Exploring Classroom Discourse

*Routledge Introductions to Applied Linguistics* is a series of introductory level textbooks covering the core topics in Applied Linguistics, primarily designed for those entering postgraduate studies and language professionals returning to academic study. The books take an innovative ‘practice to theory’ approach, with a ‘back-to-front’ structure. This leads the reader from real-world problems and issues, through a discussion of intervention and how to engage with these concerns, before finally relating these practical issues to theoretical foundations. Additional features include tasks with commentaries, a glossary of key terms, and an annotated further reading section.

*Classroom Discourse* looks at the relationship between language, interaction and learning. Providing a comprehensive account of current perspectives on classroom discourse, the book promotes a fuller understanding of the interaction, which is central to effective teaching, and introduces the concept of classroom interactional competence (CIC).

Walsh makes the case for a need not only to describe classroom discourse, but to ensure that teachers and learners develop the kind of interactional competence which will result in more engaged, dynamic classrooms where learners are actively involved in the learning process. This approach makes the book an invaluable resource for language teachers and educators, as well as advanced undergraduates and post-graduate/graduate students of language and education, and language acquisition within the field of applied linguistics.

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Routledge Introductions to Applied Linguistics

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Exploring English Language Teaching
Language in Action
Graham Hall

Exploring Classroom Discourse
Language in Action
Steve Walsh

‘The innovative approach devised by the series editors will make this series very attractive to students, teacher educators, and even to a general readership, wanting to explore and understand the field of applied linguistics. The volumes in this series take as their starting point the everyday professional problems and issues that applied linguists seek to illuminate. The volumes are authoritatively written, using an engaging “back-to-front” structure that moves from practical interests to the conceptual bases and theories that underpin applications of practice.’

Anne Burns, Aston University, UK

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Series editors’ introduction

The Introducing Applied Linguistics series

This series provides clear, authoritative, up-to-date overviews of the major areas of applied linguistics. The books are designed particularly for students embarking on masters-level or teacher-education courses, as well as students in the closing stages of undergraduate study. The practical focus will make the books particularly useful and relevant to those returning to academic study after a period of professional practice, and also to those about to leave the academic world for the challenges of language-related work. For students who have not previously studied applied linguistics, including those who are unfamiliar with current academic study in English-speaking universities, the books can act as one-step introductions. For those with more academic experience, they can also provide a way of surveying, updating and organizing existing knowledge.

The view of applied linguistics in this series follows a famous definition of the field by Christopher Brumfit as:

The theoretical and empirical investigation of real-world problems in which language is a central issue.

(Brumfit, 1995: 27)

In keeping with this broad problem-oriented view, the series will cover a range of topics of relevance to a variety of language-related professions. While language teaching and learning rightly remain prominent and will be the central preoccupation of many readers, our conception of the discipline is by no means limited to these areas. Our view is that while each reader of the series will have their own needs, specialities and interests, there is also much to be gained from a broader view of the discipline as a whole. We believe there is much in common between all enquiries into language-related problems in the real world, and much to be gained from a comparison of the insights from one area of applied linguistics with another. Our hope therefore is that readers and course designers will not choose only those volumes relating to their own particular interests, but use this series.
to construct a wider knowledge and understanding of the field, and the many crossovers and resonances between its various areas. Thus the topics to be covered are wide in range, embracing an exciting mixture of established and new areas of applied linguistic enquiry.

The perspective on applied linguistics in this series

In line with this problem-oriented definition of the field, and to address the concerns of readers who are interested in how academic study can inform their own professional practice, each book follows a structure in marked contrast to the usual movement from theory to practice. In this series, this usual progression is presented back to front. The argument moves from Problems, through Intervention, and only finally to Theory. Thus each topic begins with a survey of everyday professional problems in the area under consideration, ones that the reader is likely to have encountered. From there it proceeds to a discussion of intervention and engagement with these problems. Only in a final section (either of the chapter or the book as a whole) does the author reflect upon the implications of this engagement for a general understanding of language, drawing out the theoretical implications. We believe this to be a truly applied linguistics perspective, in line with the definition given above, and one in which engagement with real-world problems is the distinctive feature, and in which professional practice can both inform and draw upon academic understanding.

Support to the reader

Although it is not the intention that the text should be in any way activity-driven, the pedagogic process is supported by measured guidance to the reader in the form of suggested activities and tasks that raise questions, prompt reflection and seek to integrate theory and practice. Each book also contains a helpful glossary of key terms.

The series complements and reflects the Routledge Handbook of Applied Linguistics, edited by James Simpson, which conceives and categorizes the scope of applied linguistics in a broadly similar way.

Ronald Carter
Guy Cook

Reference

Note

There is a section of commentaries on a number of the tasks, at the back of the book from p. 235. The \( \text{TG} \) symbol in the margin indicates that there is a commentary on that task.
1 Introduction

Introduction

The central thesis of this book is that language teachers can improve their professional practice by developing a closer understanding of classroom discourse and, in particular, by focusing on the complex relationship between language, interaction and learning. The book provides a comprehensive account of current perspectives on classroom discourse, aiming to promote a fuller understanding of interaction, which here is regarded as being central to effective teaching. While classroom interaction has been the focus of attention for researchers for more than fifty years, the complex relationship between language, interaction and learning is still only partially understood. The case is made for a need not only to describe classroom discourse, but to ensure that teachers and learners develop the kind of interactional competence that will result in more engaged, dynamic classrooms where learners are actively involved in the learning process. The concept of classroom interactional competence (CIC) is introduced, described and problematised as a means of developing closer understandings of how learning and learning opportunity can be improved.

