CA-INFORMED ANALYSIS OF ENGLISH CONVERSATIONS IN THAI HIGH SCHOOL TEXTBOOKS

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Abstract - This study attempts to apply Conversation Analysis (CA) insights into enhancing features of textbooks used for teaching English conversation to Thai high school students. It particularly aims to explore features of model conversations and related exercises presented in the textbooks used in the mainstream classroom to identify features of naturally occurring conversation that are missing and should be added for students' awareness raising. The two textbooks examined were taken from the textbook series with function- and theme-based communicative contents, referred to as Textbook A and B respectively. The books are currently used for teaching integrated English skills to grade 9 students in Thailand. The analysis of their communication sections was performed with CA insights on practices involved in the organization of naturally occurring conversation. The findings show that both textbooks contain authentic examples of everyday conversation with only a few samples of phone conversation. Stressing the importance of face-to-face conversation, they, however, lack features highlighting essential practices in the natural organization of the conversation of this type. While Textbook B provides various exercises for students to practice making conversation with their peers after learning a dialogue example, Textbook A offers few exercises allowing students to practice constructing turns and sequences. With a separate section in each chapter, the latter seemed to place more emphasis on the pronunciation of certain sounds, stress, and intonation. In terms of the overall structure of the conversation samples presented, most of the conversations in Textbook A are short, goal-driven dialogues with both opening and closing. On the other hand, Textbook B provides limited examples of conversations with opening and closing sequences, and most of the conversation samples are abruptly ended without accomplishing clear interactional goals. Finally, the features of naturally occurring conversation such as overlap and repair are missing from both the books and the audio materials accompanying them. It is suggested that to enhance the quality of the books for the benefit of the Thai students most of whom have limited exposure to English outside the classroom, sample conversations approximating naturally occurring conversation can be provided along with balanced exercises targeting its natural features and various aspects of turn-taking and sequencing practices.

Keywords - Conversation Analysis, English Conversation Textbooks, EFL Learners, Textbook Analysis, Thai High School Students

I. INTRODUCTION

English has become an even more vital means to career success in the digitally globalized world. Nevertheless, Thai students' English proficiency has always remained at the lowest level compared to those of (Southeast) Asian countries especially when it comes to speaking skills (Education First, 2012; Khamkhien, 2010; Prapphal, 2001; WhereisThailand.info, 2012). Education First (2018) reported Thais' English proficiency of 48.54 out of 100, while National Institute of Educational Testing Service (NIETS) revealed the lowest average O-Net score of English of Mattayom 6 students in the academic year of 2017, 28.31, among the five main subjects tested (Nation, 2019). The communication section of the test aimed at assessing the students' conversation abilities was found most challenging for the students (Atagi, 2011). Thai government has taken various measures to deal with the problem (Punthumasen, 2007), one of which has been to promote Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), aiming at developing students' communicative competence and self-directed learning (Nonkukhetkhong, Baidauf.Jr., & Moni, 2006; Pusporini, 2009). English programs putting native English teachers in public schools have also been introduced as one of the solutions to the low English abilities of Thai students. However, CLT implementation has not been easy for Thai practitioners for a myriad of reasons. The incongruence between methods and students' needs and preferences was often reported in EFL settings like Thailand (Teng & Sinwongsuwat, 2015).

Thai students in particular prefer to take more passive, less dominant roles in the classroom (Wangkijichinda, 2011; Saengboon, 2002). Additionally, making conversation requires more than just grammatical and communicative competence, but interactional competence. To overcome these challenges especially in the area of oral English communication, Conversation Analysis (CA), a long-standing sociological approach to studying natural occurring interaction, has been introduced to enhance L2 students' English conversation skills (Barraja-Rohan, 1997, 2011; Markee, 2009; Richards & Seed house, 2005; Seed house, 2004, 2007; Wong & Waring, 2010). Markee (2009) in particular maintained that CA provides a clear and explicit

