Abstract

Recent communicative approaches have suggested that a goal of ELT teaching should be to replicate 'genuine' or 'natural' communication in the ELT classroom: 'typical' or 'traditional' ELT classroom interaction has been viewed negatively by comparison. This article argues that such a goal is both paradoxical and unattainable, and that there are serious flaws in the assumptions underlying the communicative 'orthodoxy' concerning ELT classroom interaction.

It is argued that it would be more satisfactory to take an institutional discourse approach: this would see ELT classroom discourse as an institutional variety of discourse in which interactional elements correspond neatly to the institutional goals.

Introduction

In the 1980s a communicative 'orthodoxy' developed which saw much 'traditional' ELT classroom communication as undesirable by comparison with 'genuine' or 'natural' communication. Nunan (1987: 137), for example, examined five exemplary
communicative language lessons and found that "when the patterns of interaction were examined more closely, they resembled traditional patterns of classroom interaction rather than genuine interaction." Nunan (1987: 141) sums up the results of the research so far:

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

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

The main assumptions of this 'orthodoxy' can be summarised as follows:

1) There is such a thing as 'genuine' or 'natural' communication (Nunan 1987: 137) (Kumaravadivelu 1993: 12) (Kramsch 1981: 8).

2) It is possible for ELT teachers to replicate 'genuine' or 'natural' communication in the classroom, but most teachers fail to do so (Nunan 1987: 144) (Kumaravadivelu 1993: 12) (Kramsch 1981: 18).

3) Most teachers instead produce interaction which features display questions and examples of the IRF cycle, which are typical of traditional classroom

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

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

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

The terms 'genuine' and 'natural' communication, as used by the communicative 'orthodoxy', are not precise sociolinguistic terms. Many writers use the terms 'genuine' or 'natural' without attempting to define or characterise them. Nunan, however, does provide a characterisation of 'genuine' communication. He suggests (1987: 137) that "... genuine communication is characterised by the uneven distribution of information, the negotiation of meaning (through, for example, clarification requests and confirmation checks), topic nomination and negotiation by more than one speaker, and the right of interlocutors to decide whether to contribute to an interaction or not. In other words, in genuine communication, decisions about who says what to whom and when are up for grabs."

Although Nunan does not actually say that he is characterising free conversation, the above is a reasonable short characterisation of free conversation in the terms of the ethnomethodological conversational analysis approach (CA henceforth). In CA terms, his last sentence clearly implies 100% local
allocational means, which can only mean conversation rather than any other speech exchange system, all of which use greater pre-allocation. (Sacks et al. 1974: 729) (Drew & Heritage 1992: 19).

Other authors reinforce that what is actually meant by genuine or natural discourse is in fact conversation: Kramsch (1981: 17) explicitly equates 'natural discourse' with conversation, whilst Ellis (1992: 38) equates 'naturalistic' discourse with conversation:

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

The communicative 'orthodoxy', then, equates 'genuine' or 'natural' communication with conversation, which is a precise sociolinguistic term (as well as a lay term). Since the rest of the article depends on sociolinguistic analysis, I will use only the sociolinguistic term 'conversation' from now on.

The clear implication in the communicative 'orthodoxy' is that it is possible for conversation to be produced within the setting of an ELT classroom lesson, and indeed this looks perfectly reasonable at first sight.

However, current sociolinguistic theory sees conversation as a "... kind of benchmark against which other more formal or 'institutional' types of interaction are recognized and experienced. Explicit within this perspective is the view
that other 'institutional' forms of interaction will show systematic variations and restrictions on activities and their design relative to ordinary conversation." (Drew & Heritage 1992: 19). Conversation, then, is clearly differentiated from the numerous varieties of institutional discourse.

If we rephrase the implication in sociolinguistic terms, then, it begins to look unreasonable: The clear implication in the communicative 'orthodoxy' is that it is possible for conversation (a non-institutional form of discourse) to be produced within the setting of an ELT classroom lesson (within an institutional form of discourse).

