

The Quality of Language Input as Revealed in Teacher Talks and Classroom Activities

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This study aims to examine the quality of the language input provided in the elementary school English classes. Considering the importance of the language input available in the classroom in the EFL context, this study analyzes the teacher talks and the classroom activities in three elementary school prize winner classes in the national competition for excellence in English teaching. According to the result of the analysis, the language input provided by the teacher talks and the classroom activities lacks the quality of the input found in the communicative classroom. Based on the result, the study argues that in order to develop the communicative language ability in their students, the elementary school English teachers must first improve their own English proficiency and develop the techniques necessary to make their classroom activities communicative enough.

Keywords: [language input/elementary school English class/teacher talk/classroom activities/언어 입력/초등영어 교실/교사 발화/교실 활동]

1. Introduction

There have been claims regarding the important role of the teacher in the language learning process (Birckbichler, 1987; Bragger, 1985; Freeman, 1989; Paulu, 1998; Shuy, 1981; Widdowson, 1990). According to these claims, the teacher's role is

to short-circuit the slow process of natural language acquisition (Widdowson, 1990), and to be able to do the job properly the teacher must possess the required knowledge, appropriate skills as well as positive attitudes and awareness of their teaching (Freeman, 1989).

Recognizing the important role of the teacher in language learning, there have been publications within the country which emphasize a more systematic and effective teacher development (Kyung-Suk Chang, 1999; Jae-Young Choi, 2003; Hae-Young Han, 2001; Yung-Suk Jung, 2001; Hae-Dong Kim, 2006; Ki-Wan Sung, 2002). This is a good phenomenon in the sense that those publications directly or indirectly can induce the national efforts to improve the situation. In fact, in 2006 Ministry of Education & Human Resources Development sponsored the first national competition for excellence in English teaching in order to encourage English teachers to improve their teaching. Among the 550 participants nationwide there were 15 prize winners, whose classes were posted on the web site of EDUNET in 2007. Although the specific theme of each class was different, the final goal of all the classes in the competition was the same: developing the communicative English ability in the students. Observation of their classes, however, makes one very doubtful about the effectiveness of their teaching. Especially, the quality of the input provided in the class through the teacher talks and the classroom activities seemed to be far from that found in the communicative language classroom.

Based on the argument that input plays a crucial role in language development but mere exposure to target language (TL) is not enough (Bragger, 1985; Swain, 1985), the present study examines the language input provided in the elementary school English classes. Specifically, the study analyzes the input provided through the teacher talks and the classroom activities in three elementary school English classes. It is hoped that the result of

this study could help the teachers recognize that teacher talks and classroom activities are important factors in determining the quality of input.

2. Background

It is known that language input plays a crucial role in language development. However, in an EFL context, where the students have little contact with the TL outside the classroom, the classroom is the only or at most the main source from which the students receive the necessary input. This means that the teacher plays a crucial role in determining the quality of the input available to the students.

As an effort to provide students with more TL input, there has been various attempts in Korea including the administrative encouragement for the implementation of the "Teaching English through English (TETE)", which requires the teacher to use the TL exclusively and does not allow the students to use their first language (L1). The TETE in Korea, an EFL context, originally came from the English-only policy in the U. S., an ESL context, which employed the policy for social or political reasons (Auerbach, 1993). However, even in the ESL context there have been claims (Auerbach, 1993; Phillipson & Skutnabb-Kangas, 1996; Richards, 1985) against the English-only policy for several reasons. One of them is that there has been no empirical evidence that the exclusive use of the TL actually produces better language learners (Richards, 1985). Another is that English can serve useful purposes only if the linguistic human rights of speakers of other languages are respected (Phillipson & Skutnabb-Kangas, 1996). Still another is that using L1 reduces affective barriers to English acquisition and allows for more rapid progress (Auerbach, 1993).

