Interactional Management in the English Classroom: Direct or Indirect Approaches?"

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The request strategies employed by American teachers in ESL classrooms are examined in this study to see the extent to which they use direct and indirect speech in their management of classroom interaction. Four adult ESL classes are investigated: two beginning-level and two advanced-level classes. Results of the study indicate that teachers in the two beginning-level ESL classes tended to use more direct approaches but they differed in the degree of the direct approaches used, depending on their perception of what is most urgent in the classroom (i.e. transparency of meaning or manners of politeness). On the other hand, teachers in the two advanced-level ESL classes were found to use both direct and indirect approaches. Their varied use of direct and indirect approaches may involve functional differences or may have to do with one of the teachers’ anxiety.

INTRODUCTION

The paper is intended as a contribution to understanding how language teachers exercise interactional management over their students in the classroom. Specifically, it undertakes to show to what extent one specific kind of management technique—i.e. direct vs. indirect approaches—are employed by English teachers for classroom interaction.

Linguists have maintained that language is used for different purposes in different social contexts (Fasold, 1990; Saville-Troike 1982; Wolfson 1989). Similarly, within the language classroom, teachers also vary their language use according to their social role: democratic or authoritarian. For example, Flanders (1970), in studying classroom talk, categorized teacher talk in terms of direct and indirect influence. Moreover, Allwright and Bailey noted that language teachers usually prefer to use an indirect approach to the management of interaction in that directness can have "unfortunate overtones of authoritarianism and plain bossiness" (1991:2). Consequently, using a language successfully involves being able to manage interaction successfully in that language (Stubbs, 1975). However, the complexity of the language use has been well documented by researchers. Mehan (1976), for instance, indicated that a teacher could produce any of the following utterances to a student:

(a) Can you shut the door?
(b) I wonder if you could shut the door.
(c) The door is still open.

As Mehan explained, utterances (a) and (b) could be either a question about a student's physical strength or be a directive depending on the context in which they are used; utterance (c) could be either an existential statement or a directive. But these kinds of conversational and conventional implicatures could pose problems to beginning language learners, no matter whether English is their L1 or L2. As Richards (1980) has pointed out, in terms of indirect speech acts, non-fluent language learners tend to stick close to the

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1 The term *conversational implicature* refers to the implication that is not part of the utterance but that can be deduced on the basis of certain Cooperative Principles (Grice 1975) governing the efficiency and normal acceptability of conversations. It is contrasted with *conventional implicature*, which is not derived from these principles but simply attached by convention to particular expressions (Crystal, 1992:173).
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surface meaning of the utterance, and as a result, often miss the intended illocutionary meaning. Similarly, Cook (1989) mentioned that people might have well understood the words and sentences they have uttered to each other but have missed the import of discourse. These statements can be further illustrated by Heath’s (1983) findings that young children often needed explicit rather than embedded directives. For example, it was shown in her study that children preferred "come to the board!" over "would you come to the board?" Additionally, Long and Sato (1983), in their analysis of lower-level adult ESL classes, reported that the teacher used significantly more imperatives and statements than questions.

Hence, based on the insight provided by researchers regarding the complexity of language use and the proficiency level of language learners, the observation made by Allwright and Bailey (1991) that classroom teachers prefer to use an indirect approach to avoid authoritarianism and bossiness seems more likely to hold for advanced-level English classes than for beginning-level English classes. It is reasonable to suggest that for advanced-level English classes where the students’ comprehension level is high, the teacher would prefer to adopt more indirect approaches to sound less authoritative. However, as far as beginning-level English classes are concerned, it seems more plausible to suggest that the teacher will tend to use more direct approaches so as to provide more comprehensible input for students with lower comprehension level (Richards, 1980), indirect speech being more syntactically complex and presumably posing more comprehension difficulties (Parker & Riley, 2000). Therefore, in addressing the research questions of what approaches English teachers may employ for classroom interactional management and of the extent to which these approaches relate to the English learners’ level of proficiency, the hypotheses proposed for this study are stated as follows:

1. In English classroom interactional management, the teacher in beginning-level classes will tend to use more direct approaches to provide more comprehensible input.

2. In English classroom interactional management, the teacher in advanced-level classes will prefer to adopt more indirect approaches to avoid authoritarianism.

SETTNG AND PARTICIPANTS

Four adult ESL classes were observed by the researcher. These four ESL classes took place at an English language program affiliated with the church. Among these four ESL classes, there were two beginning-level and two advanced-level classes. The first beginning-level class was "100/200 AO (Aural/Oral)," which was instructed by a female Asian American, working with 12 students; the second beginning-level class was "Working English," which was instructed by a female African American, working with five students. The first advanced-level class was "Conversational Strategies" and the teacher was a male Caucasian American, working with 11 students; the second advanced-level class was "Advanced Conversation" and the teacher was a male Caucasian American, working with seven students.