Rather than simply describing the discourse of second language classrooms – an enterprise that has been underway for more than fifty years – the concern here is to promote understanding and facilitate professional development. Chapter 1 focuses on the main features of classroom discourse and considers how it is typically structured. Chapters 2 and 3 look at the relevance of classroom discourse to teaching and learning, while Chapters 4 and 5 evaluate different approaches to studying classroom discourse. Chapters 6 and 7 introduce the SETT framework as a means of helping practitioners evaluate their own use of language while teaching. Chapter 8 focuses on the concept of classroom interactional competence. In Chapter 9 the main conclusions are presented.

This chapter considers some of the characteristics of second language classroom interaction, offering an overview of the more commonly found and widespread features that characterise classroom interaction throughout the world. Using extracts from a range of English language lessons, the aim is to offer a brief sketch of classroom
discourse features rather than a detailed description. Many of the themes and issues raised here will be dealt with in more detail in the rest of the book.

The chapter is divided into three sections. In the first section, I present a description of the nature of classroom interaction in the context of language teaching. The following section deals in more detail with the underlying structure of classroom discourse, while in the final section, I point to the future by highlighting some of the challenges that face teachers and learners in relation to classroom interaction.

The nature of classroom interaction

When we reflect on classes that we have been in, either as teachers or learners, we quickly realise that classroom communication is both highly complex and central to all classroom activity. In the rapid flow of classroom interaction, it is difficult to comprehend what is happening. Not only is the interaction very fast and involves many people, it has multiple foci; the language being used may be performing several functions at the same time: seeking information, checking learning, offering advice and so on.

Given its complexity and centrality to teaching and learning, it is fair to say that any endeavour to improve teaching and learning should begin by looking at classroom interaction. Everything that occurs in the classroom requires the use of language. Like most human ‘joint enterprise’ language underpins every action, every activity. It is through language that ‘real world problems are solved’ (Brumfit 1995). Crucially, in a classroom, it is through language in interaction that we access new knowledge, acquire and develop new skills, identify problems of understanding, deal with ‘breakdowns’ in the communication, establish and maintain relationships and so on. Language, quite simply, lies at the heart of everything. This situation is further complicated when we consider that in a language classroom, the language being used is not only the means of acquiring new knowledge, it is also the goal of study: ‘the vehicle and object of study’ (Long 1983: 67).

Personal reflection

Think about your own experiences as a learner or teacher. Why is communication in the classroom so important? In what ways can teachers make effective use of their language? What is the relationship, if any, between the language used by teachers and learners and the learning that occurs?
Yet despite its obvious importance, until recently, little time has been given to helping teachers understand classroom interaction. While researchers have gone to great lengths to describe the interactional processes of the language classroom, few have used this knowledge to help teachers improve their practices. Most teacher education programmes devote a considerable amount of time to teaching methods and to subject knowledge. Few, I suggest, devote nearly enough time to developing understandings of interactional processes and the relationship between the ways in which language is used to establish, develop and promote understandings. Teachers and learners, arguably, need to acquire what I call ‘Classroom Interactional Competence’ (CIC, see Walsh 2006) if they are to work effectively together. That is, teachers and learners must make use of a range of appropriate interactional and linguistic resources in order to promote active, engaged learning. Classroom interactional competence is discussed in full in Chapter 8.

Let’s go back to the three questions you were asked to consider on p. 2 and answer each in turn:

• Why is communication in the classroom so important?
• In what ways can teachers make effective use of their language?
• What is the relationship, if any, between the language used by teachers and learners and the learning which occurs?

To some extent, the first question has been answered: communication in the classroom is so important because it underpins everything that goes on in classrooms. It is central to teaching, to learning, to managing groups of people and the learning process, and to organising the various tasks and activities that make up classroom practices. Communication refers to the ways in which language is used to promote interaction; according to van Lier (1996), interaction is ‘the most important thing on the curriculum’. If we are to become effective as teachers, we need not only to understand classroom communication, we need to improve it.

When we consider the second question, how can teachers make effective use of their language, we must first define what we mean by ‘effective’. Given that the main concern of teachers is to promote learning, effective, here, means language that promotes learning. There are many ways in which teachers can influence learning through their choice of language and their interactional decision-making. We come back to this later in the chapter. For the time being, ‘effective’ simply means using language that helps, rather than hinders, the learning process (Walsh 2002).

Our third question is more difficult to answer. What is the relationship between the language used by teachers and learners and
the learning that occurs? There is no clear and exact response to this question. According to Ellis (1994), this relationship can be seen as a strong one, where language use has a direct influence on the learning that takes place; a weak one, where there is some link between the language used and the learning that occurs; or a zero one, where there is simply no relationship at all between the language used by teachers and the learning that ensues. And of course, this relationship is difficult to assess given that there are so many other factors that influence learning. However, the very fact that this question is often asked does suggest that there is a relationship between classroom language use and learning. It is a question that underpins much of the discussion in this book and one that we will be returning to.

In the remainder of this section, I offer an overview of the most important features of second language classroom discourse. The discussion that follows presents these features largely from the perspective of the teacher who has the main responsibility for controlling the interaction. Later in this chapter, we take a closer look at the language used by teachers and learners (see below). Four features of classroom discourse have been selected, largely because they typify much of the interaction that takes place in classrooms and are prevalent in all parts of the world:

- Control of the interaction.
- Speech modification.
- Elicitation.
- Repair.

Control of the interaction

One of the most striking features of any classroom is that the roles of the participants (teacher and learners) are not equal, they are asymmetrical. This is true of all classrooms: primary, secondary, tertiary, monolingual, multilingual, with adult, teenager or very young learners. It is also true of many other contexts in which institutional discourse prevails and where roles are unequal: doctor/patient, solicitor/client, shop assistant/customer, and so on. In each of these settings, including classrooms, one party is in a position of power or authority; that person has control of the patterns of communication that occur and is able to direct and manage the interaction. In language classrooms, teachers control patterns of communication by managing both the topic of conversation and turn-taking, while students typically take their cues from the teacher through whom they direct most of their responses. Even in the most decentralised and learner-centred classroom, teachers decide who speaks, when, to whom and for how
long. Teachers are able to interrupt when they like, take the floor, hand over a turn, direct the discussion, switch topics. As Breen puts it, it is the teacher who ‘orchestrates the interaction’ (1998: 119).

