AN ANALYSIS OF CLASSROOM DISCOURSE

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Several papers and discussions at the recent TESOL Convention in Mexico City demonstrated the growing interest in research into classroom discourse. Although many teachers and educators appear to have great hopes of the immediate application of this research to syllabus design, materials and teacher training, the consensus of opinion among the experts at the Convention was that such hopes were premature. One participant in the Colloquium on Classroom Centred Research stated flatly that "we are still in the stone-age with this thing."

In spite of this surge of interest, many readers in Mexico of this journal may be unfamiliar with ways of analyzing classroom discourse; for this reason it may be of help to show a few extracts from a stone-age attempt to analyze part of two lessons given to students of English as a foreign language in England in early 1977.

After recording and transcribing parts of two lessons, the first problem was to decide which system of analysis to employ (there are already several to choose from), or whether to develop a completely new one. Some, such as Flanders' 10 point system, mix linguistic (e.g. Asks Questions) with other, more subjective categories (e.g. Accepts Feeling). For various reasons it was finally decided to use a more linguistically based system, and the one chosen was published in a book "Towards an Analysis of Discourse: the English used by teachers and pupils" (1975) by J. McH. Sinclair and R. M. Coulthard, who will hereafter be referred to as SC. Their system had been used for analyzing classes in various school subjects, but not with a foreign language class. This meant that modifications had to be made, unfortunately.

Discourse analysists have already generated whole galaxies of neologisms, as well as long lists of categories. Perhaps the best way to begin is to examine an example. (T=teacher; S=student).

T Now. Where are Volkswagens made? Juan.

S In Puebla.

T Yes, good. There is a very large factory in Puebla.

According to the SC system these utterances are called an EXCHANGE, which consists of three MOVES. The first move is known as an initiating move and is usually made by the teacher (as in this case). It is followed by a responding move by the student, and concludes with a feedback move by the teacher, acknowledging the student's response and often adding further information or comment. There are different kinds of exchange, but the above (with Initiation-Response-Feedback moves) is typical of the structure of a teaching exchange, and billions of such exchanges must take place in schools all over the world every day.

The three moves may be analyzed in more detail. The teacher's first word, "Now," has the function of directing students' attention to what he is going to ask; it acts as a marker. His question "Where are Volkswagens made?" acts as an elicitation, requesting a linguistic response. "Juan" nominates the student who is supposed to reply. "In Puebla" is the student's reply. The teacher then says "Yes, good;" this not only accepts the pupil's reply but evaluates it. The teacher then goes on to comment "There is a very large factory in Puebla."

These smaller units (marker, elicitation, nomination, etc.) are called ACTS.

At a higher rank a group of exchanges (an oral drill or a discussion of a particular text, for example) is known as a TRANSACTION. It is difficult to find any discourse structure in the classroom higher than a transaction.

To summarize so far, we have four categories (or ranks) in the following order:

Transactions, which consist of one or more

Exchanges, " " " " " "

Moves, which consists of one or more

Acts.

It should be emphasized that these are not grammatical categories, such as sentence, clause, group, word and morpheme, but operate on a different level. The lowest rank of the discouse hierarchy, the act, is realized by a sentence, clause, etc., but in discourse we are concerned with function rather than grammatical form.

Obviously such an analysis works best in the structured situation of the classroom, where the teacher imposes a pattern of discourse, and particularly in an intensely structured activity such as an oral substitution drill. Let us examine thirty seconds or so of such a drill. The class consisted of 18 young Swiss students in a language school in southern England. They had received about 30 hours of classroom instruction. A transcription was made from a tape of a 15 minute drill; the students were doing first practice of the pattern like+verb-ing.

Here are four typical exchanges:

MOVE		ACT
1. Initiation	T Question. (Mimes)	Cue. (verbal and non-verbal)
	(Points to student)	Nomination. (non-verbal)
Response	S1 Do you like...playing... football?	Elicitation
Feedback	T Good.	Accept and Evaluate
2. Initiation	T Answer	Cue.
	(Points to student)	Nomination.
Response	S2 No...I don't.	Reply.
Feedback	T Right.	Accept and Evaluate

3. Initiation	T	Question	Cue.
		(Points to student)	Nomination.
Response	S3	Do you like washing football	Elicitation 1
	S4	...watching football.	Correction.
	S3	...watching football?	Elicitation 2.
4. Initiation	T	(Points to student	Nomination.
Response	S5	...er...no...I don't	Reply.
Feedback	T	O.K.	Accept and Evaluate.

Even in this simple series of exchanges the unexpected happened: an unsolicited student-to-student correction in Exchange 3. It soon became clear in analyzing the transcription that the category of acts listed by SC was not complete enough to cover such utterances. Nor did it distinguish between a student's response that could have only one correct form and a response that might have several. Even in the substitution drill above, students were able to choose from three possible correct replies: I do/I don't/I don't know. Perhaps it is impossible as yet to take any system of discourse analysis and apply it without modification to the purposes of one's own investigation.

However, clear patterns do emerge. For the substitution drill the commonest pattern was, predictably:

Teacher cues - nominates a student - the student responds - the teacher acknowledges (accepts and/or evaluates).

