WHAT COUNTS AS LANGUAGE LEARNING: ANALYSIS OF TEACHER-LEARNER
INTERACTIONS IN AN ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE CLASSROOM
IN SAUDI ARABIA

by

OTHMAN ALMENIEI

(Under the Direction of Betsy Rymes)

ABSTRACT

In contexts where English is considered a foreign language, the classroom provides the only exposure to language for most learners. As such, it becomes an important site to investigate the cause(s) of low proficiency and learning problems that have been documented in a number of studies carried out in Saudi Arabia.

What motivates this study is a hypothesis that poor student performance is due to the lack of opportunities to use language inside the classroom. To investigate this, I conducted a semester-long study of one EFL classroom. Through close transcription of talk, the study identifies patterns of language use, norms of participation, typical communicative events, and amount of participation in these events. It attempts to show how students are socialized to use English in the process and find out what counts as language learning and its relation to students’ opportunities to use English.

A quantitative analysis at the turn and word level was carried out on a sample taken from all speech events. It shows that student talk remains scarce and in most cases does not reach sentence level. The turn is shown to be a crude measure of the distribution of talk since analysis
at the word level provides a more fine-grained measure that reflects the true nature of classroom discourse.

The next phase of the analysis utilized a qualitative approach to capture the complexity involved in analyzing spoken discourse. Within speech events, exchanges were coded through inductive cyclic analysis of data and open coding. The patterns of communication identified were divided into two major groups. The first group highlights interactional details, while the second reveals the instructor’s assumptions about language and their relation to what counts as knowledge and language learning.

Findings suggest that classroom talk engenders grammatical accuracy and knowledge of discrete vocabulary items. This is shown to have a direct negative effect on fluency and opportunities for language use. The overall nature of classroom talk is characterized as a one-way transmission of knowledge that does not allow for student interaction. The study offers suggestions for further research, implications for classroom practices, and venues for professional development.

INDEX WORDS: Classroom discourse, EFL, ESP, Ethnography of communication, Qualitative research, Saudi Arabia, Sociocultural theory
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DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my late father who had been a source of inspiration for me, to my mother whose prayers and love have been instrumental in achieving my goals.

I also dedicate it to my wife for her unconditional support and perseverance throughout my graduate work, to my children who have taught me so much about language learning.
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Second language acquisition research has shown the importance of classroom interaction in the acquisition/learning and further development of additional languages (Aljaafreh & Lantolf, 1994; Antón, 1999; Ellis, 1999; Hall and Verplaetse, 2000; Ohta, 1995, 2000; Swain & Lapkin, 1998; van Lier, 1988; to cite a few). In contexts where English is considered a foreign language, the classroom provides the only exposure to language in most cases. As such, the classroom becomes our first site to investigate the cause(s) of English learning problems, low proficiency, and inability to use language among learners that have been documented in a number of studies carried out at the school and college levels in Saudi Arabia.

What motivates the current study then is a hypothesis that poor student performance is due to the lack of opportunities to use language in the classroom. To investigate this, I conducted a study of one EFL classroom in a junior college of technical education in Saudi Arabia. The study identifies classroom interactional details, i.e. patterns of language use, norms of participation, typical communicative events, and level of participation in these events and then attempts to show how students are socialized to use English in the process. The overall purpose of the analysis is to find out what counts as language learning practice in this classroom and its relation to students’ opportunities to use the target language.

From a methodological perspective, the ethnographic nature of the study is an attempt to fill a gap in field research concerned with EFL learning in Saudi Arabia since most-if not all-we know about the current state of English education in the Saudi context comes from product-
oriented research. As such, the study is an attempt to start a tradition of classroom-based research and investigate the nitty-gritty nature of teacher-student interaction inside the language classroom. It is hoped that this research will contribute to a growing interest in investigating classroom interaction in EFL contexts.

Background of the Study: English Learning in Saudi Arabia

The Ministry of Education is the official government body responsible for funding, planning, and teaching all areas of study for the 1st twelve years of general education. These are divided into six years of Elementary school, three years in Middle school, and three years in Secondary school. The curriculum and textbooks for English and other areas of study are the same across the Kingdom and are run and supervised by Educational Directorates in different regions of the country that report to the ministry of education. There are separate schools for boys and girls at all levels including higher education but the instructional content is very similar operating under the slogan “separated yet equal” in terms of learning opportunities. The separation comes about in adherence to Islamic teachings that are followed and applied at all spheres of life in Saudi Arabia.

Students begin learning English in middle school till they finish secondary school taking four classes per week during all six school years. The majority of private schools introduce English to their students as early as kindergarten. Recently, the Ministry of Education has approved a plan to start teaching English to students in the fourth grade and above in the year 2004. This plan created some heated discussions among academics and the general public in newspapers and internet discussion boards with pros and cons. Those opposed to this change argue that teaching English in the elementary school has its toll on students’ developing command of their first language. Some point out that the country is not ready with enough
qualified teachers. Those in favor of teaching English earlier argue that it can improve chances of language learning, citing anecdotal and scholarly evidence to the point such as research under the purview of Foreign Language in the Elementary Schools (FLES).

The English curriculum of middle and secondary schools is designed in accordance with the guidelines of Communicative Language Teaching offering plenty of opportunities for students to use language in meaningful situations. Its textbooks have been nativized and filtered from sensitive cultural content that is not considered appropriate for a conservative society like Saudi (Al-Qahtani, 2003). Since its inception in 1958, the whole curriculum has undergone a number of major changes and improvements (Al-Ahaydib, 1986). However, the real world of classrooms is markedly different from what curriculum planners and textbook designers had in mind. Meaningful use of English is limited and most of the work students and teachers do is not geared to learn English but learn about English. Tests and exams attest to this fact. Most tests are made up of questions on discrete grammar points and vocabulary items. As such, students are not evaluated according to their ability to use the language. Rather, they are evaluated according to how much they know about it as an abstract area of study viewed by many as the hardest and a stumbling block that is likely to hinder students from advancing to the next academic year (Zaid, 1993).

The ability to read, write, and speak English fluently is viewed as a commodity and a skill needed in the job market. Therefore, universities and colleges require students to take English courses as part of their degree requirements. Most of them require students to take one or two English courses. However, the number soars high in colleges that require English in their content area such as English departments, medical colleges, computer science, and other
technical colleges. Some require a semester to one year of intensive courses aiming to prepare students to use English in the content area.

Previous Research in the Saudi Context

Saudi students are exposed to English through what can be described as an ‘input-poor environment’ that offers limited exposure and opportunities for students to use language inside the classroom and even slimmer chances to use English outside the classroom (Al-Otaibi, 2004). A number of studies conducted in the Saudi context addressed the apparent low proficiency level among learners of English. The problem was investigated and approached from varying angles and that was mainly driven by the theoretical orientations of the authors of these studies. In what follows, I will present a brief review of some studies that addressed, in one way or another, problems of English proficiency among Saudi learners in public schools and colleges. The review is intended to provide some background on the type of research carried out and how each study contributed to our understanding of the current state of affairs of English learning in Saudi Arabia.

Al-Ahaydib (1986) conducted a study that surveyed students, teachers and supervisors of English in the Saudi public schools. The study found that teachers spend most of their time on grammar instruction using Arabic. Student participation was found to be limited due to the dominant role of the teachers. The study also reported that students were motivated to learn English at the beginning but that faded as they went through their programs of study. Related to this was the finding that the general atmosphere was not motivating for learning.

Some researchers looked at the problem from the perspective of foreign language in the elementary schools (FLES) investigating the lack of proficiency as a result of late exposure to English in the early developmental or critical periods for Language learning. Abdan (1991)
conducted a study on 160 students in the ninth grade. This grade was chosen because students in public schools have already spent three years of EFL study. Half of the participants attended private schools and were exposed to English since kindergarten or first grade. The other half started EFL in the seventh grade. Results from an EFL achievement test and a brief Arabic questionnaire showed significant difference in favor of the early-exposure group.

Two studies noted the problem of low English proficiency and each hypothesized a certain cause. Al-Qahtani (2003) argued that students in Saudi public schools lack the communicative competence needed to use the target language appropriately despite six years of study because teaching materials in public schools have been filtered from all aspects of the target culture to make them less intrusive on a conservative culture like that of Saudi Arabia. The study utilized questionnaires and interviews with select teachers to describe their views towards introducing the target culture in their classes. The teachers were found to have positive attitudes towards using materials rich in cultural content. However, using culturally-rich content was found to be limited due to the teachers’ beliefs that exposing students to cultural content can affect their religious beliefs.

In the other study, Al-Nujaidi (2003) argued that college freshmen enrolled in English departments find a great gap between their low proficiency level and the command of English expected from them, which resulted in high drop-out rate from English programs at Saudi universities. He argued that L2 reading ability and vocabulary size are considered the most important requirement for success of EFL learners and conducted a study to investigate the relationship between reading strategies, vocabulary size, and reading comprehension of Saudi male and female learners enrolled in post secondary school English programs. Data for the study comes from a reading strategies survey, a vocabulary size test, and a reading comprehension test.
Among other things, the study found that participants had a low reading ability and a small vocabulary size with significant gender differences in favor of female participants.

Other research on EFL learning and teaching in Saudi Arabia concentrated on learners’ production and errors in language skills like grammar, reading, writing, and pronunciation. For example, Afifi & Altaha (2000) looked at errors made by Saudi learners in their production and recognition of grammatical structures. To test production, students from male and female English departments were given a number of sentences leaving the verbs in the infinitive form and students were asked to supply the correct tense. To test recognition, students were given multiple choice questions to choose the correct tense. Students were found to make more production than recognition errors.

What binds the above research together is that it looks at the broad picture and investigates the product without observing the process through which learners are exposed to the target language inside the classroom; the most important site of language learning. The current study is an attempt to fill this gap since there has not been a single study carried out in Saudi Arabia that investigated the nature of classroom discourse.

Rationale for the Study

English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms provide, in most cases, the only opportunity for exposure to the target language. When students spend a reasonable amount of time without appropriating the skills necessary for the accomplishment of academic and social activities using the target language, then the classroom becomes our first place to look for explanations to such a problem. Furthermore, given the current situation of English proficiency among Saudi learners, what goes on everyday inside the language classroom could provide some plausible explanations for the possible cause of the problem. Therefore, the purpose of this study
is to conduct a detailed analysis of classroom interactions using ethnographic methods to provide a valid interpretation of classroom events showing what counts as language learning through the analysis of video tapes of lessons supported by interviews, instructional materials, and field notes.

Research Hypotheses

First Hypothesis

H₀: Modes of communication are invariable across different communicative events.

H₁: Different modes of communication exist within classroom events.

The following questions will help to identify modes of communication specific to particular classroom communicative events:

1. How does the teacher frame the boundaries of communicative events?
2. What are the rhetorical structures of these events?
3. How do students and teacher accomplish the events?
4. What are the resources and mediational tools used in the accomplishment of events?
5. What is the quantity of student participation across classroom activities?
6. What is the quality of student participation across classroom activities?

Second Hypothesis

H₀: what counts as knowledge and accepted language use is the same for students and teacher

H₂: students and teacher have different assumptions on what counts as knowledge and considered accepted language use.

Significance of this Study

This study is significant for advancing our understanding of classroom discourse in EFL classrooms at two levels. On a broader more theory based level, this study fills a dearth in
research on classroom interaction in a context that was never investigated before since most, if not all we know and have based the current theories on classroom interaction comes from research conducted in the US and other Western contexts. On a local level, this study aims to investigate the apparent lack of English proficiency among Saudi students despite the amount of exposure students receive. Most previous research investigated this problem looking at the product such survey and controlled experiment research. This current study aims at investigating the process through which students learn or do not learn English. The analysis is guided by the researcher’s background, graduate studies, and training in the Sociocultural Perspective on language (Hymes, 1972; Vygotsky, 1978) that investigates learning through looking at the social plain whereby learners appropriate through interaction the opportunities afforded to them. As such, studying the dynamics and moment-to-moment interactions in the classroom (EFL in this case) becomes of paramount importance. This ethnographic study aims to provide a detailed and multilayered analysis of classroom discourse taking the context of the situation into account and offering valid interpretation of classroom events through the triangulation of data sources (van Lier, 1988; Denzin 1970).
CHAPTER 2
REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Theoretical Perspectives on Learning

This research is informed by the sociocultural theory of development that draws heavily
on the ideas of the Soviet psychologist L.S. Vygotsky, philosopher M. Bakhtin, and linguistic
anthropologist Dell Hymes. The overarching assumption of the theory is that linguistic and
cognitive development is primarily socially constituted through goal-directed, regularly
occurring everyday activities (Cole, 1996; Hall, 2002; Lantolf, 1994; Vygotsky, 1978; Wertch,
1991). Wertsch (1991) noted three basic themes that run through Vygotsky’s writings:
(1) reliance on developmental analysis; (2) the claim that higher mental functioning in the
individual derives from social life; and (3) that human social and individual action is mediated
by tools and signs the most important of which is language (p. 19).

Informed by such insights, Swain and Lapkin (1998) conducted a study to explore the
perspective that language is a means of communication in addition to being a psychological tool
of mediation in the accomplishment of a given language-learning task. Appel and Lantolf (1994)
conducted a similar study to show how speaking, particularly in the form of private speech
(speech addressed to the self) in L1/L2 serves to mediate mental activity of recalling and
comprehending a narrative and a more demanding expository text. Both studies demonstrated the
dual function of language; as a means for communication and a cognitive tool that mediates
learning.
According to this perspective, language is considered a fundamentally sociocultural resource constituted by available behavioral possibilities through social interaction, which is the site of language and cognitive development. Learning then is a process through which the learner is socialized into the intellectual practices of a particular sociocultural group appropriating through interaction the means and resources needed for effective participation. In the process, socially constructed knowledge and skills are transformed into individualized abilities through repeated participation in these activities (Hall, 2002).

Bakhtin’s contribution to the framework of sociocultural theory and additional language learning comes into play through his notion of ‘dialogicality’ that presupposes the presence of at least two voices in an utterance; that of the individual who produced the utterance and the other is in the conventional meaning that utterances have. In this connection, Hall (2002) noted that

The meaning of language does not reside in the system of linguistic resources removed from their contexts of use and community of users. Nor does it reside in our individual use of them as we engage in activities particular to our sociocultural worlds. Rather, language meaning is located in the dialogic relationship between the historical and the present, between the social and the individual. (p. 12)

When a dialogue takes place among learners or between a learner and a teacher in the target language, we can turn to Bakhtin’s notion of dialogue for insights into aspects of the interaction. What comes to be incorporated into an utterance are voices that were represented in the interaction (Wertch, 1991, p. 90). This corroborates and reflects Vygotsky’s (1978) insights about learning stipulating that it begins at the interpersonal (social) level and is then appropriated into the intrapersonal (individual) level.
The linguistic anthropologist Dell Hymes also argued for the situatedness of meaning in social life. In response to Chomsky’s universalistic and innatist theory of language that considers it as a fixed, context-free universal property, Hymes (1972) argued that such a view of language is limited in the sense that it cannot account for how speakers of a language use it in appropriate ways. He noted that Chomsky’s ‘linguistic competence’ as a model of language, limits language to being a system of rules that merely link sound to referential and conventional meaning. Hymes further argued that a theory of language “[must] account for the fact that a normal child acquires knowledge of sentences, not only as grammatical, but also as appropriate. . . a child becomes able to accomplish a repertoire of speech acts, to take part in speech events, and to evaluate their accomplishment by others” (p. 277). He called this ‘communicative competence’ and argued that its acquisition is fed by social experience.

The two different perspectives on language chiefly differ on the amount of attention given to context in investigating language acquisition. Chomsky’s research program is geared towards understanding the human mind through investigating language and proposing a set of rules known as Universal Grammar (UG) that are true for all languages. Language is viewed as a system of universal structures; syntax, phonology, and morphology. This system is internal to the individual, i.e. it is all in the brain. However, for language acquisition to occur there must be some external input to trigger (re)setting of the parameters of universal grammar. Knowledge from this perspective precedes use and performance, although usually mentioned in reference to competence, is not a mirror image of it. It does not reflect the speaker’s competence because it is affected by factors such as stress, sloppiness, fatigue, etc. Grammaticality judgment is usually used to externalize the speaker’s linguistic competence. In short, one can safely argue that Hymes and Chomsky both work on two different research programs with different goals and
agendas. In SLA research however, these perspectives are brought to bear on the research questions asked and overall goals of research and as a result have created a division in the field (see Firth & Wagoner, 1997 and the response articles contained in the MLJ special issue on the topic).

Classroom Discourse

Related to the concern of the current study is the role of classroom discourse in language learning especially when it constitutes the sole exposure to English for most students. Early research on classroom discourse (Mehan, 1979; Sinclair & Coulthard, 1975) found a pattern of teacher-student interactions that contained a teacher’s initiation, a student’s response, and the teacher’s evaluation of the response. This came to be known in the literature as the IRE sequence or the ‘recitation script’ (Mehan, 1979, 1985). The discursive nature of classroom talk is captured by looking at topically related sets (TRS). Such proposal allowed mapping classroom talk and relating seemingly distant IRE’s through their topic relevance. This framework generated a great amount of research that found a fixed pattern of classroom discourse at all grade levels. For example, Cazden (1988) found that teachers talk two thirds of the time and that repeated use of the IRE limited students’ language use.

A number of studies also found similar patterns in foreign language classrooms. In one study, Hall (1995) found that the teacher in a Spanish as a foreign language speaking class solely used the recitation script. She noted that this foreign language classroom provided students with limited contexts for language use and thus constrained their development of cognitively complex discursive knowledge that makes them competent participants in the target language community.

In a study that problematized the IRE sequence, Wells (1993) found that it is the content of the teacher’s feedback to the student’s response that shaped subsequent discourse. He argued
that teachers either evaluate a student’s response thus closing the exchange or follow the
response up with comments that further extend the discourse. The three-part exchange came to
be known as the IRE/IRF depending on the content of the teacher’s third move. This finding was
confirmed by a number of studies (e.g., Boyd & Maloof, 2000; Consolo, 2000; Duff, 2000; Hall,
1998; to cite a few). These studies found that the three-part exchange can facilitate or hinder
student participation and contribution to classroom discourse. In a recent review of literature on
classroom interaction, Hall and Walsh (2002) concluded that the third move of the IRF/IRE
triadic exchange reflected to a great extent the role of the teacher in restricting or enhancing
students’ subsequent moves. The authors concluded that there are two versions of the follow up
move: in the first, teachers assess and evaluate students’ responses. This has a limiting effect on
the quality of interaction as well as on the level of students’ participation in learning. In the
second version, teachers’ follow-ups tend to acknowledge, expand, build on, rephrase, and
revoice students’ contributions. All these foster positive learning environments as they encourage
further participation.

The aforementioned discussion about the importance of classroom discourse in shaping
learning outcomes is even more crucial for learning additional languages in contexts where the
classroom is the only opportunity for exposure to the target language. The communicative
activities a language classroom creates for learners shape, to a large extent, students’ potentials
for learning.

Ethnography of Communication

Due to the inextricable link between language use and context of the situation, I intend to
utilize Dell Hymes’ approach to the study of language called ‘the ethnography of
communication’ (Hymes, 1962, 1964, 1972). It involves the description and analysis of
communication and as such discrete units of analysis such as the speech situation, event, and act were proposed. These constructs allow for different layers of analysis. At the macro level is the speech situation, which is the context in which communication takes place such as a class in a school. A more bounded and basic unit of analysis is the speech event. It is referred to in the literature as the speech event since speech constitutes the event as a whole such as a phone conversation, a lecture, or a meeting. It has subcomponents within the event to suit the function of the event and boundaries that mark its beginning and end signaled by silence or deliberate shift in talk. An example of event boundaries is the way teachers navigate through classroom time doing different activities. The labeling of different speech events allows for comparison among similar and different events and across time. Within the speech event, the speech act refers to the interactional function of speech such as a referential statement, a request, command and can be nonverbal since silence can be interpreted in different ways depending on the context of the situation (Saville-Troike, 2003).

