Improving Students' Oral Interaction in the EFL Classrooms at Ton Duc Thang University in Vietnam

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Abstract

The purposes of this research were to investigate the reasons of students' low oral interaction at Ton Duc Thang University (TDTU) and then offer some activities to maximize their oral participation. In the first stage, the questionnaires were dispatched 96 students. The findings revealed the backgrounds and significant factors leading to their low oral interaction. From these causes, some oral activities were proposed to enhance the students' oral participation. In the next stage, the researcher selected two class samplings of similar level of speaking and listening for observations. The 10 observations were conducted in the two classes. The suggested oral activities were applied to the experimental class. The students in this class were taught with a purposive sampling method in which oral activities were adopted to improve their oral interaction. Flanders' Interaction Analysis System (FIAS) was used to secure quantity of oral interaction in the classroom. Time sampling for each observed classroom was for 35 minutes in a 45-minute period. The data revealed evident discrepancies of students' oral participation between the two classes. The number of oral interactions in the experimental class increased considerably.

Keywords : oral interaction, display question, referential question, wait-time

บทคัดย่อ

วิจัยนี้มีวัตถุประสงค์เพื่อศึกษาเหตุผลของการมีปฏิสัมพันธ์ทางวาจาของนักศึกษาที่อยู่ในระดับต่ำที่มหาวิทยาลัยทัน ดุค ทาง (TDTU) และเสนอกิจกรรมต่างๆ เพื่อเพิ่มการมีส่วนร่วมในการพูดให้มากที่สุดในขั้นตอนแรก มีการแจกแบบสอบถามให้กับนักศึกษาจำนวน 96 คน ผลการวิจัยแสดงให้เห็นถึงภูมิหลังและปัจจัยสำคัญต่างๆที่นำไปสู่มีปฏิสัมพันธ์ทางวาจาที่อยู่ในระดับต่ำ จากสาเหตุเหล่านี้ มีการจัดกิจกรรมทางการพูดต่างๆ เพื่อเสริมสร้างการมีส่วนร่วมในการพูดของนักศึกษาให้มากขึ้นในขั้นตอนถัดมา ผู้วิจัยได้เลือก 2 กลุ่มตัวอย่างชั้นเรียนที่มีระดับการพูดและการฟังที่คล้ายกันเพื่อสังเกตการณ์ มีการสังเกตการณ์สองกลุ่มนั้นจำนวน 10 ครั้ง โดยนำกิจกรรมการพูดต่างๆที่ได้รับการแนะนำไปใช้ในกลุ่มทดลอง นักศึกษาในชั้นนี้ถูกสอนด้วยวิธีการสุ่มแบบเจาะจงซึ่งใช้กิจกรรมการพูดในการพัฒนาปฏิสัมพันธ์ทางวาจาของนักศึกษาให้ดีขึ้น โดยใช้ระบบการวิเคราะห์ปฏิสัมพันธ์ของฟลานเดอร์ (FIAS) เพื่อควบคุมปริมาณการมีปฏิสัมพันธ์ทางวาจาในชั้นเรียน ใช้เวลาในการสังเกตการณ์กลุ่มตัวอย่างแต่ละชั้นเรียนเป็นเวลา 35 นาทีจากคาบเรียน 45 นาที ข้อมูลแสดงให้เห็นถึงความแตกต่างอย่างเห็นได้ชัดของการมีส่วนร่วมทางการพูดของนักศึกษาระหว่างสองชั้นเรียน การมีปฏิสัมพันธ์ทางวาจาในชั้นเรียนทดลองนั้นเพิ่มขึ้นเป็นอย่างมาก

คำสำคัญ : ปฏิสัมพันธ์ทางวาจา คำถามทวนความจำ คำถามเพื่อหาคำตอบ ช่วงเวลารอ

1. Introduction

It is undeniable that English has been the most common and important language. In Vietnam, English has been taught as a main subject at every level of education from primary school to university. The vital objective of teaching English is to help students use it in communication. However, after the seven-year-study of English, the problem is that most students still cannot communicate in English well.

1.1 Classroom oral interaction

In communicative approach of language teaching, oral interaction becomes an important feature of second language pedagogy. It implies that students interact with others by speaking in class, answering and asking questions, making comments, or taking part in discussions. Rivers (1987) wrote "...Through interaction, students can increase their language store as they listen to or read authentic linguistic material, or even output of their fellow students in discussions, skits, joint problem-solving tasks,

or dialogue journals. In interaction, students can use all they possess of the language – all they have learned or casually absorbed – in real life exchanges…" Rivers (1987, pp. 4-5). Oral interaction can occur between the teacher and learners, and/or between learners themselves, either collectively or individually.

