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THE INTERACTIONAL ARCHITECTURE OF THE LANGUAGE CLASSROOM: A Conversation Analysis Perspective

International Perspectives on ELT Classroom Interaction

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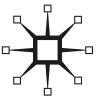

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Contents

List of Figures vii

Series Editors' Preface ix

Notes on Contributors xii

1 International Perspectives on ELT Classroom Interaction: An Introduction 1
Paul Seedhouse and Christopher J. Jenks

2 Teaching Methods and Approaches: Looking into a Unique CLIL Classroom in Germany 10
Götz Schwab

3 Summons Turns: The Business of Securing a Turn in Busy Classrooms 28
Rod Gardner

4 'Funds of Knowledge' for Achievement and Success: Multilingual Pedagogies for Mainstream Primary Classrooms in England 49
Jean Conteh

5 The Multimodal Organisation of Teacher-Led Classroom Interaction 64
Leila Kääntä

6 Networked Classrooms and Networked Minds: Language Teaching in a Brave New World 84
Melinda Dooly

7 Giving and Following Pedagogical Instructions in Task-Based Instruction: An Ethnomethodological Perspective 110
Numa Markee

8 Scaffolding for Mediated Learning during 'Whole-Class Exercises' in Kenyan Secondary English Lessons 129
Dorine Lugendo and Heather Smith

9 L2 and L3 Integrated Learning: Lingua Franca Use in Learning an Additional Language in the Classroom 149
Spencer Hazel and Johannes Wagner

10 What's the Use of Technology? Insights from EFL Classrooms in Chinese Secondary Schools 168
Li Li

11 Analysing ELT in the European Arena: Multilingual Practices 188
Gudrun Ziegler, Natalia Durus, Olcay Sert, and Neiloufar Family

12 Examining English-Only in the EFL Classroom of a Swedish School: A Conversation Analytic Perspective 208
Alia Amir

13 Applying Global Perspectives on ELT Classroom Interaction to Current Issues in Language Teaching 219
Christopher J. Jenks and Paul Seedhouse

References 227

Index 251

List of Figures

2.1	Linguistic profiles based on interviews (t1–t3)	21
2.2	Linguistic profiles based on lessons	22
3.1	Classroom map	40
3.2	Butterfly life cycle	42
6.1	Virtual art gallery in Second Life	88
6.2	Cues for first draft of chapter	89
6.3	Specially made flashcards	90
6.4	Scientist avatars observe a boy exercising ('healthy habit')	91
6.5	'Students discuss information during videoconference'	92
6.6	Gameboy Gary complains of his backache to Dr Stella	93
6.7	Student controls Snoopy avatar	97
6.8	Tracking of verbal directions on maps	98
8.1	Chalkboard used to note main points for learners	130
8.2	Handmade charts are used to summarise factual information for learners	130
8.3	Three pupils are used as models to demonstrate how adjectives are used to describe a person	138
8.4	Learners write down lesson notes dictated to them	139
8.5	A learner raises her hand to ask a question	140
8.6	Developing collective knowledge through whole-class exercises: a learner underlines and categorises the adverb 'anywhere'	140
11.1	Names of the participants: Kosta, Pedro, Teacher, Bojan, Fritz, and Chris	192
11.2	1.66, Fritz's cutting gesture, gaze orientation to the teacher	194
11.3	1.79, Kosta pointing to Chris, Chris has his hand on the hand-out	195
11.4	l.87, Kosta pointing to the teacher, the teacher's cutting gesture	195
11.5	l.2, Kosta starts writing with his finger on the table, gesture to be done until l.12	197

11.6 l.13, Kosta pointing at Chris 198
11.7 l.10, Kosta depicts a serpent-like movement with his hand, orienting to Chris 201
11.8 l.17, Pedro depicts a serpent-like movement with his palms brought together orienting to Bojan 201
11.9 l.21, Kosta's gaze to Chris 202

Series Editors' Preface

Classrooms are strange places, and none is stranger than those where the business of language teaching and learning gets done. Thirty years ago White and Lightbown (1984) discovered that the English language teachers in their Canadian study asked up to four questions a minute, though nearly half of these received no response – which wasn't as bad as it sounded because two-thirds of their questions were repeats of earlier questions. These teachers were persistent, though, and would happily repeat the same question up to nine times.

