
Classroom Interaction Research: from Teacher Focused to Teacher Based

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Abstract

This paper begins by summarizing early research in foreign language classrooms, where researchers tended to focus on the teacher, ignoring the role of the learner in the language classroom. The paper moves on to a discussion of the various roles that teachers and learners can play in a classroom as a way of providing teachers with a framework for investigating their own classrooms. The paper concludes with an argument that what is needed today is teacher based research in which classroom teachers themselves investigate, on an ongoing basis, their own classrooms.

Introduction

In an important article on classroom research, Long (1983) argued that a great deal of classroom research has focused on the input of language classrooms i.e., what method to use and who the teachers and students are, and the output of language classrooms i.e., student achievement scores, rather than examining what actually occurs in a language classroom as teachers and students interact. Long contends that researchers have acted as if what occurs in a language classroom is an impenetrable "black box" which cannot be examined.

This paper urges classroom teachers to begin to investigate the "black box" of classroom interaction by monitoring their own roles in the classroom, along with that of their students, and then examining the effect that such roles have on things like student involvement and language use. To begin, the author provides a brief overview of foreign language classroom research from a his-

torical perspective as a way of demonstrating how early research tended to be teacher focused, ignoring the role of the learner in the classroom. The second part of the paper discusses the various roles that teachers and learners can play in the language classroom as a way of providing teachers with a framework for investigating the interaction of their own classroom.

The purpose of classroom interaction research is to investigate who talks in the classroom, how much and with what impact on the verbal performance of others (Gaies 1983:209). As Allwright (1983:191) puts it, classroom interaction research "simply tries to investigate what happens inside the classroom when learners and teachers come together.... We want to understand why it is that things happen as they do in the classroom--how it is, for example, that some learners participate more and others less than planned by the teacher and how we might expect such factors to affect language learning itself."

According to Gaies (1983:205), classroom interaction research is highly diverse. As he says, "One is struck by the enormous differences among settings investigated--foreign language classrooms, ESL programs, immersion programs, bilingual classrooms in a variety of cultural contexts, involving learners of all ages representing a variety of ethnic and educational backgrounds--and by the diversity of the investigative approaches employed." Given the tremendous diversity of language classroom studies and given the fact that Thai English teachers are involved in foreign language classrooms, the following discussion will focus on two important studies of foreign language classrooms illustrating how early research tended to focus primarily on the teachers' role in the classroom as a basis for prescribing what teachers should do in the language classroom.

Teacher Focused Research

Research in classroom interaction began in the 1950s when teacher trainers sought to provide their students with an overview of what constitutes effective teaching. In order to determine the qualities of good teachers, researchers began to examine what it is that teachers do in a classroom and how this influences language learning (Allwright 1983:194). One of the first in depth studies of foreign language classrooms was that done by Politzer (1970). In this study, Politzer investigated the behavior of seventeen high school teachers of French, correlating various teacher behaviors with how well the students did on a standardized achievement test in French. The particular teaching behaviors investigated were the kinds of drills that teachers used--repetition, substitution, dialogue, translation, conversation and free response, along with whether or not the teacher referred to the book, used audiovisual aids, promoted student-student interaction or varied grammatical structures. Thus, the study dealt with a very limited number of teaching behaviors and took as the measure of a teacher's success how well that teacher's students did on a standard test.

Politzer found that high student achievement scores correlated well with the number of free

response and conversation drills used in the class and with the teacher's use of visual aids and variation in the structures used. The most important finding of his study was that a particular teaching behavior in itself was neither good nor bad but depended on how frequently it was used in comparison with other behaviors. As he says, "there are probably very few teaching behaviors or devices which can be classified as intrinsically 'bad' or 'good.' Ultimately, most teaching activities undertaken by a language teacher in a language class have probably some value; but each activity is subject to what might be called a principle of economics. Each activity consumes a limited resource--namely time. Thus the value of each activity depends on the value of other activities which might be substituted for it at a given moment" (Politzer 1970:41).

