Classroom talk, interaction and collaboration

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Introduction

This chapter looks at the important relationship between classroom talk, interaction and collaboration, a relationship which needs to be understood in order to maximise and enhance language learning. Learning, in this context, is viewed from a broadly sociocultural perspective, closely associated with learner participation, engagement and co-construction, where language acts as a mediating tool (see Negueruela-Azarola and García, this volume, for further discussion of sociocultural theory). Although participation in itself cannot always be equated with language learning, there is a strong and identifiable relationship between participation, collaboration and learning. For the purposes of this chapter, collaboration refers to the ways in which learning can be enhanced through interaction. It includes both the co-constructed learning which takes place in the second language classroom between teacher and students, and students and students, and also the ways in which teachers and teacher educators might collaborate in developing more detailed understandings of classroom interaction. This perspective, highlighting the importance of participation and collaboration, offers valuable insights into the learning and teaching process. Implications for teacher education and classroom practice are also discussed.

A key argument which we develop in the chapter is the need to place an understanding of classroom discourse at the centre of English and/or any second language teacher education or development programme. One way in which language teachers might improve their professional practice is to develop fine-grained, detailed understandings of their local context, something which they might achieve by examining the complex interplay between language, classroom interaction and learning.

A focus on classroom discourse

Why focus on classroom discourse?

As any teacher or learner knows, second language classrooms are highly complex, fast-paced, multi-party social contexts where talk and interaction are central to all activity. As Walsh puts it (2011: 168):

In the rapid flow of classroom interaction, it is difficult to comprehend what is happening. Not only is the interaction very fast and involves many people, it has multiple foci; the
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language being used may be performing several functions at the same time: seeking information, checking learning, offering advice and so on.

In a language classroom, it very quickly becomes apparent that learners access and acquire new knowledge and skills through the talk, interaction and collaboration which take place. Language is learned, problems are solved, new understandings accomplished and breakdowns repaired through the ensuing talk and according to the ways in which interaction is managed. Crucially, not only is language central to absolutely everything which takes place, it is also very often the goal of the interaction, the target of the talk; as Long (1983: 9) points out, language is “the vehicle and object of instruction”.

So why should we, as teachers, teacher educators and researchers, focus on classroom discourse? First, there is a strong link between language and learning, with language playing a mediational role (Vygotsky, 1978); in other words, all learning requires language, the basic ‘tool’ which underpins or ‘mediates’ the learning process. To this end, interaction is central to learning, “the most important element in the curriculum” (van Lier, 1996: 5), a position echoed by Ellis (2000: 209) who tells us that “learning arises not through interaction, but in interaction” (original emphasis). As such, the relationship between talk, interaction and learning is central to classroom practice.

Second, ‘good teaching’ is concerned with more than good planning. As van Lier (1991) has commented, teaching has two essential ingredients: planning and improvising. The interactive decisions taken by teachers as they teach are at least as important as the planning which occurs before teaching (Bailey and Nunan, 1996). One way to access teachers’ interactive, ‘online’ decision making (Walsh, 2006) is to look at their interactions with students. Good interactive decisions are ones which promote learning and learning opportunities and which reflect the pedagogic goals of the teacher, the goals of the learners, and the opportunities or constraints imposed by the context (see, for example, Seedhouse, 2004). Good decisions are those which are appropriate to the moment, not necessarily the ones which ‘follow the plan’. Teachers may restrict or facilitate learning opportunities in their moment-by-moment decision making (Walsh, 2002). Their ability to make the ‘right decision’ entails an understanding of the complex relationship which prevails between talk, interaction and learning.

How might we focus on classroom discourse?

If it is accepted that teachers need to reflect on their practice as a way of developing more appropriate methodologies (Holliday, 1994; see also Holliday, this volume), there is a strong and compelling need for their reflections to be data led and evidence based (Mann and Walsh, 2013). Reflections are more likely to be meaningful and result in better teaching when they use some kind of evidence, such as a piece of material, a test score or a conversation with a student or colleague.

One way in which teachers might develop better understandings of their classroom practices is to study the interactions which take place in their own classrooms. By developing and extending their classroom interactional competence (CIC, Walsh, 2013) through reflection and dialogue, teachers will improve many aspects of their performance and promote engaged, dialogic learning environments. We return to this point in subsequent sections in this chapter.

