

Classroom Discourse and Effective Learning of Students

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Abstract

The term ‘classroom discourse,’ refers to all forms of talk that occurs inside the classroom and comprises the verbal as well as the non-verbal elements of discourse. The verbal element of discourse includes the language used by the teacher and the students, as well as teacher-student and student-student interactions. The non-verbal element of discourse includes non-lexical components of communication like gestures, prosody, and silence etc. The verbal and nonverbal elements together form the observable aspect of classroom discourse. Classroom discourse is often different in form and function from language used in other situations because of particular social roles which learners and teachers have in classrooms and the kind of activities they usually carry out there. The purpose of this present paper is to discuss the concept of classroom discourse and its elements in order to show its effect on student’s learning. The focus is on pattern and strategies of interactions between teachers and students for describing, identifying and operationalizing meaningful regularities in their discourse.

Keywords: Classroom discourse, language, meaning, verbal, interaction

Language is an extremely powerful tool; not only in everyday life, but in the classroom as well. Learning is very much a social interaction, thus language plays a very important role in the classroom. As Johnston (2004) stated in his book *Choice Words: How Language Affects Children’s Learning*, through the use of language, teachers can “build emotionally and

relationally healthy learning communities—intellectual environments that produce not mere technical competence, but caring, secure, actively literate human beings” (p. 2). Many people argue that learning is a social activity. Halliday (1993) states that “the distinctive characteristic of human learning is that it is a process of making meaning—a semiotic process; and the prototypical form of human semiotic is language. Hence the ontogenesis of language is at the same time the ontogenesis of learning” (Halliday, 1993, p. 93). He also goes on to say that “language is the essential condition of knowing, the process by which experience becomes knowledge” (Halliday, 1993, p. 94). Language, in other words, is how we think. It's how we process information and remember. It's our operating system. Vygotsky (1962) suggested that thinking develops into words in a number of phases, moving from imaging to inner speech to inner speaking to speech. Tracing this idea backward, speech—talk—is the representation of thinking. As such, it seems reasonable to suggest that classrooms should be filled with talk, given that we want them filled with thinking. Vygotsky explains the interaction between learning and development, among which the concept of the zone of proximal development (ZPD) is the central idea and he defines it as “the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers” (Vygotsky, 1978:86). He also claims that speech plays a crucial role in children’s learning in the ZPD. In compliance to Vygotsky’s theory, M.A.K.Halliday in “Explorations in the Functions of Language” argues that discourse plays a vital role at all levels of education. In addition to this, Wells (1999:xiii-36) points out that Vygotsky stresses more in the ways language influences mental functions and how language functions inner speech, while Halliday pays more attention to ‘language in its social uses’, ‘the relationships between spoken and written texts’, and ‘the situations in which languages are created and interpreted’. His functional approach contributes to establish some general principles about the use of language. First, the ideational function of language serves for the expression of context; second, the interpersonal function works when language is used as a means of intrusion into the speech event; third, textual function enables language to make links with the internal organization of sentences and its meaning (Halliday, 1976:105-7). Classroom Interactional Competence (CIC) is defined as, ‘Teachers’ and learners’ ability to use interaction as a tool for mediating and assisting learning’

(Walsh 2011, p: 158). It puts interaction firmly at the centre of teaching and learning and argues that by improving their CIC, both teachers and learners will immediately improve learning and opportunities for learning.

