

How To Reduce Teacher Talking Time (TTT) & Improve Teacher's Role In Reading Classes At Luong The Vinh High School

Mai Thi Lan Anh

Faculty Of Foreign Languages, Dong Nai University, Bien Hoa City, Vietnam

Date of Submission: 14-03-2024

Date of Acceptance: 24-03-2024

I. Introduction And Justification

Reading is a very important skill in learning a language. *'In fact, it is probably true to say that more time is spent teaching reading than any other skill'* (Nunan; 1999: 249). I have heard this saying, "The more you read, the more things you know. The more that you learn, the more places you'll go." It is absolutely correct. Reading is a gateway to the sea of knowledge – learning new concepts, discovering wonderful places, understanding people's viewpoints and building a better-rounded self-image. This is why the reading skill is much emphasized in language learning, and the reading section plays a very important role in exam tests, taking up 35% to 40% of the total mark. Although reading is of such importance, the reading classes do not seem to be successful. I have been teaching reading for high school students for more than ten years and from my own observations, the role of the teacher in reading classes has not changed much: teachers talk most of the time and do most of the work 'for' their students – explaining the meanings and use of vocabulary, giving model reading, asking questions, providing correct answers and offering translation of the text into L1. The teacher acts as the transmitter of knowledge (Nunan; 1999:7). As Long (1983) observes that the transmission model of education above *'leaves the learners little opportunity to practise the genuine communicative uses of language in a full range of functional moves or to negotiate for meaning'* (cited in Allwright & Bailey; 1991:141). Students usually sit there and wait to be called. They are usually passively involved in the learning process.

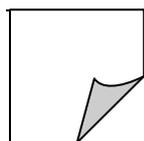
Those are the reasons why I want to carry out this research project on how to reduce TTT in reading classes for students in the high school where I am working.

I hope the research will point out the ineffectiveness of teacher's talk dominance in reading classes and help me to find ways to improve the teacher's role so as to get the students more actively involved in the learning activities.

II. Literature Review

Teacher talk is necessary to provide learners with what can be their only access to live target language input (Nunan; 1991:190). However, Brown suggests that 'teacher talk should not occupy the major proportion of a class hour' (2001:108) and Gower et al (1995) warns that when teacher talks too much, then *'the chances are that the students are not being given maximum opportunity to talk'* (p.1) and it is also likely that he/ she won't be listening to the students closely as he/ she is busy thinking too much about what to say next. Gower also points out that if the teacher talks 'for' the students, they will become demotivated as they think the teacher does not appreciate their efforts (p.1). Scrivener (1994) emphasizes that *'talking at the learners does not necessarily mean that learning is taking place; in many cases TTT actually represents time when the learners are not doing very much and are not very involved'*. Brown (2001) also shares the same idea and advises teachers not to consider themselves as those who must constantly 'deliver' information to the students, but think of themselves more as the 'facilitator of learning' whose job is *'to set the stage for learning, to start the wheels turning inside the heads of the students, to turn them on to their own abilities, and to help channel those abilities in fruitful directions'* (p.81).

Gower et al (1995:2) suggests some ways to avoid unnecessary and unhelpful TTT: 1) choosing language the students already know to give instructions and explanation 2) not using ten words where one will do 3) not using words at all where a gesture, mime, an object or a picture can convey the meaning quickly and unambiguously 4) not repeating yourself unless you have to 5) giving students enough wait time to process the question 6) not automatically repeating or echoing what the students say. He also considers interactive activities through pair work and group work as an effective way to give students 'more valuable talking time' than whole



class learning (p.8). Peltzman and Bernardo (2003 - online) share the same idea that small groups help language instructors to greatly maximize student talking time (STT) in the classroom and therefore minimizing TTT.

According to Flanders (1970) and Goodlad (1984) in a traditional class, teacher talk is estimated between 60 – 75% of the whole class time and students usually talking one at a time during the rest (cited in Crandall p.235). However, Kagan (1994 cited in Crandall p.236) pointed out that the above distribution is almost reversed with students talking part of the time and the teacher's contributions reduced accordingly in cooperative learning (group – learning activity' (Olsen & Kagan; 1992 cited in Brown & Rodgers; 2002:84). He also added that '*even when teacher talk remains high, the amount of learner talk is increased because more than one student talks at a time*'.

