

## Young Learner ESL Classroom: Talk, Talk and More Talk?

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### ABSTRACT

Teacher talk is a tricky business which often invites more negative remarks rather than positive ones. The issue of 'too much' talk or 'too little' talk is one such debate that often arises. Then, there is the infamous 'quality' versus 'quantity' dispute. These issues generally arise when what constitutes good teacher talk should be characterized by who the learners are and in what context does learning occur. This article seeks to discuss characteristics of teacher talk in two rural young learner Malaysian ESL classrooms and also provide an insight into why teacher talk is a major constituent in these classrooms. Two teachers with two different classrooms participated in the study where interviews with the teachers were carried out. Classroom observations were also carried out which were later transcribed to glean most of the data on teacher talk. Stimulated recall interviews were then carried out with the teachers to gain more insight into their classroom practices. This article seeks to proffer a look into what constitutes good teacher talk in a rural young learner L2 classroom taking into account who the learners are and the context of L2 learning present in these classrooms.

*Keywords:* Teacher talk, ESL, young learners, Malaysian, rural, L2 learning, teacher beliefs

### INTRODUCTION

Teacher talk is a tricky business in language teaching and learning, most especially in the context of English as a Second Language (ESL). ESL classrooms place the teacher in the central position of teaching and learning whereby the direction of language learning is determined mainly by the teacher. As pointed out by Kim and Elder (2005), the Foreign Language (FL) teacher is often the only source of Target Language (TL) input for English as a Foreign Language (EFL) or ESL learners in this instance. So, more talk could only mean more 'learning', can it not? Even so, the time old argument is that teacher code-switching practices is detrimental to ESL learning as it could deprive learners of opportunities for TL intake and for 'authentic' communication in the TL (Ellis, 2000; Van Lier, 1996). Walsh (2002), on the other hand, observes that teachers control most of the interaction in the classroom from the topics and participants to turns and lengths of responses. In lieu of these two opposing ideas, Seedhouse (1996) and Johnson (1995) intimate that classrooms should be viewed as a context in its own right, or rather a series of interrelated contexts, jointly created and defined by the participants: the teacher and learners. Bearing these views in mind, one can only conclude that every language classroom is indeed an island, as different from one another as can be while very much similar in terms of the ultimate objective i.e. of learning and acquiring the target language.

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What happens in one classroom may not be the same as the other simply because the participants (teacher and learners) are not the same at all. Therefore, the language learning and teaching that transpires in each classroom is as unique, individual and purposive as the other. Keeping that in mind, this paper seeks to identify what transpires as teaching and learning in two Malaysian rural young learner ESL classrooms through teacher talk. The two research questions that are sought to be answered are:

1. What are the characteristics of teacher talk in two Malaysian rural young learner classrooms?
2. Why is teacher talk a major constituent in these two classrooms?

## TEACHER TALK

While many scholars agree that teacher talk constitutes much of what is happening in language classrooms (Walsh, 2002 ; Jarvis and Robinson, 1997), the other end of the stick reflects that there is often ‘too much’ teacher talk and less opportunities for learner interaction (Musumeci, 1996; Thornbury, 1996; Nunan, 1995). ESL classrooms are generally encouraged to provide learners with ample opportunities for authentic communication. Moser *et al.* (2012: 82) posited the view that teacher talk-training should be provided to pre-service EFL teachers because they believe that teachers, through their own L2 use, could both provide rich input and scaffold their students’ language performances. Therefore, teacher talk can be seen as a major constituent of what is going on in ESL classrooms. Musumeci (1996: 314) eloquently addressed talk in the classroom by saying: “teachers speak more, more often, control the topic of discussion, rarely ask questions for which they do not have answers, and appear to understand absolutely everything the students say, sometimes even before they say it! One might conclude from these findings that teachers are a loquacious, manipulative, power-hungry bunch of know-it-alls. Not at all!” Musumeci’s rather infamous conclusion highlights situations that are occurring in most ESL classrooms. As the ‘authority’ in the language classroom, teachers often believe they shoulder the full responsibility of controlling and directing the lessons. Most often it is not a mere show of power, but on the contrary it is a form of guiding learners and establishing rapport, as observed by Tannen (1990: 136). Scholars such as Walsh (2002, 2006) convey the idea that teacher talk is a somewhat grey area that could construct or obstruct learners’ learning opportunities and involvement in the process hence requiring much careful attention on the teacher’s part. Walsh (2006: 5) further explicates that in teacher-fronted instructions, teachers should engage learners in the classroom discourse, encourage interactional adjustments between teacher and learners, promote opportunities for self-expression and facilitate and encourage clarification by learners. What this paper seeks to convey is that the ‘quantity’ and ‘quality’ of teacher talk should be viewed within the context of the language classroom and its learners. Having said that, characteristics of teacher talk have been addressed by Walsh (2002), Thornbury (1996) and Musumeci (1996). Nonetheless, teacher talk in young learner classrooms within the Malaysian perspective has been rarely discussed. Thus, this paper will look into teacher talk elements that are present in two Malaysian rural young learner ESL classrooms and provide some reasons behind the presence of these elements.

