Classroom discourse analysis

Classroom Teacher Children

What Characteristic patterns of classroom discourse are apparent in the passage below?

Context: This discourse takes place in a first-grade classroom in the USA, where the children are approximately 6 years old. The teacher has been reading from a book on hurricanes and tornados.

1. Manuel: Uh, if tornados go to the Antarctica, what the penguin gonna do?

2. Teacher: Oh, you know what*…

3. Male Child: They could go under water.

4. Teacher: Could they go under water? What kind of protection could a penguin have?

5. Bernardo: If there's enemies // if there's enemies, how could a penguin go underneath the water if there's enemies?

6. Teacher: Oh, he wouldn't want to go underneath the water would he? Well, who's his enemy?

7. Children: The seal.

8. Teacher: The seals, yeah. Good thinking, questioner, yeah.

9. Children: [several students speaking at once]

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10. Teacher: Alright, Manuel had his hand up first. He asked a really important question. He said, ' well, what can a penguin do if he knows that a tornado is coming'? Wasn't that your question?

11. Bernardo: No, that was mine.

12. Teacher: Well, together you were kind of talking about it. Now listen. That's a really good question. Now let's try to the question…

13. Teacher: Now, I'm going to go over and get a book. In fact… Alejandro, no, Manuel, you go over and get the Emperor penguin book. The one from National Geographic on the table over there. (Adapted from the Shuart-Faris and Bloome, 2004, p. 106).

From their beginnings children grow up learning language. This complex learning process is often taken for granted, as babies absorb and begin responding to the language which surrounds them. Bancroft (2007) suggests that these early language developments take place primarily between the dyad, in other words the child and his/her main caregiver (p. 14). As children get older they become exposed to, and learn from, a much wider group of people and this helps to develop their ability to use language effectively. While the development of language skills is an on-going process, the children in the example of classroom discourse above have clearly already developed many of the skills essential in spoken language. These children can conform to the basic rules of conversation, such as turn taking and responding to prompts, recognising the teacher as being the initiator and themselves as respondents. They have also already developed enough comprehension of vocabulary to be able to participate in the discourse and have enough

language knowledge to behave appropriately within the context of a classroom discussion.

At approximately six years of age, these children appear to have already developed some of the skills which Crystal (1995) identified as essential acquisitions for young language learners; an extensive vocabulary, with words such as ' enemies' and ' underneath' along with comprehension of words such as ' protection', and knowledge and use of grammatical structure, such as the sentence formation shown in lines one, three, five and eleven (cited in Bancroft, 2007, p. 5). This discourse, according to Crystal's (1995) theory, is a reasonably representative example, as he claims that at least three quarters of all grammar is understood by most children by the time they first attend school (cited in Bancroft, 2007, p. 5).

Sinclair and Coulthard (1975) were the first linguists to describe the structural element of classroom talk, otherwise known as Initiation-Response-Feedback exchange or IRF (cited in Mercer, 2007, p. 122). Mercer (2007) explains that IRF exchanges between teacher and pupil are considered to be standard interaction, with the teacher asking questions and the pupil(s) responding (p. 122). As a result of their research, Wills (1983) and Edwards (1992) concluded that children quickly become familiar with the use of IRF within the structure of classroom discourse, and will automatically begin to participate in it (cited in Mercer, 2007, p. 124). In the transcript above we can see clear examples of IRF; in both lines 4 and 6 the teacher asks direct questions to their pupils. In the first IRF exchange the teacher asks two questions and while the first was a closed question which could be answered by one ' correct' answer, by following it immediately with an open

question, it would seem that the teacher was attempting to make the children consider the subject before prompting a discussion. In the second IRF exchange, seen on line 6, the teacher again asks two questions at once, these however are both quite closed questions which indeed are followed by all of the children answering together with the correct answer of ' the seal'.