Politzer's study was essentially prescriptive in nature; its goal was to determine what teachers should do in a classroom by investigating what teaching behaviors correlated with high student test scores. There are several limitations to Politzer's study. First, the study focused exclusively on the behavior of the teacher, ignoring the role of the students. The study, for example, did not even consider how many students participated in a class session, let alone the length and quality of their responses. Thus, the study suggests that what is important in a language class is what the teacher does rather than how the teachers and learners interact with one another. Second, the study examined only a limited number of teaching behaviors, most of which had to do with teacher-centered activities. By doing this, it suggests that the primary role of the teacher is to conduct various drills. Finally, the study assumes that what constitutes good teaching is determined by students' test scores on standardized tests, thus ignoring such things as how well a teacher can motivate students to use the language.

While Politzer's study was concerned with what teaching behaviors correlated with high achievement scores by learners, Moskowitz's study (1976) was one of the first studies to investigate

the actual classroom behavior of effective teachers by use of an interaction analysis system. The primary purpose of her research was "to determine specific classroom behavior and activities which outstanding foreign language teachers use as they interact in their classes" (Moskowitz 1976:136). In order to determine which foreign language teachers were particularly "effective," Moskowitz conducted a poll of former students of Temple University and asked them to designate language teachers they thought had been outstanding. She then compared the classroom behavior of teachers

who had been designated as outstanding with teachers who had not received this rating.

In the study, she investigated the interaction that occurred in three separate language lessons of twenty-two senior high school teachers of French and Spanish. In analyzing the interaction that occurred during these lessons, Moskowitz used what she termed the FLint system (Foreign Language interaction). The table shown below contains the categories used in this system.

THE FLINT SYSTEM

Indirect influence	1.	<i>Deals with feelings:</i> In a nonthreatening way, accepting, discussing, referring to, or communicating understanding of past, present, or future feelings of students.
	2.	<i>Praises or encourages:</i> Praising, complimenting, telling students why what they have said or done is valued. Encouraging students to continue, trying to give them confidence. Confirming answers are correct.
	2a.	<i>Jokes:</i> International joking, kidding, making puns, attempting to be humorous, providing the joking is not at anyone's expense. Unintentional humor is not included in this category.
	3.	<i>Uses ideas of students:</i> Clarifying, using, interpreting, summarizing the ideas of students. The ideas must be rephrased by the teacher but still recognized as being student contributions.
Teacher talk	3a.	<i>Repeats student response verbatim:</i> Repeating the exact words of students after they participate.
	4.	<i>Asks questions:</i> Asking questions to which an answer is anticipated. Rhetorical questions are <i>not</i> included in this category.
Direct influence	5.	<i>Gives information:</i> Giving information, facts, own opinion or ideas, lecturing, or asking rhetorical questions.
	5a.	<i>Corrects without rejection:</i> Telling students who have made a mistake the correct response without using words or intonations which communicate criticism.
	6.	<i>Gives directions:</i> Giving directions, requests, or commands which students are expected to follow.
	6a.	<i>Directs pattern drills:</i> Giving statements which students are expected to repeat exactly, to make substitutions in (i.e., substitution drills), or to change from one form to another (i.e., transformation drills).
	7.	<i>Criticizes student behavior:</i> Rejecting the behavior of students; trying to change the nonacceptable behavior; communicating anger, displeasure, annoyance, dissatisfaction with what students are doing.
	7a.	<i>Criticizes student response:</i> Telling the student his response is not correct or acceptable and communicating by words or intonation criticism, displeasure, annoyance, rejection.

Student talk	8.	<i>Student response, specific</i> : Responding to the teacher within a specific and limited range of available or previously shaped answers. Reading aloud.
	8a.	<i>Student response, choral</i> : Choral response by the total class or part of the class.
	9.	<i>Student response, open-ended or student-initiated</i> : Responding to the teacher with students' own ideas, opinions, reactions, feelings. Giving one from among many possible answers which have been previously shaped but from which students must now make a selection. Initiating the participation.
	10.	<i>Silence</i> : Pauses in the interaction. Periods of quiet during which there is no verbal interaction.
	10a.	<i>Silence-AV</i> : Silence in the interaction during which a piece of audio-visual equipment, e.g., a tape recorder, filmstrip projector, record player, etc., is being used to communicate.
	11.	<i>Confusion, work-oriented</i> : More than one person at a time talking, so the interaction cannot be recorded. Students calling out excitedly, eager to participate or respond, concerned with talk at hand.
	11a.	<i>Confusion, non-work-oriented</i> : More than one person at a time talking, so the interaction cannot be recorded. Students out-of-order, not behaving as the teacher wishes, not concerned with task at hand.
	12.	<i>Laughter</i> : Laughing, giggling by the class, individuals, and/or the teacher.
	e.	<i>Uses English</i> : Use of English (the native language) by the teacher or the students. This category is always combined with one of the 15 categories from 1 to 9.
	n.	<i>Nonverbal</i> : Nonverbal gestures or facial expressions by the teacher or the student which communicate without the use of words. This category is always combined with one of the categories of teacher or pupil behavior.

