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ABSTRACT

Education may be seen as a form of verbal communication. Opinions about the part language plays in pedagogical communication differ according to the emphasis placed on: (1) the teacher (i.e., language as a means of transferring knowledge, as in the traditional teacher-centered concept); (2) the students (or language as a means of learning); or (3) the communicative process itself (i.e., teaching and learning as communicative interaction or dialogue). Most recently, research on classroom communication, while still looking at teacher and student talk, has taken on a new perspective. This more process-centered approach, which studies classroom verbal interaction as a form of conversation, is realized through the ethnographic method. Ethnolinguistic research on educational discourse has begun to focus on underlying social norms, schemata created and signaled by participants, and systems governing verbal classroom interaction. Within the last category are studies of pedagogical actions expressed in language (structuring, soliciting, responding, reacting), of the transactions occurring in lessons, and of the eliciting of verbal exchanges. A 39-item bibliography is included. (MSE)

VERBAL COMMUNICATION IN THE CLASSROOM

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ABSTRACT

Education may be looked upon as a form of (verbal) communication. Opinions concerning the part of language played in pedagogical communication differ according to the stress put on the teacher (language as a means of transferring knowledge), the pupils (language as a means of learning), or the communicative process itself (teaching-learning as communicative interaction or dialogue). Nowadays, next to the study of the characteristics of teacher and pupil talk, research on verbal interaction in the classroom takes a new start. This change in perspective is realised through an ethnographic methodology.

1. Education as a form of communication

"Je ne répéterai jamais assez que nous donnons trop de pouvoir aux mots: avec notre éducation babillarde, nous ne faisons que des babillards" (I can't but repeat: we give too much power to words: our babbling ecucation only creates babblers).

I read these lines, which obviously express the feelings of many educationists in the Nordic (and not so Nordic) countries, in a book written more than 200 years ago. Indeed, they are quoted from the French philosopher of education J.-J. Rousseau, the Benjamin Spock of his time. Education makes use of words, of language and, as Rousseau feared, in his Emile ou de l'éducation, sometimes in overdose, thereby causing educational inflation.

Rousseau's statement also implicitly points at a distinction which many educationists are willing to make with him, namely one between the process and the product of education. This distinction, however handy it may be, distracts the attention from the conceptual unity of education. It could rather be the case that the range of activities, both formal and informal, whereby people are initiated into, or realigned with, the evolving traditions, structures and social relations should be taken to constitute their

education. Education has essentially to do with learning, but it remains an open question, not only in the language domain, whether all learning requires teaching.

Educating and teaching (intended or not) can be viewed as transactions of the type 'by doing activity P, person A was x-ing person B'. Kleinig (1982), following H. Freeman, calls them perficienary transactions; educate/teach are thus, from this pragmatic point of view, perficient (X-ing) verbs (belonging to the same class as hurt, interrupt, offend, dominate, inspire, reform ...) rather than activity verbs. When the educational relationship is dialogical, learning can be in-depth and critical.

The intellectual exercises of Kleinig and other philosophers of education can revitalise the discussions in educational circles on items such as the relative isomorphy (of terms like) between educating/teaching, socialisation/education, education/communication. It is, for example, to stick to the latter pair, not unusual for educationists to regard education as (a form of) (primarily verbal) communication. Obviously, a general view like this, leaves room for different interpretations, depending on the definitions of sender and receiver in the communication process.

1.1. The traditional concept: teacher-centred

A traditional educator/teacher centred interpretation considers language the means 'par excellence' for the transmission and evaluation of linguistically 'canned' knowledge. The teacher is regarded a as non-stop broadcaster, the pupils are to standby, receive and, occasionally, 're-broadcast'. Becoming a pupil means for the young child adaptation to a situation in which the omnipresence of the words (of the teacher) is a predominant, constant, and systematic fact (Bruner 1971: 65). Does he fail to do so, class will become a 'linguistic Passchendaele' (Hawkins 1981: 226) for him very soon.

A large part of the manifest curriculum, the subject matter, is transmitted by the teacher in monologues. Traditional teacher profiles point at the necessity of a 'good verbal ability': is the teacher not earning his living by means of speech, a realisation of a sociolect and a subject-related idiom? Moreover he holds the floor, he defines who can speak or, for that matter, who is not allowed to. If the permission is granted, the decision regarding the relevance of the pupil's message remains with the teacher (Coulthard 1974: 237).

1.2. The 'modern education' concept: centred on the pupil

Now, let us turn to views that centre on the learner, views that have been influenced by modern developmental psychology and (cognitive) learning psychology. They emphasize the possibility of language as a means of learning. The acquisition of concepts and skills is intimately linked with learning to use language to come to grips with concepts and to execute skills mentally. Language regarded as 'frozen activity' (Tymister 1978: 165) can become a means for the pupil to reconstruct and interpret the extralinguistic reality.

To know something or to be able to do something is intimately linked with the ability to question and frame the world outside linguistically. Thus, classes should embody opportunities for such activities to take place. Educating is a matter of questioning, not so much putting of questions, but rather the creation of adequate constructions, be they linguistic and/or sensorial, that raise questions in the learner (Hodgkin 1975: 9). Moreover, it is suggested that in a learner-oriented view the success of educational communication should be defined in terms of learners (see for example Peters 1968: 19, 20).