## Teaching Young Learners

The field of teaching English for young learners focuses on learners at the age of 7 to 12 years old. In the Malaysian context of teaching young learners, the teacher is not only the bridge between classroom communities and learners’ cultures. The teacher is also the mediator between the language curriculum and the learners. Expectations and ideologies reach the students through their teachers. Learners know what is expected from them and what to expect from themselves because their teachers are there to guide and assist them. Again, we need no further explanation on how vital the many roles of the teacher is – expert, more competent other, learning assistant, guide, bridge and mediator – in providing learners with the best language learning experience. Teaching English to young learners intimates that the teachers need to constantly bear in mind their focus group. Children are different from teenagers and adults and thus require different styles of teaching, various activities, and constant attention from the teacher as well as classroom routines (Moon, 2005). Pinter (2006: 2) intimates that children are unique and two children at the chronologically same age can exhibit different characteristics. She (*ibid*) further explains that it is essential to be aware of the distinction between younger and older learners. She explicates that younger learners understand meaningful chunks but are not really ready to analyse language. They, with limited reading and writing skills, are generally more concerned

of themselves and enjoy fantasy, imagination and movement. Pinter's insights are most useful and should be taken into consideration by all teachers of young learners. Furthermore, Nunan (2011) identifies five challenges in teaching young learners namely cognitive development, motivation, attention, multi-level groups and assessment. To address these issues, Nunan (ibid) draws up some ideas and suggestions. He explicates that teachers should personalize and scaffold learning for young learners. Learning should be relatable to them and they should be able to see the progress that they have made. Besides that, activities should be varied and should cater to different learning styles. Nunan (ibid) further elucidates that addressing different learning styles will be able to overcome the challenge of young learners' limited attention spans (Nunan, 2011; Nunan, 1995). As teachers of young learners, they need to be mindful of the different learning styles of their learners so that they are able to make their lessons enjoyable and educational for their students. Oxford (2003) identifies sensory preferences which can be broken down into four main areas: visual, auditory, kinaesthetic (movement-oriented), and tactile (touch-oriented) in determining learning styles. Reid (1987) demonstrated that ESL students varied significantly in their sensory preferences, with people from certain cultures differentially favouring the three different modalities for learning. ESL students from a variety of cultures were tactile and kinaesthetic in their sensory preferences. Hence, keeping in mind these 'special' characteristics of young learners would serve well in ESL classrooms.

