

In Pursuit of an Optimal Model of Teacher Talk

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Abstract

The increasing interest in optimal teaching and learning frames after Coronavirus lockdown (Nunes, 2021; UNICEF, 2020; Coman, Tiru, Mesesan Schmitz, Stanciu & Bularca, 2020) identified new roles allocated to teachers and learners and revived the age-long debate between didactics and dialogics in evaluating teacher talk (Gemertz, 2020; Coman, Tiru, Mesesan Schmitz, Stanciu & Bularca, 2020). Gewertz (2020), Davis (2011) and Zhou & Zhou (2002) interrogate teacher talk time (TTT) and its dominance of classroom talk. The study traces the didactic and dialogic models and addresses their main characteristics and ideals through a quasi-experiment in an attempt to put forth a tangible teacher talk model. Thirty-two participants working in the field of education took part in a quasi-experiment then completed a survey questionnaire based on the quasi-experiment, followed by small group discussions, to identify the componential values, objectives, characteristics of teacher talk and ways of maximizing participants' talk time. The replies identified the epistemological nature of teacher talk makes it a necessary component in any model of teaching be it didactic or dialogic. Furthermore, the study proposed that teacher talk time (TTT) and student talk time (STT) should not be perceived as fixed notions but rather proportional entities that vary according to the estimated knowledge thresholds of the learners.

Key words: Teacher Talk Time, Student Talk Time, epistemological value, didactic and dialogic models.

Introduction

The increasing interest in optimal teaching and learning frames resurfaced with new elevations after Coronavirus lockdown (Nunes, 2021; UNICEF, 2020; Coman, Tiru, Mesesan Schmitz, Stanciu & Bularca, 2020). The new roles allocated to teachers, as well as learners during the online teaching mode, brought to the forefront age-long debates in pursuit of a prototypical model that is pedagogically sound, cognitively motivating and fulfils

the objectives of the challenging programmes of education (Gemertz, 2020; Coman, Tiru, Mesesan Schmitz, Stanciu & Bularca, 2020). Teaching and learning under the pandemic lockdown has changed the experiences and expectations of both faculty and students (Saeed, Al-Khatib, Abdelhafeez, & Nour, 2022). Faculty explored with new ways of delivering content and students assumed more responsibilities and roles in preparing material and getting ready for the discussions in the online forums.

With the receding of the fourth wave of the pandemic, faculty and researchers engaged in reflective evaluation of the pedagogic practices that were forced into the educational enterprise under the lockdown (Saeed, Al-Khatib *et al*, 2022). A prominent feature that emerged from the evaluation was the changed nature and degree of prominence of teacher talk (UNICEF, 2020; Zamarro, Camp, Fuchsman, & McGee, 2021).

The Longman Dictionary of Language Teaching and Applied Linguistics (Richards & Schmidt, 2002) defined teacher talk (TT) as that variety of language sometimes used by teachers, when they are in the process of teaching. Ellis (1985) defined teacher talk (TT) as, the special language that teachers use when addressing learners. Webster-Stratton (2012) identified teacher talk (TT) as, everything that a teacher says in the classroom, including content, context, tone and vocabulary.

According to Solita *et al.* (2021), teacher talk (TT) is any word or sentence spoken by the teacher during the interaction in teaching and learning process. Borich (2002) viewed teacher talk (TT) as effective teaching that is combined with applied methods in the classroom. Zhang (2002) proposed that teacher talk (TT) is the change that teachers apply when they move between spontaneous speech and classroom talk. Zhao (2001) suggested that teacher talk (TT) is the teaching quality in the discourse of classroom talk. Nystrand and Gamoran (1997) associated teacher talk (TT) with dialogue and the dynamics of language and learning in the classroom. Nunan (1991) associated teacher talk (TT) with classroom interactions.

However, in the light of contemporary studies such as Gewertz (2020), Davis (2011) and Zhou & Zhou (2002), teacher talk time (TTT) is interrogated since it is taking up seventy percent of classroom talk. While some scholars such as Resnick, Michaels, & O'Connor (2010), Lin (2008), Cousin (2006) and Long (1983), advocate the necessity of this proportion, others like Gewertz (2020), Scrivener (2005), Dellar (2004) and Brownhill

(2002) argue that this proportion should be inverted in favour of student talk. Thornbury (2006) emphasized that teacher talk time (TTT) should be reduced in order to allow student talk time (STT) to flourish.

