EFL Classroom Discourse in the Iranian Context: Investigating Teacher Talk Adaptation to Students' Proficiency Level

Fatemeh Hemmati
Associate Professor, Payame Noor University

f.hemmati@jonoub.tpnu.ac.ir

Amir Valadi
PhD Candidate, Payame Noor University

a_valadi@yahoo.com

Abstract

How language teachers talk is a key factor in organizing and facilitating learning specifically in language classrooms where the medium of instruction is also the subject matter. This study aimed to examine the extent and ways of teacher talk adaptation to students' proficiency levels in the Iranian EFL context. Two EFL teachers who were teaching three different proficiency levels were observed and recorded. They were also interviewed to see if they would make any conscious effort to adapt to their students' proficiency level. Furthermore, the students of the same classes were interviewed for the comprehensibility of their teachers' talk. Data were analyzed for four major areas of adaptation including speech rate, vocabulary, syntax, and discourse. The results showed that teachers' adaptation to students' level does happen clearly for elementary students, but the adaptation boundary between the intermediate and advanced levels is fuzzy. The findings also indicated that in spite of what they think, teachers' talk is not tuned to elementary students' understanding.

Keywords: Teacher Talk, Teacher Talk Adaptation, Students' Proficiency Level, Comprehensible Input, Classroom Discourse

1. Introduction

ELT classrooms around the world are diverse and complex: cultural contexts, institutional curricula, teaching styles and beliefs, and learners' needs and expectations differ from context to context. However, in spite of all this variation, classroom discourse remains generally similar since wherever they work and whatever they teach, teachers are more or less involved in some similar practices (Hall, 2011). For example, they organize activities for classes of different learners, manage unruly behaviors, are expected to teach a specific curriculum, and evaluate the educational progress of the learners. All facets of teachers' actions can be mirrored in their use of language as the main tool at their disposal. In fact, the instruction language of teacher acts as the main input for learners in EFL context, because in many contexts the most authentic target language learners receive as input is the instruction language of teachers (Murray & Christison, 2011). The same point was asserted by Nunan (1991) where he noted: "In terms of acquisition, teacher talk is important because it is probably the major source of comprehensible target language input the learner is likely to receive" (p.189).

Input was the basis of earlier SLA studies (e.g., Krashen, 1977) in which the major driving force behind learning a language was the language to which learners were exposed; however, as interest shifted to the innate system of language learners, studies on input and its crucial importance diminished as well (Gass & Selinker, 2008). Later on, the Interaction Hypothesis (Long, 1981) suggested that interaction plays a key role in generating comprehensible input for language learners. This hypothesis led to the regain of interest in input studies and its vital role in negotiation and interaction. Generating comprehensible input can be looked at from another angle as well. The process of interactional modification provides comprehensible input for

learners; however, in line with Krashen's idea about i+1, the Interaction Hypothesis also implies that complexity and increased input are necessary for L2 acquisition rather than just slow, simplified and reduced input (Hall, 2011). Furthermore, supporting the basic principle of the Input Hypothesis, Long (1983) emphasized that: "Acquisition is either severely delayed or does not occur at all if comprehensible input is unavailable. This is true for first and second language acquisition by both adults and children" (p. 97).

In EFL contexts, one of the teachers' main roles is to make sure that students receive comprehensible input, because if the input is not comprehensible, no learning can take place (Gass & Selineker, 2008). Therefore, in conversations between teachers and students, as instances of more proficient speakers talking to less proficient speakers, teachers might make modifications to their speech to be understood and to scaffold students' learning process. Ewert (2009) emphasized on the same point: "Scaffolding is often associated with a socio-cultural orientation to language learning since it describes the facilitative talk of expert/novice pairs in the zone of proximal development (ZPD)" (p. 252). While there seems to be little doubt about the role of teachers' talk as a key factor in organizing and facilitating learning specifically in contexts where the medium of teaching is also the subject matter, little attention has been devoted to the actual discourse of teachers and learners in EFL contexts where the same teacher teaches different proficiency levels (Ewert, 2009).

