

# What am I speaking for? Exploring classroom discourse in search of meaningful interaction

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## INTRODUCTION

The study investigates classroom discourse and, in particular, teacher-pupils interaction at school, while learning activities are going on.

Classroom discourse has primarily been investigated as a kind of interaction easier to handle because of its more overt structure, owing to its institutional goals and setting. Literature on the subject (Sinclair, Coulthard 1975; Mehan 1979; Sinclair 1987; Drew, Heritage 1992; Levinson 1992) considers classroom discourse as a variety of institutional interaction that, as such, imposes many constraints on language use. Systematic restrictions on interlocutors' language use have been traced as far as the orientation of the whole interaction is concerned, in relation to the institutional goals, the right of allocating turns, selecting subjects, evaluating contributions and of timing the interaction by at least one of the participants. These restrictions on language use produce some visible features of the classroom discourse, that is to say: a considerable amount of teacher talk and, in particular, of display questions, the I-R-E pattern of exchanges and a rigid teacher-ruled allocation and timing of turns.

This study aims at investigating any possible correlations between patterns of classroom interaction and types of learning activities in which specific language uses are embedded along the lines of a theory of learning (problem solving) and a theory of language use.

As for the former, being a model of the cognitive processes and structures underlying performances in complex tasks, a theory of problem solving provides a powerful set of features and principles on whose bases it is possible to analyze classroom interaction and single out, from classroom interaction, those portions that involves task-centred activities and problem solving activities, that focus on cognitive value on one side and on the interactive import of classroom task on the other.

As a matter of fact, along with the analysis made by Greeno J.G and H.A.Simon (1988), emerges the complementarity of cognitive action and of cognitive representation in problem solving performance and, in particular within cognitive representation, the importance of the role of problem space and, consequently, of individual representation of the objects in the problem situation, the goal of the problem, the actions and strategies that can be performed and the knowledge of constraints in the problem situation.

As for the linguistic side, this study refers to a theory of language use that explores the interconnection between language use and the structure of human activities that constrain the verbal contributions as far as participants, setting, goals, acts, key, instrumentalities, norms and genre are concerned (Hymes 1974). The analysis follows the suggestions made by the study of inference in discourse (Shegloff, Sacks 1973; Levinson 1992), with great relevance given to the sequential analysis of discourse and the structural organization of particular activities in which a particular language use takes place.

A sequential analysis of conversation reveals the participants' inferential schemata on the

role utterances have according to their collocation within discourse, since: «utterances are *in the first* instance contextually understood by reference to their placement and participation within sequences of actions». (Atkinson, Heritage 1984). The focus on sequential analysis casts light on the participants' orientation to the turn to be taken within each sequence of utterances, whose strongest form is known as «adjacency pair». By means of this sequential organization of talk, interactants communicate to each other their understandings of the state of talk.

## HYPOTHESIS

Getting back to the teaching purpose of classroom interaction and to the specific nature of this activity type, we may assert that:

- classroom discourse is a variety of institutional discourse and, as such, it is characterized by specific features and constraints (Sinclair 1987)
- language use is strictly related to the nature of the activity in which utterances take place;
- classroom discourse is didactic in purpose and it is therefore related to activities conducive to learning. It is subjected to pedagogical goals as well as those which are socially determined;
- there are correspondences between activity types and learning circumstances and the degree of pupils' participation to the learning interaction.

In other words, apart from the social constraints, the turns sequence organization is influenced and somehow determined by the kind of activity that goes on in the classroom.

## DATA COLLECTION AND SELECTION

The corpus is constituted by 15 lessons (45' each) held in the school-year 1996-'97, in a third-year-class of a primary school in Bologna: «Scuola Elementare Casaralta». The class is composed of 20 pupils aged 8-9. All the lessons were audio-recorded.