Therefore, opinion is divided on whether Teacher Talk should be **the** prominent feature of any classroom; be it virtual or physical, or whether other practices or mechanisms should be in place. The debate is rooted in the pedagogic philosophies associated with the didactic and dialogic models of teacher talk.

The historical development of teacher talk

The earliest form of teacher talk took place in the didactic school, developed in Egypt's Middle Kingdom, around 2061-2010 BC, and evidenced in the excavations of the archeologic tablets pertaining to the period of Mentuhotep III. The excavations reveal a teacher instructing pupils who are receiving information and taking notes.



In its historical progression, the authoritarian model of didacticism was vehemently challenged in the teachings of Socrates who believed that the dialectic or dialogic was the best way to arrive at knowledge.

Didactic Teacher Talk (DTT) was the classical approach to teaching. It referred to the manner of instruction in which information is presented directly from the teacher to the pupil. Fillmore (as cited in Xia-yan, 2006) pointed out that in successful classrooms, the teachers serve as the main source of input and hence can assume their teaching role through a didactic model, which can benefit the learners who receive adequate and accurate input.

In more recent “reforms in education”, didactic teacher talk has been negatively associated with teacher-centered methods of teaching. Teacher talk in Socrates dialogues, around 4th century BC, took the form of exploratory learning. It was conducted with seven handpicked

students: four Athenians, Antisthenes, Aeschines, Plato and Xenophon, and three Grecians, Euclides Aristippus and Phaedo. In medieval times Augustine's *Confessions* followed the Socratic dialogue; Galilei's *Dialogue* concerning the two chief world systems; Hume's *Dialogues* concerning natural religion; are but a few examples on the influence of the dialectic or dialogic model in teaching.

The two leading pedagogical approaches, the didactic and the dialectic (or dialogic) teaching approaches, affected the teaching and learning modes and influenced the spectrum and scale of teacher talk. While didactics mandated more time to the teacher to allow teaching and instruction in any given field of study, dialectics delegated large intervals to exploratory learning and dialogic teacher talk.

With the advancement of Communicative Language Approach (CLA) in the 1980s, more emphasis was given to student talk time (STT) and teacher talk time (TTT) became once more under scrutiny. In 2022, education thinkers and reformists still debate the values and flaws of each of the two modes, in pursuit of an optimal model that can guide teacher talk.

The contemporary debate

Nystrand and Gamoran (1997) examined teacher talk and the dynamics of language and learning in the English classroom and underlined the fact that teachers predominate classroom discourse in didactic ventures. Zhao (2001) inspected teacher talk in classes that integrate technology into education and found that teachers talk remains undisrupted and goal oriented in the classroom. Long (1983) focused on teacher talk and its role of imparting comprehensible input. Zhang (2002) studied the changing styles applied by teachers when they move between spontaneous speech and teacher talk and underlined social and pedagogic correlations for each.

According to Dellar (2004) the dominating role of the teacher in the traditional classroom, which is manifested in teacher talk time or TTT, can hinder the students' attempt to construct knowledge. Dellar argues that talking at the student does not necessarily mean talking to the student. The communicative language teaching approach that developed in the 1980s focused on developing learners' communicative competence and challenged teacher talk time as counter-productive. Dialogic teacher talk focuses on the importance of engaging students through dialogic teacher talk in constructing adequate and accurate

knowledge. In dialogic teacher talk models, students are expected to contribute to class interaction and in building concept knowledge. However, views have been diverse in considering whether dialogic teacher talk was successful in promoting learning through engagement. Scrivener (2005) and Jarvis (2002) perceive that the advancement of the Communicative Language Approach (CLA) has led to new teaching methods that broke free from traditional didacticism, albeit at a cost. CLA assumes a degree of knowledge in learners that enables them to contribute to the session activities and the communicative event in the classroom. However, in beginners' levels this assumed knowledge may not be available and thus an essential component that is indispensable to triggering learning, can cause, through its absence, lack of learning.

Nunes (2021) proposed that the ideal teacher talk time should not exceed 20-30% of the entire session time and should chart a journey of exploration in the classroom where the teacher use teacher talk to find new ways of teaching content and enhance learner skills and strategies. Whereas Xiaohui (2010) regarded that the amount and type of TT is a decisive factor of success and failure.