Source: Reprinted with permission from G. Moskowitz, "Interaction analysis: a new modern language for supervisors," *Foreign Language Annals* 5 : 213 (1971).

According to this system, teacher behavior is divided into indirect categories (i.e., those behaviors which encourage students to act and participate) and direct categories (i.e., those which tend to limit the actions of students). To obtain a description of what behaviors were used in a class period, an observer wrote down a category system every time it occurred at three second intervals. Thus, each time the teacher praised or encouraged students, the observer would record their behavior. Based on her analysis of the twenty-two classes using the FLint system, Moskowitz found that outstanding teachers in all their lessons tended to make more use of the following behaviors.

1. More total use of the foreign language by the teacher and students combined;
2. More teacher talk in the foreign language;
3. More student talk in the foreign language;

4. Less student talk which is off the task;
5. More indirect behaviors in the total lesson;
6. More indirect behaviors in the foreign language;
7. More nonverbal indirect behaviors;
8. More use of praise and joking;
9. More use of personalized questions; and
10. More nonverbal information-giving (i.e., gesturing to convey meaning) (Moskowitz 1976:146).

What is noteworthy in both the Politzer and the Moskowitz studies is that the primary focus is on the teacher, suggesting that what is of primary significance in a classroom is what a teacher does rather than what a learner does or how the two interact. Furthermore, both studies are prescriptive in nature sharing the goal of delineating what a teacher should do in order to be effective rather than describing what happens. More recent class-

room research has begun to look at the classroom as what Allwright (1983:196) terms a "*socially constructed event*, as something that is the product of the interactive work of all the people present." As he says, "such researchers have stopped looking at teaching as if everything of importance came from the teacher and have instead started looking at the way in which people interact in the classroom to collectively produce the learning opportunities that arise there" (Allwright 1983:196). The discussion which follows will demonstrate how this new focus on teachers and students interacting in a classroom offers an opportunity for teachers to investigate what kind of interaction is occurring in their own classroom. The discussion begins with a summary of the assumptions underlying current classroom interaction research since these assumptions provide the basis for teacher based research.

Teacher Based Research

According to Allwright, today, classroom interaction research has shifted from an early emphasis on prescription and techniques to an emphasis on description and process. This shift means researchers are "trying to find ways of *describing classroom processes* to find out what actually happens in language classes, *not* assuming that all that happens is that a particular method or a particular set of techniques is simply implemented..." (Allwright 1983:106).

One method that has been useful in studying the process of classroom interaction is ethnography. Ethnography involves unstructured observation of classrooms. Thus, the researcher does not approach a classroom with a number of set categories such as the FLint system, but rather the researcher structures the account by describing what occurs during the class. However, while ethnographic research is unstructured, it is not unsystematic. As Long (1983:18) says in contrast to the studies examined earlier,

The anthropological approach to classroom research is procedurally highly systematic. What is observed and, hence, the data gathered using these

procedures, however, is free to vary during the course of the observation as a reflection of the observer's developing understanding of what he or she is studying. The difference, then, is that the structuring is done by the researcher (or through him or her by informants) and not by the data-gathering device chosen prior to beginning the observation. Another fundamental difference is that the researcher in the anthropological approach does not set out, in theory, at least, with preconceived notions as to variables to be studied or with hypotheses to test.

