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COMPARING THE PROPORTION OF THE LANGUAGE OF USE AND USAGE IN TEACHERS WITH DIFFERENT PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE

Abstract

Effective communication in the classroom has been the focus of interest of second language acquisition research for several decades. Widdowson's (1978) contribution to classroom discourse studies made a significant impact on our understanding of the concepts of language *usage* and *use*, and their role in classroom interaction. It is claimed that both types of teacher language should be employed to cater for the effective development of conversational skills. It was observed in the past that usage expressions were more frequent as the focus of classroom interaction was on correctness and not on fluency. Nowadays more and more teachers feel the need to use English in the classroom for the purpose of authentic communication with their learners. The research described in this paper investigates whether and to what extent Polish teachers of English with different teaching experience vary their language directed at students as regards its usage and use. The results of observations and the analysis of lesson transcripts reveal that, surprisingly enough, more experienced teachers resort more often to language directed at correctness, and the language of use seems to be rather neglected. Some possible explanations of this phenomenon are presented in the concluding part of this paper.

1. Introduction

Since the onset of the Communicative Approach to language teaching in the late 1970s, we have been observing a growing interest in the research on its impact on language attainment. Both researchers and teachers realized that effective communication does not only require knowing grammar and vocabulary. As

Widdowson (1978) claims, learners might possess knowledge about the language, but they may not be able to use it effectively to convey a required message. The successful teaching of language as communication also depends, according to Widdowson (1978), on the type of language used by the teacher in the classroom, in particular on the proportion of the language of *usage* and *use*.

These two types of classroom language can be used in parallel, by the same teacher, in the same lesson. *Usage* refers to producing correct sentences without taking into consideration particular contexts. Usage often concerns language employed to exemplify a specific grammatical rule, for example, when the teacher asks a question to which s/he knows the answer, and the answer elicited from the student serves only as evidence of knowing the particular grammatical structure. On the other hand, language *use* is the ability to produce sentences in order to gain some communicative goal. Other terms used in second language acquisition and ELT methodology to denote the same phenomena are *educational discourse* and *natural discourse*.

The aim of the research presented in this article is to observe the occurrence of language of use and usage in the classroom discourse produced by teachers with different professional experience. It is presupposed that there might be some differences both in quantity and quality. The study will try to answer four research questions which will be presented in part five of this paper. This article consists of seven parts. The first part is the introduction. In the second one, the importance of discourse in the Communicative Approach, and consequently in Communicative Language Teaching, will be tackled. The third part will develop the idea of classroom interaction and its importance for learners' progress in a foreign language. The fourth part will be devoted to the idea of usage and use and to other proposals put forward by Widdowson (1978). The research and its results will be presented in parts five and six, respectively. The article will close with some tentative conclusions (part seven) resulting from the research.¹

2. The role of discourse in the Communicative Approach

As Widdowson (1980) points out, communication in the classroom occurs as discourse through which students negotiate meanings while interacting with each other. Discourse, according to Dakowska (2005), does not stand for reciting sentences one after another, but it constitutes an integral entity, an organic element of the communicative circumstances from which it results. In other words, discourse does not comprise single sentences which are not linked with each other by any propositions but it refers to a broader unit of communication consisting of joined sentences that together create a meaningful whole. As Dakowska further asserts (2005), Communicative Language Teaching is an approach based on discourse, and it was created in opposition to earlier approach-

¹ All translations from Polish into English have been made by the author of this article.

es (e.g. audiolingual and cognitive code learning theory) that were sentence-based. Consequently, it seems to be obligatory for students to go beyond the sentence level in their language analysis, and examine longer parts of texts that are used to constitute discourse.

As Widdowson (1980) explains, discourse has two main features. First of all, it is interactive and concerns situations in which students are supposed to negotiate meanings in order to achieve a common communicative goal. The second characteristic of discourse is that interaction generates a sequence of structures by which the permutation of propositions creates larger entities of communication. That is to say, through communication students produce certain sentences which are connected to one another by propositions so that in effect there appears a greater unit of speech, constituting a specific text.

