

ASPECTS OF TEACHERS' FEEDBACK ON STUDENTS' CONTRIBUTIONS IN CLASS

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The writers of this article are currently working as English Language Teachers in the UK and in China, where the Communicative Language Teaching paradigm is, or is becoming, prevalent. Commitment to teaching within this paradigm entails a perspective of language classes as 'interactive learning communities' (Britton, 1998), with an attendant expectation of variety, both in activities, interaction patterns and roles.

We have begun by asking what are the components that might constitute criteria for effective teaching, competent subject-specific teaching skill, and appropriate knowledge and use of English, in this context.

We start from the position that teachers are 'being', 'thinking', 'doing' and 'saying' individuals, who reveal what they are and what they think through what they do and say in class. How much of teaching is about 'applying a set of techniques and procedures' ('doing'), and how much of it is about 'creating purposeful interaction during which learning takes place' ('saying')? We believe that 'doing' has been prioritised over 'saying' in the Teacher Education literature, and we wish in this article to give due attention to the part played by teachers' use of the target language in their language classes.

We identify three broad functions for teacher-generated target language in class, namely:

1. Teaching functions

Helping students to construct, extend or activate knowledge and understanding;

2. Structuring functions

Structuring and managing procedures conducive to learning;

3. Rapport-enhancing functions

Creating and maintaining positive affect through rapport.

The first broad function relates to what it is we teach, i.e. the systems and skills appropriate to the target language. The second broad function relates to the managerial tasks we carry out in class, such as staging, grouping, or giving instructions for tasks. The third broad function relates to affective features, and it is the third category that we are concerned with in this paper.

Like Roberts (1998), we attach importance to language classes as social experiences, in which the teacher's ability to create and maintain rapport can play a crucial role. Like Leon (2005), we acknowledge the importance of teachers' own use of language in behaviour that is viewed by learners as 'confirming'.

Leon's examples of verbal 'confirming' behaviour include congratulating students when they do something well ('congratulations'); conveying happiness about learners' achievements ('I'm so proud of you'); and conveying confidence in learner possibilities for achievement ('you can do it'). Acknowledgement and praise, exemplified in the first two of Leon's examples just quoted, are affective features that we have noted in our own classroom data along with playful repartee and self-disclosure.

For the particular research project that is the focus of this paper, we concentrated on the language of the 'F-move' (Cullen, 1998; 2002). This is the final move in the Sinclair-Coulthard IRF exchange structure system (Coulthard, 1977), where 'I' stands for 'initiation', 'R' for 'response' and 'F' for 'follow-up'. In the classroom, it is the teacher who typically carries out both I and F moves, and the learner who fulfils the R move, e.g. (own example).

I: Can anybody tell me – what's the capital of Belarus?

R: It's Minsk, Sir.

F: It's Minsk (*repetition*). That's it (*acknowledgement*). Good (*praise*).

In everyday conversation, the F-move frequently has a relational function that can be missing in the classroom: a speaker typically acknowledges a response and its information, as in the classroom example above, but may also use comment to encode meanings that are social, cultural or affective, and carry out key conversational processes, such as convergence (McCarthy, 1998), e.g. (own example):

I: What's the capital of Belarus – you've been there, haven't you?

R: It's Minsk.

F: Minsk (*repetition*). That's it (*acknowledgement*). I thought it began with 'm' (*comment*).

In the language classroom, it is possible to give feedback that develops a dialogue between teacher and class, by picking up students' contributions and incorporating them into the flow of discourse (Mercer, 2000). This type of feedback is 'discoursal' rather than simply 'evaluative', and is exemplified in the following extract from Cullen's data, where three separate strategies for providing 'discoursal feedback' are identified (in italics):

I: Now suppose you were in the plane that would crash, what would you do?

R: I will shout.

F: You will shout. (*repetition*) Aagh! (*elaboration*) I don't know if Heaven will hear you. (*comment*)

(Cullen, 2002, p.121)

In Cullen's terminology, 'repetition' occurs where the teacher repeats the learner's utterance; 'elaboration' occurs where the teacher works with the learner's utterance to clarify or extend it; and 'comment' occurs where the teacher refers to the content of the learner's utterance and takes it further.

