

Factors Affecting Learners' Attention to Teacher Talk in Nine ESL Classrooms

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Abstract

With classroom observation and stimulated recall interviews as research instruments, the present study investigated some of the factors that affected learners' attention to teacher talk in nine English as a Second Language (ESL) classrooms. The results revealed five such factors, namely, learners' self evaluation of their language knowledge, the way teachers provided language information, learners' role in language episodes, peer behavior, and learners' concern for "face." Specifically, learners paid more attention to teacher talk when they thought they did not understand a language feature, when they were the initiator of a question or at least involved in a language episode, when peers reacted to their mistakes, and when teachers used various techniques to explain a language point.

Keywords: attention; teacher talk; classroom observation; stimulated recall interview

Introduction

Attention is a process that "encodes language input, keeps it active in working and short-term memory, and retrieves it from long-term memory" (Robinson, 2003, p. 631). It has been identified as an important cognitive process in second language acquisition (SLA). Noticing is the part of the attentional system that involves the detection and consequent registration of stimuli in memory (Philp, 2003; Robinson, 1995). It has generated heated discussion in the field of SLA.

In the second language (L2) literature, almost all theories of L2 learning recognize the significance of input in the acquisition process (Gass & Selinker, 2001). In L2 classrooms, teacher talk is (one of) the major source(s) of input. Feedback, an important component of teacher talk, has attracted great attention from researchers. A plethora of studies have been conducted to examine the effect of the characteristics of particular teacher feedback moves (e.g., Loewen & Philp, 2006; Sheen, 2006) or the characteristics of whole teacher feedback episodes (e.g., Ellis, Basturkmen, & Loewen, 2001a, 2001b; Loewen, 2004, 2005) on L2 learning.

Given the importance of both attention/noticing and teacher talk in SLA, the study reported in this paper attempted to investigate some of the factors that affected learners' attention to teacher talk in nine ESL classrooms in a North American context.

Literature review

The role of attention and noticing in SLA

The role of attention and noticing in selecting input for L2 learning is a controversial issue in the SLA literature. Some researchers believe that attention/noticing is not important in SLA. Krashen (1982) makes a distinction between language acquisition, a subconscious process, and language learning, a conscious process. He believes that only the acquired system can be used to produce language while the learned system can only serve as a monitor for the former. According to Krashen (1985, 1994), in acquiring a second language, adult learners can access the same "unconscious" processes and innate mechanism that guide first language acquisition, and that conscious learning is of minimal use for L2 communication. Unlike Krashen, some researchers see a significant role for attention in SLA. Schmidt (1990, 1993, 2001), for example, argues that we must pay attention to and "notice" input in order to learn it. In his famous "Noticing Hypothesis," he proposes that the subjective experience of "noticing" is the necessary and sufficient condition for the conversion of input into intake; noticing is therefore the first step of language learning.

Numerous studies have been conducted to investigate the role of attention and noticing in SLA (e.g., Gass, Svetics, & Lemelin, 2003; Leow, 2000, 2001; Robinson, 1996, 1997; Rosa & Leow, 2004; Rosa & O'Neill, 1999; Schmidt & Frota, 1986; Williams, 2005). Although some studies found that there could be learning without awareness, the cumulative findings from these studies show that attention and noticing are important in SLA. It has been argued that even if noticing is not the necessary and sufficient condition for L2 learning, it certainly facilitates L2 learning. In less technical words, "people learn about the things that they attend to and do not learn much about the things they do not attend to" (Schmidt, 2010, p. 722).

The findings of attention/noticing studies in turn have generated a considerable amount of research which focused on or touched upon factors that can possibly affect learners' attention to or noticing of the L2 information they receive, such as input enhancement (e.g., Han, Park, & Combs, 2008; Jourdenais, Ota, Stauffer, Boyson, & Doughty, 1995; White, 1998), output (e.g., Izumi & Bigelow, 2000; Song & Suh, 2008; Swain, 1993, 1995, 2005); feedback type (e.g., Amar, 2008; Amar & Spada, 2006; Iwashita, 2003; Lyster, 1998, 2004); feedback characteristics (e.g., Ellis et al., 2001a, 2001b; Loewen, 2004, 2005; Loewen & Philp, 2006; Sheen, 2006), task type (e.g., Hanaoka & Izumi, 2012; Qi & Lapkin, 2001; Thornbury, 1997), and task repetition (e.g., Birjandi & Ahangari, 2008; Bygate, 2001; Hawkes, 2012). Probably as a result of the powerful influence of the noticing hypothesis, an overwhelming majority of these studies focused on attention at the noticing level. In the present study, attention was treated as a unitary concept, with no special emphasis on noticing.

