



THE DISTINCTIVENESS OF FOREIGN LANGUAGE CLASSROOM DISCOURSE

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Classroom discourse resembles other status-marked language interactions in that it may be analysed in terms of setting, functions, stages, goals, participant roles, etc. Like other institutional activities, classroom activity is a socially constructed and negotiated activity, with clear stages and aims, in which the participants – teachers and students – assume various roles while organising the teaching – learning process. With its two metafunctions – the regulative and the instructional, which manifest linguistically as two registers (Bernstein 1999, 2000), the variety of ages of its participants, its varied interactional patterns and various degrees of formality, classroom discourse is much more diverse and complex than other forms of institutional discourse.

The foreign language classroom discourse is a complex sub-genre of classroom discourse. While in pedagogical discourse in general, the instructional register is embedded in the regulative one, in the foreign language classroom discourse the instructional register subordinates the expression of the regulative register. Typically, the regulative register brings the classroom into being and manages it. It determines the direction, sequencing, pacing and evaluation of the classroom activity. On the other hand, the instructional register realizes the ‘content’ of each class: the specialist information, the substance of the teaching – learning activity. In terms of authority, the regulative register shows the teacher’s authority over the students, while the instructional register shows the teacher’s superior knowledge over that of the students. In the case of the foreign language classroom discourse, the instructional register subordinates the expression of the regulative register. Here the teacher’s authority is manifested in all the ways in which it manifests itself in the pedagogical discourse in general, including the symbolic control invested in the teacher by the institution, to which is added the teachers’ incomparably superior command of the foreign language. This gives superior authority to the foreign language teacher over the students.

The foreign language students are thus the subject of twofold control achieved through the authority of the teacher both as representative of the institution and master of the means expression. The nature of the teacher’s authority that operates in classroom discourse can be traced in several aspects of the classroom interaction:

- the pedagogic relationship established in the classroom. The role played by the use of a foreign language increases the authority of the foreign language teacher who is also the students’ language model and evaluator.
- the privileged and privileging status of classroom discourse. The knowledge of the foreign language confers power to the one who possesses it. On the other hand, the students’ power of expression may be significantly limited.
- the authority that is invested in the teacher who is the initiator, facilitator and structurer of the pedagogic relationship.

- the students' position of pedagogic subjects. Theirs is the position of the apprentice whose consciousness and behaviour are shaped. They acquire ways of behaving, responding, reasoning and articulating their own experience.

Pedagogic discourse involves a 'moral regulation' of the pedagogic subjects in the sense that the moral order is prior to, and a condition for the transmission of competences (Bernstein, 1990). Naturally, the establishing and maintaining of acceptable patterns of classroom behaviour tend to be better represented in the classroom discourse in the earlier years of schooling. Young learners at beginner level are taught not only how to greet and how to practise good manners, but also how to address each other formally and informally, how to pay polite attention to each other, how to offer considerate comments to each other, how to be acceptably polite, etc. In addition, they are trained to recognise the symbolic positions of power: standing vs. sitting or standing at the front of the class. The physical dispositions of the speaker(s) and listeners are important, symbolising their relative status and underscoring the acceptable behaviours required.

With young students, the language used by the foreign language teachers to signal the control over the classroom is often duplicated after the mother tongue. This probably explains the widespread use of the imperative in the English classes in Romania, as this is the accepted rule in the Romanian classrooms, although it sounds rather rude in English. These explicit rules of behaviour become less noticeable over time; yet their implicit expression remains a measure of their importance in acceptable pedagogic behaviour.

Classroom talk is sometimes referred to as 'instructional conversation'. However, this notion may be misleading, as it does not really imply a dialogue between equals. How are turns and topics managed when the talk is goal-directed by a single speaker and negotiation is replaced by the rights claimed and conceded to make the required decisions? Authority is quite strongly marked in the ways teachers may shape the process of 'moral regulation' that occurs in the classrooms, when they offer overt advice, admonition and (negative) feedback on the pupils' behaviour.

start listening
don't waste your time
right that's enough

Overt and explicit advice and admonition tends to be appropriated more and more by the instructional register in the case of older students, and the establishing of methods of dealing with the subject matter becomes more and more significant over time.

The selection of tasks, topics and the allocation of speaking turns by one participant are also absent in real conversation and represent marks of teacher authority. Teacher and student status inequality determines the pre-allocation of such rights as who is speaking first or speaking last, or speaking most; deciding who else shall speak, when and for how long; interrupting, correcting or discarding the contribution of others. Competent students who function in such a setting know their place, and if they challenge it, this will be recognised by the others as being a challenge and not as a display of incompetence. In orderly classrooms, the teacher takes turns at will, allocates turns to others, determines topics, and provides a running commentary on what is being said and meant. This commentary is the main source of cohesion within and between the sequences of the lesson.