However, there is as yet no widely available meta-language which can be used by teachers to describe classroom interaction. Understandings of interactional processes must begin with description (van Lier, 2000a), and understandings are co-constructed by teachers through dialogue with others about their professional world (Lantolf, 2000; Johnson, 2009). Description and dialogue, both of which are central to promoting CIC, require an appropriate meta-language, a
language which can be used by teachers to talk about teaching and enhance understanding of their local context. We suggest that a more nuanced, qualitative approach to describing classroom discourse is needed to replace terms such as ‘high’ and ‘low’ teacher talk, or ‘communicative’ or ‘uncommunicative’ classrooms. Access to a more sophisticated, widely available meta-language and opportunities for dialogue are central to professional development (Edge, 2011). Expertise and understanding emerge through the insights and voices of L2 teachers (Bailey and Nunan, 1996); these voices need a language which allows concerns to be raised, questions to be asked and reflections to be discussed and shared.

Having outlined both the importance of classroom discourse and the need to understand the way in which it affects learning opportunities, the remainder of the chapter will first examine historical perspectives on classroom discourse before looking at its key features. We will then discuss appropriate methods of investigating classroom discourse before concluding with a consideration of future challenges in this area.

**Historical perspectives**

Classroom discourse has been researched extensively since the 1960s, when the advent of audio-recordings meant that classroom interactions could be recorded, transcribed and studied in some detail (Jenks and Seedhouse, 2015). Although the precise focus of these studies, the meaning of classroom discourse and what constitutes an appropriate approach for its study vary from one investigation to the next, a common theme is the need to explore the relationship between teacher and learner talk and learning.

Early work on classroom interaction focused on characterising patterns of discourse (e.g. Flanders, 1970), suggesting that classroom talk is structured and therefore can be categorised and quantified through description. The most influential work in this early period was arguably that of Sinclair and Coulthard (1975), who identified the three-part exchange structure, IRF – initiation-response-feedback – consisting of a teacher initiation in the form of a question, a student response and teacher feedback (see below for a fuller discussion). Subsequent studies in the 1980s made use of observation schedules to record what happened in classroom interactions and attempt to quantify specific features such as questions, responses, silence and so on.

Recognising the absence of a methodological framework for analysing classroom talk, Seedhouse (1996) argued for an ‘emic’ perspective, which adopts an institutional discourse conversation analysis approach (see below). Seedhouse (1996, 2004) demonstrates how a conversation analytic (CA) methodology is able to show the ways in which pedagogic goals and the language used to achieve them are inextricably linked. This line of research has generated a great deal of interest, resulting in a number of studies which provide detailed, emic perspectives on classroom discourse (e.g. Hall, 2009; Hellermann, 2011).

For example, based on the earlier work of Kramsch (1986), He and Young (1998) introduced a theory of interactional competence, which studied learners’ discursive practices by focusing on turn-taking strategies, topic management and a range of interactional strategies used in various learning contexts. Young (2008) built on this work, proposing a number of linguistic and interactional resources used by learners such as turn taking, repair and so on. Developing learners’ interactional competence requires their active participation in class (see also Hall et al., 2011; Young, 2013).

More recently, classroom discourse research has used interaction as a lens to investigate issues concerning learning and pedagogy. Areas of inquiry include what learning is and how learning can be promoted in class (Walsh and Li, 2013); teachers’ decision making and pedagogical thinking (Li and Walsh, 2011; Fagan, 2012; Li, 2012, 2013; Morton, 2012); and how language
teachers facilitate the development of learners’ thinking skills in language learning by providing
time, space and scaffolded help for students or hinder thinking skills by restricting student con-
tributions and intervening too much (Li, 2011). All this work is clearly situated around notions
of collaborative learning and highlights the participatory role of learners and how teachers can
facilitate ‘space for learning’ (Walsh and Li, 2013).

Features of classroom discourse
In this section, we offer an overview of the most important features of second language class-
room discourse, selected largely because they typify much of the interaction which takes place
in classrooms and are prevalent in all parts of the world. They are control of patterns of commu-
nication, speech modification, elicitation and repair.