1.2 Teacher questioning

Questioning is a common technique used in English language teaching to check if students understand what has been taught, to enhance their involvement, and to promote their creative thinking in classroom interaction. Through questioning, the teacher may get students' responses as well as evaluate their knowledge and understanding of subject matter. In Ur's view (2000), the teacher questioning serves the purposes such as letting students present their ideas, testing students' knowledge or skills, encouraging students to actively participate in the classroom interactions, stimulating students' thinking, and getting them to review and practice previous lessons. In general, questioning process has its potential to stimulate students' interaction, thinking and learning. There are two kinds of questions such as "display" and "referential" questions. "Display" questions are the questions for which the teacher knows the answers beforehand and requires learners to display knowledge. "Referential" questions are the questions whose answers are not already known by the teacher. Therefore, they have greater potential to generate social discourses.

1.3 Wait-time

In order to improve students' oral interactions, English teachers need to take into account the device: wait-time. According to Rowe (1974), wait-time is the length of time a teacher pauses after asking a question. After raising a question, teachers tend to wait only one second or less for a student's response. A suitable pause should last 3-4 seconds of uninterrupted silence since wait-time strictly connects to improvements in student achievement. In fact, wait-time helps to increase the length of students' responses, stimulates the variety of responses, and decreases students' failure to respond.

1.4 Feedback and Correction

Speaking is always one of the most difficult skills for students to promote because it requires students to both produce the target language and construct the appropriate and correct utterances simultaneously. Therefore, students frequently make errors in speaking. Nunan (1989) asserts that one of the functions of teachers

in the classroom is to correct students' errors. Errors are inevitable indicators of the progress in language learning. According to Hendrickson (1978, 1981), errors show that learning is taking place. Also, the students' progress and success are indicated by error occurrence. Davies and Pearse (2000) state that "errors are integral part of language learning and not evidence of failure to learn". Gorbert (1979) suggests that errors must be seen not as signs of failure, but as signs of learning. When the teachers are tolerant of some errors, the students feel more confident of using the target language than if all errors are corrected. Mendelson (1990) also presents three criteria for efficient and effective errors correction: correct selectively, choose productive items and correct constructively. In the speaking class, teachers often face the dilemma of how to correct errors without causing the students become hesitant or nervous about talking. Hendrickson (1978) presents that students prefer not to be marked down for each minor speaking error because this practice ruins their confidence and forces them to spend so much effort on details that leads to the loss of overall ability to use the language.

1.5 Factors influencing classroom interaction

According to Fawzia (2002), the factors are divided into three categories: student factors, social factors and educational factors. Student factors contain students' perception, attitudes, learning styles, background of students, and personal affective factors. Social factors include the gender of students in class and nature community feelings in a group. The lecturer, the course, and the topic are all related to pedagogical factors. In Tatar's study (2005), classroom interaction is influenced by the factors from students: lacking language skills as well as inadequate content knowledge, avoiding making mistakes in front of the teacher and their friends, and dodging embarrassing situations that may make them lose their faces. However, studying a language is to use it. Students get the English knowledge from the teacher and then introduce their own ideas. It means that the active role of both the teacher and students is absolutely necessary to create effective interactions. The researcher is, therefore, interested in doing the research entitled "Improving Learners' Oral Interaction in the EFL Classrooms at Ton Duc Thang University in Ho Chi Minh City".

2. Research Objectives

This research consisted of three objectives:

2.1 to investigate the reasons why the students at TDTU have low oral interaction ;

2.2 to provide some oral activities to help the students improve their oral interaction ; and

2.3 to evaluate the students' progress through suggested activities.

3. Research Methodology

3.1 Samples

The subjects are full-time students in non-English major classes. The questionnaires were distributed to three different classes from different faculties at Ton Duc Thang University in Ho Chi Minh City. The gender ratio was 45.7% and 54.3% for male and female, respectively. Out of 92 student respondents, 86 students (93.4%) had been learning English over 7 years. This shows that most of them had been studying English for rather a long time, so they had a long exposure to English.

3.2 Research Instruments

In collecting the data, questionnaires and observations were used for investigating students' oral participation in classroom.