The teacher may also be concerned with the acceptable behaviour as defined by reference to what is acceptably done at different moments in the lesson or by reference to correction of inattentiveness and an associated requirement to participate appropriately as a member of the class group. In this respect, many teachers invoke considerations of time in

initiating the activity, thus providing some definition to the time and task to be commenced, and distinguishing it from what had gone before:

time's up, put your pens down

On frequent instances, teachers invoke for the inattentive junior students a sense of more value attached to good behaviour as a characteristic of being a good participant in class:

you're spoiling the game + go back to your place and remember what you have to do

Overt directions to use acceptable behaviour are not a characteristic feature of the discourse of the later years. They become less frequent with older students. When they do occur, they are realised linguistically in a different manner as many teachers tend to prefer low and median modality expressions, although the imperative is still frequently used by the Romanian teachers of English:

*all right perhaps you want to sit around this table all of you here
A lot of work may be done with a partner
could you find yourself a partner it's up to you
start working please.*

Notice that the teacher's authority is not at all in doubt but the more oblique means used to organise the activity are meant to establish acceptable behaviours using a less imposing language. With more advanced students, teachers may also invoke considerations of time when starting an activity or defining a task:

right OK now we're going to start our next activity, but we are actually starting a little later than planned because of the...

When establishing goals and directions, teachers perceive their authority to be intact and they tend to use high modality:

so we've got to do a lot of concentrating on...

Teachers also tend to use abstract words such as *requirement, one, stuff like that*, etc. Apparently, their authority is at its strongest when they use such abstractions, because the human agency involved (their own!) is rendered invisible in favour of the principle that is expressed. Such expressions cannot be usually found in the language of teacher talk at low levels or with young pupils.

the requirement is for various things to be done

As a general principle, the older the students and the higher their level of language proficiency, the least usage of language used for overt advice, and directions concerning desirable behaviours (the regulative register) are used.¹

While the classroom is clearly a status-marked setting, classroom discourse may vary between formal talk (which is organised through markedly unequal rights and obligations arising from status differences), and informal talk (which is organised as it goes along as none of the participants has any special rights or obligations to carry out orderly interaction). At the formal end of the continuum, classroom discourse is similar to other types of discourse that take place in public settings, and at the informal end it resembles casual conversation.

However, even an informal conversation between an adult and a child may often show features of inequality, as the adult may decline to listen when s/he has better things to do, insist to be heard, exclude topics which s/he considers silly and decide when the topic

has gone on long enough. Such interaction characteristics would cause offence to another adult. A student, in the position of a young conversational partner may have to struggle to initiate an encounter and then to sustain it. Also, very often, a young partner is dependent on having the meanings interpreted appropriately by an authoritative teacher.

Unlike other types of discourse, classroom discourse is also characterised by orderly transitions from one topic to another. These are not thought of as being a collective responsibility, but as belonging or conceded to the teacher. This characteristic places classroom discourse at the formal end of the continuum. While one of the aims of the foreign language class is to offer practice in 'real' communication, the question remains to what extent can we seek to carry teacher - student talk towards the informal end of the continuum?

An obvious contrast in conditions between ordinary conversation and classroom talk is one of numbers. Ordinary conversation takes place among a few equals, while classroom talk involves a lot more people. The managing of turns in a large group is complicated and causes the frustration of waiting for one's turn. Outside the classroom, such a large group would naturally break up into more manageable units. In a usual class, the teacher is likely to have about thirty or even more potential speakers to manage, often within a central communication system meant to make everything that is said heard by all. Such conditions are bound to make much of what is said irrelevant or excessively noisy, and much of the teacher's attention is directed against talking out of turn (*Stop talking when I'm talking; Are you listening? What have I just said?*). When the pupils are engaged in whole-class activities, 'unofficial' talk has a visible and public quality which requires preventive action from the teacher before it is imitated by the rest of the students.

Even if the decentralising of classroom communication which characterises group and pair work may be seen by some participants as a weapon to be used against the teacher, this makes it possible to avoid the 'spotlighting' of misbehaviour, and makes the teacher's interaction with the disruptive students more of a private affair.