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2 According to Austin (1962), *illocutionary acts* refer to what the speaker does in uttering a sentence. They include such acts as stating, requesting, questioning, promising, apologizing, and appointing. Searl (1976) further classified illocutionary acts into representative, directive, question, commissive, expressive, and declaration (see Parker & Riley 2000:15 for definitions and illustrative examples).
ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

The present study utilized the categories devised by Blum-Kulka, House, and Kasper (1989:18) to analyze the requesting strategy types used by the four ESL teachers in classroom management of interaction. Blum-Kulka et al. classified various requesting strategy types into three major levels. These levels and some of their corresponding examples are given below:

Explicit Most Direct Level
I am asking you not to park the car here.
Clean up this mess, please.
I would like you to give your lecture a week earlier.

Conventional Indirect Level
Could you clean up the kitchen, please?
How about some cleaning-up?

Nonconventional (i.e. Conversational) Indirect Level
I'm a nun. (in response to a persistent boy.)
You've left the kitchen in a right mess.

The three major levels categorized by Blum-Kulka et al. have been adopted in the present study, but the subcategories in the explicit most direct level have been devised by the researcher for the purpose of data description. Make-up examples for each level and sub-level are given in the following:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Requesting Types</th>
<th>Examples</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Explicit Most Direct Level</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(1) Imperative (direct order)</td>
<td><em>Open the door.</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(2) Explicit request</td>
<td><em>I want you to open the door.</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(3) Mitigated imperative</td>
<td><em>Please open the door.</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(4) Hedging request</td>
<td><em>I would like you to open the door.</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Conventional Indirect Level</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>Can you open the door?</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>Would you like to open the door?</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Conversational Indirect Level</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>It's hot here, isn't it?</em></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| | *The room is certainly hot!*

Blum-Kulka et al. label example (4) as direct request. However, Brown and Levinson (1987:133) regard examples of this kind as indirect speech acts, as illustrated by the following example they provide: *I'd like you to shut the door.*
DATA COLLECTION AND DESCRIPTION

The data for this study came from four adult ESL classes and were collected by means of tape-recording, interviews, and fieldnotes. Each of the four adult ESL classes is described in turn.

First of all, "100/200 AO" was a beginning-level class. The focus of the class lesson was on vocabulary and idioms. After some small talk with the students, such as ‘Is anyone here related to each other?’ the teacher proceeded to the vocabulary lesson on family relationships. Starting with the discourse marker now, the teacher marked the beginning of the vocabulary lesson and, at the same time, exhibited her direct approach of interactional management, ‘Now, I want you to go over these words.’ It was immediately followed by general questions solicited by the teacher, such as ‘Do you know the word nephew?’ ‘How many nephews do you have?’ Then she continued to explain some of the word meanings. Next, a general class discussion on various family relationships was initiated and then ended. The second phase of the lesson was a continuing discussion of family relationships but the focus was on idiomatic expressions. The teacher announced the next activity, ‘O.K., now I want to teach you some idioms.’ She selected a student to work with her in performing a dialogue for the rest of the class; the dialogue contained several idioms (e.g. 'take after') from the textbook. She then spent some time explaining the meaning of each idiom in the dialogue. The teacher moved next to a major phase of the lesson. She asked the students to work in groups of three to create sentences based upon the vocabulary and idioms she just taught: ‘Now, I want you to do something.’ ‘I want you to divide into groups of three.’ ‘Try to use as many words and idioms as you can.’ ‘Then you have to do an oral report.’ ‘Tell me verbally....’ The teacher then walked from group to group to help.

Next, "Working English" was a beginning-level class, and it was the first day of class. After greeting the students, the teacher introduced herself and spent a considerable amount of time asking each of the five students many referential questions, such as ‘How long have you been in the United States?’ ‘What is your job?’ ‘What do you do?’ Her intention was probably to establish a sense of rapport between the students and herself and among the students themselves. After the small talk, the teacher began her lesson and asked the students if they had the textbook on working English: ‘O.K., do you all have the book?’ ‘Good!’ (after the students answered 'yes'). ‘Now, please turn to page five.’ She continued to ask many display questions, based on the textbook (e.g., ‘How does a taxi driver do?’). In this beginning-level English class, the teacher appeared to exhibit very few techniques of interactional management. This is presumably because she followed the textbook closely by drilling the students one by one with questions in the textbook; the drill continued until all of the students had a chance to answer the questions. The other example the teacher uttered was: ‘I would like you to tell me which you do and which you don't do at home.’ (referring to chores listed in the textbook, such as fixing the car, cleaning the house, and serving the guests.)

