
LANGUAGE IN THE CLASSROOM

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Edwards and Westgate note that professional interest in classroom language has grown with the recognition of its centrality in the process of learning, and its value as evidence of how relationships and meanings are organized.¹ Supported by studies like those of Barnes et al., more attention is being paid to the communicative demands made on children in classrooms, and to the rather limited range of skills they are typically called upon to display.² There is increased interest in how much those demands vary across age groups and across subjects of the curriculum. Regrettably misconceptions and views based on stereotypes persist in some school staffrooms - for example, that 'the only good classroom is a silent one', or 'When they (particular categories of students) come to us, they just don't have any language'.

There are obvious attractions in recording classroom talk. Listening to it and transcribing it could reveal characteristics of teacher-pupil encounters unnoticed in the hectic pace of classroom life. It is evidence of a kind which teachers can collect for themselves and so contribute to research rather than wait for the

¹ EDWARDS, A.D., and WESTGATE, D.P.G., *Investigating Classroom Talk*, (Falmer Press, Lewes 1987).

² BARNES, D., BRITTON, J., and ROSEN, H., *Language, the Learner and the School*, (Penguin, Harmondsworth 1969).

'findings' of others.³ Much of the impetus behind investigations of classroom talk came from outside the ranks of educational researchers. It came from sociolinguists who sought to extend the domain of linguistic study beyond a rigorous concentration on structure abstracted from use to a more 'socially-realistic' concern with persons in a social world who must know when to speak, when not, what to talk about, with whom, when, where, and in what manner.⁴ In this endeavour they were joined by 'ethnographers of communication', whose primary theoretical purpose was to discover how talk is systematically patterned and how the speakers perceive their relationships and situation. Such talk may then become more broadly predictable 'on the basis of certain features of the local social system'.⁵

Sinclair and Coulthard presented classrooms as attractive research settings because 'teacher-pupil relationships are sufficiently well-defined for us to expect clear evidence of this in the text'.⁶ Numerous investigations of the distinctiveness of classrooms as communicative settings, of the nature of the demands commonly made on students as they receive and display school knowledge, and of the continuities and discontinuities between those demands and their experience of language being used in the other main settings of their social world, have been conducted. Much sociolinguistic work was directed by Cazden's address to those engaged in testing children's language development: 'When a child makes or fails to make a particular

³ MARTIN, N., 'Researchers and Learners', in MEEK, M. and MILLER, J. (eds), *Changing English: Essays for Harold Rosen*, (Heinemann, London 1984).

⁴ HYMES, D., 'On Communicative Competence', in PRIDE, J. and HOLMES, J. (eds), *Sociolinguistics*, (Penguin, Harmondsworth 1972), p.277.

⁵ BLOM, J. and GUMPERZ, J., 'Social Meaning in Linguistic Structure: Code-switching in Norway', in GUMPERZ, J. and HYMES, D., (eds), *Directions in Sociolinguistics: The Ethnography of Communication*, (Rinehart and Winston, Holt, New York 1972), pp. 421-2.

⁶ SINCLAIR, J. and COULTHARD, M., *Towards an Analysis of Discourse: The Language of Teachers and Pupils*, (Oxford University Press, London 1975), p.2.

kind of utterance, consider characteristics of the situation as well as of the child'.⁷

Hymes's influential discussion of communicative competence was largely directed towards the problems encountered by children from one cultural background who enter classrooms where communicative demands may be defined largely in terms of another.⁸ Analysis of such problems necessarily carried researchers far beyond the classroom. It was the challenge of narrowing the gap between what is known and what needs to be known about the communicative skills necessary for educational success which led Hymes to see the study of 'language in education' as the turning-point of a fully social linguistics, and as an 'integrating focus' for many other areas of research.

Researchers like Edwards & Furlong⁹ and Westgate et al.,¹⁰ have demonstrated that there are benefits to be gained from working closely with teachers on the analysis of classroom language. Studies carried out by individuals and by groups of teachers have sought to transform their everyday intuitive experience into deeper, more systematic and more shareable insights (for example, Talk Workshop Group and Hull).¹¹ Many

⁷ CAZDEN, C., 'The Neglected Situation in Child Language Research and Education', in WILLIAMS, F., (ed.), *Language and Poverty*, (Markham, Chicago 1971) p.84, and CAZDEN, C., 'Concentrated versus Contrived Encounters: Suggestions for Language Assessment in Early Childhood', in DAVIES, A., (ed.), *Language and Learning in Early Childhood*, (Heinemann Educational Books, London 1977).