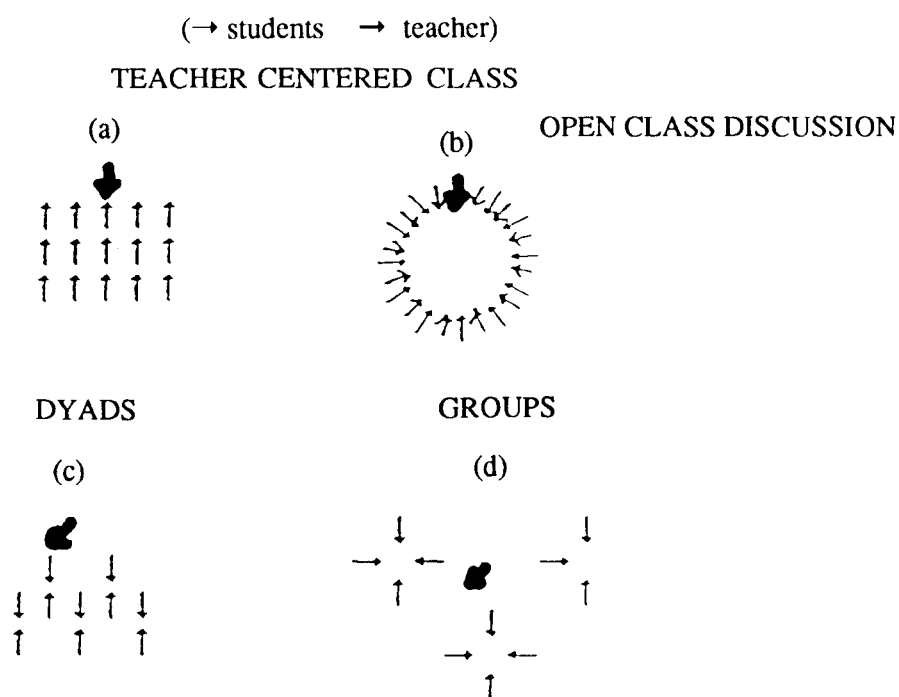
Hence, the goal of ethnographic research is descriptive in nature and hypothesis generating rather than prescriptive and hypothesis testing as in the Politzer and Moskowitz studies. Ethnographic research can be undertaken either by the participant of an event such as a teacher or by an outside observer. Typically, the period of study in ethnographic research is quite long, perhaps a whole term or more, and usually involves only one class. The information that is gathered can include interviews with the teacher and students, questionnaires and field notes. All of this information is then used to provide an overall description of the interaction patterns of a particular class. Most classroom teachers do not have the time or resources available to undertake such extended research. How then can such research be valuable to classroom teachers? While it is unreasonable to expect teachers to undertake a complete ethnographic account of their classroom, they can attempt to better understand the interaction process in their own classroom by undertaking teacher based classroom research (also termed action research).

In teacher based classroom research, teachers begin by pinpointing a concern or problem they have in their class. For example, a Thai teacher may be concerned with the fact that their students are answering questions in English with only one word or simple sentences rather than more complex sentences. In order to encourage students to

participate more, the teacher carefully develops a plan to improve what is happening in the class. For example, the teacher may decide to try and get students to take more risks and answer in longer sentences by asking the students more referential questions (i.e., questions to which the teacher does not know the answer as, for example, asking the students how they feel that day) rather than display questions (i.e., questions to which the teacher already knows the answer like "Is this a book?") The teacher decides to do this because existing research suggests that students do use longer answers in response to referential questions (see Long et al. 1984). Finally, the teacher carefully

observes the class during the following week to see if students do in fact use longer sentences.

In teacher based classroom research then teachers try to improve what they do in a class by carefully observing what happens when they deliberately try to alter the classroom interaction pattern. In undertaking teacher based classroom research, it is important for teachers to be aware of the typical roles they have so they can better decide how to alter the pattern of classroom interaction for a particular purpose. The following diagram illustrates four major ways in which a class can be structured.



In situation A, all communication is directed toward the teacher, resulting in a *teacher centered* class. In situation B, the teacher and all the learners interact on the same level in an *open class discussion*. In situation C, learners are in pairs or *dyads* with the teacher as observer, while in situation D, the learners are in groups of several students with the teacher again as observer.

According to Harmer (1983:200-204), teachers can play a variety of roles in the classroom.

First, teachers can be *controllers*. As a controller, teachers are totally in charge of the class, determining what the students do, when they speak

and what language they use.

Second, teachers can be *organizers*. In this capacity the role of the teacher is "to tell the students what they are going to talk about (or read about), give clear instructions about what exactly their task is, get the activity going, and then organize feedback when it is over" (page 202). Typically, teachers are more likely to act as organizers in a communicative activity and controllers in a mechanical activity.

