

A Review of Research in Teacher Talk of English Classroom Instruction: Summary and the Way Forward

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Abstract: Studies on teacher talk have received much emphasis in foreign language teaching. It is irreplaceable in language classroom teaching and the process of language acquisition. This research takes literature review in chronological order, which is based on the studies on teacher talk at home and abroad in order to make a summary and outlook on teacher talk in English classroom instruction. The research finds that scholars at home and abroad tend to use IRE model, input hypothesis, interactive theory to explore teacher talk. The research methods and research objects tend to be diverse. However, scholars at home and abroad have their own opinions on teacher talk in terms of questioning, meaning negotiation and so on. The research objects of teacher talk are more specific in China than that in western countries. For example, Chinese scholars made a comparison to investigate the effects on pronunciation of different teachers in English classroom instruction. Last but not least, the future studies on teacher talk can be done in four aspects: constructing our own native theories, exploring interdisciplinary studies on teacher talk, improving research methods and completing studies on teacher talk in primary and secondary schools.

1. Introduction

Teacher talk is one of the components of English classroom instruction. “After having come up with the foreigner talk in 1951 and baby talk in 1964, teacher talk was firstly introduced by Ferguson as another new simplified register of language” [1]. Teacher talk not only serves as a tool for teachers to carry out teaching plans, but also acts as a tremendous resource of students’ language input. Therefore, “it plays a vital role in English classroom instruction and the process of students’ language acquisition” [2]. Because of the particularity of English classroom, student’s language input mainly depends on teacher talk in classroom teaching. There is no doubt that studies on teacher talk have received much emphasis in foreign language teaching. This research takes literature review based on the studies on teacher talk from CNKI, Science Direct and Google. It aims to provide some suggestions for the future studies on teacher talk by making a summary and outlook on teacher talk in language classroom instruction in chronological order.

2. Literature Review

Rod Ellis (1994) [3] pointed out that teacher talk, as a register with its own specific formal and

interactional properties, is a special language that teachers address to second language learners. This research will review the studies of teacher talk at home and abroad in chronological order, which are examined through the following sources: the search engine “Google”, the databases “CNKI” and “Science Direct”.

2.1 The Studies of Teacher Talk Abroad

From abroad, researchers have begun to probe into teacher talk systematically and comprehensively since the 1950s.

In 1952, Harris put forward the view that “language does not occur in scattered words or sentences, but in coherent discourse”, which opened the door of discourse analysis [4]. In 1966, Bellack pushed discourse analysis into another field, namely, the study of classroom discourse [5].

In 1970s and 1980s, western scholars had gradually noticed the importance of teacher talk in foreign language classroom and a great number of research methods to describe and understand teacher talk in foreign language classroom had emerged.

Sinclair & Coulthard (1975)[6] put forward with the description categories which includes lesson, transaction, exchange, move and act by analyzing the interaction between teachers and students in the native language classroom. What’s more, they proposed IRE model, which means initiation, response and evaluation are common forms in classroom interaction. Initiation refers to the questions raised by teachers. Response is the answer responded from students. Evaluation refers to the feedback from teachers to students according to students’ learning behavior. Initiation, response and evaluation constantly circulate in classroom teaching.

Long (1983) [7] presented interaction hypothesis. He agreed with the importance of understandable language input in English classroom teaching. And he emphasized that two-way communication facilitates language acquisition for foreign learners in that two-way communication enables teachers and students to have interaction and modification.

Krashen (1985) [8] proposed input hypothesis in order to make an objection that the success of a lesson depends on the amount of words spoken by teachers. He considered that the most basic approach to language acquisition is to have deeper understanding of language. Therefore, the most critical means of language teaching is to help learners accept more understandable language input as possible.

IRE model, interaction hypothesis and input hypothesis have great influence on the studies on teacher talk until now.

Pica & Long (1986) [9] examined teacher talk in traditional classroom, which mainly focused on teacher's explanation and had less communication between teacher and students and between students. They summarized that there is no real communication in the traditional teacher-led classroom, so learners get less understandable language input, which is meaningless to language acquisition.

Nunan's (1987) [10] research further proved that when teachers use referential questions, students’ language output are more complex and closer to the natural discourse.

Chaudron (1988) [11] investigated teacher feedback in language classroom and Long (1983) analyzed questioning in language teaching. Both of them revealed the importance of teacher talk in SLT. At the same time, he made a comprehensive survey of the teacher-talk studies in which he analyzed the characteristics of teacher talk from the perspective of linguistics in terms of speed, pause, pronunciation, vocabulary, grammar and syntax adjustment.

