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Discourse patterns and teachers' beliefs in the EFL classroom

Pourquoi la langue 2 n'est-elle que relativement peu utilisée comme langue de communication durant les leçons de langue? L'auteure a conduit une recherche dans quelques classes de lycée hollandaises, analysant en particulier l'alternance entre discours monologal et dialogal. Les résultats montrent que la première forme est bien plus présente: en situation de monologue, l'enseignant peut interroger les élèves afin de vérifier s'ils ont bien saisi ce qu'il attend qu'ils sachent. Au contraire, dans les situations de dialogue, les questions sont plus ouvertes et l'enseignant tend plutôt à réagir au contenu des interventions sans en évaluer avant tout la correction. Ce type de discours, pourtant, est plus authentique et devrait favoriser l'acquisition des compétences communicatives en L2. En fait, le type, monologal, qui prévaut dans les classes de langue étrangère reste étroitement lié aux représentations et aux convictions des enseignants à propos de l'enseignement / apprentissage. Celles-ci sont construites et reproduites culturellement, sur la base de leurs expériences personnelles, et renforcées par la culture propre de l'institution scolaire et des étudiants. L'usage de la L2 dans la classe s'en trouve diminué dans ce contexte dans lequel l'école, les enseignants et les élèves sont convaincus que le savoir linguistique est plus important que les aspects communicatifs dans la classe de L2.

Introduction

This article presents the results of a study that answered the question: Why is there little target language spoken in the language classroom?

Most people agree that the purpose of learning a foreign language is to communicate (Takashami, Austin & Morimoto, 2000). This general belief, that learning to speak a language involves speaking the second or foreign language, is the premise on which the communicative approach is based (Brown, 2001). From this movement a gamut of teaching activities has emerged to foster communicative competence. Communicative competence can be defined as the knowledge and usage of language rules to understand and produce appropriate language in various settings to produce meaning (Hedge, 2000).

Yet despite the wide array of material, little change has occurred in the SL/FL classrooms in the last 30 years (Savignon, 2002). In most language classes the transmission of lexical and grammatical knowledge is standard fare and the focus of spoken English is on correct usage and pronunciation. Research supports and validates the benefits of promoting language use among learners in the classroom (Hall, 2000). For example, Swain's and Lapkin's (2002) research showed that by using collaborative dialogue, a type of discourse that the participants were trained in using, language development had taken place. Our question then became, what is the type of discourse that normally prevails in teaching situations? For an answer to this we turned to the work of Nystrand, Gamoran, Kachur and Prendergast (1997) as they have found that discourse patterns can be clustered around

two types of discourse: monologic and dialogic.

Monologic vs dialogic discourse

In a monologic discourse the teacher initiates most of the questions that are designed to test whether the students know what the teacher expects them to know. The teacher already knows the answer and very little 'uptake' occurs whereby the teacher builds on previous responses. This type of interaction is similar to what Mehan (1979) coined as the IRE (the teacher Initiates, the student Responds and the teacher Evaluates) pattern.

In a dialogic discourse, as characterized by Dysthe (1993), three essential elements are present: authentic questions, uptake and high-level evaluation. Authentic questions are open-ended and contain no pre-specified answer, uptake means that the answer given by the student is incorporated into following remarks or questions made by the teacher, and high-level evaluation involves responding more substantially than the standard response of 'good' or reiterating what the student said. Rather, the teacher, for example, incorporates the student's answer in the subsequent discussion. Key to our research was to uncover the reasons why monologic discourse prevails over dialogic discourse by means of conducting two semester-long case studies in three English classrooms in senior Dutch high schools.¹ More specifically, our research focused on three questions involving teaching practices in terms of language use and beliefs underlying teaching, learning and language.

Question one: What are the discourse patterns?

The first question is about ‘what’ happens in the classroom. Via Nystrand et al. (1997) we had a construct of discourse in the framework of socio-cultural theory (Vygotsky, 1981) that allowed us to analyze the discourse and label it as being monologic or dialogic and thus qualify the type of spoken English observed.

Question two: What are the teachers’ beliefs about language, learning and teaching?

The second question is about ‘why’ of the discourse patterns observed in the classroom.

The question consisted of identifying the teachers’ beliefs in regards to language, learning and teaching. The teachers’ beliefs were explored by means of interview discourse.

Question three: What are the students’, staff’s and school’s beliefs?

The third question is about ‘why’ of the discourse patterns observed in the context of the classroom and school. The third part of the research consisted

of uncovering the students’ beliefs by means of interview discourse as well as identifying the staffs’ and schools’ beliefs. The staffs’ and schools’ beliefs were ascertained by means of characterizing the classroom discourse patterns according to the attributes of monologue and dialogue, and scrutinizing school policy documents for explicitly worded views of teaching and learning.

