Exploring teacher talk: Just listen to yourself

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This paper documents an action research project conducted to investigate both the quantity and the quality of teacher talk (TT) in my EFL classes from a communicative language teaching (CLT) perspective. Suspecting that my classroom discourse is at times excessive and uncommunicative, I set out to measure my TT while evaluating the degree of its communicative functionality as defined by Nunan (1987) and Thornbury (1996). Two classes were recorded in order to isolate and code the TT using the Communicative Analysis of Teacher Talk (CATT) observation instrument, developed specifically for the current study. Although TT levels were found to be lower than the average reported in the literature, they were considered too high for a student-centered communicative classroom. Several strategies were devised to reduce TT in the identified problem areas while increasing overall levels of communicativeness.

この論文は、言語伝達教授法(CLT)の側面から外国語として英語を学習する教室内で使われる教師言葉(TT)の量と質の両面から調査する為に実施された行動研究計画記録である。私の指導時の発言は時に多く、非会話的だと感じることがあったので、教師言葉(TT)の自己評価とヌーナン(1987)とソーンベリー(1996)によって定義された方法で指導時の発言の伝達機能の評価も試みた。この研究のために構想された観察方法である教師言葉の言語伝達解析法(CATT)を用い、教師言葉を分離しコード化する為に2つのクラスを録音した。本研究中では、教師言葉(TT)の程度は既に発表されている研究報告の平均的な回数よりは低いことが判明したが、生徒中心の言語伝達教授法(CLT)とはまだ言い難い結果であった。この研究結果を基に言語伝達的指導の向上と特に目立った問題の解決案を発表する。

Communicative language teaching (CLT) is based on the assumption that students learn language most efficiently by using it for authentic and meaningful communication (Richards & Schmidt, 2002). While most language teachers nowadays would probably claim to employ CLT methodology in their classrooms (Richards, 2006), Nunan (1987) has noted that interactions in CLT classes are often not truly communicative and stresses the need for teachers to "become the prime agents of change through an increased sensitivity to what is really happening in their classes" (p. 144). Setting out to analyze my own classroom interaction from a CLT perspective, I conducted an action research project in which I developed the Communicative Analysis of Teacher Talk (CATT) observation instrument and applied it to two recordings of my EFL classes. On discovering that my teacher talk (TT) is at times excessive and uncommunicative, I outlined several interaction strategies aimed at reducing my TT while maximizing its communicativeness. Before presenting the details of the action research, it is

necessary to discuss both the features of communicative and uncommunicative TT.

Communicative teacher talk

It is well documented that teachers modify TT in several ways, including quantity, rate of speech, and lexicogrammatical simplification (Chaudron, 1988). From a CLT perspective, it is important for teachers to monitor both the quantity and the communicative quality of TT in order to promote and maximize authentic and meaningful communication within the confines of the classroom.

Quantity

Previous research has shown that both first and second language teachers tend to dominate classroom discourse, speaking for approximately 60%, or two-thirds, of class time on average (Chaudron, 1988). This is too high for a CLT classroom. While Krashen (1981) asserted that *comprehensible input* is "the crucial and necessary ingredient" (p. 9) for second language acquisition, Swain (1985) demonstrated that input alone is insufficient for developing language production skills and argued instead for the importance of *comprehensible output*, noting that learners need to pay more attention to meaning when producing language than for comprehension. In communicative EFL classes then, excessive TT should be avoided (Nunan, 1991) and total TT should not take up the majority of the class, as this will not provide students with enough opportunity for language production (Brown, 2001). On the other hand, TT often provides EFL learners with their only source of live target language input (Nunan, 1991). It is therefore important, as a teacher, to be aware of the amount of time that you spend speaking in the classroom.

Quality

It is also important, within a CLT framework, to be aware of the communicative quality of your teacher talk. Communicative TT, as described by Nunan (1987) and Thornbury (1996), is characterized by several main features:

- Referential questions (RQ): These are genuine questions in which the teacher does not know the answer.
- Content feedback (CF): The teacher responds to the content of student messages.
- Increased wait time for student answers: Waiting three to four seconds, instead of just one, has been shown to result in more student responses, longer answers, and more student-initiated questions (Thornbury, 1996).
- Student-initiated/controlled talk: This should include the right for students to decide for themselves whether or not they want to participate in a discussion (Nunan, 1987).
- Negotiation-of-meaning (N) exchanges: e.g. requests for clarification and comprehension checks.

