Classroom interaction: Possibilities and impossibilities

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Recent communicative approaches have suggested that one goal of Eng-lish language teaching should be to replicate 'genuine' or 'natural' rather than 'typical' or 'traditional' classroom communication. This article argues that such a goal is both paradoxical and unattainable, and that there are serious flaws in the assumptions underlying the communicative ortho-doxy concerning ELT classroom interaction. It also argues that it would be more satisfactory to take an institutional discourse approach, where classroom discourse is regarded as an institutional variety of discourse, in which interactional elements correspond neatly to institutional goals.

Introduction In the 1980s a communicative orthodoxy developed which saw much 'traditional' ELT classroom communication as undesirable by compar-ison with 'genuine' or 'natural' communication. Nunan (1987: 137), for example, examined five exemplary communicative language lessons, and found that 'when the patterns of interaction were examined more closely, they resembled traditional patterns of classroom interaction rather than genuine interaction.' He summed up the results as follows (ibid.: 141):

> . . . there is a growing body of classroom-based research which supports the conclusion drawn here, that there are comparatively few opportunities for genuine communicative language use in second-language classrooms. Thus Long and Sato report: 'ESL teachers continue to emphasize form over meaning, accuracy over commu-nication' (1983: 283). The reader is also referred to Brock 1986; Dinsmore 1985; Long and Crookes 1986; and Pica and Long 1986. A disconfirming study is yet to be documented.

Kumaravadivelu (1993: 12) confirms that this orthodoxy is still prevalent in the 1990s: 'Research studies . . . show that even teachers who are committed to communicative language teaching can fail to create opportunities for genuine interaction in the language classroom' (see also Savignon 1993: 45).

The main assumptions of this orthodoxy can be summarized as follows:

1 There is such a thing as 'genuine' or 'natural' communication (Nunan 1987: 137; Kumaravadivelu 1993: 12; Kramsch 1981: 8).
2 It is possible for EFL teachers to replicate genuine or natural communication in the classroom, but most fail to do so (Nunan 1987: 144; Kumaravadivelu 1993: 12; Kramsch 1981: 18).
3 Most teachers produce interaction which features examples of the

IRF cycle (teacher initiation–learner response–teacher follow-up) and display questions; these are typical of traditional classroom interaction, but rarely occur in genuine or natural communication (Nunan 1987: 141; 1988: 139; Dinsmore 1985: 226–7; Long and Sato 1983: 284).

4 Teachers could be trained to replicate genuine or natural communication in the classroom (Nunan 1987: 144; Kumaravadivelu 1993: 18).

I will now examine each element of this orthodoxy and propose that such serious flaws are evident that its validity needs to be questioned.

Assumption 1 *There is such a thing as genuine or natural communication.*

The words 'genuine' and 'natural', as used in communicative orthodoxy, are not precise sociolinguistic terms. Many writers use them without attempting a definition, but Nunan (1987: 137) does so by suggesting that

> genuine communication is characterized by the uneven distribution of information, the negotiation of meaning (through, for example, clarification requests and confirmation checks), topic nomination and negotiation by more than one speaker, and the right of interlocutors to decide whether to contribute to an interaction or not. In other words, in genuine communication, decisions about who says what to whom and when are up for grabs.

Although Nunan does not actually use the term, this is a reasonable short characterization of free conversation in the terms of the ethnomethodological conversational analysis approach (Sacks *et al.* 1974: 729; Drew and Heritage 1992: 19).

Other authors reinforce the view that what is actually meant by genuine or natural discourse is, in fact, conversation: Kramsch (1981: 17) equates 'natural discourse' with conversation, for instance, and Ellis (1992: 38) equates it with 'naturalistic' discourse:

> It is common to emphasize the differences that exist between pedagogic and naturalistic discourse. A good example of this is to be found in work on turn-taking. In ordinary conversations in English turn-taking is characterized by self-regulated competition and initiative (Sacks *et al.* 1974), whereas in classroom discourse there is frequently a rigid allocation of turns.

Communicative orthodoxy, then, equates genuine or natural communication with conversation, which is a precise sociolinguistic (as well as a lay) term. Since the rest of the article depends on sociolinguistic analysis, I will use it in its sociolinguistic sense.