In drawing dichotomies between teacher talk time and students talk time, research implicitly revived age-old debate and associated between didacticism through underlining TTT's instructional and information transmission nature. Nunan (1991) argued that whether 70% or 80% of TTT can be considered a good thing will depend on the relevance of TTT to the lesson objectives and within the learning outcomes of the programme.

Following the recent trend towards more "learner-centered" teaching strategies, researchers emphasize the need to pay attention to the amount and type of talking that is applied by teachers. Nunan (1991) argued that teachers need to pay attention to the amount and type of talking they do and to evaluate its effectiveness in the light of their pedagogical objectives. Teacher Talk needs to follow a pedagogically sound model that incorporates the objectives of the programme.

Brown (2001) stated that teachers are inclined, by training and profession, to talk too much. Consequently, proposing an effective teacher talk model can support teachers and new trainees in implementing effective sessions. Rus (2016) argues that didacticism is unavoidable in the strategies and methods that a language instructor need to use during the class for an adequate achievement of teaching objectives.

In a study by Myhill, Jones and Hopper (2006) and Putri (2015), teacher talk occupied 70% of classroom interaction and was organized around curriculum related activities, organizational, regulatory activities, test strategy activities, social talk as well as uncodable categories. On the other hand, Cook-Sather (2018) argues that the job of educators is to create rooms filled with student voices and not to dominate with their own voices. Agreeing on an effective Teacher Talk model continued to create much debate in relation to teacher talk time (TTT) and student talk time (STT).

Brown (2001) emphasized that TT should not occupy the major proportion of a class hour, otherwise teachers are not probably giving students enough opportunity to talk. Harmer (2000) pointed out that getting students to speak is a vital part of a teacher's job. Students are the ones who need practice, not the teacher.

Resnick *et al* (2010) reformed the enquiry and introduced the concept of "well-structured talk". They argued that well-structured talk should be what pedagogy needs. However, the potential well structured teacher talk needs to incorporate clear componential division of its main parts and establish proportional allocation to the suggested componential tiers.

The present paper traces the developing approaches that contributed to the progression of teacher talk time in an attempt to propose an optimal model that can support practitioners' efforts and chart a more balanced teacher performance.

The study

In an attempt to explore contemporary views on teacher talk, 32 participants working in the field of education took part in a quasi-experiment to identify the impact of teacher talk on participant groups. The participants took part in a seminar, listening to presentations given by established scholars on several pedagogical topics. They were asked to rate the presenters/instructors talk from receptors' perspectives and elaborate in small group discussions. The quasi experiment differs from experimental research because it has no control group; all groups undergo the same experiment.

The 32 participants were tasked with experimenting through active participation, the strengths and weaknesses of the presenters' talk and filling in a related questionnaire survey then engaging in small group discussion on a number of mini themes emerging from the survey questionnaire and related to the study objectives. The questionnaire survey is a

technique for gathering information about the attributes, attitudes, or actions of a population by a structured set of questions.

All participants work in the field of education, hence there is no random selection, and the task is assigned based on the objectives of the study and the feedback obtained from the survey questionnaire, therefore there is no random assignment. In addition, there is no active manipulation of variables since all small discussion groups are engaged in the same natural field experiment under the same circumstance.