With the dominance of CLT approaches and task-based techniques, teacher-centeredness is no longer valued over learner-centeredness. However, in the Iranian context, some EFL teachers still continue to dominate the teaching/learning process (Kiany & Shayestehfar, 2010) and do not provide opportunities for students to communicate (Kariminia & Salehi, 2007) leading

to taking up a great deal of time in many language classes to provide comprehensible input. Identifying different types of classroom activities, Ellis (2005) emphasized on the L2 teacher's role as the input provider and categorized the type of activity in which all class members are the addressees of the talk provided by the teacher as a whole-class activity. He maintained that a negative consequence of this kind of interaction is insufficient negotiation and high rate of teacher talk. All in all, it seems that the vital role of comprehensible input has been established in second and foreign language learning; however, there are some potential problems with teachers' talk as the input provider. The first one, addressed widely in the literature, is the excessive rate of teacher talk and the other one is concerned with making input comprehensible enough for language learners of different proficiency levels. Logically, one expects teachers to talk differently to students with different proficiency levels. If this difference is not observed, then the students are left with confusion and despair as a result of teacher talk not being tuned to their level. Hence, the questions of the extent of adaptation, its appropriateness, and the ways the adaptation is applied are of concern in the present study.

2. Review of Literature

The idea of making adjustments in speech in order to be understood was proposed long time ago by Ferguson, 1971 in the form of Foreigner Talk Hypothesis arguing that native speakers simplify their language in order to address speakers who do not know their language. In 1983, Hatch summarized the features of foreigner talk in a list covering four areas. The first area was *slow rate* which included clearer articulation, using fewer reduced vowels, using fewer contractions, and longer pauses. The second area was *vocabulary* which included using high frequency vocabulary, less slang, fewer idioms, fewer

pronoun forms, definitions, overtly marked utterances, semantic feature information, contextual information, and gestures and pictures. The third area was *syntax* that included using simple sentences, movement of topics to front of sentence, repetition and restatement, new information at the end of the sentence, correcting the learner's ungrammatical utterances, and filling in the blank for learners' incomplete utterances. The last area was *discourse* in which the native speaker gives reply within a question, uses tag questions, and offers correction to help the non-native speaker.

As far as the functions of foreigner talk in terms of language learning are concerned, one can claim that by listening to simplified speech the language learner will be better able to understand. As mentioned in the previous section, without understanding the language, no learning can take place and although understanding alone does not guarantee that learning will occur, it does set the scene for learning to take place. However, it goes without saying that not all types of speech simplification are created equal or have an equal effect. For example, Parker and Chaudron (1987) showed that simplifications that occur at the linguistic level are not as effective as those at the discourse or conversational structure level.

Scientific studies done on teacher talk are more than twenty years old and have approached the issue from four main views: descriptive, experimental, correlational, and qualitative studies. The origin of all these studies refer back to researches carried out on caretaker speech and foreigner talk which are both discussed in second language research (Matsumoto, 2010). In such studies, the linguistic characteristics of teacher talk shared in various second language classrooms are described and the prominent role of discourse and conversational analysis both in teachers' monologues and their interactions with the students have been scrutinized. For example, with regard to error

treatment as one of the indispensable features of any second/foreign language classroom, Ellis (2005) climes that encouraging students' correct performance and providing corrective feedback for their incorrect performance are required. Besides, different types of corrective feedback have been studied and classified by different researchers (e.g., Lyster & Mori, 2006).

In addition to Parker and Chaudron's (1987) study, mentioned above, teacher's adaptation to the proficiency level of students has been reported in some other studies. For example, Goldstein and Conrad (1990) focused on the conferences between a teacher and three ESL learners. The researchers used the interactionist model of negotiation, turn taking, questions and topic nomination to analyze the recorded discourse. The results showed that teacher talk did not necessarily increase interaction or revision. Not every student was able to negotiate meaning, to express their ideas, and to ask questions. Another finding of the study was that the conferences varied in relation to the learners' language proficiency. That is, contrary to expectation, more negotiation occurred between the teacher and the more proficient learners rather than the less proficient ones.