According to Larsen-Freeman (2000), understanding discourse constitutes a vital part of language learning. Learners ought to manipulate a given language at the level above the sentence so as to learn about two important properties of language discourse which are *coherence* and *cohesion*. Widdowson (1980: 244-255) explains coherence as a restatement or reference that clarifies something previously discussed, whereas cohesion means that a certain idea is realized by a proposition that merges with and arises from previously mentioned propositions. These two properties tie utterances together so that an example of discourse is comprehensible and clear. A good example of a teaching activity that aims at discourse training, used in Communicative Language Teaching, and mentioned by both Larsen-Freeman (2000) and Dakowska (2005), is *scrambled sentences* or *scrambled text*. The main purpose of this activity is to arrange the text into a whole so that in the end it is fully consistent and understandable.

Canale and Swain (1980) emphasized the importance of understanding discourse in language teaching by labeling *discourse competence* as one of the constituent factors of communicative competence. This concept pertains to construction of single message strands with respect to their interconnectedness and the way their meaning is displayed in relation to the whole text. Students should possess the knowledge of how to interpret language utterances with respect to their social meaning, in particular when the intention of the speaker is asserted indirectly. To make communication in the classroom as genuine as possible, it is vital to apply such activities that would make students practice discourse and become competent in this field. Also teacher language should constitute a source of discourse, not only an exemplification of language rules.

3. Classroom interaction patterns – general remarks

With time researchers in second language acquisition studies started to perceive the importance of language input directed to students in formal classroom settings. In other words, the focus was shifted to language produced in the classroom and the way it influenced students' learning achievements (Łęska, 2008).

Researchers started to investigate what types of language utterances are used during the lesson and who says something to whom. As early as in 1975, Sinclair and Coulthart, who started serious studies in classroom discourse analysis, asserted that the most frequent pattern of classroom interaction is the teacher initiating communication, a student or students replying to the teacher's question, and the teacher providing feedback and initiating another exchange. In such a context, the teacher constantly controls all the language utterances. Nevertheless, there also appear other types of interaction patterns in the classroom setting. As Ur (1996) claims, interaction can also take place between students and between students and the teacher, when it is the student who initiates interaction. Student – student interaction has many advantages. First of all, it is extremely valuable with regard to practicing oral fluency since learners have more opportunities to speak than in teacher – students interaction type. What is more, such a pattern favours students' independence and makes them responsible for their own learning. It also improves cooperation and motivation to learn the language. As Ur concludes (1996), regrettably teachers seem reluctant to use student – student interaction frequently since it may cause discipline problems or may provoke learners to use their mother tongue. In this paper the main concern will be with teacher – student or teacher – students interaction since these two patterns are closely related to the aim of the study, that is teachers' language, and in particular the proportion of use and usage in teachers' speech.

4. Widdowson's contribution to understanding the notion of usage and use

As we already mentioned in the introduction, Widdowson (1978) made an important contribution to the development of teaching languages as communication. He pointed out a number of obvious issues, which were somehow taken for granted in naturalistic communication in L1, but were hardly ever considered in foreign language learning in the classroom. The first issue to be mentioned here is his proposal for the description of foreign language skills.

The traditional division of language skills into receptive and productive has been challenged as in genuine communication there occurs a constant interplay of both types of abilities. For example, we cannot really consider speaking as a separate skill because in any kind of interaction both speaking and listening are involved. It is impossible to communicate without understanding what other people say. Thus, Widdowson (1978) proposed *talking* as an ability comprising both speaking and listening, and these two must be given equal attention in a foreign language classroom. It would be difficult to imagine a foreign language lesson consisting only of speaking activities where listening is not involved at all. A similar situation occurs when we consider reading and writing. It is hard to imagine writing without reading at the same time. Consequently, Widdowson (1978) suggested the term *interpreting* which comprises both skills.

The proposed terminology referring to language skills was, however, not widely accepted. This, I believe, occurred basically because both teachers and researchers were too strongly attached to traditional categorization. Besides, as the newest neurolinguistic research confirmed, there seems to be a justification for a clear distinction between reception and production in language acquisition. They appear to be subserved by different parts of the brain and thus are distinct processes (Paradis, 2009). Nevertheless, even though Widdowson's (1978) naming was not really appropriated, we could observe a growing interest in skill integration which, after a few years of the development of the communicative approach and methodology, became a standard teaching and assessment procedure in foreign language classrooms. It can be observed that communicative language teaching placed emphasis on making foreign language instruction as naturalistic as possible, even though later criticism of certain classroom procedures considerably weakened its impact on the process of language learning. The notions of *usage* and *use*, already mentioned in the Introduction, also contributed to the development of studies on classroom discourse.