In addition, "Conversational Strategies" was an advanced-level class. In this class, the teacher divided the 11 students into two groups. Each group was asked to role-play a skit in which the topic was provided by the teacher. However, the students were asked to create their own lines relevant to the situation. Group A, composed of six students, was assigned to deal with a conflict between a florist who wants to sell his daisies because they are withering and a customer who wants to buy roses because they are popular flowers in the U.S. Additionally, Group B, composed of five students, was assigned to handle a conflict between a brother who needs to go far away and work to pay for her sister's medical expense and an ill sister who wants him to stay to keep her company. The teacher first asked for volunteers to act out the skit, ‘Who will like to speak first?’ After the role-players in each skit were chosen and other remaining students were assigned as supporting
members, the teacher instructed each group to go to a corner of the classroom to rehearse the assigned skit. He first walked to Group A and said, ‘*Please don’t show it to the other group.*’ Walking toward Group B, the teacher indicated, ‘*I don’t want the other group to hear you.*’ he then walked around the classroom to see how each group was doing in preparing for the skit. In Group A, the teacher approached two male students, who did not appear to participate much, and indicated, ‘*I would like you to help the girls.*’ In Group B, a male student who was a supporting member appeared to stand silently next to the person who was practicing role-playing the brother. The teacher walked to two male students and said, ‘*Can you two help each other?*’ During the first skit which was performed by Group A, the teacher asked a question of the students in Group B: ‘*Can you tell what’s the shopkeeper’s trying to do?*’ In the second skit which was performed by Group B, he once answered a question from a student in Group A with an idiom: ‘*Let’s not open another can of worms now.*’

Finally, "Advanced Conversation" was an advanced-level class. The topic of the class was on some issue concerning the Bible. The class started with a question raised by a student, ‘*Is the Bible true?*’ The teacher initiated the class discussion with a general solicit: ‘*So what do you guys think?*’ ‘And can you tell me why you think is the Bible true?’ The teacher's management techniques of classroom interaction were illustrated with the following examples in a failed attempt to help a student formulate her beliefs with a complete sentence. The increasing anxiety on the part of the teacher seemed to have been reflected by his tone of voice and by the fact that he instructions were built up toward more explicit directives, as indicated below.

‘*Can you just answer to the question “Is the Bible true?”*’
‘*Can you formulate what you just said in “I believe the Bible because' and answer that?”*’
‘*Can you give me a whole sentence?*’
‘So I would like you to say is “I believe the Bible is true.” You said you believe the Bible's true.*’
‘*Start and say “I believe the Bile is true because God's something or doing something.”*’
‘*Start from “I believe....” I know your answer but I want you to put it in a whole sentence.*’
‘*Don't start with “because....”*’
‘*Start from “I believe....”*’

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section illustrates the ESL teachers' management techniques of classroom interaction (i.e., requesting strategies) as they range from most direct to most implicit, utilizing the revised model from Blum-Kulka et al.

The Teacher in "100/200 AO" (beginning-level class) Request Types

(1) *Try to use as many words and idioms as you can.* Imperative
(2) *Then you have to do an oral report.* "
(3) *Tell me verbally....* "

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(4) Now I want you to go over these words.  Explicit Request
(5) OK, now I want to teach you some idioms.  
(6) Now I want you to do something.  
(7) I want you to divide into groups of three.  

The Teacher in "Working English" (beginning-level class)
(1) Now please turn to page five.  Mitigated Imperative
(2) I would like you to tell me which you do and which you don't do at home?  Hedging Request

The Teacher in "Conversational Strategies" (advanced-level class)
(1) Let's not open another can of worms now.  Imperative
(2) I don't want the other group to hear you.  Explicit Request
(3) Please don't show it to the other.  Mitigated Imperative
(4) I would like you to help the girls.  Hedging Request
(5) Can you two help each other?  Conventionally indirect
(6) Can you tell me what's the storekeeper trying to do?  
(7) Who will like to speak first?  

The Teacher in "Advanced Conversation" (advanced-level class)
(1) Start from I believe.  Imperative
(2) Don't start with because.  
(3) Start and say....  
(4) I want you to put in a whole sentence.  Explicit Request
(5) I would like you to say is....  Hedging Request
(6) Can you give me a whole sentence?  Conventionally indirect
(7) Can you formulate what you just said...?  
(8) Can you just answer to the question...?  
(9) Can you tell me why you think is the Bible true?  