Considering such claims against the English-only policy even in the ESL context, it is very unfortunate to find teachers in Korea who blindly adopt the TETE without proper preparation, thus making the class harder to the students. Those teachers seem to believe that the students' L1 is an obstacle in the TL learning and the exclusive use of the TL is helpful in developing the communicative language ability (Sung-Ae Kim, 2002). However, unlike their beliefs, many studies claim that the students' L1 can be a resource rather than an obstacle and thus the L1 and the L2 can exist simultaneously (Auerbach, 1993; Cook, 2001; Jensen & Vinther, 1983; Kharma & Hajjaj, 1989; Polio & Duff, 1994; Turnbull, 2001). For instance, Cook (2001) argues that given the fact of life, the indisputable L1-L2 connection, keeping the languages visibly separate in language teaching is contradicted by the invisible processes in students' minds. Auerbach (1993) also maintains that using the L1 reduces affective barriers to English acquisition and allows for more rapid progress.

Summarizing the arguments for the use of the TL and the L1 in the EFL class, one can say that what is crucial in developing the students' L2 proficiency is not whether the TL is exclusively used or not or whether to use the L1 or not. Rather, it is how the TL or the L1 is used. As Jensen and Vinther (1983) maintains, what is necessary for an effective L2 development seems to be the maximal use of the TL and the judicious use of the L1. Given all the arguments for the use of L1 in the L2 class, employing the TETE sacrificing the students' understanding looks unreasonable.

In order to provide more language input, teachers in the language classrooms employ various classroom activities. However, not all the activities used are the same in their effectiveness in generating the input. In the discussion of the classroom activities, Rivers (1983) distinguishes between the skill-getting and skill-using activities. According to her, the skill-getting activities consist of the knowledge both in the perception of units,

categories, and functions, and in the internalization of the rules relating these categories and functions, whereas the skill-using activities are the opportunities for autonomous use of the language involving the motivation to communicate and the opportunity to do so interactively. For an L2 development with fluency, as well as accuracy, it is argued that both the skill-getting and the skill-using activities are necessary (Bragger, 1985; Celce-Murcia, 1991). Unfortunately, however, many less skilled teachers too often focus only on the skill-getting activities, depriving the students of the opportunities for language use through negotiating interaction. In order not to deprive the students of the freedom to create whatever little language they may actually have at their disposal (Bragger, 1985), teachers need to reduce the skill-getting activities and increase the skill-using activities.

A typical characteristic of the class with too much focus on the skill-getting activities is an excessive use of the IRF (i.e. Initiation-Response-Feedback) type of discourse, where the teacher initiates asking the student a question, the students respond, and then the teacher gives a feedback. This is because in contrast to the questions used outside the classrooms, the questions in such a class are not intended to sustain a conversation or to elicit new information but intended to evaluate the students' understanding of the subject matter (White & Lightbown, 1984). Even though such a type of discourse also demonstrates the classroom interaction, as Cook (2001) points out, it hardly exposes the students to the full range of external language available outside the classroom.

Exposure to comprehensible input has been claimed to be crucial in L2 development (Bragger, 1985; Chaudron, 1988; Gass & Varonis, 1994; Krashen, 1985; Long, 1985; Loschky, 1994; Swain, 1985). In the natural context this may not draw much attention because it occurs naturally and always available to the learner. In the classroom context, however, this is a serious concern because what kind of input is provided or how much input is provided depends

very much on the teacher. By the language that the teacher uses and by the classroom activities that the teacher employs, the quality as well as the quantity of the input provided to the students is to be determined.

Thus far, arguments in the literature has been introduced as a theoretical background for the study. Based on the arguments that the input provided by the teacher can play a crucial role in the language classroom, the study examines what the input in our elementary school English classes is like. Introduced in the following section is how the data for the study were collected and analyzed.

3. Method

3.1 Collection of Data

Three classes (Class A, Class B & Class C) were selected from 10 elementary school English classes which won a prize (i.e., two first prize, three second prize, and five third prize classes) in the 2006 national competition for excellence in English teaching. The competition was sponsored by Ministry of Education & Human Resources Development. The criteria used for the selection of the three classes were that they were from different parts of the country, from different grades (4th, 5th, and 6th grade class), and from the first, second, and third prize winner classes, respectively.