At first sight, the clear implication in communicative orthodoxy that it is possible for conversation to be produced within the classroom setting looks perfectly reasonable. However, current sociolinguistic theory sees conversation as

a kind of benchmark against which other more formal or 'institutional' types of interaction are recognized and experienced. Explicit within this perspective is the view that other institutional forms of interaction will show systematic variations and restrictions on activities and their design relative to ordinary conversation. (Drew and Heritage 1992: 19).

Conversation, then, is clearly differentiated from the numerous varieties of institutional discourse.

When we rephrase the implication in sociolinguistic terms, therefore, the implication in communicative orthodoxy—that it is possible for conversation (a non-institutional form of discourse) to be produced within the classroom lesson (within an institutional setting)—begins to look unreasonable.

Assumption 2 *It is possible for teachers to replicate genuine or natural communication in the classroom, but most fail to do so.*

I will argue that it is, in theory, not possible for teachers to replicate conversation (in its precise sociolinguistic sense) in the classroom as part of a lesson. Using naturally-occurring conversation data, Warren (1993: 8) develops the following precise and consensual definition of conversation to distinguish conversation from other discourse types:

> A speech event *outside of an institutionalized setting* involving at least two participants who share responsibility for the progress and outcome of an impromptu and unmarked verbal encounter consisting of more than a ritualized exchange. (italics added)

For classroom interaction to be equivalent to free conversation, the following features of naturalness in conversation (paraphrasing Warren) would have to be met: the setting must not be an institutional one; turn-taking and participation rights in conversation must be unrestricted; responsibility for managing and monitoring the progress of the discourse must be shared by all participants; conversations are open-ended, and participants jointly negotiate the topic.

The only way, therefore, in which an ELT lesson could become identical to conversation would be for the learners to regard the teacher as a fellow-conversationalist of identical status rather than as a teacher, for the teacher not to direct the discourse in any way at all, and for the setting to be non-institutional. In other words, no institutional purposes could shape the discourse. The stated purpose of ELT institutions is to teach English to foreigners. As soon as the teacher instructs the learners to 'have a conversation in English', the institutional purpose will be invoked, and the interaction could not be conversation as defined here. To replicate conversation, the lesson would therefore have to cease to be a lesson in any understood sense of the term and become a conversation which did not have any underlying pedagogical purpose, which was not about English or even, in many situations, *in* English.

All this is not to suggest that it is impossible for conversation to take place in the classroom, simply that it cannot occur as part of a lesson. In the vast majority of ELT classrooms around the world, the learners share the same L1. The only conceivable way in which conversation could occur in these monolingual classrooms would be for the learners to converse in their L1. In many multilingual classrooms it would be quite natural for learners to use English to have a conversation. In order for it to be a conversation in the sociolinguistic sense, however, the teacher would not be able to suggest the topic of the discourse or direct it in any way. Such a conversation might just as well take place in the coffee bar as in the classroom.

It is therefore impossible, in theory, for teachers to produce conversation in the classroom as part of a lesson. During the discussion of Assumption 4 I will attempt to demonstrate that this is also impossible in practice.

Assumption 3 *Most teachers produce interaction which features examples of the IRF cycle and display questions; these are typical of traditional classroom interaction, but rarely occur in genuine or natural communication.*

Both Nunan (1987: 137) and Dinsmore (1985: 226) give the presence of the IRF cycle as their initial reason for asserting that there was little genuine communication in the lessons which they observed. An example of the IRF cycle is:

T: Can you tell me what are the three parts of the description she gives about this man?
L: His character?
T: Yes, character.
(Van Lier 1988: 202)

Dinsmore (1985: 227) claims that the prevalence of the IRF cycle and the unequal power distribution 'hardly seems compatible with a "communicative" language teaching methodology'.

Writing about the communicative language lessons be examined, Nunan (1987: 137) says that

On the surface, the lessons appeared to conform to the sorts of communicative principles advocated in the literature. However, when the patterns of interaction were examined more closely, they resembled traditional patterns of classroom interaction other than genuine interaction. Thus, the most commonly occurring pattern of interaction was identical with the basic exchange structure . . . teacher initiation, learner response, teacher follow-up.