Shan Fu (2005) investigated classroom data provided by five native speaker English teachers working in Britain with multilingual adult classes, and five Chinese teachers of English working in China with monolingual adult classes of similar level and type. Alongside Cullen's feedback categories, she identified two other strategies, exemplified in the following extract from her data:

I: What do people wear in funerals, red or black?

R: White.

F: After the Queen Mother died ... Do you know the Queen Mother? She was a very old lady. We had an official mourning. We didn't have to wear black. (*further information*) I'm shocked, she was dead. (*self disclosure*)

In Shan Fu's terminology, 'further information' occurs where the teacher volunteers new information that is relevant to, but does not arise from, the learner's utterance itself. In the above extract, for example, the teacher provides factual and cultural information that is relevant to the topic (funerals), rather than to the learner's utterance (colour of funeral clothes). 'Self disclosure', in Shan Fu's terms, refers to a teacher's utterance that reveals emotional response or tells a personal anecdote relevant to the learner's contribution.

The following table represents the overall categorisation of F-moves across the data from the ten classes that were investigated. The five native speaker teachers' lessons (NST1 to NST5) are listed first, followed by the five non-native speaker teachers' lessons (NNST1 to NNST5). For each lesson, the occurrence of discursial feedback strategies is listed, broken down into five categories. These are 'repetition' (R); 'elaboration' (E); 'further information' (FI); 'comment' (C); and 'self disclosure' (SD). Strategies are listed as 'present' (P) or 'absent' (A):

	R	E	FI	C	SD
NST1	p	p	p	p	p
NST2	p	p	p	p	p
NST3	p	a	p	p	p
NST4	p	p	a	p	p
NST5	p	a	p	p	p
NNST1	a	a	a	a	a
NNST2	a	a	a	a	a
NNST3	a	a	a	a	a
NNST4	a	a	a	a	a
NNST5	a	a	a	p	a

In her data as a whole, Shan Fu found that the native speaker teachers reacted flexibly to learners' messages, picking up learners' contributions and making use of the learning opportunities these created. However, the Chinese teachers of English rarely used discursial feedback; instead, they typically concluded the exchange and quickly moved on, with 'OK', 'Good', 'All right', or 'Any other ideas?'.

The following classroom extract exemplifies this finding (the class have just finished reading a text about Christmas):

I: Now I'd like to give some questions for discussion. The boy thinks the Christmas was both best and worst. Why? Another question: have you ever experienced anything that first made you miserable and then happy? If yes, please tell us. OK, these two topics, just pick up one. For the first, which group would like to say something?

R: I'll say something about my experience. My birthday. My parents are out of town. That day is my birthday. On that morning, my father phoned and said that we are busy and couldn't go home. I was very sad, went to school. After school, I found my parents were at home. Then I laughed and cried.

F: Thank you so much. And just now she gave the answer of the second question. I'd like you to say something about the first question.

We can only speculate on how the learner in the extract might have felt about the teacher's lack of feedback on the emotional or factual content of the personal anecdote that had just been disclosed.

After analysing her classroom data, Shan Fu interviewed the ten teachers who had provided her with classroom data about their use of, and attitude to, the F-move in general. The native speaker teachers of English mentioned that they saw communication as the main aim of English Language Teaching, and as congruent with discursal feedback. In particular, they mentioned concern with affective factors such as learner anxiety and self esteem. The Chinese teachers of English bemoaned their lack of training in teacher talk, and viewed their own level of language proficiency both as a barrier to communication and as a threat to teacher authority in class. They also mentioned inhibiting constraints, such as time, class size and examination requirements.

When discussing the findings from this research, we considered whether sociocultural and political factors might have inhibited the use of discursal feedback in the Chinese context. We discussed the impact of the notion of 'harmony' ('he' in Chinese), which might be responsible for the adoption of strategies such as silence, non-assertiveness and self-effacement. We also noted the fact that the Chinese teachers of English were working in a non English-speaking environment, where there was no authentic need for communicating in English. Finally, we considered whether the Chinese teachers' perception of themselves as having low economic status may have made them unwilling to take the initiative in giving discursal feedback. Whatever the case, we feel that our research studies highlight a need for teacher educators to raise their students' awareness of the role of affect in teacher talk.

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