

Mini Discourses in Classroom Interactions: Do Teacher Educators in North-Western Nigeria Care to Explore these for Students' Oral Competence?

Sirajo Muhammad Gulubba^{1*}, Hema Rosheny Binti Mustafa²

¹Department of English, School of Languages Education Federal College of Education (Technical) Gusau, Nigeria

²Language Academy, School of Education, Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities University of Teknologi, Malaysia

*Corresponding author: gulubba1@gmail.com

Abstract

In line with global teaching practices, mini discourse exploration is part of an integrated skills development methodology that addresses deficiencies in students' speaking and grammatical competence. In this qualitative investigation, lesson transcripts of four Nigerian teacher educators from two Colleges of Education in the northwest of the country were sampled. The teachers were video recorded in a naturally occurring classroom setting. The data were transcribed and qualitatively analysed. The findings revealed instances of mini discourses that developed during classroom exchanges between teachers and students. The discourses lend themselves to teacher exploration, which is potentially significant for students' debate and discussion. However, none of the mini discourses was explored or contextualised to provide for students' voices. Instead, the teachers continued to cling to a long-established traditional approach, focusing wholesale on the grammatical content of the lessons. Key to the recommendations is raising teacher awareness of integrative skills development and effective classroom interaction. This study of significance for second language classroom practice.

Keywords: *Discourse, Exploration, Implicit, Interaction, Oral Competence, Teacher-Educator*

Introduction

There is abundant research on classroom discourse, which provides direction on how to support second language learners' oral fluent language (Dao & Iwashita, 2018; Kayi-Aydar, 2013; Lasala, 2014; Tavi, 2010; Yeh & Lai, 2019; Young, 2015). Such an investigation benefits teachers' classroom practice in providing opportunities for cooperative dialogue to explore implicit oral classroom discourses for students' classroom interaction during lesson delivery. In most instances, however, these opportunities are ignored either as part of teachers' teaching gaps or because discourse exploration is not the teaching target. The dominant topic preoccupation by teachers leads to a loss of such opportunities for students' meaningful interactions and oral skills development. It seems that most classrooms in second language teaching contexts only recycle content focus in their language teaching, resulting in a relegation of students' face-to-face communication (Chan, 2020; Mpho, 2016).

Review of Related Literature

Classroom discourse refers to teacher and student exchanges which develop in the course of classroom lesson delivery. At different stages of a lesson, teachers engage students and invite their contributions in different aspects of the lesson. This happens at the introductory or presentation stage, during class activities, while practicing new language or at the stage where students are exposed to more challenging activities requiring them to produce some new knowledge (Abdul-Majeed & Muhammad, 2015; Cheng, 2021; Masuram & Sripada, 2020). Discourse, oral or written, is marked by coherence and cohesion devices (Banguis-Bantawig, 2019). Coherence ensures that clauses or sentences are sequenced logically to give a sense of meaning. Cohesion is achieved when the text's elements are cohesive or stick together to create meaning. Cohesion is either lexical or grammatical. For lexical cohesion, two subtypes have been identified. The first is the repetition of words used in the discourse. The second is topic-related words, called registers employed in a specific field (Rose et al., 2018). Grammatical cohesion includes the use of anaphoric reference, the use of pronouns. It includes tense agreement, use of linkers and the use of ellipses (Banguis-Bantawig, 2019). The use of substitution is also an element of grammatical cohesion. Substitution in the use of phrases to refer back to something introduced or said in the discourse (Banguis-Bantawig, 2019).

Then, there is a tense agreement. This is marked by the use of right tenses in the discourse to make it meaningful. There is the use of linkers such as, and, but, also, however, and other related words to connect ideas and clauses so that there is a successful, meaningful expression of the message. Grammatical cohesion also includes the use of ellipses in oral interaction. Ellipses mean the deliberate omission of words without the loss of meaning (González & Skultety, 2018). 1.