Since the 1990s, teacher talk has been studying increasingly extensively. Empirical study has been popularly adopted in the research of teacher talk, which demonstrates the research methods of teacher talk are more scientific.

Thornbury (1996) [12], Cullen (1998) queried the IRE model since teachers have absolutely authority in IRE model. In other words, student-centered teaching philosophy of modern foreign language teaching does not fit in IRE model and it can not represent accurately the characteristics of

classroom discourse.

Jarvis & Robinson (1997) [13] studied teacher talk based on the empirical research by observing the primary school English classroom interaction between teachers and students. They tried to analyze teacher talk with the help of pedagogy and psychology. They finally summarized the functions of teacher talk, which include the acceptance of students' discourse, demonstration, tips, developmental discourse, clarification and rejection or criticism. They both emphasized teachers' active response and effective usage of students' discourse are important factors to improve learners learning effects. The research of Jarvis & Robinson showed that the studies of teacher talk become interdisciplinary. And scholars tend to pay attention to the teacher talk in stage of compulsory school.

In recent years, the studies of teacher talk become deeper and more mature. One of the features is interdisciplinary studies on teacher talk.

Walsh (2002) pointed out that if we analyze the rationality and effectiveness of teacher talk, we need to analyze whether teacher talk is compatible with the purpose of teaching activities and whether teacher talk contributes to the achievement of teaching objectives.

At the same time, foreign language researchers began to focus on code switching in teacher talk [14]. The studies of code switching in teacher talk include the percentage of mother tongue and target language, the time to use mother tongue and target language, influence factors of code switching and the influence of teacher talk on learners' learning. And so forth, Steve Walsh (2011) [15], published the book *Classroom Discourse Research*, in which he made two breakthroughs (the concept of classroom interaction ability and the framework of teacher talk self-evaluation) in teacher talk research. It is meaningful to solve the problems of teacher talk research in classroom interaction.

To sum up, teacher talk has been first proposed in the 1950s. In 1970s and 1980s, western scholars were gradually aware of the importance of teacher talk in foreign language classroom. IRE model, interaction hypothesis, input hypothesis and other theoretical methods and ideas have been emerged to investigate teacher talk in language classroom and the second language acquisition. And in this period, scholars mostly adopted philosophical method to study teacher talk. Since the 1990s, the research methods have been shifted from philosophical method to empirical method (classroom observation, case study, questionnaire, etc.). And the studies of teacher talk become interdisciplinary. Until now, the research perspective of teacher talk is broader and the research content is more specific.

As far as I am concerned, western researches on teacher talk basically have two kinds of. One takes the method of interactive analysis (IRE model, interaction hypothesis, etc.) to investigate the relationship between teacher-student interaction and second language acquisition (SLA) from the angle of teaching. The other apply linguistic methodology to study the structure and function of teacher talk.

2.2 The Studies of Teacher Talk at Home

In China, the studies of teacher talk are relatively late, which have started in 1990s. Zhao Xiaohong (1998) [16] is the first researcher to study teacher talk. He explored the amount of teacher talk, teachers' feedback in college English class with the method of quantitative data statistics. And he found that the amount of teachers' talk occupied 70% or even 90% in the college English class. What's more, he also proposed the influence on teacher talk in college English class. Wang Yinquan (1999) [17] pointed out that the major difference between teacher talk in foreign language teaching classroom and other teaching classroom is that teacher talk is not only the learning objective but also serves as teaching medium.

In 2001-2010, under the influence of IRE model, interaction hypothesis and input hypothesis, the studies on teacher talk have entered a new era. Researchers began to explore teacher talk with empirical method. They started to investigate teacher talk in the aspects of discourse quantity,

teachers' questioning, the interactive modifications between teachers, teachers' polite expression and teachers' feedback. What's more, some scholars also made comparisons about teacher talk between Chinese teachers and foreign teachers in language classroom.

