Problems in Chinese Teachers' Instructional Discourse —From the Perspective of Authenticity*

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In the English language classroom, authenticity is a basic discursual feature of teachers' instructional discourse. Without authenticity, there will be a mismatch between what students learn in the classroom and what they use in real life. However, the notion of authenticity varies with the change between the natural mode and pedagogic mode in the classroom. Therefore, based on this assumption, retrieving and analyzing data from the corpus and classroom videos, the present paper identifies two categories of problems in Chinese teachers' instructional discourse. Sample extracts are discussed and predictions are made on how teachers' failure to produce authentic discourse may result in ineffective teaching and learning.

Keywords: teachers' instructional discourse, authenticity, genuineness, unnaturalness

Introduction

Teachers' instructional discourse, a sub-category of teacher discourse, is the medium that teachers use to achieve the teaching and learning goals. It functions as teachers' introductory discourse, instructions of organizing activities, explanatory discourse, and classroom control discourse. It is not only the means for teachers to organize teaching activities, but can also be taken as the model language by students.

Authenticity in the classroom is an important factor to measure the quality of teacher discourse. Authentic language helps teachers to set a good example of language use in the real world. While inauthentic discourse may make the lesson artificial. Some may argue that the classroom lacks authenticity, because it is a pedagogical setting and it cannot provide a complete authentic context. Actually, the classroom is a special pedagogical setting, yet at the same time, it is an authentic setting in which there are activities and interactions between teachers and students. Therefore, in the language teaching classroom, authenticity, a notion which requires authentic language as well as authentic settings, is a basic discursual feature of teachers' instructional discourse, for teachers' instructional discourse is used to communicate with the students and to activate the interaction in a preferably natural setting (DING, 2014). When authenticity is absent, problems may arise, directly affecting the effectiveness of teaching and students' construction of knowledge and development of language skills. In a word, authenticity should be a goal that teachers and students work towards, consciously and constantly.

Most studies on teacher discourse in China are basic quantitative descriptions of the functions and features

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of teacher discourse, such as the amount of teacher talk, the frequency of occurrence of certain types of questioning and feedback (e.g., ZHAO, 1998; LIU & JIANG, 2004; HU, 2007; WANG, 2013). Few researches dig into the problems in teacher discourse. Furthermore, many researches are based on researchers' interpretation of the data from the pedagogical perspective, which only scratches the surface and looks for problems in the formal or functional features of discourse, ignoring the problems that lie in the discourse itself and teachers' use of discourse. Thus, from the perspective of authenticity, the present paper attempts to identify the recurring problems in Chinese teachers' instructional discourse.

Data Collection and Analysis

The data for analysis are retrieved from a corpus called MSCT (Middle School Classroom Teaching) and some videos of English classes in middle schools in China. Discourse in 20 classes taught by in-service teachers is used in the present paper. The videos of English classes used in this study contain 41 classes taught by 41 teachers from different places of China, among whom 10 are junior high teachers and 31 are senior high teachers.

The transcripts in the corpus are read through and the videos are watched by the researcher repeatedly. Problems in terms of authenticity in teachers' instructional discourse are identified. Next, the transcripts where there are problems are combined into a composite list for the entire research sample. "Stories" in the videos and assumed "stories" in the corpus that happen in the problematic transcripts are found out, so as to ensure that the problems are real problems. Then, transcripts with problems are read and reread in order to compare the problems to find similarities and differences. At this stage, categories of problems in terms of authenticity are formulated.

Problems From the Perspective of Authenticity

According to Gil (2002), the instruction in the language classroom contains two modes—the pedagogic mode and the natural mode. The former refers to discourse with a pedagogical goal, focusing on form. While the later refers to discourse without a pedagogical goal, and an example would be the directives or feedbacks used to organize activities focusing on meaning. The collective construction of the context requires that successful teachers' instructional discourse flexibly moves within the two modes and matches the context or setting moment by moment. It also requires that the discourse itself exists in the real life, rather than being made up, and that the teacher-student interaction in the classroom needs to contain the characteristics of real and natural communication; that is, the setting the teacher creates should be authentic. In addition, the teacher needs to lead students to deal with the new situations that emerge so as to make the right decision for the classroom activities to go on smoothly and fluently.

Authentic instructional discourse entails naturalness in the particular setting for the particular medium, topic, and purpose. If teachers' instructional discourse is authentic in this sense, the language should be natural to the very context in which the teacher is speaking. If a teacher's instructional discourse is not authentic, the language is distorted and strange in the context.

Two sub-categories of problems concerning authenticity are identified according to the two different modes. One is corresponding to the natural mode called low degree of genuineness, and the other is in accordance with the pedagogic mode called unnaturalness in the language of the pedagogic mode.