In contrast, TT that is considered uncommunicative consists of higher ratios of:

- Display questions (DQ): These are questions to which the teacher already knows the answer and are therefore not genuine questions.
- Form feedback (FF): The teacher only responds to the form of the student message, e.g. pointing out/correcting errors or praising correct form.
- Echoing (E) of student responses: The teacher repeats what a student has said for the rest of the students.
- Predictable teacher-centered Initiation-Response-Feedback (IRF) sequences (see Sinclair & Coulthard, 1992).

In other words, communicative TT aims to reflect authentic and meaningful communication. In real life situations, people generally do not ask DQ or give FF. Questions are asked to get unknown information and communication is an interactive process with all parties involved collaborating to create meaning.

Action research: Interaction analysis

In the field of language teaching, action research often involves small-scale investigative projects conducted by teachers in their classrooms to increase awareness of, and improve, aspects of their teaching (Richards & Schmidt, 2002), and are typically conducted in a series of recurring cycles of planning, action, observation and reflection (Richards & Lockhart, 1996). The following sections document the first cycle of an action research project that helped me reflect on and improve my classroom discourse habits.

Planning

In the planning phase, I decided to record two of my conversation classes, choosing different proficiency levels to determine if and how the communicative quality of my TT was affected by class level. I then developed the CATT observation instrument, and made some pre-recording predictions. It should be noted that I specifically set out to isolate and evaluate my TT to determine if my classroom interaction is truly communicative. The analysis therefore does not reflect any of the student-student interaction that is also highly valued in CLT classrooms.

Beginner class

The beginner class consisted of two students, a middle-aged couple, who studied for one hour a week. The class usually started with 10-15 minutes of free conversation to warm up and the remainder of the class was spent on textbook activities, using Interchange Intro, Third Edition (Richards, 2005) as a rough syllabus.

Low-intermediate class

The low-intermediate class met for 75 minutes per week and consisted of four women ranging in age from early-thirties to mid-fifties. The majority of the class time was spent in conversation. The class textbook, American Headway 3 (Soars & Soars, 2003), was used sparingly and not relied on as a course syllabus.

Hypotheses

1) Concerning the quantity of my TT, I first considered the following pre-research self-evaluation.

Table 1. Pre-research self-evaluation

Amount of time I think I spend talking in class	0 -20%	20- 40%	**40- 60%**	60- 80%	80- 100%
Amount of time I think I should spend talking in class	0 -20%	**20- 40%**	40- 60%	60- 80%	80- 100%

The predicted range of total TT for the classes, based on introspection and Chaudron's (1988) research findings, is in conflict with the desired amount of TT. While I believe that *comprehensible input* (Krashen, 1981) is an important aspect of language learning, I would like the students to have the majority of the class time for

language production in the form of *comprehensible output* (Swain, 1985) as they generally only commit one hour per week to classroom learning in their EFL context. Although I always strive for communicative, student-centered lessons, I often find myself giving lengthy explanations or personal information (e.g., comments, anecdotes, etc.) that could easily be reduced or eliminated for the benefit of the students. A TT range of 20% to 40% would allow more opportunities for student language production and student-student interaction than the predicted amount of 40% to 60% while maintaining a substantial level of communicative input.

2) The percentage of TT in the beginner class was expected to be approximately 5% to 10% higher than TT in the low intermediate class. This hypothesis was based on my experience with the two groups of students. The low-intermediate students, having considerably higher English proficiency, tended to speak for longer periods of time, which should have reduced my TT.

3) The low intermediate class was expected to have a higher ratio of communicative features (e.g., RQ and CF) than the beginner class. However, the beginner class was expected to have a higher percentage of N exchanges.

These predictions were based on the differences in class level and atmosphere, as well as the respective textbooks used. The higher-level students spoke for longer periods of time, had larger vocabularies, and took more controlling and interactive roles in the classroom discussions. This higher level of student-initiated interaction should have contributed to more RQs being asked, and more CF than FF was expected due to fewer communication-impeding errors.