### **Sociocultural Theory of Learning**

Within the scope of the Sociocultural Theory of Learning (SCT), advocates of this theory of learning such as Vygotsky (1978) and Lantolf (2006) personify teachers as the expert guide who mediates learners' language learning. The Vygotskyian paradigm advocates the idea that learning is a social process that occurs when learners interact, with an expert, with each other and with their environment. What this means is that our cognitive process are mediated by social interaction which results in the occurrence of learning. From an SCT point of view, the construction of knowledge, growth, and development is borne out of active engagement between the learner, the goals, and more competent others (Razfar *et al.*, 2011). With reference to the Vygotskyian paradigm, the 'more competent other' or 'expert' in a young learner ESL classroom would most significantly be the teacher. Language teachers take up the roles of experts and more competent others in presenting and demonstrating the use and production of language to the learners. Keeping in mind Vygotsky's views, the teacher as the expert guide influences what the learners internalize through language learning. As pointed out by Kim and Elder (2005) earlier, the ESL teacher is more often than not the only source of target language input, especially in rural schools where English is taught as a second language. Pinter (2006: 12) concurs by adding that a teacher's language use is most often the main source of language input for children in the primary school language classroom. Therefore, the 'quantity' and 'quality' of teacher talk lies in the 'able' hands of the language teacher as the expert guide who is well-versed with her or his language learners as well as the context of the language classroom.

### **METHODOLOGY**

To answer the aforementioned two research questions, two teacher participants, Teacher A and Teacher B, consented to be part of this study. Learners in both classes are ten year-olds of higher academic ability whereby students with higher performance during the end-of-year standardized tests would be placed in the first two classes while those who perform poorly will be placed in the last two classes and the intermediate ones will be placed in the middle two classes. Nonetheless, teachers identified their learners to be of lower language proficiency levels as their only encounters with the target language are during their language lessons in school. First, the two participants were interviewed separately to identify their stated beliefs about their roles as teachers and how learners learn a language. Each interview was semi-structured and one-on-one which were audio recorded. Data obtained from the interview were later transcribed. Next, classroom video recordings of three one-hour lessons for each participant were carried out. These video recordings provided the bigger chunk of secondary data on the classroom pedagogical practices of the teacher which includes teacher talk. Once video recordings of L2 lessons and classroom interactions were completed, the stimulated recall interview was carried out to identify the participants' underlying beliefs in relation to their classroom pedagogical practices. As per previous research, the gap between classroom observation and the stimulated recall (SR) interview cannot be delayed as this may tamper with the validity of the data. Thus, SR interviews were conducted within seven

days of each observation. These transcriptions proffer the remaining chunk of primary data which will help shed more light on teacher classroom practices.

## FINDINGS & DISCUSSION

### Characteristics of Teacher Talk

**Teacher-Dominated Interaction.** Classroom interaction plays an imperative role in setting the stage for language learning and teaching. There is some evidence of teachers dominating the whole classroom teaching and discourse (David, 2007; Myhill, 2006) and questioning practices (Farahian and Rezaee, 2012; Li-Ping 2012). In the cases of Teacher A and B, some predominance of teacher talk is evident. Below is an excerpt from Teacher A's classroom:

COB 1

<b>Turn 1</b>	<b>T:</b> Ok, three pictures. Ok, look at the first picture. Look at the second picture. And look at the third picture. Ok, <i>agak-agak awak</i> , the first picture <i>tu pasal apa?</i> (What do you think the first picture is about?) The first picture <i>pasal apa?</i>
<b>Turn 2</b>	<b>LL:</b> Flying kites.
<b>Turn 3</b>	<b>T:</b> Flying kites. <i>Pada cuaca yang?</i> (During what kind of weather?) Windy! What does it mean by windy?
<b>Turn 4</b>	<b>LL:</b> <i>Berangin.</i> (Windy).
<b>Turn 5</b>	<b>T:</b> <i>Berangin. Pandai.</i> (Windy. Clever <to students>). <i>Kalau saya bagi Bahasa Melayu, cakap Melayu, kalau Bahasa Inggeris, Bahasa Inggeris.</i> (When I allow you to speak in Malay, you can, if I say English, then you can only speak English.) Ok, so how many boys are there? <b>LL:</b> Three!
<b>Turn 6</b>	<b>T:</b> Ok, three boys are playing kite. Ok, so <i>kat mana diaorang main layang-layang tu?</i> (Where are they playing kites?)
<b>Turn 7</b>	<b>T:</b> In front of their house. Ok. Now <i>tengok</i> (look at) second picture. What do you think happened in the second picture? <repeats question in Malay> <i>Apa yang jadi dalam gambar yang kedua?</i>
<b>Turn 8</b>	<b>LL:</b> Strong wind.
<b>Turn 9</b>	