The same students were taped again after 78 contact hours, but this time the activity was freer; the teacher was trying to encourage the students to ask questions using any question forms they had been taught up to that point. It is no longer so easy to mark the boundaries of exchanges; a student's question and another's reply have now been included in the same exchange.

MOVE			ACT
1. Initiation	T	Where did you go on holiday in 1977?	Elicitation
		(Points to student)	Nomination
Response	S1	I went to San Moritz.	Reply
Feedback	T	San Moritz.	Accept
2. Initiation		Visit...question... visit.	Cue
	S2	(inaudible)	
Initiation	S3	Where's San Moritz?	Elicitation
Response	S1	San Moritz?	
	T	Yes.	
	S1	In Switzerland.	Reply
Feedback	T	Good.	Accept. Evaluate
3. Initiation		Ask her... stay... where...	Cue
Initiation	S4	Is this a town?	Elicitation
Response	S1	Yes...a village?	Reply
Feedback	T	It's a village.	Accept.
	S1	It's a village.	
4. Initiation	S2	Where did you...	Elicitation 1
Initiation	S5	And how much...how many... people...has it?	Elicitation 2
	T	(Whispers)...are there.	Prompt

	S5 ...are there?	
Response	S1 I don't know	Reply
Feedback	T ...don't know.	Accept
	Alright.	Evaluate
5. Initiation	S6 Where did you visit in San Moritz?	Elicitation
Response	S1 I visited Pitzner	Reply 1
	T What?	
	S1 Pitzner	Reply 2
	S7 It's a mountain	Unsolicited comment
	T I what...?	Prompt
	S1 I visited Pitzner.	Reply 3
6. Initiation	S8 (inaudible) ski...with the ski...with the ski.	
	T What? What?	
Initiation	S9 Do you go...you do...you are go...you did go... you did...you are going ...	Elicitation 1
	T (Whispers)...did you go...	Prompt
	S9 Did you go alone?	Elicitation 2
Response	S1 No, I didn't.	Reply

There are several things to notice about these six exchanges. First, in ordinary school classes the initiating move

is almost always made by the teacher (whatever we should like to believe); here in exchanges 4, 5 and 6, students made the initiating move. Moreover, as in real conversation, students competed for a turn: with the teacher, whom they ignored, in exchanges 2 and 3, and with each other in exchanges 4 and 6. The student S9 in exchange 6 was a very determined young lady who refused to allow S8 to formulate his question about skiing. The teacher's normal feedback move becomes unnecessary once the students have really got going; too many interruptions would be unnatural.

The discourse pattern of the acts seems to show that the teacher's role has changed. From being a drill-master whose basic function is to cue and acknowledge students' responses, he has become a kind of consultant, available to prompt when a student is having trouble, as in exchanges 4 and 6. In exchange 5 his question "What?" is misunderstood. He was in fact querying the pronunciation /wizitid/, but S1 thought he had not heard the word "Pitzner," and S7 thought he had heard it but did not know what Pitzner was. The teacher immediately focused on the problem word by asking for a repetition "I what?".

We could go on with this analysis. There are problems such as classifying the Acts in some of the above exchanges. The teacher's intonation in accepting and evaluating is very important and needs transcribing with great care. If, in the first exchange the teacher had used a rising intonation in the feedback move, it would have meant that he was dissatisfied with the form or content of the reply. But this paper is only intended as a brief introduction.

What then is the point of this kind of analysis? Transcribing even a few minutes of EFL classroom discourse is a lengthy and tedious process, so why bother with it? Or, if we are mainly concerned with improving our teaching and the teaching of others, perhaps we should ask: Will such analysis help us to become more effective teachers? Well, first a word of caution. There is no theoretical reason to suppose that patterns of discourse can be related to <u>effective</u> teaching; indeed given the number of variables in classroom interaction, no investigation of this kind — in which only <u>part</u> of the interaction is recorded — is likely to prove in a scientific way that such a relationship can be demonstrated.

Nevertheless it is safe to assume that the more we are aware of in a classroom interaction, the more it will help us, and our students. A varied selection of tapes and transcripts of classes at different levels would provide a goldmine of information, models and examples for discussion. To conclude, here is a thought-provoking example from the second transcription (the teacher is also a folk-singer, by the way):

T More questions. O.K... will you ask <u>me</u> some questions.

S1 What do you read?

T Er...books...I mean...just books...yes.

S1 About?

T Well...there are a lot of novels...a lot of fiction...

S2 Science-fiction?

T Sometimes...only sometimes.

S3 What do you sing about?

T What do I sing about?

I sing folk-songs.

S3 English folk-songs?

T Uhm...yes.

These exchanges are remarkably natural; so natural in fact that they no longer conform to the structure of a teaching exchange, with its initiation-response-feedback moves. The problem is that these, and many other exchanges showed that the students were very good at communicating; their language was very "appropriate": they could even make gentle fun of the teacher and each other. However what often blocked communication

was their lack of fluency in providing the correct grammatical forms (e.g. choosing between Present and Past Tense auxiliaries). It may be that for these educated European students there was no communicative interference in this particular context. Or it may be that we worry too much about communication and should concentrate on grammatical form at least in the first 100 hours.

FURTHER READING

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