We can see that teacher talk is a problem that has attracted the interest of many researchers and they have suggested some good solutions. However, it seems that there is little research into ways to reduce TTT in teaching reading. Therefore, hopefully my research will point out useful ways to make teacher talk more effective especially in reading classes.

III. Research Aims

I have three aims in carrying out this research project.

The first aim is to investigate how effective teacher talk is in reading classes. I strongly believe that teacher talk is essential as it allows the students to be presented with models of good English. However, it does not mean that the more the teacher talks, the better the students' language acquisition is. Therefore, I aim at looking into what teachers usually do while they are talking to their students, whether the teacher engages their attention and presents them with comprehensible input, whether teacher talk facilitates students' language acquisition.

The second aim is to investigate teachers' and students' attitudes towards TTT and teacher's role in different activities in reading classes: what kind of teacher talk is helpful and necessary, what role they want the teacher to play in those activities and what they want to change to improve the teaching and learning process.

From the insights I have gained from the research, my third aim is to find ways to avoid '*needless or over-lengthy explanations and instructions*' (Richards & Lockhart; 1996:114) in order to improve the teacher's role in the reading classes so as to get students more actively involved in the learning process, to become more autonomous, and to promote better language acquisition.

IV. Subjects

The subjects of my research included two groups. The first group consisted of five teachers of English in the high school where I am working – two males and three females with their ages ranging from 28 to 43. They all have taught reading for at least four years. The second one included 60 seventeen – year – old students of Grade 11 from three different classes. The first class has 17 students – 5 girls and 12 boys, the second one 23 students – 20 girls and 3 boys, and the third 20 students – 11 girls and 9 boys. Although their majors are different, they have to study English as one of other academic subjects. They all have been learning English for 4 years at secondary high school and 1 year at senior high school. Their proficiency level is intermediate or so.

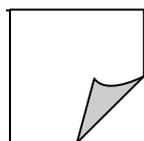
V. Methods

I employed three methods of investigation in my research project: observations, questionnaires and interviews.

First, I observed three different teachers teaching the same reading text to three different classes. The purposes were to find out the ratio of TTT vs. STT, to investigate what teachers did while they were talking to their classes and what the students did in reading activities. I used this method as I think it is a suitable way to observe and '*reflect systematically upon classroom interactions and events when they actually occur*' (Burns; 1999:80). Before taking classroom observations, I had worked out a checklist in which I determined what aspect of the teaching and learning to focus on. However, this method is only reliable to some extent and cannot be used as a principal method for data collection on its own because it is based on personal interpretation (Petraiki; 2006:8). To increase the validity of the research, I used two other methods.

After the classroom observations, I gave all the students the questionnaires to find out their attitudes towards TTT and teacher's role. The reasons why I chose questionnaires are that they are very popular research tool (Cohen & Manion; 1989 cited in McDonough & McDonough; 1997:171), easy to carry out, not time-consuming and anonymous. McDonough & McDonough (1997) also pointed out that '*the anonymity of the questionnaire may mean that more honest responses are given*' (p.183).

I designed both open-response questions and closed-response questions as each kind has its own strengths. With closed questions it is easier for the researcher to collate and analyse responses while she often gets more useful information from open questions (Nunan; 1992:143) as the respondents can contribute more individual points of view and more detailed information (McDonough & McDonough; 1997:176).



In order to find out teachers' attitudes towards TTT and teacher's role in reading classes, I interviewed 5 teachers individually including the 3 teachers whose classes I had observed. I used semi-structured interviews because they still 'have a structured overall framework' (McDonough & McDonough; 1997:183) but give 'the interviewee a degree of power and control over the course of the interview and the interviewer a great deal of flexibility' (Nunan; 1992:150).

