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English Language Department

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Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of
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Entitled

**A Comparative Study of Classroom Processes in Iranian High Schools and
Private English Institutes**

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In the Name of God

*Dedicated to My
Family with Love*

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Abstract

Task-based and form-based teaching and learning are of interest to many scholars in the field of English language teaching. Their verbal interaction process characteristics are either different or the same. The main purpose of this study is to illustrate these two sets of verbal interaction processes, in Iranian high schools and private English institutes, to find out similarities and differences between them in terms of the number of occurrences of (1) explicit and implicit error correction (2) referential and display questions (3) turn regulating by the teacher and students (4) teacher-turn and student-turn (5) teacher-talk and student-talk. Using a descriptive observational design, three elementary classes in high schools and three in private English institutes with different teachers were selected. Twelve sessions of each class were observed and audio-recorded by an MP3 player. Findings reveal that high schools and institutes are similar in using these five interaction process characteristics, but there are differences in the degree of using these characteristics, i.e. the degree of using task-based verbal interaction process characteristics in Iranian private English institutes is higher than that of high schools. Since, in the light of the significant findings of this study, the effects of different verbal interaction process characteristics on developing students' English proficiency have been illustrated, this study hopes to attract teacher trainers' attentions on how to manage effective classroom processes.

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List of Abbreviations

EFL: English as a Foreign Language

FFI: Form-Focused Instruction

PPP: Present, Practice, Production

TBI: Task-Based Instruction

TBLT: Task-Based Language Teaching

SLA: Second Language Acquisition

ESL: English as a Second Language

Chapter One

Introduction

1.1. Background of the Study

The background of the study, the setting and the significance of the study, the purpose of the study, research questions, as well as the definitions of key terms are all dealt with in this chapter.

English has played an important role in the daily lives of Iranian people for many years because of its influence on education, careers and also economics. Focusing on the significance and value of English, it has been placed in the curriculum from guidance school to high school. English is formally taught as a foreign language to Iranian students. In high school, students have about three hours of formal instruction in English every week. Valizadeh and Eslami-rasekhi (2004) state that the culture of teaching is basically teacher-centered in Iran and teachers' main focus is on teaching grammar and vocabulary. As Nunan (2004) asserts, in teacher-centered classes, teachers "monopolize" the learning and teaching process, and learners' role in learning is minimized. In addition, compared to EFL learners in other countries, Iranian EFL learners do not have chance to use English outside the classroom, and "very few English programs are broadcasted on TV or radio" (as cited in Sae-ong, 2010, p. 1).

Problems in teaching and learning English as a foreign language relate to both teachers and students. Lochana and Deb (2006) state that most EFL teachers teach language by lecturing and focusing on grammatical rules instead of language use. However, Ellis (2003) believes that it is more effective to teach language in context and focus on meaning. By focusing on grammar, teachers often provide insufficient opportunities for learners to practice English. To make the situation worse, both teachers and learners, frequently speak in Persian in English classes. As a result, after studying English language for years in schools, they can not use English language in conversation. Accordingly, Lochana and Deb (2006) have suggested that teachers abandon traditional form-focused instruction and replace it with task-based instruction (as cited in Sae-ong, 2010). TBI is learner-centred method of language learning, focuses on using language,

provides learners more exposure to the language, and encourages them to be involved in the learning process.

Although TBI itself like other methods is not problem free, a lot of researches show that task-based teaching and learning has been accepted as an alternative to solve the crisis of teaching English. Muller (2006) argues that after using task-based learning, teachers can be confident that they covered “institutional requirement” and facilitated “the development of genuine communication skills” among learners, (as cited in Sae-ong, 2010, p. 3). Ellis (2003) revealed, task-based learning meets the theoretical view that instruction should be compatible with the cognitive processes involved in second language acquisition. Also, task-based learning emphasizes the importance of learners’ participation in the processes of learning. Finally, a task prepares suitable framework to specify learners’ needs that can be used to design the courses with specific purposes. Thus, in task-based instruction, the main focus is on learners’ understanding and expressing meaning in interactive processes.

