

## Discourse and Education

One of the central concerns of discourse analysis in educational settings has been to uncover the ways in which talk at school is unique and thus what children must be able to do linguistically in order to succeed there. Attention focuses on the socialization functions that schools serve, especially but not exclusively those connected to teaching and learning. Discourse analysis is helping to explicate the actions in which the primary goal of schools – learning – is realized.

The flow of interaction and multiparty talk alike is governed by timing and contextualization cues: “any aspect of the surface form of utterances which, when mapped onto message content, can be shown to be functional in signalling of interpretive frames” (Gumperz 1977: 199), such as **gaze**, **proxemics**, **intonational contours**, and **volume**. Cues cluster to establish a cadence that facilitates the social organization of attention and action in conversation.

The rise in discourse analytic study of educational settings is part of a broader embracing of qualitative study in a domain long dominated by behavioral theory and quantitative research methods. Reasons for this shift are complex, but a prime influence came from the imperative – moral, legal, and economic – to educate a diverse population of students.

Like other branches of linguistics, language teaching has until recently been concerned with grammatical rather than communicative competence. Following Canale (1983) we can usefully see communicative competence as being composed of four areas of knowledge and skill: *grammatical*, *sociolinguistic*, *discourse* and *strategic* competences. *Grammatical* competence is concerned with 'the knowledge and skill required to understand and express the literal meaning of utterances' and as such is the traditional concern of grammatical syllabuses. *Sociolinguistic* competence is concerned with appropriateness - 'both appropriateness of meaning and appropriateness of form' - and this includes not simply rules of address and questions of politeness but also selection and formulation of topic and the social significance of indirect speech acts. *Discourse* competence is concerned with cohesion and coherence in the structure of texts; it therefore includes knowledge about the organization of different speech events and the interpretive rules for relating form to function. Finally, *strategic* competence is 'composed of verbal and non-verbal communication strategies' which enable speakers to handle breakdowns in communication and their own lexico-grammatical inadequacies and to enhance the effectiveness of their message.

In order to succeed in school, students are obliged to conform to rules and regulations that are required, but, in many cases, not made explicit. These conventions, including the regulation of communicative interaction in the classroom, as well as the construction of written work, are culture-specific, of course:

- Written work is subject to particular formal conventions, including the use of Standard English.
- The content of both written work and spoken interaction is pre-defined by the nature of the subject matter being studied, and frequently also by the teacher's control over the semantic substance of discussion. Writing or speaking on 'off-topic' matters is usually discouraged, and often disallowed.
- Turns at talking are conventionalized. For example, in higher education, attendance at traditionally structured lectures involves maintaining silence when the lecturer is speaking, while at the same time showing attentiveness by means of sporadic eye contact, nodding or note-taking, for instance.
- At most levels of compulsory schooling, terms of address between teachers and pupils are non-reciprocal. Teachers are permitted to call students and pupils by their first names, while pupils are normally expected to address their teachers by their title plus surname (e.g. Mr Smith) or by other formal means of address such as 'Sir' or 'Miss'.
- Young children are not permitted to call out an answer to a teacher's question, but rather are required to raise their hands in a bid to offer responses. With hands up, children must then wait to be selected by the teacher before speaking.

Individual teachers are required to fulfil certain roles and engage in particular practices in accordance with the ethos of their school, and to meet ever-changing government guidelines, requirements and targets.

Furthermore, as well as satisfying conditions imposed from 'above', successful teachers must also meet the expectations of their students, and these may in turn present contradictory pressures. On the one hand, students expect good teachers to control the class, to be challenging and to ensure that students achieve to the level of their highest ability. On the other hand, and at the same time, students require that teachers be interesting and entertaining.

Speech exchanges between teachers and pupils display many of the features typical of asymmetrical speech encounters: we see, for example, an interrogation-like structure to the discourse; the use of closed-ended questions calling for minimal responses; instances of controlling speech, such as commands; and differentially distributed patterns of intrusion and interruption. In contrast to such '*transmissive*' (*teacher-directed*) pedagogical practice, student-centred education involves more active and collaborative learning. Knowledge is not seen as a discrete entity that can be transmitted from one individual to another, but as dynamic and flexible understanding that is constructed within meaningful discussion and debate. Student-centred education relies on more interactive and *discourse-intensive* teaching styles in which teachers and pupils cooperate in composing the dialogue of learning and the construction of meaning. In interactive classrooms, heuristic methods (encouraging students to learn for themselves) are valued, and teachers and

pupils work together to form a ‘learning community’. Interactive teaching methods therefore seek to establish different social roles for teachers and pupils, to enable more reciprocal social relationships and to provide possibilities for the development of non-conventional subject positions.