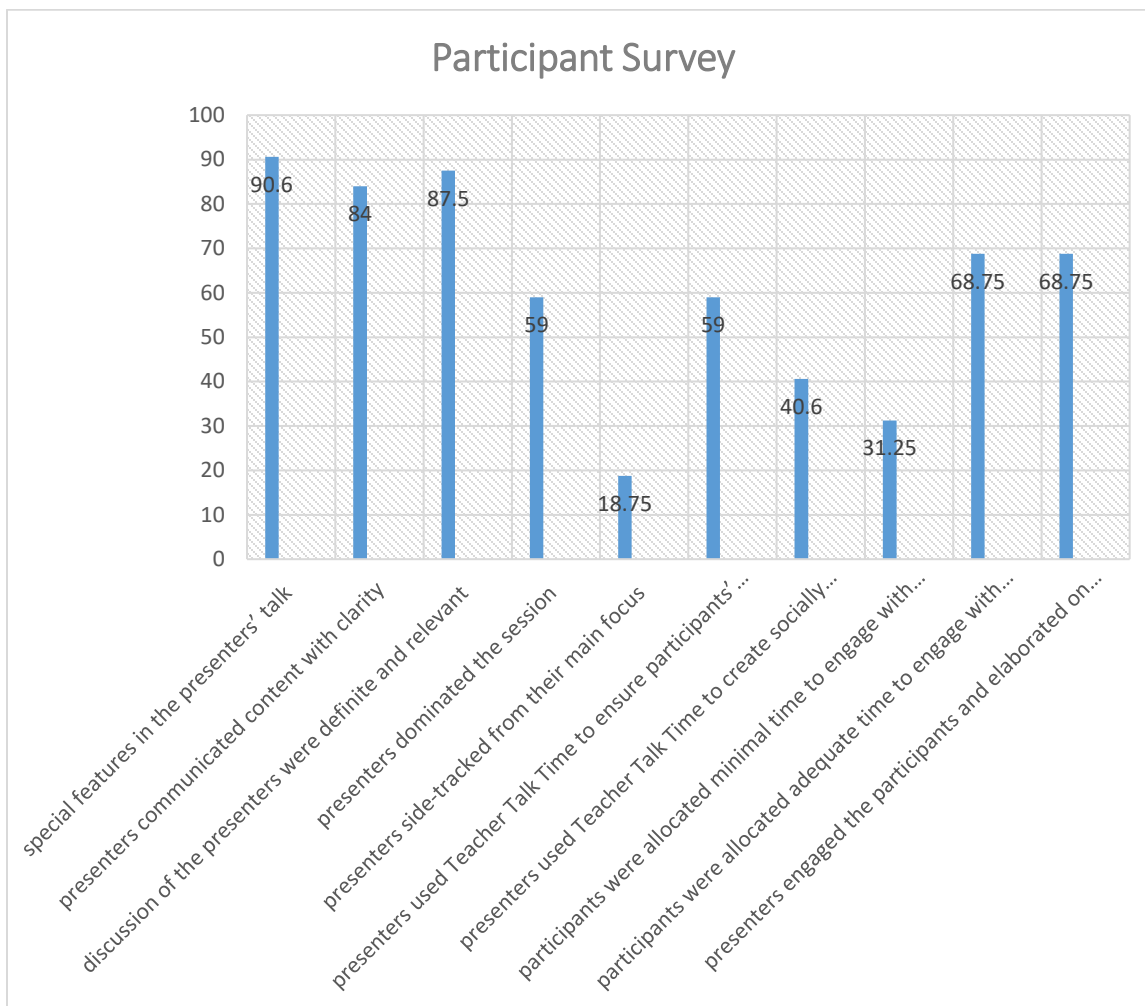
Small group discussions allow participants to debate the prompt they are working with and arrive at a consensus in their group replies.

The survey questionnaire

The survey questionnaire required participants to identify true or false statements based on their experience in the session. The survey questionnaire prompted the participants to consider whether there were special features in the presenters' talk that facilitated the comprehension of the content of the presentation. It probed participants whether the presenters communicated content with clarity and whether the discussion of the presenters were definite and relevant to the subject matter. Some questions underlined whether the presenters dominated the session; sidetracked from their focus of the discussion; used Teacher Talk Time to ensure participants' understanding or create socially accommodating setting. In addition, the survey questionnaire attempted to gain from participants' perspective whether they were allocated minimal or adequate time to engage with the discussion. Finally, the survey questionnaire enquired whether the presenters engaged the participants and elaborated on their responses (Appendix A).