As Widdowson (1978) stated, teachers in the classroom devoted more time and attention to practice language usage than use, for instance in activities like drills or traditional presentation of grammatical structures. However, it does not mean that teachers should completely avoid such practices but what they should do is try to set some limitations on language usage in favour of language use. Second/foreign language performance, according to Widdowson (1978), comprises a constant display of the system of the language as usage and its understanding as use. Obviously, it is possible to separate these two aspects from each other if a teacher wants to draw students' attention to language form at a given time. Nevertheless, the issue is that teachers while separating the two aspects tend to forget about language use and they simply focus more on usage, for instance when preparing their own materials and selecting particular language utterances to be presented and practiced. The emphasis on usage is also visible in the practice stage when the teacher asks display questions to which answers are already known or can easily be worked out by the students. As Widdowson asserts, such practices are useful when we take into consideration the teaching of appropriate forms, but they are not designed to teach appropriate communication. This type of meaning is referred to as *signification* (Widdowson, 1978: 11). On the other hand, there is the second aspect of meaning called *value*, and it concerns sentences produced in a way that they fulfill a communicative goal. Students may produce grammatically correct sentences that are significant but at the same time might not have any value at all, in other words, they may not be relevant to a given context. It is also possible, however, that an utterance which has significance can still have a little value. According to Komorowska (2001), in a classroom setting teachers should focus more on language use rather than constantly train language usage, which in fact would not develop communicative skills in students because real language is unpredictable.

The research project presented below aims to investigate how the patterns of usage and use in teachers' classroom language are distributed among teachers with different professional experience.

5. Research description

The research reported in this paper is mostly of the qualitative type, with some quantitative elements. It is possible then, to qualify it as an instance of mixed research. The study was highly selective as only a specially chosen group of teachers took part in the research; it was also non-interventional because it involved pure observation of the examined teachers, without the researcher's intervention. It was possible to distinguish three variables in the study. The independent variable comprises teachers' years of professional experience, the dependent variable involves the appearance of language use and usage it teachers' speech directed at students. The control variable was students' level of proficiency in English: all students were at the intermediate level. The study was carried out by an MA candidate who prepared her thesis under the supervision of the author of this paper (Kilańska, 2011).

Nine teachers agreed to take part in the research which involved observations and audio recordings of their lessons in pre-intermediate groups of students. The teachers worked in both public and private schools, and each teacher was observed once. The subjects were divided into three groups, according to their years of teaching experience:

- Group One: 1-4 years.
- Group Two: 8-10 years.
- Group Three: 2030 years.

The study aimed to answer the following four research questions:

1. Are there any differences in language use and usage among groups of teachers with different teaching experience?
2. Which of the observed groups of teachers uses more language for natural communication purposes?
3. What are the most common categories of analyzed teachers' language produced in the classroom by the examined groups?
4. When and how often do teachers with different professional experience produce utterances characteristic for language use?

Three instruments were used in the study. The first one comprised tape recordings of each lesson observed at schools. This instrument was in fact the most reliable since it allowed to collect detailed data. On the basis of nine recordings transcripts were prepared, which were subjected to further analysis as regards the type of language used by the teachers. The second instrument was a questionnaire for observed teachers, where the subjects had to provide answers to ten questions. Nine of the questions were closed-ended and only one, refer-

ring to the years of teaching experience, was open-ended. Four questions checked when and how often the subjects of the research applied language use in the classroom. The next four questions aimed to gather the same information concerning language usage. The questionnaire can be found in Appendix One. The last instrument was an observation sheet (Appendix Two) which was completed in the course of each observed lesson. This instrument allowed the researcher to observe the language of usage and use together with situations in which they occurred. The observation sheets proved to be helpful in preparing the transcripts of the lessons.

6. Research findings

The analysed transcripts and observations reveal that during the nine lessons the teachers produced 1096 utterances altogether, mainly questions. Group One, i.e. teachers with the shortest teaching experience produced 32.7% of all utterances whereas groups two and three generated 33.4% and 33.9% of utterances, respectively. In general, the teachers in all three groups created a similar number of utterances in their lessons. Since there was hardly any difference in the amount of language produced in three observed groups of teachers, it can be concluded that the number of years of teaching experience did not have any significant influence on teacher talking time. The obtained results, however, show observable differences as regards the language of usage and use. They are presented in Table 1.