The role of feedback in SLA

Feedback in conversational interactions can provide input to learners either as positive evidence or negative evidence or a combination of the two. Upon receiving feedback, learners may try to correct themselves. The new utterance can be regarded as pushed output, which can then help with language learning by realizing the three functions of output: the noticing function, the hypothesis testing function, and the metalinguistic function (See Swain, 2005).

The role of feedback in SLA is exemplified by recasts, a type of implicit negative feedback. Long (2007) thoroughly discusses the role of recasts in L2 learning. With a detailed review of both cross-sectional and longitudinal studies, Long concludes that, although they are not necessary for acquisition, recasts “appear to be facilitative, to work better than models, and to do so incidentally, without interrupting the flow of conversations and participants’ focus on message contents” (p. 94).

This facilitative role of recasts in particular and feedback in general is reflected in the notion of negotiation:

Negotiation serves as a catalyst for change because of its focus on incorrect forms. By providing learners with information about incorrect forms, negotiation enables learners to search for additional confirmatory or nonconfirmatory evidence. (Gass & Selinker, 2001, p. 283)

While the focus of this claim is negotiation, it points to the importance of feedback. To a large extent, feedback is what initiates changes in learners’ interlanguage system. Without feedback, learners may not notice the gaps or holes in their L2 knowledge; they may not modify their inappropriate language production; and they may not get the input they need in order to confirm or disconfirm their hypotheses about a language structure.

Attention and noticing in feedback contexts

In studies which examined the effectiveness of different types of feedback (e.g., Amar, 2008; Amar & Spada, 2006; Iwashita, 2003; Lyster, 1998, 2004), the features of particular feedback moves (e.g., Loewen & Philp, 2006; Sheen, 2006) or the characteristics of whole feedback episodes (e.g., Ellis et al., 2001a, 2001b; Loewen, 2004, 2005), noticing, although not always directly operationalized as a focal variable, has frequently come up in the discussion of the level of explicitness of feedback, which is an issue of primary concern in feedback research.

Other than these studies, there have also been some studies that specifically examined learners’ perception or interpretation of teacher feedback. One such study that has been frequently cited is Mackey, Gass, and McDonough (2000). The characteristic the researchers focused on was the linguistic target of interactive feedback. Drawing on stimulated recall comments, they found that learners were more accurate in their perception of lexical, semantic, and phonological feedback than morphosyntactic feedback. In a more recent study carried out in Arabic foreign language classrooms, Mackey and other colleagues (2007) found that learners’ perception of and teachers’ intention about the linguistic target of corrective feedback overlapped the most when the feedback concerned lexis and was provided explicitly.

Another study that deserves special attention is Egi's (2007) in which he explored how linguistic targets, length, and number of changes might affect learners' noticing and interpretation of recasts. Recasts of morphosyntactic and lexical errors were provided to learners during task-based activities. Information about their noticing and interpretation of recasts was gathered with immediate recall and stimulated recall. The results indicated that recasts were occasionally interpreted as responses to content when they were long and substantially different from learners' problematic utterances. In contrast, when recasts were short and closely resembled the original utterances, learners were significantly more likely to attend to the linguistic evidence. The patterns were observed in both morphosyntactic and lexical recasts. These findings suggest that length and the number of changes might partially determine the explicitness of recasts and thus affect learners' abilities to interpret them.

To sum up, learners' noticing of feedback can be greatly affected by the nature of feedback itself. All the feedback studies reviewed above had the type or characteristics of feedback as the key variable. Feedback interaction is a multifaceted phenomenon. The current study is an attempt to look beyond at some other factors that may affect learners' attention to the language information teachers provide.

It is important to point out that although feedback as one of the most researched components of teacher talk was specifically reviewed above, in the present study the language information teachers provided was not just corrective feedback or feedback in response to erroneous learner production. Sometimes teachers questioned students about certain language features. When learners were not able to (correctly) answer the questions, teachers would provide information about those language features. There were also times when learners inquired about certain language structures and teachers provided information to them. In both cases, the information teachers provided was similar to corrective feedback, serving as a type of input. For this reason, the present study is targeted at teacher talk in general rather than corrective feedback in particular.