⁸ HYMES, D., 'On Communicative Competence', in PRIDE, J. and HOLMES, J. (eds), *op. cit.*

⁹ EDWARDS, A. and FURLONG, V.J., *The Language of Teaching*, (Heinemann, London 1978). EDWARDS, A. and FURLONG, V.J., 'Reflections on the Language of Teaching', in BURGESS, R. (ed.), *Field Methods in the Study of Education*, (Falmer Press, Lewes 1985).

¹⁰ WESTGATE, D., BATEY, J., BROWNLEE, J. and BUTLER, M., 'Some Characteristics of Interaction in Foreign Language Classrooms', *British Educational Research Journal*, vol.11, no.3, (1985) pp.271-81.

¹¹ TALK WORKSHOP GROUP, *Becoming Our Own Experts*, (Talk Workshop Group, London 1982); and HULL, R., *The Language Gap: How Classroom Dialogue Fails*, (Methuen, London 1985).

teachers are now producing classroom studies in the context of in-service courses, thereby increasing their awareness of how language is used in classrooms and bringing it under more conscious control.

The study of language in its own social contexts, and in particular with its typical forms and functions in classrooms is fascinating. If there is a single theme which should unify and focus the interests of the teaching community in Malta, it should be a concern with the communicative consequences of transmitting knowledge, and a concern for the often limited and limiting quality of language experience which Maltese schools offer Maltese children. This is especially crucial at a time when schools are facing increasing demands for a greater accountability, relevance and innovation while having to cope with diminishing resources.

WHY INVESTIGATE CLASSROOM TALK?

In the act of making statements about the world, or asking or answering questions, we also locate ourselves socially, indicate how we perceive others, and announce, confirm or challenge how the situation is to be defined.¹² As observers of the talk of others, we draw on this everyday knowledge in treating the words as evidence of the meanings, purposes and consequences for those involved. Grice suggests a basis for orderly talk which he calls a 'co-operative principle'.¹³ It consists of a readiness to assume that our interlocutors' utterances mean something, and that it is our job to discern what that something may be. Both talk and context are scanned for relevant evidence. Continuous interpretation, and frequent re-interpretation, are among the intricacies which confer upon talk its fascination as an object of study. Linguistics, psycholinguistics, and philosophy of language have been concerned with 'transactional' uses of talk, whereas sociolinguistics has been more concerned with the interactional functions of language, that is, its uses to establish and maintain social relationships.

¹² EDWARDS, A.D. and WESTGATE, D.P.G., op. cit.

¹³ GRICE, H., 'Logic and Conversation' in COLE, P. and MORGAN, J. (eds), *Syntax and Semantics 3: Speech Acts*, (Academic Press, New York 1975).

Talk is social action and represents the fundamentally human way of getting things done. Teacher-pupil relationships appear normally to be high in power and low in solidarity, and classroom talk represents from this perspective the working-out of a power relationship. Students and teachers have to develop the language skills necessary to meet the transactional and interactional demands characteristic of classrooms. Edwards and Westgate have demonstrated that some of these skills have already been learned in the home and are easily transferred to a new setting, some have to be newly acquired, and much of what has been learned already about communication has to be set aside as unnecessary or inappropriate to learning as it is formally organized.¹⁴

EDUCATIONAL STATUS OF LANGUAGE IN THE CLASSROOM

We need to begin by examining the nature of the language experience in the dialogue between teacher and class... By its very nature a lesson is a verbal encounter through which the teacher draws information from the class, elaborates and generalizes it, and produces a synthesis. His skill is in selecting, prompting, improving, and generally orchestrating the exchange.¹⁵

Learning through talk is only one form of instruction. Formal schooling, however, normally means lessons, and most lessons are 'verbal encounters' orchestrated by the teacher. Traditional education put its stress on written language. The transmission of information was achieved mainly through the teacher's 'talk and chalk', and the students' note-taking and written exercises. The students' talk was largely confined to chanting in chorus, reciting what had been learned by rote, and answering questions that tested memory and attentiveness. Edwards and Westgate demonstrate how over the last twenty years the status of classroom talk has changed markedly and how it has been accorded a central place in the processes of learning.¹⁶ Strong

¹⁴ EDWARDS, A.D. and WESTGATE, D.P.G., op. cit.

¹⁵ BULLOCK REPORT, 'A Language for Life', (Bullock Report, 1975), p.141.