3.2.1 Questionnaires

The researcher employed the technique of questionnaires to investigate the reasons making students' low oral interaction. By handing and getting questionnaires back later, informants were free to answer the questions without the researcher's interference and so the answers were objective. Also, it was convenient for informants to express what they really wanted to say by choosing the appropriate answers or by filling in the blanks without any difficulties.

3.2.2 Observations

Classroom observation is a method of measuring classroom behaviors from direct observations. The observations in this study occurred continually and spontaneously throughout classroom visits. The majority of observations were taken

notes carefully during seatwork and collaborative learning activities. The two case study teachers and their respective classes were observed in turn within a semester resulting in a total of 10 observational visits. The researcher adopted FIAS to categorize the classroom oral interactions in both classes.

3.3 Data Collection

3.3.1 Data collection from questionnaires

The process of collecting the data began with questionnaire distribution. The researcher piloted the questionnaires in Vietnamese to 10 students. From their suggestions, questionnaires were adjusted for understanding thoroughly. After adjusted, the questionnaires were delivered to all 96 students involved in this study. To ensure a high return, the questionnaires for students were distributed and administered by their teachers. Four questionnaires from the students were eliminated since they did not meet the requirements of this study. After gathering the questionnaires, the re-searcher synthesized the data to find out the reasons to students' low oral interaction and then propose effective activities to enhance students' oral participation.

3.3.2 Data collection from observations

Prior to the classroom observations, five Vietnamese teachers of English in this school were interviewed about 10 minutes in order to choose the two case study teachers for observations. One was a control class and the other was an experimental class. The experimental class would adopt the activities of improving oral interac-tions. On the contrary, the control class would still continue the current methods of teaching. A total of 10 classroom observation sessions were done in this research and each observation lasted for 35 minutes. At the end of each 3-second period, the researcher ticked the category that best represented the communication of events just completed and wrote down this category number while simultaneously accessing communication in the next period. The processes were continued at the rate 18 to 20 observations per minute. FIAS procedures were employed to observe classroom interaction patterns in both of the experimental and control class.

4. Research Results

4.1 The results from questionnaires were presented according to the research objectives as follows:

4.1.1 The reasons why the students at TDTU have low oral interaction

Table 1 *Reasons of students' low interest in oral activities*

Reasons	Responses		Percent of Cases
	N	Percent	
too difficult	15	8.2%	16.3%
too boring	20	11.0%	21.7%
not relevant to real-life situations	49	26.9%	53.3%
not related to textbooks	18	9.9%	19.6%
no oral test	80	44.0%	87.0%
Total	182	100.0%	197.8%

Table 2 *Reasons of students' low interest in oral activities*

Reasons	Responses		Percent of Cases
	N	Percent	
lack of ideas	63	37.3%	71.6%
fear to make incorrect pro	19	11.2%	21.6%
lack of vocabulary	68	40.2%	77.3%
fear to make gram errors	19	11.2%	21.6%
Total	169	100.0%	192.0%

The two tables above reveal that causes of students' low interest oral activities come from activities and exams as well as from students. The evident reasons from the surveyed students are no oral test (87.0%), not relevant to real-life situations (53.3%), lack of vocabulary to express ideas (77.3%), and lack of ideas (71.6%). When oral topics are not related to the real life, they become unfamiliar with students. They have no knowledge and experience to participate in discussions. Besides vocabulary is a core component of language proficiency. Poor vocabulary repertoire inevitably prevents students from understanding a certain issue as well as from expressing their own ideas clearly. As displayed in Table 1, 87.0% of the students said that "no oral tests" lost their interest in oral interaction. There is no wonder that students could successfully pass tough written tests, but are still poor in oral performance. Oral tests not only encourage students to take an active part in classroom activities but also

extend their enthusiasm and interests in speaking the target language in class. According to Bostwick and Gakuen (1995), oral tests help students take control of their own learning and arouse their enthusiasm for speaking the target language.

4.1.2 Teachers' talk time in the classroom

Table 3 Teacher's talk time

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
under 25%	5	5.4	5.4	5.4
from 25% to 50%	10	10.9	10.9	16.3
from 50% to 75%	30	32.6	32.6	48.9
over 75%	47	51.1	51.1	100.0
Total	92	100.0	100.0	

Table 3 illustrates the time occupied by teacher's talk time in the class of 45-minute class period. The findings reveal that the teacher talk was more than the students' in the classroom (32.6% for from 50% to 75% and 51.1% for over 75%). These findings are in line with those by Cook (2001), which divulged that teacher talk makes up over 70% of the total talk. It is evident that when teachers devote large amount of time to lectures, explanations or management instructions, student talk will be indeed severely restricted. Consequently, the students have fewer opportunities to develop their language proficiency. According to Harmer (2000), getting students to speak and to use the target language should be a vital part of a teacher's job. It is really a need for students to have more time to interact orally in class. Hence, teachers should change their ways of teaching speaking to enhance the students' speaking skill.