The excerpt above is taken from a guided writing lesson. Teacher A is teaching her students how to compose a simple story based on three picture cues and some corresponding word cues. Looking at the excerpt, there are nine turns identified whereby five (T1, T3, T5, T7, T8) is the teacher's and the remaining four (T2, T4, T6, T9) are turns taken by the students. Besides having the bigger number of turns, the teacher also speaks relatively more than the students whose turns are taken with single words or short phrases. This predicament exhibits the predominance of teacher talk in the classroom.

**Display Questions.** In general terms, display questions require simple Yes/No answers and do not encourage much learner participation. This is generally the case in classrooms with students of limited proficiency levels. Yes/No questions seem to be the question mode of choice in the two classrooms. Below is an excerpt from Teacher B's classroom:

COB 2

Yes/No question	<b>T:</b> Kamil absent yesterday. Okay, now listen! <b>Remember the 5 fingers?</b> <b>LL:</b> Yes.
Yes/No question	<b>T:</b> Do you remember the 5 fingers? <b>LL:</b> Yes
Yes/No question	<b>T:</b> Yes or no? <b>LL:</b> Yes.
Display question	<b>T:</b> What is it Syafa? <i>5 Fingers apa dia?</i> (What's 5 fingers?). <while showing her 5 fingers> <b>LL:</b> Who, what, why, when, which

In the above excerpt, Teacher B is conducting a grammar lesson on WH questions. Her questions are displayed, close ended and mostly require Yes/No answers from the students as iterated by Li-ping (2012) and David (2007). Teacher B's interaction with her learners consists of typical display questions. Obviously, there is not much 'interaction' that can be gleaned on the learners' part through this exchange as their responses are basically yes or no. Yet, one can argue that the teacher could genuinely be interested in assessing her students' understanding of the previous lesson as she is enquiring on whether they remember what they had learnt.

**Code-Switching.** Gauci & Grima (2012) bring to light the idea that during classroom discourse; in reality, teachers resort to other languages spoken by learners, especially their L1. This is teacher code-switching, whereby teachers use other languages such as their students' first language (eg: Malay in Malaysia) to teach English. Tien (2009) looked at how teachers and learners use more than one language to talk around monolingual textbooks in an attempt to accomplish lessons. Teacher code-switching is closely related to using another language in assisting the learning process of a language. Below is an excerpt from Teacher A's classroom:

COB 1

<p><b>T:</b> Ok, <i>tengok gambar pertama dulu. Tengok gambar pertama dulu.</i> (Ok, look at the first picture, look at the first picture.) Just look at the first picture. Then look at the sentence, I mean look at the words. <i>Tengok perkataan perkataan.</i> (Look at the words.) Ok, any word that you don't understand? <i>Perkataan yang awak tak faham?</i> (Are there any words you do not understand?) Is there any? <i>Ada yang tak faham?</i> Raise your hand. <i>Angkat tangan.</i> (Any you don't understand, raise your hand.) Yes, Alia? <b>Alia:</b> Their <b>T:</b> Their. Their <i>tu maksudnya mereka.</i> (Their means like them). <i>Mereka.</i> (them) Their. Their house. First picture <i>dulu.</i> (First picture first). Near? Near <i>maksudnya berhampiran.</i> &lt;Explains meaning through translation&gt; Near; the meaning of near is <i>berhampiran.</i> Atif, &lt;addresses one student&gt; kau faham semua maksud ke? (Do you understand the meaning of all the words?) <i>Ha, Atif? Faham semua maksud dah?</i> (So, Atif? You understand everything?). <i>Tulis.</i> (Write it.)</p>	<p>Note: Nuur is conducting a guided writing lesson whereby learners need to compose a simple story based on a series of three pictures and word cues given. The extract depicts a brainstorming session between the teacher and learners based on the picture and word cues.</p>
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As is observed, the teacher alternates between the target language and the learners' first language during the brainstorming session. Teachers resort to code-switching in most instances to serve some pedagogic functions. Gauci & Grima (2012) indicate

that teachers code-switch to teach subject matter, i.e. when language is being taught as a subject. Low & Dan Lu (2006) explain that code-switching is used to best explain a concept that has no exact translation while Tien (2009) points out that code-switching is used to explain linguistic forms. Similarly, Teacher A uses translation to explain the meanings of words that may seem abstract or ambiguous to her learners such ‘near’ and ‘their’.