¹⁶ EDWARDS, A.D. and WESTGATE, D.P.G., op. cit.

academic support has been given to talk in psychology, child development, sociolinguistics and sociology. An extensive literature on 'language in education' which looks critically at how language is organized and used in classrooms has emerged. Official reports have urged teachers to consider language 'across the curriculum', and to plan deliberately to extend the range of opportunities available to students when listening and speaking no less than when reading and writing.

PATTERNS OF CLASSROOM TALK

Any school child playing teacher will produce most of the behaviours used by most teachers...standing in front of a group of relatively passive onlookers, doing most of the talking, asking questions to which they already know the answers, and evaluating by passing judgements.¹⁷

Pupil competence in classrooms is usually defined by the demands of instructional encounters which are dominated by teachers. It is also judged and needs to gain acceptance by one's peers. It has long been claimed that middle-class children are, in general, better prepared to cope with 'disembedded' language. They are more accustomed to making their ideas verbally explicit, and to responding to tasks presented through words alone. Middle-class children are also more practised in answering, or more disposed to answer questions to which the questioner already knows the answers, especially when those questions are about names, and what things are called.

Whereas in the traditional whole-class teaching almost all 'official' talk is channelled to or by the teacher, in the more 'progressively' organized classrooms in primary schools, a high proportion of teacher interaction is (or should be) with individual

¹⁷ SIMON, A. and BOYER, G. (eds), *Mirrors for Behaviour: An Anthology of Classroom Observation Instruments*, (Research for Better Schools Inc., Philadelphia, 1970), vol. 2, p.2.

children while the rest of the class is 'getting on with their work'. Either the 'progressive' teacher will

move rapidly round the tables, checking work, clarifying instructions and giving information, or she will remain seated at her desk while the students form a queue.¹⁸

Mixed-ability grouping might be expected to move teachers away from a single communication system centred on themselves and towards more varied encounters with students who are at very different stages of activity and understanding.¹⁹ However, research suggests a strong tendency to preserve more traditional patterns of classroom talk under the appearances of organizational or curriculum change. Whole-class teaching has proved resilient in primary schools (including Maltese schools), despite the strictures levelled against it and the anxieties expressed by others at its relative demise.²⁰ Even where interaction is organized more individually, whether in line with 'progressive' practice or in response to mixed-ability groups, the scope for pupil initiatives and for more demanding encounters with the teacher is not necessarily increased nor is the teacher's interactional and

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- ¹⁸ GALTON, M. and WILLCOCKS, J. (eds), *Moving from the Primary Classroom*, (Routledge and Kegan Paul, London 1983) pp. 161-2. BENNETT, N., DESFORGES, C., COCKBURN, A. and WILKINSON, B., *The Quality of Pupil Learning Experiences*, (Erlbaum, London 1984). TIZARD, B. and HUGHES, M., *Young Children Learning: Talking and Thinking at Home and at School*, (Fontana, London 1984).
- ¹⁹ CORBISHLEY, P., EVANS, J., KENRICK, C. and DAVIES, B., 'Teacher Strategies and Pupil Identities in Mixed-Ability Curricula', in BARTON, L. (ed.), *Schools, Teachers and Teaching*, (Falmer Press, Lewes 1981), KERRY, T., 'The Demands Made on Pupils: Thinking in Mixed-ability Classes', in SANDS, M. and KERRY, T. (eds) *Mixed Ability Teaching*, (Croom Helm, London 1982).
- ²⁰ SIMON, B., 'The Primary School Revolution: Myth or Reality?', in SIMON, B. and WILLCOCKS, J. (eds), *Research and Practice in the Primary School*, (Routledge and Kegan Paul, London 1981). POLLARD, A., *The Social World of the Primary School*, (Rinehart and Winston, Holt, Eastbourne 1985).

semantic control consistently diminished.²¹ Settings which are less physically trammelled than the traditional rows of desks within closed rooms are not to be too predictably associated with more open styles of teaching, and of teacher-pupil interaction.²² In orderly classrooms, the teacher takes turns at will, allocates turns to others, determines topics, interrupts and re-allocates turns judged to be irrelevant to those topics, and provides a running commentary on what is being said and meant. This acts as the main source of cohesion within and between the various sequences of the lesson.

SOCIAL CONVERSATION VERSUS CLASSROOM TALK

Ordinary conversation and ordinary classroom talk differ considerably in the number of participants. Conversation is not only 'talk among equals'; it is also talk among a few. However, teachers are likely to have thirty or more potential speakers to manage, often within a central communication system in which whoever is speaking is supposed to be heard by all. This accounts for the high incidence of 'irrelevant talk' and 'excessively noisy talk' in reports of students' misbehaviour.²³ A high proportion of teachers' disciplinary actions is directed against talking out of turn — "*Titkellimx meta nithkellem jien.*" [Do not talk when I am talking.], "*Aghlqulu ha nibdew.*" [Shut up so that we can begin.], "*Qed tisma?! X'ghadni kemm ghidt jien?!*" [Are you listening to me? What have I just said?], and so on.