Assumption 2) It is possible for ELT teachers to replicate conversation in the classroom, but most teachers fail to do so.

I will argue that it is, in theory, not possible for ELT teachers to replicate conversation (in its precise sociolinguistic sense) in the ELT classroom as part of a lesson. Warren's 1993 PhD thesis 'Towards a Description of the Features of Naturalness in Conversation' is based on a corpus of 40 recordings of free conversation (totalling 25,000 words) in natural settings without the knowledge of the conversationalists. This is important, since his analysis is based on evidence of what ordinary people actually do, rather than on what theorists imagine that other people do in conversation. Warren develops a precise and consensual definition of conversation which distinguishes conversation from other discourse types:
"A speech event outside of an institutionalised setting (my italics) involving at least two participants who share responsibility for the progress and outcome of an impromptu and unmarked verbal encounter consisting of more than a ritualised exchange." (p. 8)

For ELT classroom interaction to be equivalent to free conversation, the following features of naturalness in conversation (paraphrasing Warren) would have to be met:

The setting must not be an institutional one. Turn-taking and participation rights in conversation must be unrestricted. Responsibility for managing and monitoring the progress of the discourse must be shared by all participants. Conversations are open-ended and participants jointly negotiate the topic.

The only way, therefore, in which an ELT lesson could become identical to conversation would be for the learners to regard the teacher as a fellow-conversationalist of identical status rather than as a teacher, for the teacher not to direct the discourse in any way at all, and for the setting to be non-institutional: no institutional purposes could shape the discourse, in other words. The stated purpose of ELT institutions is to teach English to foreigners. As soon as the teacher instructs the learners to 'have a conversation in English', the institutional purpose will be invoked, and the interaction could not be conversation as defined here. To replicate conversation, the ELT lesson would therefore have to cease to be an ELT lesson in any understood sense of the term and become a conversation which did not have any underlying pedagogical purpose, which was not about English or even, in many situations, in English.
This is not to suggest that it is impossible for conversation to take place in the physical setting of an ELT classroom: I am suggesting that it cannot occur as part of an ELT lesson. In the vast majority of ELT classrooms around the world, the learners share the same L1. The only conceivable way in which conversation could occur in these monolingual ELT classrooms would be for the learners to converse in their L1. In multilingual ELT classrooms, which are frequently found in the UK and the USA, it would be quite natural for learners to use English to have a conversation. In order for it to be a conversation, however, the teacher would not be able to suggest the topic of the discourse or direct it in any way. Such a conversation might just as well take place in the coffee bar as in the ELT classroom.

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

Assumption 3) Most teachers instead produce interaction which features display questions and examples of the IRF cycle, which are typical of traditional classroom interaction, and which are rarely found in conversation.

Both Nunan (1987: 137) and Dinsmore (1985: 226) give the presence of the IRF cycle as their initial reason for asserting that there was little 'genuine' communication in the ELT classrooms which they observed. The IRF cycle is the Teacher Initiation, Learner Response and Teacher Follow-up structure, as in the
following example:

"T: Can you tell me what are the three parts of the description she gives about this man?
L: His character?
T: Yes, character."

(Van Lier 1988: 202)

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

Nunan writes (1987: 137) that "On the surface, the lessons appeared to conform to the sorts of communicative principles advocated in the literature. However, when the patterns of interaction were examined more closely, they resembled traditional patterns of classroom interaction rather than genuine interaction. Thus, the most commonly occurring pattern of interaction was identical with the basic exchange structure ...... Teacher initiation, Learner response, Teacher follow up."

It is certainly true that the IRF cycle is normally noticeably absent from adult-adult conversation and I have already argued (in point 2) that it is impossible to replicate conversation in the ELT classroom. However, it is important to note that the IRF cycle is very noticeably present in a particular discourse setting outside the classroom, namely in the home in parent-child
interaction.