On the other hand, the lower-level students had difficulty communicating at times. They needed more help with form at this stage, which should have led to more FF, and explanations of lexicogrammatical features (XLG), pronunciation (XP), and functional features (XF). Also, the class textbook was used much more in the beginner class and the activities needed to have more structure, requiring more directions (D). Finally, it was predicted that there would be more teacher-initiated N in the beginner class as many of the N exchanges in the low-intermediate class were student initiated, whereas the beginner students interacted less with each other in the target language and had more difficulty conveying their meaning in general.

Observation instrument

The CATT was designed specifically for this action research as none of the commonly used interaction analysis instruments or discourse analysis frameworks were found to adequately match my specific research questions on communicative TT quality and quantity. For example, the FLint instrument (Moskowitz, 2000) does not distinguish between RQ and DQ; nor does it provide an accurate measure of total TT time, designed instead for real-time coding in three-second intervals. Although much of the research on TT levels in both L1 and L2 classes is based on the proportion of discourse moves, it was deemed more appropriate to measure the actual length of each move for this study. This ensures a more accurate measure of TT whereas a single move in other measurement systems such as Fanselow's (1977) FOCUS instrument or Sinclair and Coulthard's (1992) IRF discourse analysis model can vary from a single word to a series of complex sentences (Chaudron, 1988). Furthermore, Holland and Shortall (2001) speculate that instruments designed by the teacher doing the research are likely to be more effective. An apparent disadvantage of this approach, however, is that the results are difficult or impossible to compare with similar studies that use different dimensions and categories of analysis (Chaudron, 1988). Table 2 outlines the CATT observation instrument according to Chaudron's (1988) classification scheme.

Table 2. Observation instrument classification
(Adapted from Chaudron, 1988, pp. 18-19)

Classifications	CATT observation instrument
type of recording procedure	category
item type	low inference
number of categories	14
multiple coding	yes (e.g. negotiation of meaning consisted of form-based feedback)
real-time coding	no
source of variables	theory influenced/author originated
intended purpose	action research/teacher self-development
unit of analysis	analytical unit: discourse moves + duration (in seconds)
focus: range of behaviors and events sampled	verbal, pedagogical, discourse

The CATT was used to simultaneously code and record the length of each teacher discourse move. Several of the categories were influenced by the work of Nunan (1987) and Thornbury (1996) pertaining to what makes TT communicative or uncommunicative. The remaining categories were determined during a pilot session with ten-minute sample recordings of the classes being investigated (see Table 3 for CATT category descriptions). Several teacher-student exchanges were transcribed for closer examination.

Table 3. CATT categories

TT category	Category code	Description
comment	C	gives general information, facts, opinions, jokes, greetings
*referential question	RQ	asks a referential question, teacher does not know answer
*display question	DQ	asks a display question, teacher knows answer
*content-based feedback	CF	gives feedback on the content of student move, includes back channeling moves that do not overlap with student discourse
*form-based feedback	FF	gives feedback on the form of the student move, includes vocabulary correction
lexicogrammar	XLG	explains or models lexicogrammatical features, includes collocations, patterns, grammar, vocabulary
pronunciation	XP	explains or models pronunciation, includes intonation
function	XF	explains functional or pragmatic point

TT category	Category code	Description
answer question	A	answers student question, includes both form and content questions
directions	D	gives directions
praise	P	praises student(s)
encourage	EN	encourages student(s) or gives hint when answering
*negotiation of meaning	N	requests clarification or checks for comprehension
*echoing	E	repeats student move

*CLT focused categories

Action

The classes were recorded using an Apple iPod and microphone, which produced very clear, high quality recordings. The microphone was placed behind the CD player at the front of the classrooms, out of sight from the students and teacher to prevent, or at least reduce, *observer's paradox* interference (see Labov, 1972). For the subsequent analysis of the recorded data, the length of each teacher discourse move was measured in seconds, including pauses and board writing that occurred within a move. Move lengths were rounded up to the nearest second. Short overlapping utterances such as natural back channeling were not coded. The data was entered into a spreadsheet to facilitate summing and tallying.

Observation

The results of the CATT analysis are presented in Table 4 below. In the discussion that follows, the CATT category codes detailed in Table 3 will be referred to.