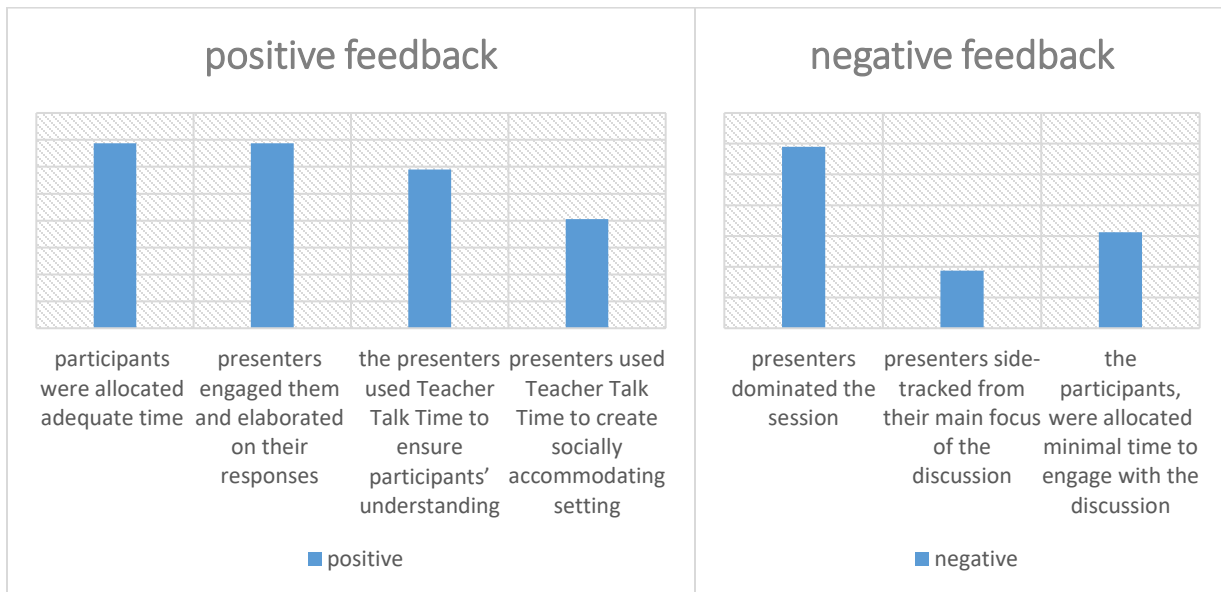
The participants identified special features in the presenter's talk that facilitated the acquisition of the content of the presentation. Twenty-nine out of the thirty-two participants (90.6%) confirmed that the presenters used cues that facilitated the comprehension of the content of the presentation. Twenty-seven out of the thirty-two participants agreed that the presenters used clear statements in discussing the topic (84%). Twenty-eight out of the thirty-two participants established that the discussion of the presenters were definite and relevant to the subject matter (87.5%). Nineteen out of the thirty-two participants believed that the presenters dominated the session (59%). Six out of the thirty-two participants

believed that the presenters side-tracked from their main focus of the discussion (18.75%). Nineteen out of the thirty-two participants believed that the presenters used Teacher Talk Time to ensure participants' understanding (59%). Thirteen out of the thirty-two participants assumed that the presenters used Teacher Talk Time to create socially accommodating setting (40.6%). Ten out of the thirty-two participants believed that they were allocated minimal time to engage with the discussion (31.25%) and twenty-two thought that participants were allocated adequate time to engage with the discussion (68.75%). Twenty-two out of the thirty-two, believed that the presenters engaged the participants and elaborated on their responses (68.75%).



In general, the participant survey questionnaire revealed positive evaluation of the session. About two-thirds of the participants thought they were allocated adequate time to engage with the discussion (68.75%) and that the presenters engaged them and elaborated on their

responses (68.75%). More than half of the participants perceived that the presenters used Teacher Talk Time to ensure participants' understanding (59%), whereas more than 40% thought that presenters used Teacher Talk Time to create socially accommodating setting. On the other hand, more than half of the participants perceived that the presenters dominated the session (59%). One-fifth thought they side-tracked from their main focus of the discussion (18.75%) and about one third thought they, the participants, were allocated minimal time to engage with the discussion (31.25%).



Small group discussions

The 32 participants, after completing the survey questionnaire were grouped into 4 randomly assigned groups, A, B, C and D, tasked with debating assigned themes that emerged from the survey questionnaire and related to the study objectives. One of the emerging problems of the questionnaire survey responses underlined inconsistency in positive and negative views on the presenters' talk. The same percentage response was given to statement 1 "The presenters dominated the session" (59%) as well as to statement 3, "The presenters used Teacher Talk Time to ensure participants' understanding" (59%). This ambiguity merited further exploration in small group discussions and was therefore assigned to Group A.

Another emerging theme that was identified as worthy of further exploration through small group discussions, was the division of the perceived functions associated with the presenters' talk. Fifty-nine percent of the participants perceived it to ensure understanding, while forty percent underlined that it was aimed at creating socially accommodating setting. This disparity was assigned for the further debate of Group B.