In 2009, using negotiation and scaffolding as two frameworks for analysis, Ewert investigated teacher talk in L2 writing conferences and came to the conclusion that teachers varied their assistance in relation to the learners' proficiency through using certain combinations of negotiation and scaffolding. However, unlike the studies done by Goldstein and Conrad (1990) and Patthey-Chavez and Ferris (1997), one of the two teachers negotiated with the less proficient learner more than the more proficient one. Furthermore, the second teacher talked to the students about the same amount. Ewert concluded that:

It is possible that the behaviors of the teacher are not as adaptive to learner's proficiency as has been suggested and are more a feature of the

teacher's interactive style generally or the stance they establish in the conference as either collaborative facilitator or prescriptive authority. (p. 267)

One of the main studies on modification techniques was carried out by Chaudron (1988) who provided a taxonomy of these techniques including repetition, pauses, modification in pronunciation, vocabulary, discourse and reducing rate of speech. Chaudron maintained that there is doubt about the efficacy of such modification strategies, although pauses in teacher's speech can lead to beneficial results in students' speech because they would find more time to process what the teacher has said or asked and, consequently, would provide longer and syntactically more complex sentences.

In a study by Yu (2010), the discourse of six English language classes were observed, recorded, and analyzed. The aim was to study the type of questions put forward by the teachers and the students' replies, but Yu concluded that in addition to modification techniques such as repetition, and pauses, already classified by Chaudron (1988) as the most frequent strategies, the teachers used code switching during instruction and practice as well.

Sannino (2009) highlighted a positive connection between resistance and agency, and its potential for teachers' professional growth and educational change. The study also examined teachers' discourse during an intervention aimed at developing teaching practices. The intervention started to deal with problems in the evaluation of students' learning. It analyzed how teachers' discourse shifted from critical and disruptive to constructive and agentive. The results proved that teacher talk modification can occur on purpose.

In a study in Iranian context, Maftoon and Rezaie (2013) investigated the discourse of an Iranian communicative EFL classroom. In addition to findings such as the larger proportion of display questions than referential questions and a clear preference for recasting and explicit correction, the results showed

that the teacher modified his speech in accordance with the learners' language proficiency level.

Aghajanzadeh Kiasi and Hemmati's (2014) study on teacher talk in Iranian EFL context focused on the importance and functions of teacher talk in teaching EFL writing. A diverse corpus of writing sessions for three different levels of students was collected, transcribed, coded and analyzed. Three types of teacher talk, *focal*, *remedial*, and *notional*, were identified and the results showed that the functions of teacher talk vary based the students' needs as well as the teachers' language proficiency level.

In 2015, Rezvani and Sayadi conducted a study which dealt with instructors' and learners' questioning in different course levels to find out whether teachers were able to enhance the learners' capacity to ask English questions. They observed classes from lower intermediate to advanced levels. The results indicated that, similar to other studies reported in the literature, questioning has different functions and serves various objectives such as encouraging the learners to interact in English, although in the case of lower proficiency students the class participation was limited to answering the questions posed by the teacher. Furthermore, the type of questions posed by the teacher in the four course levels varied from one level of proficiency to the other and teachers teaching in lower proficiency classes posed a significantly higher number of questions and resorted to display questions.

As the reviewed studies show, there is evidence in the related literature that teacher talk adaptation to learners' understanding level does occur in English language classrooms. While this may be the case, evidence for the extent of adaptation and how properly and in what ways teachers gear their language to learners' understanding level seems to be scarce; therefore, the present study

aimed at investigating these aspects of teacher talk to answer the following questions:

1. To what extent does adaptation to the level of students occur in Iranian EFL classes?
2. How properly and in what ways do the adaptations occur?

3. Methodology

3.1. Participants

The participants of this study were two non-native EFL teachers (one male and one female) of one of the Iran Language institutes (ILI) in Khoramabad, a city in the west of Iran, together with their students. The teachers were teaching at different proficiency levels from basic to advanced ones at the time of the study. They had M.A degrees in TEFL and were 27 and 30 years old, both with more than seven years of experience in teaching English.

The students were in three language proficiency levels: elementary, intermediate, and advanced with 15 students in each group. Prior to this study, the students had been placed at the three language proficiency levels. Upon registration at the ILI, all students have to take part in an in-house placement test, similar to TOEFL, consisting of 100 multiple choice questions including grammar, vocabulary, reading, as well as an oral interview. The test has been in use for more than twenty years, and, according to teachers and officials, after years of item analysis and modification it is valid and reliable in placing students in homogenous groups. Depending on their scores, the students are placed at basic to advanced levels, each level with three sublevels. It further needs to be noted that all the students of the present study had started their language learning from basic levels and had gradually reached higher levels (elementary after one and a half year, intermediate after two years, and

advanced after three or more years) after passing the required written and oral tests at the end of each semester. Therefore, going through these stages and tests, the students had been even more refined in terms of homogeneity.