As can be seen from the above data, no conversational (i.e. nonconventional) indirect requests were found in any of the four teachers' speech. It is presumably because conversational indirect requests are too subtle for the ESL learners to grasp and they are primarily used among adult native speakers of English, since conversational implicatures require high-level inference and presumed shared knowledge must be in effect in order for communication to be successful. It is also possible that conversational indirect requests are uncommon to the language classroom situations no matter how advanced or communicative the ESL learners may be. 4

Based on data analysis in the management techniques of classroom interaction, the results of the beginning-level classes are rather straightforward. Namely, both teachers in "100/200 AO" and "Working English" employed direct approaches exclusively: The former used either imperatives or explicit requests; the latter used either mitigated imperatives or hedging requests. On the other hand, in light of the techniques employed by the teachers in the advanced-level classes, the study produced mixed results: That is, both

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4 Thanks to Dr. Teresa Pica for her insightful suggestion of this possibility.
teachers in "Conversational Strategies" and "Advanced Conversation" used direct and indirect approaches, ranging from imperatives, explicit requests, mitigated imperatives, a hedging request, to conventional indirect requests. Thus, the results of the findings indicated that, in terms of classroom interactional management, the ESL teachers in beginning-level classes employed only direct approaches, whereas the ESL teachers in advanced-level classes utilized both direct and indirect approaches.

The findings of this study that the teachers in the beginning-level ESL classes exclusively used direct approaches such as imperatives (mitigated or not) and requests (explicit or hedging) appear to correspond to Long and Sato's (1983) findings that the teacher used significantly more imperatives and statements than questions in lower-level adult ESL classes. However, one thing deserves notice in this study is that, although both ESL teachers in the beginning-level preferred direct approaches in classroom interactional management, they differed in the degree of the direct approaches being exercised. Specifically, the teacher in "100/200 AO" tended to use the most direct approach (i.e., imperative), as compared to the teacher in "Working English," who used more particles (e.g., 'please') and hedges to downplay the directness of her speech. After the classes, both teachers were interviewed with respect to their classroom interactional management. The teacher in "100/200 AO" indicated that because she was concerned about the students' low level of English proficiency, she tried to use as many directives as possible, which she perceived would be easier for the students to comprehend. As for the teacher in "Working English," she noted that she tried to teach students manners (an aspect of American culture) in addition to language. Therefore, she tended to incorporate politeness makers into her speech.

In light of the interactional management techniques used by the teachers in the advanced-level classes, both teachers in "Conversational Strategies" and "Advanced Conversation" employed direct and indirect approaches. As for direct approaches, they both used imperatives and explicit requests. As for indirect approaches, they both used hedging requests and conventional indirect requests. In order to see if there were functional differences involved for the varied use of interactional management, the two teachers in the advanced-level classes were interviewed regarding their use of direct and indirect approaches. According to the teacher in "Conversational Strategies," he would try to use more indirect speech in an advanced-level class because the students' comprehension level is generally high, in contrast to lower-level classes, in which he would tend to use more direct speech. He further indicated that if time was not enough, he would use more direct speech to draw the students' attention, even if he was in an advanced-level class. Moreover, the teacher in "Advanced Conversation" indicated that he did not particularly pay any attention to either type of management techniques; he just used them as he saw fit. However, it is difficult to see if the teachers were actually aware of the management differences they claimed to exercise. As Wolfson (1989) pointed out, most language use is largely below the level of conscious or intuitive analysis. Hence, it is necessary to base one's analysis on what native speakers of the target language actually do. Based on the data collected in this study, it seems that the teacher in "Conversational Strategies" tended to use more direct speech in managing classroom activities (e.g., ‘I don't want the other group to hear you.’ ‘Please don't show it to the other.’), whereas he used more indirect speech when trying to get students to participate or share their opinions (e.g., ‘Can you two help each other?’ and ‘Can you tell me what's the storekeeper trying to do?’). As for the teacher in "Advanced Conversation," the teacher's anxiety might have played a role in his use of indirect and direct speech in the classroom. As can be seen from the section on Result and Discussion, he varied his speech from more conventionally indirect to a hedging request, explicit requests, and finally to imperatives.
CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER STUDIES

Based on the findings of this study, it appears that the first hypothesis proposed in this study that the English teacher will tend to use more direct approaches so as to provide more comprehensible input for students with lower comprehension level is confirmed. However, the degree of the direct approaches being employed may also allows for some differences, which may be based on the teacher’s perception of what is most urgent in the classroom: transparency of meaning or manners of politeness. Moreover, the second hypothesis proposed in this study that the English teacher will prefer to adopt more indirect approaches to sound less authoritative for students whose comprehension level is high not entirely supported. As revealed by the data analysis of this study, both direct and indirect approaches were used by the teachers in the advanced-level classes. It is possible that the teacher’s varied use of indirect and indirect approaches might involve functional differences—i.e. managing classroom activities vs. soliciting student opinions—as in the class of “Conversational Strategies" or it might have to do with the teacher's anxiety, as in the class of "Advanced Conversation." Further studies need to be conducted to see the nature that underlies the mixed results for the teachers' speech in the advanced-level classes. Furthermore, it is relevant for subsequent studies to investigate whether or not the teachers' classroom styles reflect differences in styles outside of the classroom. Comparative data from other speech situations would shed more light on the current analysis and enable researchers to see what value are conveyed by the specific kinds of interactional management that teachers exercise.

REFERENCES