Class A, the 1st prize winner class, consisted of 27 6th grade students, Class B, the 3rd prize winner class consisted of 38 5th grade students, and Class C, the 2nd prize winner class, consisted of 30 4th grade students. The theme of each class was "Developing Communicative Language Ability through Whole Language Approach", "Enhancing Students' confidence through

Personalization of Real-Life English”, and “Developing Communicative English Ability through Leveled Small Group Activity”, respectively. The textbooks used were published by Ministry of Education & Human Resources Development (2002). The specific textbook unit taught in Class A, Class B and Class C was “Lesson 10: I’m Stronger than You.”, “Lesson 13: What did you do yesterday?”, and “Lesson 7: Sorry, I can’t.”, respectively.

The data for analysis were taken from the video-taped classes posted on the web site of EDUNET. The lesson plans with a detailed description of what the teacher would do in the class were also available, but they were used only as the supplementary data because the description was often different from what the teacher actually did in the class.

Even though the three classes analyzed are very limited in number and thus may not reflect all that happens in the elementary school English classes, they are still believed to reveal the common quality of the language input provided in the elementary school English classes.

3.2 Analysis of Data

Since the present study aims to examine the quality of the language input provided in the elementary school English classes, the analysis focused on the input provided by the teacher talks and the classroom activities. More specifically, the analysis was conducted in the following categories: 1) appropriateness of the vocabulary used in the teacher talks, 2) lexical/grammatical correctness of teacher talks, 3) naturalness or authenticity of the expressions in teacher talks, 4) common type of discourse in teacher-student interactions, and 5) teacher’s use of paraphrasing or retelling strategy. It must be said that these categories were descriptive in nature. That is, after the preliminary observation of the classes, the researcher

categorized the problems found in the teacher talks and in the classroom activities. After the categories were made, the researcher observed the classes several times again for the accuracy of the analysis and finally described the weaknesses in terms of the five categories.

'Appropriateness of the vocabulary' was evaluated by checking if there were any difficult vocabulary items used by the teacher. The criterion used for difficulty judgment was the vocabulary list recommended in the Teacher's Guide (Ministry of Education & Human Resources Development, 2002) and the judgement by two elementary school English teachers. 'Lexical/grammatical correctness' was judged by checking if the sentences had any lexical/grammatical errors. 'Naturalness or authenticity of expressions' was evaluated, with the assistance of a native speaker, by the plausibility of the expression in the real world. 'Common type of discourse in teacher-student interactions' was examined by analyzing whether the question the teacher asked was intended to sustain a conversation by eliciting new information or to evaluate the students' understanding (White & Lightbown, 1984). Finally, 'Teacher's use of the paraphrasing or retelling strategy' to make the input more comprehensible to the students was examined by checking the teacher's repetition of the sentence with the same meaning but in a different form.

Even though the analysis was not exhaustive, it was still expected to provide valuable information about the common quality of the language input available in the elementary school English classes.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Appropriateness of Vocabulary Used in Teacher Talks

In order to make the class more effective with increased students' interest, teachers must ensure that the difficulty level of the input is adjusted to suit the ability of the students (Clarke, 1989). This implies that despite the TETE which the government tries to implement, using English beyond the students' comprehension should be avoided for an effective teaching.

All the three teachers observed adopted the TETE and they rarely used Korean in their classes even when they had to use it to enhance comprehension. Thus, the explanation they gave in English was often beyond the students' comprehension. Table 1 gives some examples of difficult vocabulary used in each class. In Class A the teacher tried to explain the grammar point "comparative degrees" in English, but it was very doubtful that the students understood her explanation well enough. In Class B and Class C as well, the teachers tried to explain the game in English using the difficult vocabulary introduced in the table. Again, however, it was very doubtful that the explanation with such difficult vocabulary really helped the students understand how the game worked.

TABLE 1
Difficult Vocabulary Used in Teacher Talks

| Examples | |
|----------|--|
| Class A | "performance", "fluently", "comparative degrees", "adjectives", "at random" |
| Class B | "material", "candidate", "basic expression" |
| Class C | "expressions", "other situation", "naturally" |

It is argued that using L1 where that use is crucial is necessary for the teaching-learning process (Khurma & Hajjaj, 1989). According to Auerbach (1993), the teacher can and must use the

students' L1 in order to help the students understand the lesson better. Giving the explanation on the grammar points or on how to do the game using difficult vocabulary such as "comparative degree", or "basic expression" seems to be unnecessary and only confusing to the students. Teachers need to remember that learnability is an important criterion in deciding whether a certain vocabulary item should be introduced or not (Nunan, 1991).