²¹ BOYDELL, D., 'Teacher-pupil Contact in Junior Classrooms', *British Journal of Educational Psychology*, vol. 44, (1974) pp. 313-18. HARROD, P., 'Talk in Junior and Middle-school Classrooms', *Educational Review*, vol. 29, (1977), pp.97-106. GALTON, M., 'Strategies and Tactics in Junior School Classrooms', *British Educational Journal*, vol. 5, no. 2, (1979) pp. 197-210. POLLARD, A., 'Coping Strategies and the Multiplication of Differentiation in Infant Classrooms', *British Educational Research Journal*, vol. 10, no. 1 (1984), pp. 33-48. EVANS, J., *Teaching in Transition: the Challenge of Mixed-Ability Groupings*, (Open University Press, Milton Keynes, 1985). EDWARDS, A. and FURLONG, V.J., *The Language of Teaching*, op. cit.

²² BENNETT, N., ANDREAEE, J., HEGARTY, P., WADE, B., *Open Plan Schools*, (N.F.E.R., Slough 1980).

²³ WRAGG, E., *Classroom Teaching Skills*, (Croom Helm, London 1984) pp. 37-9.

Borg and Falzon listed 'talkative' as one of the qualities which is perceived to be undesirable by Maltese primary school teachers.²⁴ For students, who have so much to say about what is happening in their lives in and out of school and which is of more direct and immediate interest than what is on the classroom agenda, not talking out of turn is strenuous. Also, where there is whole-class teaching, students' unofficial talk has a visible and public quality which requires swift preventative action from the teacher if it is not to be imitated. The 'decentralizing' of classroom communication has been seen as a means for reducing the occasions for confrontation by allowing some room for tolerated conversation. This in turn reduces the effectiveness of noise as the main weapon to be used against the teacher.²⁵ It also takes the focus away from misbehaviour by rendering teacher-pupil interaction a relatively more private affair.

Most teachers see close and persistent control over classroom communication as a pre-condition for reaching their educational objectives. The possibility of losing control is always present in their minds because of the immediate problems of managing turns and topics in such restricted conditions. Also their failure to 'keep the noise down' is likely to be severely judged, both by their students and their colleagues. Teachers are rarely observed by other teachers while actually engaged in instruction, but they and their classrooms can usually be overheard. Excessively noisy classrooms make the task of other teachers more difficult. There are clearly constraints against asking 'open' questions, because of the unpredictability of what may follow. Indeed the more successful the teacher is in initiating 'discussion', the more the ensuing talk may move towards the structure of conversation. While this may be organizationally feasible in conditions where small-group teaching is commonplace - for example in higher education - it will pose a formidable challenge to the teacher's skills in the normally crowded conditions of the classroom.

²⁴ BORG, M. and FALZON, J.M., 'Primary School Teachers' Perception of Pupils' Undesirable Behaviours', in *Educational Studies*, (1989) vol. 15, no. 3.

²⁵ EDWARDS, A. and FURLONG, V.J., *The Language of Teaching*, op. cit., and DENSCOMBE, M., 'Pupil Strategies and the Open Classroom', in WOODS, P. (ed.), *Pupil Strategies*, (Croom Helm, London 1980).

Most classroom talk which has been recorded displays a clear boundary between knowledge and ignorance. Students are mainly or merely receivers of knowledge, and there are heavy constraints on what they can say and mean because it has to be confined within the limits of what the teacher treats as being relevant and correct. These constraints are most apparent in the kinds of questions which they are normally asked. 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 its 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.²⁶

TEACHERS OR RESEARCHERS?

The boundary between the roles of teacher and researcher needs to become less sharply defined than in the past. Many have promoted concepts of 'teachers as researchers'.²⁷ While there are clearly forms of enquiry which can only be carried out effectively by specialist researchers because of their technical demands, teachers' own involvement or collaboration in research brings an enhanced capacity to 'reflect systematically upon the complex situations they confront', and thereby extend their 'practical

²⁶ YOUNG, R., 'Teaching Equals Indoctrination: The Dominant Epistemic Practices of our Schools', *British Journal of Educational Studies*, vol. 32, no. 3, (1984) pp. 220-38.