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

(Mother and Kevin look at pictures)

M. And what are those?
K. Shells.
M. Shells, yes.
You've got some shells, haven't you?
What's that?
K. Milk.

(Harris & Coltheart 1986: 50)


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

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

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

An institutional discourse approach (which will be outlined in the final section) would attempt to account for the fact that the IRF cycle is prevalent in the classroom and parent-child interaction but rare in conversation in the following way. In the classroom and parent-child interaction the core goal is learning or education, and the IRF cycle is an interactional feature which is well suited to this core goal. The business of learning is accomplished through the interactional feature. Drew and Heritage (1992: 41) explain the point in these terms:

"Classroom instruction can ... consist of a recursive chain or progression of such three-part sequences (the IRF cycle). This distinctive sequential pattern is characteristic of talk in classrooms because it is associated with the core activity in that setting, namely instruction. We here underscore an important point: the three-part sequence is characteristic of the setting (classroom) only because it is generated out of the management of the activity (instruction) which is the institutionalized and recurrent activity in the setting. Thus, where the
same activity is performed in other and possibly noninstitutionalized settings, as when parents instruct their children in the home, there also may be found similar three-part sequence structures (see Drew 1981). The sequence structure is the instrument through which the activity is accomplished on any given occasion."

Display questions have come in for the same type of criticism as the IRF cycle. Nunan (1988: 139) states that one of the characteristics of 'genuine' communication is the use of referential questions, and that one of the reasons the patterns of interaction in the lessons he observed are non-communicative is that the questions are almost exclusively of the display type. Nunan's (1987: 142) conclusion was that "increasing the use of referential questions over display questions is likely to stimulate a greater quantity of genuine classroom interaction." This has been challenged by Van Lier (1988: 222-223), who argues that there is little difference in interactional terms between a cue, a display question and a referential question. As with the IRF cycle, display questions "are also very common in adult-child talk in the pre-school years." (Maclure & French 1981: 211): display questions are very common in virtually every collection of transcripts of parent-child conversation: an example is provided:

"(Mother and H (aged 19 months) are reading)

M: What's this Hal?

H: Bunny

M: Yes; bunny's sleeping."

(Painter 1989: 38)
The same arguments which were used above concerning the IRF cycle apply equally to the use of display questions.

From an institutional discourse perspective, then, both the IRF cycle and display questions are interactional features which are appropriate to the core goals of education and learning, whether at home, learning an L1, or in the ELT classroom, learning an L2. The IRF cycle and display questions seem not to be interactional features which are specific to a particular culture or age: they appear to be universal phenomena in education and learning contexts. The following quotation is from a fourth century Buddhist scripture (Conze 1959: 164) and shows an example of the IRF cycle combined with a display question in a learning context which is identical in interactional terms to examples found in twentieth century classrooms:

"The Lord asked Subhuti: What do you think, was there any dharma which awoke the Tathagata, when he was with the Tathagata Dipankara to the utmost, right, and perfect enlightenment?
Subhuti replied: As I understand the meaning of the Lord's teaching, this was not due to any dharma.
The Lord said: So it is, Subhuti, so it is."

Assumption 4) Teachers could be trained to replicate conversation in the ELT classroom.

I argued in point 2) that it is in theory impossible for ELT teachers to replicate
conversation in the ELT classroom as part of a lesson. It follows that it is not possible to train teachers to do so. However, I would now like to examine a classroom extract in which the teacher has succeeded in replicating interaction which is ostensibly as close to conversation as possible: I will then attempt to demonstrate that it is not in fact conversation (if we are to use precise sociolinguistic terms) but ELT classroom discourse. The teacher does not take part in the interaction: teenage girl learners (in a state secondary school in rural Malaysia) are discussing fashion photographs in a group.

"L1 I like this fashion because I can wear it for sleep not to go anywhere.
L2 Ooh!
L3 I like this fashion.
L2 I like this.
L4 Why?
L5 I like this.
L2 Because - because..
L1 The girl..
L4 This is good this fashion.
L2 This is a beautiful skirt.
L1 Beautiful, but when I done it - I put it long long but -
L4 This one better than that one. Who like this one?
L1 Aah, I like this."