4.2 Lexical/Grammatical Correctness of Teacher Talks

Even though it has been recommended that sometimes students' errors should be ignored in order to make the communication flow, this does not mean that the teacher's errors are also acceptable. This is because the language the teacher uses in the EFL classroom can be the model of the TL for the students. In the sense that what the teacher says in the class including the teacher errors can become the input to the students, the teacher's correct English is not only important but also required.

TABLE 2
Lexical/Grammatical Errors in Teacher Talks

| | Examples |
|---------|---|
| | "It will be rain today." for <i>It will rain today.</i> |
| | "Let's play some performance." probably for <i>Let's see if we can do it.</i> |
| Class A | "I prepare some bags." for <i>I prepared a bag.</i> |
| | "There are lots of objectives in this bag." for <i>There are several objects in this bag.</i> |
| | "Next class we will learn another comparative degrees more specific, specific using this mini book." probably for <i>Next class, we will learn more about comparative degrees using this mini book.</i> |
| Class B | "Students should speak to the past thing." for <i>Students can talk about the past.</i> |

| | |
|-------|---|
| | "Every morning I went to there. Go to there." for <i>Every morning I go there.</i> |
| | "Can you say your yesterday?" for <i>Can you tell us about your yesterday?</i> |
| | "Please take out your material." for <i>Please put away your material.</i> |
| | "Do(Did) you fun? for <i>Did you have fun?</i> |
| | "Let's find out next class." <i>Let's find out what we're going to study next class.</i> |
| | "Next time we will be learn 'what did you do yesterday.' again." for <i>Next time we will learn 'What did you do yesterday.' again.</i> |
| Class | "Listen carefully and do as I told." for <i>Listen carefully and do as I say (or as you are told).</i> |
| C | "Move your seat as this rubric." for <i>You need to move your seat for this game.</i> |

Table 2 introduces some of the examples of lexical/grammatical errors. As can be noticed, the teachers' English proficiency was not enough for communicative language teaching. With the frequent lexical and grammatical errors the sentences the teachers produced were often unnatural, unauthentic, and incomprehensible, making the students the victims of their poor English. Moreover, their pronunciation and rhythm were also unnatural and could hardly be a good language model for the students. Given that imitation is one of two basic processes involved in the acquisition and automatization of a second language (Faerch & Kasper, 1985, recited from O'Malley & Chamot, 1990) and that exposure to the TL is a factor that affects the pronunciation (Brown, 1994), teachers need to remember that they play an important role in the students' learning of the TL pronunciation and rhythm.

Due to the complexity involved in describing them, examples of the teachers' unnatural rhythm are not introduced but only a few examples of their pronunciation errors are described below.

e.g. (In Class A) "adjective"[*ədʒektɪv]

(In Class B) "Today, we have learned[*rənd] ----"
"Let's find[*faɪn] out next class."

(In Class C) "I'm sick[*sɪk]." "Let's find[*faɪn]out."

4.3 Naturalness/Authenticity of Expressions in Teacher Talks

During the classes all the three teachers asked lots of questions in order to make the students talk. However, their questions were mostly not the kinds of questions that were found in the real world. That is, they lacked naturalness or authenticity. This lack of naturalness or authenticity seemed to have resulted from the teacher's lack of knowledge about the difference between the skill-getting activities and the skill-using activities. It seemed that the teacher thought she was giving the students opportunities to use the language by asking questions to be answered. However, simply making the students talk by asking questions with no information gap is different from engaging the students in language use or communication.

As shown in Table 3, all the three teachers started the class with a question such as "How's the weather today?", "What day is it today?", and "How's the weather outside?". These questions were asked not because the teachers wanted to get information about the weather or day but because they wanted to see if the students could understand the questions and give the right answers. In other words, there was no information gap between the questioner (teacher) and the answerers (students). The teacher asked about what she already knew and the students gave the answer to the teacher who already had it. In the real world this kind of question and answer would not be given except for a special purpose. In a language classroom asking a question about what one already knows is considered to be not language use but only language practice. Even though language practice also plays a role, it is not enough to develop the communicative ability in the

TL.