In the current study, the speech situation refers to the ESP language class of 27 students that meet four times a week for an entire semester. Within the class, the analysis will utilize the ‘speech event’ as the next unit of analysis to account for the regularly occurring classroom activities. The third level of analysis will be at the exchange level. These units of analysis will be elaborated upon in the analysis section.

Hymes (1972) proposed the SPEAKING model as both a conceptual framework and a method for conducting language study. The eight letters of the word ‘speaking’ mnemonically represent the components of the model. They include description of: (S) situation, setting and scene; (P) participants; (E) ends, purposes and outcomes/goals; (A) act sequence of events, their message form/content; (K) key, tone of event; (I) instrumentalities, channel/forms of speech;
(N) norms of interaction/interpretation; and (G) genres i.e. lecture story telling, etc. (Hymes, 1972, pp. 59-65). Not all the components of the model may be relevant to certain acts or genres. Hymes further proposed that there is no established hierarchy of the components in the description. In this connection, Hall (2002) argued that:

Analysis of communicative events is inductive and typically involves four stages. In the first, features important for the accomplishment of the event are noted. In the second, their patterned uses are described and, in the third stage, the conventional meanings of the patterns are interpreted in light of how they are typically used by the participants to take action...In the last stage of analysis, the participants’ actions,...events themselves, are explained in light of the larger social, historical, and political contexts they help to (re)create. (p. 144)

Ethnography is used as an approach to examine the functions of speech in communication. It describes the communicative event and takes into account effects of the larger societal, institutional, and sociohistorical forces. Ethnographic techniques such as participant observation, audio/video recording of verbal interactions, and interviews with participants allow for understanding of participants’ ‘ways of speaking’. Of critical importance is the value of ethnography for its holistic emic or internal view that equates the viewpoint of the participants with research findings giving them internal validity, as “[It] seeks to describe the set of understandings and specific knowledge shared among participants that guide their behavior in that specific context, that is, to describe the culture of that community, classroom, event, or program” (Hornberger, 1994, p. 688).
In analyzing communicative events, care is taken to explain participants’ speech across different speech events. In this connection, Hymes (1964) argued that an approach to language study needs to be concerned with investigating

The use of language in contexts of situation so as to discern patterns proper to speech activity … [It] must take as context a community, investigating its communicative habits as a whole, so that any given use of channel and code takes its place as but part of the resources upon which the members of the community draw. (pp. 2-3, emphasis added)

What Hymes suggests here is broadening the scope of investigating language beyond its abstract form to include how it is used by speakers of a community. Contextual information about the community under study is given primacy since without such information, no analysis and consequently theory of language is adequate enough. Therefore, the object of analysis of a given study is measured and evaluated in relation to the broader norms of interaction. In other words, the social event in its totality becomes the unit of analysis instead of only focusing on language forms. The overall aim of such analysis of individual social events is to relate them to similar events and to the culture as a whole providing in effect layers of analysis. To better understand a short exchange between a teacher and a student in a language classroom for instance, one needs to locate the exchange within the speech event in which it is a part, the lesson as a whole, the whole course, and the program of study. The participants and repertoire of resources they rely on in the accomplishment of the speech event are brought to bear in the analysis.

From Community to Communities of Practice

Community and the context of the situation are two interrelated key concepts in the above quote and are relevant in the current study and each will be expanded and elaborated upon next. I will comment on Hymes’ use of the term ‘community’ and discuss recent explorations of the
term. The importance of the context of the situation will be discussed through explicating the relationship between context and Discourse Analysis.

The Ethnography of Communication was proposed in the sixties as an approach to language study. Hymes argued that it is ethnography not linguistics, communication not language that “must provide the frame of reference within which the place of language in culture and society is to be described (Hymes, 1964, p. 3). The choice of ethnography over linguistics entails describing people’s ways of speaking in place of viewing language in the abstract. The focus on communication rather than language itself means that the concern of the analysis is geared towards what people do with language. He further argued that the cultural beliefs, value systems, history, and ecology of a community should be examined in relation to communicative events under study. The assumption that people studied by anthropologists form a ‘community’ means that its members share some commonalities, habits, social activities, and language, (Duranti, 1997). Addressing the same topic, Saville-Troike (2003) noted that

All definitions of community used in the social sciences include the dimension of shared knowledge, possessions, or behaviors, derived from Latin communitae ‘held in common’… The essential criterion for “community” is that some significant dimension of experience be shared, and for “speech community” that the shared dimension be related to ways in which members of the group use, value, or interpret language. (p. 15, emphasis in original)

For the purposes of this study, I will explore a more recent conceptualization of the classroom under study to be a community of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 2003). In a joint work aimed at proposing a theory of learning, Lave and Wenger (1991) analyzed five case studies of apprenticeship. In the process they proposed the concept of ‘legitimate peripheral
participation’ (LLP hereafter) to characterize learning. They argued that LLP “provides a way to speak about the relations between newcomers and old-timers, and about activities, identities, artifacts and communities of knowledge and practice” (1991, p. 29). They further argued that the concept must not be decomposed into single terms since they constitute each other and that the antonyms of the terms-illegitimate, central, and nonparticipation-can be misleading as a proposal. Let me use an example of a student just admitted to graduate school to explicate my own understanding of LLP. The aim of that student is to gain access to the research community and learn the tools of the trade of this community of practice. S/he is a legitimate participant by virtue of the fact the s/he joined this community and belong there. Peripherality suggests being located in the social world of academia learning its ways through participation with its members. In other words, this student, a new comer to the community of academics masters their skills through moving towards full participation. Viewed in this way, learning is then the processes of co participation with members of a community of practitioners. This in effect places the activity of participation in the center stage thus widening the scope of investigation.

The above discussion necessitates the explication of the concept of ‘community of practice’. We all belong to different communities of practice at the same time. For example, I belong to the community of practice of academics, my sports’ communities (soccer, volleyball), my family and circles of friends. I have been a member of different communities throughout the stages of my life. We develop and learn to live by the practices of the communities we live in. Students form communities of practice in their classrooms. They bring their lived experiences and multiple identities as young men and women with varied interests and group memberships. For example, the students in the classroom under study come from different regions of the country, different educational background, varying degrees of English fluency (very distinctive
in an EFL classroom), some belong to religious sects other than the mainstream, among other characteristics. Yet, they are all united in the fact that they belong to a class about English in computer and telecommunication fields. They are new comers in the periphery, which gives them access to participate in the activities of the community of practice of computer and telecom practitioners to learn their practices and participate in them in English. By the same token, each classroom is a community of practice in its own right; we can speak of community of math, engineering, or physics practioners for instance.

The concept of ‘communities of practice’ sketched above provides a safe way to talk about groups of participants united to achieve certain goals. It is very important to point out that the concept does not imply culture sharing entity (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Members of a community of practice have different interests, goals, and investments in the activities of the community and as such make diverse contributions to that effect. Now that I have delineated the concept of community and community of practice, I will comment on what warrants an ethnographic approach to doing discourse analysis.

The Relationship of Context to Discourse Analysis

What is ‘discourse’ that we try to analyze? van Lier (1988) defines it “as the process or the range of processes by which text (in its widest sense, including conversation) is created.” (p. 122). Discourse Analysis then is the analysis of the process of interaction by means of a close examination of audiovisual records of talk. Crucial to understanding and interpreting discourse is the adoption of an ethnographic approach to the study of language use. This is due to the latter’s holistic approach to language study that provides a methodology for studying language as used by participants taking the context of the situation into account. Contextual information thus becomes important in interpreting what a given form mean by a speaker and how it is understood.
by a hearer in a given situation. In proposing an ethnographic perspective to guide discourse analysis for studying learning in social settings, Gee and Green (1998) argue that

> Discourse analysis, then, when guided by an ethnographic perspective, forms a basis for identifying what members of a social group (e.g., a classroom or other educational setting) need to know, produce, predict, interpret, and evaluate in a given setting or social group to participate appropriately (Heath…) and, through that participation, learn (i.e., acquire and construct the cultural knowledge of the group). Thus an ethnographic perspective provides a conceptual approach for analyzing discourse data (oral or written) from an emic (insider’s) perspective and for examining how discourse shapes both what is available to be learned and what is, in fact, learned. (p. 126)

The fact that an ethnographic perspective guides the study of language use places the burden of arriving at an understanding of how knowledge is constructed (in classrooms in this case) on including contextual information about participants, their identities, and sociocultural worlds; to interpret their participation to classroom talk.

The use of contextual information is what separates fields of enquiry like Conversation Analysis (CA) from Discourse Analysis (DA) or the Ethnography of Communication (EC) as approaches to the study of talk in interaction. Since the methodology reflects the theory used in research, I will use as examples two studies coming from different research disciplines to show how context is crucial in interpreting discourse. The two are contained in an *Applied Linguistics*’ special issue on microanalyses of classroom discourse: Duff (2002) on ethnography of communication (EC) and Mori (2002) on conversation analysis (CA).

Duff (2002) adopted EC as an approach to investigate references to cultural identity and difference in classroom interactions in one content area course in an ethnically mixed high
school in Canada. The analysis focused on teacher-led whole class discussions. Interpretation of events and their significance was achieved through discourse analysis supported by contextual information about the school, the teacher, and every student since the focus of the study was to investigate cultural identity and interpersonal differences. Contextual information becomes very crucial in understanding how these notions are manifested in classroom discourse.

In the other study, Mori (2002) adopted CA to study the development of talk in interaction in an upper level Japanese course at an American university. The epistemological orientation of Mori, coming from CA that stipulates that contextual information not manifested in the data should be avoided, initially confined the focus of analysis to the transcript. However, going away from ‘straight ahead’ CA (Heap, 1997) and more towards applied CA, Mori includes more contextual information about the pre-task planning effects and students’ competences in Japanese that are brought to bear on the analysis of the transcript. This move is a clear example of the tension that exists between straight ahead and applied CA. Pure CA would make wrong predictions about the transcripts without crucial information about students’ competences. This issue was also discussed by Rampton, Roberts, Leung, and Harris (2002) who argued that research carried out within Applied Linguistics can inform the research methodology in the home discipline, here, CA. A heated debate continues among the disciplines over the role of contextual information in analyzing data. Both CA and DA are interested in the analysis of the social dimensions of discourse and acknowledge the context dependency of discourse. However, they differ in the fact that discourse analysts use their knowledge of the world to interpret discourse and utilize contextual information in the analysis while conversation analysts contend that analysis should ‘prove’ contextualization rather than presuppose it (Van Dijk, 1999).
Related Research

The ethnography of communication approach was initially used in the description of speech events of bona fide speech communities (cf. the collection of studies in Gumperz and Hymes, 1972). Because of its descriptive power, this approach has been utilized in bilingual and general education research (Michaels, 1981). An early often cited work is Philips’ (1972) study of an American Indian community. Through the study of speech events involving the Indian children at school and in different communities outside the classroom, she was able to explain the reasons behind the children’s sometimes reticent and ‘quiet’ behavior during certain patterns of interaction. She concluded that the cause was in the discrepancy between home and school participation norms, which she called ‘participant structures’. In another study, Foster (1989) analyzed two distinct speech events through which a black teacher in an urban community college maintained congruent face-to-face interaction. The study demonstrated the effects of the features of each event on students’ participation and the value they ascribed to each.

A great deal of research in second/foreign language research has also utilized this approach (e.g., Duff, 2000; Harklau, 1994). For example, Duff (1995) examined the effects of broader sociopolitical changes in Hungary in the late 1980’s on educational discourse. Accompanying those changes were other micro-level changes introduced in the form of teaching content area subjects like history for instance through English as the medium of instruction. By comparing two speech events: the Hungarian recitation (feleleš) used in Hungarian-medium history lessons and student lectures used in English-medium classes, the study related observations on both contexts to the sociopolitical environment outside the classroom. The Hungarian recitation embodied authoritarian discourses of communism. While, the student lectures found in English-medium classes were aligned with the Western more interactive style
by being less rigid and sometimes co-constructed with other students. All in all, the study showed that the two speech events exhibited totally different approaches to speech delivery indicating that language use is affected as it is the product of larger sociopolitical changes that penetrate the classroom. Such finding also speaks to the relation of context to Discourse Analysis discussed above; namely that Duff’s (1995) analysis of classroom talk took into account contextual information that constituted the different kinds of talk in the two classrooms. Moreover, the choice of the contrasting classrooms indicates that researchers allow relying on contextual information even in the early stages of research site selection (cf. the two contrasting classrooms) to make their points.

As apparent in the studies cited and reviewed here, the ‘ethnography of communication’ has been a suitable approach to the study of communities in general and for the study of classrooms and school contexts in particular. In this connection Farah (1997) noted that this approach has drawn attention to the multilayered contexts in which classroom interaction is embedded.

Ethnography has usually been associated with studying ‘others’. Therefore, the ethnographer needs to spend sometime to learn the language of the people under study and gain a deep understanding of the norms and conventions of the group. For ethnography of a local scene, as the case is for this research, there is a need to ‘reverse the process and make the familiar strange in order to understand it’ (Mehan, 1981, p. 47). As with any science that heavily relies on observation and interpretation, it is important to be clear about our preconceptions, epistemic, theoretical, and disciplinary orientations coloring and selectively guiding our attention to see some facts and ignore others as unworthy or unrepresentative of the data as a whole. Therefore, there must be a principled and systematic method for data collection, selection for reporting, and
an explicit rationale for reporting excerpts for discussion. This will be explicated in detail in the
next chapter on research methodology. The criterion for selecting representative excerpts for
discussion will be made clear in the analysis chapters that follow.
CHAPTER 3

METHODS

Setting the Scene: Contextual Information

In this section, I furnish the reader with pertinent information surrounding the research site. I begin with a description of the community, the college, the classroom, the artifacts used, and the participants. The purpose of this information is to locate the classroom under study among the different layers that surround it.

The Community

The college is located in a progressive area of a metropolitan city in Saudi Arabia. Riyadh is home to two major universities, a private university, and a number of government and private colleges. According to the 2004 census count, Riyadh has 5.45 million inhabitants that make 24.1 % of the total country’s 22.7 million people (The Saudi Arabia Information Resource, n.d.). Such a large number of inhabitants compared to the country’s total population is due to people’s search for jobs and a better life style. Others attend universities in Riyadh and settle there after graduation. There are also second generation residents who were born to parents who originally moved to Riyadh. This means that most students who live in Riyadh have originally come from different parts of the Kingdom. They bring with them different cultures and traditions and ways of speaking since different areas of the kingdom have different distinguishing accents in the same way that one can tell that a person is from New England, Boston, or Texas based on the way they speak. However, throughout the past fifty years or so a moderate accent developed in Riyadh as people try to hide marked ways of talk to blend in with the new community.
Nonetheless, Riyadh remains a multicultural metropolitan rich in diversity and ways of speaking that still echo the different regions people originally came from.

Students in this study bring with them for instance different knowledge of what constitutes a classroom and how knowledge is gained through their past school experiences. The concern for better life style made them venture out from their small towns and villages to get a diploma and find a job in an era marked with high unemployment rates. Some of them were veterans of one or two colleges prior to enrolling in the current one for failing to pass intensive English courses. Others bring with them, albeit, passively other religious sects different from the mainstream interacting only with those that share their belief and keeping contact with others to a minimum. The reverse could very well be true; that locals alienate them because of their religious orientations.

The College

The classroom under study in this project is one of several classes in a junior college of technical education and vocational training preparing students for telecommunication and computer related jobs. The college was originally an institute accepting students who have finished middle school. In 1998, it was developed into a college accepting secondary school graduates offering them a diploma. The duration of the study was originally three years. That was reduced to two and a half years in 2002.

The decision to reduce the number of credit hours required for graduation was based on a needs analysis of the job market. Therefore, courses that were thought to be redundant were removed from the curriculum. That meant that the number of general and ESP classes was reduced from 25 to only 9 credit hours. Cutting the number of English classes in particular was the result of the dissatisfaction with student performance despite the large number of courses
they attend (personal communication, college administration). Students currently take one class of grammar and two technical English classes as opposed to one grammar class, a class that promotes communicative skills, a writing class, and two technical English classes—in the past.

The college physically comprises twelve two-story buildings connected together through corridors. Three buildings house the dean’s office and administration staff. One is for the center for community services and continuing education. A fifth is for the library with the cafeteria in the ground floor. The rest of the buildings house the three major departments in the college, faculty offices, labs, classrooms, and workshops. The buildings are old and sit on a large well kept lawn with long benches and shaded areas where students spend their free time.

Required courses have multiple sections and students have different time tables and move from one class to another throughout the day. Teachers work in teams; each team is responsible for a given course. For example, five teachers teach English 101, three teach advanced math planning their classes independently. Two years prior to the study, the exams were standardized; sections of a given course taught by different instructors have a unified exam usually prepared by teachers of those sections. The college administration preferred such practice for the sake of fairness. However, there were many problems with such a method. Students complained of ‘surprising’ or unexpected questions on the exam. With no benchmarks guiding teachers to achieve set objectives, problems of inconsistency were likely to occur since it is very hard to find two teachers with exact teaching styles and no two groups of students are ever the same. As a result of the apparent failure of unified exams, at the time of the study, each teacher prepares his own exams for his students provided that the exam is administered to all classes taught by that teacher at the same time.
The Class

This class meets four times a week from Saturday to Tuesday at 07:30 am. The work and school week has a different beginning and end in Saudi and most Islamic countries. It begins on Saturday and ends on Wednesday. Thursday and Friday are the weekend there. The class had large widows and plenty of sun light. It was located in a quiet building in the far end corner of the college. There was plenty of room as students occupied about two thirds of the large room. The seats are set up to face the board throughout the semester. Videotaping began three weeks after entry to the site and I sat and placed the camera in different places in the classroom to capture different angles and video tape the largest number of students possible.

The front of the class had a podium teachers use to put their materials and there was no chair for the teacher. As such the teacher, Ray, spent the majority of classes throughout the semester standing. He pulled a student’s chair for the few times he sat down. The walls had a large number of small graffiti written with ball pens negatively depicting some teachers in the college who -according to the graffiti-gave the students poor grades. Others contained folk poetry, popular Arabic songs, English terminology of specialized computing and networking terms, and scribbles of math equations. They seem to have been written by students sitting in the desks by the wall.

With the exception of four class periods throughout the semester, students would come before the teacher and sit silently. One does not see interaction and common chit chats that take place before the teacher comes in. In two of the four occasions in which the students were active, they were talking about upcoming term exams. The teacher even noticed that and said “it seems you have many news, you have a lot to say” and Asim replied that they had questions about the exam. In the other, they requested the teacher to spend that class reviewing for the upcoming
second term exam. In the other two occasions, students were talking about soccer matches that took place the weekend before the class. Pre-class speech events were not measured and are not part of the analysis.

*The Textbook*

The textbook used is *Oxford English for Computing* (Boeckner & Brown, 1993). It is an intermediate level text designed for students preparing for computer related fields. There are fifteen units in the text, five were chosen for study because they suited the students’ content area. Each unit begins with a prereading activity raising broad questions about the unit. This is followed by a more specific activity matching a word with its definition. The words chosen in the activity are considered key words in the page-long reading passage that follows. A number of post reading activities follow such as fill in the blanks and word study exercises requiring students to find synonym and antonym meanings of words in the text. Each unit ends with a section that focuses on a certain grammatical item(s).