Low Degree of Genuineness

In the classroom a large part of the instructional discourse is not concerned with the language to be learned. According to Willis (1992), taken as the outer language, language used for greetings, comments, task directing, task switching, and discipline regulation should be genuine opposed to the pedagogically processed inner language. When the teacher communicates with the students in the classroom, this kind of discourse must be as genuine as possible. The reasons are that, first, this kind of discourse is in the natural mode and, second students may directly imitate it when they encounter the similar setting outside the classroom. In the data, low degree of genuineness is often found in teachers' greetings at the beginning of the class and questions used for directions. Extract 1 is an example and the greeting is unjustified.

Extract 1

Line 1 T: Good. Excuse me. Which class are you in?

Line 2 S: I am in Class Five Grade One.

Line 3 T: Are you in Grade Two?

Line 4 S: No, I am not.

In this extract, it is the first time for the teacher to offer a class to the students. After a brief introduction about himself or herself, the teacher asks some basic questions about the students for interpersonal purposes. In Line 1, the teacher asks the student which class he or she is in. The student tells clearly which class and grade he or she is in. However, in Line 3, the teacher asks whether the student is in Grade Two. It is so strange that such a question comes out when the student has just told the answer. We cannot understand why the teacher asks such a question in the greeting setting in which the goal is not for practicing the sentence pattern "No, I am not". In a word, the discourse here is illogical and disobeys the logic of the natural conversation.

Extract 2 is a teacher's questioning for directions. This extract indicates the teacher's low proficiency in using the English language.

Extract 2

T: Yeah. Sit down please—yeah. They are boxes. What colour are they? They are yellow. They are yellow: boxes. OK. Now—what colour is number one?

SS: It's yellow.

T: What colour is number two?

SS: It's white.

T: What colour is number three?

SS: It's orange.

T: What colour is number four?

SS: It's brown.

T: What colour is number five?

SS: It's red.

T: What colour is number six?

SS: It's blue.

T: What colour is number seven?

SS: It's green.

T: What colour is number eight?

SS: It's black.

In the above extract, the teacher is asking students questions in order to guide them to practice the words of colors. He or she may present eight pictures or objects in front of the students and ask them to speak out the color of every picture or object one by one. Looking at every sentence in the extract separately, we may not find out any problems. The teacher's every direction is a very simple and clear sentence—"what colour is number...". However, on the whole, we may find the series of the questions unfavorable to our ears. In the eight questions, only the last word that is the number is different from each other. Normally, when we ask a series of these kinds of questions, we do not use the full sentence so many times. We may ask "what colour is number one" only once, and then ask "what about number two?", "number three?" or "next?" to replace the full form. The eight questions may be clear, but the expressions are not genuine.

Genuineness is discussed within the natural mode of the classroom. Once the learning target of a lesson is involved, authenticity is examined under the label of naturalness.

Unnaturalness in the Language of the Pedagogic Mode

It is believed that in the classroom there is a clear relationship between the setting and the type of language use that occurs in that setting. Since the pedagogical setting in the classroom is different from the natural setting outside the classroom, teachers usually imitate natural settings for students to learn the language. In the classroom, there are circumstances when the teacher creates a setting for guiding students to learn certain sentence pattern or grammar; however, the words he or she says cannot match the context and the words that the teacher uses to elicit the sentence pattern sound very odd in that situation. Intuitively, it seems that authenticity is not the right concept here, for the context is not authentic. Rather, we might say that the discourse is defective or ill-formed. Nonetheless, according to Widdowson (1978), if the contextual conditions are appropriate to the learners, the language can be authenticated. Therefore, the "ill-formed" question is not really ill-formed, but not natural in the imitated setting.

Unnaturalness in the language of the pedagogic mode refers to the phenomenon when the teacher creates a setting for students to learn the language that happens in the setting, yet the language he or she uses is not natural to the particular setting. The problems normally hide in both teachers' questions and directives. Extract 3 is an example.

Extract 3

Line 1 T: Look at this again. What is this? This is a clock. Right. The clock is broken—I know this girl is very good. Here you are—do it.

(SS laugh)

Line 2 T: So now. Excuse me. Excuse me. What is she doing?

Line 3 S: She is mending.

Line 4 T: Ha ha ha no no no no no stop. OK. Yah. + She is +

Line 5 S: + She is + mending clock.

Line 6 T: Is she mending my clock?

Line 7 S: Yes.

Line 8 T: Good. OK. Again. Is she mending my clock?

Line 9 S: Yes. She is.

Line 10 T: Yes. She is. OK. So can you give this to him—excuse me? Boy—can you mend my clock?

Line 11 S: Yes, I can.