4.1.3 Kinds of questions often raised by teachers

Table 4 Kind of questions often raised by teachers

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
display question	67	72.8	72.8	72.8
referential question	25	27.2	27.2	100.0
Total	92	100.0	100.0	

Questioning is to check whether students understand the lessons, to evaluate students' knowledge, to enhance students' involvement, and to promote students' creative thinking in classroom interaction, especially oral interaction. Besides, it is usually used as one of mutual exchange teaching skills between teachers and students.

According to Long & Sato (1983) and Pica & Long (1986), the teachers in EFL classes often ask more display questions than referential questions. The findings from Table 4 also show that there is the predominance of display questions (72.8%) over referential questions (27.2%). "Display questions tend to elicit short answers. Students supply the information for didactic purposes only, have less communicative involvement in producing a display response, and thus have less motivational drive for using the target language" (Chaudron, 1988). On the contrary, referential questions are beneficial to the development of students' communicative competence since their answers are more likely to produce complex target language structures in naturalistic settings.

4.1.4 Teacher's wait-time

Table 5 *Teachers' wait-time before students' response*

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
less than 3 seconds	67	72.8	72.8	72.8
more than 3 seconds	25	27.2	27.2	100.0
Total	92	100.0	100.0	

This result denotes that the teachers did not give their students enough time to consider a question and formulate a response (72.8% for less than 3 seconds). The teachers tended to fill in the time gap and nominate a student immediately after raising a question, which explains why most of the students flinched from answering their teachers' questions. To attain the benefits, the teachers were urged to "wait" in silence at least 3 seconds after their questions (Casteel and Stahl, 1973; Rowe, 1972; Stah, 1990; Tobin, 1987). Wait-time is one of helpful strategies in promoting student responses.

4.1.5 Feedback and correction

Providing feedback and correcting errors on students' performance is a crucial facet of teaching. An effective feedback and error correction help reduce the number of students' errors.Nonetheless, errors are also considered as reflections of students' language development since they are the indicators of natural progress of learning the second language. It is tricky to decide when and how to correct students.

Table 6 *Teachers' feedback and correction*

	Responses		Percent of
	N	Percent	Cases
immediately invite another student	66	52.4%	71.7%
correct all errors on content, gram & pro	31	24.6%	33.7%
translate the questions into Vietnamese	19	15.1%	20.7%
turn out displeased	10	7.9%	10.9%
Total	126	100.0%	137.0%

Table 6 presents that most teachers tend to give feedback and correct students' errors through such ways as immediately inviting another student (71.7%), correcting all errors on content, grammar and pronunciation (33.7%). At first, it is seen that 71.7% of the teachers immediately invite another student in case the student offers incorrect answers. The students need to have some time of thinking to give longer and more accurate answers. Therefore, the teacher should give the wait-time which helps the students think more prior to giving the answers. Besides, the teacher should reiterate the questions more slowly, break down the questions, or give cues to the questions. The majority of the teachers (33.7%) correct all errors on content, grammar and pronunciation, which loses the students' interest in responding to questions. The students are under the great pressure for avoiding the errors on grammar and pronunciation, but keeping the adequate content. Teachers should provide selective and constructive feedbacks on students' classroom performances and put more stress on the contents than the forms.

4.2 The results from classroom observations

From the data of the questionnaire survey, the actual reasons to the students' low oral interaction were discerned. From that, some oral activities for improving oral interaction were designed and adopted to the experimental class. The observed data will be divided into three categories such as teacher's talk, students' talk, and silence, as illustrated in Figure 1 &2.
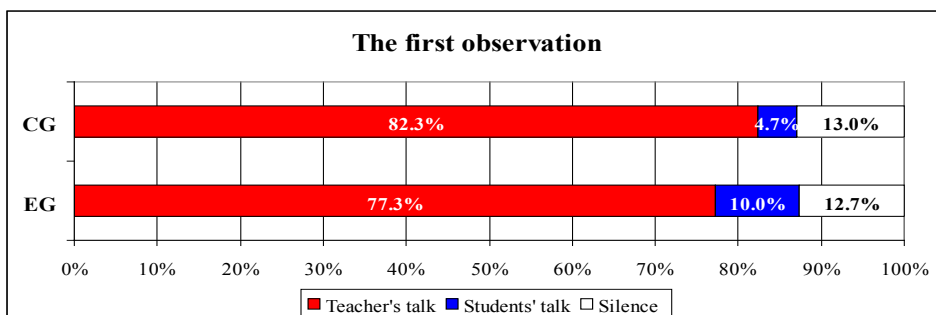
The first observation