*Participants*

The participants in this study are twenty seven students and one teacher. The teacher, Ray, is from India and has been teaching for over twenty five years with experience in three different countries teaching EFL. He has a PhD and is certified to teach ESL/EFL. He speaks English as a second language with native-like fluency. His command of Arabic is limited and rarely speaks it in class with the exception of fillers, some function words, and discrete vocabulary items. He has been teaching in the college for three years at the time of the study. In class, he is reserved and serious. That changes to an outgoing person with a sense of humor among colleagues or during coffee breaks in the teachers’ lounge. He is a Muslim and as such shares the students the same
belief. This was apparent in the latitude he gave to students during the fasting month of Ramadan.

The Students

There were 27 students ranging from 19 to 22 years old. All the students have already taken the grammar and introductory ESP classes prior to taking this class with Ray. About half of them are local students living with their families, the rest come from different parts of the kingdom to enroll in this college. Five students always sit close to each other at the right side of the class. I rarely noticed them talk with other students or participate in class activities. All five come from the eastern province (about 250 miles east of Riyadh).

With the exception of a few students who sit close to each other and seem to interact with each other before the teacher comes and after class time, there does not seem to be a sense of community membership binding all students to this class. I addressed this very issue in the interviews with students and almost all of them commented that there was no time since they can barely make it from one class to another. The fact that students come and leave quickly also made it even hard for me to get to know them. They were apprehensive of my presence at the beginning; they would go away from the place where I sit and try to avoid being in direct view of the camera. However, this uneasiness decreased as I became part of their daily routine.

Of all the students, about one third actively participated in class activities. This made it almost impossible for me to know the rest especially when they did not show up for their scheduled interviews. As such I am able to give some information about the outspoken students as well as those who showed up in the interviews.
Asim always chooses to sit in the back right corner of the class. He often bids to read and self-selects to give word meaning. He is outgoing and socializes with most students before and after class. I developed strong rapport with him and his interview was quite revealing.

Faisal usually sits in the right side of the second row. This makes him frequently in direct view of the camera. He made a number of comments to me expressing his opinion about some events in the class. He speaks English with some expression and is confident about his ability to discuss the readings without reference to the text. He finished his secondary school in a small village south west of Riyadh.

Husain, Ali, Sadiq, always sit together. They come from the eastern province of the country. They rarely, if ever, participate actively in class activities or talk to the rest of students in the class. They did not come for the interview.

Majed sits in the center of the front row placing himself directly in front of the teacher most of the time. He comes to class well before time and sits quietly reviewing his word study. The teacher relies on him for keeping track of where they are in the textbook. He is very organized and in fact he is the only student carrying a book pack. I cannot call it a back pack like the one common in Western campuses because it is not used here in Saudi. Only grade school children use back packs simply because grown ups wear the head piece called ghutra (white) or shumagh (red and white) making it impossible to wear the head piece and back pack at the same time.

Apart from the poor grade he ended up with, I can say with confidence that Majed made the best of this class. His language use developed from simple word level responses from the book to elaborated turns and questions. He takes risks and welcomes being corrected because he says (in an interview) that this helps him learn. He is very courteous and often offers to help me
with the camera set up and the like. He came to my office in numerous occasions to talk about
the best ways to improve his English. He even called me to confirm his interview appointment. I
must say that I was impressed!

**Mansoor** sits in the center back row. The teacher addresses him and a couple other
students with their first names from the beginning of the semester. During opening events,
comments are often addressed to him and Ray often asks him to read. He speaks with some
expression and has a sharp eye for looking for the correct answers from the book.

**Salman** sits next to Majed though less engaged with class activities. He attends a private
language school after classes and says that it is one of his best English learning experiences
commenting that it is engaging and interactive.

**Sami** usually sits in the back of the class and often participates in word meaning
exercises.

**Waleed** always sits with his friends Hamad and Tariq at the back right of the class. He is
the most outspoken of the three. He reads often and participates in reading comprehension
activities. The interview was carried out with him and his other two friends. However, Tariq was
the outspoken one in the interview.

**Data Collection**

Data for this study comes from a semester-long observation of one ESP class in a junior
college of technical education. The observation began in mid September and continued until the
end of December of 2003. Other data used in the analysis are videotapes of some of the classes,
interviews with the students and teacher, field notes, and instructional materials gathered over
the course of the semester.
Participant Observation

Driven by my theoretical assumptions about language learning, which is viewed not simply as the acquisition and internalization of linguistic forms, but also as the appropriation of linguistic forms and noting their functions as they are used in meaningful situations, I view the language classroom as an important site for research. Participant Observation, a time honored research method long before used in anthropology and sociology has proven to be a valid tool for understanding human behavior. It has been adopted in educational settings and allowed researchers to provide principled subjective interpretations of events based on how they understood them.

In order for me to validate any interpretation I make about classroom events, I needed to spend time inside the classroom to understand the lived experiences of students in the class, going through the same exercises and reading the same passages they read. I watched them take part in classroom events, observed their reactions, spoken or otherwise, to teacher questions and comments. Only through observation of an extended period of time was I able to understand the teacher’s assumptions about language and how that was reflected on the activities he assigns in class and those he gives for homework.

Field Notes

An integral part of participant observation is field notes. I took notes describing classroom events and commenting on their functions as I saw them happen. Field notes were very helpful at the beginning prior to bringing the intrusion of the video camera and aided after the camera was brought to class. They help me take notes on things the camera does not capture and explain shrugs and gestures that could only be understood at the moment of production.
Field notes have also helped me record instructional activities and explanations the teacher wrote on the board. They are my support reference during the cyclic viewing of video tapes of lessons.

**Video Tapes**

The advent of digital technology facilitated capturing classroom events through digital cameras. I video taped twelve lessons. The decision to bring the camera on a given date was subject to the availability of the equipment and tapes. I also did not bring the camera until I spent three weeks in the class. Also, I sometimes did not bring the camera for two reasons. The first has to do with the lingering thought that the intrusive presence of the camera would certainly affect the performance of the teacher. The other concerns the amount of field notes I take when there is no camera. I noticed that I generated a large amount of field notes describing classroom events when the camera was not present.

**Interviews**

I asked all students to come to my office for an interview at their most convenient time. Only nine out of twenty seven students turned up for the interviews. The interviews were carried out in Arabic though some code switching took place during interviews with two fluent students. The questions I asked were about students’ previous learning experiences compared to the current, their learning preferences, motivation, general thoughts, and other issues that will be discussed in detail in the analysis. Since the turn out for the interview was low, I wrote the second interview questions and distributed them towards the end of the semester. I must say that the quality and amount of information in the written questionnaire was nowhere close to the face to face interviews. All in all, the interviews were very helpful in understanding students’ assumptions about language and their reactions to language use in the classroom.
Data Analysis

Ten of the twelve videos were transcribed for analysis. Two tapes were discarded for purely technical problems with the quality of the sound. They were the 1st and 2nd recorded videos. The interview with the teacher was also transcribed for analysis. Student interviews were carried out in Arabic. I therefore wrote a translation of their responses to the interview questions. Faisal was code switching between English and Arabic. All his English use was transcribed and put in quotation marks to distinguish it from my translation of his responses in Arabic.

The videos were digitized and then transcribed with Transana ® software; a tool for qualitative research using video. It facilitates transcription and filing of clips and grouping them under headings such as higher levels of analysis. After all the videos were transcribed, I moved to the next step; grouping distinct speech events into collections for comparison and analysis. Within speech events, I coded patterns of language use at the exchange level though Open and Axial coding (Strauss & Corbin 1990). The exchange could consist of an adjacency pair like a question and answer, it could be an instance of an IRE, and it can extend to encompass a topically related set (TRS) (Mehan, 1979). The rationale for pegging the description and analysis on the exchange rather than the speech act is due to the contingency of talk and that an utterance is only interpreted in relation to a host of factors such as its effect on the addressee, the type of event, genre, among others. The analysis is thus multilayered drawing on three levels; the speech situation, speech event, and exchanges within a speech event. The first level provides contextual information that places the classroom in space and time. The speech event is a unit of analysis that allows for comparison among different events. Within speech events, language use will be analyzed at the exchange level labeling talk with indigenous categories. Distribution of patterns of communication will then be compared across speech events.
On Validity: Triangulation of Data Sources

In this study, I provide my own understanding and interpretation of classroom events and language use, using in the process different sources of data. I constantly use my experience as a participant observer eavesdropping over classroom events and trying to make sense of what they mean to those whose behavior I study. I have become part of the context of the classroom participating- passively by way of observation-in its events. In the process, I record notes not captured by the camera and impressions, if not captured and recorded on the spot, fade in the abyss of limited memory capacity. I also use the transcript of classroom talk for cyclic analysis that has continued throughout data analysis and even in the final drafts and write up phases of this project. The interviews with the students and teacher provide another source that I use to portray and interpret the people and events in the classroom under study.
Data triangulation, “a term borrowed from land surveying, refers to the idea that at least
two perspectives are needed to obtain an accurate picture of any phenomena” (Bailey & Nunan,
1996, p. 3; citing Denzin, 1970). In qualitative research, the term has been used to refer to using
multiple data sets to interpret events. I will present an excerpt that shows the process through
which I understand what is happening from the perspective of the people involved. Nunan (1996)
arguing for the type of naturalistic research adopted here notes that “…in order to understand
what is going on, [in the classroom] we need to set the interpretations of the researcher against
insights provided by the other actors in the educational drama.” (p. 46). I will use as an example
of how I analyze the data a long exchange about the meaning of the expression ‘as though’
(henceforth the as though exchange). It is taken from a reading event.

The exchange is quite long and for reasons of reader attention span and space, I will
paraphrase it citing key turns. The students were working on a reading comprehension activity
when the phrase ‘as though’ appeared and the teacher asked them what it meant. It took about 15
minutes of class time from its introduction until the students were able to use it in sentences of
their own. This is a common practice in this classroom, something that I labeled ‘Word Detours’
(see p. 63 below for an explanation of the term).

T  as though, what is the meaning of ‘as though’?

Students replied that it means ‘as if’ then they were asked to produce examples. Majed produced:

M  He is discussing as though he is Dr. Ray

Ray then explains the meaning of the expression and provides a rationale for using the
subjunctive in the second part of the expression

Ray  I told you, remember, the part that comes after ‘as though’ is not true…you think of an imaginary
condition.
He does not begin to explain the use of the subjunctive ‘were’ until students were able to produce the complete structure only using ‘is’ instead of ‘were’. He then starts to correct the helping verb used in each example. Students produced examples like:

W The soldier speaks as though he is the commander
F I talk as though I am your boss, right?
Ray yes, as though I were your boss, again, again, reword
F I talk as though I were your boss

The teacher seems to be under the impression that students have understood the expression, since he usually does not move back from the word detour until several students have produced accurate sentences. Once a number of students were able to use ‘as though’ in sentences of their own, he moved back to where they stopped in the reading and resumed vocabulary and reading comprehension questions.

When the above exchange is taken at face value, it seems to represent a successful learning of a new expression. This is achieved through explanation of what the expression means and when it is used. Next, students and teacher provide examples. The linguistic needs of the students are gauged as they provide their own examples and a suitable metalanguage explanation is provided. Students appear to take in the structural features of the expression as they begin to produce error free expressions that are approved by the teacher. All in all, the whole exchange exemplifies a successful presentation and learning of an expression. Depending on the theoretical orientation of the observer, such an exchange can be used as an example of learning in the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) (Vygotsky, 1978). The expert, the teacher here, gauges the needs of the novice, the learners, and offers gradual contingent advice until the form is appropriated into their communicative competence. From a different Psycholinguistic Naturalist perspective, this exchange can arguably be a neat exemplification of Krashen’s i+1 construct.
(Krashen, 1985). The input presented in the exchange was a bit beyond the current levels of the learners. It is made comprehensible through negotiation of meaning, examples, and formal instruction. What seemed to follow was an apparent learning that took place in the interaction. I am not comparing the two theoretical constructs (ZPD and i+1) or suggesting that they are similar since there is a risk involved when theoretical concepts taken from different paradigms are equated. I am only trying to show that the researcher her/himself is an instrument by which data is interpreted and portrayed. As such, the theoretical assumptions and prejudices of the researcher must be made clear from the outset of the research. I also want to explicitly show the ‘workings’ of my research procedures and how I look at the data (Holliday, 2002) and make visible what was involved during all phases of the study.

A crucially important source of internal validity of qualitative research is the use of multiple data sets. When other data sources such as field notes, non-participant observation and the interviews are used in the analysis, a completely different picture emerges. The exchange is anything but the above two hypothetical interpretations I presented. I arrived at this conclusion because while I was observing the class that day, I felt some bewilderment on the faces of some students that were not actively participating. Those who were actively engaged in the interaction to produce the expression were making grammatical errors that suggest that they have understood the expression to mean a totally different thing. For example, when Majed said “He is discussing as though Dr. Ray”, I felt that he understood the expression to be another rather complicated way of saying ‘he is discussing like Dr. Ray. By the same token, I felt that Waleed’s example ‘the soldier speaks as though commander’ could be interpreted to mean ‘the soldier speaks like a commander’, i.e. imitating the commander or speaking in the same manner. But the expression means being hypothetically in the same
shoes as someone else such as ‘if I were the judge, I would…’. However, how could I explain instances when students began to produce very close or error-free expressions using words of their own? So far, all I have is my hunch as a linguist and my gut feeling as an observer in the midst of the action. The interviews could not have come at a better time. Without planning it, I was interviewing students that same week and two of them were interviewed on the same day the ‘as though’ exchange took place. I asked all the students about the meaning of the expression and whether it made sense to them at the time. All of them said that they thought it meant ‘look like’ understanding that the example:

He talks as though he were the dean
to mean ‘he talks like the dean’. Others thought it meant ‘he imitates the dean’. However, most of them noted that it did not make much sense. I further asked them to explain why some of them were producing the expression using different words each time suggesting to the observer that they understand what it means. Waleed said that he himself gave an example and still did not know what it meant. Ibrahim sums up his classmates’ comments succinctly:

O did you understand 'as though' you folks talked about today?
I ‘as though’? I thought it meant like but that didn't make much sense
O some came up with examples.
I I think they just used different words on the same sentence structure without understanding what the whole sentence meant. (Translation of Ibrahim interview)

This was exactly my impression in class. I felt that students who produced close and error-free sentences were keeping the structure constant and changing the words. This is of course true about the grammar of a language. But I felt that they were doing it mechanically without really understanding what the expression really meant; that is how to use it in context functionally and appropriately. In other words, the rule is not part of their communicative competence allowing
them to utilize this knowledge to use the expression in different and new situations. During the interviews, there was a sigh of relief and laughter each time I explained what the expression meant in classical and colloquial Arabic.

What can explain the behavior of the students in the class? Why do they go as far as faking participation? The answer comes from the students themselves. Most of them comment on the tension that exists in the class to the extent that Asim said:

I just open my book without knowing much of what he is talking about faking that I follow him and waiting when this will be over. (Interview transcript)

The majority of the students; about twenty out of twenty seven choose this way avoiding participation and therefore contact with the teacher. Those who actively participated in the above exchange pretend they understand when they do not. Waleed, Tariq, and Malik were talking about this exchange noting that it was vague citing the teacher’s inability to speak Arabic as a major cause. Despite the vagueness of the exchange, Waleed decides to imitate his classmate’s sentence structure changing only the words. He said he did that just to participate and put on a good show. Throughout the exchange, the teacher was pressuring the students to use examples as the following turns taken from different points in the exchange suggest:

Ray So can you think of one example using ‘as though, can you use ‘as though’ in a sentence?

Ray All of you must try. Yes come on, what happened, I think we have discussed this before…

What the students in the above exchange did was not an idiosyncratic behavior true only to them. Students are very good at this practice and a number of metaphors were used in the literature to describe this behavior. Bloome, Puro, and Theodorou (1989) addressed a similar practice that they referred to as ‘procedural display’ where students and teachers accomplish the lesson as a cultural event without substantive engagement in academic substance (p. 284). They do so as if there is a colluded agreement between the teacher and students to execute a given task
to keep the flow of the school day going. Edwards and Mercer (1987) argued that participants’ knowledge is either principled or ritual. It is principled when students understand the issues and concepts and their relationship to the activities; or it can be ritual where students are consumed in the activities themselves without a grasp of the real rationale for what they do. In the case of the ‘as though’ exchange, the students are engaged in the activity to produce the term as an end in itself. Their ability to produce it seems the objective as the activity ended there.

The following teacher’s turn makes the collusion more explicit. Here, he makes reference to the exam noting that the use of ‘as though’ in the subjunctive mode is a likely exam item; an incentive commonly used to urge students to study. He further instructs them to copy from the board the structural features needed to produce the expression.

T Where's your notebook? The students are giving good examples. As I said the other day, last lecture or a number of lectures ago, I may ask you this in the examination, you must give me real examples.((students copy from the board)) I want you to take note of the three things I marked with a red pen. These things must be there in the instructions. There will be two parts: one before as though and one after… and this verb must be invariably in the past tense even if it is for a singular.

The above exchange is an example of ritual knowledge where students were able to negotiate and learn what is needed to do the task, which is using the subjunctive mode correctly. They were able to manipulate linguistic forms, understand the activity as a whole but that did not help them transform this into their repertoire of words that collectively make them fluent speakers of English. Furthermore, they accomplished the task without necessarily knowing what the expression really meant. They did it so well to the extent that the teacher was under the impression that they understood the activity.
To recap, the above exchange was presented as an exemplary piece through which I showed how I look at the data. I argued that a value-free qualitative research is more of a fantasy than real. The best way to use the researcher’s subjectivity as an asset is by making the procedures of the research explicit and using multiple sources of data. In my quest to arrive at the above interpretation of the above exchange, and many others, I used my impressions of events as I observed them happening, my field notes, the transcript of classroom talk, and the interviews with the participants involved.
CHAPTER 4

INTERPRETATION OF CLASSROOM DISCOURSE

Introduction

In general, classroom periods are segmented into time slots designated to accomplish specific language learning goals. A classic example is the teaching of the different skills of language, namely; listening, speaking, reading, writing, and grammar. Of course these skills can be taught separately or in combination depending on the assumptions about how language is learned. In order to ascertain how language is taught in the classroom under study, two assumptions guided the investigation. First, there are different communicative events, the purpose of which is to teach different language skills. Second, that language use is different during these communicative events. In this chapter, I will present the first hypothesis, its subsidiary questions, and use the data to reject the null hypothesis and subsequently test the first hypothesis. For ease of reference, the first hypothesis is rewritten here along with its subsidiary questions:

\[ H_0: \text{Modes of communication are invariable across different classroom activities.} \]

\[ H_1: \text{Different modes of communication exist within different classroom activities.} \]

The following questions will help me identify modes of communication specific to particular classroom activities:

1. How does the teacher frame the boundaries of communicative events?
2. What are the rhetorical structures of these events?
3. How do students and teacher accomplish the events?
4. What are the resources and mediational tools used in the accomplishment of events?

5. What is the quantity of student participation across classroom activities?

6. What is the quality of student participation across classroom activities?

Testing the first hypothesis is twofold: first, the existence of different classroom activities has to be established. Then, a characterization of interactional details of the identified activities is provided.

An inductive approach to data analysis was utilized. I began with transcribing the videos. A cyclic analysis of the transcript was performed looking for different activities. With Hymes’ (1972) concept of the speech event in mind, I searched the data for particular speech events. The objective and topic of the activity was the criteria used for identifying events. Special attention was paid to boundaries of activities since these set them apart from the others. Analysis revealed a number of different speech events summarized in the following table

Table 4.1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Key Events</th>
<th>Opening</th>
<th>Reading</th>
<th>Exercises</th>
<th>Grammar</th>
<th>Advice</th>
<th>Exams</th>
<th>Closing</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Frequency</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Duration (minutes)</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>255</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>519</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Speech Events

Activities in this classroom can be characterized as belonging to different types of speech events with clear temporal boundaries. In what follows, I will describe exemplary speech events discussing the features of each.
Opening Speech Events

The opening speech events, as their name suggests, are the first few minutes during which the teacher spends some time asking students about interesting things and events like sports, current news, etc. The boundaries of opening events are framed by the teacher. They open with the teacher’s questions about current news, weekend, sports, etc and end by asking about where the class stopped the last time they met. The structure of the discourse follows the typical IRE exchange discussed in the literature review above. Nonetheless, opening events contain the largest number of genuine questions compared to other speech events. The novice/expert roles are exchanged when the event contains information the students know. In what follows, I will describe a typical opening event.