3.2. Procedure

To examine the extent to which teacher talk adaptation might vary depending on the students' proficiency level, three classes of each teacher: elementary, intermediate, and advanced were observed. Since teacher talk is influenced by the material being taught, that is, the vocabulary and grammar a teacher uses are directly dependent on the type of the material being taught, as a result it would be rather impossible to compare teacher talk adaptation at different proficiency levels. To compensate for this, the teachers were asked to run three free discussions for the three classes all with the same topic. Specifically two teacher talk sections were of interest to us. First, the opening talk the teachers gave students to start the discussion and second when the teacher and the student came into interaction. Both talking sections were audio-taped for later transcription.

As further evidence regarding the adaptation, the students were asked to answer the following Likert-type question:

- How much do you think your teacher talk is understandable to you?

1) little   2) a little   3) to some extent   4) much   5) completely

The question was translated into Farsi for elementary students to make sure the linguistic feature of the question would not influence their answers. Both teachers were interviewed on how they tried to adapt their talk to the students' understanding and whether their talks really changed from one level to another.

3.3. Data Analysis

The audio-taped teacher talks and interactions were transcribed to be thoroughly examined in terms of various linguistic adjustments, such as speech rate, shorter/longer utterances, syntactically complex sentences, lexicons, repetition/rephrasing/summaries of preceding utterances, and initiation, response, feedback (IRF) patterns. All the above possible adjustments were quantified and qualified so that they could be strong evidence to answer the research questions. To ensure that adaptation had been realized by students, their answers to the Likert-type question were quantified too.

4. Results

4.1. Opening Talks

The teachers' opening talks at the beginning of the discussions were the following (The topic chosen by the male teacher was *football* and topic the female teacher chose was *language learning*):

> T- *OK, today we want to talk about football. Do you like it? …….. (Waiting for response). Now the question is: Why do many people like playing football? (Elementary class)*

> T- *As you know, football has become a phenomenon all over the world and it has attracted many young people around the world. Why do you think this is the case or better to say what are special reasons for that? (Intermediate class)*

> T- *Nowadays football has found a place almost everywhere. There must be reasons for such a fame, that is, why I want you to put forward your ideas on*

the possible reasons on this issue. Why do you think football is more loved than other sports? (Advanced class)

T- Well, this session we want to talk about different ways for language learning. What can we do to learn English better? Who can answer the question? (Elementary class)

T- To learn English better, there are different ways and techniques we can benefit from. I want you to first think and then tell the class how we can improve our language learning through applying different methods? (Intermediate class)

T- As everybody who has tried learning a language knows that some activities better help us in language learning. Today we want to discuss this topic. Specifically, I want everybody in the class to speak about how a person can be a better language leaner. (Advanced level)

The descriptive analysis of the above opening talks is given in Tables 1 and 2.

Table 1. *Descriptive Analysis of the Opening Talks Given by the Male Teacher*

Proficiency level	Elementary	Intermediate	Advanced
Speech rate for each word per second	11.93/22=.54	11.43/40=.28	13.40/43=.30
Long utterances	none	2	2
Short utterances	5	none	1
Syntactically complex sentences	none	2	2
Number of words	22	40	43

Table 2. *Descriptive Analysis of the Opening Talks Given by the Female Teacher*

Proficiency level	Elementary	Intermediate	Advanced
Speech rate for each word per second	11.61/26=.44	11/36=.30	12.91/44=.29
Long utterances	none	2	2
Short utterances	2	none	1
Syntactically complex sentences	none	2	2
Number of words	26	36	44

As the tables show, the teachers, when dealing with elementary classes, used no complex sentences and there were fewer words in the opening talks. Even the rate of speech used by the teachers to address the elementary class was far slower than that used for addressing the other levels (.54 and .44 second for elementary classes). Besides, the number of words used when talking to the elementary classes can indicate that the teachers have attempted not to bring about cognitive overload for their students (22 and 26 words). The words chosen by the teachers when addressing the elementary students were daily and frequent words like: OK, today, want, talk about, like, now question, many, people, different, for, learning, what, can, learn, English, better, who, answer.