Case study one: Hank’s classroom

Hank, the first teacher, had 15 years teaching experience and was head of the English department. He volunteered one of his fourth form classes for the project. The students were approximately 16 years of age and received two 50-minute periods of English per week.

Question one: What are the discourse patterns?

Hank’s target language use conformed to the characteristics associated with IRE patterns (Mehan, 1979) that are witnessed in the majority of SL/FL

classrooms. For example, Hank initiated most discussions and questions and called on students for answers. Students answered in one word or in a short phrase and Hank, in turn, responded by means of a comment such as, “right” and “okay” (class video, 23/03/01). For example:

H – “What is ‘bankrupt’ in Dutch?”

S – “Faillissement”

H – “Good”

(Class video, 21/03/01)

Question two: What are the teacher’s beliefs about language, learning and teaching?

Hank believes that language learning involves being exposed to language and acquiring the components of language sequentially by means of self-motivation and capability. These beliefs are reflected in Hank’s beliefs about teaching that are, respectively, that teaching is a function of imparting information, in blocks, to motivated and capable students. Hank’s beliefs about learning and teaching, as expressed in the monologic discourse patterns that he fosters in the classroom, are reinforced by his colleagues.

Question three: What are the students’, staff’s and school’s beliefs?

The colleagues observed deliver instruction using similar discourse patterns as does Hank in his classroom. Hank’s beliefs are further complemented by the students’ beliefs about language learning. The students maintain that academic learning for tests occurs at school and that spoken skills are learned by practising speaking. Spoken skills, however, cannot be practised at school and the students feel that the classroom environment is not conducive to speaking. In sum, Hank’s beliefs are supported by those of the students and school that assist in creating the context that enables Hank to achieve his goal of teaching to prepare students for tests and to impart British culture to the students.



Alexander Calder, Flamingo (Chicago).

Case study two: Len's classroom

Len, the second teacher involved in the study, had taught English for 19 years. The class he volunteered for the project was a fourth form class. The students were approximately 15 years old and received English twice a week for 50 minutes.

Question one: What are the discourse patterns?

Len's use of the target language is characterized by factors associated with dialogic discourse. For example, Len asks referential questions. Some of the questions he asks are personal, the answers to which are unknown and unpredictable. The questions are formulated in such a way that an answer consisting of more than one word, or short phrase, is required. The students' responses form the basis of the next question posed by the teacher. For example:

T - "Is it true that success is measured in terms of money?"

S1 - "No, you can also have success in your [sic] marriage, or the football club. So you don't have to have big money."

T - "But what is that, success in your marriage?"

S1 - "A good marriage, you don't have a fight. And you're just happy together."

T - "Yeah, so a good marriage, or good relation, leads to happiness. Does that equal success?..."

(Class video, 05/03/02)

Question two: What are the teacher's beliefs about language, learning and teaching?

Len believes that language learning consists of learning to interact and get along with others, speaking by activating language skills and actively monitoring one's language development. Len's beliefs are translated into teaching practices that involve teaching the students how to interact with one another, facilitating the application of language skills and encouraging self and peer correction. Len's beliefs about learning and teaching that are communicated in the dialogic discourse

The teachers' ability to engage their students in target language use is a function of the type of discourse that the teachers promote in the classroom. The type of discourse that the teachers employ is determined by their beliefs about teaching and learning.

patterns he fosters in the classroom are encouraged by the school's beliefs.

Question three: What are the students', staff's and school's beliefs?

The official policy asserts that the school is a "learning organization" (School Plan Of The Secondary School, 1999, p. 5) and actively supports both the students' and teachers' involvement in their learning and development. Colleagues observed in their classrooms used similar discourse patterns to those seen in Len's classroom and encouraged by the school policy. Len's beliefs are aligned with the students' beliefs about language learning. The students believe that learning to speak a language involves formal learning and active involvement and practice both in and outside the school. The students state that the classroom environment makes it possible for them to develop their spoken language skills. In sum, Len's beliefs are supported by those of the students and school that assist in creating the context that enables Len to achieve his goal of helping his students make progress in all areas of language development, with an emphasis placed on speaking abilities.

Conclusions

The teachers' ability to engage their students in target language use is a function of the type of discourse that the teachers promote in the classroom.

The type of discourse that the teachers employ is determined by their beliefs about teaching and learning. The teachers' beliefs are constructed, or culturally reproduced, out of their own experiences as learners and teachers and are reinforced by the beliefs of the school and also of the students. Len has beliefs about learning and teaching that he incorporates into a choice of discourse that creates an environment conducive for students to engage in target language use. Hank, however, does not engage his students in target language use because his beliefs about language learning and teaching are such that student involvement in learning to speak is not necessary. The discourse that Hank promotes is thus one that is monologic in character.