TABLE 3
Unnatural/Unauthentic Expressions in Teacher Talks

| Examples | |
|----------|--|
| | "How's the weather today?" & "What day is it today?" as greeting. |
| Class | "Please speak fluently." |
| A | "From now on, I want to tell you some story." for <i>Now, I will tell you a story.</i> |
| | "How was your performance?" for <i>How did you like the act-out?</i> |
| Class | "How's the weather outside?" as greeting |
| B | "You answer very well, I will give you a sticker. OK?" |
| Class | "How's the weather today?" as greeting, |
| C | "If you speak naturally, I will give you a sticker." |

In addition, the expressions such as "Please speak fluently." in Class A and "If you speak naturally, I will give you a sticker." in Class C also sound odd because speaking fluently or speaking naturally/ unnaturally is not a matter of choice but the result of one's language use, and hence, such expressions would not be used in the real world.

4.4 Common Type of Discourse in Teacher-Student Interactions

Despite all the claims for learner-centered activities in the language classroom, the observed classes were still excessively teacher-centered in that the teacher controlled most of what happened in the class, deciding what and how the students were to say. As expected, there were many repetitions and substitutions and there were little language use involving information gap. In Class A, for instance, where the activities included one individual work and five whole-class works, there was no language use involving information gap. In Class B as well, where the activities

included one pair work, one group work, and six whole-class works, there was no language use involving information gap, either. Likewise, in Class C, where the activities included one group work and four whole-class works, only one whole-class work included language use involving information gap. Given that information gap activities are the typical activities in the communicative language classroom (Walz, 1996), it can be said that the students in the three classes had little opportunity for language use but were mostly involved in language practice.

TABLE 4
IRF Type of Discourse

| Examples | |
|----------|---|
| Class A | T: "Look at the window. How's the weather?" Ss: "It's cloudy." T: "What day is it?" Ss: "It's Wednesday." T: "Right." |
| Class B | T: "Jaewon, Stand up, please. OK. What's your favorite subject?" S: "Math." T: "OK Jaewon, Very good. Jaewon, please ask somebody." |
| Class C | T: "Can you guess what we are going to study?" S: "제안하는 말을 배울 것 같습니다." T: "OK, Very good!" |

When the class is full of language practice (i.e., skill-getting activity), the common type of classroom discourse is the IRF type of discourse (White & Lightbown, 1990). Also, in many skill-getting activities it happens that one party (usually the teacher) always asks the question and the other party (usually the student(s)) always gives the answer (Sung-Ae Kim, 2002). This was exactly what happened in the observed classes. During the activities in all the three classes it was the teacher rather than the students who virtually got most of the practice. The

teacher usually asked the questions in full sentences, while the students answered in short, often one word sentences. As a result, there were few errors produced by the students. Teachers must remember that silence makes no errors. It is necessary to give the students opportunity to experiment with what they have learned.

Table 4 gives some examples of the IRF (Initiation-Response-Feedback) type of discourse most common in the observed classes. Even though it is true that some language practice (or drills) must precede actual language use since nobody can use what s/he does not know (Sung-Ae Kim, 2005), it is still not acceptable for the teacher to spend most of the class time making the students involved in language practice only. In fact, except in some greeting part, all the interactions between the teacher and the student(s) in the three classes were basically the IRF type. It was always the teacher who initiated the interaction and the basic pattern was that the teacher asked a question to check student comprehension, then gave a feedback (usually compliment) to the students' response. Given the pattern of interaction between the teacher and the students, and given the language practice which took most of the class time, it was hard for the researcher to consider their classes to be "communicative". By forcing the students to answer only what the teacher asked and by rarely allowing time for any autonomous language use, the teachers generated artificial interaction even when it was possible to generate genuine communication. Teachers need to remember that making the students talk in class does not necessarily mean that they are involved in communication. If they want the students to become communicators, they must allow their students to use the language, not just practice the language. After all, people learn to communicate by communicating (Larsen-Freeman, 1986).