Although the findings indicate a clear cut difference between talks addressed to elementary classes and talks addressed to intermediate and advanced levels, comparing the latter levels is not ever distinguishing and, in fact, the difficulty border between intermediate and advanced levels is linguistically blurred. At both levels (intermediate and advanced) the teachers used complex and long utterances. The trivial higher speed shown in the table is simply because of the lower number of words which indicate that both teachers were roughly and identically articulate when talking to the students. The words used at both levels by the teachers were more formal and complex than the words used to address the elementary levels. Just compare the following words with the above mentioned ones:

discuss, specifically ,improve, benefit, activities, topic, applying, techniques, nowadays, everywhere, put forward, reason, possible, attracted, phenomenon
From what went on above, teacher talk adaptation can be better identified when compared in two levels with distinctive proficiency levels (elementary vs. intermediate or advanced levels) than when compared in two rather closer proficiency levels (intermediate vs. advanced level).

Interactions

The second important section regarding teacher talk was when the teachers were interacting with the students. For each level two initiation, response, feedback (IRF) patterns have been provided as samples.

Elementary levels

1

T- Do you like football?

S- Yes, I like

T- Aha, yes, you do. Why do you like it?

T- Good, it helps us talk to tourists

S- Good, we playing to classmates

2

T- Why is speaking English important?

S- Helping us talk tourist.

The above IRF patterns are representatives of many others which were transcribed. Nearly all of the IRF patterns were initiated and ended by the teachers. Most IRF patterns contained three or four turns at most and during the turns the teachers tried to provide the students with words so that the students could continue talking. Whenever a wrong grammatical form was uttered, the teachers provided the students with the correct form. Most of the free discussions dealt with corrective feedback on the part of the teachers. When the teachers felt that the students were not able to add more comments to the IRF patterns, they shifted to other students and initiated another pattern. One point worth mentioning is that the elementary level students at ILI are the ones who have been learning English for one and a half year and have gained the required grammatical and vocabulary knowledge to take part in simple discussions with their teachers.

It seemed that the teachers' focus were on giving corrective feedback to the students' wrong grammatical forms or providing them with English words as they had difficulty in retrieving proper words for the context. It is implied that

at lower levels of proficiency running free discussions can be a demanding activity for teachers because naturally such discussions will turn into giving corrective feedbacks.

Intermediate levels

1

  S- When my mistakes are told to me I lose my confidence in talking.

  T- You are right. That can block the fluency of the students.

  S- I think if teachers let us finish the talk we can perform better.

  T- You mean they don't let you do that?

  S- Not always, but sometimes they cause problems in our talking and make it hard for us to continue,……………(the interaction continues to the tenth turn)

2

  T- I think it is not because it is a group sport that many people like it what do you think?

  S- That's right. There are many other sports which are not liked as much as football like basketball and volleyball

  T- So it seems that this phenomenon should have other reasons for its fame…….(the interaction continues to the eighth turn)

As the transcriptions show, compared with the elementary levels, the type of vocabulary and grammar in the intermediate groups are at higher level. From other similar transcriptions, one could conclude that the teachers themselves prevented the IRF patterns from going on because they wanted to let other students to take part in the discussion. The teachers were not necessarily the initiators of the talk and it seemed that the students were able to follow the teachers' talks as they rarely asked for explanations on words or

grammatical structures. There were few cases of providing words on the part of the teachers and few corrective feedback were recorded.

Advanced levels

1

T- Well I really don't believe in giving my students scores as indexes of their language abilities. Do you agree with me?

S- No, because if we don't students scores, then how can we decide if he can pass the course?

T- Do you think that scores are the only ways for making decisions as to the ability of a student? (the interaction continues about 3 minutes)

2

S- It is not true that people like it because it is unpredictable. Well there are a couple of sports which have this unpredictability. I think the reason is that we grow up with football

T- Can you explain more?