A relationship exists between the classroom discourse patterns and the beliefs of the teachers, students and schools. The relationship is complex and involves not only the teachers, students and schools but also factors such as personal biographies, government requirements and pedagogical material. As such, not one single determining factor can account for the type of discourse, and thus learning, that occurs at school.

Although teachers are responsible for establishing the discourse patterns in the classroom, the teacher does not operate in isolation. The teachers' beliefs are reinforced by the schools' beliefs in terms of the teaching practices that are explicitly encouraged in official policy documents, the teaching practices of other teachers and the students' beliefs about language learning and their expectations of language learning at school.

In conclusion, teachers', students' and schools' beliefs about language, learning and teaching exist and have been reinforced by historical views about learning and teaching in SL/FL movements. As a consequence, the teachers', students' and school's beliefs interact and create environments where monologic discourse patterns

frequently flourish. Underlying the beliefs are theories of knowledge, within paradigms of education as outlined by Nystrand et al. (1997). The history and traditions of teaching, as shown by research conducted by Nystrand et al. (1997) and supported in a sociocultural framework that asserts the power of cultural reproduction that is reflected in language use, accentuates the prevalent and persistent nature of teaching.

The answer to the question: Why is there little target language spoken in the language classroom? Is that teachers', students' and schools' beliefs about what constitutes knowledge interact and produce classrooms that are often monologic in nature. In such classrooms factual information that is disseminated by the teacher is valued and communicative competence is not fostered. However, our research has also shown that dialogic discourse exists and that it is possible to create contexts in which communicative competence can flourish.

Note

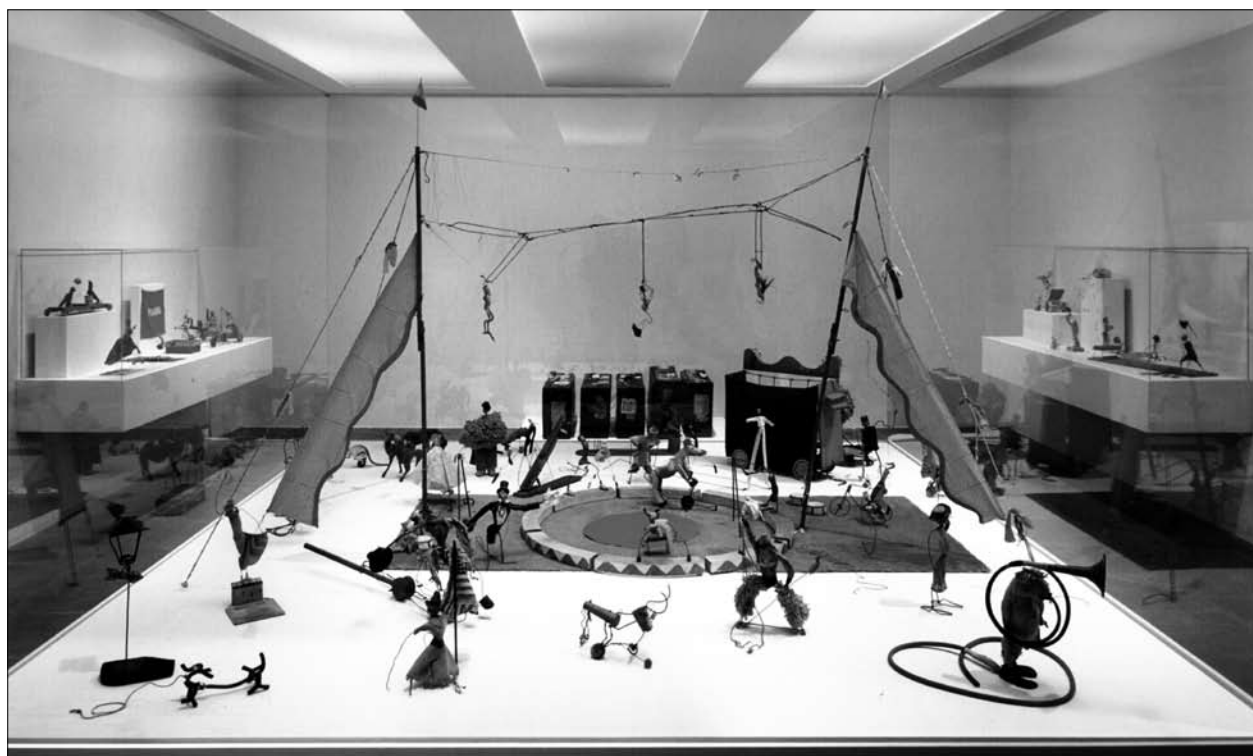
¹ Only two case studies will be examined in this article.

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Cirque Calder, 1926-1931.