The opportunity for pupils to engage in such exploratory and collaborative communication is crucial to educational experience: if teaching is talking, then it is equally true that learning is largely linguistic. The opportunity for students to engage actively in the construction of discourse is vital for the shaping of experience into knowledge and understanding. Indeed, according to the influential (social) constructivism theory of education, the most valuable learning takes place when we build new information and skills on to the foundation of our existing knowledge and understanding. The opportunity to use language to make this link is crucial to cognitive development. Furthermore, since learning is not merely a matter of ‘adding’ information to our existing store, but rather involves reshaping and re-evaluating our own understanding to formulate new interpretations and meanings, then the opportunity for engaging in exploratory and collaborative talk is particularly important.

Language becomes a vital means of rehearsing ideas and advancing understanding: reading, listening, discussing, note-taking and essay-writing become especially important. What is more, students’ knowledge is primarily assessed by linguistic means: answering teachers’ questions, constructing written coursework, sitting examinations, and so forth.

At advanced levels of education, the way in which students articulate their knowledge is seen to hold the key to the development of independent and critical thinking. In spoken interaction, for example, students are expected to present papers, engage in debates and form critical questions in discussions. In such contexts, tutors are typically advised to take a back seat in interactions and allow students to initiate and instigate their own dialogues. In this respect, the tutor’s role is often defined as a *coordinator* of the activity inspired by students. However, even at the most advanced levels of education, teacher coordination of communication may still be a form of teacher control. As a result, as Norman Fairclough explains, educational practices result in ‘the inculcation of particular cultural meanings and values, social relationships and identities, and pedagogies.

There are three key linguistic areas where educational authorities exert significant control over what is deemed to be appropriate in the context of the classroom. These are language (tongue), dialect and style.

### **Language: diversity, Dialect**

It is not just diversity in languages which is perceived to present a challenge to the established sociolinguistic order; so too is dialectal diversity within English.

What type of English were you expected to use at school, particularly in constructing written pieces of work?

Students do not learn by simply ‘adding’ information to an already established store, but rather reinterpret and reshape existing ideas and knowledge in the light of new information. In this respect, it seems unlikely that Standard English can simply be added to students’ linguistic repertoire without influencing the way in which students view their own dialects.

### **Style**

Student writers are expected to follow certain conventions that govern both the type of knowledge represented and the way in which knowledge is expressed. They are often provided with essay-writing guides that provide advice on academic style, but the reasons for the conventions are rarely spelled out in such documents. Consequently, rather than look at essay-writing guides, it will be more useful for us to examine tutors’ criticisms of student writing: it is in tutors’ evaluative comments, after all, that we can identify the academic conventions that are actually imposed on student writers.

In universities, as in other educational institutions, it is teachers who have control over the content of what students write – or, at least, who have the authority to determine the writing that will contribute to awards and qualifications. A teacher may choose to exert strict control by assigning just a single essay title, or provide more scope for students by presenting a list of topics for students to choose from, or even allow students to select their own titles and topics. A lesson’s instructional goals motivate certain tasks and topics that constrain interpretation.

The traditional requirement for objectivity in academic writing frequently leads student writers to employ language that suggests a *lack* of personal commitment to the ideas expressed: becoming a proficient academic writer entails the acquisition of a detached voice. Plagiarism is the deadly sin of academic writing. A student who downloads an essay from the internet and presents it as their own may be suspended from an institution or have qualifications and awards withheld. Wholesale plagiarism is rare. However, students can be disciplined not only for blatant plagiarism, but also for copying even small parts of texts from books or other sources without explicit acknowledgement that the text has been copied (by the use of inverted commas, for example).