VI. Findings And Discussion

When asked about the most effective activity in a reading lesson, 94% of the students chose to be given clues such as pictures, title of the text or key words of the reading passage in order to guess its topic. They also liked to have a short discussion or raised questions about what they wanted to know about the text. Only 6% wanted the teacher to introduce the contents of the reading passage before they read it and no student wanted the teacher to read the text aloud and explain its main idea(s) – the activity that is still taken by many teachers. It completely coincides with the choices the students made in question 2 when they were asked to rank the most common activities in reading classes from the most efficient to the least efficient (see Table 1 below). 'Activating students' schemata' and 'asking questions about the reading text before students read' are ranked first and second accordingly.

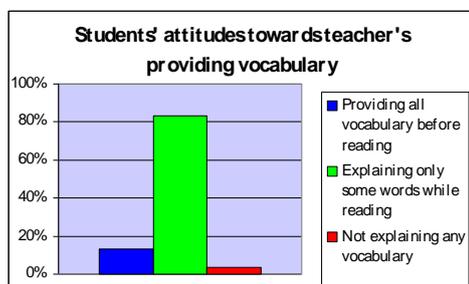
Table 1: Students' attitudes towards different activities in reading classes

Activities	Most efficient				Least efficient		
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Using clues to activate students' schemata	72%	5%	15%	2%	3%	3%	0%
Providing vocabulary	8%	8%	15%	8%	60%	0%	0%
Model reading	5%	23%	13%	8%	8%	40%	2%
Asking questions before reading	5%	63%	5%	8%	3%	15%	0%
Correcting students' answers	10%	0%	47%	7%	13%	18%	5%
Giving or correcting the translation of the text	0%	0%	2%	0%	0%	5%	93%
Giving the summary	0%	0%	3%	67%	12%	18%	0%

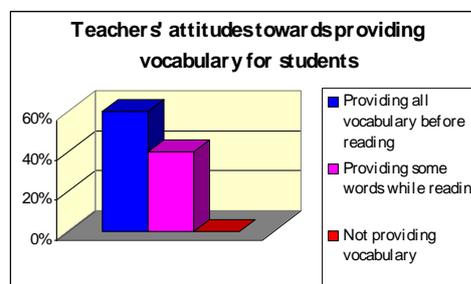
From the above results, I have realised that nowadays the students may be no longer satisfied with their passive role as in traditional classes; they may want to discover things, not just sit still, listen to the teacher's lectures and take notes.

All the teachers interviewed also agreed that activating students' background knowledge and previous experience is the most effective in creating students' interest in the reading text. It makes the students become more involved in their lesson and helps to create the intrinsic motivation which can facilitate teaching and learning activities.

Moreover, through the three class observations, I have noticed that in the reading lessons with pre-reading activity, the students had more chance to practise the language. Although their speaking skill was not so good, they all tried to express themselves, especially when seeing the teacher's encouragement through their verbal or non-verbal expressions. And above all, the class became more exciting, which offered a good start to both the teacher and the students.



Graph 1



Graph 2

Graph 1 shows students' attitudes towards teacher's providing vocabulary. 84% of the students wanted the teacher to explain only some new words and let them guess their meaning while reading. Just 13% liked to be provided with all the new words before starting reading and 3% said that they didn't want vocabulary explanation.

This is similar to the result of question 2 which is presented in table 1 above. 'Providing vocabulary' was ranked fifth in the list, only before the two least efficient activities: model reading and the translation of the reading text.

Compared with the results from the questionnaires, those got from the interviews are quite surprising as seen in graph 2 above. 40% of the teachers interviewed thought teachers should explain just some difficult words while the students were reading and it was better to teach them how to guess meanings of words in context. Meanwhile, 60% of the teachers believed that it was really necessary to provide all the new words for the students so that they could have better understanding of the reading text. Moreover, they added that the students needed to be supplied with different meanings of a word and their different parts of speech so that they can increase their vocabulary. Many teachers still hold the belief that only when the students have known all the words in the reading passage can they have thorough understanding. This belief must stem from the Vietnamese traditional teaching context in which the curriculum focuses heavily on grammar and vocabulary. Each unit in the text books for high school students begins with a reading text which only serves as a means of teaching grammatical structures and vocabulary. From year to year, it has become a common practice that teachers explain everything in the text, teach a lot of vocabulary to the students. This practice makes the students become too reliant on the teacher. They form the habit of reading word by word, and often get stuck when finding a new word while reading.