S- Yes, I can remember that when I was a 5 years old boy my father bought me a ball,…(the interaction continues for 4 minutes)

The same analysis given for the intermediate discussions is applicable to the advanced levels. However, the point worth mentioning is that making a clear cut distinction between the intermediate and advanced levels in terms of their linguistic features of the related teacher talks was not straightforward. That is, the types of vocabulary and grammatical forms used in the discussions of the intermediate groups were barely distinguishable from the advanced ones.

Interviews with the teachers

Both teachers were interviewed as to how they tried to adapt their talk to the students' level of understanding and whether their talk really changed from one level to another. Both teachers said that they spoke with a lower speed to their elementary level students, tried to use common and frequent words and avoided using grammatically complex sentences. Therefore, all the three elements that were elicited from the observation data as evidence of adaptation to the students' level were confirmed by the data from the interviews. The interviews also confirmed that the teachers do the adaptation on purpose and deliberately.

As to changes in adaptation from one level to another, they said that they easily realized the difference between talking to elementary students and talking to intermediate or advanced students. Regarding the difference between intermediate and advanced levels in terms of adaptation both teachers believed that such a difference is not really observed in their talk and in fact their discourse does not change much linguistically. Once more, the interview data supported the observation data in which there was no significant difference between the teachers' talk in intermediate and advanced levels. The only discrepancy between data from the interviews with that from the observations was that the teachers talked about using L1 as a technique to help elementary students; however, there was no code switching in the observed classes.

Students' ideas

As to the comprehensibility of the talks, the learners were required to answer the following Likert-type question (This question was not based on the discussions. It was a general question):

115

Generally speaking, how much do you think you understand your teacher when he/she talks to you?

1) little   2) a little   3) to somewhat   4) much   5) completely

There were fifteen language learners in each group, and each student was given a slip of paper on which the above question was written. Their answers were averaged out of five as the question was on a scale of five points. Table 3 below shows the results.

Table 3. *The Students' Average Score on the Likert-Type Question*

	Elementary	Intermediate	Advanced
Male teacher class	3	4.5	4.95
Female teacher class	2.97	4.75	4.98

As shown in the table, the majority of students at intermediate and advanced levels thought that they understood their teacher talk while things were different with the elementary students. To these students teacher talk was not as understandable.

5. Discussion

The results of the first part of data analysis indicated the use of less complex sentences, fewer but simpler words, as well as slower rate of speech for elementary students. The deliberate avoidance of complex sentences and trying to be more articulate when talking to elementary students are in line with the results of studies mentioned in the introduction and literature review. For example, using grammatically simple sentences, slower pace of speech and limited number of simple words are among the areas listed in Hatch's (1983) summary of the features of the Foreigner Talk Hypothesis. Indeed, all these

features were present in the teachers' talk to provide students with more *comprehensible input* and to make them get involved in classroom *interaction*.

The next phase of analyses which dealt with distinctions among different proficiency levels indicated a clear difference between elementary and intermediate/advanced levels, but not between intermediate and advanced levels. The results could be interpreted with reference to the Input Hypothesis and the idea of i+1 level in which i is the current level and 1 is the next level to be reached. One criticism against the idea is that we never know precisely where the i level ends and where 1 level further starts. It seems that the teachers of this study have not been able to make the distinction either. Another justification could be that the teachers were not native speakers of English; therefore, making a distinction between intermediate and advanced levels could be demanding. In fact, in the interviews, both teachers confirmed the same point that it was easy for them to employ linguistically different English languages for beginners versus advanced students but not between advanced and intermediate ones. It should be mentioned that Rezvani and Sayadi (2015) who focused on question types at different proficiency levels, found more or less the same results. In their study, in lower proficiency groups, they found higher number of questions, especially display questions. Furthermore, the teachers tried to adapt their language level to their students understanding level. Indeed, patterns of teachers' scaffolding could be traced from the discussions. The teachers tried, in accordance with what Ewert (2009) said, to scaffold their students with a socio-cultural orientation to language learning. The facilitative talk of expert/novice (teacher/student) occurred in the zone of proximal development (ZPD).