The lessons recorded include a sizable amount of interaction that follow the I-R-E discourse structure. However, it has been possible to spot episodes presenting a different pattern of interaction and, specifically, situations where pupils:

- participate meaningfully (with personal observations) without waiting for the teacher to call on students and allocate turns;
- complete teacher's moves;
- anticipate their answer without waiting for teacher's initiation and, finally,
- get their turn in order to provide new information, interrupting the exchange going on at that moment.

The 13-minute episode, here analyzed, presents all the features above listed. It was selected from a lesson on history subjects and, specifically, on time representation (the cycle and the sequence)

## ANALYSIS

The analysis moves, therefore, from the spotting of interaction samples that don't fit into the I-R-E pattern. These occurrences are included in larger portions of speech, whose boundaries have been identified according to the notion of «frame» and «focus elements» (Sinclair, Coulthard 1975). In this way a number of larger portions of lessons have been selected from the whole lesson, as being specific activity types according to specific learning goals and specific constraints as far as cognitive representation and performance, as well as linguistic performance, were required from the students.

The episode has been analyzed along the lines of the problem solving theory. The analysis revealed the presence of a typical three-phase structure of problem solving activity, including orientation, solution and connection. (Greeno, Simon 1984; Greenleaf, Warshauer Freeman 1993).

The orientation phase comprehends the definition of the problem space which very often consists of «an initial declarative form (an elaborated example), which must be interpreted (....) to produce performance» (Anderson 1993). The teacher, therefore, proposes an example which must be interpreted as far as the objects, the goals, the actions, strategies and constraints relevant to the problem. In the example selected, it is a whole-group conversation that shows the presence, within the first exchanges, of an occurrence of pupils' participation in a typical teacher's initiating move. The pupil understands the teacher's expectations on pupils' behaviour and he anticipates the teacher's utterance:

**T:** – Is there anyone who knows which kind of ...  
Which drawings did we made?

**ST:** – hands up

**T:** – Valentina!

In the following lines the pupil acts as if guiding the drawing of the teacher on the blackboard; she often offers hints and suggestions in a cooperative way, interacting with the teacher in the drawing of the phases of the cycle of the day.

**T:** – With the different (xxx)parts, all right?  
of the day.  
Now I'm not drawing all of them...  
It's the cycle of the day  
In the reading legenda here...what are we going to draw?  
What did we draw?  
Margherita?

**ST(M):** – Eh!...morning

**T:** – Eh! The morning  
we drew the rising sun, didn't we?  
(Noon....noon

**ST(M):** – (Eh! Noon

**T:** – (Noon  
The sun high above in the sky  
sunse... then

**ST(M):** – then (afternoon eh.....

- T:** – (Afternoon  
again the sun, but it is orange  
isn't it?  
(sunset  
ST(M): – (and the evening  
like that  
and the night the moon with stars  
**T:** – Here we are!

In the following lines the teacher is to move into the next stage (giving instructions for the task), when Susanna decides there has been a lack of information on the subject previously discussed (examples of time cycle). She decides to provide it and manages to get her turn, interrupting the teacher's utterance:

- T:** – Now  
you've got to focus on the time you spent at school  
to choose  
tell me Susanna  
**ST(S):** – The hours  
**T:** – the hou...  
good girl  
the hours  
why?

## CONCLUSIONS

The analysis, therefore, seems to confirm a correspondance between a more interactive and meaningful language use at school and learning activities based on task and problem solving: the more the learning activity is task-centred, the more it is likely that it might encourage meaningful interaction on the pupils' side. More specifically, in the sequential organization of classroom discourse, the way partners design their utterances builds up a mechanism of preferredness «that allows conversational interactants (as well as analysts) to infer meaning» (Greenleaf and Freedman, 1993) and, therefore, to improve and facilitate the process of skill learning.

Since talking skills and learning skills are strictly interrelated, especially in the first years of schooling, I believe that this area of research could give important contributions on how language competence is built up in the first years of schooling. Research on classroom discourse might also have applications on teacher training, syllabus design, teaching approaches and methodologies and, more generally, as far as theories on learning are concerned.

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