Control of the interaction
One of the most striking features of any classroom is that the roles of the participants (teacher
and learners) are not equal; they are asymmetrical (as are many other institutional settings, for
example doctor/patient, solicitor/client etc.). In language classrooms, teachers generally control
patterns of communication by managing both the topic of conversation and turn taking, while
students typically take their cues from the teacher, through whom they direct most of their
responses. Even in the most decentralised and learner-centred classroom, teachers decide who
speaks, when, to whom and for how long. Teachers are able to interrupt when they like, take the
floor, hand over a turn, direct the discussion and switch topics. As Breen puts it, it is the teacher

A teacher’s ability to ‘orchestrate the interaction’ in this way not only determines who may
participate and when, it also influences opportunities for learning (Walsh, 2002). By controlling
participation structures, teachers also control the amount of ‘space for learning’ (Walsh and Li,
2013) students have; this is one of the key influences on learning and learning opportuni-
ties. Teachers may open up space by, for example, asking more open-ended questions, reducing
‘teacher echo’ and increasing their wait time (see below).

A key feature of classroom discourse, first proposed by Sinclair and Coulthard (1975), is
a three-part exchange structure, also known as a triadic exchange structure. Typically in this
exchange, for every contribution made by a student, the teacher makes two. This exchange struc-
ture is known as initiation-response-feedback (IRF; see above), or initiation-response-evaluation
(IRE; Mehan, 1979), illustrated as follows:

Teacher I: what’s the past tense of go?
Student R: went
Teacher F: went, excellent.

A consequence of this structure is that teachers clearly talk more than learners and occupy more
of the interactional space of the classroom. Learners’ opportunities to contribute are largely
controlled by the teacher.

The IRF exchange structure has been influential in advancing understandings of classroom
interaction (and spoken interactions more generally) in a number of ways. First, it helps us to
appreciate that all classroom discourse is goal-oriented. The responsibility for establishing goals and
‘setting the agenda’ lies largely with the teacher. Pedagogic goals and the language used to achieve
them are very closely related, even intertwined. Second, teachers have the main responsibility for
what is said in the classroom and control the discourse not only through the special power and authority they have but also through their control of the discourse. They control who may speak and when, for how long and on what topic. They control turn taking through the use of IRF; not only do they initiate a response, they offer an evaluation – further evidence of control. Third, we see that learners take their cues from the teacher and rarely initiate a response. Their role, one which they are socialised into from a very early age, is to answer the teacher’s questions, respond to prompts and so on. Fourth, an understanding of IRF – the ‘building block’ of classroom discourse – helps us to appreciate the special nature of classroom discourse and appreciate how teachers might vary interaction more and introduce alternative types of sequence.

A number of debates have emerged from studies on IRF. While some researchers believe that the exchange does not provide learners with opportunities to take initiatives (van Lier, 2000b) or is even negatively correlated with learning (Nystrand, 1997), others (e.g. Hall and Walsh, 2002: 196–197) argue that IRF users “have a more inquiry-based understanding of learning, which values the activities of exploration, hypothesis testing, and problem solving”. In fact, the value of IRF in creating a learning opportunity to engage students lies in the task and pedagogical goal of the moment and how the teacher manages the F-move (e.g. Waring and Zhang, 2008). When a teacher is able to create a spiral IRF (Li, 2011), there is space for students to take the initiative, build on each other’s contributions and therefore develop criticality through a sequence of teacher questions, learner answers and further teacher prompts.

**Speech modification**

A second feature of classroom discourse is teachers’ speech modification, similar to the ‘caretaker speech’ employed by parents when speaking to very young children. The modification strategies used by teachers are conscious and deliberate and include: slower, louder, more deliberate speech; greater use of pausing and emphasis; and more exaggerated use of gestures and facial expressions to help convey meaning. Speech modification is used to help learners understand and to model new structures and vocabulary, for example. In many parts of the world, a teacher’s articulation of the second language, for example English, may be the only exposure to the language that learners actually receive. It is important, therefore, that the L2 is modelled correctly and appropriately. Crucially, given the highly complex nature of classroom interaction, speech modification is necessary to ensure that everyone is following the multilogue (multi-party talk, Schwab, 2011) and taking part without getting lost.