About the effectiveness of interaction in L2 learning, Long (1996) and Gass (2003) claim that interaction facilitates language learning because while focusing on communicating, learners can receive feedback and opportunities to use that feedback by modifying their outputs (as cited in Rahimpour & Magsoudpour, 2011). Considering the problems and importance of teaching and learning English, the researcher is interested in illustrating and comparing two different teaching methods used in Iranian high schools and private English institutes, to reveal their similarities and differences in terms of verbal interaction classroom process characteristics stated by Ellis (2003, p. 253).

1.2. Significance of the Study

As mentioned earlier, after studying English language for years in Iranian schools, learners can not use English language in conversation. However, Talebinezhad and Aliakhbare (2002) believe that by rapid growth of private English institutes, the opportunities for English language learning have greatly improved. Since, most problems in teaching and learning English as an EFL have roots in classroom processes especially verbal interaction processes for increasing the benefits of education the focus of research should be on classroom processes. Classroom processes are implicated as “significant moderators of treatment effects” in language classes. Within classroom process, teacher-student interaction, group work, degrees of learners’ control over their learning play an important role in the quality and quantity of learners’ production and interaction with the target language (Battistich et al., 2001). The researcher aimed to compare the interaction processes in Iranian high schools and private English institutes and focus on five interaction process characteristics mentioned by Ellis (2003):

1. Types of error correction
2. Types of question
3. types of turn regulating
4. Amount of teacher-turn and student-turn
5. Amount of teacher-talk and student-talk

In the present study by form-based instruction, the researcher means traditional focus-on-forms method, in which the grammar is taught explicitly and the main focus is on accuracy and grammatical correctness of the sentences, the method which is used in Iranian high school classes. And by task-based instruction, the researcher means focus-on-form method in which grammar is taught implicitly and negotiation of meaning and fluency are mainly under the focus, the method which is used, not completely but partially, in Iranian private English institutes.

What is important is the fact that scholars like Gremmo et al. (1978); Nunan (1987); Kasper (1986) have pointed out that the processes described for task-based classes are a rarity even in the classes that teacher claims to be teaching communicatively(as cited in Ellis, 2003). According to Ellis (2003), it is because teachers and students find it difficult to consider language as a tool and act as language users when they both know that the reason for their being together is to teach and to learn the language.

1.3. Purpose of the Study

The main purpose of this study is to compare classroom processes of Iranian high schools and private English institutes in terms of verbal interaction process characteristics mentioned by Ellis (2003, p. 253) to find out similarities and differences between them and finally to reveal which classes meet more TBI and which classes meet more FFI verbal interaction process characteristics. The present study focuses on five verbal interaction process characteristics and compares Iranian high schools and private English institutes in terms of 1) explicit and implicit formal error correction 2) referential and display question 3) turn regulating by teacher and students 4) amount of student turn and teacher turn and 5) amount of teacher talk and student talk in English per word.

1.4. Research Questions

The questions raised by the researcher in present study consist of:

Research question 1: Are there any similarities and differences between Iranian high schools and private English institutes in terms of verbal interaction process characteristics? If yes, what are they?

For answering the second part of the research question, the researcher should address the following questions one by one:

Research question 2: What are the similarities and differences between high schools and private English institutes in terms of error correction?

Research question 3: What are the similarities and differences between high schools and private English institutes in terms of question types?

Research question 4: What are the similarities and differences between high schools and private English institutes in terms of turn regulating?

Research question 5: What are the similarities and differences between high schools and private English institutes in terms of teacher-turn and student-turn?

Research question 6: What are the similarities and differences between high schools and private English institutes in terms of amount of teacher-talk and student-talk?

1.5. Definition of Key Terms

In the present study, there are terms that may need to be explained. Some of these terms have been described here.

- **Classroom process:**

According to Richards, Platt, and Platt (1992), classroom process refers to the classroom behaviors of teachers and learners, focusing on such things as the linguistic features of classroom language, teacher talk, patterns of teacher-student interaction, and teacher treatment of errors, communication strategies, and turn taking patterns in the language classrooms.

- **Display question:**

Display questions are questions to which the teacher already knows the answers, and teachers often ask these questions to check what the learners know (Lightbown & Spada, 1999).

- **Referential question:**

Referential questions are genuine or real questions for which the teacher does not know the answer in advanced and they seek new information (Ellis, 1994; Lynch, 1996; Thompson, 1997).