To those inside them, of course, classrooms seem perfectly straightforward; it is only when the research spotlight is shone on them that the subtleties and complexities of their interactional patternings are revealed. As Seedhouse and Jenks note in their introduction, when access to audio recording technology became widely available in the 1960s, researchers were able to capture the data they needed in order to understand classroom talk. The yield has been a rich one, and not only for researchers; one of the most encouraging aspects of developments in this area has been the way in which they have enabled teachers to discover for themselves the riches of their own pedagogic worlds. There is, as Seedhouse and Jenks point out, no limit to the range of phenomena to be explored.

As the editors admit, it would be impossible to capture all the riches of this diverse area within a single collection, but they have assembled a range of contributions impressive not only for its geographical reach but for the variety of topics and approaches it encompasses. Ranging from Scandinavia to Australia, Canada to Kenya, covering primary schools to universities, embracing multimodal to ethnomethodological analytical perspectives, and covering topics from CLIL to translanguaging, the contributions in this collection reflect in their own ways the world of superdiversity with which language education now needs to engage.

The inadequacies of comfortable assumptions underlying the search for a best method in the last century have been exposed by shifts in the tectonic plates of language pedagogy as they respond to the forces of globalisation in its many manifestations, and the chapters in this collection reflect the impact of these changes. The idea of the classroom as merely a platform for the delivery of a target language has given way to its reconceptualisation as a multilingual space in which linguistic resources can be deployed strategically. The chapters by Hazel and Wagner, and Ziegler, Durus, Sert and Family

explore the possibilities inherent in the investment of multilingual resources, the latter focusing on the interactional organisation of 'conversational writing', while Hazel and Wagner advance the case for shifting from a native-speaker model to a *competent multilingual* model of teaching. Conteh's focus on 'funds of knowledge' also makes a persuasive case for drawing on the linguistic and social resources of students as part of a 'multilingual pedagogy, with dialogic talk at its centre, and translanguaging practices as a key feature.'

Important though these perspectives are, this is a diverse collection and there is space for other voices. Amir, for example, addresses the issue of language policing and reveals how the teaching context bears on the ways in which the 'English-only' rule is managed in a Swedish school where, as in many situations, all interested parties have strong views about whether the L1 should be used in ELT classes. Schwab takes a different tack, revealing the value of CLIL in enabling even low-achieving students to succeed. His finding that students claimed it was easier for them to understand content when it was taught in the L2 will give many readers pause for thought. The poignancy of Gardner's paper will also stir the interest of many. Located in a primary school in Australia where Aboriginal pupils are taught by Anglo-Australian teachers and examining the ways in which children summon their teacher, it reports a high incidence of failure. Its recommendation that teachers should therefore record their classroom interactions in order to better understand the nature of these practices could stand as a paradigm case for the value of investigating classroom interaction.

Another major shift that has reshaped the pedagogic landscape has arisen from the impact of technology, and this collection considers this from two different perspectives. The first examines how technology can contribute to language teaching. Dooly's chapter engages directly with the opportunities offered by technology in a globalised world, describing a two-year telecollaborative project linking young learners in Spain with target language speakers in Canada. Significantly, it aims not only to develop in learners the capacity to collaborate with others online in multiple languages but also to feel at home in different technological environments. In a similar vein, Li shows how technology can be used in innovative ways in the language classroom to enhance the learning experience.

The second perspective on technology in this collection is directed to its capacity to enhance our understanding of what happens in the classroom. Kääntä, for example, applies multimodal analysis of video data to the Initiation-Response-Evaluation sequence, revealing that conventional views of it as three consecutive verbal actions do not do justice to its complexity and that the structure can only properly be understood in terms of the interplay of talk and embodiment. Markee offers similar insights into instruction-giving practices, demonstrating that they are far from monologic and that non-verbal

elements have an important part to play in their interactive construction. Finally, Lugendo and Smith turn their attention to large classes in Kenya, using video data to demonstrate how student teachers are able to maximise learning opportunities in whole-class teaching. All of these chapters return to ground that has already been well trodden, but their use of technology compels us to re-evaluate much that we have taken for granted about it.

Anyone reading the foregoing descriptions could be forgiven for wondering where the analysis of classroom interaction is to be found in these chapters, so rich are the methodological gifts on offer, but it is at the heart of all of them. In fact – and quite deliberately – this collection is more research-oriented than others in the series because, as Jenks and Seedhouse sagely observe in their conclusion, 'the ELT classroom is a constantly evolving, co-negotiated space', and if we wish to improve our practice in it we must continually apply our understanding to the nature of that evolution.

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