Line 12 T: Oh. Yes. I can. Please do it. So now, excuse me?

Line 13 S: Yes.

Line 14 T: What is he doing?

Line 15 S: He is mending your clock.

Line 16 T: Good. He is mending your clock. Is he mending your clock?

Line 17 S: No.

Line 18 T: No. Whose clock is he mending?

(SS laugh)

Line 19 T: Whose clock is she mending?

(SS laugh)

Line 20 S: It's yours.

Line 21 T: It's yours. Yes. So he is.

Line 22 S: Mending your clock.

Line 23 T: Yeah. Thank you, thank you.

The above extract is a teacher's explanatory discourse, a typical IRF (initiation-response-feedback) model. The learning goal of this lesson is the Present Continuous. In order to have the students practice the sentence pattern "somebody is doing...", the teacher creates a situation in which her clock is broken and she needs help. Pedagogically, it seems that the teacher has succeeded, because the sentence of Present Continuous is practiced. However, her directives and questions are strange in the "broken clock" setting. She first gives the broken clock to a student and asks her to mend it. Then she asks other students the question "what is she doing" so as to elicit the target sentence pattern. After the students have answered her question, she gives the clock to another student and asks the same question again.

In natural discourse, what a person says needs to fit the situation where he or she is speaking. Similarly, in the classroom, once a setting is created, the teacher should say the right words suitable for the setting.

There are several problematic places in this extract. First, the teacher's discourse in Line 1 shows that because she knows "the girl is very good", she gives the broken clock to her and tells her to "do it". It is not natural for somebody to give a broken clock to someone else to mend it for the reason that he or she is very good. The directive "here you are—do it" is neither natural nor polite. Second, it is so odd that the request for help is followed by questions such as "what is she doing?" and "is she mending my clock?". Third, in Line 19, the teacher asks students the question "whose clock is she mending" to elicit the sentence "she is mending...". It is clear that such a question does not ask about the action of a person, but the person who owns the clock. From the students' answer we can also find that this question does not work. Only after the teacher's further guidance, do the students understand what they should say. Obviously, this question is not natural at all in the situation, nor can it achieve the learning goal.

Below is another example. The problem exists in the teacher's questioning.

Extract 4

Line 1 T: Now I give you 20 seconds to prepare OK. Talk with each other. Now begin (practice 20s) anyone—good. Thank you.

Line 2 S1: What bad weather!

Line 3 S2: It will be warm tomorrow.

Line 4 S: Will it. Will it be warm tomorrow?

Line 5 S3: No, it won't.

Line 6 T: OK. What bad weather it will be warm tomorrow! What weather!

Line 7 S1: What weather!

Line 8 T: Good or bad?

Line 9 S1: Good.

Line 11 T: Who like to be warm? Who likes to be warm or to be cold?

Line 12 SS: Be warm.

Line 13 T: Be warm so you say what + good weather +

Line 14 SS: + Good weather +

In Extract 4, the topic of the lesson is weather, and thus the teacher is asking questions to guide the students to practice the expressions about weather. In this extract, the expression being learned is the interjectional sentence "what good/bad weather!". We can infer that the teacher asks the question "who likes to be warm" in order to elicit the interjectional sentence from the students. He or she intends to create a setting in which the question can be followed by the sentence pattern "what good/bad weather!". However, the question in Line 11 is not appropriate to elicit the sentence pattern. Normally, somebody wants to say the sentence "what good/bad weather!" when the weather is really very warm and comfortable or very cold and terrible. Somebody asks such a question when he or she wants to know others' preference of the weather. It is very strange for one to say that he or she likes to be warm and then continues to say "what good weather!", because there is no proper context for him or her to do so. Therefore, the teacher's questioning is too artificial in the context. Meanwhile, he or she fails to create a setting to practice the sentence pattern.

The examination of authenticity in teachers' instructional discourse is based on the assumption that the notion of authenticity varies with the change of the context. Therefore, there is difference between the authenticity of the natural mode and that of the pedagogic mode. The key for deciding whether a piece of discourse is authentic is the context. The context changes, so does the definition of authenticity.

Conclusion

From the perspective of authenticity, the present paper has analyzed the hidden problems in Chinese teachers' instructional discourse. Examples of the problems have been demonstrated to show how they influence the classroom authenticity, and further hinder the effectiveness of classroom teaching and learning.

Since the language classroom has a natural mode and a pedagogic mode, problems in the two modes differ. Two categories of problems are found in the data under the label of authenticity. They are low degree of genuineness and unnaturalness in the language of the pedagogic mode. Lack of authenticity may mislead students and bring artificiality to students' production of the language. The results of this study may help teachers realize the potential problems in their discourse so that they may modify their language and adjust their teaching in the English language classroom.

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