Research question

The present study is part of a larger study on the noticing and effectiveness of teacher talk. The question the current study attempted to answer is: In addition to the type and characteristics of feedback, what are some other factors that affected learners' attention to teachers' talk about language form in nine ESL classrooms?

Method

Teaching context

The study was conducted in an intensive English program at a large university in the United States. The program was designed to help students learn communicative and academic skills and to prepare them for their future study and life in the country. Accordingly, the courses offered to students were based on a communicative curriculum. The lessons covered topics such as grammar, reading, writing, speaking, and listening skills.

Participants

A total of 8 teachers (6 women and 2 men) and 9 intact classes participated in the study. There were only 8 teachers because one of the teachers taught two parallel classes. Of the 8 teachers, 7 were English L1 speakers, and 1 was a Spanish L1 and English L2 speaker who grew up in the United States. The teachers' teaching experience varied from 1.5 to 37 years, with an average of 10.3 years. A total of 117 students participated in the study. The students, with an average age of 20.4, came from a variety of L1 backgrounds, including Chinese, Arabic, Korean, Japanese, Russian, and Bambara. Their length of English study ranged from 5 to 11 years, with an average of 7.3 years. The majority of students had been in the U.S. for around 6 months. Only a few had been in the country for 12 months or more.

Instruments

The first instrument used in the present study is classroom observation. Altogether, 4 integrated listening and speaking classes, 2 integrated reading and writing classes, 2 academic reading classes, and 1 grammar class were observed. In all classes observed, learners participated in all kinds of communicative activities, such as comparing answers in groups, writing summaries in pairs, and working on information gap tasks. During the lessons, teachers provided language information to students by correcting students' errors, addressing students' queries, asking students questions, etc. The language information provided included various domains, such as pronunciation, spelling, word meaning, and grammar. During the observations, the researcher served as a non-participant observer in the classrooms, monitoring the recording instruments and taking notes, without getting involved in any of the class activities. A Sony digital voice recorder with a clip-on microphone attached to the teachers and a Sony high definition video camera located in a corner of the classrooms were used to record teacher-student exchanges.

In the larger study, 4 to 6 observations were conducted in each class. Each observation lasted an average 80 minutes. Among the 4 to 6 observations in each class, 1 or 2 were followed by stimulated recall interviews. For the present study, 2 observations were selected from each class. When there were 2 observations with stimulated recall interviews for a class in the larger data set, both the 2 observations were selected for that class. When there was only 1 observation with stimulated recall interviews for a class, this observation was selected and the other one was randomly chosen from other observations for supplementary information. Consequently, there were a total of 18 observations, with 14 followed by stimulated recall interviews.

The second instrument used in the present study is a stimulated recall interview (see Gass & Mackey, 2007). Video clips from the classroom observations served as stimuli. Before the interviews, the researcher explained to the learners, with specific examples, that they should talk about what they were thinking at the time the language episodes occurred, not their thinking at the time they watched the video clips. During the interviews, they were reminded to comment on what they were thinking "then," not what they were thinking "now." If learners could speak their L1 in the interviews, they would be able to express themselves better and more information would be elicited.

Unfortunately, this was very difficult with 40% of the learners because the researcher as a student herself did not have the resources to understand these learners' comments in various L1s (e.g., Arabic and Bambara) or to have their comments translated into a language she understood. Consequently, for these learners, the interviews were held in English. As for the other 60% of learners, they reported that their native language was Chinese, which was also the researcher's native language. For these learners, the interviews were held in either Chinese or English as the learners preferred.

Procedure

Before starting formal observation in a class, the researcher distributed the consent forms and conducted a small background survey of the class. With the teacher's consent, she then stayed in the classroom for an hour or two to get familiar with the teacher's teaching style and to select possible positions for the video camera. This also gave the researcher the opportunity to talk to learners and to try to establish a rapport with them.

After each observation, the researcher listened to the recordings, transcribed them, and identified all language episodes. She then selected high-quality video clips and conducted stimulated recall interviews with learners. Ideally, the stimulated recall interviews should be conducted immediately after the observations. However, this turned out to be impossible. For one thing, it took time for the researcher to identify language episodes and to select recall cues. In fact, just importing the videos from the camera to a laptop and converting them into an easily viewable format took a long time. For another thing, learners often had other classes to attend right after an observation or they were simply too tired to participate in the interview session after a long day of study. More often than not, it was even difficult to arrange a meeting time the following day. For these reasons, a range of 1 to 2 days was necessary to allow some leeway for the interviews.