It is 7:30 on Saturday morning (1st day of the week); the earliest period of the day. The class is very quiet and students are coming in. Students are not assigned to specific seats. However, I noticed that they go to the same spots; Majed for instance, has never changed his seat, which is always right in the middle of the front row.

Ray said in an informal interview that he intentionally comes about five minutes late to allow for all the students to be in class. However, students keep coming until 7:40-45. Meanwhile, Ray asks about interesting things that took place during the weekend “you were all in Riyadh only? Did you go out for the weekend?” Majed says that it is the beginning of the annual cultural heritage. Ray asks why people would go there, “to see how past” Majed says, and Ray reformulates Majed’s sentence: “to see how people were living in the past”. Ray, being an alien to the community, keeps asking questions about the kind of games in the heritage festival, times, and entry tickets. Most of the students are involved in the discussion. When Ray asks about the tickets, Salman says “it’s free”. Khalid tells Ray how to get there. Asim says that there
is a horse race also. The discussion took more than six minutes and was followed by a reading passage.

In the heritage festival event mentioned, the teacher was asking genuine questions. In events about sports, students are more involved; they self-select, interpolate on their peer responses, and talk about authentic sports issues.

*Reading Speech Events*

Reading events are accomplished in four stages. In stage one; a student is nominated to read a paragraph. In stage two, the teacher establishes the main idea(s) through comprehension questions. In the third stage, the teacher starts rereading sentence by sentence followed by questions on word meaning. In the final stage, the new words are repeated with their definitions; sometimes this latter practice is withheld till the end of the class to include all the new words encountered that day.

The progression of classroom activities closely follows that of the textbook and Majed, a diligent student, always keeps track of the last activity they stopped at the previous class. He keeps page and line numbers. From the beginning of the semester, Ray has established the importance of word meaning for the ability to communicate, understand readings, and pass the exam. He required that all students prepare the new words of a reading passage before they come to class and have the words written in their notebooks for future reference.

The following excerpt is about ‘computer viruses’ and is chosen because it is not as long as the other readings and it contains all features of interaction common to reading events. Ray finished discussing the previous paragraph and calls “next paragraph”. Asim bids to read and is nominated (stage one). Asim stumbles with the first word in the paragraph “despite” but gets it
right on his own. Then he struggles with “incidence” until Ray helps him. Then he continues the rest of the paragraph with no interruptions. When he is done reading, Ray asks:

Excerpt 4.1

Ray yeah, what is the main idea here?(3.2) what does this paragraph a a tell about?(2.1) it is about what? (2.6)
Asim about a program checking virus, it's a low (1.7)
Ray sorry
Asim low low not happen
Ray a a there's another main idea, what is the main idea here?(1.6) about viruses.(3.6)
Asim it has two kinds
s2 [X]
Ray yeah! it has two kinds. What are they?
Asim shields
Ray ahh
Asim shields as they are infecting=
Ray yeah virus a virus shields and
s scanning
Ray virus scanners, very good. so there are two types of? What are they? (1.5)
Asim virus scan=
Ray [are they viruses]? What are they?
s1 viruses
s2 anti-viruses
Ray anti-viruses very good. So there are two kinds of anti-viruses scan(2.1)

The above part contains the first two phases of the reading comprehension practice. In the first, Asim reads and gets corrected for mispronunciation. Then Ray establishes the main idea of the paragraph through asking comprehension and word meaning questions. Then, he moves to a detailed (third) stage asking about the meaning of individual words and expressions.
Ray continues asking about the meaning of other words in the paragraph. A lengthy discussion about the difference between virus shields and virus scanners took more than ten minutes. After establishing the function of each type of antivirus, they move on to the next paragraph. The pace of reading events is quite slow and Ray told me in informal and formal interviews and addressed the class in more than one occasion that they are going slow because students do not do their word study. It is quite normal that a whole period is spent working on half a page.

*Exercise Speech Events*

The data sets include nine exercise speech events. Three were focused on how to form questions in English and were very lengthy. The rest were six events on vocabulary; synonyms, antonyms, word puzzles, and post reading cloze activities. Unlike question formation exercises, the pace of vocabulary activities is very fast. This is due to students’ ability to respond to questions on the meaning of discrete vocabulary items.

The teacher frames the beginning of the event by reading the instructions of the activity. The event ends after the last item on the exercise is answered. The teacher then moves on to the next event. All exercise events represent the typical IRE triadic exchange in which the teacher initiates through a question or nomination, a student replies, and then the teacher evaluates the response. Below is a ‘fill-in-the-blank’ activity, the words are supplied and students are asked to use them in the right place. The turns are shorter than those during question formation events and the number of students involved is larger. Ray’s turns are shorter than average.

(I) Initiation, (R) Response, (E) Evaluation

Excerpt 4.2

Ray   ok, task four number one answer yes (I) (framing event boundary)
Asim: computer networks link computers locally or by a= (R)
Ray: what's the answer? Give me the answer number one what's the answer?= (E/I)

Asim wanted to read the whole sentence after he chose the suitable word thus producing a meaningful statement. Ray on the other hand preferred that each student fill in the blank without reading the whole sentence. Therefore, students’ turns contain one word. Note how some of Ray’s turns function as an evaluation of the answer and an initiation for the next student move.

These are labeled as (E/I)

Asim: protocols (R)
Ray: protocols, very good number two yes (E/I)
s2: extension (R)
Ray: extension number three (E/I)
s3: dis distrab (R)
Ray: distributed (E)
s3: distributed systems (R)
Ray: yes very good number four (E/I)
ss: work station (R)
Ray: sorry? (Clarification)
s: work station (R)
Ray: work station yes (E)
s2: screen handle (R)
Ray: sorry? (Clarification)
s2: screen handling (E)
Ray: yeah very good screen handling number six (E/I)
s: queries (R)
Ray: yes very good, number seven (E/I)
ss: parses (R)
Ray: parses yes a number eight (E/I)
More similar activities followed. The class concludes with Ray calling the students’ names for the daily attendance.

**Grammar Speech Events**

Unlike reading and exercise speech events that are taken from the text, grammar speech events are triggered when certain grammatical features surface in the reading and the teacher thinks they need explanation. This means that all grammar events are embedded within reading events. For example, talk about the formal aspects of the passive voice was triggered during a reading that has a large number of passive structures. The following move serves as an event boundary that sets it apart from the reading event within which it is embedded. The event can be divided into five stages. This move is the first stage in the development of the event.

**Excerpt 4.3**

Ray I like the grammar part of this paragraph, what kind of tense is used here in the grammar, here, you see the grammar?
Students respond that it is the passive. In the second stage, the teacher asks about formal features of the passive. Faced with no response, he shifts and asks students to find passive sentences in the reading and students were able to retrieve all of them. In the third stage, the formal features of the passive structure are discussed through a series of IRE’s and explanation on the board. In the fourth stage, uses of the passive are discussed. In the fifth stage, students use the passive in sentences of their own. The event concludes with the following move

Ray  we'll move to the next paragraph, third paragraph read silently, I’ll give you 5 minutes... So I’m very confident that my students can answer these passive sentences I’m sure in the examination.

This is going to be one of our items in the examination questions

S  the exam from the passive?

Ray  yes

Exam Speech Events

There were three exam speech events in the data; one was an announcement of an upcoming midterm that developed through student questions into an exam outline. The other two events were exam reviews after students had already prepared for the exams. In these events, students are very attentive writing notes and raising questions on particular-mostly grammatical-issues.

Advice Speech Events

Similar to grammar events, advice events are always embedded within other events. They are always triggered by students’ lack of participation. Students are never actively involved during advice speech events. They just listen, agree, and nod. Advice events are significant in the data because they provide insights about the teacher’s assumptions about language learning and what counts as such. They include issues like the importance of vocabulary study, dictionary use, urging students to work hard, and how to prepare for exams.
**Closing Speech Events**

An exchange is labeled as an event according to its function. Closing events have been the hardest to classify since three of them did not involve any language use that signals closing of the class. In these, the teacher simply concludes with taking the daily attendance. So only seven closing events have been identified and included in the analysis. These are framed with a typical statement like “ok we’ll call it a day” and followed with comments about students’ performance during that class, a reminder of upcoming tasks, and a word for the students to work harder and come to class prepared.

**Rejection of the Null Hypothesis**

The above description shows the existence of different speech events marked with clear event boundaries and temporal ordering of sub-units or stages within each event. I have shown in broad terms that language use is characteristically different among these events in terms of content and function. For example, reading events are marked with extensive use of comprehension and word meaning questions to achieve the function of the event; namely the understanding of the reading. By the same token, since the function of opening events is to warm students up, the teacher uses genuine questions about topics of interest to students. During vocabulary events, students appeared at their best performance; quick to respond and self-selecting in many occasions. This behavior echoes the weight and importance assigned to knowledge of discrete vocabulary items.

The apparent difference among speech events in terms of content, function, mode of communication, and pace should set the stage now for closely examining language use during these events and is enough grounds to reject the null hypothesis; namely that modes of communication are different across different speech events. In what follows, I will present
different layers of analysis to portray language use in this classroom. Amount of student participation and complexity of their talk will be presented next to further show that the distinction among speech events is reflected in the amount of language use.

Distribution of Talk across Speech Events

For this section, I took a ten minute sample from each speech event. This reflects about 12% of the whole transcript, which is considered an acceptable sample (Bernard, 2000). For short events, I combined more than one clip of class videos to make ten minutes of transcript.

I performed turn and word count for teacher and students’ utterances. A turn is considered as such when a student or the teacher utters something and all words are counted regardless of intelligibility. Student talk is measured in proportion to the whole event. For example, the percentage of student words is measured by adding up teacher and all students’ turns then calculating the proportion of students’ words to the whole event.

Table 4.2

Frequency Counts for Turns and Words

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Event</th>
<th>Opening</th>
<th>Reading</th>
<th>Exercise</th>
<th>Grammar</th>
<th>Exams</th>
<th>Advice</th>
<th>Closing</th>
<th>Mean</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>% St Turns</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>51.3</td>
<td>42.9</td>
<td>46.4</td>
<td>48.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% St Words</td>
<td>19.9</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>15.1</td>
<td>24.9</td>
<td>10.8</td>
<td>4.6</td>
<td>9.5</td>
<td>13.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% T Words</td>
<td>80.1</td>
<td>89</td>
<td>84.9</td>
<td>75.1</td>
<td>89.2</td>
<td>95.4</td>
<td>90.5</td>
<td>86.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S Wpt</td>
<td>3.4</td>
<td>2.14</td>
<td>2.8</td>
<td>5.7</td>
<td>2.3</td>
<td>3.2</td>
<td>3.1</td>
<td>3.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>T Wpt</td>
<td>13.8</td>
<td>21.1</td>
<td>15.8</td>
<td>14.5</td>
<td>20.3</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>25.5</td>
<td>22.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S:T Ratio</td>
<td>1:4.1</td>
<td>1:9.9</td>
<td>1:5.7</td>
<td>1:2.5</td>
<td>1:8.8</td>
<td>1:15.3</td>
<td>1:8.2</td>
<td>1:7.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4.2 shows the distribution of language use across speech events measured through: (1) number of turns; (2) proportion of words uttered to the entire event; (3) mean word per turn;
and (4) the ratio of student to teacher words. The analysis shows that the turn used as a variable does not yield differences across speech events. This is consistent with other studies that found that the turn used as a measure does not provide an accurate picture of the distribution of classroom talk (Patthy-Chavez, in press). The median of student turns is 48.8%. This can be viewed as a positive sign indicating that students contribute about half the turns of a given event. However, this is not the case as the discussion of word measure will show. Furthermore, we are comparing the turns of a class of 27 students combined in proportion to one teacher’s turns.

The picture becomes clear when we look at students’ contribution to the entire event at the word level. They contribute 19.9% in opening, 11% in reading, 15.1% in exercise, 24.9% in grammar, 10.8%, 4.6 in advice, and 9.5 in closing events with a mean of 13.7 compared to the teacher’s 86.3. This indicates a number of things: (1) the paucity of student talk; for instance, students only talk 11% during reading events that make up about 50% of the data making the teacher talk 89% of the time during these events; (2) word count is a more fine-grained measure since it accurately accounts for the difference in the distribution of talk across speech events. For instance, during advice speech events, students’ turns are limited to words that show acknowledgment. This is accurately reflected in the word measure (4.6%) but not in the turn measure since it is close to the mean of all events.

The next measure of frequency and distribution of talk is the students’ word per turn. All students’ words combined reach their highest level during grammar events (5.7). The mean word per turn for all speech events is 3.2%. What is alarming is that their mean during reading events that make up the majority of class time is only 2.14%. Compared to the students’, the teacher’s word per turn is high in all events. However, teacher’s Wpt tends to decrease when student’s Wpt increase such as the case during opening and grammar events.
The ratio of students’ to teacher’s word per turn also reflects the imbalance in the distribution of talk in class in favor of the teacher. In opening events, the teacher spoke 4.1 words for each word all the students uttered, 9.9 in reading events, 5.7 in exercise events, 2.5 in grammar events, 8.8 in exams events, 15.3 in advice events, and 8.2 words in closing events bringing the mean to 7.8 words for each word all the students combined uttered.

Eliciting Response through Questions

During the cyclic analysis of speech events, I noticed the ubiquity of teacher’s questions to elicit student responses. I initially planned to classify questions according to whether they are genuine or display questions. Display or “known answer questions” as the name suggests are those where the teacher asks a question to which he already knows the answer. On the other hand, genuine questions are ones that seek new information. Teachers’ use of these questions has been debated in the literature for over three decades (Cazden 1988; Hall & Verpletse 2000; Mehan 1979; Sinclair & Coulthard, 1975; Wells, 1993). However, initial investigation of teacher’s questions showed that such a measure would state the obvious since most, if not all the teacher’s questions can be considered as display questions. As an alternative, I looked for general themes that teacher’s questions fell into. I found that they could be classified into three broad categories according to their function: (1) reading comprehension questions; (2) questions to define or paraphrase word meaning; and (3) a broad category that includes exchange for information questions. Even the third type does not have genuine questions by the teacher with the exception of one opening event when he was asking students about a cultural heritage festival with which he was not familiar.
Table 4.3

**Frequency and Distribution of Question Types across Speech Events**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Key events (their duration in minutes)</th>
<th>1. Comprehension questions</th>
<th>2. Questions for word meaning</th>
<th>3. Request for information</th>
<th>Total questions for each event</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>T S</td>
<td>T S</td>
<td>T S</td>
<td>T S</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opening (37)</td>
<td>2 22</td>
<td>69 11</td>
<td>105</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reading (255)</td>
<td>236 216</td>
<td>58 11</td>
<td>522</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exercise (90)</td>
<td>46 4</td>
<td>90 4</td>
<td>144</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grammar (18)</td>
<td>8 33</td>
<td>33 2</td>
<td>43</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exams (47)</td>
<td>10 1</td>
<td>37 33</td>
<td>81</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advice (20)</td>
<td>11 4</td>
<td>6 33</td>
<td>21</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Closing (18)</td>
<td>2 9</td>
<td>9 1</td>
<td>12</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total (485)</td>
<td>315 247</td>
<td>302 62</td>
<td>928</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4.3 contains frequency counts for all instances of any question uttered by the teacher or students for the duration of the recorded transcript. The numbers are not ratios, percentages, or means. Therefore, reading the numbers is best understood with reference to event duration shown in parentheses. Even though the events are not equally divided in time, the above table is significant for a number of reasons. It shows that the number of teacher questions is extremely large. During 485 minutes of recorded class time, the teacher asked 864 questions to elicit student responses. This is close to two questions per minute. All students asked a total of 64 questions, half of these questions took place during exam speech events and were about the format of the test, likely exam questions, and the number of words they need to prepare for the test.

Despite the large number of teacher’s questions, there is a paucity of student responses and overall participation in class activities. This finding indicates that the kind of questions used here are not the best method to elicit student participation. In fact, when the number of questions increases, student participation decreases. This is apparent when a comparison is made between reading and grammar events. The largest number of comprehension and word meaning questions
is found in reading events and students’ participation is the lowest during these events. In contrast, grammar events have the highest level of student participation, (15.1%) of the words uttered in class (table 4.2 above); but the number of teacher questions is the lowest (41) among events students are expected to talk, i.e. excluding advice and closing events.

**Conclusion**

In the above section, I have shown that classroom time is segmented into distinctly different speech events. The quantitatively different distribution of turns and talk substantiate the proposal that classroom time is segmented into distinct speech events. They had different goals and that was reflected on the quantity of language use. With simple turn count, word count, word per turn count, and question count; the analysis presents a clear and concise picture of the type of interaction that takes place in the class under study. Frequency counts indicate that the teacher takes the lion’s share of classroom talk. The above quantitative analysis will be supported next with qualitative discourse analysis of language use.

**Coding Spoken Data**

**Introduction**

In order to characterize the discourse of the classroom under study, I examined the data through cyclic inductive analysis of the transcripts and videos using open and axial coding of talk (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). These codes were not adopted from an etic grid or predefined coding schemes. Rather, codes and labels are internal to the data and have emerged from my cyclic analysis of the videos and transcripts. Of course, the patterns of talk that I see in the data have been influenced by my studies and training in the sociocultural theory of language that looks beyond the formal aspects of language to encompass the context surrounding language use; one that includes the dynamics surrounding classroom talk and myself and what I bring to the
data. Another influence comes from my classroom observations and field notes that help me understand what it means when a student shrugs or gestures with his hand. Classroom observation has given me an insider’s understanding of the interaction taking place between the teacher and students. I videotaped 12 sessions but I attended four months of class time missing only a few.

Since paralinguistic and contextual information about spoken language are brought to bear on the coding of data, I adopted the exchange as the next unit of analysis looking specifically at the interactional function of talk. For example, a teacher’s utterance is coded as ‘Leading’ when its function appears to lead students to respond in a certain way. In the remainder of this chapter, the different patterns of communication identified will be illustrated and then the frequency of their occurrence within speech events will be discussed. What follows is a brief discussion relating to the validity of coding the data.

*Internal Validity Revisited*

In all qualitative research, the researcher is the most important tool of the research endeavor. His/her judgments can be influenced by a host of factors such as prior training, theoretical orientation, familiarity of the subject of study or lack thereof, among others. This being the case, one needs to be objective and subjective at the same time.

Objectivity is distancing oneself from his/her value system, cultural bias, epistemological stance, and reactions to the subject of study to achieve a degree of objectivity through using careful measurement. However, this endeavor seems hard to achieve if not impossible. The current research is a scientific inquiry concerned with a specific language learning experience with the aim of producing an accurate account of classroom discourse. In order to do so, one needs to be aware of “…Our own experiences, our opinions, our values. We can hold our field
observations up to a cold light and ask whether we’ve seen what we wanted to see, or what is really out there” (Bernard 2000, p. 335).

Subjectivity in contrast means using our experiences, epistemological stances, theoretical and disciplinary orientations, beliefs, values, and gut feelings to gain an insight into what is really going on in the subject of our study. We rely on all these to understand what is going on ourselves first then try to present as accurate an account as possible about the subject of study.

There seems to be a need to strike a balance between the two contrasting issues in order to achieve an objective account of a subjective experience. One needs to be aware of one’s own cultural biases while at the same time building enough rapport with the people under study and achieving some kind of identification with them in order to provide an insider’s account of what is taking place. One needs to immerse oneself in the community of study and comes out to his/her own judgment to make sense and objectively record an emic view of the subject of study.