The most common form of IRF, consisting of closed questions being asked, has received criticism from educational researchers such as Dillon (1988) and Wood (1992) who feel that little opportunity is given for pupils to develop their ability to reason, argue and explain using language (cited in Mercer, 2007, p. 123). Mercer (2007) however argues that, by including open questions in these exchanges, IRF can be used positively to shape pupils awareness and help them gain deeper understanding. He concludes that, while he accepts criticisms of IRF, caution must be taken in simply associating language structures, or verbs used in questions, with language functions, the act of asking a question, as what is ultimately more revealing is looking at the context in which these exchanges occur (p. 124). A good example of this is a recording on the U211 DVD (2007) of a teacher speaking to secondary school students about a project they were participating in. As we are able to hear this discourse we can assess the use of tone, intonation and stress patterns, along with the language structure and language function to give a much clearer idea as to the effectiveness of IRF. Throughout this IRF exchange the teacher is encouraging the students to share, and expand on, information about their project, using open questions along with informal, supportive and friendly intonation (Unit 20). Without the ability to hear the

classroom discourse exchange in our question, we should acknowledge that we can only make limited judgements as to the mode of IRF used.

One aspect of classroom discourse which is not present in our example is that of specialised technical terms. Children in education will inevitably encounter these terms, as Mercer (2007) explains, which come from specific vocabularies of the different subjects within their curriculum. The fact that technical terms are lacking from our example could be due to the age of the children, as pupils will progressively become exposed to, and begin to use, these terms as they go through their education. Mercer notes that the use of this language can be confusing for pupils and easily misinterpreted, with children reliant upon the teachers skill in helping to learn and understand them (p. 127).

In our discourse example a teacher is present and is initiating, shaping and controlling the conversation. Mercer (2007) however comments on how school based language interaction between teachers and pupils differs greatly to that between pupils only. He suggests that pupils working in groups or pairs without the presence of a teacher tend to make extended contributions to the conversation, are more willing to share knowledge, offer explanations and express uncertainty, probably due to their shared status (p. 131). Teachers undoubtedly play an important role in the education of children, however we should consider whether more pupils in our example would have shared their knowledge if they had been discussing the topic without the teachers presence. We can see on lines 7 and 9 more than one child talking at once, firstly to provide an answer to a closed question and

secondly in inaudible speech, but besides these there are only two children who offer answers in this, admittedly small section, of discourse.

While researching the topic of classroom discourse, Halliday (1985) stressed the importance of a child's understanding and use of the distinctive register of written English (cited in Mercer, 2007, p. 139). Halliday's theory of functional linguistics was the basis of the development of the genre approach, which recognised that language needed to be used in different ways dependent upon the context or medium for which it was being used (Maybin, cited in Mercer, 2007, p. 140). In other words, as Mercer (2007) explains, children need to learn education ground rules, or conventions, in order to recognise and utilize language effectively (p. 138). These ground rules include learning specialised words, patterns of classroom interactions and the differences between spoken language and written texts (DVD, Unit 20). Mercer (2007) also acknowledges that rather than these ground rules being directly taught, children will learn them through their teacher's example and feedback (p. 139). In our example we have no written comparison for the transcribed spoken language, and it is therefore difficult to assess just how different the language would be if the children had been writing about tornados rather than discussing them. Maybin (1994) suggests that ' written genres tend to be more condensed and abstract' (cited in Mercer, 2007, p. 139). In line 5 of our example we can see an example of this, with Bernardo possibly speaking while still determining what it is that he wants to say. Had he been asked to write his question, we would be unlikely to see any evidence of the false start or repetition of the words ' if there's

enemies' which we see in his speech, as the ground rules of written language require the thought process to be completed prior to writing.

One of the most important points about our example, as mentioned earlier, is with only a written transcript of the conversation it is difficult to be able to fully analyse the discourse. Intonation, rate of speech and facial expressions, also known as paralinguistic features, play an important role in spoken language (Mayor, 2007, p. 71), and without knowledge of this we cannot be sure of the rapport between the teacher and their students. We can see clear evidence of IRF in our example, but what we cannot gauge is the extent to which the teacher was engaging and encouraging the pupils. What is clear is that the complete process of learning is extensive, with children developing unspoken rules of language alongside the curriculum. Learning, by example and through the feedback, the ground rules of language – the construction of different forms of language, specialised technical terms and discourse patterns – is just as important as learning specific set information, as without it children would grow up unable to communicate effectively.

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