Third, teachers can be *participants* as is illustrated in an open class discussion. In this role, teachers can participate in any of the activities that

occur in a class whether they be role playing, journal writing or group work.

Fourth, teachers can be *resources*. In this capacity, teachers provide the students with help and information whenever they need it. When teachers act in this capacity, the class is typically structured in either dyads or groups working on a specified task.

Fifth, teachers can be *prompters*. In this role teachers encourage students to participate in a class or suggest how students might act when there is silence or confusion about what to do next. Teachers can assume this role in any type of classroom structure--teacher-centered, open class discussion, dyads or groups.

Finally, teachers can be *assessors*. In this capacity, teachers assess students' work both in terms of content and form. Teachers in this role organize feedback deciding when, how and whether or not something should be corrected.

Traditionally, these roles are played exclusively by teachers with the learners basically responding to the roles of the teacher, but there is no reason why this has to be. In fact there may be classes in which a learner provides feedback to other learners, or acts as a resource person or controls a brief drill. One possibility for experimentation in language classrooms would be for teachers to ask learners to assume a less traditional role and then to observe and describe how this affects what happens in the classroom.

When students work in pairs or groups, the type of task which the teacher gives the students will affect the kind of student-student interaction that occurs. Two major types of student-student interaction are the following.

Negotiation: In this type of student-student interaction, each student has some information which the other members do not have. The goal of the interaction is thus to find out the information which the other members have. Information gap activities illustrate this type of interaction.

Cooperation: In this type of student-student

interaction, all the members of a group pool their knowledge to attain some goal set by the teacher. Often the members of the group cooperate with one another in competition with other groups in the class. One example of a cooperating activity would be for all the members of a group to work together to solve a crossword puzzle before any other group is able to do so.

One of the first steps in undertaking teacher based classroom research is for the teacher to clarify the role of the teacher in the class and the role of the learner in the group. Then the teacher will be able to compare the language that is generated between the teacher and learners and the learners and learners in one type of interaction pattern as opposed to another. For example, a teacher based classroom research project in Thailand might involve a teacher monitoring how much English is used in comparison with Thai in each of the two group structures mentioned above. Do students use more English when they must ask for and give information in a negotiating task or when they pool their information in a cooperating task? The value then of teacher based classroom research is that it enables teachers to better assess the effect of particular patterns of classroom interaction on their students' use of English.

Summary

The studies by Politzer and Moskowitz, while teacher focused, each provide some guidance for teacher based classroom research. Politzer's conclusion that no activity by itself is inherently good or bad suggests that the effectiveness of a particular teaching activity needs to be judged in light of how well it fulfills a particular teaching objective. What classroom teachers need to do in undertaking teacher based classroom research is to consistently clarify their teaching objectives, consciously select the classroom interaction pattern that they think will best meet their goals and then carefully observe the effect of this pattern on their students' behavior as well as on their own.

Moskowitz's interactional analysis system can be used by teachers to monitor their own behavior. Teachers, for example, could monitor

how regularly they praise or encourage their students or how often they deal with their students' feelings and observe the effect of such behavior on their students. In order to verify if Moskowitz's overall findings are applicable to English teaching in Thailand, Thai teachers might observe if such things as a greater use of English in the classroom, more use of personalized questions and nonverbal cues contribute to greater student interaction and involvement.

Since ultimately it is the teacher who decides how the teacher and students will interact with one another, classroom interaction should not be a "black box" rarely examined by teachers; rather examining what occurs in a classroom should be a central concern of all teachers and teacher training programs. As Richards (1988:10) points out,

Teachers and teachers in preparation need to be involved in the investigation of their own teaching and the teaching of others, in order to generate an understanding of how good teaching comes

about. It is this process of looking at teaching and reflecting about it which is of greatest value, rather than the results of a particular investigation. In education, this involves novice teachers working with experienced teachers, observing them and gradually exploring with them the hidden dimension of the classrooms. For the reflective teacher, it involves self-monitoring and self-investigation--an ongoing program of gathering data about one's own teaching through journal accounts, self-reports, or audio or video recordings in order to gain a deeper understanding of one's own teaching.

Thai English teachers then, as all language teachers, need to consider undertaking their own teacher based classroom research in which they design ways to monitor what happens in their classroom and assess the effect of various behaviors and interaction patterns on their students' learning of English.

The Author

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