Classroom talk has been characterized as a speech exchange system which is institutional in nature with highly predictable patterns. For example, the teacher is the initiator of language exchanges; the students' job is to respond to the teacher's initiation; and the teacher is the arbiter of acceptable student performance (Long, 1975). This three-part structure – teacher initiation/student reply/teacher feedback (IRF) – has been identified by Mehan (1979) and Sinclair and Coulthard (1975) as the dominant pattern in most classroom interactions. Behind this institutional discourse sequence, there are always “restrictions on who may speak, when they may speak, and sometimes in what order they may speak” (Psathas, 1995, p. 36). The need for teachers to generate different interaction patterns in the classroom to better equip students to meet the varied demands of the less predictable, more variegated, and context-sensitive nature of everyday social discourse, as well as to enable students to experience language use with different roles and identities so that “student's initiative, independent thinking, clarity of expression, the development of conversational skills (including turn taking, planning ahead, negotiating, and arguing), and self-determination” will not be reduced (van Lier, 1996, p. 156). In an institutional setting, the classroom small talk is non-institutional in nature. By non-institutional, I mean that it involves informal interactions between teachers and students that are not intended for formal pedagogical purposes. In educational settings, this type of talk has also been referred to as social talk, which, according to Biggs and Edwards (1994), has much in common with open-ended interactions in its function of developing “mutual trust and respect between students and teacher [in a] friendly non-threatening atmosphere” (p. 86).

According to van Lier (1988), participants in small talk are free to show their individuality and creativity within a loose kind of frame, or sets of rules for talk. All conversationalists will find “a certain amount of leeway to do what they think they are best at, but at the same time conform to the basic unstated rules” (p. 151). Therefore, small talk may allow learners to perform their speaking roles with a high degree of flexibility while not being completely directionless. By creating opportunities for participation and intellectual engagement,

standardized classroom routines are large determinants of the conceptual meaning students make. Cazden argued that in recent discussions there has been an emphasis on the shift to more self selection by students, a move from pre-determination of turns by the teacher to more local management of turn taking during speaking. According to him “with this shift, classroom talk becomes more like informal conversation, not the same as conversation, because there is still the large group of potential speakers and the educational necessity to stick to an agenda” . He also claimed that the previous pattern of classroom discourse; Initiation, Response, and Evaluation have been the “default pattern” or the “unmarked” one which seems to be natural at least to some teachers (Faruji, 2011, p. 1820). In this pattern the students are often limited to a responding role with only one chance of speaking and there may be few opportunities for students to practice communicative strategies.

Classroom dialogue mainly attempts to make concentration and involvement compulsory and to link talk into a meaningful order. Robin Alexander suggests five principles or criteria of dialogic teaching: (i) collective: teachers and children address learning tasks together, whether as a group or as a class; (ii)reciprocal: teachers and children listen to each other, share ideas and consider alternative viewpoints; (iii)supportive: children articulate their ideas freely, without fear of embarrassment over wrong answers; and they help each other to reach common understandings; (iv)cumulative: teachers and children build on their own and each others’ ideas and chain them into coherent lines of thinking and enquiry; (v)purposeful: teachers plan and steer classroom talk with specific educational goals in view (2005,p.14). Classroom conversation is frequently used to check comprehension rather than develop thinking. Teachers rely primarily on questioning to check learner understands. Questioning is an important tool that teachers have, but students also need opportunities for dialogue if they want to learn. And, unfortunately, most questioning uses an initiate–respond–evaluate cycle in which teachers initiate a question, a student responds, and then the teacher evaluates the answer. For effective learning Moore (2001; pp.200-209) suggested three levels of questions (monitoring talk) i.e. focusing, prompting and probing questions and by level he derived four levels based on Bloom’s taxonomy namely; factual, empirical, productive and evaluative. Focusing questions were meant to get the students’ attention focused on the lesson at hand by arousing interest, exploring previous knowledge or

linking to daily life. Prompting questions are used when students' fail to respond correctly to the teacher's question in the first place and probing questions are used to urge students to furnish more details, think thoroughly, and clarify their previous answer (Mahmood and Rana, 2006, p.23-24). The description of question types by level is described in the following Table as suggested by Moore.

Table 1

Category	Bloom's Taxonomy	Type of thinking	Examples
Factual	Knowledge or comprehension	Student simply recall information	Define...? Who was ...? What did the text say ...?
Empirical	Application or analysis	Student integrate and analyzes given or recalled information	Compare ...? Explain in your words ...? Calculate the ...?
Productive	Synthesis	Students thinks creatively and imaginatively and produces something unique	What will life be like ...? What's good name for ...? How could we ...?
Evaluative	Evaluation	Students make judgment or express value	Which method is most suitable...? Why do you favor ...? Who is the best ...?