Learners, on other hand, do not enjoy the same level of control of the patterns of communication, although there will certainly be times when the roles of teacher and learners are more equal, allowing more even turn-taking and greater participation by learners. For much of the time, learners respond to the cues given by teachers: in the form of a spoken response, an action (such as opening a book, changing seats), or a change of focus (from a PowerPoint slide to coursebook, for example, or from listening to the teacher to talking to a classmate).

If we look now at some classroom data, we can see quite clearly how teachers control the interaction. Look at extract 1.1 below, in which a group of multilingual, intermediate adult learners are discussing issues about law and order in their respective countries. In line 1, we see how the teacher nominates a student (Erica), thereby determining who may speak. Her question, ‘what happens if you commit a crime’, both establishes the topic and provides a cue for Erica, who must now reply to the question, which she does in line 3. In line 5, we can see that the learner is experiencing some difficulty and the teacher interrupts in line 6, indicated by = (a latched turn, where one turn follows another without any pausing). Again, in line 6, the teacher is controlling the interaction, seeking clarification and correcting an error (‘what’s the verb’?). Not only does the teacher control the topic, she controls the precise content of the learner’s subsequent utterance in line 8, ‘they go to court’. Finally, in line 9, the teacher brings L1’s contribution to an end ‘they can go home’, controlling participation by inviting a response from another student ‘what happens in Brazil?’ Breen’s (1998) powerful metaphor of the teacher orchestrating the interaction is in evidence throughout this extract. Arguably, a teacher’s ability to ‘orchestrate the interaction’ in this way not only determines who may participate and when, it influences opportunities for learning. It is also apparent when we look at extract 1.1 that teachers have control over the amount of ‘space’ learners have in the interaction. For every contribution made by the student, the teacher typically makes two: asking a question (in lines 1 and 6) and giving feedback (in lines 4 and 9). The consequence of this is that teachers clearly talk more and occupy more of the interactional space of the classroom. Learners’ opportunities to contribute are largely controlled by the teacher. This three-part discourse structure, comprising a teacher question, learner response and teacher feedback is another feature of classroom discourse that exemplifies the ways in which teachers control the interaction. We discuss this in some detail under ‘Exchange structure’ – see page 17. (For a definition of the transcription system please refer to Appendix B, p. 220.)
Extract 1.1

1 T: OK Erica could you explain something about law and order in Japan what happens if you commit a crime?
2 L1: almost same as Britain policeman come to take somebody to police station
3 T: yes
4 L1: and prisoner questioned and if he is (5 seconds unintelligible)=
5 T: =yes what’s the verb Eric Erica . . . if she or he yes commits a crime they go
6 T: to
7 L1: they go to court yes but if they he they didn’t do that they can go home
8 T: they can go home (. . .) very good indeed right what happens in Brazil

To summarise, we have seen that teachers, through their unique status in a classroom, and by the power and authority they have, control both the content and procedure of a lesson, as well as controlling participation.

Speech modification

One of the defining characteristics of all classroom discourse is teachers’ modification of their spoken language. In some respects, teachers’ use of a more restricted code is similar to the spoken language of parents talking to young children. Typically, a teacher’s speech is slower, louder, more deliberate, and makes greater use of pausing and emphasis. Teachers also make a great deal of use of gestures and facial expressions to help convey meaning. The modification strategies used by teachers are not accidental; they are conscious and deliberate and occur for a number of reasons. The first, and obvious one is that learners must understand what a teacher is saying if they are going to learn. It is highly unlikely that learners will progress if they do not understand their teacher. A second reason is that, for much of the time, teachers model language for their students. That is, they use appropriate pronunciation, intonation, sentence and word stress, and so on in order to give learners an opportunity to hear the sounds of the target language. In many cases and in many parts of the world, a teacher’s articulation of a second language may be the only exposure to the language that learners actually receive. It is important, therefore, that the L2 is modelled correctly and appropriately. A third reason for speech modification is the fact that there is so much happening at any one moment in a classroom that teachers need to ensure that the class is following, that everyone understands and that learners don’t
‘get lost’ in the rapid flow of the discourse. In his 1998 paper, Michael Breen talks about the need for learners to ‘navigate’ the discourse and the fact that many learners do actually get lost from time to time. It is the teacher’s responsibility to ensure that this does not happen by making frequent use of repetition, by ‘echoing’ an individual learner’s contribution for the benefit of the whole class, by seeking clarification and so on.

An understanding of the ways in which second language teachers modify their speech to learners is clearly important to gaining greater insights into the interactional organisation of the second language classroom and to helping teachers make better use of the strategies open to them. What strategies do teachers use to modify their speech? We can look at modified speech in two ways. On the one hand, teachers employ a different range of linguistic resources to facilitate comprehension and assist the learning process. There are several features of spoken classroom language that teachers normally modify in some way. Perhaps the most obvious one is the use of simplified vocabulary and the absence of more idiomatic or regional variations. Grammar too is frequently simplified through the use of simpler and shorter utterances, the use of a more limited range of tenses and fewer modal verbs. Pronunciation is also often clearer, with slower articulations and wider use of standard forms. Of course, teachers may ask themselves if they are losing something of their identity by making all these changes. In my experience, this does not happen to any great extent, although teachers do employ their own particular ‘classroom idiolect’ (Walsh 2006): an individual way of talking that is normally based on their personal conversational style. There are times when a teacher’s classroom idiolect may help learners and there are other times when learners simply do not understand because of the teacher’s idiolect.