picture of how students can use conversation structure as a method to get comprehensible input and produce comprehensible output. Moreover, it can also be used as a tool to analyze features of natural conversation and raise students' awareness of sociocultural norms, making explicit understanding of practices involved in making conversation (Baraja-Rohan, 1997, 2011; Wong & Waring, 2010). While CA-informed lessons locally created with authentic conversation materials have been proven to be beneficial for developing students' conversation skills, English conversation textbooks, used as the main material in the classroom, have yet to be examined with CA insights. It is important to help teachers develop or select materials that would match their objectives of developing students' natural conversation abilities (Kanoksilapatham, 2007). It has been reported that EFL textbooks are mostly theme- or situation-based even though model dialogs given do not always provide an accurate representation of what people actually do in real life conversation. Many lack conversations with authentic opening and closing sequences (Bardovi et al., 1991; Grant & Starks, 2001; Wong, 2007). Pre-sequencing, which is essential for getting much interactional work done, is also missing (Bernsten, 2002). Without features of naturally occurring talks being adequately represented, such textbooks often fail to get learners to recognize the orderliness and machineries responsible for the organization of natural talk as well as to equip them with strategies to handle talk problems in real life (Waedaoh, 2018; Wong, 2007). It has thus been strongly recommended that authentic spoken language data be incorporated into the design of conversation teaching materials (Burns, 1998; Carter & McCarthy, 1997; McCarthy, 1991; Scotton & Bernsten, 1988; Thornbury, 2005). In an attempt to apply CA insights into enhancing the quality of EFL textbooks used in conversation classrooms to promote the development of Thai EFL students' interactional competence, the study aims at exploring model conversations along with related exercises presented in textbooks used in the mainstream classroom in Thai high school contexts in order to identify missing features of naturally-occurring conversation.

II. LITERATURE

A. Roles of English in Thai education system

In Thailand, English has been considered a lingua franca that connects her citizens to those of other countries in four primary domains: commercial, intellectual, cultural, and digital (Wongsothorn, Hiranburana, Chinnawongs, 2003). Thai students are therefore required to study English from both primary schools to university levels. The Ministry of Education of Thailand has in fact included English as a foreign language in the Basic Education Core Curriculum B.E. 2551 (A.D.2008). The main purposes are to develop Thai students' abilities to communicate in English and to adopt it as a tool for autonomous life-long learning (Ministry of Education, 2008).

B. Teaching English conversation in Thai context

In Thai context, attempts have been made to apply teaching approaches such as Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) to building learners' communication skills such as conversation. However, the implementation of the CLT approach has not always met its expectations. (Seangboon, 2004). While CLT has been promoted for many years in EFL contexts, there is still room for improvement in both pedagogical practice and materials (Burns, 1998). Teachers especially need to understand the nature of the communicative skills being taught in the classroom.

As stated in Islam & Bari (2012), Thai teachers and students tend to focus on grades and examinations rather than the improvement of students' communicative competence. Thus, from the aforementioned, there seem to be gaps between the goal and methodologies imposed by official curriculum statements. In a major advance in 2000, Chulalongkorn University Academic Services conducted a survey in which several problems in the implementation of curriculum changes were noted such as a mismatch between students' English proficiency and curriculum content. Even English teachers are often found with few opportunities to practice and maintain their engagement in natural English conversation (Yunibandhu, 2004). To enhance Thai students' oral proficiency, some practitioners have therefore stressed needs for an integration of insights from research oriented towards the development of interactional competence such as Conversation Analysis (CA). It has in fact been suggested that with an understanding of conversation practices revealed via CA and frequent exposure to genuine conversation materials in CA-informed lessons, the students' conversation abilities can really be improved (Sitthaikoson, 2017, Teng & Sinwongsuwat, 2015, Waedaoh, 2018). This is in line with Barraja and Rohan (1997) and Wong and Waring (2010), who argued that in order to successfully develop L2 learners' communicative competence, features such as basics of CA sequences must be taught explicitly to second language learners. CLT activities could be undertaken more efficiently with their orientation towards the complexities of naturally occurring conversation uncovered by the CA approach. Additionally, teaching materials such as textbooks should also contain accurate representations of genuine spoken language features found in real life conversation adequate for developing conversation abilities (Kwon, 2017, Kanoksilapatham, 2007).

