Training in instructional conversation

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Teacher-learner interaction

In their pioneering study of teacher-learner interaction, Sinclair and Brazil (1982) concluded that learners 'have only very restricted opportunities to participate in the language of the classroom'. In similar vein, Nunan (1987: 144) claimed that 'there is growing evidence that, in communicative classes, interactions may, in fact, not be very communicative after all'. The growing evidence Nunan adduces includes studies that characterise teacher-learner interaction as being almost entirely teacher-led and dominated, and as consisting largely of IRF (initiate-response-follow up) sequences, of which the initiating element is almost always a display question (as opposed to a referential one). Nunan (1989: 26), for example, claims 'it has been shown that teachers talk for up to 89 per cent of the available time' while Wells (1999) cites a figure of 70 per cent of all teacher-learner talk as being of the IRF type. Similarly, Long and Sato (1983) found that 79 per cent of teacher-learner questions were display questions.

In the light of such findings, the following sequence (from Nunan 1990) would seem to be fairly representative:

Extract 1: *Clothes*

T: [...] Anything else? Hair. Height. What about this? (Gestures to clothing)
S: Clothes.
T: Clothes. Clothes.
S: (Inaud.)
T: What's the question? (Inaud.) Not colour. What's the question for clothes, you ask — the question — for clothes? What... The question. Come on, we did this last week. Can you remember? The question?
S: What clothes do you like?
S: What kind of clothes do you like?
T: Not like.
S: Wear.
T: Wear, yeah. What's the question? Wear.

S:	What kind of a...
S:	What ...
S:	Where do you buy ...
T:	Wear. No, not where do you buy. Clothes.
S:	What clothes do you usually wear.
T:	Good question — what clothes do you usually wear? What about now — what? What's the question now what...?
S:	What do you wear?
T:	What do you wear? No. What...? Question. Now. Me. What.
S:	Clothes. What.
T:	What's the question? Wear. What. Not do. Not do. What ...? OK, let's think of the answer. What're these? (Gestures to trousers).
S:	Pants. Clothes.
T:	Trousers. Trousers.
S:	Trousers. Trousers.
T:	Colour?
S:	Green.
T:	Green, green, OK. Green trousers. Sentence!
S.	What colour are you...
T:	Not question, sentence!
S:	You, you wear wear, you are wearing ...
T.	Joe.
S.	You are wearing the green trousers.
T:	Ok, I'm wearing ... I'm wearing ... green trousers. I'm wearing green trousers. What's the question? What...?
Ss:	...are you wearing.
T:	What're you wearing? What're you wearing? What're you wearing? Everyone.
Ss:	What are you wearing?
	[pp. 18–19]

A positive gloss of this extract would highlight the scaffolding of instruction that the teacher provides through her questions, and the way in which learners are actively involved in achieving an instructional goal. Better this dialogic mode than a monologic lecture on the form and use of the present continuous.

A less charitable view might wonder at the efficiency of this sequence relative to the (fairly trivial) goal achieved, both with regard to the time expended and the probable cost in terms of learner and teacher patience. Worse: if such sequences comprise the major part of all teacher-learner inter-

action, as the research studies suggest they do, it is hard to imagine where learning opportunities (or *affordances*) occur. Van Lier (2001: 96) observes that 'student's opportunities to exercise initiative ... or to develop a sense of control and self-regulation (a sense of ownership of the discourse, a sense of being empowered) are extremely restricted in the IRF format'. Yet, according to Ellis (1998), it is precisely through having ownership of the discourse that learning opportunities are mediated. It is not enough simply to be *engaged* in conversational discourse; learners need to have opportunities to *control* the discourse, through, for example, *topicalization*: 'the process by which learners take up what the teacher (or another learner) has said and make it into a sub-topic of their own' (Ellis 1998: 153). Ellis draws on both Long's (1983) interaction hypothesis and Vygotskian social-cognitive theory to support his claim that the way in which classroom discourse is constructed and negotiated can affect acquisition. Vygotskian theory in particular, and its belief that learning opportunities are maximised when the learner's performance is *scaffolded* by a more capable other in the *zone of proximal development*, suggests why learner control of the discourse is so important: 'It provides the teacher with information regarding what learners are capable of saying on their own. This helps the teacher to identify what speech forms may lie within the learners' zone of proximal development and provides a basis for determining the kind of scaffolding needed to assist the learner to use and subsequently internalize more complex language' (ibid.:162). (See Grundy, previous chapter, on the importance of teacher awareness of learners' reflexive language.)