Table 4. TT data

	Beginner class				Low-intermediate class			
	# of Moves	Time (secs.)	% TT	% Class time	# of Moves	Time (secs.)	% TT	% Class time
C	15	109	6.09	3.08	59	634	23.48	12.20
RQ	33	108	6.04	3.05	49	115	4.26	2.21
DQ	13	65	3.63	1.84	22	104	3.85	2.00
CF	19	53	2.96	1.50	55	126	4.67	2.42
FF	32	262	14.64	7.40	74	297	11.00	5.72
XLG	25	356	19.90	10.05	54	800	29.63	15.40
XP	7	144	8.05	4.07	7	39	1.44	0.75
XF	6	106	5.92	2.99	0	0	0.00	0.00

	Beginner class				Low-intermediate class			
	# of Moves	Time (secs.)	% TT	% Class time	# of Moves	Time (secs.)	% TT	% Class time
A	1	2	0.11	0.06	25	359	13.30	6.91
D	35	377	21.07	10.65	22	159	5.89	3.06
P	26	87	4.86	2.46	7	7	0.26	0.13
EN	2	26	1.45	0.73	1	1	0.04	0.02
N	27	64	3.58	1.81	24	43	1.59	0.83
E	14	34	1.90	0.96	10	19	0.70	0.37
Total*	257	1798	100.48	50.79	410	2711	100.41	52.17

* Note: Totals slightly higher than actual figures due to multiple coding.

Quantity

Total TT for the beginner and low-intermediate classes was measured at 50% and 52% respectively, falling in the middle of the predicted range. Surprisingly, the low-intermediate class had a slightly higher percentage of TT than the beginner class. This is contrary to what was expected. Although the difference in the percentage of TT between the two classes was minimal, it was predicted that the beginner class would have five to ten percent more TT. It should be noted however, that 2 minutes and 15 seconds in the beginner class were spent on a textbook listening activity while there were no listening activities in the low-intermediate class, possibly reducing potential TT.

Quality

It is evident in the categorical breakdown of TT that there was a notable difference in the distribution of TT types between the two classes. While both classes were dominated by FF and XLG, the beginner class consisted of a higher level of D, whereas the low-intermediate class had higher levels of C and A. Contrary to what was predicted, communicative features were not notably higher in the low-intermediate class, which had slightly higher levels of CF, but slightly lower levels of RQ. As predicted however, the level of teacher-initiated N was slightly higher in the beginner class.

Reflection

In the reflection phase, I identified both the positive and the negative features of my classroom discourse affecting TT levels as seen in the analyzed data. I then developed several interaction strategies to reduce my TT and increase its overall communicativeness.

Positive features

I considered several features of my TT to be beneficial to the students from a communicative perspective:

- I ask more RQ than DQ in both low and high-level classes.
- I initiate meaningful and communicative N exchanges throughout my classes.
- There are very few instances of E and IRF sequences, which are considered teacher-centered and uncommunicative (Nunan, 1987; Thornbury, 1996).

Negative features

The features of my TT levels that I consider to have a negative and uncommunicative effect include:

- My feedback habits: The amount of form feedback far exceeds the amount of content feedback in both classes.
- XLG, C, D, and A tend to be lengthy and repetitive at times.

It should be noted that several researchers consider teachers' self repetitions to be useful in that they "provide the learner with more opportunities to process the information or follow the teacher's model" (Chaudron, 1988, p. 84). In addition, the large proportion of TT spent answering questions in the low-intermediate class seems to reflect the higher level of student controlled discourse in that class which should be considered positive. Nonetheless, I would like to reduce teacher moves of conspicuous length as much as possible, while maintaining their communicative input potential, to allow students more time for communicative output.

TT alterations

1) Follow DQ with RQ

Although I ask more RQ than DQ, I would like to further increase the use of RQ. While this may be achievable simply through conscious effort during my classes, I intend to apply a more active strategy: When I do ask a DQ, such as a lexicogrammatical or textbook derived comprehension check, I will follow the DQ with related RQs where applicable. This pairing strategy was observed in the low-intermediate class data and naturally progressed from the design of the textbook, American Headway 3 (Soars & Soars, 2003, p. 52), in which students are required to form a present perfect question from the given prompt words. In the excerpt below, the students are forming a question from the prompts [have/an operation].