On another level, teachers modify their interactional resources to assist comprehension and help learners ‘navigate the discourse’. Most notable is the use of transition markers to signal the beginnings and endings of various activities or stages in a lesson. Words such as right, ok, now, so, alright – typically discourse markers – perform a very important function in signalling changes in the interaction or organisation of learning. They function like punctuation marks on a printed page: consider how difficult it would be to read a newspaper without punctuation. The same applies in a classroom if teachers fail to make appropriate use of transition markers. This important category of discourse markers enables teachers to guide learners through the discourse, hold their attention, announce a change in activity, signal the beginning or end of a lesson stage. Crucially, they help a class ‘stay together’ and work in harmony.

In addition to the more obvious ways in which teachers modify their speech discussed above, there are other more subtle strategies that teachers use in order to clarify, check or confirm meanings.
Task 1.1

Consider the extract below. To what extent does this teacher ‘guide’ learners through the discourse? As a learner in this class, in what ways might you feel ‘lost’ and how might the teacher address this problem?

66 T: =yes it’s the result of INtensive farming they call it (writes on board) which is er (2) yeah

67 and this is for MAXimimum profit from erm meat so as a result the animals suffer they

68 have very BAD conditions and very small erm they’re given food to really to make

69 them big and fat and usually it’s unnatural and as you said they HAVE to give them a

70 lot of anti-biotics because the conditions in which they’re kept erm they have far more

71 disease than they would normally have so they give them steroids to make them

72 stronger and of course this is now being passed through to the HAMburger that you

73 eat is contaminated with er=

74 L: =sorry how do you spell anti- anti-biotics?

75 T: anti-biotics? anti-biotics yes? erm anti-biotics?

76 L: how to spell it?

77 T: oh how do you spell it right (writes on board) there’s er

I think I read a very shocking report

78 recently that nearly all for example chickens and beef now

pigs all all these that are reared

79 with intensive farming they’re ALL given anti-biotics as a

matter of course and of course the

80 public don’t hear this until quite a long time after we’ve been

eating it and this this is what

81 makes me angry quite a scandal really . . . sometimes when

I listen to these reports I think oh

82 perhaps I should be vegetarian and sometimes er you

wonder about the meat=

83 L4: =how the people who offer food on the street how can you

((2))

84 T: =er you can’t er check that they’re=

85 L4: =no no I mean what the name?

86 T: er oh well street vendors? you could say yes (writes on board) er vendors from to sell yes?
include confirmation checks, where teachers make sure they understand learners; comprehension checks, ensuring that learners understand the teacher; repetition; clarification requests, asking students for clarification; reformulation, rephrasing a learner’s utterance; turn completion, finishing a learner’s contribution; backtracking, returning to an earlier part of a dialogue. These strategies operate at the level of interaction rather than solo performance; they are used to ensure that the discourse flows well and that the complex relationship between language use and learning is maintained. Interestingly, perhaps, teachers rarely ask learners to modify their speech, often relying instead on imposing their own interpretation. Very often this results in teachers ‘filling in the gaps’ and ‘smoothing over’ learner contributions, as a means of maintaining the flow of a lesson or in order to create a flawless discourse. Unfortunately, by so doing, learners may be denied crucial opportunities for learning. Arguably, by seeking clarification and requesting confirmation, by getting learners to reiterate their contributions, by paraphrasing and extending learner contributions, in sum, by ‘shaping’ what learners say, teachers are greatly helping learners’ language development.

An example of how this works is presented in extract 1.2 on p. 10. Here, the teacher is working with a group of upper intermediate adult learners and the focus is academic writing. By seeking clarification and by negotiating meaning, the teacher helps the learners to express themselves more fully and more clearly. Note how learner turns are frequently longer and more complex than those of the teacher (122, 126). In the extract, this teacher works pretty hard to adopt a more
facilitative role, seeking clarification (121, 123, 129) and eliciting from the learners descriptions of their writing strategies. Clarification requests are extremely valuable in promoting opportunities for learning since they ‘compel’ learners to reformulate their contribution, by rephrasing or paraphrasing. There is clear evidence in this extract that the teacher’s unwillingness to accept the learner’s first contribution (in 123, 125) promotes a longer and higher-quality contribution in 126. Note too how the teacher shows confirmation and understanding (in 121, 123, 125, 129) through the backchannels ‘yes’ and ‘right’. Backchannels are very important in all human interaction since they tell the speaker that the listener has understood and is following what is being said. They ‘oil the wheels’ of the interaction and ensure that communication occurs. Consider how you feel during a telephone call when there is silence at the other end of the line – you have no way of knowing that you have been understood. The same is true in classroom interactions.

Extract 1.2

121 T: =yes so tell me again what you mean by that?=  
122 L: =the first is the introduction the second eh in this case we have the ((3)) who you are to eh introduce yourself a few words about yourself and where you live and what I do [and]  
123 T: [so ] . . . yes?=  
124 L: =and then it’s the problem what happened . . .  
125 T: yes=  
126 L: =and you need to explain it and why you are writing because probably you did something like you gave the information to the police but it didn’t happen . . .  
127 T: so can I ask you why did you write it in your head as you said?=  
128 L: =I don’t know it’s like a rule=  
129 T: =right so it’s like a rule what do you mean? . . .