	Group One	Group Two	Group Three
Usage	13.7	23.2	39.0
Use	86.3	76.8	61.0

Table 1: Percentage of language usage and use in three groups of teachers.

On the basis of the obtained results it can be stated that the group comprising teachers with the number of years of teaching experience ranging from one to four (Group One) produced in their lessons a large number of language utterances that fostered real communication in the classroom. Surprisingly, in the third group which included teachers with the longest teaching experience, the amount of utterances which concentrated on language use (natural communication) was the smallest in comparison to the remaining two groups. Examples of educational communication (language usage) include:

1. Questions to the texts students read or listened to.
2. Translations, e.g. *How do you say 'fryzjer'?*, *What does it mean 'to take a year off'?*
3. Reminders, e.g. *Could you remind us, Marysia, what the text was about?*
4. Questions about grammar structures, e.g. *Are these action or non-action verbs? Do they refer to a single action or repeated action?*

Examples of natural communication (language use) in the observed lessons include:

1. *Can you finish this sentence, please?*
2. A dialogue:
 Teacher: *Today – a crazy day, crazy day... For you as well?*
 Students: *YES!!!*
 Teacher: *What happened?*
3. *How did you do your homework? With your eyes inside Matthew's book?*
4. *Have you finished? Are you ready?*

In answer to the first two research questions, the analysis showed that there indeed exist differences in language use and usage among teachers with different teaching experience in the observed groups. What is more, it was confirmed that the oldest teachers use the smallest amount of utterances characteristic for natural communication in the classroom. On the other hand, teachers who had just started working in the teaching profession or taught for a comparatively short time used plenty of language utterances that favoured natural communication. Their language, and mainly questions, made students produce answers which were unpredictable and unique. What is more, teachers in this group often encouraged students to participate in discussions and in continued conversations as if they were in a natural setting.

Apart from investigating the amount of language use and usage in the three examined groups of teachers, the next aim of the study was to categorize language utterances and to find out which category was the most common. Thirty six categories were distinguished in total. However, in this report only those that reached the amount of 1% of the total number of utterances will be enumerated. The most common category of language produced by examined teachers was *asking for information* (28.8%), for example: *Do you understand the first set? What do you have in number one, Radek?* These can be classified as instances of language use since the teacher could not know the answer to such questions. The second most common category was *eliciting answers*, for example: *Who were the people talking? What tense is this?* These were mostly instances of language usage because the teacher knew the answers to such questions. They mainly served educational purpose. Eliciting information equaled 12.1% of all the language utterances produced by the observed teachers. The third most frequently used category was *asking for opinion* and accounted for 8.8% of all utterances, e.g. *What do you think? Do you think it is true?* These were mostly instances of natural communication. The remaining categories were:

1. Encouraging participation (7.8%), e.g. *Anyone else did it in the same way? Can we add anything else?*
2. Asking for explanation (7.7%), e.g. *What do you mean? How did they do it?*
3. Asking for details (5.9%), e.g. *Who exactly did it? The driver of what?*
4. Requests (3.9%), e.g. *Could you read this sentence once again, please?*
5. Asking for meaning (3.6%), e.g. *What does 'belly dancing' mean?*
6. Asking for confirmation (3.4%), e.g. *They should look for a job, yes?*

7. Asking for a concrete answer (2.6%), e.g. *Are these action or non-action verbs?*
8. Repetition of students' answers (2.6%), e.g. T: *How are you today?* S: *Fine.* T: *Fine.*
9. Checking the task completion (2%), e.g. *OK. What's in the next one?*
10. Asking about facts (1.7%), e.g. *Are you prepared?*
11. Giving instructions (1.4%), e.g. *Put verbs into appropriate categories.*
12. Asking for clarification (1.4%), e.g. *What do you mean by game?*
13. Asking about the state of completed activity (1.3%), e.g. *Have you finished?*

It was characteristic that *socializing*, in other words, trying to make personal contact with the students, amounted only to 0.9% of the total number of utterances produced in the observed group of teachers. The detailed analysis presented above helped to answer the third research question formulated at the beginning of this study.