T: Last week we did "meet anyone famous"…
S3: Um hm.
T: Did we do "have/an operation"?
S3: No I didn't.
T: OK, so what's the question? (DQ)
Ss: Have you ever had an operation?
T: Hmm. Have you ever had an operation? (RQ)
S1: Yes, I have. Small.
T: Small operation? OK. Not serious? (RQ)
S1: Not serious.

The student answering the RQ continued to explain the operation she had had, which led to an extended N exchange between the students. Although this DQ-RQ sequence was prompted by the textbook design, it could easily be adapted to other comprehension check DQs. For example, the textbook listening exercise that was used in the beginner class (reproduced below) consists of a conversation constructed to illustrate the simple past tense, and if used simply to illustrate the grammatical structure and initiate a sequence of IRF comprehension checks, would not be very communicative.

Laura: So, did you go anywhere last summer?
Erica: Yes, I did. My sister and I went to Arizona.
Laura: Really? Did you like it?
Erica: Oh, yes. We loved it!
Laura: Did you go hiking there?
Erica: No. We didn't. Actually, we rode horses. And we also went white-water rafting on the Colorado River!
Laura: Wow! Did you have fun?

Erica: Yes, we did. We had a great time!

(Reproduced from Interchange Intro, Third Edition (Richards, 2005, p. 95), with permission from Cambridge University Press)

Using DQ-RQ sequencing could easily make this a more communicative activity while retaining its original pedagogic features. Comprehension check DQs such as "Did Erica have a good summer?", "Where did she go?" and "What did she do there?" could be paired with RQs such as "How about you? Did you have a good summer?", "Where did you go on your last vacation?" and "Have you ever tried white-water rafting?" or "What do you like to do when you go on vacation?" This interaction strategy should lead to longer student responses and further follow-up questions, reducing my TT while increasing communicative questioning.

2) Reduce FF and follow with CF

The ratio of FF to CF for the two classes was more than 2 to 1, which seems far too high for a communicative classroom. Ideally, I would like to reverse this trend; decreasing FF while increasing CF may also lead to more N. I do however, believe there to be value in FF and know some students expect this type of feedback and may not want it reduced. One way to address this issue was found in the coded transcripts for the two classes. Several sequences were identified in which I immediately followed FF with CF, similar to the DQ-RQ sequencing described above:

T: What did you do this morning?

S1: This morning?

T: Um.

S1: This morning…*nani shita*…oh, I'm angry…to…to my daughter.

T: Ah, OK. Angry, **with** your daughter? (FF)

S1: Yes [laughs].

T: Why? What did she do? (CF)

S1: Ah, *nani*, yesterday dinner he, ah he *ja nai*, she ah *nandaro*, rice rice ah, not eat.

T: Ah, OK.

Note: Stressed intonation is shown in bold print. Code-switching to student L1 (Japanese) is shown in italics.

Although this was not a deliberate method at the time, it appears to be an effective way of pairing FF, in the form of recasting, with communicative CF. At the very least, FF and CF levels will be balanced. This method should also encourage more student-produced language and N that should in turn contribute to a reduction in TT.

3) Decrease XLG / Increase consciousness-raising examples

The feature of my TT that I feel requires the most attention is the amount of XLG. This includes defining vocabulary items and explaining grammar separately, but more often, I tend to present commonly used lexicogrammatical patterns. As can be seen in Table 4, nearly 30% of my TT is XLG in the low-intermediate class and a closer examination (see Appendix 1 for the class transcript excerpt) reveals that much of this consists of repetition and rephrasing of an explanation. As noted above, not all repetition is perceived as negative, but it seems obvious that decreasing XLG repetitions will help reduce TT.

Increasing opportunities for inductive learning and comprehension could further reduce XLG. Rather than begin a lengthy explanation full of repetition, I could write some examples of the lexicogrammatical feature or features in question on the board and encourage the students to form their own hypoth-

eses concerning rules, patterns and compatible vocabulary, i.e. consciousness-raising. For example, in teacher move number 14 of the class transcript excerpt, the longest XLG move at 112 seconds, I make up several example sentences to demonstrate the pattern *to run out of something*. A more communicative way to accomplish this would have been to write those sentences on the board and have the students discuss what they thought *to run out of something* meant and to think about the differences between *to run out of*, *running out of* and *ran out of*. Giving the students more responsibility over their own learning should help reduce my XLG.