However, many teachers still see close and persistent control over classroom communication as a precondition for reaching their educational objectives. They see students as mainly receivers of knowledge, limited by the constraints on what they can say and mean, by the teacher's agenda and by practical purposes of relevance and correctness. These limits are apparent in the kinds of questions which the teachers ask: these are questions asked by someone who already knows the answer, and wants to know whether the students know it, too. Thus the answer can be accepted, rejected or evaluated according to the questioner's beliefs about what is true and relevant. From this perspective, classroom is a context in which one participant has prior and often superior knowledge of the topic under discussion. The other participants accept this claim and the talk is organised by reference to that hierarchy. The expert will control the knowledge by asking the questions, controlling the length and content of the answers, evaluating and shaping or discarding the answers, terminating the exchanges when enough information has been obtained for the practical purposes of the stage of the lesson. The teachers establish the parameters of the answers. What is said in the answer is shaped by the predetermined ends of the teacher. The consequence is a managerial constraint on teachers to ask open questions which make it 'natural' to regain the floor at regular intervals, which commonly extends to doing so every other turn, in order to evaluate the answer and redirect the questions. The main constraint against asking 'open' questions is that what follows may be unpredictable. The more successful the teachers are in initiating 'discussions', the more the following talk may move towards the structure of conversation. While this is feasible in small-group teaching, it is challenging to the teacher's skills in a crowded classroom.

Less crowded conditions, such as those of pair and group work also determine a relaxation of the control over the meanings that are exchanged during the interaction and allow alternative frames of reference. Pair and group work talk is not only talk between equals, seen in the allocation and organisation of turns, and the determining of topics. It is also talk without a predetermined expert, without constraints to reach authoritatively defined conclusions. At its best, it can be an unrehearsed intellectual journey, without an arbiter.

The organisation of pair and group work and of free self-expression activities can change temporarily the balance of power more to the benefit of the students. These activities allow the students opportunities to select and talk about aspects of personal experience. They may be given a reasonably free hand in selecting the content and the expression. The students are encouraged to explore meanings collaboratively in the absence of an asymmetrical relationship. The lack of pre-allocated rights and obligations make it necessary for them to negotiate the terms of their interaction. They have to give and receive more information about the function of their utterances as compared to the situation when there is a single source of authoritative decisions to rely on.

Much of the advocacy of pair and group work stresses the possibility of giving students more responsibility for managing their talk. For the teacher, the pressure of trying to contain so many participants within a single communication system is reduced. On such occasions, the teacher may find it even impossible to monitor all the students involved and to help those who experience difficulties in sustaining their contribution. Acts normally monopolised by the teacher (repairing of breakdowns in understanding, providing of regular summaries have now to be done by various members of the group). Such conditions of relative equality make possible something like conversation. However, the pressures of friendship relationships in classroom life may also be manifest: Unwillingness to take social risks of disagreement with friends may lead group discussions to close down prematurely without reaching consensus. Moreover, one member of the group may act as a teacher substitute or enact a parody of the teacher's directing role, before the discussion develops into something close to a state of conversational equality.

Such personal self-expression classroom practices may be significant on condition they do not leave issues of content or instruction poorly articulated. In such cases, the teacher's authority may be questioned.

A compromise solution is to provide pupils opportunities to talk about their experiences by sharing experience about the same topic, after practising talking about it, while also using the shared activity and talk to provide a basis for movement into new areas of activity and knowledge. In such an activity it is the teacher who exercises authority over the selection of the content, although this does not rule out the consultation of the pupils. When the selection has been made by the teacher, and in a sense constrained and framed, it will be made as part of a larger plan, in accordance with the curriculum, and allowing more than one substantial presentation.

Note

¹The classroom language samples are taken from recordings done by MA students in EFL Methodology at "Al. I. Cuza" University of Iași in their own classes.

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Rezumat

Articolul prezintă caracteristicile discursului pedagogic propriu orei de limbi străine și prezintă motivele pentru care acest tip de discurs poate fi considerat un subgen: pe de o parte datorită subordonării registrului regulator față de registrul instructiv și, pe de altă parte, datorită dublului control al discursului pe care profesorul îl exercită prin intermediul autorității instituționale și prin stăpânirea mijloacelor de exprimare.

Résumé

L'article présente les caractéristiques du discours pédagogique de la classe de langues étrangères et décrit pourquoi ce type de discours peut être considéré un sous-genre: d'une part, à cause de la subordination du registre régulateur par le registre instructif, et, par ailleurs, à cause du double contrôle du discours que le professeur exerce par l'autorité institutionnelle et par la maîtrise des moyens d'expression.

Abstract

The article describes the features of the pedagogical discourse specific to foreign language classes and accounts for the idea that it may be a sub-genre: on the one hand, due to the subordination of the regulating register by the instructive register and, on the other hand, due to the double control of the discourse which the teacher performs through their institutional authority as well as through the mastering of the means of expression.