It is certainly true that the IRF cycle is normally noticeably absent from adult–adult conversation, and I have already argued that it is impossible to replicate conversation in the classroom. However, it is important to note that the IRF cycle is very noticeably present in a particular discourse setting outside the classroom, namely in the home in parent–

child interaction.

Examples of the IRF cycle are to be found in virtually every published collection of transcripts of parent–child conversation. The interactional structure cannot be differentiated from that which takes place in the ELT classroom:

(Mother and Kevin look at pictures)
M: And what are those?
K: Shells.
M: Shells, yes. You've got some shells, haven't you? What's that?
K: Milk.
(Harris and Coltheart 1986: 50)

Further transcripts containing examples of the IRF cycle in adult–child conversation outside the classroom can be found in Painter (1989: 38), Nelson (1983: 15), Wells Lindfors (1987: 114), and Wells and Montgomery (1981: 211).

It appears that critics of the IRF cycle in L2 learning contexts have failed to notice the significant role it plays in L1 learning in a home environment. Ellis (1992: 37) reports that:

Much of the (L2 acquisition) research which has taken place has been motivated by the assumption that classroom L2 acquisition will be most successful if the environmental conditions which are to be found in naturalistic acquisition prevail. According to this view, all that is needed to create an acquisition-rich environment is to stop interfering in the learning process and to *create opportunities for learners to engage in interactions of the kind experienced by children acquiring their L1.* (italics added)

Given the prominence of the IRF cycle in parent–child interaction, one might therefore have expected communicative theorists to be actively promoting the use of the IRF cycle rather than attempting to banish it.

Display questions (to which the teacher knows the answer) have come in for the same type of criticism as the IRF cycle. Nunan (1988: 139) states that one of the characteristics of genuine communication is the use of referential questions (to which the teacher does not know the answer), and that one of the reasons the patterns of interaction in the lessons he observed are non-communicative is that the questions are almost exclusively of the display type. Nunan's (1987: 142) conclusion was that 'increasing the use of referential questions over display questions is likely to stimulate a greater quantity of genuine classroom interaction'. This has been challenged by Van Lier (1988: 222–3), who argues that there is little difference, in interactional terms, between a display question and a referential question. As with the IRF cycle, display questions 'are also very common in adult–child talk in the pre-school years' (Maclure and French 1981: 211). An example can be found in Painter (1989: 38):

(Mother and Hal, aged 19 months, are reading)

M: What's this Hal?

H: Bunny.

M: Yes; bunny's sleeping.

In the classroom and in parent–child interaction, the core goal is learning or education, and both the IRF cycle and display questions are interactional features well suited to this core goal. The business of learning is accomplished through these features (Drew and Heritage 1992: 41), whether it takes place at home, in L1 learning, or in the ELT classroom, learning an L2.

Assumption 4   *Teachers could be trained to replicate genuine or natural communication in the classroom.*

In Assumption 2 I argued that it is in theory impossible for teachers to replicate conversation in the classroom as part of a lesson. It follows that it is not possible to train teachers to do so. I will now examine a classroom extract in which the teacher has succeeded in replicating interaction which is ostensibly as close to conversation as possible, and attempt to demonstrate that it is not, in fact, conversation (if we are to use precise sociolinguistic terms) but classroom discourse. In this extract the learners are discussing women's fashion photographs. The teacher does not take part in the interaction:

L1: I like this fashion because I can wear it for sleep not to go anywhere.

L2: Ooh!

L3: I like this fashion.

L2: I like this.

L4: Why?

L5: I like this.

L2: Because . . . because . . .

L1: The girl . . .

L4: This is good this fashion.

L2: This is a beautiful skirt.

L1: Beautiful, but when I done it . . . I put it long long but . . .

L4: This one better than that one. Who like this one?

L1: Aah, I like this.

(Warren 1985: 223)

The interaction seems highly communicative: in fact the interaction corresponds neatly (on the surface) to Nunan's (1987) characterization of 'genuine communication' or conversation. The point is, however, that the linguistic forms and patterns the learners produced were directly related to the pedagogical purposes which the teacher introduced, even though the teacher did not participate in the interaction. Warren states clearly what his pedagogical purposes were: the photographs were selected in order to motivate the students and the activity was devised 'to stimulate natural discourse in the classroom' (p. 45); 'the only instruction was that the students should look at the photographs and that

anything they might say had to be in English' (p. 47). Warren hoped that the exercise 'might lead to the voicing of likes and dislikes' (p. 45).