4) Decrease C, D and A levels

In addition to XLG, the amount of C, D, and A time I spend commenting seems higher than necessary and should be reduced. Unlike XLG however, the methods available to reduce these areas of my TT are less concrete. It is my hope that simply being more conscious of these TT habits will contribute to their reduction, and Thornbury (1996) confirms that simply being aware of "non-communicative ritualized teaching behaviours" can lead to "improved classroom practice" (p. 279).

In the case of C and A levels, I should be cautious and aware of my tendency to comment and answer questions at length, shorten these moves as much as possible and relinquish the floor with related RQs.

Finally, I should attempt to reduce D by having students read directions themselves, asking a student who understands the task to explain it to those who do not, and to generally plan my wording for directions more carefully so that I do not take too much time rephrasing.

Conclusion

Although the CATT analysis was time consuming and labour intensive, it proved to be invaluable as a tool for teacher reflection and awareness. This newfound awareness will no doubt lead to improved classroom practice in the form of more communicative TT. As this was only one cycle of action research, a second cycle will need to be carried out in which I record more lessons while implementing my TT reduction strategies in order to evaluate their effectiveness. It is my hope, that by documenting this action research, more teachers will take the initiative to explore their own TT. Are the interactions in your CLT classroom truly communicative? To find out, just listen to yourself.

Bio data

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Appendix 1

Teacher XLG discourse moves: Low-intermediate class

1) T: What do you, what do you need, what do you call it?
   S1: Eh?
2) T: Wha, what do you… What's wrong? How do you say in English?
   S2: Pencil, *ja na kute*…
   S3: *Desu neh?*
   S1: Mechanical pencil?
3) T: It's a mechanical pencil, but, we don't need to say 'mechanical'. My pencil is…(XLG)
   S1: My pencil…died [laughs].
4) T: Ah…die is for batteries, or machines…
   S2: Broke?
5) T: No…
   S2: Broke *ja na kute*…
6) T: It's a very useful expression for many things…
   S2: Ah…
   S1: …doesn't work?
7) T: I think it works…Can I see? It works right? But you need…more…
   S1: Pencil [laughs].
   S2: Pencil *ja nai* no…lost…*chigao*…
8) T: No, no, she used it all, she used it all, so her pencil is out of lead. (XLG)
   Ss: Out of lead.
9) T: Out of, out of lead…pencil lead. *It's out of lead* [writing on board]. Out of lead. Pencil lead. It's not real lead, but we

still say pencil lead. (XLG)

S3: Lead, this, this black…

10) T: Um hmm, yeah, um…I think it's carbon, it used to be, maybe in the past was made of lead, I think, or something yeah…we say, we say pencil lead, and a regular pencil, like a wooden pencil is lead, ah graphite, I think the real material, but we say lead. (XLG) What does your dictionary say for…?

S1: *Enpitsu no shin*…OK lead.

S3: Lead.

S2: Lead.

11) T: Just lead. Um, yeah, so out of, now this… [knock at door, student 4 enters] hello how are you?

Ss: Hello.

S4: Hello, sorry I'm late.

12) T: How are you today?

S4: Good thank you. How about you?

13) T: I'm good.

14) T: So this is useful for many, many things. Her pencil is out of lead. Out of lead means the supply something is used up, finished. Her pencil's out of lead. Or, um, we're out of coffee, can you buy more coffee? It means something that you use regularly, the supply is out, or out of lead. Her pencil is out of lead. Um, I drink coffee every day, I make coffee every morning. My wife does the groceries, so there's no more coffee. We're out of coffee, can you buy some later? We're out of coffee. Out of sugar. Ah, the car is out of gas. Right, out of. Now, or, another thing is it's almost out, not completely but almost. It's almost out of lead. The car is almost out of gas, we have to go to a gas station. Almost out, and similar is, [writing on board] we also say this, running out. (XLG)

S2: Running… ah, running out.

15) T: We're running out of sugar or coffee. Past tense, we ran out. We ran out of coffee, equals we are out of coffee. (XLG)

Ss: Ah…

16) T: Run is kind of like, happening, we're running out. (XLG)

Note: Code-switching to student L1 (Japanese) is shown in italics.