Zhou Xing & Zhou Yun (2002) [18] investigated teacher talk from different dimensions under "student-centered teaching mode" including the quantity of teacher talk, teacher's questions, interactive modifications, teacher's feedback and so on. And the results showed that modern teaching mode can provide learners with more opportunities for two-way communication and meaning negotiation compared with the traditional teacher-led teaching mode. It is more beneficial to learners' language acquisition. Xu Ying (2003) [19] made an investigation on the polite expression used by teachers in foreign language teaching and pointed out that teachers should use polite words to communicate with students in order to advocate equality status between teachers and students and make a harmonious relationship. Liu Jiarong & Jiang Yuhong (2004) [14] concluded that teacher should give students more opportunities and time to communicate in target language in language classroom by exploring the form of teacher talk, amount of student's output, sentence length and code switching in a case study. Hu Qingqiu (2007) [20] made a comparative analysis of teacher talk between Chinese teachers and foreign teachers and summarized that they have similarities between the amount of teacher talk and teachers' feedback. However, the number of classroom questions from Chinese teachers is more than that of foreign teachers.

In 2010-2015, researchers explored teacher talk from the perspective of functions of teacher talk, multimodal discourse, corpus linguistics and so on. And the research methods tend to be diverse and rigorous because both quantities and qualitative means have been integrated. Research objects are mostly the teacher talk of college English teaching [21].

Cheng Xiaotang & Kang Yan [22] explored new functions of teacher talk based on which a new framework of discourse functions, including 4 categories and 25 subcategories. The result of the research has provided insights for the study of language teaching. Zhang Lixin (2012) [23] investigated teacher talk in the perspective of multimodal discourse taking teacher talk in college English classroom for example. The result showed that "visual and oral modalities are mainly employed with language in the construction of the conceptual, representational meaning. In the construction of 'the interpersonal, interactive meaning', more tactile, visual and auditory modalities are used to negotiate affects and attitudes with the help of paralanguages, such as body sign, gaze, video clips, pictures, colors within social distance. To predict the textual meaning, visual modality is mainly used by means of forms, diagrams, fonts and signs" [20]. Yan Tao & Zhang Liyun (2013) [24] explored the use of meta discourse of teacher talk based on self-complied corpus utilizing the both quantities and qualitative means. They found that meta discourse of teacher talk in language classroom provides understandable input for students and improves their pragmatic competence.

In recent years, Chinese scholars have started to study teacher talk in the state of compulsory education, the differences of teacher talk between novice teacher and expert teachers, the optimizing strategy of teacher talk and so on, which means research objects are broader than before. The research methods are case study, classroom observation and interview.

Wang Hongxiang (2015) [25] explored teacher talk in middle school English classroom by class videotaping. She concluded that questioning is the major part in language classroom and teacher feedback is the most effective way for learners to have language input. Wu Xiaoyan (2018) [26] analyzed the similarities and differences between expert and novice high school English teachers based on Krashen's input hypothesis, Swain's output hypothesis and Long's interaction hypothesis. And the research found that the amount of teacher talk of novice teacher is more than expert teacher and novice teacher gives more opportunities for students to have output exercises. Han Yali (2019) [27] raised some problems in teacher talk in primary school, for example, classroom expressions are simple; professional expressions are obscure and teacher's feedback is not concrete enough. These have certain meanings to evaluate teacher talk in primary English instruction.

To sum up, the studies in teacher talk in China can be divided into four periods. In the first period (1990-2000), Chinese scholars began to focus on teacher talk under the influence of western

countries. In the second period (2000-2010), researchers began to explore teacher talk in the aspects of discourse quantity, teachers' questioning, the interactive modifications between teachers, teachers' polite expression and teachers' feedback with empirical method (case study, interview, classroom reservation, etc.). In the third period (2010-2015), teacher talk of college English teaching was the research focus by analyzing multimodal discourse, corpus linguistics, functions and so on. Both quantities and qualitative methods have been integrated in this period, which means the research method on teacher talk becomes mature. In recent years, one of the trends is the research object shifted from college English classroom to the state of compulsory education. Researches try to explore the similarities and differences of teacher talk between foreign teachers and Chinese teachers, expert teachers and novice teachers.

2.3 Summary on Teacher Talk at Home and Abroad: Similarities and Differences

All in all, researchers at home and abroad have made great achievement on teacher talk. Firstly, they are both aware of the importance of teacher talk in English classroom teaching and explore teacher talk by adopting the methodology like IRE model, interaction hypothesis, input hypothesis and so on. Secondly, empirical method is applied in these studies, like case study, interview, classroom reservation, questionnaire and so on. Thirdly, both Chinese scholars and foreign scholars explore teacher talk based on different levels of teachers. In a word, the research methods are diversified and the research objects are expanded in the study of teacher talk at home and abroad. However, the angle of analyzing of teacher talk needs to be expanded.