We have seen, then, that modified speech is a key element of classroom interaction and one that can have profound effects on the quantity and quality of the learning that takes place. Effective speech modification ensures that learners feel safe and included and gives them the confidence to participate in the interaction. It also minimises breakdowns and misunderstandings and creates a sense of purposeful dialogue in which a group of learners is engaged in a collective activity. Although we do have some understandings of the role of speech modification in teaching and learning, there are a number of questions that remain unanswered:
• Do some types of speech modification create opportunities for learning?
• Do some hinder opportunities for learning?
• How might teachers help learners modify their speech?
• How might teachers gain a closer understanding of the relationship between speech modification and learner participation?

We shall return to these questions in Chapter 3.

Elicitation techniques

Elicitation techniques are the strategies used by (normally) teachers to get learners to respond. Typically, elicitation entails asking questions.

**Task 1.2**

Add as many reasons as possible to the following list of reasons why teachers ask so many questions. Then suggest alternatives to questions:

- To provide a model.
- To check comprehension.
- To test.
- To activate learners’ responses.
- To stimulate practice.

Classroom discourse is dominated by question and answer routines, with teachers asking most of the questions, while learners ask correspondingly few questions. It is by asking questions that teachers are able to control the discourse, especially given that they know the answers to most of the questions they ask! Questions like these, where teachers already know the answer (for example, ‘what’s the past tense of go?’) are called display questions since they require learners to display what they know. Classrooms are unique in that for most of the questions that are asked, the answer is already known. Imagine if you were to ask your friends or family questions to which you already know the answer – they would find this very strange, abnormal even! Yet in classrooms this practice is the norm. Display questions serve a range of functions, including:
eliciting a response;
checking understanding;
guiding learners towards a particular response;
promoting involvement;
concept checking.

Essentially, the defining characteristic of display questions is to check or evaluate: understanding, concepts, learning, previous learning and so on. Responses tend to be short, simple, restricted, often comprising one or two words. Rather than opening up space for learning, they tend to close it down and result in a rather stereotypical, almost mechanical type of interaction that is often exemplified in IRF\textsuperscript{1} sequences (see below).

Apart from display questions, teachers also ask genuine, more open-ended questions, designed to promote discussion and debate, engage learners and produce longer, more complex responses. These so-called referential questions result in more ‘natural’ responses by learners, often longer and more complicated, and resulting in a more conversational type of interaction. Referential questions often begin with a \textit{why}-question such as \textit{who, why, what}, etc. From a teaching and learning perspective, the distinction between display and referential is less important than the relationship between a teacher’s pedagogic goal and choice of question. If the aim is to quickly check understanding or establish what learners already know, display questions are perfectly adequate. If, on the other hand, the aim is to promote discussion or help learners improve oral fluency, then referential questions are more appropriate. The extent to which a question produces a communicative response is less important than the extent to which a question serves its purpose at a particular point in a lesson. In short, the use of appropriate questioning strategies requires an understanding of the \textit{function} of a question in relation to what is being taught.

Consider the two extracts following. In extract 1.3 on p. 13, the teacher is working with a group of low-intermediate adult learners. The class has recently read a story and here, the teacher is simply recapping. It is immediately obvious that the turn-taking, participation and contribution of each learner are all tightly controlled by the teacher’s use of display questions. In lines 11, 13 and 15, the teacher simply gets students to ‘display’ what they already know from what they have read. The interaction is rapid and allows little space for full responses, indicated by the latched turns (=: one turn follows another with no pausing or silence). Learner responses are short, typically two or three words and there is no space here for topic development (in lines 12, 14 and 16). We can surmise from this that the teacher’s goal was to
check understanding before moving on: her choice of display questions here is entirely in tune with her teaching goal. The ensuing discourse is ‘classic IRF’, with each teacher contribution serving to both evaluate a learner response and move the discourse forward with another prompt (again, in 11, 13, 15).

**Extract 1.3**

9  
T: I’ll see if I have a (2) a photocopy (looks for papers) right you can’t find it? look you  
10  
have this book and cos I’ve got another book here good . . . so can you read question  
11  
2 Junya  
12 L1: (reading from book) where was Sabina when this happened?  
13 T: right yes where was Sabina? (4) in unit ten where was she?  
14 L: er go out=  
15 T: =she went out yes so first she was in the=  
16 L: =kitchen=  
17 T: =kitchen good and then what did she take with her?  
18 T: L: =er drug=  
19 T: =good she took the memory drug and she ran OUT

Compare extract 1.3 with extract 1.4 on p. 14. In 1.4, it is immediately evident that learners have more interactional space and freedom in both what they say and when they say it. This is a multilingual group of advanced learners, preparing for a reading activity on the supernatural. The teacher’s opening question is perceived as a genuine one – he is seeking the opinions of the group. Note the two-second pause (in line 50) and the relatively short responses by learners in 51 and 52. But it is the question why not in 53, accompanied by the seven seconds of silence, which promotes the long learner turn in 54. Seven seconds of silence is very unusual in most classrooms; typically, the average wait time (the length of time that elapses between a teacher’s question and learner response) is around one second. In line 54, and following seven seconds of silence, learner 3 produces an elaborated response and works hard to express herself. While to us, as outsiders, the meaning is not immediately apparent, the teacher seems satisfied with her contribution and moves on to another student, Monica, in 57. The teacher’s comments (in 53 and 57) are non-evaluative, relating more to the content of the message than the language used to express it. By being non-evaluative, and by asking genuine questions and allowing pauses, the teacher succeeds in eliciting fuller, more complex responses from the learners and in promoting a more engaged,
conversational type of interaction. His choice of questions is extremely important to the resulting extended learner turns and produces a more equal exchange, similar to casual conversation.