Discourse vs metadiscourse

Why, though, do teachers seem so reluctant to relinquish the reins of classroom talk? Why are instructional sequences like *Clothes* so common? There are a number of related reasons, but perhaps all can be traced to issues of control and, ultimately, power. Faced with the *unpredictability, multidimensionality* and *simultaneity* of the classroom ecology (Doyle 1977), teachers — especially inexperienced ones — opt for behaviours that minimise the potential for disruption, even at the cost of student involvement and motivation. One behaviour typically associated with high teacher-control is the transmission of subject matter knowledge. In a transmission model of education the goal of instruction is seen as 'an act of transmitting existing knowledge [and] minimising the part actively played by pupils' (Barnes 1976: 149). In the case of

language teaching, 'existing knowledge' is essentially grammar. Elicit-and-drill routines, such as the one cited above (*Clothes*), are symptomatic of a classroom culture that is fixated on grammatical form. Despite the superficially interactive nature of the exchange, the teacher's and students' efforts are wholly directed at (re-)producing linguistic forms. With this purpose in mind, the teacher (in the *Clothes* extract) controls the direction and content of the interaction and her questions are all display questions. The aim is the accurate (re-) production of preselected linguistic forms. Metalinguistic terms are used to shape the interaction. The teacher's response to learners' utterances is confined solely to feedback on their accuracy or appropriacy within the elicitation framework she has established. Reference beyond the immediate instructional context is limited to reference to previous instruction ('We did this last week'). (Significantly, the teacher's comment encodes previous instruction in terms that both reify lesson content, and construe the learning process as consisting of an accumulation of incremental steps, as in *We did the present perfect; we covered the third conditional,* etc. See Thornbury (2000).

The discourse that characterises grammar-driven teaching, and of which *Clothes* is a representative example, is not so much discourse as metadiscourse (Scollon and Scollon 1995). Teachers and their students don't 'talk language'; they talk *about* language, and even so-called production activities are, as Johnson (1996, citing Prabhu), points out, less production than *re*production activities. As Legutke and Thomas (1991: 8–9) observe: 'Very little is actually communicated in the L2 classroom. The way it is structured does not seem to stimulate the wish of learners to say something, nor does it tap what they might have to say. ... Learners do not find room to speak as themselves, to use language in communicative encounters, to create text, to stimulate responses from fellow learners, or to find solutions to relevant problems.'

Whether intentional or not, this preoccupation with grammatical form is also consistent with what Giroux (1997: 21) has called the *culture of positivism.* According to a positivist view, 'knowledge ... becomes not only countable and measurable, it also becomes impersonal. Teaching in this pedagogical paradigm is usually discipline based and treats subject matter in a compartmentalized and atomized fashion'. The effect of such an approach is to construe the learner as being at the receiving end of a production line of transmittable 'facts':

> There is little in the positivist pedagogical model that encourages students to generate their own meanings, to capitalize on their own cultural capital, or to participate in evaluating their own classroom experiences. The principles of order, control, and certainty in positivist pedagogy appear inherently opposed to such an approach (ibid.:25).

Whether motivated or not initially by the teacher's need to control the direction of the lesson, a teacher-driven, grammar-focused pedagogy is readily accommodated into an educational culture that prioritises control, discipline, assessment and cultural reproduction. This culture of positivism is further reinforced and perpetuated by the global marketing of teaching materials that are predicated on a compartmentalized and atomized view of language. In using these materials, teachers become — wittingly or unwittingly — complicit in a grammar delivery system that threatens to reduce the learner to the role of consumer of 'grammar McNuggets' (Thornbury 2000). If authentic language use occurs at all in such a pedagogy, it is in the interstices and marginalia of lessons. The net effect is best summed up in the words of one student who complained: 'Our teacher never talks to us.'

It has been argued (e.g. by Seedhouse 1996, Cullen 1997) that teachers *cannot* talk to students, that the sociocultural nature of the classroom precludes real talk of the kind advocated by, for example, Legutke and Thomas, and that the interactional style of the kind exemplified in the *Clothes* extract is a specific institutional variety of discourse designed to fulfil specific institutional goals.

It is exactly these goals that I am questioning. If it were simply the case that language teaching was the transmission of discrete items of knowledge, then perhaps — just perhaps — the reliance on elicit-and-drill sequences might be appropriate. But language teaching — if it is to provide opportunities for *languaging* (cf. Joseph, this volume), i.e. the proceduralization of language knowledge — requires more than this. Metadiscourse without discourse is like meta-swimming without swimming.

Goals, context, and discourse

If, as Seedhouse (op. cit.) argues, the institutional goals determine and constrain the nature of the discourse, then perhaps the goals need to be changed, or, at least, re-negotiated. Goals that are formulated solely in terms of the transmission of grammar 'McNuggets' are incompatible with a view of language learning that prioritises 'language socialisation' (Roberts 2001). If, on the other hand, it is the sociocultural nature of the classroom that determines the way the discourse is managed, then the classroom context, including the relationship between its interactants, may need to be critically examined, even at the most basic level. Do, for example, the learners know each others' names?

