom discourse. These issues may render more meaningful answers to the classroom-based researchers in general. Therefore, further studies are needed to explain the effect of these aspects on EFL classrooms.

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