Source: adapted from Constructivist Classroom: Elements of Class Discourse as Measure of Constructivist Practice (Mahmood and Rana, 2006, p.23-24)

For the teacher to realize their central role in the scaffolding process, by building on what children know and providing them with opportunities to interact with and learn from their environment, they will need to have the requisite skills. Wells describes these skills as listening and questioning (Wells, 1995). It is through listening that the teacher can grasp the child's thinking, which enables them to either address difficulties or to present new challenges. Similarly they will need to provide a learning environment which encourages children to articulate their ideas, and here one key strategy will be effective questioning. Teacher questions have long been emphasised as central to educational practice, and McNamara suggests that views as to the nature of those questions have not changed much in the last century (McNamara, 1981). Wood describes how teachers ask questions every two minutes, with 44% of all teacher inputs ending with a question (Wood, 1992). Accordingly, emphasis is placed on teacher questioning in the classroom discourse literature and this is reflected in the design of my classroom observation tools.

The work of Sinclair and Coulthard, which has been particularly influential in relation to classroom interaction, also emphasises the role of questions in teacher initiation (Sinclair and Coulthard, 1975). By asking questions, teachers can elicit information from their pupils, and help them to probe, revise and consolidate their original ideas. Wood also talks of the role of questions in motivating, sustaining and directing the thought processes of children (Wood, 1992). Questions can support the scaffolding process if they probe children's thinking, ask for explanations of steps taken so far, and encourage the child to reflect on their own cognitive action. Such questions would be open, in that the child shares their own thinking rather than articulates that of the teacher, but effective questions would help add structure to that thinking and provide parameters. Edwards (1992) suggests that teachers can invite elaboration, asking the child to say more about their initial response, usually referred to as 'probing'.

Classroom discourse is often deviated towards the shallow rather than the deep end of the comprehension continuum. Teachers typically follow a curriculum script that covers definitions, facts, concepts, attributes of concepts, and examples. This content is at the lower levels of Benjamin Bloom's taxonomy of cognitive objectives. Teachers rarely attempt to encourage Bloom's higher levels of inference, synthesis, integration, and the application of knowledge to

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practical problems. Effective class discussions focus on critical thinking rather than right answers. Psychologically, questions can help to develop a healthy emotional and intellectual climate and encourage motivation. Teachers' emphasis on questions is a likely reflection of their own perceptions of the educational process and their own role within it.

Self-checking questions may help a teacher to self-assess the quality of discourse in a class: Is the emphasis on giving the right answers rather than processes and strategies? Do the verbal interactions follow the teacher-dominated initiation-response-evaluation pattern? Is discourse carried by the voices of a few where the others are reluctant to contribute? Do you often provide opportunities for students to lead the discourse? Do you model and insist wait-time be used as a key component of dialogue? Do you send non-verbal signals to students based on your perception of their ability to give a quick or correct response? Does your lack of comfort with content lead you to pose more close-ended questions?

The quality of student's learning is mainly associated with the quality of classroom discourse. Thus, a teacher should have to attach more importance to spoken discourse during classroom interaction. He/ She should manage to act like a consultant not mere a transmitter of information; recognize various group-based discussions as real work; and encourage students to generate their own questions and to explore alternative answers. Moreover, authentic questions should be structured to encourage thoughtful answers, and further student questions built on previous responses are promoted. In addition to these, oral tasks should be given greater prominence than it is in the traditional ratio of spoken and written tasks. In order to achieve this, teachers ought to improve self-teaching skills. As a teacher, we can improve the quality of classroom discourse; we can certainly raise the quality of student learning. The Classroom discourse and normative interaction patterns, guide and influence student's learning in ways that improve achievement. Recommendations are primarily concerned with the ways educational community can support and encourage teachers to develop responsive, intellectually demanding discursive patterns in their classrooms. Therefore, it is required to realize the importance of discourse in the classroom, to bring necessary changes in the prevailing patterns of interaction, and to evolve ways for thoughtful integration of responsiveness and intellectual work with core content.

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