Written discourse is created around a topic often marked by different types of sentence patterns and, in some instances, involving complex vocabulary. It includes paragraphing with headings and sub-headings, particularly when the topic reflects a formal genre. In general, there can be variation in language and sentence types where the discourse addresses the requirement of an informal genre. Spoken discourse is generally characterised by informality, short utterances, fillers, discourse markers, turn-taking and co-constructed grammar (Bygate, 1987; Masuram & Sripada, 2020). Both types of discourse share in context and appropriate sociolinguistics. They also share in the use of coherence and cohesion devices signalling order and unity in either discourse forms. Students' written and spoken discourses are improved upon through grammar instruction in most second language contexts. It is believed that a good grasp on grammar can support students' written and spoken construction. Spoken skill development particularly requires speaking opportunities in the class so students can employ a variety of grammar for self-expression. This is only possible in integrated skills lessons (Tom-Lawyer, 2016; Wildeman et al., 2021) in which teachers explore and contextualise grammar to provide space for students' oral discourse during classroom interaction.

Research Questions

The main objectives of the Study were to investigate mini-discussions which emerge in the course of teacher-student interactions and how they are explored by teachers to support students' spoken language. In more specific terms, the study aimed to answer these questions.

Research Questions

1. Are implicit mini-discourses identifiable in teacher-student classroom exchanges?
2. Did teacher educators explore the implicit discourses for students' speaking fluency?

Accordingly, these research objectives are to find out:

1. If implicit mini-discourses are identifiable in teacher-student classroom exchanges
2. Whether teacher educators explored the implicit discourses for students' speaking fluency.

Methodology

This is a qualitative research design which collected and analysed data qualitatively (Salminen et al., 2021; Yuvayapan, 2019). In this study, four teacher educators were selected. Transcripts of their lesson interactions were used for samples of implicit mini discourses. As an instrument for data collection, video recording was employed to record naturally occurring classroom interaction. This was then transcribed and qualitatively analysed to determine mini-discourses that emerge from the interaction and extent of exploring them for students' oral competence.

This investigation is underpinned by sociocultural theory (Vygotsky, 1978), which holds that social interaction is key to scaffolding (Bruner, 1976) students' communicative competence. The classroom provides the sociocultural environment for supporting this engagement. The teacher, as the better other, is the provider of the support mechanism aiming at students' oral discourse competence in the course of teacher-student interactions.

Analysis

The analysed data show that different implicit mini discourses were identified in the patterns of the recorded classroom interactions. The pieces of evidence of the mini discourses were found in the extracts of four teacher educators involved in the study. This is shown in the analysis below:

Teacher educator 1

Teacher educator, asking how much had been covered in the previous lesson, elicited:

T: How many things have we done so far?

St: we have done the identification of phrase, we also have done clause examples, we have done phrase, we also done clause example.

Evidence of Mini-discourse

The teacher educator asked about the topics covered in the previous lesson. A student responded that: "we have done identification of phrase (1), we also have done clause examples (2), we have done phrase (3), we also done clause example." (4). Four clauses were produced. In this mini discourse, there is coherence in the logical sequencing of the four clauses. "We have" is repeated throughout the discourse to explain what was covered as part of discourse cohesion. Other cohesion devices include the grammatical linker "also" in the second and fourth clauses. There is another cohesion in the form of the present perfect "we have done" in all four clauses, making the discourse elements stick together.

This mini discourse can be explored by contextualising it, for example, seeking more elaboration on the phrases and clauses taught and their significance to the students' language use. This could extend to more discussion, allowing students to say more. However, the students missed that opportunity as implied in the teacher's follow-up remark signalling a focus on grammatical elements taught.

T: Very good, so we have almost done that.
(line 11- 15)

The teacher could use other question types such as why, how, for what reasons to reformulate his elicitations. This would provide spaces for students' voices.

Teacher educator 2

In his interaction, the teacher educator said:

T: Suppose the police arrested you late evening or late night. If they arrest you, they will interrogate you, then what do we mean by interrogative? Here, the teacher who produced the mini discourse.

Evidence of discourse devices in this is noticeable in its coherence, marked by a good succession of the four clauses making up the discourse: "suppose the police arrested you late evening or late night (1). If they arrest you (2), they will interrogate you (3), then what do we mean by interrogative?" (4). Then, three types of grammatical cohesion are identified here. The first is the use of the anaphoric reference "they" in the second clause, which refers to the police in the first clause. The second grammatical cohesion is in the linkers "if" in the second and last clause, and "then" in the third clause. The third grammatical cohesion is in the use of tenses: past simple, present simple, future simple, present simple interrogative. So, the tenses mark discourse of the discourse (line 41 – 44).