²⁷ ELLIOTT, J., 'Facilitating Action Research in Schools: Some Dilemmas', in BURGESS, R. (ed.) *Field Methods in the Study of Education*, op. cit. EBBUTT, D. and ELLIOTT, J., 'Why Should Teachers Do Research?', in EBBUTT, D., ELLIOTT, J. (eds), *Issues in Teaching for Understanding*, (School Curriculum Development Committee and Longman, London 1985). NIXON, J. (ed.), *A Teacher's Guide to Action Research*, (Grant McIntyre, London 1981). POLLARD, A., 'Opportunities and Difficulties of a Teacher-ethnographer: A Personal Account', in BURGESS, R. (ed.), *Field Methods in the Study of Education*, op. cit. SKILBECK, M., 'Lawrence Stenhouse: Research Methodology', *British Educational Research Journal*, vol. 9, no. 1 (1983) pp. 11-20. WALKER, R., *A Handbook of Research for Teachers*, (Methuen, London 1985).

judgement' and their repertoire of professional skills.²⁸ Some of the technicalities involved, say in discourse analysis or in conversational analysis, can appear either daunting in themselves or more complex than is really necessary for the kinds of enquiry which teachers might undertake. These technicalities may be dismissed by impatient practitioners seeking practical guidance. However one cannot presume to look for too easy and rapid results from research, especially where the object of investigation is as complex as language. What the best research has done is to deepen understanding of that complexity.²⁹

INVESTIGATING CLASSROOM TALK

Dell Hymes contends that classrooms offer an exceptionally useful and appropriate setting for basic work in sociolinguistics generally.³⁰ However, the range of methodologies for investigating classroom talk is wide. No single approach will serve all research purposes, or be applicable to any and every educational setting. There are sharp differences of opinion about both the theoretical underpinnings and practical validity of every main option. There is no single conceptual framework or adequate shared vocabulary for describing classroom events and processes. The attractions of recording and transcribing are offset by some formidable difficulties.

RECORDING AND TRANSCRIBING

Choices of approach are inevitably related to purposes and procedures. They also necessarily involve theoretical, even philosophical, implications for every stage of the work. The researcher's choice of recording method or methods depends on the response to questions arising from the phenomenon of language itself to which the intending researcher must offer at least provisional answers. For instance, an initial decision has to be

²⁸ NIXON, J., *op. cit.*

²⁹ EDWARDS, A.D. and WESTGATE, D.P.G., *op. cit.*

³⁰ HYMES, D., 'Language in Education: Forward to Fundamentals', in GARNICA, O. and KING, M. (eds), *Language, Children and Society*, (Pergamon, Oxford 1979).

made between the immediate coding of observed behaviour as it occurs, and the creation of an audio or audio-visual record that can be replayed after the event.

Simultaneous coding is carried out by observers trained to assign features of the interaction to pre-specified categories listed on an observation schedule. Such schedules were conceived as devices through which teachers might inspect themselves at work, profiting from the almost immediate feedback which they provided. They have strong links historically with microteaching and other 'competency-based' teacher training programmes. In this way utterances can therefore be adequately categorized as they occur in terms of their broadly defined functions. The resulting record then extends to a record of what was done through what was said. The outcome is a great quantity of data about what 'really occurred' which can be computed like any other survey material.

Others prefer to make recordings for retrospective analysis. They see interaction as being constructed both through the participants' interpretation of many factors which are not easily accessible to an observer. Those participants draw on background knowledge of which the observer may be unaware. They respond to the constraints of particular types of discourse at various stages in the lesson, and they regularly reinterpret the meaning of what was said in the light of what was then said after it.

Choice between instant coding and the various types of retrospective analysis reflects working assumptions about interaction and the transparency of talk, and about the kinds of data needed if the researcher is to capture more than the unambiguously observable phenomena.³¹

There are wide disagreements, however, about what constitutes an adequate transcript on which to base some analysis of the complexities of the talk or to validate claims made at the reporting stage. The initial record cannot be all-embracing, yet its form will guide or predispose the directions which analysis can take. The final report must provide evidence in support of whatever conclusions are drawn, and allow the reader some room for judging these against at least sample sections of the record. In

³¹ EDWARDS, A.D. and WESTGATE, D.P.G., *op. cit.*

general, the guiding principle is still to suit the type and quantity of the data to the kind and depth of analysis intended.