According to John Sinclair, whose ground-breaking linguistic research into classroom interaction, teachers have more free choice of what they say, and more authority to constrain what others say, than those working in any other profession – with the possible exception of judges. In classrooms, as in courtrooms and medical consultations, speaking turns tend to be distributed unevenly in accordance with the hierarchical power relationships that hold

between participants. Teachers, like judges (and doctors, as we have seen), maintain full rights over the routines of turn-taking.

In the 1970s, the linguists John Sinclair and Malcolm Coulthard identified the following three-part routine of turns as being particularly prevalent in traditional classroom interaction:

- 1 Teacher initiation
- 2 Student response
- 3 Teacher follow-up (sometimes also referred to as ‘teacher evaluation’).

A teacher utterance that consists solely of a student’s name, one of the phenomena occurring more frequently in instructional discourse than elsewhere, can function as elicitations because they recycle a question previously asked.

The elicitation sequence composed of teacher initiation, student response, and teacher evaluation (IRE), proposed as a basic unit of instructional interaction, was tested against empirical evidence. The IRE continues to be featured in discourse analytic accounts of academic talk. But communication in classrooms frequently proceeds in ways that do not follow the sequential, reciprocal model of interaction between teacher and students that the IRE captures so well.

Many other features are typical of teacher–student exchanges. We pause here only to identify the relevant discourse strategies:

- Teachers frame discourse in a manner which sets out both the topics to be discussed and the communicative routines to be followed. The teacher establishes the topic to be discussed, gives direction and defines the organizational structure of the interaction in which the topic is to be discussed.
- Teachers ask questions and pupils are expected to answer. Teachers phrase their questions in particular ways and often repeat and rephrase their enquiries., the teacher asks a ‘wh-’ question, for instance, and may reformulate it if s/sh needs to.
- Pupils’ responses are typically shorter than teachers’ questions.
- Teachers are as likely to provide follow-up utterances that criticize or praise students as they evaluate the content of what students say.

Encouraging talk between students in the classroom context may be particularly vital for enabling and enhancing opportunities for learning. Not only do such group discussions appear to encourage usually ‘quiet’ students to contribute to debates, but the types of issues raised in group discussions are often more extended, elaborate, wide-ranging and far-reaching than those that take place in contexts in which classes are managed in more conventional teacher-to-class (or teacher-to-student) interaction routines.

Specifically, peer group discussions appear to facilitate creativity in thinking and to encourage discussions that go usefully beyond what the teacher might too

narrowly construe as the ‘boundaries’ of a particular subject area, topic or theme.

One of the primary functions of teacher talk is the verbalization of the events that take place in this hierarchical structure. Teachers have often been observed to present a ‘running commentary’ that keeps students up to speed on the activities in hand and those that are forthcoming. The use of a **framing** language is highly characteristic of classroom communication and is represented by a class of discourse markers such as *now*, *right* and *well*,

### **Initiating classroom communication**

The teacher’s initiation takes the form of an **elicitation**: ‘what would the next shape be on our list?’ Elicitations call for a verbal response from students. Other initiations serve different purposes, including **informing**, **directing** and **checking**.

Initiations that serve to inform are used to guide the nature of the following discourse and often accomplish the function of expressing facts and ideas. In contrast to elicitation, informing initiations may not require any response from pupils or may call for only minimal acknowledgement. a **checking** initiation that calls for a minimal ‘yes’ or ‘no’ response from students. Initiations that, in general, may be classified as **directive**. interrogatives and, on the surface, appear to be further instances of **eliciting** initiations.

Consequently, the way in which teachers elicit verbal contributions from students is crucial. What type of questions do teachers ask? Research at all levels of education, from the analysis of primary school lessons to the examination of university seminars, has found that teachers do not typically ask questions to request information, but rather as a means of checking on the students’ level of knowledge or understanding. It is generally accepted that much of teacher–class talk is conducted not to explore ideas, but to test, rhetorically, whether the students have learned and can reproduce the information that the teacher has presented to them. As a result, in many lessons, teachers’ questions imply that all that is required of students is the production of the ‘right answer’; such forms are described as, for example, ‘check’, ‘display’ and ‘pseudo’ questions. Look at the following two extracts of data and consider the question forms and their functions.

The use of pseudo-questions, while not unique to classroom discourse, is particularly characteristic of this context: where else are we expected to answer a barrage of questions in the full knowledge that the questioner already has possession of the relevant answers?