Are they sitting so that they can see one another? Is the teacher seated with the learners? and so on.

If, conversely, one takes the view that it is the discourse that determines the sociocultural nature of the classroom, serving both to establish and maintain a non-symmetrical classroom culture, then maybe the discourse should be changed. This is the thinking underlying Wells' (1999: 10) concept of dialogic teaching in which a Hallidayan perspective is adopted in order to effect changes in the classroom discourse formations: 'Teachers are not entirely constrained by traditional definitions of the situation types that constitute a typical 'lesson'. By making different choices from their meaning potential, particularly with respect to tenor and mode, they can significantly change the register and genre that prevail and thereby create different learning opportunities for their students.' At the level of question types, the effect of training teachers to ask a greater number of referential questions was examined by Brock (1986: 55) who found that 'learners' responses to referential questions were on average more than twice as long and more than twice as syntactically complex as their responses to display questions, which led her to conclude that 'such questions may be an important tool in the language classroom, especially in those contexts in which the classroom provides learners with their only opportunity to produce the target language' (ibid.:56).

Training for 'a pedagogy of possibility'

The approach we take on the in-service Diploma courses we run at International House, Barcelona, acknowledges the interdependency of goals, context and discourse, and attempts both to examine how these elements work and to explore the extent to which they might be re-worked, in the interests of what we call big-C CLT (Thornbury 1996a). Nevertheless, we recognise that educational goals, contexts, and discourses are nested within larger cultural, political and ideological constructs, and that the approach we have taken may not easily translate to other contexts. At the same time, in attempting to shape curriculum change our perspective has always been from the vantage point of the learners themselves, inasmuch as we can locate it, and a starting point in training is to encourage trainees to gauge their learners' responses to instruction, through, for example, the use of interactive learner diaries (see Gray 1998). It is from one of these that the following comment comes:

> I enjoy more when a teacher sits down in front of us and explains a real thing that
> happened to him/her and then he asks us for similar situations that we can have
> gone through...

The *goals* of teaching EFL we address primarily in the course content, through contrasting, from the outset, form-driven and meaning-driven models of instruction. A basic distinction is made between error pre-emptive, discrete-item, grammar-driven models, where instruction is premised on what learners *don't know,* and a learner language responsive, task-based model, where instruction is premised on what learners *can do.* In the former model, since there is always something that the learners don't know, a culture of dependency is created. In the latter, since there is always something that the learners can do, a culture of possibility is nurtured (cf. Widdowson, this volume, on the learners' need to invest in meaning *potential*).

At the same time, we attempt to shift the teachers' perceptions of the goals of instruction from a concern for transmission of the (native speaker) *user's* grammar, to a concern for fostering the emergence of the *learners'* grammar (Cook 1999). This involves analysing examples of learner interlanguage in terms of what the learners achieve (rather than what they fail to achieve) and through studying the inherent systematicity of their interlanguage, as opposed to its lack of conformity to privileged native speaker norms. It also involves a critical analysis of coursebook prescriptions regarding grammar, particularly where these provide evidence of a restrictive, deficit model of pedagogy and/or make false claims about usage, as in the following examples:

> Don't let the false beginners dominate the real beginners or pull you along too
> quickly... Encourage [the false beginners] to concentrate on areas where they can
> improve (e.g. pronunciation) and don't let them think they know it all! (Oxenden
> and Seligson 1996: 15).

> Some false beginners may want to use *will* to express the future. Explain that we
> use *going to* for plans. It's the most useful future form. *Will* is taught in [book] 2.
> (ibid.:109).[1]

Translating a pedagogy of possibility into the classroom *context* is realised through the teaching practice component. We take the view that the classroom is 'an arena of human interactions' (Prabhu 1992: 230) in which, as Kumaravadivelu (1993: 13) puts it, 'teachers and learners are co-participants in the generation of classroom discourse'. It is our experience that materials — especially those designed to reinforce a grammatical agenda — often interfere in this process. Instead of over-relying on materials, teachers are encour-

aged to exploit the content that the co-participants bring to the classroom. This may take the form of *reconstruction* tasks, where the teacher's text (such as a personal anecdote) is reconstructed by the students, or *reformulation,* where the students' texts (e.g. their stories) are reformulated by the teacher (Thornbury 1997).

Such an approach does *not* mean that the teacher takes a 'back-seat' role in the classroom, abdicating his or her authority and expertise. As van Lier (2001: 104) points out: 'The answer to a disproportionate amount of highly controlling and depersonalized teacher talk is not to minimize all teacher talk per se but to find ways to modify it in more contingent directions.' Hence, the teacher's role is construed less in 'transmission' than in 'interpretation' terms (Barnes 1976: 144), where a defining characteristic of the 'interpretation' teacher is that he or she 'perceives the teacher's task to be the setting up of a dialogue in which the learner can reshape his knowledge through interactions with others'.

