Teacher self-talk: Interactional resource for managing instruction and eliciting empathy

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Abstract

This study reveals the significant role of teacher self-talk in managing classroom interaction during unplanned moments of instruction and in building affective teacher–student relationships. We examined 24 hours of video-recordings collected from nine university level courses: three upper level ESL courses; one undergraduate linguistics course; a split-level undergraduate/graduate course and four graduate courses, all broadly related to the topic of applied linguistics. Drawing on conversation analytic methods, we present a detailed analysis of five examples of teacher self-talk. Findings suggest that the practice of teacher self-talk, accomplished via specific prosodic cues, eye gaze direction, and body positioning, plays a significant role in managing the moments when aspects of the pedagogical task need to be monitored or adjusted. By making the students aware of the teacher's predicament, self-talk helps to maintain the instructional space while trouble is being resolved by keeping students' focus on the instructional task. Moreover, teacher self-talk acts as an affordance for eliciting self-initiated empathetic responses from students. The findings confirm the importance of examining how unplanned classroom moments are accomplished in talk-in-interaction, and reveal how practices like self-talk, which may appear on the surface be slight or unimportant, in fact make significant contributions to teaching.

1. Introduction

Teaching is a complex and challenging pursuit. In their interactions with students, teachers must manage multiple activities and goals simultaneously. At the very least, they must coordinate their actions in ways that maintain order as they instruct, ensure that students are attending to the instructional task, and encourage student participation. Balancing these multiple tasks at the same time can be a challenge even when classroom interaction proceeds smoothly. However, teachers and researchers know by experience that instruction rarely unfolds as a sequence of pre-planned steps. There are always moments that constitute ''departure from classroom normativity'' and yet are ''interactionally complex'' and consequential to the advancement of the instructional agenda (Hellermann and Pekarek Doehler, 2010:42).

By and large, however, the investigatory focus of much research on classroom discourse has focused on official forms of instructional talk disregarding the equally important ''managerial and procedural'' (Cazden, 1988:54) aspects of classroom discourse. A well-researched pattern is the IRF[1] sequence, found to be the most prevalent form of

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[1] The IRF is a sequence of three actions: an instructor question or directive; a student response; and a teacher-produced comment on the response or another question or directive.

instructional discourse in all kinds of classrooms (e.g., Barnes, 1992; Cazden, 1988; Hall, 2007; Lee, 2007; Mehan, 1979; Nassaji and Wells, 2000). While there has been a surge of interest in recent years in examining less typical forms of instructional talk constituting large group discussions and small group work (e.g., Markee, 2004; Paoletti and Fele, 2004; Hellermann, 2008; Hellermann and Pekarek Doehler, 2010; Luk, 2004), there remains ''a dearth of detailed description of communication in its less orthodox forms'' in the classroom setting (Edwards and Westgate, 1994:43).

One of the few studies that consider less typical forms of instructional talk is Icbay (2011). Focusing on transitions between classroom activities, the study shows that at such points of "contextual changes" (p. 237), without teacher guidance, the students disengaged from the collective activity and, instead, engaged in conversations among themselves, changing their body positionings and gaze orientations as they did. Conversely, when teachers used 'tying signals' (Icbay, 2011:248), i.e. verbal and nonverbal cues that made public the move from one activity to another, students remained engaged in the instructional framework. Our paper also considers atypical moments in classroom interaction, ones where instruction is suspended for teachers to handle an emergent technology related issue. Specifically, we show the significant role that the side-sequence of teacher self-talk plays in managing such moments and keeping students' focus on the instructional task.

In addition to managing instructional aspects of classroom interaction, teachers must attend to the relational aspects of their practices and actions, since, as the research on effective teaching suggests, maintaining empathetic relationships with students enhances student engagement with learning (Cornelius-White, 2007; Nordstrom and Korpelainen, 2012; Roorda et al., 2011). Despite the acknowledged importance of rapport building to student learning, there have been only a few empirical studies looking at how such relationships are accomplished in teacher–student interaction. Nguyen (2007), for example, shows how an ESL teacher's playful use of a wide range of verbal and nonverbal cues during instruction heightened students' enjoyment in their lessons. Similarly, Sullivan (2000) demonstrates how an EFL teacher's use of repartee during vocabulary tasks increased his adult students' engagement in learning and their feelings of mutual support. Encouraging students to share their personal experiences during instruction and responding empathetically to the stories as well as engaging in small talk with students between instructional activities have also been shown to be effective in establishing rapport (e.g., Boxer and Cortes-Conde, 2000; Luk, 2004). Our study adds to this small, but important body of research on the interactional establishment of positive affective teacher–student relationships by revealing another important role of teacher self-talk, that of affordance for eliciting empathetic responses from students.

We discovered the phenomenon of teacher self-talk while viewing video recordings of several university level classrooms collected as part of a larger research project examining practices and actions accomplished in classroom interaction (Penn State CA Research Group, 2010). During the viewings, we noticed that there were times during instruction when the prosodic cues of the instructor's talk changed in that, while still audible, the talk was spoken more softly and with a different rhythm than surrounding talk. Accompanying the talk were changes in the teacher's eye gaze, body positioning and nonverbal gestures. We also observed that these moments occurred when the instructor was confronted with troubles in managing the technological medium being used to facilitate the instructional task.

Our analyses of these moments reveal that the practice of teacher self-talk accomplishes three actions. First, it signals a temporary change in footing, from the ongoing instructional sequence to a side-sequence in which troubles related to the instructional task are dealt with. At the same time, it maintains the instructional space and the participation framework of 'doing instructing' with the students. This is important in that it reveals in micro-analytic details the interactional complexities of maintaining multiple floors while teaching. Finally, and perhaps most significantly, teacher self-talk acts as an affordance for eliciting self-initiated, affiliating or empathetic[2] responses from students. Such opportunities are significant in that they change the dynamics of traditional teacher–student interaction, equalizing the distribution of power and authority for deciding who can speak and when and thus binding the instructors to their co-present students in positive, pro-social ways. Before we provide details on the study and our findings, we briefly review the literature on self-talk.

1.1. Self-talk

The term 'self-talk' has been used in different disciplines to describe aspects of intrapersonal communication where the self is the only target interlocutor. The term gained particular prominence in psychotherapy research such as rational-emotive therapy (e.g., Ellis, 1994, 2004) and cognitive therapy (e.g., Beck, 1995; Butler and Beck, 1995). In these studies self-talk is viewed as a powerful tool for transforming unproductive irrational thinking into desirable rational beliefs.

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[2] Note that the term 'empathic' is also used in the literature. It has a longer history of use; however, we have chosen to use empathetic because it is more common.