C. Second Language Learning and Conversation Analysis (CA)

CA focuses on the explication of talk, especially how speakers mutually manage their talk to get things done via its sequential organization (Seed house, 2005). Primary data include naturally occurring conversations that have been recorded and transcribed as CA considers it essential to know what people actually do to have a conversation not what they are set out to do (Schegloff, 1997). Actual instances of talk that are analyzed not only include non-institutional talk such as everyday conversations between friends, family members, strangers, but also talk occurring in institutional settings such as doctor-patient classroom, courtroom interactions. Via the analysis of transcribed naturally occurring interactional data, CA has shed light on important interactional practices such as the turn-taking system, sequences of actions, preference organization, overlap and repair. While these practices are context-free, their structuring can vary from culture to culture depending on types of social interaction and settings involved. Language learners therefore need to be made aware of these differences. They need to know not only how to construct and allocate turns in the target language, but also what social actions the turns embody, especially what action is to be achieved through each turn in different social situations (Wong & Waring, 2010). Common actions done through turns at talk include greetings/leave-taking, agreement/disagreement, news announcements, compliment/response, invitation/decline, and apology (Sidnell, 2011). The understanding of these actions and how to respond to them is considered a crucial part of interactional competence (Wong, 2010); therefore, any materials aiming at developing such competence in students should not miss them.

D. Textbook's roles in language teaching

Textbooks are an important teaching and learning tool, functioning as a main source of language knowledge and practice for students provided by educators. According to Richards (2010), different lessons in a textbook serve targeted learners with different knowledge, and offer teachers not only language content to teach but ideas about how to teach it. Different skills are presented with language practice activities that teachers can use for teaching and learners can join in. Learners also benefit from the book via exposure to the target language. Aside from offering teaching and learning models, textbooks make time management possible (Ansary & Babii, 2002). They also often are affordable materials available in general knowledge places, such as a bookstore. Undoubtedly, with ready-made teaching texts and learning tasks, many language classes are unmanageable without textbooks. Most teachers consider them as an assisting tool in planning and manipulating their lessons, and also for amateur teachers, they can serve as a fundamental form of teacher practice. For teachers, using textbooks means saving time, teaching with directions, and assigning homework with ease. While making teaching easier, more manageable, and better organized, they also benefit learners, making them learn faster, better, and with more security and confidence (Hutchinson & Torres, 1994).

III. METHODOLOGY

A. Samples of the study

The textbook samples analyzed were received from secondary school teachers voluntarily joining a CA-informed English conversation teaching workshop organized at the Faculty of Liberal Arts, Prince of Songkla University, Hat Yai, Thailand in June 2019. The teachers attending the workshop were from high schools in the Secondary Education Service Area Office 15. The textbooks that were reportedly used for teaching English speaking include Textbooks A and B, aimed at teaching integrated skills to Matayom 3 (grade 9) students. The speaking content of Textbook A is function-based, starting from simple conversation about daily routines and personal matters to more complex conversation involving job application and business transactions. Textbook B, on the other hand, has theme-based communicative content, being organized around topics talked about in daily life such as shopping, health, and entertainment. The two textbooks served as convenient and purposive samples for the text analysis. The study did not attempt to make statistical inferences in relation to larger collections of textbooks used in public secondary schools in other areas of Thailand.

B. Research Instruments

The instrument used is a CA-informed checklist of features of naturally-occurring conversation created for the researcher to tick the presence or absence of the conversational features in question (Hodder Education & Hachette UK Company, 2017). The checklist used was developed by the researcher and validated by CA specialists. It contains a list of features of both face-to-face and phone conversation (Shegloff & Sack, 1973; Shegloff, 1986; Wong & Waring, 2010).

C. Data collection and analysis

After obtaining the textbooks from teachers voluntarily joining the workshop, a pre-analysis was performed as Textbooks A and B were examined to understand their purposes and overall structure. The basis on which units in the textbooks are organized was determined. Unit exercises which are

fundamental for learners' speaking practice were also explored to identify their goals and to determine how they serve to develop learners' speaking skills. Then, the CA-informed checklist that had been validated was used as a tool to analyze model English conversations presented in each chapter of both textbooks. Features present in each unit were ticked and described in detail as to how they are represented in the model conversation and related exercises. The data from the textbook analysis was categorized into the following themes: the organization of the book, the presentation and representation of model conversations, types of conversation (e.g., dialogue or multi-party, face-to-face or phone), related exercises, and missing features of naturally-occurring conversation.