Whatever methods the teacher is using—and even if the teacher claims to be relinquishing control of the classroom interaction—the linguistic forms and patterns of interaction which the learners produce will inevitably be linked in some way to the pedagogical purposes which the teacher introduces. So although the above extract appears superficially to have the characteristics of conversation, when it is seen in context it is a clear example of institutional interaction.

There would appear to be an inherent paradox in the communicative orthodoxy: communicative theorists would like to see teachers introducing the pedagogical purpose of replicating genuine discourse or conversation. But as soon as the teacher has introduced any pedagogical purpose at all, even if the instruction is to 'have a conversation in English', he or she has ensured that what will occur will be institutional discourse rather than conversation. We might go so far as to propose that a paradoxical institutional aim of communicative language teaching is to produce non-institutional discourse in an institutional setting.

An institutional discourse approach I would like to suggest that a move towards viewing ELT classroom interaction as a variety of institutional discourse would be preferable to the communicative orthodoxy. The following is a brief characterization of institutional discourse:

1 Institutional interaction involves an orientation by at least one of the participants to some core goal, task, or identity (or set of them) conventionally associated with the institution in question. In short, institutional talk is normally informed by goal orientations of a relatively restricted conventional form.

2 Institutional interaction may often involve special and particular constraints on what one or both of the participants will treat as allowable contributions to the business at hand.

3 Institutional talk may be associated with inferential frameworks and procedures that are particular to specific institutional contexts.

(Drew and Heritage 1992: 22)

From an institutional discourse perspective, one would try to understand how noticeable procedures and interactional features, such as the IRF cycle and display questions, relate to the core institutional goal, rather than dismissing them as undesirable or not genuine. The institutional character of the interaction is seen to be embodied in its form, and one would try to understand how the institutional business is carried out through the interactional forms.

One might attempt to establish what the universal and distinctive characteristics of classroom interaction are, and to explain how these characteristics accomplish the institutional business. For example, there are three distinctive underlying characteristics of ELT classroom discourse which may apply to all ELT classrooms:

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1 The linguistic forms and patterns of interaction which the learners produce are subject to evaluation by the teacher in some way.
2 Language is both the vehicle and object of instruction.
3 The linguistic forms and patterns of interaction which the learners produce will be linked in some way to the pedagogical purposes which the teacher introduces.

One might attempt to understand how these characteristics relate (on a macro level) to the institutional goal, and how they relate (on a micro level) to the discourse produced in the classroom.

Conclusion This analysis has revealed the fundamental problems and paradoxes inherent in any approach which compares typical classroom discourse unfavourably with conversation or with any other variety of discourse. Classroom communication is a sociolinguistic variety or institutional discourse type like any other, and has not been regarded as inferior or less 'real' by sociolinguists: quite the opposite. When Sinclair and Coulthard (1975) wanted to gather data to build a model for discourse analysis, they chose to record classroom communication. Hymes (1972: Introduction) wrote that 'Studying language in the classroom is not really "applied" linguistics; it is really basic research. Progress in understanding language in the classroom is progress in linguistic theory.' There is no basis or mechanism in sociolinguistics for evaluating one variety of discourse as better, more genuine or more natural than another: the concept is a purely pedagogical one. A basic problem with communicative orthodoxy was the belief that it was possible to use terms like 'genuine' and 'natural', derived from pedagogy, to describe a sociolinguistic phenomenon such as discourse.

It is likely that the communicative orthodoxy outlined above has resulted in a large number of teachers feeling guilty about the nature of communication in their own classrooms, and suspicious of researchers wanting to record their lessons. It would be reasonable to conclude that ELT teachers who produce 'typical' ELT classroom interaction do not, in fact, have anything to feel guilty about.

It is suggested that a preferable, sociolinguistic approach to communication in the classroom would be to see it as an institutional variety of discourse produced by a speech community or communities convened for the institutional purpose of learning English, working within particular speech exchange systems suited to that purpose. The discourse displays certain distinctive and characteristic features which are related to the institutional purpose.

In other words, it would be more fruitful for ELT classroom research to concentrate on understanding the possibilities inherent in our variety of institutional discourse, than to aim at impossibilities.

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