There are a number of ways in which teachers use speech modification to create learning opportunities. At the simplest level, teachers employ a different range of linguistic resources to facilitate comprehension and assist the learning process. Through the use of simplified vocabulary, a more limited range of tenses and fewer modal verbs, clearer, slower pronunciation and a more extensive use of standard or non-idiomatic forms, teachers can greatly facilitate comprehension. On another level, teachers may modify their interactional resources to assist comprehension and help learners find their way. Key to this is the use of discourse markers (see, for example, Yang, 2014) to mark the beginnings and endings of various activities or stages in a lesson. Words such as *right, OK, now, so, all right* – which function typically as discourse markers – perform a very important function in signalling changes in the interaction or organisation of learning. The amount and type of organisational work performed by discourse markers is enormous since they signal both ‘what is happening’ in terms of teaching and learning and highlight particular linguistic features in the discourse.

In addition, teachers may use a range of strategies to both modify their speech and elicit speech modifications from learners. Strategies include: confirmation checks, where teachers confirm
correct understanding; comprehension checks, used to ensure that learners understand the teacher; clarification requests, where students are invited to clarify a contribution; reformulation, rephrasing a learner's utterance; turn completion, finishing a learner's contribution; and backtracking, returning to an earlier part of a dialogue. These strategies operate at the level of interaction rather than solo performance; they are used to ensure that the discourse flows well and that the complex relationship between language use and learning is maintained. One interesting class of linguistic features used in classroom interaction is backchannels (words like uh-huh, yeah, right, sure, OK) – also known as acknowledgement tokens – which serve to ‘oil the wheels’ of the interaction and indicate ‘listenership’ (McCarthy, 2003) by acknowledging a turn and providing feedback.

**Elicitation techniques**

Elicitation techniques are the strategies teachers use to get learners to make a contribution during class. Typically, elicitation entails asking questions. Much of L2 classroom discourse is dominated by question-and-answer routines, with teachers asking most of the questions while learners ask correspondingly few questions. It is by asking questions that teachers are able to control the discourse (see the discussion of the IRF exchange, above), especially given that they know the answers to most of the questions they ask! Questions like these, where teachers already know the answer (for example, what's the past tense of “go”?) are called ‘display’ questions since they require learners to display what they know. Essentially, the defining characteristic of display questions is to check or evaluate understanding, concepts, learning, previous learning and so on.

More open-ended, genuine questions are called ‘referential’ questions. They are designed to promote discussion and debate, engage learners and produce longer, more complex responses which carry actual meaning (i.e. the teacher or listener does not know what the speaker/learner is going to say in advance). Such questions typically result in more ‘natural’ responses by learners, often longer and more complicated, and producing a more conversational type of interaction. Referential questions often begin with a *wh-* question such as who, why, what, etc. From a teaching and learning perspective, the distinction between display and referential is less important than the relationship between a teacher's pedagogic goal and choice of question – in other words, understanding what a question is actually doing. If the aim is to quickly check understanding or establish what learners already know, display questions are perfectly adequate. If, on the other hand, the aim is to promote discussion or help learners improve oral fluency, then referential questions are more appropriate. The extent to which a question produces a communicative response is less important than the extent to which a question serves its purpose at a particular point in a lesson.

**Repair**

Repair simply refers to the ways in which teachers deal with errors. It includes direct and indirect error correction. Error, repair and the possibilities surrounding corrective feedback are discussed in detail in the chapter by Mackey, Park and Tagarelli, this volume. However, it is worth summarising key points surrounding the relationship between repair and classroom discourse here.

Clearly, there is a range of forms of error correction available to a teacher at any point in time. As with all pedagogic strategies, some will be more or less appropriate than others at any given moment. Teachers may decide to ignore the error completely; signal that an error has been made and correct it; get learners to correct their own errors; or indicate that an error has been made and seek help from other learners to correct it. There is a close correlation between the choices teachers make when correcting errors and the four types of repair described by conversation analysts when studying naturally occurring conversation: self-initiated self-repair (i.e. I correct
myself, unprompted), self-initiated other repair (i.e. I correct someone else, unprompted), other-initiated self-repair (i.e. someone prompts me to correct myself), and other-initiated other repair (i.e. someone else prompts others to correct themselves) (see Sacks et al., 1974).

According to van Lier, “apart from questioning, the activity which most characterizes language classrooms is correction of errors” (1988: 276). He addresses one of the main debates confronting teachers when dealing with errors: should we avoid error correction at all costs since it affects the flow of classroom communication, or should we correct all errors so that learners acquire a ‘proper’ standard? Here, we suggest that the type of strategy used for error correction must relate to the pedagogic goals of the moment; for example, a highly controlled practice activity requires more error correction than one where the focus is oral fluency. The pedagogic goal and the language used to achieve it must be convergent – they should work together.