During the class observations, I noticed that the provision and explanation of vocabulary took nearly 45% of the class time (from 20 to 22 minutes/ 45 minutes) and during these activities, the teacher usually talked twice as much as the students. In class 11T, the teacher talk was estimated at about 10 minutes, meanwhile the students had only approximately 5 minutes. In class 11V, the teacher even talked three times as much as the students, with about 15 minutes compared with around 5 – 6 minutes. In those activities, only 4 – 7 students had the chance to speak.

Therefore, it is time teachers needed to look back at their teaching methods. The students need to be trained in more practical tasks that they may deal with in real life and in which they can use their knowledge of the language. They need to become more actively involved in the learning process by using the language to communicate.

When asked to choose the favourite way to work in order to find out answers to the teacher's comprehension questions, 52% of the students like working in pairs or small groups before presenting in front of the class, only 33% liked working in groups to work out the answers, then compared theirs with those in the teacher's answer sheet and asked questions if there was any. It is possible that the students are still too much dependent on the teacher and always need the teacher's correction. Furthermore, some students may be too shy to ask the teacher questions in front of the class for fear of losing face.

Just 12% wanted to search for the answers on their own and give the answers when called by the teacher. The least favoured (3%) is 'the students search for the answers by themselves and compare with the teacher's'.

This also correlates with the results seen in table 2 below. Most (41%) of the students' favourite working mode in reading classes is the combination of all the three: whole class, pairs and small groups. 'Small groups' was ranked second, before 'pair work' and the last is 'whole-class grouping'

Table 2: Students' attitudes towards different learning modes in reading classes

Learning modes	Most favoured		least favoured	
	1	2	3	4
Whole class	0%	5%	32%	63%
pairs	27%	28%	40%	5%
Small groups	32%	62%	3%	3%
All the three modes	41%	5%	25%	29%

However, what I have got from the interviews with teachers is much different. 60% supported whole-class grouping. They commented that it was easy to control and there was not so much noise. According to them, students were used to receiving knowledge directly from the teacher. They refused to work in groups or pairs as they thought they could not learn anything from their friends whose proficiency was just the same. Some teachers added that at times working in pairs or groups was just a waste of time as the students often chatted or spoke in L1. Pair work and group work are not so welcome for another reason. Students always become very noisy, which can affect nextdoor classes.

Just 40% preferred the combination of the three learning modes. They pointed out that with pair work and group work, the students had more chance to practise the language before presenting in front of the class. This made them feel more confident. Besides, they said these activities encouraged the students to be more responsible for their work as it is not easy to 'hide' in small groups. Pair work and group work allowed students to work and interact independently without the necessary guidance of the teacher, which could promote students' independence. They also added that for these activities to be effective, teachers should be careful in organising the pairs or groups and set suitable tasks with enough time for the students to do. In their opinion,

whole-class grouping is suitable for giving explanation and instructions, showing material such as pictures and texts.

From the observations of the reading comprehension activities, I have got some findings. First, reading comprehension was the second that took much more time than the others (after vocabulary teaching). And sadly, in this activity, the teacher usually talked twice or nearly twice as much as the students – in class 11T, the teacher spoke in 8 minutes while the students only 4 minutes, in class 11V, the teacher talk time was around 6-7 minutes and the students about 3-4 and not all the students had a chance to speak. Nevertheless, teacher talk could be reduced considerably in the same activity in the third class (class 11H) – the teacher talked about 4-5 minutes and the students about 8-9 minutes but the students worked in pairs to find out the answers to the list of questions given by the teacher and then practised them before presenting in front of the class and it is obvious that almost everyone was involved in the activity and had a chance to speak. When called to give the answers, there was not much wait time as the students all had the answers. All the students looked excited and interested.