Instructional conversation

At the *discourse* level, such an approach requires 'basic conversational processes, adapted for the formal, public nature of the classroom' (Jarvis & Robinson 1997: 220). This seems to approximate both to Barnes' (op. cit.) notion of 'exploratory talk', and to what Tharp and Gallimore (1988: 111) call 'instructional conversation':

> 'Instruction' and 'conversation' appear contrary, the one implying authority and planning, the other equality and responsiveness. The task of teaching is to resolve the paradox. To most truly teach, one must converse; to truly converse is to teach.

Note that such a classroom discourse is not *simply* conversation. Instructional affordances are embedded within the talk 'as when the teacher side-tracks to explain the meaning of a lexical item or deal with a grammatical problem' (Ellis 1990: 171). The joint construction of meaning is not incompatible with a focus on form, but the form need not be pre-selected much less the primary vector of the lesson. Rather, a form focus is realised by means of what Cazden (1992: 14) terms an *instructional detour,* i.e. 'the prior establishment of a main road of meaningful language use, to which the detour is a momentary diversion when needed'.

Teachers need to be alert to whatever opportunities arise to take these instructional detours and capable of responding spontaneously and efficiently

(which assumes sophisticated language awareness and error analysis skills). They need to be capable, too, of relaxing their hold on the lesson, in the interests of devolving greater learner control: 'Opportunities for giving learners control of the discourse will arise naturally in the course of a language lesson. The extent to which teachers grasp these opportunities, for example by permitting learner topicalizations, may well prove more crucial for creating the optimal conditions for acquisition to take place than any planned decisions they make.' (Ellis 1998: 166).

Reactive teaching can be trained, to a certain extent, but it assumes a willingness on the part of the teacher to relinquish a degree of 'planned-ness' in their teaching, to *teach* less, even to *talk* more, responding to the on-line needs of their learners as they engage in meaningful, message-focused, tasks. At the same time, it requires of the teacher an awareness of the discourse features of supportive, scaffolding teacher talk. This is the object of a 'teacher-talk' project (described in Thornbury 1996b), in which trainees record, transcribe and evaluate a segment of teacher-fronted classroom talk. The following extract from one of these projects demonstrates well, I think, how classroom talk can achieve the 'contingency' (to borrow van Lier's term) of naturally occurring conversation, while at the same time it can incorporate an explicit instructional component. Note the learner-initiated topic shift (turn 3); the number of referential questions on the part of the teacher (turns 4, 6, 12, 14, 20, 25); the clarification requests (turns 8, 14, 23); the learner-initiated questions (turns 15, 25, 28) and the embedded instructional 'detours' (turns 10, 17, 20). The talk is supported ('scaffolded') by the teacher, but not in the traditional IRF framework. Moreover, topic control is entirely learner-initiated and driven. It is, in short, instructional conversation:

Extract 2. *'Barrancking'*
S1:   What about go to mountains?
 T: What about...?
S1:   What about going to mountains, we can do 'barrancking' [Ss laugh]
 T: What's 'barrancking'?
S2:   Is a sport.
 T: Yes, but what do you do exactly?
S3:   You have a river, a small river and [gestures]
 T: Goes down?
S3:   Yes, as a cataract
 T: OK, a waterfall [writes it on board] What's a waterfall, Manel? Can you give me an example? A famous waterfall [draws]

S1:   Like Niagara?

T: OK. So what do you do with the waterfall?

S4:   You go down.

T: What? In a boat?

S4:   No, no, with a ... ¿como se dice cuerda?

S3:   Cord.

T: No, rope, a cord is smaller, like at the window, look [points]

S4:   Rope, rope, you go down rope in waterfall.

S2:   You wear ... 'black clothes' [mispronounced]

T: Black clothes. Repeat [student repeats] ... [...] This sounds dangerous, is it dangerous?

Ss: No no

S3:   Is in summer, no much water

T: Sorry?

S3:   Poco ... poco ... little water, river is not strong

T: OK ... and you have done this? What's it called in Spanish?

S4:   Barranquismo. In English?

T: I don't know. I'll have to ask somebody.

S2:   It is good, you come? ¿Como es dìu? Let's go together.

T: I don't think so [laughs]

S4:   Yes, yes, you come, we can go in summer

T: Well, in the summer, not now, it's too cold

Ss: No no

      [author's data]

Note

1. On the basis of corpus evidence, Biber *et al.* (1999: 490) demonstrate that not only is *will* the most common modal verb in English, but that it is by far the most common way of expressing future time across all registers. While g*oing to* is relatively common in conversation, it 'is rarely used in written exposition'.

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