It is also probably fair to say that within the classroom, learners do expect to have their errors corrected. While it may not be appropriate in more naturalistic settings for speakers to correct each other’s errors, in classrooms, this is both what learners want and expect. As Seedhouse (1997: 571) puts it, “making linguistic errors and having them corrected directly and overtly is not an embarrassing matter.” Rather than deciding whether we should or should not correct errors, teachers would do well to consider the appropriacy of a particular strategy in relation to their intended goals. By adopting more conscious strategies and by understanding how a particular type of error correction impacts on the discourse, teachers can do much to tailor their error correction to the ‘moment’ and promote opportunities for learning.

**Other issues**

In addition to these features, others of note include ‘feedback’, which includes the strategies used by teachers to accept or modify a learner contribution, and ‘confirmation checks’ and ‘clarification requests’, actions which show acceptance or seek clarification of a learner contribution (see Mackey, Park and Tagarelli’s chapter, this volume, for comprehensive discussion of these features). A further characteristic of classroom discourse, ‘scaffolding’, merits further brief discussion here, however.

Scaffolding in the L2 classroom refers to those supportive behaviours employed by a more advanced partner in collaboration with a less competent learner that aims to foster the latter’s progress to a higher level of language proficiency (Memari-Hanjani and Li, 2014: 102). Scaffolding is “graduated”, “contingent” and “dialogic” assistance/guidance (Aljaafreh and Lantolf, 1994: 495), which can be interpreted as the ways in which teachers (and learners) provide linguistic ‘props’ to assist learners in a language classroom. It is a typical feature of most language classroom discourse.

**Appropriate methods of investigating classroom discourse**

Previously in this chapter, we noted that the two main reasons for studying classroom interaction are that it promotes better understandings of learning and learning processes and that it facilitates teacher development. We turn now to the main approaches which have been used for such investigations.

**Interaction analysis approaches**

During the 1960s and 1970s, one of the most reliable, quantitative approaches to analysing interaction was thought to be through the use of observation instruments, or *coding systems,*
to record what observers consider to be happening at any given moment. From these recordings and the ensuing statistical treatment, classroom profiles could be established, which, it was argued, provide an objective and ‘scientific’ analysis of the interaction. According to Brown and Rodgers (2002), over 200 different observation instruments exist. Essentially, these interactionist approaches to classroom discourse use some system of recording what observers see, often in the form of ticking boxes, making marks etc., usually at pre-specified time intervals throughout a lesson (e.g. every minute). Such instruments were regarded as being reliable since they offered a moment-by-moment record of ‘what really happened’ in the classroom (as we shall see shortly, however, these approaches have been critiqued).

According to Wallace (1998), observation schedules can be defined as either ‘system-based’ or ‘ad hoc’. System-based observation instruments normally have a number of fixed categories which have been pre-determined by extensive trialling in different classroom contexts. There are several advantages to using a fixed system: the system is ready-made — there is no need to design a completely new approach; because the system is well-known, there is no need for validation; any system may be used in real-time or following a recording; and comparisons between one system and another are possible. Examples include Bellack et al. (1966) and Flanders (1970).

The trend in later years was to include more and more categories designed to capture the complexities of classroom interaction. The COLT system (communicative orientation to language teaching), for example, was proposed by Allen et al. in 1984 (revised in 1995) and comprised 73 categories. Its principal goal was to enable the observer to make a connection between teaching methodology and language use, drawing heavily on the assumptions underpinning communicative language teaching (see Thornbury, this volume) and its goal of an interactive, ‘communicative’ classroom.

The main limitations of system-based interaction analysis approaches are the difficulty of matching interaction to pre-determined categories; they provide an etic (from the outside, by researchers or via pre-determined categories) rather than emic (from the inside, by participants or emerging from the classroom events themselves) perspective on the interaction; and a failure by observers to agree on ‘what really happened’ (i.e. amidst the complexity and rapid flow of a language class, different observers could interpret the same event in differing ways). In contrast, ad hoc approaches offer the construction of a more flexible instrument, which may, for example, be based on a specific classroom problem or area of interest. This approach allows specific details in the interaction to be studied and normally provides a more emic perspective.