As for the results of interviews, both teachers admitted that making adaptation to their teaching talk was heavily dependent on the students' level,

the topic of the lesson, and whether teachers had enough schematic knowledge on the topic. Furthermore, both teachers recounted many teaching experiences during which they had recourse to learners' mother tongue, as a result of the learners' lack of enough vocabulary knowledge, to get their messages across. This point was in contrast to the observation data, since there was no case of resorting to L1 in the observations. The reason could be that in the institute where the present study was carried out, teachers are not allowed to use L1. It is worth mentioning that using L1 in some studies (e.g., Matsumoto, 2010; Yu, 2010) has been suggested as evidence of adaptation to students' level in cases when the teacher shares the same first language with students.

The last issue discussed by the teachers was that holding discussion groups for elementary students is difficult because the flow of conversation is disturbed by so many corrections and feedbacks that it cannot be called discussion anymore. In fact, teachers' views were confirmed by what elementary students said when they were asked whether they were able to follow the discussions. One justification for this could be that elementary students are still at the start of their learning process and need to know more words and grammatical structures to be able to cope with teacher talk. This point makes things more difficult for the teacher, because as acknowledged in the interviews, teacher's attempts to talk comprehensible enough for elementary students, in Long's (1983) terms, might make the talk "impoverished", lexically controlled, repetitious and "with little or no communicative value" (p. 113). In other words, with extreme lexical and structural control and repetition, the input might get comprehensible but at the expense of losing the features of valuable input without, in Long's terms, enough "surprises". Long (1983) refers to the same point: "…yet, it has been argued, it is these surprises that must occur if acquisition of new structures is to proceed." (p.113).

6. Conclusion

This study aimed at answering two questions. The first question was: To what extent does adaptation to the level of students occur in Iranian EFL classes? The results of data analyses on both the observations and interviews indicated that the teachers did adapt their talk to the students' proficiency level. The results supported the basic features listed in Hatch's summary of the features of the Foreigner Talk Hypothesis. Furthermore, in line with Krashen's Input Hypothesis and Long's Interaction Hypothesis, the teachers seemed to be concerned with providing *comprehensible input* for their students as well as getting them involved in classroom *interaction*. They also had to scaffold their students, especially at elementary level to keep the flow of conversation.

The second question was: How properly and in what ways do the adaptations occur? The results indicated that the teachers mainly recruited three major tools at their disposal. They included: adjusting speech rate and being more articulate, using more frequent and simple vocabulary, and recruiting grammatically short and simple sentences when dealing with elementary students. These were in line with some previous studies (e.g., Chaudron, 1988; Hatch, 1983; Yu, 2010).

The findings of this study also revealed that although teachers make an effort to provide comprehensible input for their students, they are not always successful in doing so. That is, their talk does not necessarily adapt to the language learners' understanding level, and, contrary to the common belief, sometimes the students might find themselves quite confused as a result of the teacher talk not geared to their proficiency level. It seemed that the teachers were concerned about impoverishing (long, 1983) the language and making it have little or no communicative value by too much repetition and control over lexicon and grammar. In other words, the teachers seemed indecisive about the

meaning and extent of comprehensible input and i + 1idea. Furthermore, the boundary between intermediate and advanced teacher talk proved to be blurred resulting in more or less similar speech at two different levels. This point was justified by referring to the argument against the i+1 in Krashen's Input Hypothesis in which identifying a distinction between what students already know with the amount of new information can be difficult for teachers. Indeed, in all levels, especially the elementary level teachers' scaffolding could be traced from the discussions. The teachers tried to scaffold their students with a socio-cultural orientation to language learning. In other words, although the facilitative talk of teacher/student occurred in the zone of proximal development (ZPD), the teachers seemed to be concerned with keeping up with their students' level and at the same time tried to maintain the natural language as far as possible. One important pedagogical lesson that can be implied from such findings is that English language teachers need to monitor their students constantly to see whether their talk is adapted to the learners' language ability level. In fact, in contexts such as the one in this study, where the bulk of input received by students is limited to a few hours of weekly lessons, the comprehensibility of input is even more important. Furthermore, it seems that teachers who have to constantly move from one proficiency group to another need to be more cautious about lower proficiency groups and combine the lessons with more visual aids and demonstration of behavior to ensure input comprehensibility. The final point is that this study was done in a limited context with only two teachers and left out some potentially influential factors such as the teachers' proficiency level and the effect of different levels of simplification on students' understanding which could be considered for further research. Besides, the number of observed sessions in this study was limited and further studies with more observation sessions are recommended.