A third inconsistency emerging from the questionnaire survey concerned perceptions on the time offered for participant engagement. Thirty-one percent perceived that participants were offered minimal time to engage with the discussion; whereas, within the same setting, sixty-eight percent of the participants estimated that they were allocated adequate time to engage with the discussion. This area was assigned to Group C for further exploration.

A last confounding item that merited small group discussion is that while fifty-nine percent of participants underlined that the presenters dominated the session, sixty-eight percent of them perceived that the presenters engaged the participants and elaborated on their responses, within their talk time. This final discrepancy was assigned to Group D for further elaboration.

The four small groups were asked to debate the following themes:

1. Can we organize the presenters'/instructors' talk into clear componential categories and how much time was given to each?
2. Can we identify a clear objective or sub-objectives for the presenters'/instructors' talk and assign time values for it?
3. Can we recognize specific characteristics that were utilized in the presenters'/instructors' talk?
4. What can be done to maximize participants' talk time?

Group A was assigned the first question, group B the second, group C the third and group D the fourth. The following answers were collected:

Group A

Can we organize the presenters'/instructors' talk into clear componential categories and estimate the time given to each?

- Theme related talk
- Organizational talk
- Regulatory talk
- Evaluation talk
- informal-digressive talk
- Expanding thinking space horizons

Group B

Can we identify a clear objective or sub-objectives for the presenters'/instructors' talk and assign time values for it?

- Information transmission
- Checking understanding
- Inspire new ideas on the topic
- Warming up participants towards the discussion

Group C

Can we recognize specific characteristics that were utilized in the presenters'/instructors' talk as well as their usefulness?

- Rich information
- Good planning/outline
- Clear objectives/points organized
- Accurate talk/concise and terminology-based
- Appropriate speed, pauses and reformulations
- Use of visual aids

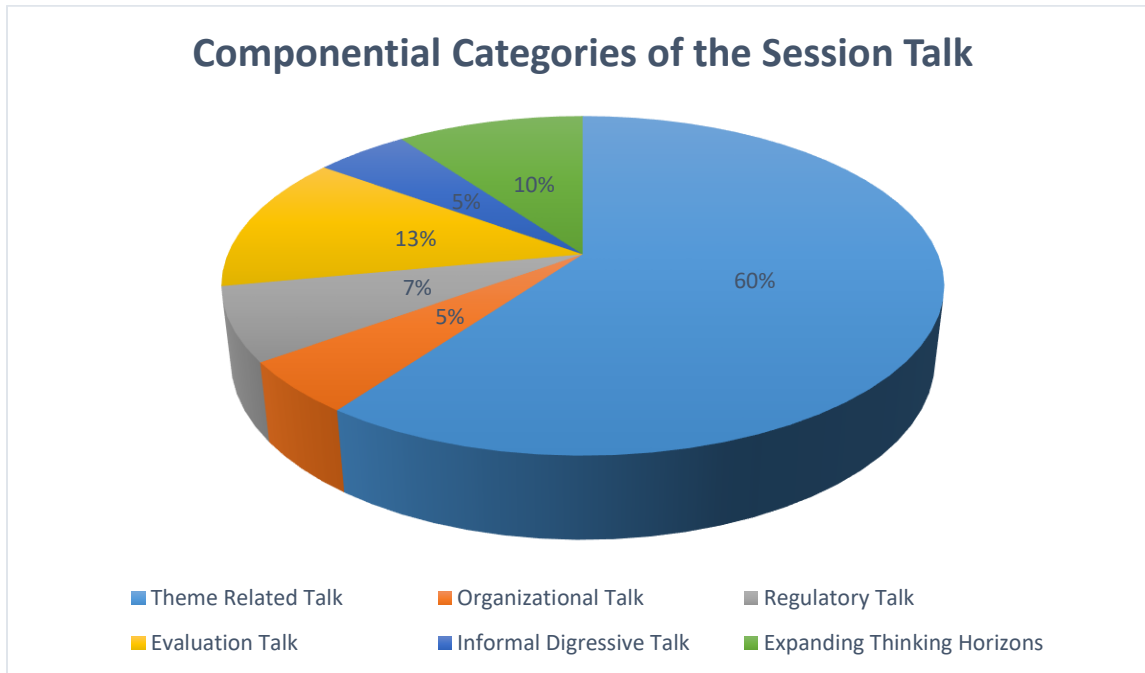
Group D

What can be done to maximize participants' talk time?