In one kind of research project, a case is made for the collection of background information which would shed light on the relationships between talk and macro-factors like social class and ethnic origin. Here reference is made to longitudinal studies of language development. The Bristol study directed by Gordon Wells recorded young children in their homes and at intervals during their first years of pre-school and more formal schooling.³² For each child, the collected transcripts were preceded by systematic notes of a general kind, while each individual sample contained more detailed contextual information. Exploration of language development at home and at school clearly requires the collection of a great deal of naturally-occurring talk, recorded over time and in both settings. The home-based recordings were obtained by using radio-microphones worn for the whole day, and a time-switched recorder operating with the subjects' consent but without their knowing when it was on. The transcription includes details of timing and location. Given the emphasis throughout the research on 'learning through interaction', the interplay has to be presented from both 'sides', the child's and his or her interlocutor's.

The researcher's highly problematic task remains therefore that of devising ways of capturing, and displaying for analysis a sufficient amount of evidence from the relevant channels of communication in the classroom. This, in order to ensure that the observer's interpretations approach the reliability of those originally made by the participants and upon which they acted. At each stage of the transcription, decisions have to be made with serious consequences for future work.

³² WELLS, G., 'Describing Children's Linguistic Development at Home and at School', *British Educational Research Journal*, vol. 5, no. 1, (1979) pp. 75-89. WELLS, G. and MONTGOMERY, M., 'Adult-child Interaction at Home and at School', in FRENCH, P. and MacLURE, M. (eds), *Adult-Child Conversation*, (Croom Helm, London 1981). WELLS, G. and WELLS, J., 'Learning to Talk and Talking to Learn', *Theory into Practice*, vol. 23, no. 3 (1984) pp. 190-7.

PROBLEMS IN OBSERVING CLASSROOM TALK

Particular kinds of data depend on styles of recording and transcription, as well as on the researcher's general theoretical orientation. Any research can be said to carry with it an implicit view of what is to be treated as significant. If the researcher intends to observe the distribution of a teacher's individually-targeted speech around the classroom, the relevant questions would be - 'How much? And to whom?', rather than 'Why?'. But where the structure and sequencing of discourse in specific settings is the focus of attention, then meanings are involved which are not directly accessible from the surface features of vocabulary and syntax. Thus a basic difference is evident between concentration on observable (or 'surface') behaviour, and on what may underlie that behaviour and direct it. We have here a positivist stance towards a directly observable reality, as against a view which seeks to encompass those complex and less accessible dimensions which some consider to be the determining characteristics of human affairs. In linguistics, the contrasts have been heightened by the sociolinguistic emphasis on language as social action, requiring reference beyond the 'purely' linguistic data to its social and cultural correlates.³³ Significant reality for such research may be said to lie behind both words and actions. Harder still to discern are the socio-cultural values and assumptions which belong to a wider reality extending far beyond the observed setting but which may be playing a crucial role within it.

OBSERVER'S PARADOX

All observation of classroom talk shares a further common problem. This is usually referred to as the 'Observer's paradox', and has to do with the effects of observational activity on the phenomena observed. The concept was formulated in linguistics by Labov as the need 'to observe how people speak when they are

³³ HALLIDAY, M., *Language as Social Semiotic*, (Edward Arnold, London 1978).
HYMES, D., *Foundations in Sociolinguistics: An Ethnographic Approach*, (Tavistock, London 1977).

not being observed'.³⁴ Observers and their recording devices are likely to be obtrusive. People who know that they are being overheard may well talk more, or talk less, or just talk differently. Samph, for example, found that under observation, teachers' verbal behaviour came more closely to resemble both that of their own ideal teacher and that which they believed a visitor might expect of them. This tendency was most marked when formal teaching styles were being observed.³⁵

There are also the distortions which Wragg identifies as resulting from teachers' simple irritation at being watched and having their every move recorded in a setting which they are likely to regard as their own.³⁶ Similarly, Blease reports children acting up when observers are present.³⁷ Recording equipment too poses a similar problem to its operators. The more elaborate it becomes in order to meet requirements of technical quality, the more questionable is the authenticity of the events being recorded. Conversely, the researcher may turn to 'low-technology' approaches, and rely on what can be achieved by a discreet observer armed with little more than pen and paper.³⁸

One strategy often used is to allow the researcher's presence to become, over time, so familiar a feature of the setting that observer and equipment are 'hardly noticed'. There is little consensus, however, about how long this familiarization process is likely to take. Westgate blurred his research role in a comprehensive school by at first simply sharing the teaching of classes who were later to be recorded with their usual teachers. His research interest was explained to all from the start, but after

³⁴ LABOV, W., 'The Study of Language in its Social Context', in GIGLIOLI, P.(ed.), *Language and Social Context*, (Penguin, Harmondsworth 1972).