It has been a constant going back and forth in and out of the data to make sense of what is taking place. I kept reminding myself throughout the process of data collection and analysis to avoid being judgmental and try to be as objective as I subjectively can. I must admit that this has been the hardest part since I am a language teacher myself and have been involved in reading a substantial amount of literature on second language learning theories being researched and discussed in the SLA literature. The theoretical assumption that learning begins in the social plain and that knowledge and skills are appropriated through repeated participation in a variety of speech events is the overarching impetus that affected my choice for the language classroom as a site for data collection. It is the place that provides the catalyst for learning for better or for worse. Studying features of language use in this learning environment sheds light on the practices that provide-for most students- the only exposure to the target language.
I have spent some length discussing myself as an instrument of measuring the data under analysis. I believe this is very important for the internal validity of the next phase of the analysis. Such background information aids in making sense of my interpretation of the data. It also relates to the explicitness that I try to achieve in the analysis and presentation of the data.

**Patterns of Language Use**

I initially detected a small number of patterns of communication that recurred across speech events but that number increased with repeated viewing of the videos and transcripts until no new patterns were detected. This is referred to in the literature as data saturation (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). What followed was a reanalysis of the patterns identified. The coded data was then presented to the dissertation committee and two external experts for comments on their validity.

The communicative patterns are divided into two groups and will be explained and exemplified in the next section. I make no claims that these patterns and the two groups are mutually exclusive but are grouped as such for the sake of clarity. The first group contains patterns that provide general interactional details while the second group contains ones that reinforce certain patterns of language use. The rationale for classifying them into two groups came about after my initial classification that was meant to bring order into chaos (van Lier, 1988) was overwhelming and seemed to defeat its purpose since I accumulated a long list of patterns of communication. This involved reanalysis and collapsing related patterns into one.

The real world and spoken language in particular can hardly be compartmentalized into neat categories that make a perfect fit. However, the function of this analysis, and indeed any analysis, is to remove the data further from this complex reality to make sense of it all and then present a valid interpretation, Holliday (2002, pp. 98-106).
General Interactional Details

This section includes seven patterns of language use that provide a window through which classroom discourse is portrayed. Each pattern of communication will be explained and exemplified through excerpts from the data taken from different speech events. A discussion of their frequency of occurrence will then be presented.

Use of Arabic

This category includes instances where Arabic is used for the purpose of establishing word meaning. For example, the teacher is very likely to ask students to give the Arabic translation of a word after they have provided an English interpretation or paraphrase.

Excerpt 4.4

Ray what's the meaning of global?
s3 alami [international]
Ray so what is it in English?
s4 international
Ray international yes global, world wide

Arabic is not often used in class. Its use is limited to the teacher’s request for the Arabic meaning of vocabulary or idiomatic expressions. Sometimes it is used spontaneously by the students when asked about the meaning of a word. The teacher also inserts in his speech some simple Arabic words corresponding to (yeah, this).

Circular Exchanges

This category includes exchanges when a question is posed for the meaning of a given word followed by a follow up question about the meaning of the answer. This also involves asking about Arabic translation. Exchanges labeled as ‘circular’ seem to lack logical connectedness found in normal conversations and this often leads to apparent student confusion. A new word triggers a shift in the subject of discussion and coming back to the original subject of discussion takes place when the meaning of the new word is provided by the students. The
data has 17 exchanges of what I call “Vocabulary Detours” because they divert classroom talk in
t heir direction. They present a roadblock that halts the discussion and the only way to move on is
through going through the word detour in question. Once that is established through explaining
the new word, the teacher goes back to the original issue of discussion.

    In the following exchange, the teacher asks about the meaning of ‘perform’ and a student
provides ‘work’ as an answer. This is not accepted. After a long stretch of talk, a student
provides ‘carry out’ as an answer. This latter answer is accepted and followed up with a question
about the meaning of ‘carry out’ thus asking the meaning of the answer.

Excerpt 4.5

Ray what is the meaning of perform?
s work=
Ray where did we see this word first?
s before=
s2 x
Ray where did we see perform?
ss in the paragraph=
Ray yeah where where where? Perform, what is the meaning of perform?
s x
Ray what is another word for perform? it is just just ten minutes ago perform. ((then they together try
to locate it in the previous paragraph))
Ray yeah question number three, it's carry out here carry out. what is the meaning of carry out?
ss perform

    In the following exchange, the teacher is trying to explain the meaning of the expression
‘it’s hardly an exaggeration’ while reading a passage. He tries to break down the words in the
expression to simplify it for students.
Excerpt 4.6

Ray  what is exaggeration in Arabic?

ss  [mubalaghah mubalaghah]

Ray  ok mubalaghah hatha gair mubalaghah [this is not exaggeration]

Here the teacher asks about the meaning of ‘exaggeration’ in Arabic and a number of students respond. Then both students and teacher establish that the expression means ‘it’s real’

s  haqiqi [real]

Ray  haqiqi, what is haqiqi?

ss  real

s  [fact] (another word to refer to the word for real)

Ray  real, so instead of saying it is real, he's [the writer] put it in another way: “it is hardly an exaggeration to say that the program transformed Carlton's life” so what is the meaning of this?

What’s the meaning of this sentence? What is the meaning of this sentence?

The above segment shows that students have come to grips with understanding the meaning of the expression. However, the teacher still asks about what the expression means. The students couldn’t follow since they have already provided translations and synonyms. This is apparent in the humming noise that I could hear in the class. Students were looking at each other and some were asking their classmates next to them what the question is about. Therefore, this exchange and other similar ones in the data are labeled as ‘circular’ because they contain questions that keep churning back to the beginning of the issue that triggered the question.

ss  ((low humming speech in the back))

Ray  what is the meaning of this sentence?

Majed  this sentence?

Ray  this sentence

Majed  where?
Asim it is not an exaggeration

Ray so what is it? What is the meaning? Total meaning of the sentence.

Majed wants to make sure that the teacher is asking about the same sentence and Asim’s response indicates that they have established what it means and repeats it. After the meaning of each word that make up the expression ‘it’s hardly an exaggeration’ is established, the teacher asks about what it means. Note that students have already shown their knowledge of its meaning in Arabic and English. Such exchanges are examples of topically related sets (Mehan, 1979) since they contain a number of IRE’s over a long stretch of talk related by topic. However, lack of logical connectivity obscures the connection between current and previous sets.

A common theme present in the above exchanges and others in the data that involve the teacher asking about word meaning is the abstraction of language. Often, students demonstrate their knowledge of a word or expression through providing a close Arabic translation, gestures, or even using the vocabulary item in question in a sentence. However, they are still asked to provide an English paraphrase. Time is spent on providing synonyms and explanations of a term. This presents language as an abstract subject of study and analysis that has to be mastered first before it can be used as a tool for communication.

Vocabulary Expansion

The teacher expands and explains the use of a word through examples and further questions. With the exception of one exchange, this category is always found in reading events and involves expansion over the meaning of a vocabulary item or expression.

Excerpt 4.7

Ray what is the meaning of indicate? indicate what what's the meaning? You refer to it in the dictionary, refer to the dictionary

to show something
Ray: yeah it is an indication, we have sign boards in the roads, the sign boards indicate the name of the place, name of the street. So it indicates which device has the control ok.

Interrogative Exchanges

In some exchanges, the interaction resembles interrogation where the interrogator repeats and rephrases the question to extract more information. In other exchanges, it resembles interrogation when a response is followed with a question about the response itself. A cursory look at the following example shows the interrogative nature of the exchange. Each response is expanded with a follow up question (shown in boldface).

Excerpt 4.8

Ray: what is the main idea here? Yes what is the idea? What is the main idea?

s: public access

Ray: **public access** what?

s: for a for the pc in the lab

Ray: **ok what happens in the lab public pc lab**, what happens? What is the suggestion what is a informed here? What is implied?

s: found a found programs to send a virus=

Ray: **so what should you do?**

s: follow the advice

Ray: **what is it?** What is the idea here? When you use=

s: public pc=

Ray: yes=

s: be careful a

Ray: **be careful about what?**

s: drives, public pc viruses

Ray: sorry?

s: can be used

Ray: you can use a common pc ok=
s entering programs into the pc drive
Ray so you should be careful about what?
s virus
Ray no no not virus. See the book go to the line
s program
Ray umhuh
s2 program
Ray program? what kind of program? Program mentioned there? No
s virus checking
Ray yeah virus checking

An examination of the pattern of the teacher’s turns shows that the students’ responses are all followed with a question that expands the answer through extracting more information the students can get through going back to the reading.

Leading

This category describes exchanges where the teacher uses language in a way that leads the student to respond in a certain way; through a y/n question following a statement or giving the answer and leaving out the required word and ending a sentence with a rising question intonation. The data shows that this limits students’ responses to the word level as 100 % of student responses after a leading turn are limited to one word or phrase (shown in bold here).

Excerpt 4.9
Ray good, direction of the speed in only one direction. Other x around the loop x and this is called marching machines. This network connects this network to other networks. Data proceeds in only one↑?
s direction
Ray one direction and at a↑?
constant speed

Ray constant speed at a what's the meaning of constant?

Excerpt 4.10

Ray at the time of infecting. So this virus shields, what do they do? They catch the virus, when do they catch? At the time of? Infecting your pc, as they are entering the pc, they catch this is the job of↑

Virus↑

shield

Ray shield so they they they detect viruses as they're infecting your pc. and virus scanners second type. what's the second type? virus↑

scanners

Metalanguage

This category describes exchanges that involve talk about the formal aspects of language. This is very common during grammar and exercise speech events as examples 1 and 2 show.

Excerpt 4.11

s excuse me sir, can we use the verb can a the answer is because

Ray =yeah very good, it's a good question, so he says if the answer is both, why don't you start like this ((writing)) this is also a good question.

Excerpt 4.12

Ray sorry?

s do

Ray do ok why do? do is used for question with with a with a what kinds of nouns? what kind of nouns that take do in the questions?

i-n-g

Ray i-n-g- is for verb a to be, do do do, when you use do in a question, how do you ask a, use do in your question

verb
Ray = se do ] in a question. use do in a question.
s what you'll do?

*Turn Sharks*

‘Turn sharks’ (Erickson, 1996) is a label used in the literature to describe interlocutors that cut off others before they begin to speak or cut them off before they finish. The teacher is the turn shark by default since there is no instance in the transcript that shows a student being a turn shark whether this involves the teacher or another student.

Excerpt 4.12

Ray so it has two major limitations, shortcomings drawbacks or disadvantage, what's the meaning of disadvantage?

Majed a a=

Ray = [what is the meaning of advantage=]

Majed = something good

s2 good

Ray *hatha [this is] advantage ok= disadvantage

Majed [worse the meaning=]

Table 4.4

*Category Frequency Count: Interactional Details*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Patterns Of Language Use</th>
<th>Key Events</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Opening</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>T</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Arabic Use</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Circular Exchanges</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Vocabulary Expansion</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Interrogative Exchanges</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Leading Turns</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Metalanguage</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Turn Sharks</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Discussion: Interactional Details

Table 4.4 shows the distribution of the different patterns of communication discussed above. With the exception of ‘Arabic use’, all the other patterns describe the teacher’s language use. This is did not come as a surprise in a teacher-centered classroom. The teacher chooses the activities, frames events, controls the structure and content of the interaction, and speaks most of the time. As such, his language use affects that of the students and a study of the classroom’s interactional details brings to the fore the role of the teacher in shaping the interaction. In what follows, I will comment on each category noting its role/effect on classroom discourse.

The teacher is a bilingual speaker of English and Urdu and speaks some Arabic. He uses Arabic very little in class and that is limited to some spontaneous fillers, requests for Arabic word meaning, and some contrastive analysis when the discussion is on formal aspects of language. The latter involves asking students about similarities of the use of a grammatical structure. Students’ Arabic use is limited to providing answers if requested to do so in Arabic and sometimes, they use Arabic to show their knowledge of a particular word when they cannot provide English paraphrase. Nonetheless, Arabic use is mostly used as a support for learning vocabulary.

The data has twenty instances of circular exchanges. This is a large number given the fact that some of these exchanges can be as long as ten minutes. One can imagine the lack of logical connectivity of talk that is mostly circular and is solely dependant on the expression or word that comes along and swerves the discussion in its direction. Vocabulary Detours are responsible for making exchanges circular and are very common in reading events (14). The other six instances of circular exchanges in opening, exercise, and exam events all involved vocabulary detours. Similar trends have been documented in the literature. Hall (1995) for instance proposed “local
lexical chaining” and argued that the teacher maintained talk in the classroom through connecting it to the next word that comes along regardless of relevance.

Closely related to circular exchanges are the teacher’s expansions on vocabulary items where he uses examples, paraphrases, and word collocations. However, expansions fall within the subject of discussion and do not create problems of coherence and discourse connectivity. As their name suggests, they are exclusively on vocabulary and they occur only during reading events and specifically during the later stages of the event when the teacher goes over the meaning of new vocabulary one by one.

I have only coded 6 instances of interrogative exchanges in the data. They have all taken place during the early phases of reading events when the teacher is working to establish the main idea of the reading. However, the data is replete with questions as table 4.3 shows and some of them are repeated consecutively to extract answers from the students. If I loosened my definition of ‘interrogative’ to include all instances of questioning, then the data will have an extremely large number of ‘Interrogative Exchanges’. As such, I limited this pattern to exchanges that are markedly longer and involve a series of questions to expand students’ replies.

Leading turns are very common in the data, especially during reading events. During such turns, the teacher uses language to lead and shape students’ responses to gauge their comprehension of the reading. I found that leading turns have a direct effect on the length of students’ responses to a leading turn limiting them to one word. Such language use by the teacher contributes to the paucity of students’ participation discussed in section 4.2 above.

Metalanguage exchanges are common in exercises (22) and grammar (8) events since talk about language is the main subject of these events. Compared to the duration length of reading
events, 7 instances of talk about language is quite small and they involve the teacher talking about parts of speech or how to form a sentence using a certain expression from the reading.

‘Turn sharks’ (Erickson, 1996) is an expression that captures the power that someone has to devour others; in our case here, it is the teacher cutting off the students’ already meager amount of talk. Some research has been done in teacher’s wait time (see Rowe, 1969). Findings show that teachers do not wait for more than two seconds on average before they reclaim the floor, redirect the question to another student, or even answer the question themselves. In contrast to wait time, turn sharks do not wait at all, they jump in the middle of someone’s talk or even before they begin. This has an adverse effect on fostering a positive and welcoming atmosphere for student participation. Instances of turn sharks are spread across speech events; something that suggests that it is a constant practice regardless of the type of event. There are no instances of turn sharks during advice and closing events because students do not speak during these events and when they do, it is limited to nods and expressions of acknowledgements as I pointed out in section 4.3.

Reinforcing Particular Patterns of Language Use

There are different styles of language use considered suitable or acceptable to certain situations but not for others, e.g. formal vs. informal situations. The decision to qualify a certain style as acceptable or appropriate is entirely the right of the teacher in this class. Observation of the complete transcript shows that the teacher prefers the formal style since colloquial and spontaneous language use by the students is not encouraged. The overarching theme that runs across all events is an emphasis on correct language use. Correct means grammatical, concise, and according to the book. Anything that deviates from this definition of accuracy is not likely to
be licensed for use in class. Below is a collection of patterns of communication that revolve around the theme of accuracy in language use.

*Language Learning*

This category includes exchanges when the teacher directly refers to language learning. It always comes in the form of advice in which the teacher reiterates the importance of word meaning. The function of this communicative pattern is almost invariably to urge students to study vocabulary.

Excerpt 4.13

Ray so for tomorrow, I want you to be I mean on your toe, you must be knowing each and every word. Come prepared. Otherwise I’m sorry we have to I mean go slow not only that, we will not be able to finish our part and you cannot have any kind of understanding. Ok we call it a day today, I’m sorry you're not a a well prepared today

The above excerpt comes from a reading event in which students’ responses to questions about word meaning was low. This triggers an advice in which the teacher urges students to work hard making this specific by referring to word study. He stipulates that students will not make sense of what takes place in class without preparing the new words for that class.

Excerpt 4.14

Ray example? Can you give an example? You see, remember, for us language, the use of language, aspects and the various parts of language are used is more important what are we learning here? We are learning what?

SS: **words.**

Ray **words**, we are learning language, we are learning†

SS: language

In the above example, Ray talks in broad terms about the importance of language use. However, vocabulary inadvertently surface as a large number of students responded “words” in response to
the teacher’s question about what they are studying in the class. This suggests that the teacher’s assumptions about language learning throughout the semester have transferred to the students in the class.

*Emphasis on Accuracy*

This category includes exchanges involving the teacher’s demand for the ‘correct’ use of language whereby students are required to use complete grammatically correct sentences with specific words instead of paraphrases. For example, a fragment answer is rejected and a full one is preferred. The data is replete with examples that show that accuracy is preferred over fluency.

I chose to include the following excerpt- taken from a reading event- as exemplary because the demand for accurate language use is directly and repeatedly emphasized. In other examples, the teacher indirectly emphasizes accuracy through repeating the question, ignoring off the mark answers and looking at other students, or if the answer is close, the student is asked to reword it.

Initially, I coded all instances of the teacher’s use of the first person pronoun (I/me) as a separate pattern. I have been thinking of the association of the use of the first person pronoun with power relations in the classroom; directing all talk to the teacher and subjecting all language use to his approval. Upon further examination of exchanges labeled as ‘Accuracy’, I found that in addition to that, the use of the 1st person pronoun- in the above sense- is related to the teacher’s demand for ‘correct’ language use.

**Excerpt 4.15**

Ray so here, there are two antivirus programs: number one virus shields what do they do?

Asim detect virus=

Ray [what do they] do? This is a question. I mean you must give me a correct answer WHAT-DO-THEY-DO? hatha [this] virus programs. Give me the answer, good answer, what do they do
The above turn by the teacher shows two aspects of the kind of interaction common in this classroom: (1) emphasis on correct language use defined above; and (2) directing all student responses to the teacher through his use of the 1st person pronoun. Once the teacher gets the correct answer, the discussion moves on.

Asim protect the=
Ray no no no how do you begin the sentence?
s x x x x=
Ray WHAT DO THEY DO?
s2 they
Ray very good
s2 prevented=
Ray see see the book, see the book, what do they do?
Asim they are protect
s3 protected
Ray give me give me the answer, full answer. WHAT DO THEY DO? Answer.
s4 ((reading from the text)) 'they detect the virus as they are infect your pc'
Ray yes very good, they detect the virus as they are infecting your pc.

Emphasis on accuracy continued until s4 used the textbook version, which concluded the exchange with the teacher revoicing the correct response. In both excerpts, the teacher uses the 1st person pronoun (shown in bold) as he demands the student to provide grammatically correct full answers. Fragments, which are perfectly acceptable in spontaneous language use, are rejected in the above excerpt and in so many similar ones in the data. There are 54 exchanges in the data that involve the teacher’s emphasis on grammatically correct sentences. Note how the teacher cuts off Asim’s response asking him how he should begin the sentence. Sometimes a response is modified and/or corrected and the modification can alter the whole response.
However, this is done indirectly through revoicing the student's answer. It is less intimidating than rejecting a whole answer because it is not correct as in the above exchange.

**Excerpt 4.16**

Ray very good octopus. So here there researchers are planning to expand, what's the meaning of expand?

s go big ((gesturing with two hands))

Ray make it bigger yeah ok.

Here, the teacher accepts the response but modifies it a little.

**Spontaneous Use of Language**

This category refers to exchanges when students use language functionally to answer or give a close response that is not exactly in line with the teacher's accuracy requirements for answers. In other words, this category refers to students’ efforts to make meaning and communicate in their own way using available resources.

**Excerpt 4.17**

Ray =no how how is it possible that we have computers, we have I mean mobiles, how is global communication very easy very cheaper now? why?