Data analysis

The first part of data analysis involved the identification of language episodes. A language episode was defined as a sequence beginning with an erroneous learner utterance, a query by the learner, or a question by the teacher, followed by information provided by the teacher, and ending with the learner's reaction to the teacher's talk where applicable (adapted from the definition of error treatment sequence by Lyster & Ranta, 1997). Episodes in which one learner provided language information to another learner and episodes in which a learner self-repaired were not included.

Learner comments from the stimulated recall interviews were also audio recorded and transcribed. The researcher identified all the comments where learners implicitly or explicitly referred to the direction and degree of their attention. Comments that concerned unrelated issues, such as the difficulty level of the task at hand and what the interviewee had done on the previous day, were excluded from further analysis. The researcher then scrutinized the resulting comments in the light of corresponding episodes and categorized the comments into different groups.

Results and discussion

Altogether, there were 609 language episodes, with 5.21 episodes per student. Analysis of interview comments along with the language episodes revealed five factors that affected participating learners' attention to teacher talk: learners' self evaluation of their language knowledge, the way teachers talked about language form, learners' role in language episodes, peer behavior, and learners' concern for "face." Table 1 below shows the frequency of stimulated recall comments illustrating the five factors.

Table 1. Frequency of comments illustrating the five factors affecting learner attention

Classes	Self evaluation of knowledge	Concern for "face"	Role in episodes	Peer behavior	Way teachers talked	Total
C1	0 (0.0%)	3 (42.9%)	2 (28.6%)	0 (0.0%)	2 (28.6%)	7
C2	4 (57.1%)	2 (28.6%)	0 (0.0%)	1 (14.3%)	0 (0.0%)	7
C3	5 (50.0%)	0 (0.0%)	3 (30.0%)	1 (10.0%)	1 (10.0%)	10
C4	16 (33.3%)	1 (2.1%)	9 (18.8%)	4 (8.3%)	18 (37.5%)	48
C5	14 (33.3%)	2 (4.8%)	14 (33.3%)	4 (9.5%)	8 (19.0%)	42
C6	16 (57.1%)	1 (3.6%)	3 (10.7%)	3 (10.7%)	5 (17.9%)	28
C7	9 (39.1%)	0 (0.0%)	4 (17.4%)	0 (0.0%)	10 (43.5%)	23
C8	15 (38.5%)	6 (15.4%)	5 (12.8%)	7 (17.9%)	6 (15.4%)	39
C9	0 (0.0%)	1 (12.5%)	2 (25.0%)	1 (12.5%)	4 (50.0%)	8
Total	79 (37.3%)	16 (7.5%)	42 (19.8%)	21 (9.9%)	54 (25.5%)	212
Mean	8.78	1.78	4.67	2.33	6.00	23.56
SD	6.72	1.86	4.30	2.35	5.55	16.47

Among a total of 212 recall comments, the most frequent are those concerning the effect of learners' self evaluation of their language knowledge (37.3%, mean=8.78, SD=6.72) and those concerning the effect of the way teachers talked (25.5%, mean=6.00, SD=5.55), followed by the ones about the effect of learners' role in language episodes (19.8%, mean=4.67, SD=4.30). The last two are comments related to the effect of peer behavior (9.9%, mean=2.33, SD=2.35) and learners' concern for "face" (7.5%, mean=1.78, SD=1.86).

Self-evaluation of language knowledge is the factor with the highest percentage. This is probably because the students were adult learners; they therefore well understood how important it was to appropriately use their learning resources, thus frequently allocating their attention resources according to how well they understood the language

feature under discussion. The way teachers talked has the second highest frequency rate among the five factors. In all the classrooms observed, the teacher was the most important source of input and the most “authoritative” figure. It is not surprising, then, that the way the teacher talked would significantly affect students’ attention. The role learners played in language episodes was another factor frequently referred to. This is natural because the more learners were involved in a language episode, the more they would be concerned with the language feature under discussion, and the more attention they would pay to teachers’ feedback or explanation. Compared with the other three factors, both peer behavior and learners’ concern for “face” have a lower frequency rate. However, the percentages of both categories are close to 10%. This indicates that peer behavior and learners’ concern for “face” also played a non-negligible role in the degree of learners’ attention to teacher talk. Below is a detailed discussion of the five factors.

