Neil Mercer

LANGUAGE FOR TEACHING A LANGUAGE

Introduction

THIS CHAPTER IS ABOUT THE use of language as a medium for teaching and learning, with special relevance to the teaching of English. However, many of the issues I will deal with, especially those in the early parts of the chapter, are not specific to the use of any particular language in the classroom, or the teaching of any particular curriculum subject. Of course, languages of instruction and curricula vary from country to country, region to region and even from school to school. Teachers differ in their style and approach, and their classes are made up of individuals of various personal characteristics and cultural backgrounds, who differ in the ways they respond to teachers and particular styles of teaching. But, as I will explain, observational research suggests that some ways that language is used in interactions between teachers and students are common features of classroom life throughout the world. I will illustrate some of these features of classroom language with real-life examples, and discuss their possible educational functions. In the latter part of the chapter, I will use the theoretical perspective of socio-cultural psychology to relate the earlier analysis of classroom language to a consideration of the nature and quality of classroom education. In these ways, I hope to demonstrate the practical educational value of a careful analysis of the interactive process of teaching-and-learning.

Language and teaching

Wherever they are and whatever they are teaching, teachers in schools and other educational institutions are likely to face some similar practical tasks. They have to organize activities to occupy classes of disparate individuals, learners who may vary considerably in their aims, abilities and motivations. They have to control unruly behaviour. They are expected to teach a specific curriculum, a body of knowledge and skills which their students would not normally encounter in their out-of-school lives. And they have to monitor and assess the educational progress the students make. All these aspects of teachers' responsibilities are reflected in their use of language as the principal tool of their responsibilities. As examples of this, I would like you now to consider two transcribed sequences of classroom talk, Sequences 1 and 2 overleaf. For each in turn, consider:

1   Can you identify any recurring patterns of interaction in the talk between teacher and pupils?

2   What would you say were the main functions of the teacher's questions in each of the
        sequences? Do the sequences differ at all in this respect?

I have made my own comments after both the sequences.

(Note: in the transcriptions words spoken particularly emphatically are underlined. Words
which were unclear during transcription are in curled brackets { }. The onset of
simultaneous speech is marked with a square bracket [.)

Sequence 1: Toy animals

This sequence was recorded in an English lesson in a Russian primary school. The teacher
has just set up a collection of soft toy animals in front of the class.

T: Have you got any toy animals at home? Be quick. Raise your hand (*she raises her own hand*)
        and show me. Have you got any toy animals? S-{Name of child}
S: (*Standing up*) I have got a cat, a
T: No, sit down, in your place.
S: Yes, I have.
T: I have got many?
S: Toys at home.
T: Toy animals at home.

Sequence 2: Personal qualities

This next sequence comes from a TESOL class for young adults in a college in London. A
little earlier, the teacher had asked each of the students to list their own personal qualities,
both positive and negative.

T: Who would like to tell the class about their personal qualities? Dalia?
D: I am polite, friendly, organized, trustworthy, responsible but sometimes I am impatient
        and unpunctual. Sometimes (*laughs*).
T: Good, isn't it? (*Addressing the class*) Thank you, Dalia. That was good. Now can you tell me
        the positive qualities you have just said.
D: Yeah?
T: That is, friendly, um, organized.
D: {Right}
T: How is it helping you . . .
D: Yeah?
T: . . . with your friends [in the class?
D: [It help me to get along with people and to understand them and
        help them.
T: That's good. And what about the, the not very positive ones [like punctual
D: [Sometimes
T: What happens then?
D: Sometimes I lose my friend basically of that because I lose my temper very quickly.
T: And what happens with me? I don't smile at you that much do I?

Comments on Sequences 1 and 2

Sequence 1 illustrates some patterns which typify most classroom talk. First, the teacher took longer turns at speaking than any students. Second, she asked all the questions. Observational research has shown that in classroom conversations teachers usually ask the great majority of questions, usually — as in this case — to elicit some kind of participatory response from the students. She then *evaluates* the replies they give. She is also using questions to direct the topic or content of the talk towards issues that she wishes to focus attention on. Looking more carefully at Sequence 1, we can see that there is a structural pattern to the talk: a *teacher's question* is followed by a *student response*, followed in turn by some *teacher feedback or evaluation*. This structural element of classroom talk was first described by the linguists Sinclair and Coulthard (1975; see also Mehan, 1979; Van Lier, Chapter 5 of this book) and usually known as an Initiation-Response-Feedback (IRF) exchange. For example:

T: . . . Have you got any toy animals? S- {Name of child}   I
       S: (*Standing up*) I have got a cat, a   R
       T: No, sit down, in your place.   F

IRF exchanges can be thought of as the archetypal form of interaction between a teacher and a pupil — a basic unit of classroom talk as a continuous stretch of language or 'text'. They do not typify the pattern of talk in all classroom activities; other kinds of talk involving different patterns of exchanges (e.g. in which students ask questions of teachers, or of other students) may happen too. And outside the most formal and traditional of classrooms, they may not often be found in their classic, simple form. But IRFs have been observed as a common feature in classrooms the world over, and in other languages besides English.