Does this question call for an answer or does it function purely as a rhetorical device? The rapidity with which the teacher continues, leaving no gap for pupils to respond, indicates that the question is serving the stylistic purpose of revising and summarizing the lessons learnt in order to *focus* on related new material (note that the closely following use of the framing discourse marker, ‘now’,

supports this analysis). The absence of a pause after the question also suggests that, as we discussed above, the teacher does not expect to hear a (negative) response from pupils.

In addition to fulfilling the function of revising, summarizing and focusing, rhetorical questions may also be used to accentuate and emphasize particular points or to serve the stylistic function of simplifying problems for students to solve. Teachers often use such questions to direct students' attention to certain aspects of relevant topics and, specifically, as a way to eliminate absurdities.

As well as the frequent use of such rhetorical forms, teachers have also been observed to ask closed-ended questions; just as in the courtroom or medical consultation, classroom discourse is characterized by the prolific use of *yes/no* questions: 'Is Paris the capital of France?' Interrogatives that take a disjunctive form and call for a simple *either/or* response are abundant: 'Is Paris the capital of Germany or France?'; as are questions that ask students to 'fill the gap': 'Paris is the capital of...?'

### **Follow-up, feedback and evaluation**

We have already commented on some aspects of what teachers are likely to say and do in their follow-up utterances: for example, we have seen that teachers tend to provide evaluative remarks rather than give instructional guidance. A recent study of primary classroom interaction sub-classified teachers' follow-up turns into four types and noted their numerical distribution: *acceptance* (e.g. 'yes, that's right') was found to be the most frequent form of feedback, occurring in 57% of cases; followed by *praise* (e.g. 'yes, well done') at 21 per cent; *probing of pupil's response* (e.g. 'tell me more about that') was used 14% of the time; *criticism* (e.g. 'no, haven't you been paying attention?') was found to be a relatively rare form of teacher evaluation, occurring in only 7 per cent of teachers' reactions.

### **Classrooms as contexts**

Detailed examinations of classroom discourse reveal how inter-actants collectively co-construct meanings, how errors arise and are repaired, how turns begin, end and are passed or seized. We can identify specific features of the discourse that help us understand how teaching and learning are accomplished. Features like direct error correction, wait-time, teacher echo, display questions and so on provide vital clues as to the ways in which 'space for learning' is either opened up or closed down. This kind of analysis can help us answer questions such as:

- To what extent do teachers include or exclude learners from the interaction?
- How are opportunities for learning created?
- Who holds the floor and for how long?
- What types of question are asked and how are they answered?
- How appropriate is the language to pedagogic goals?

Which types of discourse promote student engagement and dialogue?

Perhaps more importantly, a fine-grained and detailed analysis of micro-contexts offers us unique insights into what is being taught, how and what learners are learning. By looking at the moment-by-moment management of turns and topics we can see, in the interaction, what is being learnt, what is not being learnt, what is the relationship between what teachers teach and what learners learn. Our endeavor is not simply to describe classroom interaction, it is to develop new understandings and improve the ways in which we teach.

Several specific features of the teacher's use of language that facilitate learner involvement and create opportunities for learning:

**Direct error correction**

Maximum economy is used when correcting errors and the teacher opts for a very open and direct approach to error correction, as preferred by learners.

**Content feedback**

The teacher quite appropriately provides personal reactions to comments made by learners.

**Checking for confirmation**

Teachers who constantly seek clarification, check for confirmation and who do not always accept the first contribution a student offers are more likely to maximise learning potential than those who do not.

**Extended wait-time**

One of the most striking features of the extract is its turn-taking structure. As the discourse progresses, the teacher takes more and more of a 'back-seat' and 'hands over' to the learners.

**Scaffolding**

Communication breakdown is a very common feature of L2 class rooms. Often it occurs because learners do not know a particular word or phrase or do not possess the appropriate communicative strategies. To pre-empt breakdown, it is the role of the teacher to intervene and feed in the missing language. Timing and sensitivity to learner needs are of utmost importance and many teachers intervene too often or too early. Scaffolding (Bruner 1990; Lantolf and Thorne 2006) involves more than simply error correction. It is a skill similar to the one possessed by many parents when helping their young children struggling to find the right word at a given moment.

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