From the findings above, I realise that the traditional teaching method has been so deeply ingrained in many teachers. Therefore, they need to be trained in the new methods so that they can see the benefits of these and hopefully change their point of view. Teaching should make the learners' needs and experience central to the educational process (Harmer; 2001:76). According to the result in the questionnaires about teacher's instructions and explanations, 62% of the students wanted the teachers to use simple words and structures suitable to students' level in giving instructions or explanations. 38% thought that teacher's comprehensible instructions or explanation are the most effective, and if the students are still confused, teachers should explain again in Vietnamese. Some commented that teachers should give demonstration if necessary.

In the interviews, I also find out the same results. 100% of the teachers said that teacher's instructions and explanations are important as they give students chance to get exposure to live language input. They also all agreed that the instructions and explanations should be short and explicit. However, from the class observations, I found that teachers' instructions and explanations were still lengthy and sometimes made the students confused. As a result, the teacher at times had to repeat himself/ herself, which even increases teacher talk.

It is very surprising to see that the students' attitude towards teacher's role and that of the teachers is quite different. 77% of the students liked the teacher to be organizer and instructor of the learning activities and 80% of these (37 Ss) also added that they wanted their teacher to give comments on and/ or assessments of their performances or their work so that they could improve their language skills. Just 20% preferred their teacher to be a master controller. Meanwhile, 60% of the teachers supported the role of a master controller. This is clearly seen in their way of organizing classroom activities. Therefore, I think it is time for teachers to change their one-sided view and find teaching methods which are more suitable for the needs and interest of the students.

VII. Recommendations

From the findings discussed above, I have come up with some suggestions for reducing TTT and increasing the students' involvement in the learning activities.

First, teachers should use clues such as pictures related to the topic, the title of the reading text, or some key words picked out from the reading passage to let the students make a guess about the main topic of the text and express what they want to know about it or hold a small discussion before they start reading. By this way, the teacher can activate the students' background knowledge and prior experience, which can give the students motivation to get more involved in the next activity. This activity also gives the students more opportunities to use the language.

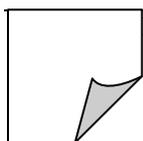
Second, teachers should not teach vocabulary separately but teach the students how to guess the meanings of words in context, or work with their friends to find out the meanings or ask the teacher if really needed. However, the most important thing is help the students avoid reading word by word. The omission of this step results in considerable reduction in teacher talk and improvement of the students' reading ability.

Third, the teacher's instructions and explanations should be short, explicit and comprehensible. Teachers should try to avoid using difficult words or complex structures and use demonstration when necessary as Harmer (2001) suggests that a demonstration of the activity that the students are going to take may be worth any number of complex instructions as it helps to ensure that the students have a better grasp of what they are supposed to do (p.59).

Next, when asking questions, teachers should not repeat the students' answers because when the teacher repeats a student's response, the other students will make no effort to understand and wait until the teacher 'interprets' it and 'echoing increases TTT, slows down the pace of a lesson and gives the impression of a teacher-dominated class' (Gower et al;1995:2)

In addition, model reading and class repetition should be omitted as they have proved to be inefficient. This can help to reduce TTT and save time for other useful activities.

Another very effective way to increase STT is through pair work and group work. 'By one estimate, if just half of your class time were spent in group work, you could increase individual practice time five-fold over



whole-class traditional methodology' (Brown; 2001:178). Moreover, group work helps the students become more autonomous, no longer dependent on the teacher. The students will get used to helping and learning from each other. Therefore, the teacher is left free to discreetly monitor progress and give help, advice and encouragement where and when it is needed (Andrewes – online).

Finally, when making the above changes, the teacher must also change the traditional role as a 'master controller' (Brown;2001:167) to a 'facilitator', a 'resource' (Brown;2001:81) who organises, instructs and facilitates the learning activities. Moreover, teachers should not be 'the only initiators of language but should encourage students to ask questions, make comments and negotiate certain options in learning where appropriate' (Brown; 2001:108). As a result, the teaching will become more student-centred and the students will get more involved in the learning process and become 'more autonomous language users' (Bruner;1983 cited in Van Lier p.104). Such increase in 'learner-centred', autonomous approaches should see a reduction in teacher talk.