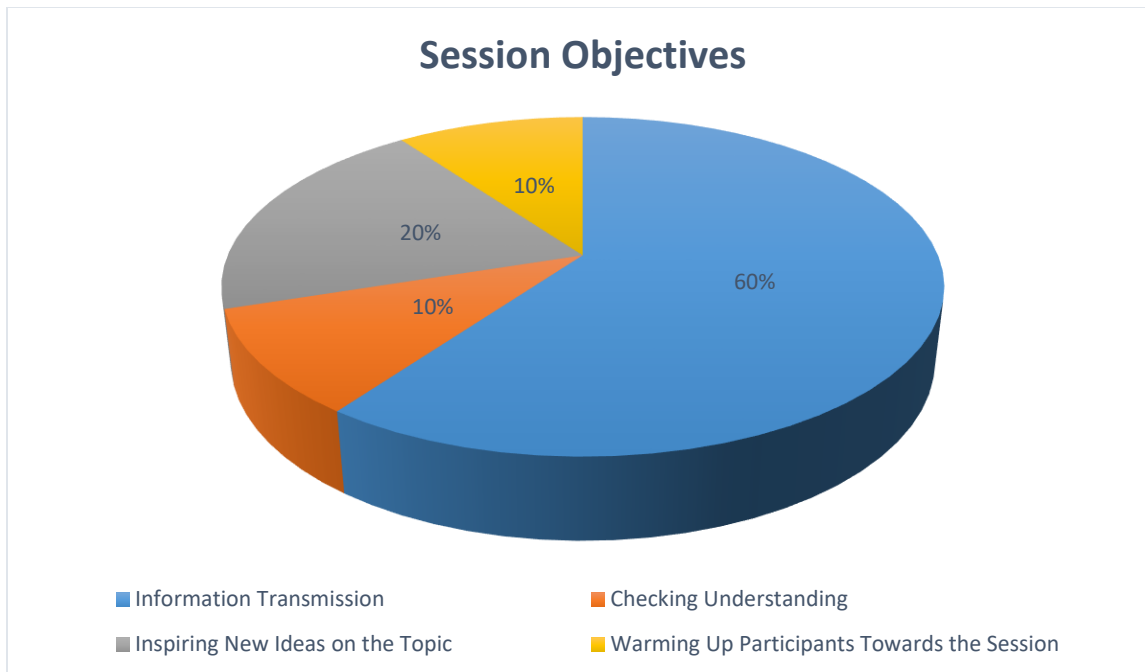
- Ask more questions and invite more questions
- Offer collaborative brainstorming
- Posing problems and requesting elucidations
- Invite alternative views, explorations and explanations

Group A identified the componential categories that were evident in all presentations and assigned to each the estimated time frame. Theme related talk accounted for 60% of the presentation time; organizational talk during which presenters offered the sequence that they will use in their performance was allocated 5% of the presentation time. Regulatory talk that was geared at regulating the activities of the exchange was allocated 7% of the

presentation time. Evaluation talk that targets the attained knowledge and understanding of the participants was allocated 13% of the session time. Informal-digressive talk accounted for 5% of the total session time and epistemological talk geared at expanding thinking space accounted for 10% of the presentation time.



Group B identified the objectives and sub-objectives of the presenters'/instructors talk and the associated time interval for each. The objective of information transmission came first taking up 60% of the total session time. Discussion aimed at checking understanding of participants was perceived to occupy 10% of session time. Inspiring new ideas on the topic was associated with 10% of the total talk time; whereas social aims like warming up participants towards the discussion accounted for 10% of the total talk time. the four objectives identified in Group B discussions featured in the componential categories assigned by Group A.



Group C identified specific characteristics that were utilized in the presenters'/instructors' talk, specifically its epistemological nature, good planning, clarity of objectives, accuracy of information and abundance of specific terminology. Additional characteristics concerned use of visual aids, good pacing, appropriate speed, pauses and reformulations.

Group D presented suggestions on what can be done to maximize participants' talk time in the form of engaging more the participants through asking and inviting more questions, offering collaborative brainstorming opportunities, posing problems and requesting elucidations and alternative views, explorations and explanations. Views on excessive presenter talk time projected loss of concentration, boredom and reduced learning.