Learners’ self evaluation of their language knowledge

According to the stimulated recall comments, learners’ evaluation of their own language knowledge affected their attention to teacher talk in three circumstances.

When learners thought they had already understood a language feature, they often paid little or no attention to what the teacher was saying. For example,

(1)

Episode:

T: When I say oh I’m bankrupt, I don’t have enough money this month.

Ira: Like poor.

T: No, it’s a legal term. If you file bankruptcy, or you’re bankrupt, that means there is really no hope of me getting out of debt...It’s hopeless.

Xin: Declare bankruptcy?

T: Yeah, declare bankruptcy.

Comment by Xin:

I learned this word when I was preparing for the TOEFL, so I thought, hmm I know this word; I learned it when I was preparing for the TOEFL...Then I thought, it’s going to be really bad if you go bankrupt. When I know a word, I may not listen carefully but think of other things. It’s easy for me to think of other things when I know a word.

In this example, the teacher was explaining the meaning of the word “bankrupt” to the class. Although Xin was listening to the teacher, the focus of his attention was not the specifics of “bankrupt” as provided by the teacher. The reason Xin gave is that he had learned about the word in the past and that he knew it already. The level of Xin’s attention to the teacher’s talk was therefore largely affected by Xin’s appraisal of his own knowledge of the word under discussion. As Xin explicitly put it, “When I know a word, I may not listen carefully but think of other things.”

In contrast to the first situation, when learners thought they did not know a language feature or did not have a good understanding of it, they would listen more carefully. For example:

(2)

Episode:

Rus: What do you call this?

T: Ok, I'll say it exactly. It's called a riot baton or riot stick. Riot stick or riot baton or a night stick. They hit people with a night stick.

Fu: (Smiles)

Comment by Fu:

I was listening to the teacher's explanation because I didn't know what to call the stick either.

In this example, a learner initiated a question about a "riot stick" during a class discussion. Although the question was not initiated by the interviewee, he "was listening to the teacher's explanation" too because he did not know the answer either.

In the third case, learners paid attention to the teacher's talk because they did not understand the language feature under discussion. Once they thought they understood it, however, their attention would shift somewhere else. For example:

3)

Episode:

T: It's a, it's a type of market. They did say flea market.

Xin: Flea market?

T: Do you know what a flea market is? You know what a flea is? It's really small in size. Dogs and cats sometimes have them and they bite them and they get itchy.

Xin: Yeah.

T: What's a flea market? A place where you buy fleas?

Xin: No, something like garage sales.

T: Exactly. Yes, it's like really big garage sale. Garage sale or yard sale....

Jea: 噢，跳蚤市场，跳蚤市场。

T: I might sell baseball cards, and Abraham sells, sometimes things you've made yourself, sometimes they're old things...

Comment by Bib:

When she first said flea market, I didn't know what she was talking about but it looked familiar to me. I was thinking of the meaning of the word "flea"....After I heard garage sale from the teacher, I realized what flea market is in Chinese. Then my neighbor gave the Chinese name of flea market too. Then I didn't pay more attention.

This example is about a class discussion of the term "flea market." It shows how a Chinese learner's attention shifted as his evaluation of his own knowledge of the term changed. At first, he did not understand "flea market," so he was thinking about the meaning of the word "flea" even though he did not say anything in the episode as shown here. Later, after the teacher explained "flea market" with a synonym and the student next to him gave the equivalent term in Chinese, he stopped paying attention to the discussion even though the teacher gave more details about "flea market."

From Examples 1, 2, and 3, we can see that participating learners' appraisal of their own language knowledge affected their attention to teacher talk to a large extent. In general, the more they thought they knew a language feature, the less attention they would pay to the teacher's talk about it. The result can be both positive and negative. Given the limited capacity of attention (Anderson, 1983; Kahneman, 1973), if the learners had appropriately appraised their knowledge about a language feature, they would be able to "save" their attention resources from what they already knew for what they believed they indeed needed to attend to. However, learners do not always have a correct evaluation of their own interlanguage system. If the learners had overestimated their knowledge about a language feature, they would have lost the opportunity to learn what they should have paid attention to.

The way teachers talked

Two major aspects were mentioned in the stimulated recall interviews concerning the way teachers provided language information: paralinguistic cues and extralinguistic cues.