4.5 Lack of Paraphrasing or Retelling Strategy

In a language classroom the teacher must do her best to make the input comprehensible to the students. This means that the teacher sometimes has to paraphrase or retell what has been said in the class in an easier English, thus making the lexically or grammatically incorrect or difficult sentences already produced more comprehensible to the students.

The paraphrasing or retelling strategy is a good means of communication (O'Malley & Chamot, 1990) and it helps the teacher provide their students with more comprehensible input. Not using them would mean that the students lose the opportunity to receive more comprehensible input. The teacher's paraphrasing or retelling is considered to be a teaching strategy used to make the class easier and provide more comprehensible input to the students. In addition, students in the classroom often miss what is said by the teacher or by another student for a variety of reasons including the low volume, poor quality of the input, their own failure to pay attention, etc. With the paraphrasing or retelling strategy, therefore, the teacher needs to do her best to make what has been said in the class comprehensible to the students.

Despite the important role of paraphrasing or retelling strategy in providing comprehensible input, however, the three teachers observed rarely used the strategy. This lack of paraphrasing or retelling strategy makes one suspect that the teachers were not paying enough attention to individual students' understanding of what was said in the class. The examples below are the sentences produced by the students in their presentation of their homework, which the teacher did not paraphrase or retell and thus failed to make them better understood by the other students or to make them input with better quality:

e.g. (In Class B)

"I went to hospital with my mom. Because I have a cold. I

met doctor. Doctor say, "Have rest time.
"I ate shrimp fry yesterday. My mom made it delicious. My
family and I eat all. It was very delicious. I want eat again."
(In Class C) "Who is you?"

If the teacher had paraphrased or retold those sentences, it would have been helpful for the students to better understand what their fellow students had said and the language input would have been better in terms of quality.

5. Summary and Suggestions

Summarizing the result of the study, there are several weaknesses found in the analysis of the teacher talks and the classroom activities. The weaknesses found include use of difficult vocabulary beyond the students' level, use of lexically/grammatically incorrect sentences, use of unnatural or unauthentic expressions, use of too much IRF type of discourse, and lack of paraphrasing or retelling strategy. These results reveal that the teachers lacked not only the English proficiency but also the teaching techniques necessary to teach their classes communicatively and effectively enough.

Based on the result, one can conclude that the quality of the input provided in the three classes analyzed was not good enough to help the students develop the communicative language ability in the TL. Due to lack of their own English proficiency and also due to lack of appropriate teaching techniques the teacher talks and the classroom activities failed to provide the students with enough comprehensible input with a high quality. Given the argument that in the classroom setting the teacher's own language proficiency as well as the methodology used has a great influence on the success of language learning (Brown, 1994; Gradman &

Hanania, 1991), the weaknesses found in the current study are very unfortunate for the students.

If we really want to see the communicative language ability develop in our students, the priority should be given to the production of teachers who are competent enough to teach the class communicatively. In the following are some suggestions to improve the quality of the input in our English classes:

Firstly, the policy makers, administrators and teacher evaluators must see the reality. They have made efforts to implement the TETE in the English classes. Unfortunately, however, few of our elementary school English teachers seem to be ready to teach their classes communicatively yet. Simply pushing the teachers may produce unexpected results as revealed in this study. Instead of pushing them, therefore, it is necessary to provide them with what they need first including appropriate in-service as well as pre-service teacher training.

Secondly, many in-service teacher training programs offered thus far provide the knowledge about how to teach but they rarely allot time for practice. As a result, the knowledge the teacher obtained in the training program is often practiced in their classes in their own way. However, we know that knowing is one thing and doing is another. It is definitely necessary to give the teachers opportunities to practice their teaching techniques. In this sense, the teacher training programs must be reorganized to respond to the needs of the teachers, improving their teaching techniques as well as TL proficiency.

Finally, in order to help the teachers do their job properly, the teacher education programs in colleges must first be changed. They need to reduce ancillary courses such as linguistics and literature and add more practical courses (Freeman, 1989) that can help the teacher candidates develop competence both in English and in teaching. Without a radical change in this matter, the teachers

produced by those programs cannot be expected to possess the competence that they need as a teacher.

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