Faisal because it comes more than a

Ray =what comes more?

Faisal this stuff, the machines

Ray stuff↑ ok↓

In Faisal’s words, ‘it comes more’ means that technology is widely used in this day in age. The word ‘stuff’ is taken with a grain of salt; note the rising tone after ‘stuff’ and the falling tone after ‘ok’. The whole response is disregarded in search for an answer directly from the book:

Faisal the machines because we are in a speed year or a speed time or technology times=

Ray that's right but what is it according to the book, see the book what does the book say? (16.5) what is the reason?
Students’ spontaneous use of language to express their ideas and respond in their own ways runs counter to what the teacher seems to consider ‘correct’ and appropriate language use. As such, most exchanges in which students use language functionally involve the teacher’s evaluation turns requesting ‘correct language use’. There are 34 exchanges involving students’ spontaneous language use; 19 of these exchanges involved demand on accuracy. This is 56 % of the exchanges involving students talking and have their contributions corrected, ignored, or rejected altogether for failure to comply with accuracy requirements.

Positive Remarks

In some exchanges, the teacher praises the performance and efforts of the students. There are 11 exchanges involving positive remarks; 7 were during exercise events. During these events, students’ performance was exceptionally good. The pace of these events was also fast and students’ responses were always on target. This is because most activities require one word responses and most of them test students’ knowledge of discrete vocabulary items and technical terms. The case is different in reading events; they only got two remarks despite the length of reading events.

Excerpt 4.18

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>s</th>
<th>detects another transmission</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ray</td>
<td>detects another's transmission this is a very good question. I am very happy. but what I don't understand is that you are able to I mean do some difficult tasks like asking questions but sometimes you don't take care of simple tasks.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This excerpt comes from an exercise event in which students were working on question formation. The praise came about after numerous tries and rewordings to for an information question.
Excerpt 4.19

Ray so technically, I mean a a you are aware, you are talking. You need a little more exposure to the uses of language. Now we go down, number 2 'taking place at exactly the same time as something else' 11 letters!

The praise came about after students showed that they can answer word puzzles quicker than other activities in class.

Negative Remarks

The teacher sometimes uses a negative tone in his advice when students' response is low. This also includes exchanges when the teacher is sarcastic or expresses his views about the students. The choice of the latter is supported by students' interviews

Excerpt 4.20

Ray go to the dictionary go to the dictionary look it up in the dictionary go to the dictionary. Why didn't you do? I told you to come prepared. What’s the use of coming here and just watching like you're coming to watch a football match? Language anyone, you don't do, i mean a enough ground work enough homework, it is very difficult. Limit

The teacher conducts reading activities through asking students questions about the main idea(s) and then about each word. As such, he repeatedly made it clear to students to prepare the new words of the reading before class. When students do not prepare the new words, the teacher’s questions remain unanswered creating moments of silence the teacher seems to find quite awkward. The above excerpt was taken from a reading event during which students’ answers to word meaning questions were quite low. This triggered this rather strong comment indicating that students come to class and do nothing.
Excerpt 4.21

Ray  what's the meaning of despondent? ((writing))

s without hope

Ray  without hope, very good. so out of 25 students only one student has prepared. This is not good.

You make me so despondent. What is the meaning of despondent? huh? ((writing)) des-pon-dent.

aywah [yeah?] without hope or without hope or? Hopeless. If you come like this if you come unprepared, you make me despondent, you make me despondent. what is despondent in Arabic?

s1  kanet [hopeless] ((a dictionary version))

Note how the teacher made use of paraphrasing and translating the word ‘despondent’ to refer to his reaction to their lack of preparation of new vocabulary. It is quite sarcastic that students cooperate with him through answering the word meaning and providing an Arabic translation of the word using one with very negative connotations, and all this is to their demise!

There are 24 exchanges involving negative remarks in the data; 62.5 % of these are found in reading events and non in exercise events making them the opposite of positive remarks. The six instances involving negative remarks in advice events highlight the negative tone of these events.

Revoicing

This category involves exchanges where the teacher recasts or rebroadcasts student contributions and often follows them with praise, e.g. very good, yeah. The teacher uses such evaluation of student replies when they conform to his definition of ‘correct’ defined and explained above.

Excerpt 4.22

Ray  why do we use this computer? This internet, this network access, distributed networks?

Why do we use it? What should it do? Like any machine, why do we use machine? Why do we use machines like car=
Faisal to make=
Ray like car=
Faisal to make a our life easy
Ray to make a very good, to make our life easier and=
Faisal simple=
Ray and simple very good=
s2 save the time
Ray save the time, very good
Faisal save the money
Ray save the money very good,
Faisal a
Ray =and also more importantly, and also at the same time distributed computer network
should improve our work environments.

The above example contains a number of typical revoice turns by the teacher as he rebroadcasts Faisal’s turns to the whole class without changing the content/language of the turn. This exchange concludes with a turn in which the teacher alters the whole response and sums up all of Faisal’s previous turns with the textbook’s version preceded by ‘more importantly’. This is an extreme version of revoicing that I initially coded as the ‘official version’, since the teacher seems to accept the student’s contribution but revoices it to the class as a totally different response.

Discussion: Reinforcing Certain Patterns of Language Use

Table 4.5 shows the distribution of the patterns of communication explained above. Whereas the patterns in table 4.4 showed interactional details, this group sheds light on the content of interaction. In the same way that the teacher frames the events and controls classroom interaction, he also decides on the content of talk. Below is a discussion of these patterns of
communication that shows that each contributes in one way or another to the paucity of student participation in this classroom.

Table 4.5

*Category Frequency Count: Reinforcing Language Use*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Patterns of Language Use</th>
<th>Opening T</th>
<th>S</th>
<th>Reading T</th>
<th>S</th>
<th>Exercise T</th>
<th>S</th>
<th>Grammar T</th>
<th>S</th>
<th>Exam T</th>
<th>S</th>
<th>Advice T</th>
<th>S</th>
<th>Closing T</th>
<th>S</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Language Learning</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>55</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Emphasis on Accuracy</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>102</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Spontaneous Lang. use</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>9</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>48</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Positive Remarks</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td>11</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Negative remarks</td>
<td>15</td>
<td></td>
<td>6</td>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>24</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Revoicing</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>97</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4.5 shows that references to language learning are fairly distributed across speech events. With the exception of three general statements about the importance of using language, the teacher seems to operationalize language learning as vocabulary learning since all other references to language involve emphasizing word study and dictionary use. There are 18 references to language learning during reading events, which make up 55% of the data. However, they are more concentrated during advice events, which are monologues about the importance of hard work and vocabulary study for learning English. Exam events also contain a large number of exchanges explicitly referring to language learning. Limiting language learning references to vocabulary study and the practices that result from this assumption has its effects on students' involvement in classroom activities. Most activities deal with vocabulary study; in reading passages, vocabulary exercises, exam outlines and reviews. Vocabulary lists are considered prerequisites that have to be mastered in isolation prior to use. A student is expected to build a reservoir of words to be able to use those words in the future. Using these words in the
class is limited to the students’ ability to demonstrate their knowledge through synonyms and paraphrase. What seems to be missing is training students to use the words they learn spontaneously in new communicative situations.

Limiting language learning to only one aspect has its toll on other interactive modes of communication such as uncontrolled discussions, sharing personal experiences and expertise. The latter is completely absent from this classroom. One would expect that a language class offered to future computer and networking specialists would involve students’ expertise and prior knowledge. However, this is absolutely not the case. There has not been a single incidence in the data that allowed for students’ background knowledge. On the contrary, they are rejected in search for more precise information from the book.

The second category that contributes to the paucity of student participation is the teacher’s emphasis on accuracy when students are given the chance to participate. There are a total of 102 exchanges in the data that involve the teacher directly or through revoice correcting students’ responses. As such, participation requires using concise and grammatically correct sentences. A student must think twice before bidding to participate since it is likely that the response is judged according to its conformation to grammatical rules rather than its propositional content. This happens even during opening events that are supposed to be warm up sessions that precede official class time. During these events, a total of 10 exchanges involved teacher’s turns correcting and modifying students’ responses.

Spontaneous language use is the only category that describes students’ initiated language use. I coded these exchanges as ‘spontaneous’ since students use their available linguistic resources to express their ideas when they respond or self-select to participate. However, 53% of all spontaneous exchanges include the teacher’s turns emphasizing accuracy. This suggests that
spontaneous language use is not encouraged. In one exchange, the teacher exclaimed “Oh my god!” in response to a long and elaborated student turn. He commented that long responses are hard to follow and asked him to use “small small sentences”. This less inviting, uncomfortable, and mostly threatening atmosphere for language use does not foster participation. I mentioned at the outset of this paper that the teacher is practically working with about one third of the classroom population. This group that ventures to participate is in effect not encouraged to do so by correcting every utterance they make.

The teacher mostly praises students’ performance during exercise activities that are mostly on discrete vocabulary items. They respond very well since the requirements for participation involve one word in most cases. Students also get to know what is considered an investment and work on it. Being spontaneous and less careful about language form is not a skill likely to be invested on. However, knowledge of ‘important’ words is and they do a good job at it and receive words of encouragement. In contrast to positive remarks, negative ones are twice as many and are concentrated on reading and advice events and 63% of these remarks are triggered by the students’ failure to respond to questions on word meaning as used in the textbook or because they have not done their dictionary work. This suggests a number of things; (1) the importance of word meaning in this class; (2) the teacher’s readiness to negatively comment on students’ performance; (3) 19 exchanges containing negative remarks and spanning 30 minutes of class time combined suggests the threatening atmosphere of the class that has its effect on students’ participation.

The final pattern of communication is revoicing only correct student responses. There are 97 exchanges in the data containing revoice turns by the teacher. This engenders only the language use approved by the teacher, which has to be correct, concise, and according to the
book. Revoicing contributes to the paucity of participation in an indirect way. When only ‘correct’ responses are revoiced, other students who can participate using their own words, paraphrases, and expansions are discouraged seeing that only a certain type of answers is qualified. The SLA literature has shown the positive effect of recasts/revoicing by giving student responses more voice, authority, and rebroadcasting them to the rest of the class. However, it can have an adverse effect when revoicing is limited to grammatically well-formed responses.

Conclusion

In an effort to test the first research hypothesis on the different modes of communication across classroom activities, the analysis has shown the existence of different speech events marked with clear event boundaries. These events aim to achieve different language learning goals. Language use and interactional patterns were shown to be different among these events.

A quantitative analysis was carried out on a sample taken from all speech events. It added more support to the reality of the hypothesis on speech events as the distribution of talk of the teacher and students was found to be different from one event to the other. However, student talk remained scarce and in most cases does not reach sentence level across all speech events. The turn was shown to be a crude measure of the distribution of talk. Analysis at the word level was shown to be a more fine-grained measure that provides an accurate picture of classroom discourse and its distribution across different speech events. For instance, while frequency counts showed that the students’ turns are evenly distributed across speech events, the word measure showed a different more accurate picture. They contribute 19.9% of the time in opening, 11% in reading, 15.1% in exercise, 24.9 % in grammar, 10.8 %, 4.6 in advice, and 9.5 in closing events.

The analysis also presented the use of questions in all speech events and showed how frequently questions were used to elicit student responses but did not seem to generate student
participation. I argued that the sole use of questions to elicit student responses is not an effective method that fosters student involvement in classroom activities. Rather, they create a tensed atmosphere that does not foster student participation.

The next phase of the analysis took a more qualitative stance to capture the complexity involved in analyzing spoken discourse. Within speech events, exchanges were coded through inductive cyclic analysis of the data and open coding (Strauss & Corbin 1990). The patterns of communication identified were divided into two major groups. The first group highlighted interactional details and showed how the teacher controls the interaction. In the second group, patterns of communication revealed the teacher’s assumptions about language and their relation to what counts as knowledge in the classroom. Emphasis on accuracy was related to the paucity of student participation. The aim of coding the data at the exchange level into patterns of communication is not so much to suggest that language use can nicely be fit into neat categories. It was an effort to present a valid description of classroom talk through systematic and principled criteria.

The use of speech events and exchanges within events in the analysis and description of the data allowed for different levels of analysis. The distribution of patterns of communication at the exchange level was shown to correlate with the type of speech event. For instance, metalanguage is almost exclusively used in grammar events and positive/negative remarks were shown to be associated with exercise and reading events respectively. By the same token, analysis at the exchange level has shown the pervasiveness of vocabulary study and emphasis on accuracy during all speech events. Such distribution highlights the overarching agenda of language teaching in this classroom. Its apparent ineffectiveness was shown in relation to student low-level participation.
CHAPTER 5
WHAT COUNTS AS KNOWLEDGE IN A LANGUAGE CLASSROOM?

Introduction

Assumptions about the best methods to teach language guide teaching practice and the search for better methods has created a wealth of teaching techniques. They were borne out from applying theory to practice. However, no matter what the broader objectives of a school or program are, the teacher has the final word when it comes to application.

In chapter four, I presented a characterization of classroom discourse through applying different lenses to portray what is taking place in an effort to provide a valid interpretation. This should provide enough background and plenty of evidence through which the null hypothesis is rejected. However, interviews with the teacher and students will be extensively used to test the hypothesis. It will be rewritten here for ease of reference.

Second Hypothesis

$H_0$: what counts as knowledge and accepted language use is the same for students and teacher

$H_2$: students and teacher have different views on what counts as knowledge and accepted language use.

Evidence to reject the null hypothesis comes from two sources; general nature of the classroom interaction gleaned from the discussion in chapter four and the interviews with the students and teacher. First of all, we established in chapter four that language use in this classroom is teacher-centered. The teacher frames the events and controls the linguistic and rhetorical structure of the exchanges between him and the students. A direct source for the
teacher’s assumptions about language learning comes from advice events. All reference to language learning involves the importance of vocabulary as a prerequisite for students’ ability to use language. Furthermore, the events discussed in chapter four show how the importance of vocabulary study surfaces across all of them.

When the teacher was asked in the interview about the important skills needed to teach language, he stated that reading is important. Through reading “[students] can understand the general outline or idea of the paragraph and pick language here and there”. When asked about vocabulary, he stated that “these words are investment [for the students] to express their ideas”. These assertions have been reflected in the way language has been taught throughout the fall semester of 2003. Reading comprehension and vocabulary study were the two most common activities throughout the semester and were accomplished exclusive through what can be described as teacher-controlled question and answer exchanges on vocabulary meaning.

What counts as knowledge must also pass the accuracy requirement if students were to participate in classroom talk. To recap then, what the teacher views as accepted knowledge is the ability to answer comprehension questions and provide vocabulary synonyms and explanations. This must be expressed in grammatically correct and concise sentences.

The students on the other hand have different views. When asked in the interviews about their learning preferences, 100 % of the students stated that they prefer open discussion and group work. This is in sharp contrast to what the teacher says and to what was taking place in the classroom. No group work was ever done in class and discussions were always controlled by the teacher through question and answer exchanges or IRE’s for the purpose of establishing the main ideas of reading comprehension passages and the word meanings therein. When they were asked
in the questionnaire towards the end of the semester about their opinion on what the teacher considers important for language learning, 69% stated that it is vocabulary.

These divergent views of the teacher on one side and the students on the other are enough evidence to reject the null hypothesis and establish grounds for working on the second hypothesis. The rest of the chapter will be divided into two sections; what the teacher says and does and what the students say.

Teacher’s Stated Beliefs vs. Practice

My observation of the semester-long class allowed me to construct a view of what the teacher believes to be important for language learning. However, I rely on the triangulation of multiple data sources to provide valid interpretations of events. The sources are the daily field notes that I took during my classroom observation, the videotapes and transcripts, and the interview with the teacher.

Teacher In-Depth Interview

The interview with the teacher was carried out towards the end of the semester and lasted for 40 minutes. The interview included a predetermined set of questions to address what the teacher believes to be important for language learning. Questions were on objectives of the course, preferred teaching style, what is important for language learning, language skills needed for learning, and learner opportunities for language use in the class. Although the questions were predetermined prior to the interview, Adjustments were made to fit the flow of talk or to probe further into a certain issue. In what follows, the teacher’s opinions on the issues I raised in the interview will be laid out and discussed.

In response to his objectives of the course, Ray stated that he does not expect students to understand word by word and as such it is enough if they get the general idea and pick up
language in the process. He believes that language should be taught through interactive discussions between the teacher and students even if the students’ proficiency level is low; “the teacher can make them understand.” When asked about what is important for language learning, he noted that attitude and motivation are essential to learn. In terms of language skills, Ray reiterated the importance of reading in a language class referring to his own experience as a language learner. His experience as a language learner surfaced again when asked about the apparent attention he gives to vocabulary study; “when I started using English and writing in English, I felt a need to have words to express my ideas.” He further argued that students in this class need words to express the wealth of ideas that they have. The interview concluded with Ray’s response to the students’ opportunities for discussions and language use in the class. He noted that there was not enough opportunity for language use in the class and argued that the reason could be due to student low proficiency level and that they are passive learners; not speaking out their learning preferences to the teacher. He further speculated that it has something to do with their prior schooling in general education and noted that there is “a need for rethinking the teaching of English at the school level.”

In what follows, I will examine the interview transcript through looking at explicit and implicit themes that surfaced throughout the interview providing more light into the teacher’s assumptions about the students, language, and learning. I will use evidence from the transcript and field notes to corroborate the points I make.

Teacher Beliefs

The original question that I started with was ‘what counts as knowledge in this classroom?’ During the interview with the teacher, I found his statements regarding his beliefs on how language is learned contravene what actually takes place in the classroom. I looked at the
literature for some previous studies and found a large body of research on teacher beliefs and their relation to what teachers do in the classroom. A very recent study is Basturkmen, Loewen, and Ellis (2004) who define teacher beliefs “as the statements teachers made about their ideas, thoughts, and knowledge that are expressed as evaluations of ‘what should be done’, ‘should be the case’, and ‘is preferable’” (p. 244). The study investigated incidental focus on form within the communicative activity through the practices of three teachers with 15, 11, and 1 year of teaching experiences. Discrepancies were found between teachers’ stated beliefs and what actually took place in the classroom. Through recall protocols, in-depth interviews, and classroom observation the study found inconsistencies in the teacher’s stated beliefs when compared to their practices in the classroom. The authors argued that the statements of teachers’ beliefs were made in the abstract representing their “…technical rather than practical knowledge” (citing Ellis, 1997, p. 246; Eraut, 1994).

Other studies on teacher beliefs (Borg, 2001; Fang, 1996; Johnson, 1992) proposed that teachers’ beliefs guide and shape their practices. For example, Johnson (1992) found the practices of the ESL teachers consistent with their theoretical stated beliefs. However, teachers’ stated beliefs do not always match their daily practices in the classroom. In a review of research on teachers’ beliefs, Fang (1996) concluded that studies tended to indicate a misfit between teacher beliefs and practices. When teachers are presented with the apparent discrepancy, they argue that other factors such as students’ proficiency level, time constraints, and administrative pressure affect the application of their beliefs into practice. Some of these issues surfaced in the current study and will be discussed next.
**Teacher Practice According to Stated Belief**

The teacher in this study pointed out constraints similar to the ones cited above. From the onset of the interview he foregrounds the students’ low proficiency level as he talks about his objectives of the course and how much material he could cover, noting that “[He] did not expect them to understand or go word by word because it is not their piece of cake”.

Other instances of teacher beliefs that surfaced in the interview were related to his theoretical orientation and experience as a language learner, which seem to guide much of his practice in the classroom. He noted the importance of vocabulary study and reading and I found these to be the most common and important activities in this class. His love of words transferred to his method of teaching vocabulary:

**Excerpt 5.1**

Ray I mean when I started using English and writing in English, I felt a need to have words express my ideas, and words have different shades also. So for example comprehend; they need to know comprehend as a verb and the noun part of it. so all these things will help them to use it…When I teach my students, it's not simply enough if they understand one level of meaning or only one shade of meaning… and as students of foreign language, they need to start with something. They have ideas… you need to have some kind of what to say investment. So these words are investment to express their ideas. (Ray: Interview transcript)

Throughout the semester, care has been made to list, exemplify, define, and paraphrase new words found in the readings. The ‘shades of meaning’ Ray mentioned above can explain his constant requirement that students must provide a synonym or a dictionary definition for the vocabulary in the readings.