³⁵ SAMPH, T., 'Observer Effects on Teacher Verbal Behaviour', *Journal of Educational Psychology*, vol. 68, no. 6 (1976) pp. 736-41.

³⁶ WRAGG, E., *op. cit.*

³⁷ BLEASE, D., 'Observer Effects on Teachers and Pupils in Classroom Research', *Educational Research*, vol. 35, no. 3 (1983) pp. 211-17.

³⁸ KING, R., *All Things Bright and Beautiful: A Sociological Study of Infants' Classrooms*, (Routledge and Kegan Paul, London 1978). EVANS, J., *Teaching in Transition*, *op. cit.*

the seven weeks which preceded the recorded sequence of lessons he became 'part of the department'.³⁹ Other common strategies for minimizing distortion are to record whole sequences of lessons, or compare recordings made at different stages in the research to see whether any differences are apparent. Andrew Pollard's use of students themselves as 'investigators' was therefore especially ingenious where the focus of his enquiry was playground life.⁴⁰ In all research, objectives and methods are determined by what is possible. Gains in quantity and quality of data need to be balanced against the costs in time and other resources.

ANALYSING CLASSROOM TALK

Lemke adopts two principles for the analysis of transcribed talk in a lesson. Firstly, he looks at the relations between the ways in which the 'content' of the lesson is developed, and the ways in which the participants in the lesson are co-operating or competing in their behaviour. Secondly, he looks at the relations between both these functional aspects of the immediate situation and larger-scale, longer-term social patterns that are being maintained or changed by what people are doing at the moment.⁴¹ These two aspects - the dynamics of social interaction and the development of the thematic content of the subject being taught - are in principle separable, but in practice they are never really independent of one another, because they are simply two aspects of the same flow of behaviour. These aspects are separated in the analysis of classroom talk only so that we can look at their relations to one another.

DISCOURSE ANALYSIS

Discourse analysis can identify and describe the regular activity routines of classrooms, and the strategies that teachers and students use in building personal relationships, defining roles and

³⁹ WESTGATE, D. et al., op. cit.

⁴⁰ POLLARD, A., *The Social World of the Primary School*, op. cit., ch. 4; and POLLARD, A., 'Opportunities and Difficulties of a Teacher-ethnographer: A Personal Account', op. cit., pp. 226-30.

⁴¹ LEMKE, J. L., *Using Language in the Classroom*, (OUP, Oxford 1989).

expectations, and manipulating the possibilities of classroom situations. The actual 'content' of the curriculum can be determined by analyzing what systems of thematic meanings are being developed in the classroom. In this way one can identify how their complex relationships are expressed in language. These methods apply not only to talk but to written work, textbooks, and teaching materials. This approach provides also a necessary basis for analyzing educational problems, formulating proposals for constructive change, and making social decisions about educational practice.⁴²

Often a relatively simple format will be revealing. Consider, for example, the following extract from an audio-recording of an English lesson in a Year 5 class made up of eleven girls and eight boys.

T: (Referring to a picture in the national reading scheme.) O.K. Now the children are going to the fun-fair.

Mark: Miss - Fun-fair - bumping-cars?

T: Not only bumping-cars. Merry-go-round, house of ghosts, everything where children can play, I said.

Joe: Teacher, *il-belt hemm...*[in Valletta there are...](T. signals Joe to stop)

T: That's the fun fair, where children can play...Now. Look at this picture. Look how many funny faces. What are they?

Students: *Maskri*. [Masks.]

T: Masks, very good. A month ago we saw a lot of masks on people's faces. A month ago, why?

Ruth: Miss, miss. In the Kar...in the...*Fil-Karnival?* [during carnival?]

T: Yes very good. Because it was carnival time. Now here in the book it is not carnival time, but at the fun fair children wear masks to enjoy themselves. But why does Rick want the mask? Why? Because he wants to play with the mask?

Mark: *Halli ma tindunax il-lady*. [So that the lady would not notice him.]

T: Very good. So that the lady won't notice him. She won't recognize him. *Ma taghrfux*. [She would not recognize him.] That's why he wants it the mask - not to play.

Joe: *Imbaghad ramiha miss?* [Did he throw it away, then, miss?]

⁴² LEMKE, J.L., op. cit.

T: *Issa*, we'll see what he's going to do, wait a minute. Look at picture seven. Look at the lady's face. What do you think of the lady? She is...?