1.3. The 'integrated' concept: process-centred

Today, the thesis 'education is communication' can no longer be defended without taking into account the developments and research generated in some disciplines. The focus is no longer on either the sender or the receiver, but rather on the mechanics of educational discourse, its constraints, aims and functions in a larger context.

For example, humanistic psychopedagogy, calls for teaching-learning processes that are characterized by dialogue. The creed is: education is for dialogue and through dialogue or not at all (Jourard 1978; Freire 1972). Humanistic educationists do not centre on the roles of teacher and learner, but rather emphasize the growth of man, of personality through this typically human way of being and realising what is (educational) discourse.

Another example may be found in communicative didactics, whose advocates consider the teaching-learning process as an interactive and communicative process which credits the participants with intentions, expectations, needs and interests (see for example Watzlawick et al. 1962).

The emphasis is on the emancipatory character of educationally valid learning/teaching: this presupposes interchangeability of roles, little psychological distance between participants, consensual agreement on the ways of evaluating and communicating. Educating is regarded as an attempt by teachers and pupils alike to create a personal and social unity through communication (Siller 1976: 42).

Recent years have also shown the blossoming of a more empirical (or ecological) linguistics, which is gradually becoming more macrolinguistic in its focus. The application of basic techniques of (interactional) sociolinguistics and ethnography has given rise to a growing amount of data on the processes by which models of educability are put into daily practice. These studies reflect a genuine interest in the different ways in which teachers and pupils together, in classrooms, construct the day-to-day reality of the social process of the transmission of knowledge (Titone 1978: Titone and Danesi 1985).

2. The study of communication in classrooms

In his Life in classrooms (1968: 175), written some 20 years ago, P.W. Jackson wrote that "classroom researchers are beginning to turn to disciplines other than psychology and educational measurement for their methods of analysing classroom phenomena". He refers to anthropological field study and participant observation. Probably this remark originated from a dissatisfaction with prestructured schemes for observation and analysis which were designed to retrieve information concerning the cognitive and emotional characteristics of educational discourse through teacher talk. And indeed, the more qualitative bottom-up techniques of participant observation for getting inside the classroom, for getting a larger picture of the educational scene, the nonjudgemental orientation and the explicit aim of contextualising data have forced many educationists to question data obtained from the application of quantitative top-down studies.

2.1. Teacher-centred

The study of verbal communication in the class in a traditional, teacher-centred view of education is characterized by a methodology that aims at objective observation and analysis of teacher talk. In most cases the final

aim was didactic: how does teacher talk stimulate the language and cognitive development of the pupils? (Prucha 1973). Special attention was given to questions asked by the teacher. These studies often used schemes for the observation of interaction which were, however, not necessarily designed for the study of verbal interaction in the classroom.

The best known is undoubtedly FIAC (Flander's (1970) Interaction Analysis Categories). This system distinguishes ten categories of linguistic behaviour in the class: seven deal with teacher talk, two with pupil talk, one is a 'litter category' for 'silence and confusion'. Though FIAC have been critisized for several reasons (for example, little attention for non-verbal aspects of communication, too atomistic), they have been used in many studies of communication in the classroom.

It is no surprise that so much attention has been given to teacher talk. In traditionally framed classes, the teacher claims the bulk of the speaking time. This can be explained as follows (Delamont 1976): the first strategy of a teacher is often to thrust his definition of class, teaching, education. This is largerly realized by means of language. So, the teacher talks and talks. FIAC studies have shown that two-thirds of the traditionally run classes consist of talking, of which two-thirds consists of teacher talk, two-thirds of which consists mainly of giving directions, evaluating, etc.

As was said before, traditional research into the influence of teacher talk on learning makes use of prestructured schemes and quantitative data. Some examples may illustrate this. Bennett (1973) investigated the relation between certain instructional strategies and the ways in which a teacher interacts verbally with the pupils. It becomes clear that the way in which education is framed or organised has repercussion on the amount of 'silence and confusion' or on the balance between teacher talk and pupil talk (eg. Gruber 1977). Other studies correlated opinions on discipline with amount of teacher talk (eg. Rexford, Willower and Winch 1972) or tried to dig up hard data for the negative influence of the lack of balance between teacher and pupil talk on the independent thinking and activity of students (Measel and Mood 1972). There have also been investigations into the relative effect of indirect (accepting the pupils' ideas, feelings, encouraging, questioning and direct (lecturing, critisizing, directing) behaviour of the teacher. Not inspired by Flanders are studies in some aspects of teacher talk, such as his intonation. For example, Brazil (1976) showed that by means of their intonation teachers clearly differentiate between those (unmarked) parts of the message which they suppose to be known

by the pupils and those (marked) parts which signal the fact that they are new.