In terms of language skills, the teacher noted during the interview that extensive reading and vocabulary study are essential for language learning noting his own experience as a language learner. This is correlated with what has taken place in the classroom as reading and vocabulary
study are the two most common activities in the classroom. In fact, language learning in this class has been operationalized by the teacher as reading and vocabulary study. The pattern of such activities is constant throughout the semester being limited to clarifying the main idea of the reading followed by providing the dictionary definition for almost every word.

*Teacher Practice Contradicting Stated Belief*

In the same way there were congruence between stated beliefs and practice, I noticed some apparent mismatch between some of his stated beliefs and what I observed to have taken place in the classroom. Issues like his belief in what he calls “interactive discussion method” (Ray interview transcript) of teaching that involves students in classroom talk was in sharp contrast to what I observed taking place.

The Webster’s dictionary definition of interactive is “mutually or reciprocally active”. However, from my observation of daily classroom events, the field notes I gathered throughout the semester, and the transcripts of the classes; it has been a one-way transmission of knowledge from the teacher to the students. The teacher did not allow for opportunities for the students to relate to their experiences and background knowledge in areas they are more expert than him since the textbook is about configurations and uses of computer and networking and the students take specialized courses on these topics receiving hands on training. However, the classroom transcript shows a pattern of classroom talk in which the teacher favors accurate language use drawn directly from the textbook over background knowledge in talking about the readings. The following excerpt illustrates this point:

**Excerpt 5.2**

1. T no how how is it possible that we have computers, we have I mean mobiles, how is
2. global communication very easy very cheaper now? Why?
3. Faisal because it comes more than a
The above exchange suggests a number of aspects about classroom talk; it is interrogative rather than interactive as the teacher’s follow up questions indicate. Note how the teacher evaluates Faisal’s language use in (5) suggesting that the concern of instruction is on how language is used rather than on the propositional content of the student’s response. But (8) succinctly shows that the teacher places constraints on what is considered accepted language use; it has to be according to the book. Here we see a clear rejection of student contribution to classroom talk. Furthermore, language learning seems to be demonstrated through the ability to extract answers from the textbook. I provided ample evidence in chapter four showing classroom talk to be interrogative rather than interactive since it is composed of a series of question and answer sessions of display or known answer questions. Student knowledge was rarely utilized or referred to in classroom talk. Exceptions are during opening events when students answer genuine teacher questions about sports and a major cultural festival that was held at the time of the study.

In response to the question on what he considers important for language learning, the teacher stated that motivation and attitude towards language learning are essential for learning to take place and that instruction can make a difference if students are motivated. He noted that he encourages students to use their own sentences and make mistakes. However, I found the latter claim to be at odds with what was actually taking place in the classroom. Students’ expertise on
computers and networking as an opportunity for self-expression was never utilized despite the fact that most readings contain material with which students are very familiar. The following excerpt will help clarify this point. In an activity that required students to match a paragraph to its respective network diagram, a student said that looking at the diagram was enough for him to match it to the paragraph that described it:

Excerpt 5.3

1. T So here there four pictures for four types of networks. One two three four. How many pictures are here?
2. ss Four
3. T Four pictures. What do these pictures describe? These pictures describe what?
4. s Four networks=
5. s2 Network configurations=
6. s3 Types of networks
7. Faisal If we know the names by a pictures (??)
8. T you know them?
9. Faisal before I read the paragraph=
10. T yeah let us give the chance for others
11. Faisal ok.

((t Ray explains the task, gives students 10 minutes to read the paragraphs, and takes the attendance meanwhile))

The above excerpt shows how classroom talk is controlled by the teacher through display questions. Note the preschool level question that is already answered about how many pictures in the page. Furthermore, it shows that the teacher seems to ignore students’ expertise and the contribution they could make towards the completion of the task. On broad terms, it also shows the different agenda Ray has for teaching which seems in sharp contrast to what the students have. Note how Faisal in (7) used ‘we’ referring to himself and colleagues as if he is speaking for them and their background knowledge that can aid them in talking about the task without
reading what the text has to say. I asked him in the interview how he knows that the other students can match just by looking at the diagram. He replied that they have all studied such network configurations in the Networking class.

After the ten minutes were over, the students matched the diagrams to their respective paragraphs very quickly and almost everyone was involved. The teacher commented:

“Ok good, glad you are able to find the pictures. Now we'll move to the meaning part of the paragraph”. The meaning part of four short paragraphs took the rest that day’s period and another one going over each word providing dictionary definitions. The students who were active in matching the diagrams to the paragraphs were not involved and were, most of the time, looking over their textbooks and shoveling dictionary pages looking for definitions.

Such exchanges reiterate the teacher’s notions of what is important for language learning despite sporadic resistance from Faisal who tried very hard on more than one occasion to invest in his expertise and fluent English but to no avail since this contradicts with what the teacher considers acceptable knowledge in the classroom. This can explain the last point I discussed with the teacher in the interview concerning the availability of enough opportunities for student language use in the classroom. The teacher noted that there were not enough chances and speculated about the reasons behind students lack of involvement in classroom activities.

What I argue here is that interactions of the kind typified in the above excerpt, which represent a trend in classroom talk, are a strong deterrent for students to get involved as they are not encouraged to refer to their expertise in classroom talk. Furthermore, the teacher places tough constraints on language use in the class; it has to be grammatically correct, taken from the book, and expressed in short concise sentences. A fluent or even a native speaker is likely to be discouraged from participation under such strict conditions. Being a foreign language learner complicates the situation; since when “…communicating in a language in which they are not
fluent, learners cannot help but feel that they are not fully representing their personality and their intelligence” (Tsui, 1996, p. 156). Furthermore, students are required to communicate in a language they are still learning; allowing only accurate responses lowers chances of participation since students will have to monitor their talk prior to production. What compounds the problem is that teachers have been found to have no tolerance for silence that exceeds the two second threshold (Rowe, 1969; White & Lightbown, 1984).

Student Voices

I had plans to conduct interviews (in Arabic) with the students at the beginning of the semester and before the end. However, the turn out for the initial interview was not that high; I was able to interview nine out of twenty seven students. As such, I prepared a set of open ended structured questions written in Arabic. I requested the teacher to use one period of class time to administer the questionnaires myself one week before the final exams. All the students present that day answered the written questions but not with the same depth and breadth I found in face to face interviews. The following two tables summarize both the oral interviews and written questionnaires. Since both tables present a synthesis of open ended questions, I organized student responses in the following way: Truths represent the majority, trends represent 2-3 opinions, and unique ideas represent single opinions. A total of 19 students participated in the survey; 16 were returned. Some responses were left unanswered.

The interviews allowed me to see the other side of the quiet students I have observed throughout the semester. I saw articulate, outspoken, and very intelligent young men able to discuss complex issues pertaining to language learning. The semi-structured interviews included a set of predetermined questions on their previous English learning experiences, current class compared to prior experiences, their learning preferences, motivation to learn, opportunities for
language use in the class, class effectiveness to prepare students for current or future language use, and concluded with any thoughts or comments students may have. Interviews lasted 25 minutes on average but those that included two and three students together took about twice as long.

Table 5.1

*Synthesis of Questionnaire Responses*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No</th>
<th>Questionnaire item</th>
<th>Truths</th>
<th>Trends</th>
<th>Unique ideas</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>What the teacher considers important to learn English</td>
<td>Vocabulary (11)</td>
<td>Did not understand question (2)</td>
<td>Helping students learn Language use but not in class</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Do you agree?</td>
<td>Yes (6)</td>
<td>No (3)</td>
<td>Problem with method Need more interactive method</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>What the student considers important to learn English</td>
<td>Basic skills: vocabulary, reading, grammar, listening (7) Discussions (5)</td>
<td>Interesting classes (3)</td>
<td>Use of multimedia (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Preferred class style</td>
<td>Interaction with teacher (8)</td>
<td>Interaction with peers (3) Interaction with both (3)</td>
<td>No preference to participate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Do you like to participate</td>
<td>Yes (14)</td>
<td>No (2)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Opportunity to participate</td>
<td>Yes (9)</td>
<td>No (7)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Is environment encouraging to participate?</td>
<td>No (14)</td>
<td>Yes (2)</td>
<td>Sometimes (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Some students have not or rarely participated, are you one of them?</td>
<td>Yes (11)</td>
<td>No (5)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Reasons for lack of participation</td>
<td>Teacher style (2)</td>
<td>No motivation to participate (2) Language proficiency (2)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Was the class to your expectation</td>
<td>No (14)</td>
<td>Yes (2)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Did the class open up new horizons to learn English</td>
<td>Yes (8)</td>
<td>No (8)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>General thoughts</td>
<td>No chance to talk in class (3)</td>
<td>We need to be treated as college students and not as if we are still in high school (2)</td>
<td>Excellent course but the content is not taught well No use of teaching aids No movement makes the class boring I enjoyed opening events Excellent teacher We memorize vocabulary lists only to show teacher</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 5.2

Synthesis of Interview Responses

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interview questions</th>
<th>Truths</th>
<th>Trends</th>
<th>Unique Ideas</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Previous learning Experience</td>
<td>The important role of the teacher in shaping the experience</td>
<td></td>
<td>A work experience with a non Arabic speaking co-worker at a summer job provided a chance to speak English not found in class</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Current class compared to prior experiences</td>
<td>Emphasis on reading and vocabulary</td>
<td>No clear view on what students are expected to learn</td>
<td>Interesting. Improves vocabulary. Advantage that the teacher doesn’t speak Arabic.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Learning preferences</td>
<td>Open discussion Group work</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Motivation to learn English</td>
<td>All students state they are motivated</td>
<td>Motivation decreased due to current class (2)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Language use in the class</td>
<td>Not possible: Threatening atmosphere Limited to word meaning</td>
<td></td>
<td>Possible in the opening five minutes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Class effectiveness to prepare for future language use</td>
<td>It fails because it is limited to word meaning (7)</td>
<td>It helps in other courses (2)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Thoughts and Comments</td>
<td>Need for a positive learning environment</td>
<td></td>
<td>Teacher does not understand students</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The remainder of this chapter will be devoted to highlighting the themes that surfaced during the interviews. Relevant excerpts from the classroom transcript will be used to discuss themes such as student motivation and learning preferences, their prior learning experiences, perception of accepted knowledge in the class, student-teacher power relations, and coping with established norms of communication in the classroom.

Student Motivation and Learning Preferences

When the issue of motivation was addressed in the interviews and questionnaire, all the students responded that they have always had the motivation to learn English and be able to speak fluently. All of them were not satisfied with the English teaching they received in general education blaming teachers for the most part. Some enrolled in private language schools that are
abundant in Riyadh seeking better learning opportunities. These schools recruit teachers from Canada, UK, and the US to attract young Saudis who consider having a teacher whose mother tongue is English as a priority. An American teacher used to teach in the college where the study took place and most students would want to be in his classes. One of the students that I interviewed went as far as filing a request to the department to transfer to the American teacher’s class and his request was granted.

Some students try other ways to create authentic exposure to the language through different means. Asim got a summer training job related to networking, which is his major in the college just because he could be with a non Arabic speaking co-worker. He noted that it was an enriching experience with plenty of opportunities to talk freely with the linguistic resources at his disposal commenting that such a scenario is almost impossible in the current class. In addition to securing a summer job in a firm that allows him access to non Arabic speakers, Faisal relies heavily on American movies, English radio programs, and music to immerse himself in the language.

Excerpt 5.4

I have the enthusiasm to speak. I’m also a movie addict. I change my video recorder twice a year from repeated playback. “I rely on receiving”. I like conversations. My friends may get a full grade but can't speak a sentence. I’m the opposite. I don't have the fear of speaking in English and if I have it, I tell my interlocutor “excuse my English” at the beginning. I worked at a company in the summer with non Arabic speakers and I enjoyed it. (Faisal interview)

Salman and Majed both attend private language programs while they take their classes at the college. This suggests the strong motivation on the part of these young men that has its toll on their limited financial resources and time as they pointed out in the interview. College classes are demanding with courses spread out throughout the day. Yet, they still attend a language
school because it offers them learning opportunities absent from their regular classes in general education and in the college:

Excerpt 5.5

The sad thing about learning English here in Saudi is that we spend 6 years of study and we cannot respond to a question like “what’s your name?” In contrast, one may take a six month course in a private school and learns a lot. He could even get a good TOEFL score if he spends a little bit more effort. (Salman: Interview transcript)

Majed considers it a big achievement when he is able to get his thoughts across to the teacher:

Excerpt 5.6

From my first year in middle school and ever since I was a kid I liked to speak English and I still have the same desire. I want to get to this stage, I mean to speak fluently in the same way I’m talking Arabic with you now. Things got better after I joined the private school and the courses I took in this college… If I’m able to say something in English to him [the teacher], I feel that I have done something extremely big, I feel that I’m somebody. (Majed: Interview transcript)

When Ibrahim talks about his previous learning experience, one cannot help but notice the sad tone in his voice. He went through two failed learning experiences during two intensive English courses prior to being considered for admission for a BA in engineering and pharmacy respectively, which both require higher levels of English proficiency. He noted that he did his best in the current class and had worked hard during his previous failed learning experiences. Despite his efforts and desire to learn, he cannot see any improvement:

Excerpt 5.7

“I work hard but I feel that I’m not learning anything. I went through two failed experiences… and there's no room for going back. I do everything required. I do my word study and everything.” (Ibrahim: Interview transcript)
All these students and I venture to say many more that I was not able to interview, have the motivation to learn English and the will to seek learning opportunities that fit their learning preferences. Asim and Faisal could have applied for any summer job. But they sought jobs that provided them with an English speaking environment in the foreign companies based in Riyadh. There, they find opportunities to interact with coworkers in English. For the same purpose, Tariq, Waleed, Salman, and Majed joined different private language schools in the evening that are similar in providing them with enough opportunity for language use in the class that, according to them, is all they could ask for. They found learning environments quite different from the teacher-centered classes they are familiar with. Informal discussions, group and pair work, engaging activities that appeal to their communicative needs are some of the things they talked about and noted were missing from their conventional classes.

In response to questions about their learning preferences, all students noted that they wanted learner-centered classrooms. Some talk from past experiences in private language schools while others mention other classes they had in the college. What unites them all is the desire that their voices be heard and appreciated for what they are:

Excerpt 5.8

I like the interactive way. I would like the teacher to ask us our opinion and actively participate in the discussion. When the teacher only relies on dictation, it is very likely that students forget. But interaction and discussion of a given topic aids understanding and make it stick.

(Later in the interview, Shaker was talking about a previous learning experience he enjoyed)

Sharing information was mutually beneficial. I share something my colleague doesn't know and the same is true for him. It lessens the pressure that exists in teacher to whole class talk. We also got to know each other and the atmosphere of the class was less threatening. There are students in this class that I still don’t know because there is no chance to do so. (Shaker: Interview transcript)
I chose to report what Shaker said in the interview because he summed up all the responses of the other students I interviewed. They all talked about their desire to get involved in open discussions of issues of interest to them. Asim noted that students should be allowed to share words and topics outside the book because, noting that “English is not only found in this book; it’s everywhere”. Others noted their inability to speak fluently because all they ever did in public education has been work on grammar that did not seem to offer them the freedom to speak the target language despite the efforts spent on learning about the language. Students noted that when all the above characteristics are available in a class, they serve as an incentive to prepare for the class and actively participate in its activities.

The above was a collection of students’ views on what they considered good learning atmosphere either ones they experienced or ideal cases they wish to be the case. Their perception of prior and current learning experiences and resistance to the status quo are the issues that will be taken up in the next two sections.

Prior Learning Experiences

In the interviews, student views on the class under study came to the fore. The question on their learning preferences was posed to the students after they spent some time talking about their previous English learning experiences. I intended to use the former question at the beginning for a number of reasons. First, I anticipated that they would be at ease talking about experiences outside of this college. Something that proved to be the case since all of them were talking freely and often quite critically about their previous experiences. Second, I wanted to know about their backgrounds and hear their voices, ones that I rarely get the chance to hear in class. They talked at length and in details citing some successful as well as frustrating
experiences. Third, I planned to use their talk about previous experiences as a spring board they use to talk about their current class.

A persistent theme present in all the students’ interviews is the role of the teacher in shaping their previous learning experiences for better or for worse. Many of them complained about the treatment they received from their teachers, the majority noted that teachers only worked with the grammar and nothing else. Successful learning experiences are all attributed to ‘good teachers’ in the eyes of the students even if that involved scolding and berating them if they don’t do well as Faisal pointed out:

Excerpt 5.9

F  loved it on 1st middle school because of a good teacher. He used to scold us bad if we didn't do well, fear and love together

O  wow! this is a difficult mix hard to take place

F  it happened to me. I was afraid to get yelled at and loved it because all my brothers speak English.

(Later in the interview)

F  I had to change school and got stuck with a teacher who only used the teacher's book to teach. I struggled my way through until I flunked in 3rd middle school and 2nd high school and had to leave this school for conflicts with the other kids in the neighborhood

Student Perception of Accepted Knowledge in the Current Class

Talking about these experiences provided some grounds for asking students about how they perceive the current class. The majority of students were quick to point out that reading comprehension and vocabulary study are two most prevalent activities for this class. This comment is consistent with the analysis presented in chapter four that showed the ubiquity of reading comprehension activities that are carried out through word for word paraphrase and
definition. It is also consistent with the teacher’s views on what is important for language learning.

Some students made some rather caustic comments on the current class. For instance, in response to a question about the class’s ability to address his learning needs, Asim noted:

Excerpt 5.10

No on the contrary, it degrades my learning. This is because in a paragraph, we concentrate on the vocabulary without understanding the gist of the reading. I may know some of the words but if you ask me about the main idea of the paragraph, I wouldn't be able to answer. (Interview transcript)

Earlier in the interview, Asim noted that he preferred open discussions, sharing his knowledge about the topic of discussion, and his wish for some latitude to use whatever linguistic resources at his disposal to talk. In the above excerpt, he sees that the class places some stringent constraints on self-expression and limits language use to finding the dictionary definition of the vocabulary in the reading. To him, the teaching value of such practice seems to be lost when students can answer specific questions but fail to understand the broad picture of what is talked about in class. But, Asim was not alone in this observation. In another interview addressing the same issue, Malik commented that he only writes down the dictionary definition of the new words in the paragraph before class without really knowing what they mean. Many students noted that they are not quite sure what they are supposed to do other than preparing the dictionary definition for the ‘new words’ when asked in class. They see that the teacher considers building a vocabulary reservoir to be essential in understanding the text. This requirement had its toll on what students are allowed to say in their own words:

Excerpt 5.11

I think that there is some pressure. I don't feel comfortable to participate. The most important thing for the teacher is to finish what's on his agenda. (Salman and Shaker Interview)
This excerpt suggests that students are fully aware of the teacher’s priorities in class and can further explain the paucity of student participation shown to take place through the analysis presented in chapter four. The choice to confront or cope with such agenda is the subject of the next section.