Discourse analysis (DA) approaches

According to Seedhouse (2004: 56), “the overwhelming majority of previous approaches to L2 classroom interaction have implicitly or explicitly adopted what is fundamentally a discourse analysis approach.” Perhaps the earliest and most well-known proponents of this approach are Sinclair and Coulthard (1975) who, in addition to identifying the IRF exchange system (see earlier in this chapter), used systemic functional linguistics (SFL; Halliday, 1985) analysis, and compiled a list of twenty-two speech acts representing the verbal behaviours of both teachers and students participating in primary classroom communication. The outcome for discourse analysis (DA) approaches is the development of a descriptive system incorporating a discourse hierarchy which moves from lesson at the highest level to speech act at the lowest. Speech acts offer a description of what is done with language by attributing functions to the interaction. While this is certainly useful and offers unique insights into the ways in which language and interaction are used to achieve particular goals, the main difficulty is that any utterance may perform a range of functions. The question ‘what time does this lesson begin?’ when asked by
a teacher may, for example, perform the function of requesting information or admonishing a student who has turned up late to class. According to Stubbs (1983), it is almost impossible to say precisely what function is being performed by a teacher (or learner) act at any point in a lesson. As with any functional analysis, the precise meaning of an utterance is heavily dependent on local context.

Any attempt to analyse classroom data using a DA approach, therefore, involves some simplification and reduction. Matching utterances to categories may be problematic owing to the absence of a direct relationship between form and function. In general, DA approaches fail to take account of the more subtle forces at work such as role relations, context and sociolinguistic norms which have to be followed. In short, a DA treatment fails to adequately account for the dynamic nature of classroom interaction and the fact that it is socially constructed by its participants.

**Conversation analytic (CA) approaches**

Conversation analysis (CA) has its roots in sociology, stemming from an interest by its originators, Sacks et al. (1974), in ‘ordinary conversation’. CA is based on the premise that social contexts are not static but are constantly being formed by participants through their use of language and the ways in which turn taking, openings and closures, sequencing of acts and so on are locally managed. Interaction is context shaped and context renewing; that is, one contribution is dependent on a previous one, and subsequent contributions create a new context for later actions. Under this microscopic view of context, one person’s contribution is inextricably linked to that of another person. Order in spoken discourse is established through sequential organisation – the way in which one utterance is connected to another.

While CA has its origins in the study of ordinary conversation, its relevance to an institutional discourse setting, such as a classroom, cannot be ignored. In L2 classrooms, the goals and actions of participants are closely linked to, and to some extent constrained by, the institutional business of learning a language. A consequence is that the features of the interaction, such as turn and topic management, sequential organisation and choice of lexis, are all determined by that enterprise and by the roles of interactants. What CA can do is to uncover something of the detail of these interactions by looking at the ways in which contexts are co-created in relation to the goal-oriented activity in which they are engaged (Heritage, 2004: 224). Essentially, what takes place in an L2 classroom between teachers and learners, and learners and their peers, can be described as ‘conversation’. It is, for the most part, two way; it entails turn taking, turn passing, turn ceding and turn seizing; and it makes use of topic switches and contains many of the features of ‘ordinary’ conversation such as false starts, hesitations, errors, silence, back channelling and so forth.

The main aim of CA is to view interaction through the eyes of the participants and account for the structural organisation of the interaction from this perspective. In this sense, the approach is strictly empirical. CA forces the researcher to focus on the interaction patterns emerging from the data rather than relying on any preconceived notions which they may bring to the data (Seedhouse, 2004). Central to this notion is that of context, which is dynamic and mutually constructed by the participants. Contexts are therefore constantly changing as a lesson progresses and according to local demands and constraints; talk is essentially goal oriented: participants are striving towards some overall objective related to the institution. Any analysis of the ensuing talk is multi-layered; because no one utterance is categorised in isolation and because contributions are examined in sequence, a CA methodology is much better equipped to interpret and account for the multi-layered structure of classroom interaction.
While we are not suggesting here that language teacher education or teacher development should make extensive use of CA, there is certainly an argument that fine-grained understandings of classroom interaction are central to promoting learning. The use of untranscribed recordings, for example, can be very useful and has much to offer in terms of fostering better understandings of the nature of interaction in the L2 classroom and enabling teachers to make changes to their practice.

**Future directions**

From the discussion in this chapter, and based on the research evidence from more than fifty years of research on classroom interaction, what challenges lie ahead for teachers and learners and how might some of those challenges be addressed?