CG	82.3%	4.7% 13.0%
EG	77.3%	10.0% 12.7%

0% 10% 20% 30% 40% 50% 60% 70% 80% 90% 100%

■ Teacher's talk ■ Students' talk □ Silence

Figure 1 *Ratios of teacher's & students' talk, and silence in the first & fifth observation*

The fifth observation

CG	75.3%	13.7% 11.0%
EG	65.7%	25.3% 9.0%

0% 10% 20% 30% 40% 50% 60% 70% 80% 90% 100%
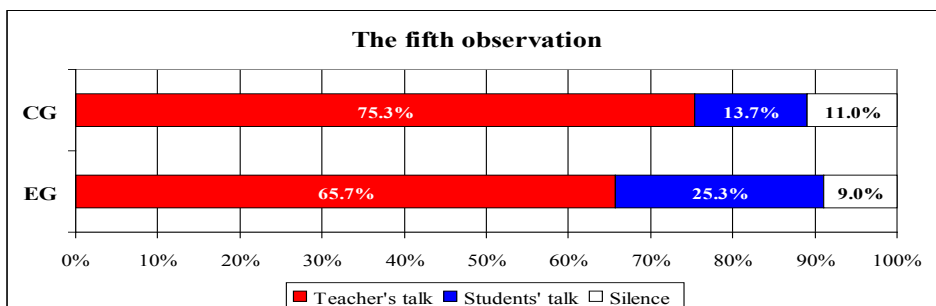
■ Teacher's talk ■ Students' talk □ Silence

Figure 2 *Ratios of teacher's & students' talk, and silence in the first & fifth observation*

Figure 1 shows that in the experimental group, 77.3% of talk time was for the teacher and 10.0% was for the students. In the control group, the teacher's and the students' talk time were 82.3% versus 4.7% respectively. The results denote that teacher's talk time in the experimental group is less than that in the control group. On the contrary, the students' talk time in the experimental group is more than that in the control group. The findings from Figure 2 show that teacher's talk time in the experimental group was 9.6% lower than that in the control group while the students' talk time in the experimental group was 11.6% higher than that in the control group. After five observations, the experimental group made a considerable progress. In comparison with the first observation, the teacher' talk time decreased by 11.6% and the students' talk time increased by 15.3%. These results proved the effectiveness of newly designed activities for the oral interaction in the experimental group.

6. Conclusions

Learning English is to use it in communication. Therefore, if provided ample opportunities of speaking, the students improve their speaking competence and become more actively involved in oral activities in classroom. In the attempts to improve the students' oral interaction by increasing their involvement, it was found that when the cultivation of communicative skills in the target language is the goal of education, interaction must be nurtured in the classroom. The students acquire the language not only through comprehensible input but also their own output.

7. Recommendations

First of all, the teachers should provide more oral activities to create a communicative environment. Many researchers on second language acquisition show that more learning takes place when students are engaged in relevant tasks within a dynamic learning environment. Oral activities should be lively, interactive, and fun for the students to feel comfortable to join. These kinds of activities provoke a very positive attitude towards language learning because they resemble real life events and stimulate critical thinking skills. The following activities are designed for spoken communication such as interviews, guessing, jigsaw tasks, presentation, role-play... Secondly, the teachers should balance between teacher-talk and student-talk time to create more opportunities for the students' talk time. The more students speak in English, the better they speak English. Thirdly, teacher's questioning gives students the impetus and opportunities to produce language comfortably without having to risk initiating themselves, serves to start a chain reaction of students' interaction among themselves, and gives the teacher immediate feedback about students' understanding. Fourthly, an important element of teacher's questioning skill is wait-time. After raising a question, teachers should give students wait-time. Finally, making mistakes is a natural part of the learning process since students may learn from and improve with mistake making and correcting. If teachers expect more students to open their mouths in class, a certain degree of tolerance of oral errors is necessary. The aim of speaking class is to make students use the target language. Therefore, teachers should correct errors selectively and constructively.

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