When the teacher used paralinguistic cues such as pauses, stresses, and a drawing voice, learners would reflect on their own language production or think about an alternative answer to a question, and thus pay more attention to the language feature the teacher was trying to explain. For example:

(4)

Episode:

T: Help me. What kind of grammar is this?

Mato: Do that for me today.

Sal: (Indistinguishable)

T: Im- (Drags voice)

Class: Imperative.

T: Imperative. Right? Imperative.

Class: Imperative.

Comment by Sal:

She was explaining to the students imperative. She said IM-(also drags voice). I paid more attention and think harder when I heard her dragging voice.

In this example, seeing that the students were not able to give the right word for the imperative, the teacher provided the first syllable of the word and dragged her voice to elicit the answer. The learner interviewed clearly indicated that he paid more attention and thought harder after he heard this voice.

When teachers used extralinguistic cues such as hand gestures and facial expressions, learners often found it easier to understand the teacher's explanation. In the example below, the learner explicitly talked about the benefit of extralinguistic cues.

(5)

Episode:

Maj: What's the meaning of dumpling?

T: What's a dumpling? Cho can you explain it?

Cho: It's a kind of food. A Chinese kind of food.

T: Yeah, it's a kind of food, sometimes Chinese. It's like eh there's meats and vegetables inside a wrapper. (Hand gestures dumpling) And you boiled it or steam it. If you go to a Chinese restaurant you can order dumplings or wantons. (Hand gestures dumpling again)

Comment by Maj:

...And I don't understand what Leh say. And then when she used eh (hand gestures dumpling) inside, and when Leh used this, I understand. What's the name of this? Gesture? Yeah, it's useful. Useful for people, for students to understand. I think it's important to education. It makes class more interesting and easy, and so we pay more attention.

In this example, the teacher was explaining to students the meaning of the word "dumpling." Before she used hand gestures, Maj did not understand what she was saying; but after she used hand gestures, he did. To Maj, gesture is important because "It makes class more interesting and easy," and so students "pay more attention."

A series of studies have been conducted to understand, directly or indirectly, the relationship between the way teachers give feedback and the attention learners pay to teacher feedback (e.g., Amar, 2008; Amar & Spada, 2006; Ellis et al., 2001a, 2001b; Iwashita, 2003; Loewen, 2004, 2005; Lyster, 1998, 2004; Sheen, 2006), but few researchers have included the paralinguistic and extralinguistic aspects of teacher feedback in their analysis and discussion. The results of the few studies which did examine the paralinguistic cues and extralinguistic cues in teacher feedback (e.g., Davies, 2006; Faraco & Kida, 2008; Loewen & Philp, 2006; Wang, 2010) indicate that these aspects of teacher feedback can have a positive effect on student learning, mostly by promoting the explicitness of the feedback and making it more perceivable by learners. The learners' comments in Examples 4 and 5 lend support to the findings of these studies and point to the importance of the paralinguistic and extralinguistic components of teacher talk.

Learners' role in language episodes

Learners' recall comments indicate that there is a close relationship between learners' degree of involvement in language episodes and the amount of attention they paid to teacher talk.

When learners were the initiators of questions, their comments were often very detailed, indicating the possibility of more attention. For example:

(6)

Episode:

Adu: No no we have to change the word.

T: What word are you trying to not use?

Adu: Change the "equipment." Can I say material?

T: Um yeah, it's ok I think in this case to use equipment even though it's the same from the original text because it's a technical word and sometimes it's hard to find another word that is exactly the same. You can use materials but materials is less specific. Maybe machinery. Machinery is kind of like equipment.

Adu: What's machinery? I've never heard about it.

T: Yeah, machinery is like the parts of the machine.

Stor: Ah!

T: Machine parts, you can say machine parts or machinery.

Adu: Uh-huh.

Comment by Adu:

For my problems, "equipment," I want to change. I don't want to say the word again 'cause we're summarizing....So I tried to write "material," but it wasn't good enough. So she gave me a new word. That's a good thing, but also I know that I can, there's like different, before I don't know the difference between "material" and "equipment," but now, yeah. So machinery is a good one.

In this episode, two learners were discussing how to write a summary for an article. Adu suggested that they use a different term for the word "equipment." When the teacher came up to their group, he asked about it. In his comment, Adu provided a detailed explanation about why he wanted a different word, what word he suggested, what word the teacher suggested, and which one was better. The reason why Adu could give such a detailed comment is probably that he as the initiator of the question was paying full attention to what the teacher was saying.