**Developing language teacher education**

A very important observation is how little time is actually spent making language teachers aware of the importance of classroom interaction, in the ways suggested in this chapter. To our knowledge, very few ELT or TESOL teacher education programmes, either pre- or in-service, pay very much attention to classroom interaction. Typically, most teacher education programmes comprise a language awareness strand and a classroom methodology or pedagogy strand. Here, we would like to propose a ‘third strand’ on language teacher education programmes, focusing specifically on the relationship between interaction, participation, collaboration and learning. The aim of this component is to sensitise language teachers to the centrality of interaction to teaching and learning and to provide them with the means of acquiring close understandings of their local contexts. Rather than trying to make ‘current’ teaching methodologies work in contexts where they have little or no relevance, an understanding of local context is the first step in improving teaching efficacy and enhancing the learner experience — and an understanding of interaction and the ability of stakeholders to engage with the issues surrounding interaction, participation and learning lie at the heart of this challenge.

Related to the challenge of developing a detailed understanding of local context is the notion of classroom interactional competence (CIC, Walsh, 2013: 130), defined as “teachers’ and learners’ ability to use interaction as a tool for mediating and assisting learning”. When studying transcripts of classroom discourse, it very quickly becomes apparent that levels of interactional competence vary hugely from one context and from one teacher to another. Some teachers, at some points in time, are very adept at managing interaction in such a way that learning and learning opportunities are maximised. Others use interactional strategies which ‘get in the way’ and which impede opportunities for learning (Walsh, 2002). By recording and analysing their own practice, teachers could develop and improve their interactions with students and establish more engaged, collaborative classes.

**Developing classroom practice**

In terms of addressing learner participation in the classroom, a number of challenges lie ahead. Perhaps the biggest and most difficult is the need to change the interactional structure of lessons so that learners might play a more equal role in classroom discourse. When we consider the ways in which learners are socialised into certain types of classroom behaviour, this is a huge challenge. In most content-based subjects, learners answer questions, respond to cues, follow the teacher’s initiative, avoid interrupting and so forth. And yet, in a language classroom, a very different set
of interactional traits is needed if learners are to play a more equal part in the discourse and to actively participate in learning. In language classrooms, we need learners to both ask and answer questions, to interrupt where appropriate, to take the initiative, seize the floor, hold a turn and so forth. In other words, there is a need for more equal roles in which learners and teachers collaborate in the process of co-constructing meanings. In such a learning environment, different interactional features prevail; turns are longer, for example, and there are more frequent topic changes. Overlaps and interruptions are more common, as are pauses. It is in this kind of environment that learners develop, since they are able to acquire the kinds of linguistic and interactional resources which will enhance the language learning process. Teachers, while still playing a more central role, would need a sophisticated understanding of classroom discourse in order to be able to manage the interaction.

And finally, it is impossible to consider future challenges without some mention of the place of technology in classroom discourse. Technology enhanced learning and the need to understand the ways in which technology, through interaction, mediates learning are key challenges in the future. There is a growing and pressing imperative to understand the ways in which technology might be embedded in classroom practices as a tool to assist and support learning (see, for example, Gruba, Hinkelman and Cárdenas-Claros, and Kern, Ware and Warschauer, this volume).

Conclusion

Such understandings of both face-to-face classroom discourse and the impacts of technology on classroom learning opportunities, and the development of good classroom practices, we suggest, can best be optimised through studies of classroom data and by looking at the ways in which interactions are created and managed. Appreciating the centrality of classroom discourse and the role of classroom talk, interaction and collaboration will help teachers and learners maximise opportunities for second language learning in class.

Discussion questions

• Which features of classroom interaction are important in your teaching, and how might you study them?
• Based on your own experience, what can teachers do to promote more engaged, collaborative classrooms?
• How would you like to improve or change the interactions which take place in your classes? How might you bring about those changes?
• How would you describe or define interactional competence in your context? How might you encourage it?

Related topics

Cognitive perspectives on classroom language learning; Communicative language teaching in theory and practice; Error, feedback and repair; Language teacher education; Sociocultural theory and the language classroom.

Further reading

Walsh, S. (2013) *Classroom discourse and teacher development*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press. (Develops many of the ideas put forward in this chapter and proposes ways of helping teachers to reflect on their interactional practices as a means of promoting professional development.)

**References**


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