VIII. Conclusion

The research has indicated that there is a big difference between the students' and the teachers' attitudes towards teacher talk as well as teacher's role through different activities in reading classes. Most of the students wanted the teacher to become an organiser and an instructor for learning activities in which students play an active part, are responsible for their work and become more independent of the teacher. Meanwhile, the majority of the teachers interviewed are affected by the traditional method in which the teacher is the transmitter of knowledge. All the learning activities are controlled by the teacher. And a very important finding I have got from the research result is that some common activities in reading classes are not effective and not suitable for the students' needs and interest.

Hopefully, the research results can make these teachers change their point of view about language teaching and learning as well as the teacher's role in reading classes. With the recommendations, I hope teachers can adjust their teaching methods to make teacher talk become more effective and increase STT and students' involvement. I'll share the findings of the research with all the teachers of English in my school and if possible with language teachers in other high schools in my town so that the teaching and learning activities in reading classes can become more effective and successfully. In the future, I hope I will have more time and opportunities to conduct more intensive research into the effectiveness of the changing of teacher's role from a transmitter of knowledge to an organiser and a facilitator in learning activities in reading classes. These future research results will point out the benefits of the teacher's new role for the students' language learning acquisition and help to find out ways to promote this new role effectively.

References

- [1] Allwright, D. & Bailey, K.M. (1991). *Focus On The Language Classroom: An Introduction To Classroom Research For Language Teachers*. Cambridge: CUP.
Andrewes, S. *Teaching English – Group Work V. Whole-Class Activities*.
[Http://www.Teachingenglish.Org.Uk/Think/Methodology/Whole_Class.Shtml](http://www.teachingenglish.org.uk/think/methodology/whole_class.shtml) (Accessed Jul 8th 2006)
- [2] Brown, H.D. (2001). *Teaching By Principles: An Interactive Approach To Language Pedagogy*. New York: Addison Wesley Longman.
- [3] Brown, J. & Rodgers, J. (2002). *Doing Second Language Research*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- [4] Burns, A. (1999). *Collaborative Action Research For English Language Teachers*. Cambridge: CUP.
- [5] Crandall, Joann (Jodi). *Cooperative Language Learning And Affective Factors*. In Arnold, J. (1999). *Affect In Language Learning*. Cambridge: CUP.
- [6] Harmer, Jeremy (2001). *The Practice Of English Language Teaching*. 3rd Ed. Harlow: Longman.
Gower, R. Et Al (1995). *Teaching Practice Handbook (New Edition)*. Oxford: Macmillan Heinemann.
- [7] Mcdonough, J. & Mcdonough, S. (1997). *Research Methods For English Language Teachers*. London: Arnold.
- [8] Nunan, D. (1991). *Language Teaching Methodology*. Hemel Hempstead, Herts: Prentice Hall.
- [9] Nunan, D. (1992). *Research Methods In Language Learning*. Cambridge: CUP.
- [10] Nunan, D. (1999). *Second Language Teaching And Learning*. Boston MA: Heinle & Heinle.
- [11] Peltzman, R. & Bernardo, K. (2003). *Product Feature: Small Group Communication Methodology*.
[Http://www.Johnclements.Com](http://www.johnclements.com) (Accessed Jul 8th 2006).
- [12] Petraki, E. (2006). *Introduction To Professional Projects – Class Notes*.
- [13] Richards, J.C. & Lockhart, C. (1996). *Reflective Teaching In Second Language Classrooms*.
Cambridge: CUP.
- [14] Scrivener, J. (1994). *Learning Teaching*. Heinemann. In OT5 – Teacher Talking Time X Student Talking Time.
[Http://www.Fvslib.Cz/Kaj/Materials/Methodology/OT5_ZS.Htm](http://www.fvslib.cz/kaj/materials/methodology/OT5_ZS.htm)
(Accessed July 8th 2006).
- [15] Van Lier, Leo. *Constraints & Resources In Classroom Talk: Issues Of Equality And Symmetry*. In Candlin, C.N. & Mercer, N. (2001). *English Language Teaching In Its Social Context*. London: Routledge.