This exchange equally lends itself to further elicitation, away from modelling 'interrogative' sentences or questions. Was this explored? Certainly not. Asking students to explain the situation of one under police custody can generate meaningful classroom talk, debate and argument. But this was not the focus of interactions. The attention was on 'interrogatives, sentences that ask questions. Question such as what happens when someone is in police custody, was not asked.

The third teacher educator produced a mini discourse while giving examples of sentence types.

T... 'Shuaibu came late for the lecture but the teacher allowed him after he considered his case as genuine (line 116-120).

In this discourse, there are three clauses "Shuaibu came late for lecture (1) but the teacher allowed him (2) after he considered his case as genuine." (3) The three clauses cohere meaningfully; they are well ordered. The cohesive elements or devices include grammatical linkers "but" and "after" to connect the second and the third clauses. There is a substitution where "case" substitutes "late" or lateness mentioned earlier in the first clause. There is an anaphoric reference "him" which refers back to Shuaibu in the first clause. There is another grammatical cohesion in the past simple tense use in all three clauses. Then, there is lexical cohesion in the use of interrelated words, "lecture, teacher, late, allowed, case, genuine" that are key registers in the discourse.

As previously examined in previous mini discourses, the teacher, in this instance, did not elicit students' responses on potential reasons why Shuaibu or anyone can come to lectures late. This could lead to varied opinions and responses from the students. The resultant discussion would present opportunities for students' language. But instead, the teacher asked:

...who can tell us the first independent clause?

Again, focus on the grammar elements was prioritised over students' speaking opportunities.

Teacher educator 3

For the third teacher, the discourse arose from a student's response to the teacher's questioning:

T: We are looking for an example of a compound-complex sentence

Student: Sir, 'the boy is crying while the mother is cooking what the husband gave her.

Evidence of discourse devices is in the coherence of the three well sequenced clauses, "sir, 'the boy is crying (1) while the mother is cooking (3) what the husband gave her.'" There is a logical and meaningful connection between the first, second, and third clauses. Then, there are four types of grammatical cohesion elements involving linkers, "while" and "what" in the second and third clauses. Another grammatical cohesion is identified in substituting "gave her" with "what" in the third clause. There is also grammatical cohesion in the form of the anaphoric reference "her" which refers to the mother in the second clause. Noticeable still is grammatical cohesion in the use of tenses: present continuous in the first and second clauses, past simple in the third clause. In the final instance, there is lexical cohesion where interrelated words "boy, crying, cooking, father" are used as home management topic-specific words. This makes the text stick together.

A three-clause sentence formed a meaningful mini discourse around a theme comprising mother, husband and a crying baby. If this discourse were put in the context of an extended discussion, students could interact lively on husbands struggling to make food available for the family; they could talk on the role of wives in home management. Away from that, the teacher concentrated on compound-complex sentence examples. Meaningful, oral interaction opportunities were lost.

Teacher educator 4

This teacher presents two instances of mini discourse in the course of classroom dialogue. The first implicit discourse was built around the Nigerian team. This emerged while the teacher was modelling dependent and independent clauses.

T: The Nigerian team won the World Cup when it was hosted by Korea and Japan (line 41)

Coherence is achieved in the two clauses through the logical ordering of the clauses. There is grammatical cohesion in the use of the linker "when" connecting the first and second clauses. There is also another grammatical cohesion to do with anaphoric

reference “it” that refers to “World Cup” in the first clause. There is another grammatical cohesion in the use of the simple past tense in both clauses. Lexical cohesion is noticed in the use of soccer-specific register “team, won, World Cup, hosted, Korea, Japan.”

Soccer, particularly in Nigeria and elsewhere, is a key and popular sport and therefore a recipe for students’ lively oral discussion. It provided a theme for rich and interesting debate for students’ varied responses. But that did not happen. Not realising any value for students’ oral language, the teacher invested his teaching energies in teaching dependent and independent clause types.

The second mini discourse also emerged from teacher modelling of compound sentences, on the theme of staff promotion in the civil service.

“Shehu was promoted because he was hard-working” (line 66).

In similar ways, there is coherence in the logical order of the two clauses: “Shehu was promoted (1) because he was hardworking.” (2). In this clause, grammatical cohesion is noticed in the linker “because” connecting the two clauses. There is an anaphoric reference “he”, a reference back to “Shehu” in the first clause. Another grammatical cohesion is noticed in the tense construction, showing past simple for the clause and past continuous tense for the second clause, respectively. Then of course there is lexical cohesion in the use of interrelated words “promoted, hardworking,” around which the theme of the discourse.