In Sequence 1, the IRF exchanges are being used to perform a common function in classrooms, one that is almost certainly familiar to you from your own schooldays: a teacher is eliciting from learners their knowledge of the relevant curriculum subject (in this case, English). Research shows that this particular kind of use of question-and-answer by a teacher — asking questions to which the teacher knows exactly what answers she seeks — is the most common function of IRFs in classrooms. Here students are essentially trying to provide the information that the teacher expects them to know. As the classroom researchers Edwards and Westgate say:

> Most classroom talk which has been recorded displays a clear boundary between knowledge and ignorance . . . To be asked a question by someone who wants to know is to be given the initiative in deciding the amount of information to be offered and the manner of telling. But to be asked by someone who already knows, and wants to know if you know, is to have your answer accepted, rejected or otherwise evaluated according to the questioner's beliefs about what is relevant and true. (1994, p 48)

Teachers need to check students' understanding of procedural, factual matters, and that is commonly the function of IRF exchanges. Sequence 1 illustrates also how 'feedback' from a teacher may also be used to control students' behaviour. These are quite legitimate functions of teacher-talk, and all teachers might expect to use language in this way quite frequently. But the danger of relying heavily and continuously on traditional, formal question-and-answer reviews for guiding learning is that students then get little opportunity for using language in more creative ways — such as experimenting with new types of language constructions.

As in much classroom talk, in Sequence 2 we can also see IRF exchanges occurring, though here as slightly more complex, linked structures, in which the student interjects during the teacher's elicitations, perhaps seeking clarification which the teacher provides. And if we consider the content and function of the question-and-answer exchanges in the two sequences, we can see that something rather different is going on in each of them. In Sequence 1, the teacher is asking her primary school pupils to produce English sentences which conform to the models she has in mind. The children respond by trying to provide these 'right answers'. The teacher in Sequence 2 is not doing that. Instead, she is asking questions to encourage the students to elaborate, in English, on what they have written. In this way, the teacher is not so much trying to elicit particular forms or structures of English, but rather encouraging the student to use English in a practical, communicative manner. I am not suggesting that either teacher is using their questioning techniques to better or worse effect, but simply illustrating the fact that IRF exchanges can be made to serve a variety of pragmatic, educational functions.

Techniques for teaching

Having identified the archetypal structure of teacher-student talk, I will next describe some specific ways of interacting with students which are commonly used by teachers. I call these 'techniques', because I believe that they represent teachers attempting to shape language into a set of suitable tools for pursuing their professional goals. I will illustrate each technique and consider how they can contribute to the process of teaching-and-learning. The techniques are summarised in Table 15.1 below.

Table 15.1 Some techniques that teachers use

. . . to elicit knowledge from learners
Direct elicitations
Cued elicitations

. . . to respond to what learners say
Confirmations
Rejections
Repetitions
Reformulations
Elaborations

. . . to describe significant aspects of shared experience
amplifications
explanations
'we' statements
recaps

Eliciting knowledge from learners

We have seen that when a teacher initiates an IRF sequence, this usually has the function of eliciting information from a student. If this is simply a straightforward request, we can describe the teacher's verbal act as a *direct elicitation*. But teachers also often engage in what can be called *cued elicitation*, which is a way of drawing out from learners the information

they are seeking – the 'right' answers to their questions – by providing visual clues and verbal hints as to what answer is required. Here is an example recorded in an English lesson in a Zimbabwean primary school. The teacher has set up a number of objects on her desk, and also has a set of cards on which various consonants ('b', 'f', 'j' etc.) are written. The children have to come to the front of the class and match the consonants to the name of an object.

Sequence 3: say the sound

Teacher: (*to child*):   Say the sound.
Child: b-b-b
Teacher: b-b-b is for?

(*Child does not answer. Teacher waves her hand over the nearest objects, one of which is a book*)

Child: b-b-b is for book.
Teacher: Well done!

The use of cued elicitation as a teaching technique is widespread. It can be traced to the Socratic dialogues constructed by Plato (Edwards, 1988). By using this technique, the teacher avoids simply giving the child the right answer. Sequence 3 also illustrates how non-verbal communication – the use of gestures and other signs – can be an important component of classroom talk.

Responding to what learners say

As illustrated by the sequences above, one of the ways that teachers sustain dialogues with their students is to use what students say as the basis for what they say next. In this way, the learners' own remarks are incorporated into the teaching-learning process. The most obvious way of doing this is through *confirmation* (as, for example, a teacher's 'Yes, that's right' to a pupil's answer). *Repetitions* of things learners say are another way, one which allows the teacher to draw to the attention of a whole class an answer or other remark which is judged by the teacher to have educational significance.

Teachers often paraphrase or *reformulate* a pupil's remark, usually so as to offer the class a revised, tidied-up version of what was said which fits in better with the point that the teacher wishes to make or the form of response being sought. For example, in this extract from Sequence 1:

S: Yes, I have.
T: I have got many?
S: Toys at home.
T: Toy <u>animals</u> at home.

There are also *elaborations*, when a teacher picks up on a cryptic statement made by a pupil and expands and/or explains its significance to the rest of the class. Wrong answers or unsuitable contributions may be explicitly *rejected* by a teacher. But we should also note a popular technique that teachers have for dealing with wrong answers – simply ignoring them.