**Motivational.** It is vital that teachers vary their activities and methodologies to cater for different learning styles. Teacher A and B have been able to do so by first identifying what kinds of learners they have and designing their pedagogic practices accordingly. This is in line with keeping in mind the idea that as young children are active learners, language learning should be through action and interaction (Cameron, 2003). Hence, language learning activities should be supplemented with visuals, realia and movement (Linse and Nunan, 2006) as done by Teacher A and B. Keeping in mind that the ESL learners are young learners, even teacher talk is supplemented with extralinguistic cues in the form of movements, gestures and actions. Below is an excerpt from Teacher B’s lesson:

COB 1:

<p><b>T:</b> Ok. This morning, let’s do some exercise. Let’s do some exercise. Stand up. Stand up. Stand up. Aiman! Stand up, <i>bukan</i> stand on the chair! (Stand up, not stand on the chair!) Ok! Puteri! Ok, show me your right hand! &lt;LL put up their right hand&gt;</p> <p><b>T:</b> Right hand! Right hand. Minion!&lt;addresses one student&gt; Right hand! Left hand! Right hand! &lt;SS follow accordingly&gt; Two hands! No hands! Two hands! No hand! Left! Right! Left! Right! Left! Left! Left! Right! Right! Left! No hand! Two hands! No hand! Two hands! Sit down! Stand up! Sit down! Sit down! Stand up! Stand up! Stand up! Left! Left! Right! Left! Right! Two hands! Swim! Swim! Freeze! Swim! Freeze! &lt;playfully pulls a student’s ears&gt; Two hands! No hand! &lt;playfully pulls another student’s ears&gt; Two hands! No hand! Pinch your nose! &lt;uses gestures to show&gt; Pinch your cheeks. Pinch your cheeks. &lt;makes a vibrating sound&gt; &lt;LL pinch their cheeks and make vibrating sounds&gt;</p>	<p>Notes: TPR activity to get students moving and energized for the lesson.</p>
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### Why Teacher Talk is a Major Constituent in These Two Classrooms

**Learners’ Low Proficiency Levels.** Predominance of teacher talk is an element that is clearly present in both classrooms. We can surmise that this could be due to the production skills and backgrounds of the students. Teacher A pointed it out to us in her interview that her students come from a ‘non-supportive environment’ whereby the English language is only practiced and produced in the classroom.

Teacher A

This is a 100% Malay school. So, they don’t have the non-Malay counterparts for them to, you know, debate. They will still resort to Bahasa Melayu because their friends are Malay. They don’t have a forceful factor to make them stick to the language (English).

As a result, Teacher A highlights that her students do not speak much because they know that they do not have to use English for their friends to understand them. Hence, they resort back to their mother tongues and the teachers then need to find ways and means to create opportunities for their students to continuously use and produce the language. In doing so, these teachers fall back on their role as the expert guide and more competent other who shoulder the responsibility of almost always being the sole target language model for their learners.

Learners' low proficiency levels could also be why the teachers fall back on more display questions rather than referential questions. Questioning is mostly used to check comprehension and in classes with low proficiency or students who do not produce language much, the teacher resorts to display, close ended questions to generate some participation from the students. Thus, students who would remain silent may feel motivated to answer questions that are simple and not too complicated to comprehend. As we can see, the students' responses are also short; either single words or short phrases. This could be due to their lack of language production skills. It may not be that they are not competent in the language. However, it could be that their speaking skills are just not as good as their writing skills because shyness, inhibitions and the fear of being laughed at come into play where speaking is concerned.