One of the ways to engage students in speaking is through modelling or giving examples to students. The second teacher used modelling to guide students’ learning of a grammatical concept, “Suppose the police arrested you late evening or late night. If they arrest you, they will interrogate you, then what do we mean by interrogative? Teacher examples, once contextualised, can provide rich student responses (Gillies, 2015; Jones & Chen, 2016; McNeil, 2011). Because in this context, other open questionings can lead students to talk about police arrests, questioning and other ordeals that suspects suffer in detention.

The third teacher trainer also employed modelling. Shuaibu came late for the lecture, but the teacher allowed him after he considered his case as genuine (line 116-120), which was limited to practising the function of dependent and independent clauses. This example was set in a context of Suaibu, a late-comer to lecture and provides an opportunity to go beyond the grammar to explore issues leading to students coming to lecture late, beyond a structural content focus.

The fourth teacher eliciting example of a compound complex sentence led to a student’s response, ‘sir, ‘the boy is crying while the mother is cooking what the husband gave her’. (line 76 – 77). This can extend to longer discourse to offer students speaking opportunities. But again, such opportunities were lost to prioritise traditional grammar teaching practices. Similarly, exploring talk on Nigerian football, which was the topic content of the implicit discourse, did not happen. In all these instances, the different implicit discourses emerging from teacher-student interactions could all be explored and contextualised to provide chances where students, in addition to learning grammatical elements, improve their spoken language competence. Integrated skills development methodology (Harmer, 2007; Idrissova et al., 2015; Tuan, 2017) provides for supporting students’ different language skills in a single lesson. Thus, focus on language structures

and mini discourses could be focused on, with the discourses contextualised to generate discussions.

Studies on contextualised teaching practices show immense benefits to students' language learning and language competence if well handled by teachers (Lo & Jeong, 2018; Mayo & Barrioluengo, 2017). Teaching grammar and oral discourse is well captured under integrated skill development (Banegas et al., 2020; Heppt et al., 2022; Onwe & Uwaleke, 2019). Thus, while instruction centres on grammar, students' voices can be allowed to initiate, contribute or elaborate classroom discussions with teachers' scaffolding. In an investigation, Tuan (2017) revealed that students' linguistic and discourse competence is supported by formal instruction and teacher-initiated conversations.

The discourses were implicit because their emergence resulted from interactional circumstances; they were not the teaching target, even as it was apparent that students' oral fluency was lacking. Teacher questioning provides a good channel for oral communication. This was employed by one of the teachers, "What have we done so far?". The response by one of the students, "we have done identification of phrase, we also have done clause examples, we have done phrase, we also have done clause examples" (line 11-13) is open to further questioning and elicitations for extended classroom talk. But this did not happen because the grammatical elements done, shown in the students' response, were the main preoccupation of the teacher. Even the type of question asked was a closed one, requiring no extended talk. Whereas teacher questioning, if well employed, has been proven to be efficient in checking and involving students' voices in the classroom (Coyle & Roca de Larios, 2020; Studhalter et al., 2021).

Findings and Discussion

In all the instances, mini discourses have been identified and analysed in the classroom interactions of the four teacher educators with supporting evidence from each of the discourses. Elements of coherence and cohesion were identified in all the mini-discourses. This answers research question one: Are min-discourses identifiable in teacher-student classroom exchanges?

And, from the evidence-based analysis, it is clear that none of the teachers explored the mini discourses for any meaningful oral classroom talk. The attention was wholly on the grammatical elements in the discourses. The teaching focus was on the identification of phrases, interrogative sentences, compound-complex sentences and dependent and independent sentences. The teacher educators, therefore, did not explore these interesting mini discourses for students' speaking fluency. This answers the second research question, asking: Did teacher educators explore the implicit discourses for students' speaking fluency?

Conclusion

In almost all language instruction, as analysed in this study, instances of implicit mini-discourse occur in lesson delivery. They are mini because they comprise only a few clauses or sentences; they are also implicit because they are not easily noticeable since they are not the teaching target. However, if explored, they would provide ample spaces for students' voices and contribute to their oral discourse competence. The findings in this investigation show that implicit mini discourses are not recognised and explored by teachers, while all attention is spent on grammatical focus and structural language teaching.

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