**Extract 1.4**

50  T: I agree do you believe in this kind of stuff? We talked about UFOs and stuff yesterday (2)
51  L: no . . .
52  L: well maybe . . .
53  T: maybe no why not? (7)
54  L3: um I’m not a religious person and that’s the thing I associate with religion and believe in supernaturals and things like that and believe in god’s will and that’s so far from me so no=
55  T: I understand so and why maybe Monica? . . .
56  L4: well I’m also not connected with religion but maybe also something exists but I erm am rather sceptical but maybe people who have experienced things maybe=
57  T: uh huh and what about you [do you]

**Repair**

Repair simply refers to the ways in which teachers deal with errors. It includes direct and indirect error correction and the ways in which teachers identify errors in the discourse. Clearly, there is a range of types of error correction available to a teacher at any point in time. As with all strategies, some will be more or less appropriate than others at any given moment. The basic choices facing a teacher are:

- ignore the error completely;
- indicate that an error has been made and correct it;
- indicate that an error has been made and get the learner who made it to correct it;
- indicate that an error has been made and get other learners to correct it.

These choices correlate very closely to the work of conversation analysts who recognise four types of error correction in naturally occurring conversation: self-initiated self repair, self-initiated other repair, other-initiated self repair, other initiated other repair (see Sacks et al. 1974).
It is apparent when we look at classroom transcripts that error correction occupies a considerable amount of teachers’ time. According to van Lier, ‘apart from questioning, the activity that most characterises language classrooms is correction of errors’ (1988: 276). He goes on to suggest that there are essentially two conflicting views of error correction: one that says we should avoid error correction at all costs since it affects the flow of classroom communication, the other that says we must correct all errors so that learners acquire a ‘proper’ standard. As teachers, we need to decide on the type and frequency of error correction. Again, the strategies selected must be related to the pedagogic goals of the moment. A highly controlled practice activity requires more error correction than one where the focus is oral fluency.

It is perhaps also true to say that, within the classroom, learners do expect to have their errors corrected. While it may not be appropriate in more naturalistic settings for speakers to correct each others’ errors, in classrooms, this is both what learners want and expect. As Seedhouse (1997: 571) puts it, ‘making linguistic errors and having them corrected directly and overtly is not an embarrassing matter’. Rather than deciding whether we should or should not correct errors, teachers would do well to consider the appropriacy of a particular strategy in relation to their intended goals. By adopting more conscious strategies and by understanding how a particular type of error correction impacts on the discourse, teachers can do much to tailor their error correction to the ‘moment’ and promote opportunities for learning.

A sample of data is perhaps the best way to gain a closer understanding of the need to tailor repair strategy to pedagogic goal. Consider extract 1.5 on p. 16, in which the teacher is working with a group of eight pre-intermediate adult learners. Her stated aim is ‘to improve oral fluency’. The most striking feature of the interaction is the overlapping speech (indicated [ ]). It is apparent from the data that this teacher believes that repair is necessary; there are examples of error correction in almost every teacher turn (277, 279, 281, etc.). The student is really unable to express herself adequately owing to the fact that the teacher interrupts so much in order to correct errors. It is only in line 286 that she is really able to produce an extended turn, presumably something the teacher wanted throughout given her stated aim of improving oral fluency. While it is apparently this teacher’s intention to help the learner by correcting errors, it is also clear that over-correction is not very helpful. The flow of the exchange is disrupted to the point that the learner is unable to clearly articulate what she wants to say. While we are not claiming that this is a deliberate strategy on the part of the teacher, this extract does underline the need to match error correction strategy to the pedagogic goal.
of the moment. In extract 1.6, we see a mismatch between the teacher’s intended goal and the language used to realise it. The result is interaction that is disjointed and lacking in coherence.

Extract 1.5

273 T: what about in Spain if you park your car illegally?
274 L4: . . . there are two possibilities
275 T: two [possibilities]
276 L4: [one] is er I park my car ((1)) and
277 T: yes . . . if I park . . . my car . . . illegally again Rosa
278 L4: (laughter) if I park my car [illegally]
279 T: [illegally]
280 L4: police stat policeman er give me give me
281 T: GIVES me
282 L4: gives me? a little small paper if er I can’t pay the money
283 T: it’s called a FINE remember a FINE yes?
284 L4: or if if my car
285 T: is parked
286 L4: is parked illegally . . . the policeman take my car and
287 . . . er . . . go to the
288 police station not police station it’s a big place where
289 where they have some
288 [cars] they

Task 1.3

Look at extract 1.6 below. Comment on the teacher’s error correction strategy. How appropriate is it here where the teacher is trying to elicit student feelings and attitudes? What is the effect of the error correction on the discourse?

Extract 1.6

11 T: ok does anyone agree with his statement?
12 L: (2) erm I am agree=
13 T: =agree be careful with the verb to agree there you as well Ensa that it’s WE
14 agree it’s not to be agree it’s to agREE Ok=
15 L: [oh I agree]
16 L: ((3))
17 T: I agree with you but not I AM agree with you the verb is to agree ok so ((3)) to
agree with (writing on board) is the preposition that follows it I so it’s I agree
with you I disagree with you . . . ok em Silvie can you em what were you going
to say?
L2: I agree with you because em when we talk about something em for
Example you saw a ((2)) on TV=

In this section, I have described some of the most important features of classroom discourse and illustrated them using data extracts. These features were teacher’s control of the discourse, speech modification, elicitation and repair. I have tried to show how different strategies are more or less appropriate according to the particular pedagogic goal of the moment and the teacher’s understanding of local context.

In the following section, I present a summary of the work on spoken interaction in classrooms, whereby all interaction can be described and analysed according to a three-part exchange structure.

The IRF exchange structure

One of the most important features of all classroom discourse is that it follows a fairly typical and predictable structure, comprising three parts: a teacher Initiation, a student Response, and a teacher Feedback, commonly known as IRF, or IRE, Initiation, Response, Evaluation. IRE is preferred by some writers and practitioners to reflect the fact that, most of the time, teachers’ feedback is an evaluation of a student’s contribution. Teachers are constantly assessing the correctness of an utterance and giving feedback to learners.