In Pursuit of an Optimal Model of Teacher Talk

Michaels, O'Connor & Resnick (2008) presented philosophical arguments that call for the creation of a model that incorporates "accountable teacher talk". Accountable teacher talk refers to the type of talk that moves learning forward. However, it is weighing whether accountable teacher talk can take place without an aspect of didacticism and teacher instruction. Small discussion groups conjointly underlined areas of difficulty that were encountered during the presentations, which identified difficulty in attaining certain concepts, effort in grasping too much information and distractions inhibiting focused

listening. It follows from the identified areas of difficulty that the epistemological significance of the presenters' talk was essential despite the difficulty encountered and that merited a good proportion of presentation time. In comparison with Socrates method of dialogic teacher talk, which involved productive dialogue, focused content and epistemologically dedicated discussions, we argue that participants in our study identified similar componential tiers. While dialogic/dialectic model underline that equitable intervals are allocated to TTT and STT in order to facilitate arriving at the ultimate interpretation through logical and inferential reasoning. We argue that this assumes prior threshold knowledge levels, below which the dialogic model cannot trigger learning.

In pedagogic literature, the concept of comprehensible input can provide key framing to our debate. Lin (2008) and Krashen (2003) underline the role of comprehensible input (Krashen, 2003; Lin, 2008) where input must be *slightly* above learners' current level in order for learning to take place. The following formula has been suggested, input +1 = learning or $i+1$. In this respect, instructors should endeavor to facilitate learning by simplifying challenging input and direct instruction can be one of the strategies used to assist in the process.

From another angle, educational research (Wang, 2020) has suggested that negative feelings such as lack of motivation, lack of self-confidence and learning anxiety act as filters that hinder and obstruct learning. In this case, joint effort in collaboration with the participant learner can contribute to resolving the situation. On his part, Cousin (2006) argues that there are learning thresholds, which refer to core concepts in a subject, where understanding these concepts is key to transforming the way students understand a whole subject, allowing them to move on in their learning. Therefore, a proposed model of TTT should incorporate reasonable didacticism, specifically from theme related talk and expanding thinking discussions, using comprehensible input to ensure that learning takes place. The other 4 non-epistemic components can be utilized through STT. The educational enterprise should take account of these propositions.

Conclusion

In the light of what has preceded, both didactic and dialogic forms involve communicative purposes that has to be based on epistemological value. Our proposition, based on what

has been presented and on our findings is that rather than setting generic allocation of TTT and STT, the following categories should be incorporated a tangible teacher talk (TT) model:

In relation to epistemological values:

Quality: TT should provide informative talk that targets significant epistemological content

Quantity: TT should utilize numerical values like facts, statistics and evidence that can contribute to epistemological learning.

Epistemological relevance: TT should be relevant, and pertinent to the concept under discussion.

As for non-epistemological values:

Delivery, social talk, organizational, evaluation and regulatory talk: TT has to be clear, interactive, and orderly, and avoid vagueness and ambiguity.

Rather than accepting at face value the estimated appropriation of classroom interaction and the sporadic allocation of teacher talk time (TTT) vis-à-vis student talk time (STT), the data collected from our quasi-experiment are able to project tangible componential tiering of a session organized around information exchange, between presenters and participants, analogous to a tutorial session. The model we propose encompasses factual TTT allocation for each of the TT components utilized in the session.

In our discussion we underline the importance of identifying and acknowledging learners' knowledge levels and call to adopt a flexible TTT that can accommodate a broad spectrum of learners. TTT and STT should not be perceived as fixed notions but rather proportional entities that vary according to the estimated knowledge thresholds of the learners. This can be represented as **$\frac{TTT}{STT} = \text{learners' knowledge threshold}$**

STT

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Appendix A : Survey statements

- There are special features in the presenters' talk that facilitate the comprehension of the content of the presentation
- The presenters communicated content with clarity
- The discussion of the presenters were definite and relevant to the subject matter
- The presenters dominated the session
- The presenters side-tracked from their main focus of the discussion
- The presenters used Teacher Talk Time to ensure participants' understanding
- The presenters used Teacher Talk Time to create socially accommodating setting
- Participants were allocated minimal time to engage with the discussion
- Participants were allocated adequate time to engage with the discussion
- The presenters engaged the participants and elaborated on their responses