Learners who were not the initiators of a question might give a detailed comment too if they were involved in the discussion of a language form. For the same episode, Adu's partner Stor gave a comment as below:

(7)

He asked her how to say the word. She said like machinery. She explained it to us. I didn't know the word. She said part of the machine. So I, I thought it was machine accessories. I was thinking, oh, we can use that. We were writing the, the summary. We thought the word was too simple. So we asked her how to be more specific. And she explained it to us.

Stor was discussing how to write the summary with Adu, and he was involved in the episode. From his comment one can see that he heard Adu's question, the word the teacher gave, and the meaning of the word. He actually did not exclude himself from the question-initiator position by saying "so we asked her." To him Adu was probably just a representative of his group to ask the question. Even though he was not the one who asked the question, Stor seemed to be listening to the teacher and gave a detailed comment too.

In a third case, when learners were not involved in a language episode, they often paid no attention at all even when the teacher's talk was within their hearing. For example:

(8)

Episode:

T: What else?

Adu: It take up a lot of place like, I don't know.

T: It takes a lot of place? I think I know what you mean. It takes a lot of land. Right?

Adu: Yeah.

Comment by Joah who was sitting right next to Adu:

That's not me...And also he was answering that...I don't remember if I was thinking of anything.

In this episode, the teacher asked about the disadvantages of landfills. Adu offered an answer and the teacher corrected the errors in his utterance. Joah, a learner who was sitting right next to Adu, did not remember if he was thinking of anything at the moment. On the surface, this is simply a result of memory loss. However, this loss of memory could have resulted from Joah's ignoring the conversation between the teacher and Adu.

It can be seen from Examples 6, 7, and 8 that the more learners were involved in an episode, the more they would pay attention to teacher talk. Specifically, the initiator of a question and the partner of the question initiator would pay more attention to teacher talk than a learner who was less involved or not involved at all. In effect, learners who are not involved in a language episode may not understand the language feature under discussion. When teachers notice such a possibility, they can take extra measures to draw these learners' attention to teacher talk.

Peer behavior

According to learners' recall comments, peer behavior could both promote their noticing of teacher talk and reduce their attention to teacher talk, depending on the nature of the behavior.

On some occasions, learners noticed their own mistake from the reaction of other students. For example:

(9)

Episode:

T: Athens is-

Stor: The most smallest.

T: The most smallest?

Class: Smallest.

Stor: Oh oh oh I just said it wrong.

Class: (Laugh)

Stor: The, the smallest.

T: Yeah the smallest. Ok, so that's just a good example we haven't talked about yet. So just like the comparative form, we won't use most and we won't use least with the ending, ok? We either use the ending or use the whole word. That's ok Stor.

Stor: I just said it wrong.

Comment by Stor:

This one?...I read “smallest” too fast and added “most” before it. I was emphasizing “smallest.” I don’t know why I said “most”....At first I didn’t know I said it wrong. Then I heard other people laughing. Then I realized the mistake and heard the teacher’s explanation.

In this example, Stor made a mistake that he thought he could have avoided. From Stor’s comment, it is clear that he was not aware of his mistake until he heard other students laughing. The reaction from peers therefore helped to draw Stor’s attention to his erroneous utterance and the teacher’s talk about it.

In some circumstances, learners did not pay attention to teacher talk as a result of the distraction from peers. Below is an example.

(10)

Episode:

T: Do you know the meaning of desire?

Class: No.

T: Desire means want. You want something.

Sar: (Indistinguishable)

T: Reversible?

Sar: Vegetable.

T: Vegetable?

Sar: Yeah.

T: No. No, desire is something you want. So I want, I want more fruit. That’s the meaning.

Comment by Nass:

I can’t listen what Leh said because the twins left, right, were talking. I can’t study.

In this example, the teacher was explaining the meaning of the word “desire” in a class discussion. The learner interviewed was not able to hear what the teacher was saying because two fellow students who were twins were talking by his side at the same time. The distractive peer behavior therefore prevented him from attending to the teacher’s talk.

As illustrated in Examples 9 and 10, peer behavior can alert learners to the mistakes they have made and push them to pay attention to the information provided by the teacher. Peer behavior can be distracting too. On such occasions, it pulls learners’ attention away from teacher talk. The effect of peer behavior on learners’ attention to teacher talk, therefore, can be both positive and negative, depending on the nature of the peer behavior and the context it is situated in.