This three-part structure was first put forward by Sinclair and Coulthard in 1975 and is known as the IRF exchange structure. The work of Sinclair and Coulthard has had a huge impact on our understandings of the ways in which teachers and learners communicate and has led to many advances in the field. IRF is also known as a recitation script or tryadic structure (see the glossary).

Look at the example below:

Extract 1.7

1 Teacher: So, can you read question two, Junya.
2 Junya: [Reading from book] Where was Sabina when this happened?
3 Teacher: Right, yes, where was Sabina.
4 In Unit 10, where was she?
In this extract, which is typical of all teacher–learner interaction and occurs very frequently in classrooms all around the world, we can see how the teacher opens the exchange and marks a new phase of activity with the discourse marker ‘so’. This opening remark, or initiation (I), leads to the question in line 1, which prompts the student response [R] in line 2. In line 3, we see how the teacher offers feedback (F) to what the learner has said (‘Right, yes’). Feedback is an important feature of the three-part exchange since it allows learners to see whether their response has been accepted or not. Frequently, feedback entails some kind of evaluation, such as good, right, ok.

In line 3, the cycle begins again, with the next initiation (‘where was Sabina?’), which is then clarified in line 4 (‘in unit 10, where was she?’). In 5, we see the learner’s grammatically incorrect response (‘er go out’), followed in 6 by the teacher’s feedback and correction. This second IRF sequence follows very logically from the first and was probably followed by a third. Based on this very brief extract, we can make a number of observations about IRF, the most commonly occurring discourse structure in any classroom:

• It enables us to understand the special nature of classroom interaction.

• It enables us to understand why teachers talk so much more than learners: for every utterance made by a learner (R), teachers typically make two (I, F).

• It allows us to see how, if overused, classroom interaction can become very mechanical, even monotonous. Teachers need to be aware of this.

While the IRF sequence is both commonly found and appropriate at certain times, there are other types of exchange that are more desirable/useful to learning. We’ll come back to this point later.

Sinclair and Coulthard’s original work took place in L1 primary classes. Based on recordings of teachers and pupils interacting in class, they produced a hierarchical model for understanding classroom discourse. They found that there were three basic kinds of exchange:

1. question-and-answer sequences;
2. pupils responding to teachers’ directions;
3. pupils listening to the teacher giving information.
While it is true to say that conversations outside the classroom frequently have a three-part structure, speakers do not usually evaluate one another’s performances. Just imagine how your friends or family members would feel if you were to ‘evaluate’ their remarks all the time!

Here’s an example of a typical ‘real-world’ exchange:

**Extract 1.8**

<p>| | | | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>A:</td>
<td>What’s the last day of the month?</td>
<td>I</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>B:</td>
<td>Friday.</td>
<td>R</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>A:</td>
<td>Friday. We’ll invoice you on Friday.</td>
<td>F/I</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>B:</td>
<td>That would be brilliant.</td>
<td>R</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>A:</td>
<td>And fax it over to you.</td>
<td>I</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>B:</td>
<td>Er, well I’ll come and get it.</td>
<td>R</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>A:</td>
<td>Okay.</td>
<td>F</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In extract 1.8, a business encounter, the interaction is opened by A in line 1 with a question (an initiation). B’s response in line 2 is then confirmed by A in line 3 (feedback), followed by a second initiation by A (‘we’ll invoice you on Friday’). Note how this second initiation is not a question, but still requires some kind of a response, which B gives in line 4. Note too how, in everyday communication, the feedback move is optional. B’s response in line 4 is followed by another initiation by A in line 5. (Although, it is also true to say that feedback does not always occur in classrooms, it is far more prevalent than in everyday exchanges outside the classroom. That is, most responses by learners receive some kind of feedback from the teacher.)

Going back to extract 1.8, we see how the exchange concludes with a third tryadic exchange in lines 5–7 comprising an initiation by A (line 5), a response by B (line 6) and feedback by A (line 7). In everyday settings then, even the most simple, ordinary encounter such as a question and response often has three parts to it and not two as people often think. It is also interesting to note that in the world outside the classroom, responses and follow-ups are not usually reactions to test questions (speaker A is not testing speaker B on what day it is, unlike the teacher, above, who was testing the learners’ understanding), but show that the speakers have understood one another, and are satisfied with the way the interaction is progressing (**Friday / that would be brilliant / okay**).

For language teachers, understanding the discourse of the classroom itself is crucial, for we teach discourse *through* discourse with our learners. This is another way of saying that in many parts of the world, the main exposure to discourse in English that learners will have is in the classroom itself, via the teacher. A number of studies have
compared the discourse of the classroom with ‘real’ communication (e.g. Nunan 1987). But as van Lier says (1988: 267), ‘the classroom is part of the real world, just as much as the airport, the interviewing room, the chemical laboratory, the beach and so on.’

From this brief introduction to the exchange structure of classrooms, we can make a number of important observations:

- All classroom discourse is goal-oriented. The responsibility for establishing goals and ‘setting the agenda’ lies largely with the teacher. Pedagogic goals and the language used to achieve them are very closely related, even intertwined.

- The prime responsibility for what is said in the classroom lies with the teacher. Teachers control the discourse through the special power and authority they have, but also through their control of the discourse. They control who may speak and when, for how long and on what topic. They control turn-taking through the use of IRF; not only do they initiate a response, they offer an evaluation – further evidence of control.

- Learners take their cues from the teacher and rarely initiate a response. Their role, one which they are socialised into from a very early age, is to answer questions, respond to prompts and so on.

- The IRF sequence enables us to understand interaction in the classroom, and comprehend its special nature. An awareness of IRF enables us to consider how we might vary interaction more and introduce alternative types of sequence (see Chapter 8).