Educationists have always been interested in the kind of questions asked by the teacher. Questioning indeed makes up a fair amount of the total amount of teacher talk, though it is well known that the larger part of the questions is not supposed to be answered by pupils or is answered by the teacher himself. It has also often been established that only a very small proportion of the teacher's questions are of the opinionating kind, pertaining to values or choices. Most questions seem to ask for a reproduction of known information. A vast factory of literature on educational questioning exists. But only relatively recent research shows that questions do not always do the job they are supposed to do in didactic theory. Good illustrations are found in ongoing investigations by Dillon (1985). He shows, for example, that questions foil discussion among pupils: if you want your students to talk more, explore and speculate more, make references to personal experiences, introduce more topics, etc., use alternatives to questions; they may foster discussion (for example, the teacher might use a declarative statement to reflect the student's view or to express his own views).

2.2. Pupil-centred

The study of pupil talk seems to concentrate on two aspects. First, there are investigations into first language development (after the first stages). A central issue here is the question of how the view on language acquisition as the ability to communicate through language in situationally contextualized conversation can be applied to learning in the school. But what is clearly of more interest is the discussion concerning the influence of sociocultural background on language development and its relevance for education. Could some groups of pupils, by virtue of the interpretive rules to which they are accustomed in their subcommunity, find the learning of the cultural capital more difficult, because of the added burden of having to acquire a repertoire of classroom-specific interpretive procedures many of which will not be reinforced in any other setting? Thanks to the vast research in this area, educationists cannot but shift their attention from formal-structural aspects of pupil talk to functional and content aspects. 'The old dictum 'to teach is to talk, to learn is to listen' should at least be rephrased into 'to teach is to listen, to learn is (also) to speak'.

2.3. Process-centred

A more process-focused approach studies verbal interaction in the class as a form of conversation. The interest in conversation cannot only be noticed in studies of educational discourse but also in other situations: for example, psychologist-testee (Cicourel et al. 1974), medical doctor-patient (Cicourel 1977), psychotherapist-client (Labov and Fanshel 1977), lawyer-client, researchers in a high-tech lab (de Weele 1985). Questions asked here include the way in which the roles of speaker/listener are attributed and realised linguistically, how topics are introduced and closed, which verbal strategies are used by the participants to get what they want, how the flow of language is sequenced, and how separate utterances are interpreted in the larger context. Educational communication seems to be an interesting topic for research, if only for technical reasons: variables can be reduced, at least in traditionally conducted classes, the "chalk and talk classes where the teacher stands out front and engages the students in some kind of pedagogical or linguistic pingpong" (Delamont and Hamilton 1976: 10-11).

The ethnolinguistic study of educational discourse has informed us on the underlying social norms. Typical examples here are known-answer questions which teachers, by virtue of their being in that position, may ask (Coulthard 1974; Harrod 1977). This and other, often lengthy, observations on the 'verbal cuisine' (Hymes 1986) made out by particular sets of teachers and pupils of common ingredients have shed light on the hidden curriculum and the way it is learned. For example, Stubbs (1976) has pointed out some metacommunicative functions through which the hidden curriculum is transmitted and the linguistic traffic in the class is managed.

Scholars like Gumperz (1985) have argued that verbal interaction in classroom settings is guided by a process of conversational inference which relies on participants' perception of verbal and non-verbal cues that contextualise the stream of daily talk activity. By means of these cues, participants recognize speech activities as wider sequences of talk through which contexts are recognisable. In this way, 'schemata' are created and signaled by participants to function as frames for each other's situated interpretations. Schematic knowledge thus provides the overall perspective which enables us to integrate what we hear with what we know.

During the past two decades, educationists have witnessed the above very productive shift in the analysis of verbal interaction in the classroom. A whole scale of more or less categorial systems, generated in real life educational interaction situations, are at their disposal now. Reference can here be made to some of them:

- Bellack et al. (1966) worked out a system based on pedagogical moves (structuring, soliciting, responding, reacting moves), which can be combined in teaching cycles;
- Sinclair and Coulthard (1975) described the transactions that make up lessons. Often these transactions begin with a marker, followed by a metatutterance. They can be subdivided into exchanges: informing, directing, eliciting exchanges;
- The structure of eliciting exchanges (in the first year of the primary school) has, for example, been studied by Mishler (1975a, 1975b, 1978). He centred on dialogues in which teachers by means of questions hold control of the situation. His basic unit of analysis constitutes of 'question-answer-reaction'. When teachers start a sequence with a question, they can hold the floor by putting subsequent questions. They can confirm, or react to students' answers by means of questions (chaining). If a teacher receives a question asked by the pupils, he can always regain the initiative by responding by means of a question (arching). This gives evidence of the way an authoritatian relationship is realised verbally in education.

When we consider applying these systems, in research or for training purposes, it would be wise, however, to take Hymes's (1966) warning seriously. He argues that what goes on in given situations escapes dichotomies and frameworks with few dimensions, and reminds us at the same time of Goffman's words that you never work up your way through the same protocol twice.

The hope can only be expressed that educational practitioners will profit from the endeavours described above. In training colleges they should be instructed of the 'rules' of the pedagogical game, of the (verbal) actions by which they are educating, of the questioning and expanding rituals by which they are helping (young) people to make sense of the world, which is not easy a job anyway.

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