Learners’ concern for “face”

Concern for face is virtually the learners’ concern for their own image in the teacher’s and fellow students’ eyes. This is shown in the case of losing or gaining “face.”

Some learners were so upset for having lost “face” that they kept thinking about the mistake they had made and were not able to concentrate on the teacher’s talk. Below is an example that shows this “losing face complexity.”

(11)

Episode:

T: Lin, what's your sentence about your partner Ye?

Lin: What is Ye?

T: Why? She's sitting right by your side and she was talking to you just now.

Lin: Ye was born while she was living in Saudi Arabia.

T: Ye was born while she was living in Saudi Arabia ? Well, I guess she was living in Saudi Arabia in her mom's tummy and then she was born. So she was already living in Saudi Arabia before she was born.

Tal: How can, how can she live in Saudi Arabia before she was born?

T: Yeah, she did not exist before she was born.

Comment by Lin:

I felt embarrassed. I didn't know the name of the girl in the same class. So I no longer listened after I answered the question.

In this example, Fu was asked to give his sentence about his partner. Before answering the teacher's question, Fu asked about the meaning of the word "Ye," which was actually the name of his partner. The teacher and other students discussed the mistake in Fu's sentence about Ye. However, feeling so embarrassed, Fu was no longer able to pay attention to the conversation.

In other cases, learners were so busy making it known to the teacher or peers that they were the "knowing" student that they concentrated on their own thinking and ignored what the teacher was saying. The example below is a good illustration.

(12)

Episode:

Mar: What's the spelling and meaning of "solitude?"

T: But you don't know what it is?

Mar: So-, I, I, yeah, I know it's like eh real life, eh...

T: Being by yourself.

Mar: Yeah, I talk Ryn it's like independence something.

T: Yeah, but it's not being with, you would like to be alone.

Mar: Solitude like-

T: Not loneLY but alone. (Stresses -ly)

Mar: The, the root word of the solitude is "solid" right?

Comment by Mar:

I just wanted to express my ideas about the "solitude" to the teacher and, and let her know what I know to this word, the meaning of this word.

In this example, as the teacher tried to explain the word "solitude" to the learner, the learner seemed to be constantly stressing what he himself thought of the word by using expressions such as "I know" and "I talk." He did not seem to have paid much attention to the difference between the teacher's definition of "solitude" and his own incomplete or incorrect understanding of the word. This is confirmed by his comment that he just

wanted to let the teacher know what he knew about “solitude.” Consequently, his attention was focused on how to create the image of the “knowing student” in the teacher’s mind, not the information the teacher provided to him.

Examples 11 and 12 suggest that learners’ concern about “face” can also significantly affect the direction and level of their attention. When learners worry too much about losing “face,” they will not be able to concentrate on the teacher’s talk. When they are too anxious to gain “face,” they will not be able to focus on the teacher’s talk either. It is possible that the desire for a good self-image has a positive effect in some circumstances. For example, it may push learners to think more actively and listen to the teacher more attentively. However, this was not found in the present study.

Conclusion

With classroom observation and stimulated recall interviews as key instruments, the present study investigated some of the factors that affected a group of learners’ attention to teacher talk. It was found that learners paid more attention to teacher talk when they thought they did not understand a language feature, when teachers used various techniques to explain a language point, when the learners were the initiators of questions or at least involved in a language episode, and when peers reacted to their mistakes. On the other hand, learners often paid less or no attention to teacher talk when they thought they had understood a language feature already, when they were not involved in a language episode, when peers behaved in a distracting way, and when learners were concerned with losing or gaining “face.”

In line with these findings, teachers can take certain measures to draw learners’ attention when providing language information. For instance, they can help students correctly evaluate their own language knowledge and take the right attitude toward “face,” try to involve as many learners as possible when discussing a language feature, purposefully draw learners’ attention to their incorrect language production through peer reaction, and use various techniques such as paralinguistic cues and extralinguistic cues when talking to students. By raising learners’ level of attention with these strategies, the effectiveness of teacher talk can be largely enhanced.

It should be pointed out that the analysis in this study is far from thorough. Restricted by the design of the larger study, the analysis only focused on observable factors that affected participating learners’ attention to teacher talk. Some covert factors were left unexamined. Personality and culture, for instance, may affect the degree of learners’ concern for “face,” which in turn, as illustrated above, may affect learners’ degree of attention to teacher talk. Motivation may play a role in the amount of learner attention to teacher talk too. Further research is needed to understand these potential factors.

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