In terms of differences, on the one hand, scholars at home and abroad have their own opinions on teacher talk in terms of questioning, amount of teacher talk, meaning negotiation, which can be attributed to teaching background, cultural differences, teaching methods and so on. On the other hand, western countries have their own methodology like IRE model, interaction hypothesis, input hypothesis to explore teacher talk. While very few native place theories about teacher talk have been put forward in China. Last but not least, the research objects of teacher talk are more specific in China than that in western countries. For example, Chinese scholars investigate pronunciation, polite expression or make comparisons about teacher talk between expert teacher and novice teacher.

Teacher talk, as the main teaching medium in classroom teaching, needs to be further investigated and reflected by all of us.

3. The Way Forward for Teacher Talk

The studies of teacher talk at home and abroad have arguably shown the way forward for teacher talk. I think it is high time for us to make more efforts in teacher talk of English classroom instruction on the aspects of constructing our own native theories, exploring interdisciplinary teacher talk, improving research methods and completing studies on teacher talk in primary and secondary schools.

3.1 The Construction of Chinese Native Theories in Teacher Talk

We must construct a kind of methodology matching our native English education. As we mention, western countries have their own methodology like IRE model, interaction hypothesis, input hypothesis to explore teacher talk, while very few native theories about teacher talk have been put forward in China. Many scholars explored teacher talk by applied foreign theories. It is of great necessity to construct our own native theories since western theories in teacher talk is not matching our countries education to some extent. We have our own teaching ideas, language teaching patterns, language background and so on. Instead, if we want to investigate teacher talk deeper in English classroom instruction in China, it is suitable to use our native theories which combine to current

English teaching context in China.

3.2 Interdisciplinary Research in Teacher Talk

Drawing on the previous studies on teacher talk at home and abroad, we find that few researches can make a conjunction of teacher talk and other disciplines. Scholars tend to analyze teacher talk in linguistic, psychology and pedagogy. As far as I am concerned, the angle and research object in teacher talk should be more broader and deeper. For example, scholars can explore the relationship between teacher talk and the characteristics of teachers, the relationship between teacher talk and teachers' educational background. In 2021, our country puts forward with ideological and political education. Scholars can start with the changes of teacher talk in the context of ideological and political education in English classroom instruction in the perspective of political science. Only when studies on teacher talk are embodies interdisciplinary, the researches can be more comprehensive and persuasive.

3.3 The Improvement of Research Method

There is no doubt that the research method becomes to be diverse. But it still needs to be improved. Attention should be paid to increase the integration of quantitative method and qualitative method and strengthen the correlation between process and result. "It is suggested that artificial intelligence and data mining should be used to make up for the existing defects of metrology and knowledge graph" [28]. What's more, time-efficient of case study should be expanded and the design of scale and questionnaire needs to based on different research objects and teaching objectives.

3.4 The Complement of Studies on Teacher Talk in Primary and Secondary Schools

As above mentioned, scholars at home and abroad study teacher talk in college English classroom in a long time. The studies on teacher talk in primary and secondary school have been emerged in recent years. Foreign language education in primary and secondary schools determines the success or failure of foreign language education. So it is an urgent task to explore the effect of teacher talk deeper in primary and secondary schools. As teacher talk in primary and secondary schools is a new focus, there is plenty of room to investigate. As far as I am concerned, the future research of teacher talk can start under the influence of education policy of the state of compulsory school, or application of modern English teaching model in primary and secondary schools, like flipped classroom, blending learning and so on.

4. Conclusion

To recap, this research takes literature review based on the studies on teacher talk in order to summarize the previous studies and provide some suggestions on future studies on teacher talk. It aims to improve teaching quality in English classroom instruction and facilitate students' language ability.

This research finds that scholars at home and abroad tend to use linguistics, psychology and pedagogy to explore teacher talk. The research methods tend to be diverse, like case study, classroom observation, interview, questionnaire and so on. The research objects of teacher talk are more specific in China than that in western countries. For example, Chinese scholars made comparisons to investigate the effects on pronunciation of different teachers in English classroom instruction in recent years.

Last but not least, the future studies on teacher talk can be done by constructing our own native theories, exploring interdisciplinary teacher talk, improving research methods and completing

studies on teacher talk in primary and secondary schools.

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