David: *Tirrabja nahseb*. [She is angry, I think.]

T: How do you say it? She is...? *Isa*. [Come on, try.] She is ang...

Students: Angry.

T: She is angry, the lady.

The following questions can be asked with reference to the passage cited above:

- Which features of the above extract indicate that the discourse took place in a classroom? Can you imagine this kind of discourse occurring outside a classroom?

- What does the evidence in the discourse itself tell you about the interpersonal relationships of T and the other participants? How do they treat each other? In what ways do they try to control one another's behaviour? Why do you think does the teacher keep repeating the students' answers to her questions? If this was done in ordinary conversation, how would it be interpreted? How do you think the students in this lesson interpret it?

- Which features of the above extract are most characteristic of **spoken**, as opposed to **written**, styles of language use? How does this transcription of classroom talk look different from what one usually sees in other forms of writing (say in the text of a play)?

CLASSROOM TALK AND SOCIAL CHANGE

Education seems to grow more authoritarian and exam-oriented at secondary school level. At this stage both teachers and students are more rigorously deprived of their right to choose for themselves what they shall spend their many hours together doing. One may ask in whose interest is it that students and teachers do not use the resources of schools to explore beyond the narrow limits of prescribed curricula?

Schools are what they are today as a consequence of their history which over the years has been shaped by social power. Teachers and students have historically exercised very little social power. They have little say, if any, in the development of new curricula and teaching techniques; this especially in places like Malta where the schooling system is burdened by an unwieldy centralized bureaucracy. Also, students and teachers do not

exercise the political power and influence to decide what must be done in classrooms. Our present educational system is very rigid and all students are forced to study the same curriculum. No mixing in classes across ages (in some cases across sexes) is allowed. In secondary schools, and most primary schools, the subject is changed every hour and there is no long-term relationship, over a day, over the years of education, between particular teachers and their students. This severely handicaps the development of project work in any subject and consequently the evolution of real human communities within schools that would tend to take stock of their own lives is greatly fettered. Textbooks and other commercial materials published for profit are used in national curricula across all schools and dominate subject study. Uniformity is enforced by means of examinations that sit students down against their will. In such a situation they are in complete isolation from all resources but individual memory. The artificial pressure of time put on them forces them to answer questions in which they have little or no human interest and which are not posed in any real social context.

The language used by teachers in most classrooms is often dehumanized and dogmatic. 'Good' teachers normally make efforts to humanize what they teach by making jokes and telling stories. Lemke discovered that students are three to four times more likely to pay close attention when teachers break away from the 'official' language of the classroom.⁴³ But teachers and students usually signal that these breaks don't belong to the serious business of the lesson. The break emphasizes by contrast that the real language of the classroom is still the dehumanized one. The formal language of the classroom also uses special linguistic strategies to show how concepts are related to each other. When students are frustrated at not being able to make sense of this kind of formal language, they are encouraged to blame themselves rather than the language. The students are made to acquire an image of themselves as incapable of understanding the distorted image of the world that is projected by these forms of language. It is only those students who pick up the tricks of learning from this particular style of language early on, who ever have a real chance

⁴³ LEMKE, J.L., *op. cit.*

of success. When 'success' is measured by traditional examinations, it is only the 'official' language of the classroom, not the informal breaks from it, that counts.

The present language of the classroom appeals to only some sorts of students with some kinds of language experience. They are the ones who succeed. In this way a disproportionate number of girls, of students from less well-off families, and others from backgrounds where formal language is less often met with will continue to be kept from participation in classroom activities and from a share of the social power that goes with it. Wider social interests are served by using the education system to select for reward those in a society who accommodate best to it.

There needs to be an on-going frank discussion regarding the problems prevailing in the present educational system and democratic trials of proposed alternatives. Such changes are fundamentally changes in social relations, and power. Any fundamental changes in social relations, where students and teachers gain in power while politically powerful interests lose it, are likely to be resisted. The strength of the resistance is a clear index of the importance of the social function the existing pattern serves. Resistance will come not only from 'above' and 'outside', but from those teachers and students who have been shamefully taught to fear their own participation in decisions that affect their own lives. They too, as members of the community, must be taken into our confidence and by challenging our ideas and strategies they may very well provide a healthy check for the rate of social change. Significant change in curriculum and classroom practices necessarily contributes to wider social change. Research and theories are not 'knowledge' to be 'learned', but tools and discourses to be used to realize new human possibilities.⁴⁴

⁴⁴ LEMKE, J.L., *op. cit.*