- An understanding of the IRF sequence enables us to model spoken language in the world outside the classroom, suggesting ways of constructing dialogues for teaching, role-plays for practicing conversation, etc.

Challenges for teachers and learners

From what we now know about classroom discourse, what are the challenges that lie ahead for both teachers and learners? In this brief overview, I posit a number of directions for future developments and then return to these in subsequent chapters.

One of the most striking and noteworthy observations about classroom discourse and language teaching is how little time is actually spent making language teachers aware of its importance. Most teacher education programmes, either pre- or in-service pay very little attention to classroom interaction. Typically, teacher education programmes offer some kind of subject-based preparation and training in classroom methodology; a model comprising two strands which is used all over
the world. I would advocate a ‘third strand’ on teacher education programmes that deals specifically with interaction in the classroom. The aim is to sensitize language teachers to the centrality of interaction to teaching and learning and provide them with the means of acquiring close understandings of their local contexts. I suggest that classroom processes will only improve once teachers have the means of understanding local context and are able to improve it. Classroom interaction lies at the heart of this.

A second and related challenge for teachers is the need to acquire what I am calling Classroom Interactional Competence (CIC). Although this is given a fuller treatment in Chapter 8, it is worth introducing it briefly here. When we analyse classroom transcripts, it is immediately obvious that levels of interactional competence vary hugely from one context and from one teacher to another. Some teachers, at some points in time, are very adept at managing interaction in such a way that learning and learning opportunities are maximised. Others use interactional strategies that ‘get in the way’ and that impede opportunities for learning (Walsh 2002). Examples have been presented throughout this chapter in the various data extracts we have studied.

I define CIC as ‘teachers’ and learners’ ability to use interaction as a tool for mediating and assisting learning’ (Walsh 2006: 130). The assumption is that by first understanding and then extending CIC, there will be greater opportunities for learning: enhanced CIC results in more learning-oriented interactions. Teachers demonstrate CIC in a number of ways. For example, ensuring that language use and pedagogic goals are aligned is an important characteristic of CIC. As we have seen in some of the extracts presented here, teachers’ use of language and their goals must work together. Other features include the use of extended wait time: allowing a reasonable time to elapse after asking a question and not interrupting students all the time; extending learner responses by careful management of the interaction and paraphrasing a learner’s utterance, for example. Similarly, teachers need to be able to help learners as and when needed by scaffolding a contribution, offering a key piece of vocabulary or introducing a new phrase as and when needed, for example. Achieving CIC will only happen if teachers are able to understand interactional processes and make changes to the ways in which they manage classroom interaction.

Other challenges facing teachers in the future is the need to gain a fuller understanding of the relationship between classroom methodologies and classroom interaction. This will be dealt with more fully in Chapter 2, but suffice to say here that a closer understanding of how interactional features manifest themselves in, for example, task-based learning, can only be of benefit to teachers and learners alike. How, for example, does task-type affect interaction and what is the
consequence for learning? How might more effective management of classroom interaction result in a more engaged, more dialogic type of learning? And what do we know of the importance of interaction during feedback following a task? This, according to many researchers is the most important part of the task-based cycle and the one most likely to lead to learning. There is much work to do in this area.

From a learner’s perspective, a number of challenges lie ahead. Perhaps the biggest and most difficult one is the need to change the interactional behaviours of learners so that they play a more equal role in classroom discourse. When we consider the ways in which learners are socialised into certain types of classroom behaviour, this is a huge challenge. In most content-based subjects, learners answer questions, respond to cues, follow the teacher’s initiative, avoid interrupting and so on. And yet, in a language classroom, a very different set of interactional traits is needed if learners are to play a more equal part in the discourse. In language classrooms, we need learners to both ask and answer questions, to interrupt where appropriate, to take the initiative, seize the floor, hold a turn and so on. By following learnt behaviours that are the product of many years of being socialised into classroom rituals and practices, we may be facilitating the kind of ‘smooth’ discourse profile that prevails at the moment. But are we helping to create interactions that result in learning? I suggest that we need to encourage interactions that have a more ‘jagged’ profile in which learners play a more central role in co-constructing meanings and in ensuring that there are opportunities for negotiation, clarification and the like. A jagged classroom interaction profile has more of the features that would be found in naturally occurring interactions such as everyday conversation, business encounters and the like. While not denying that the language classroom is a social context in its own right, many of its features are determined by the fact that control of the communication lies with the teacher. In other contexts, roles are much more equal, resulting in different interactional features. Turns are longer, for example, and there are more frequent topic changes. Overlaps and interruptions are more common, as are pauses. I am suggesting that it is in this kind of interaction that learners have the opportunity to acquire the kinds of linguistic and interactional resources that will help them develop as learners. Teachers, while still playing a more central role, would need a far more sophisticated understanding of classroom discourse in order to be able to manage the interaction. We’ll return to these ideas in Chapter 8.

Summary

In this chapter, I have provided a brief sketch of some of the main features of L2 classroom discourse, presented under four main themes:
control of patterns of communication, teachers’ modified language, elicitation and repair. These themes, or features of classroom discourse, have been chosen because they are representative of the kinds of interaction that typically occur in second language (and other) classrooms. One of the most commonly found structures – the IRF exchange – was then introduced and exemplified. This ‘tryadic discourse’, first postulated by Sinclair and Coulthard in 1975, is still by far the most commonly occurring discourse structure to be found in classrooms all over the world. Finally, we considered some of the challenges facing both teachers and learners in language classrooms. In Chapter 2, we build on some of these themes by looking at the relationship between classroom discourse and teaching.

Note

1 IRF is explained in the next section. It means teacher initiation, learner response, teacher feedback and is the basic unit of discourse in any classroom.