The first three questions were answered on the basis of transcript analysis and observation sheets. The last question concentrated on how often and when the language of use appears in the lessons conducted by the observed teachers. These findings were gathered on the basis of the analysis of questionnaires completed by all the subjects. As was already mentioned, the questionnaire can be found in Appendix One. Interestingly, the answers were quite divergent. The teachers in Group One, with the least professional experience, admitted to asking questions with unpredictable answers with the frequency of one out of three questions in general. However, the observations and recordings confirmed that in this particular group of teachers authentic questions were asked more frequently. Apparently, the teachers themselves did not fully realize what kind of questions they asked in the classroom. The other groups of teachers gave different answers to this question and therefore it is not possible to provide an unequivocal opinion on that matter.

As regards the time when natural communication took place in the lesson, the teachers gave different answers to that question. Only Group Three, that is teachers with the longest professional experience, claimed that they asked such questions usually at the end of the lesson. As to question five of the questionnaire, concerning students' opinions, the gathered data reveal that the most experienced teachers were not really interested in them. The less experienced teachers asked about students' opinions and beliefs more frequently. As regards the time of the lesson when the opinion questions could have been asked, the information teachers gave in answer to question six of the questionnaire were rather divergent and could not be generalized.

Questions three and five of the questionnaire concerned the frequency of practicing language use. The general conclusion was that teachers with the greatest experience made students train language use less frequently than the remaining groups. Clearly, that group of teachers had a tendency to focus on language usage more frequently than on language use, which was also confirmed by observations and the analysis of the audio recordings of the lessons.

Question number seven concerned the frequency of students practicing fixed forms and playing settled roles in the classroom, for instance, in controlled

dialogues. Looking at the obtained data we may claim that practising fixed forms took place on the average once in three lessons in all groups of teachers. As regards the time of the lesson, it appears that controlled practice takes place usually either in the middle or at the end of the lesson. No teacher did it at the beginning of the lesson. Most individual teachers claimed that in fact language usage was practiced at every stage of the lesson.

7. Conclusions

After answering all four research questions it is possible to draw some tentative conclusions and offer comments on the behaviour of observed groups of teachers. It turned out that the teachers with the longest professional experience were the least willing to employ the language of use for natural communication in the classroom. The reason why such a situation could have taken place might be that those teachers had been using fixed language patterns for a long period of time and these instances of language usage had become routines in their classroom language. Another reason might be that the experienced teachers had become so disillusioned with their students' lack of motivation and persistence in their efforts that they decided to use only the minimum of complex language patterns and resort to the basic structures which did not create any particular challenge for the students. Still another reason, the most pessimistic one, may be that the most experienced teachers had already started to suffer from L2 attrition and those fixed phrases are the only ones they feel safe with in classroom use. It was also observed that the teachers used the category *asking for information* most frequently in their lessons as that was the most essential function of classroom language and the most natural reason for asking questions in real-life school discourse. As regards the time of the lesson and the frequency of language usage and use, the teachers varied considerably in their answers and no significant conclusions could be drawn.

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Appendix One
Questionnaire for teachers

(The questionnaire was given to the teachers in its Polish version).

Please answer the questions to your best knowledge and opinion. The questionnaire is anonymous and answers will be made use of only for research purposes

- 1/ Gender (male or female)
- 2/ How many years have you been working as an English teacher?
- 3/ How often do you ask your students questions to which answers cannot be predicted? (e.g. about their plans for the weekend). Please circle the appropriate answer:
Every other question/every third question/every fourth question/every fifth question/less frequently
- 4/ When do you usually ask questions to which answers cannot be predicted? (beginning of the lesson/middle of the lesson/end of the lesson)
- 5/ How often do you ask students questions about their beliefs and opinions? Please circle the appropriate answer: every other question/every third question/every fourth/fifth/less frequently.
- 6/ When (beginning of the lesson/middle/end) do you ask your students questions about their beliefs and opinions?
- 7/ How often do your students practice fixed roles and language forms (e.g. controlled dialogues)? Please circle the appropriate answer: at each lesson/every other lesson/every third lesson/once a month/less frequently.
- 8/ When do your students (beginning of the lesson/middle/end) practice fixed roles and language forms?
- 9/ How often do you ask your students questions to which answers can be predicted, for instance, they can be derived from context? Please circle the appropriate answer: every other question/every third/every fourth/every fifth/less frequently.
- 10/ When usually (the beginning of the lesson/middle/end) do you ask questions to which answers can be predicted?

Thank you for completing the survey.

Appendix Two
Observation sheet (form)

Instances of usage		Instances of use	
language	situation	language	situation