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The analysis revealed that both textbooks contain authentic examples of daily life English conversation most of which are face-to-face dialogues. There are only few examples of phone conversation. Textbook A, which contains function-based communicative content, has only one two-party phone conversation between the call center and a customer, while Textbook B has no examples of phone conversation. As far as segmental features of speech are concerned, only Textbook A contains separate exercises for pronunciation practice of certain sounds, placing emphasis on those sounds not appearing in Thai such as final consonants /l/, fricatives and affricates (e.g., /s/ /ʃ), diphthong /ɪə/, and the reduced vowel sound /ə/. Textbook B however integrates these sounds into their conversation grammar focus, providing only an implicit treatment. To tackle Thai students' problematic pronunciation of these English sounds, it is perhaps better to single out the sounds for learners' awareness raising and more focused practice. Concerning suprasegmentally features, both textbooks provide students with exposure to English stress and intonation mainly through their audio materials.

These features are not highlighted in any way in the printed text. However, Textbook A, which offers repeated examples of particular stress and intonation patterns via short conversation sequences, seems to have the edge over B, which provides lengthy and less manageable conversation. While B offers various exercises to help check students' understanding of the content of the model conversation presented and to engage them in making conversation on each topic with their peers, Textbook A has only limited exercises highlighting certain patterns of language in conversation to be mastered in every chapter, allowing them to practice constructing turns and make proper conversation sequences. The conversations presented in textbook B are both dialogues and multi-party conversations, while A emphasizes dialogues only. While textbook A offers short, complete, goal-driven dialogues, as seen in example I below, B provides long conversations some of which end abruptly with an incomplete sequence.

Example I: Textbook A, Unit 4e
Harry: Julie, there is a documentary about the dolphins on TV
Julie: Sure. I really like documentaries. What channel is it on?
Harry: Chanel 2. There is a sports programme on after that
Julie: Oh no, Harry. I hate sports. How about channel 1?
Harry: Why? What's on?
Julie: East Enders
Harry: Oh no, not that!
Presented along with comprehension questions, the lengthy conversation sample in Textbook B, as shown below, ends with a questioning first pair-part turn with no response. This suggests the book's emphasis more on students' understanding conversation content rather than on getting them to master constructing conversation sequences.

Example II: Textbook B, Unit 4 …
Julie: …It's the Rolling Stones. I love them.
Erin: Oh I don't.
Julie: What? The guitar Keith Richards is phenomenal…
Erin: Julie!!! What about your sister?
Additionally, there are no instances of conversation with overlap and repair, essential mechanisms of conversation, in both printed texts and audio materials of the books, making their conversation models sound unnatural.

Therefore, if the goal of the textbook is to expose learners to the target language in real use and encourage them to practice making natural conversation, a balance should be kept between different types of conversation. A greater variety of conversation such as multi-party and phone conversations could be introduced. There should also be exercises that highlight certain segmental and suprasegmentally features of spoken English which appear problematic for Thai learners. Accompanied with audio materials, the exercises may be graded, allowing them to master the pronunciation of sounds, words and utterances of larger units. The focus should also be placed not only on comprehending the content of the conversation presented, but on constructing turns and sequences that compose it with a clear interactional goal. Therefore, complete and more manageable conversation sequences are essential for student practice. Examples of naturally occurring talks with these sequences should also be presented along with awareness-raising activities of its organizational features including how to enter and end a conversation appropriately.

V. CONCLUSION

This study attempted to apply CA insights to the analysis of model conversations and related exercises presented in EFL textbooks used in Thai mainstream classrooms for developing Grade 9 Thai learners' communicative competence. It aimed at exploring the overall characteristics of conversation material and related exercises presented in the books and determining what is still missing with reference to features of naturally occurring talk. The preliminary analysis revealed that both textbooks put more emphasis on face-to-face conversation, and did not explicitly highlight suprasegmentally features of speech. To enhance their quality, the books could offer a greater variety of conversation models including telephone conversation, as well as more exercises for students to practice constructing goal-driven manageable conversation sequences, and may add model conversations both in print and in audio/video highlighting features of naturally occurring talk such as repair and overlap. With a clear picture of talk intricacies that need to be dealt with in real life, learners stand a better chance of successful communication. As stressed in Wong (2002), students' conversation abilities can be enhanced by the quality of learning material used to teach them.

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