References

Aghajanzadeh Kiasi, M. & Hemmati, F. (2014). The importance of 'Teacher Talk' in teaching EFL writing. *Porta Linguarum, 22*, 95-108.

Chaudron, C. (1988). *Second language classrooms: Research on teaching and learning.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Ellis, R. (2005). Measuring implicit and explicit knowledge of a second language: A psychometric study. *Studies in Second Language Acquisition, 27*, 141–172.

Ewert, D. E. (2009). L2 Writing Conferences: Investigating teacher talk. *Journal of Second Language Writing, 18*, 251-269.

Ferguson, C. (1971). Absence of copula and the notion of simplicity: A study of normal speech, baby talk, foreigner talk and pidgins. In D. Hymes (Ed.), *Pidginization and creolization of languages* (pp. 141–150). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Ferguson, C. (1971). Absence of copula and the notion of simplicity: A study of normal speech, baby talk, foreigner talk and pidgins. In D. Hymes (Ed.), *Pidginization and creolization of languages*. London: Cambridge University Press.

Gass, S., & Selinker, L. (2008). *Second language acquisition: An introductory course.* New York, Routledge.

Goldstein, L. M., & Conrad, S. M. (1990). Student input and negotiation of meaning in ESL writing conferences. *TESOL Quarterly, 24*, 443–460.

Hall, G. (2011). *Exploring English language teaching, language in action.* Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, London and New York.

Hatch, E. (1983). *Psycholinguistics: A second language perspective.* Rowley, MA: Newbury House.

Kariminia, A. & Salehi, S. (2007) Communication strategies: English language departments in Iran. *Journal of Language Studies (IJLS),1(4)*, 287–300.

Kiany, G. & Shayestefar, P. (2010) High school students' perceptions of EFL teacher control orientations and their English academic achievement. *British Journal of Educational Psychology, 81(3)*, 491–508.

Krashen, S. (1977). Some issues relating to the monitor model. In H. Brown, C. Yorio, & R. Crymes (Eds.), *On TESOL '77: Teaching and learning English as a second language: Trends in research and practice* (pp. 144–158). Washington, DC.

Long, M. H. (198l). Questions in foreigner talk discourse. *Language Learning, 31(1),* 135-157.

Long, M. H. (1983). Linguistic and conversational adjustments to non-native speakers. *Studies in Second Language Acquisition, 5,* 177–193.

Lyster, R., & Mori, H. (2006). Interactional feedback and instructional counterbalance. *Studies in Second Language Acquisition, 28,* 269-300.

Maftoon, P., & Rezaie, Gh. (2013). Investigating classroom discourse: A case study of an Iranian communicative EFL classroom. *Iranian Journal of Applied Linguistics (IJAL), 16(1),* 107-128

Matsumoto, H. (2010). Students' perception about teacher talk in Japanese as a second language classes. *Arizona Working Papers in SLA & Teaching, 17,* 53-74.

Murray, D. E., & Christison, M. A. (2011). *What English language teachers need to know (vol.1), understanding learning.* Routledge, Taylor and Francis Group. New York, London.

Nunan, D. (1991). *Language teaching methodology: A textbook for teachers.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Parker, K., & Chaudron, C. (1987). The effects of linguistic simplifications and elaborative modifications on L2 comprehension. *University of Hawai'i Working Papers in English as a Second Language, 6,* 107–133.

Patthey-Chavez, G. G., & Ferris, D. (1997). Writing conferences and the weaving of multi-voiced texts in college composition. *Research in the Teaching of English, 31,* 51–90.

Rezvani, R., & Sayadi, A. (2015). Instructors' and learners' questioning: A case of EFL classroom discourse in Iran. *The Journal of Teaching Language Skills (JTLS), 7(3),* 141-164.

Sannino, A. (2009). Teachers' talk of experiencing: Conflict, resistance and agency. *Teaching and Teacher Education, 26,* 838-844.

Yu, W. (2010). An analysis of college English classroom questioning. *Journal of Language Teaching and Research, 1,* 136-144.