**Motivation.** Teachers of young learners should also bear in mind that children have short attention spans (Nunan, 2011; Nunan, 1995). Hence, activities that require movement and actions would work very well to get them moving. Teacher B conducts routine activities in her lessons to get students moving and not just being stagnant at their desks. She gets them to move their hands up and down, touches her cheeks and other body parts and pinches her friends' noses. This activity is carried out at the beginning of the lesson and sometimes even in the middle or towards the end. Being young children, they easily lose interest and boredom creeps in. Getting them to move around through simple exercises or games avoids loss of interest and boredom. Teacher B provides her own reasons along this line through stimulated recall.

B: I would start them with my routine exercise first because I would want them to be anticipating, be anticipated, in learning English. Because, I don't know about other teachers, but I believe in starting off my class with a very hyperactive situation. Instead of like a dull one, sitting on the chair, ok what's, today we're going to learn about, and I'm going to write on the board, and they're going to copy and then send to me. No! I believe in making the class feel active, feel energetic. So I would always start them with the exercise.

Teacher B uses movements, gestures and actions to arouse her students' interest in learning and cater to their short attention spans. She prefers a lively, energetic and fun language classroom which she strives to achieve by having short language based exercises with simple instructions and directions whereby students can pick up the language while carrying out the activity. She also believes that the teacher, being the expert guide and more competent other, should demonstrate and model language learning to facilitate learners' acquisition of the target language. Her views are tabulated below:

B: I like to show them examples. I like moving my hands around, showing them. Like according to that video, you can see that I'm holding the kids' hands, showing them how to do it and stuff. Because I believe that by giving examples, either by showing it yourself or using another person, it would like, the kids would follow our examples as teachers. Because we can demonstrate it better than them.

R: Meaning they understand better as well through your demonstration?

B: Yeah. Because they would be like if I follow teacher I'm doing it right which is like, yeah. When we demonstrate, it will give positive results, good results. They will follow us accordingly.

Therefore, in conducting such activities to constantly motivate and drive their learners, teachers end up 'dominating' the interaction through their instructions and teaching.

**Establishing Solidarity and Eliminating Fear.** Second language classrooms can be tough, daunting and almost menacing. To reduce learners' intimidation and fear of the language learning process, teachers need to source out many different methods that would be able to do the deed, as observed by Tannen (1990) and Musumeci (1996). One strategy employed by teachers could be code-switching. This is in order to foster a more engaging and harmonious language learning environment for the learners. Teachers may be able to modify and present a persona that is more engaging and less intimidating to the learners. Corcoll (2011)

found that aspects related to students' motivation, self-esteem and classroom atmosphere lead to language improvement for both the language taught and the children's mother tongues. As the teachers had already explained, motivation is key to their learners' language learning experience and hence promoting a learner-friendly and less threatening language learning environment is vital.

## CONCLUSION

In answering the two research questions, some major themes were generated from the data. The four major characteristics of teacher talk identified in the two classrooms revolve around teacher-dominated interaction, display questions, code-switching and motivational language and activities. The three reasons highlighted for these characteristics of teacher talk are learners' low proficiency levels, motivation and establishing solidarity and eliminating fear. These findings highlight the individuality and uniqueness of every young learner ESL classroom. The elements and characteristics, rhyme and reason found here may not all exist in other classrooms. Yet, here and there language teachers may be able to relate to at least some of these elements to their own classrooms. This paper sought to illustrate what transpires in a Malaysian rural young learner classroom. By doing so, the issue of 'too much' or 'too little' teacher talk was addressed. Within a sociocultural perspective, it is established that the teacher is considered to be the expert guiding the novice learners. In the context of young learners in a rural setting, 'too much' or 'too little' talk should be decided by the teacher based on the context, backgrounds and pedagogic objectives of her or his teaching and learning. Nevertheless, warnings that teacher-dominated instruction may hamper learning opportunities should be heeded. In the event that the teacher is the only target language 'authority' and model in the language classroom, opportunities for language production by the learners must also be given ample attention and importance. Teachers, let's be more creative! Godspeed!

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