(Warren 1985: 223)
The interaction seems highly 'communicative': in fact the interaction corresponds neatly (on the surface) to Nunan's characterisation of 'genuine communication' or conversation (see page *). The point is, however, that the linguistic forms and patterns the learners produced were directly related to the pedagogical purposes which the teacher introduced, even though the teacher did not participate in the interaction.

Warren states clearly what his pedagogical purposes were with these learners: a collection of women's fashion photographs was selected in order to be provocative to the students. The students were left alone with a tape recorder. The writer devised the activity "to stimulate natural discourse in the classroom." (p. 45) and "...the only instruction was that the students should look at the photographs and that anything they might say had to be in English." (p. 47). Warren hoped that the exercise "... might lead to the voicing of likes and dislikes." (p. 45).

We can clearly see the link between the teacher's pedagogical purposes and the linguistic forms and patterns of interaction produced by the learners: the learners speak only in English, discuss the photographs and express likes and dislikes.

My point is, then, that whatever methods the teacher is using - and even if the teacher claims to be relinquishing control of the classroom interaction - the linguistic forms and patterns of interaction which the learners produce will inevitably be linked in some way to the pedagogical purposes which the teacher introduces into the ELT classroom environment. So although the above extract appears superficially to resemble characterisations of conversation, when it
is seen in context it is a clear example of institutional interaction. As soon as the teacher gives the learners any instructions (even if the instruction is to 'have a conversation in English'), the resultant interaction will be institutional and not conversation.

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

**An Institutional Discourse Approach**

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

"1. Institutional interaction involves an orientation by at least one of the participants to some core goal, task or identity (or set of them) conventionally associated with the institution in question. In short, institutional talk is normally informed by goal orientations of a relatively restricted conventional
2. Institutional interaction may often involve special and particular constraints on what one or both of the participants will treat as allowable contributions to the business at hand.

3. Institutional talk may be associated with inferential frameworks and procedures that are particular to specific institutional contexts." (Drew & Heritage 1992: 22)

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

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

1) The linguistic forms and patterns of interaction which the learners produce are subject to evaluation by the teacher in some way: "Everyone involved in language teaching and learning will readily agree that evaluation and feedback are central to the process and progress of language learning." (Van Lier 1988: 32).

2) Language is "... both the vehicle and object of instruction." (Long
1983: 9).

3) The linguistic forms and patterns of interaction which the learners produce will be linked in some way to the pedagogical purposes which the teacher introduces (Seedhouse 1994). Note, for example, how even the ostensibly free conversation which Warren's learners produced was linked directly to the pedagogical purposes which he introduced (see page***).

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

Conclusions

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

It is likely that the communicative 'orthodoxy' outlined above has resulted in a large number of teachers feeling guilty about the communication in their own classrooms and suspicious of researchers wanting to record their lessons: "Currently teachers feel guilty about not being communicative (because theorists say that) classroom discourse should correspond as closely as possible to real-life use of language." (Swan 1985: 82). The analysis in this article points to the conclusion that the validity of this communicative 'orthodoxy' is in doubt. It would be reasonable to conclude that ELT teachers who produce 'typical' ELT classroom interaction do not in fact have anything to feel guilty about.

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

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

Brock, C. 1986. 'The effects of referential questions on ESL classroom discourse.' TESOL Quarterly 20/1.


Helm.


Hymes, D. 1972. 'Introduction'. in C. Cazden, V.P. John & D. Hymes (eds.).


Long, M. 1983. 'Inside the "Black Box"' in H. Seliger & M. Long (eds.).


Wells, G. & M. Montgomery. 1981. 'Adult-Child Interaction at Home and at School' in P. French & M. MacLure (eds.).

Biographical Details

Paul Seedhouse has taught EFL in Austria, Thailand, Brunei and Spain and is currently Director of Studies at the University of York, Norwegian Study Centre. He has an RSA Diploma in TEFL and an MSc in Teaching English from Aston University.

Subject Index

Communication
Genuine communication

Institutional Discourse

Classroom interaction