Power, Scattered Resistance, and Coping

Classrooms at all levels are administered according to explicit and implicit power relations between the teacher and students no matter how liberal the teacher or advanced the level of the class is. The teacher decides on what to include in the syllabus, sets rules of behavior, controls norms of participation, and grading among others. This power is more exercised in certain places over others. In this class, the teacher exercised his power through putting into action what he thinks is important for language learning. In the process, activities have to be done in a certain way to ensure the execution of this agenda. For example, students are explicitly instructed to use short and grammatically correct sentences following the word of the textbook. Spontaneous use of language involving ‘mistakes’ is not encouraged. Furthermore, events are framed and exchanges are controlled in a way to allow for what the teacher wants. For the most part, students followed the explicit and implicit norms of communication set forth by the teacher. Students and teacher surreptitiously cooperate to achieve the functions of classroom events. For instance, the teacher frames and controls a reading event so as to allow for a specific kind of responses from students. Accordingly, they abide by the requirements the teacher set forth to accomplish the event thus co-constructing power relations in the classroom (Manke, 1997). This takes place because classroom talk is so controlled so as to allow for what the teacher considers accepted form of knowledge that leads to language learning. The reason can be as simple or as complex as Asim puts it:
Excerpt 5.12

You know, the teacher can do anything, they can raise or lower student grades and we just try to end the semester in peace. It would be better if there's a dialogue and exchange of opinions between us and teacher or administration but in here the teacher is always right even if he has done injustice to the student. (Asim: Interview transcript)

The power relations between the teacher and students (in general) are summed up in Asim’s first line. It expresses the idea that the teacher is free to hit students where it hurts them the most; their grades. Even if their grades are at stake, students prefer to avoid confrontation and end the term in peace. The way that students are evaluated give grades a center stage in evaluating their performance throughout the semester. For instance, 90% of the grade in this class comes from three exams; the other 10% covers students’ homework, attendance, and participation. Such allocation of the class grade is imbalanced especially when exams are made up of a small number of discrete items on grammar, vocabulary and reading comprehension questions. When a student misses an item, it has a direct impact on his final grade. This can explain the overall poor grades students got at the end of the class as the following table suggests:

An outspoken and fluent student like Faisal got a D. A diligent hard working student like Majed barely made it. The latter talked to me in the interview about his efforts to get an A in the class to increase his chances of being considered for admission to the BA program (located in a college nearby and offered to select students) and his long-term plans for graduate studies. Chances are those plans were shattered at the end of the semester. What counts as knowledge seems to be reflected in student evaluation since only few students throughout the semester were able to follow the accuracy requirement for language use and that was reflected in their grades.
Table 5.3

*Students’ Final Grades*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grade</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Notes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>6</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td>15</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Two dropped out of class</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>29</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The issue of grades keeps lingering as Ibrahim notes that he prefers to avoid or at least keep contact with the teacher to a minimum.

Excerpt 5.13

I  *yeah, we don't want him to put us in his mind. You know a professor has all the upper hand.*

O  *he's not that bad*

I  *I’m talking about professors in general. You just want to keep away from them. Give them what they want and do not ask them for anything. (Ibrahim interview)*

The key phrase is “put us in his mind”. Some students would go as far as to assume that if they disagree with the teacher or show a sign of disrespect, their grade would be negatively affected. Addressing the same topic in another interview, Malik said,

“*We’re scared to tell him [end the class]”.*

Ibrahim’s and Malik’s statements were in response to my question about why students do not tell the teacher or even hint to indicate that class time is over. This is a simple and straightforward request to remind the teacher who went over class time that they have other classes. Yet, their responses suggest the rigid power relations that exist in the classroom to the extent that college aged young men say that they are afraid to express their rights to go to another class and be on time. Three other students I interviewed mentioned that they sometimes get marked absent in the attendance sheet of the class following this one because they stayed over time in this class.
and were subsequently late for the next class that is located in another building. Despite the fact that this happened, they prefer silence even if this affects their attendance roster in the other class, which may result in depriving them entry to the final exam because of repeated tardiness.

What the above excerpts suggest is a gap that exists between teachers in general and students. Professors are addressed in particular because-as students note-no higher authority questions the actions of professors in higher education. Students believe that the latter have the power to raise and lower their grades or even fail them. In large classes where there is a strong chance that a student is only known to the teacher in the attendance sheet and exam papers but never as a person, students look for a refuge to hide themselves from being known to the teacher, who, in their perspective, is a danger they want to hide from. I am not suggesting that teachers are evil and ready to take students for a prey. On the contrary, teachers may not know at all that students want to avoid contact with them as they are consumed in teaching language in the best way they know possible. In the interview with the teacher, he expressed his concern that students do not take the initiative and talk to him about their learning preferences:

Excerpt 5.14

I have never heard from students or I have never seen anybody telling me, ‘we want this not this or we need to know this’. ‘This is too simple’. ‘Why don't you give us more?’ Like for example listening to cassettes, there's no such a demand from the students. (Ray: Interview transcript)

The textbook they use in class has a number of listening activities that require a language lab or even a simple cassette player. The cassettes that are supposed to accompany the textbook for teachers to use were not supplied from the publisher. If they were, the college does not have language labs. More importantly, the excerpt suggests that a gap exists between the teacher and students. He says that he expects them to talk to him and express their learning preferences;
about the listening activities he has been skipping throughout the semester for instance. Later in the interview, Ray reiterates that he expected students to take the initiative:

Excerpt 5.15

This is the reason I told you earlier also; there was no demand from the students. They have not asked, 'excuse me I want this, explain this'. They have never asked because one reason can be they are not that much, I mean competent in language so as differentiate I know this, I don't know this.

Because of the barrier that they both built, students and teacher only speculate on the reasons. The teacher suspects their proficiency level to be a reason why they do not talk to him about what they prefer in class. However, my classroom observation notes and the class transcripts indicate that the teacher did not make room for students to make suggestions. Suggestions for alternate ways of working on activities are not endorsed since they seem to run counter to the teacher’s agenda of teaching language through extensive vocabulary instruction. Such atmosphere does not encourage other students to challenge the status quo.

Scattered Resistance

Inside the classroom, I have observed very few instances when students showed some resistance to the rules of participation set forth by the teacher. In these instances students tried to use their own language and world knowledge to answer comprehension questions. The data sets include only two exchanges that show a degree of what can be described as faint resistance; one of these will be included next. Silence seems to be the alternative elsewhere in the data.

Prior to the following excerpt, students were working on a matching activity where they were required to match a paragraph to its corresponding network configuration. Faisal told the teacher that he could match the network configuration to its paragraph just by reading the paragraph title. Not expecting such a comment, Ray was silent for a moment then said, “you can↑?” and preferred to give a chance for other students. They were given ten minutes and they
matched the diagrams to their paragraphs with ease. The teacher then moved to reading the paragraphs for the usual reading comprehension activity. Faisal asked to read and he was nominated.

Excerpt 5.16

345. Ray what does it describe? what does it say? did you mean, a a i mean what do you understand from this a reading?

346. Faisal all there are many computers communicating together in one net

347. Ray ahuh ok ok

348. Faisal not world not one center, centers is a machine or computer for special purpose look like hub or switch =

349. Ray oh my god! You're x giving and describing. just, I mean try to give me the information in small small sentences because if you go on giving explanation we do not know what you are saying about this, we do not know where to stop. But it's very difficult to keep track of your explanation. It is better to give them in small small sentences

350. Faisal simple a =

351. Ray yes simple sentences yes

352. Faisal good a many=

353. Ray [I appreciate I appreciate] you are able to I mean give me a good no definition but a at this level and for our understanding, for first level understanding it's better if you start with small and simple sentences ok. Right. ((starts reading from the text))

The above excerpt was in response to the question about the general idea of the paragraph. Let’s keep in mind that Faisal already knew the types of configurations from his Networking class and offered to respond before reading and was asked to wait. In turns 346 and 348, Faisal explains what the ‘Star’ configuration is using his available linguistic resources and background knowledge. However, this was not accepted by the teacher who cuts Faisal in the
middle of his talk exclaiming about the sheer length of the answer and the difficulty to keep track of such a convoluted response (turn 349).

I interviewed Faisal on the same day the above exchange took place and I did a quasi-recall procedure asking him about his reaction to the whole exchange. He said that he was disappointed and angry. He then talked about a previous learning experience where they can talk about the general idea of the readings in their own words, “we talk about it for a short while and move on”. He further noted and the classroom transcript shows that they spend too much time with painstaking detail about every single word in the readings.

The above excerpt shows an instance of a student challenging the requirements for what an accepted response is. In other words, Faisal challenged the power of the teacher by altering the usual one word responses or answers directly taken from the book. This incidence was dealt with boldly on the spot. The teacher went as far as to exclaim about the length of the response and followed that with reiterating his preferences of what counts as an accepted answer. These suggestions are not limited to this incidence but permeate classroom interaction during the entire four months of my observation and recording of classroom events. Throughout his turns in the excerpt, the teacher emphasizes the use of small and short sentences. Note in (353) that despite his appreciation of Faisal’s ability to use his own words not the usual standard practice of using dictionary and textbook definitions, he stresses the need for Faisal to use short sentences. His reason is the apparent, in his words, low proficiency level of the students. The teacher’s words in class are corroborated with what he said in the interview about students’ low proficiency level and its role in shaping his expectations about their performance and language use in class. Such perception of students’ potentials to use English was foregrounded in the interview and put to
work throughout the semester, building impervious yet invisible walls between the teacher and students. These walls helped to shape the power relations that exist in the classroom.

Another student, Asim, tried to resist the heavy homework assignments that required them to write the dictionary definitions of large numbers of vocabulary items through talking to the teacher about his responsibilities for his family and for other classes. He noted that the meeting ended with a negative tone and as a result Asim decided to keep a low profile in class.

_Coping with Established Norms of Participation_

While I could consider what Faisal and Asim did as forms of resistance to the status quo, others chose to cope with the situation in different ways. Some pretended that they follow classroom activities as one puts it:

_Excerpt 5.17_

The class itself is a burden and I just open my book without knowing much of what he is talking about _faking_ that I follow him and watching when this will be over. (Waleed: Interview transcript)

The key word here is ‘_faking_’ participation. Others were able to notice what the teacher considers knowledge in the class and engage in classroom talk doing what is known as ‘procedural display’ (Bloome et al., 1989). Students get consumed in doing the required activity without understanding its purpose. Their classroom experience has shown them that being able to provide word meaning is considered valid participation. They do so to the extent that they look up the meaning of words and ignore the gist of the topic of study:

_Excerpt 5.18_

M I only look for the new words in the passage and write what they mean without reading the passage

O do you try to get the context around the word?

M I do that, but I only write the meaning from the dictionary without really knowing what it means

(Malik: Interview transcript)
Malik speaks for a number of students that have expressed similar coping strategies to keep the flow of classroom events going. They knew what was expected of them and invested in vocabulary study *only* to be able to take part in classroom events despite the fact that they *know* that such knowledge of words stripped of their immediate and broad context is futile. This effort also served to reify the construction of classroom power relations and allowed students to keep a low profile and avoid direct contact with the teacher even if this strips them their true voice.

On broad terms, these power relations are related to classroom talk and students’ investment in participating in classroom events. I have shown how power relations were co-constructed through teacher’s daily emphasis on what counts as knowledge in the classroom and students acquiescence. In the process, there was some faint resistance from some students challenging through using available linguistic resources the rules of participation they were supposed to adhere to. However, the majority of students chose to cope with the situation through avoiding contact with the teacher and go as far as fake participation.

Conclusion

The above chapter was concerned with what counts as knowledge and accepted language learning activities. Students and teacher were shown to have opposing views on what counts as knowledge. This was shown through reporting students’ learning preferences, motivation, prior and current learning experiences, and classroom power relations. An unexpected topic about teacher beliefs emerged due to the discrepancy found between teacher stated beliefs during the in-depth interview and observed classroom practice. Reasons were consistent with prior research on the topic since teachers were found to attribute their inability to do what they believe in to students’ low proficiency, class size, time, and administrative constraints. Another reason was
found to be the transfer of the teacher’s own tried and true ways of learning the target language to his current classroom practice despite stating different beliefs in the interview.

The other half of the chapter was devoted to student voices. They talked about their overwhelming motivation to learn English that gets stifled in most cases due to the teacher-centered, grammar driven classes that only increase their knowledge about the target language while leaving its actual use in communicative situations on hold. They articulated their perceptions of accepted knowledge in the current class citing examples from current and previous learning experiences.

Despite the contradiction between students’ preferred learning styles and the teacher’s vocabulary driven instruction, students colluded with the teacher in the accomplishment of classroom activities. While few students appeared to challenge accepted norms of communication, the majority opted to cope with these norms through silence, avoiding contact with the teacher, or through faking participation and procedural display of knowledge. I argued that the subtle but impervious walls that both students and teacher create are responsible for the gap that exists between them. I also discussed excerpts from the classroom transcript that show that the accuracy requirements for accepted participation in classroom events discourage many students to take part in classroom talk. Those who venture to violate them are dealt with on the spot. On broad terms, this chapter was a window through which student voices are heard since their classes do not give them a chance to express themselves.
CHAPTER 6

DISCUSSION

This chapter will serve to discuss the findings of the analysis. I will begin by addressing the findings commenting on the themes that have emerged. As such, this chapter is organized around such themes as the unit of analysis, overall nature of classroom discourse, paucity of student participation, and what counts as knowledge. Throughout the discussion, relevant literature will be cited and some occasional excerpts from the current research will be quoted.

On Methodology: Units of Analysis

Two hierarchically related units of analysis were utilized in the current study; one is the speech event proposed in cultural anthropology by Dell Hymes (1964, 1972). Within speech events talk was coded at the exchange level.

The speech event has been used in studies in anthropology (Hymes & Gumperz, 1972) and adopted for use in educational research and classroom ethnography (Watson-Gegeo, 1988). It is different than traditional linguistic form oriented units of analysis. Rather, it is a social unit that encompasses talk and the context around it including but not limited to the participants, their lived experiences, values and beliefs, and the sociocultural worlds they bring with them to their place of study. An important feature in utilizing the speech event as a unit of analysis is the value of comparing it to similar and other speech events across time. Patterns of language use cannot be observed and judgments made on the basis of single incidents. Furthermore, these events have to be interpreted in relation to the broader contexts in which they occur. This study investigated language use in one classroom and contextualized the analysis through description of the
participants, college, town, and country. The different speech events identified in the current study lend more support to the existence of the construct of the speech event as a viable tool for doing qualitative research in educational settings.

The next layer of analysis is at the exchange level. Classroom talk was coded according to its interactional function. Exchanges range in length from a single IRE to an extended series of IRE’s known as topically related sets (Mehan, 1979). For instance, a series of exchanges related in topic but lack logical connectivity and result in lack of discourse coherence are coded as ‘circular’. Coding them as such is only possible by examining a long stretch of talk and relating language use to its effects on participants. Coding the data at the exchange level provided a principled and consistent method for analyzing discourse. Therefore, it allowed for examining the frequency of certain patterns of talk within and across different speech events.

Overall Nature of Classroom Talk

Similar to the many studies of classroom discourse, this study found that classroom talk is teacher-centered and students’ talk was meager, choppy, and for the most part limited to one word responses. The analysis showed that student talk comes close to sentence level only in grammar speech events. Why were they more engaged in grammar events only? I looked at the interviews for an answer and found that what happened was natural since all the students interviewed noted that the thing they understood the most and were able to work with during their current and past learning experiences was grammar. They made comments like; “it’s easy because you can memorize it”, “most of the teachers work only with the grammar”, “the exams were on the grammar we study so we memorize it”. What were the reasons behind limited student talk and apparent less interest in other classroom activities? The answer to this question will be taken up in the next sections that are based on examining the findings of the study.
Class Set Up and Atmosphere

The class set up contributed to the level of student involvement in classroom activities. Student chairs all faced the teacher giving no room for student-student interaction. Side talk was almost non-existent with the exception of sporadic questions about page numbers or for assistance to understand what is taking place. All talk is directed to the teacher and many students commented in the interviews that they found talk in the classroom threatening and as such opted not to participate due to the constant pressure to extract answers from them.

Students also find participation difficult since the chances for their answers being accepted are very slim. Many exchanges involve a large number of students trying to respond only to be faced with statements like “are you making a wild guess?” or “I’m not encouraged by your results”. Moreover, the method of presenting activities has been the same throughout the semester. Many students noted that they found that less than appealing and boring at times.

Class within a Class

Faced with the reality of large classrooms, teachers tend to work with a limited number of students inadvertently creating, within the large classroom, a small classroom they can work with. In a study of large classrooms in Pakistan, Shamim (1996) found that teachers only work with a small number of students to keep the flow of talk going and avoid the uneasiness moments of silence can create when less able students are addressed. In another study, Hall (1998) argued that students developed different learner identities as a result of differential teacher attention. According to the study, the subtle difference lied in the amount and kind of topical contribution each student is allowed and the teacher attention received suggesting the inequality in the distribution of learning opportunities among students.
In the current classroom, about one third of the students are involved in class activities. The rest choose to hide behind the covers of their textbooks pretending to follow and avoid eye contact with the teacher that may bring them to the center of attention. A synthesis of the interviews with the students suggests two points. First, those who participate and take membership in the small class, in Shamim’s terms, do so just to fulfill their duty as students answering teacher questions. I discussed in chapter five how a number of students were faking participation to help the colluded act between themselves and the teacher go undisturbed. Second, those who opt not to participate noted that the overall class atmosphere is less than inviting and threatening at times.

Artifacts Guide Classroom Practice

Classroom talk revolved around the book as all the activities were taken from there. The daily routine throughout the semester has been explaining, demystifying its readings and exercises, which are for the most part dated. The book was first published in 1993 and so many technologies have developed making many of its content obsolete. Students find making connections quite hard coupled with tight teacher control over what is allowed as valid contribution to classroom talk. For instance, in a reading about computer viruses, the passage considered floppy disks as a potential for viruses and that users of public PC’s should run their virus checking floppies before using these machines. Such technology existed before the internet which is now the conduit for viruses. In one exchange on this topic, a student said something to this effect but was not understood by the teacher since the answer was not from the reading:

Excerpt 6.1

1. Ray     no no not virus. see the book go to the line
2. s        program
3. Ray      umhuh
4. Asim *internet* program

5. Ray program? What kind of program? Program mentioned there? no

6. * s virus checking

7. Ray yeah virus checking

8. Ray so if you use a shared pc, what is the meaning of shared?

The key word in the above excerpt is “internet”. It suggests that Asim has a frame of reference about the topic different from the teacher. He is using current knowledge about how viruses spread through the internet. Asim’s intertextual contribution to the topic could have opened an interesting discussion about the internet, current computer virus types and names, among others. However, it was not taken or even understood by the teacher since it was not mentioned in the book. Business continued as usual when talk swerved in the direction of explaining the meaning of the new word ‘shared’.

As I pointed out in chapter five, students do not openly challenge teacher’s methodology, style, or choice of activities. But, they expressed their dissatisfaction during the interviews over the over-reliance on the book and only licensing classroom talk that revolves around it.

Excerpt 6.2

The teacher should ask us and bring words outside the book because *English is not only found in this book; it’s everywhere.* (Asim interview, emphasis added)

Here Asim suggests that the English they use in class revolves around the book. Apparently not content, he argued that opportunities for language use can come from myriad sources besides their dated text.

Excerpt 6.3

The teacher is only concerned about looking up the meaning of the words in the dictionary and reading the paragraph. (Faisal interview)
Faisal also notes how talk is limited to working on the textbook, which I have observed to be guiding the practice of the teacher.

One-Way Transmission of Knowledge

In the interviews with students about their previous English learning experiences, they articulated the dominant role of the teacher in shaping their experiences. I argue, as an insider and part of the students’ culture, that this is quite expected in a culture that revolves around passing knowledge and wisdom from one generation to another. The teacher is considered the sole bearer of knowledge and his/her job is to pass it to students who are considered blank slates ready to be filled. The teachers are operating within their culture doing their job in the best way they know possible. As such one expects teachers to talk all the time and students to attentively listen and write down whatever they find on the blackboard. This cultural effect detached teachers from their students, limited interaction and mutual understanding between them, and contributed in producing passive learners. (see Shamim, 1996 for a similar cultural effect on teaching).

This is not limited to teaching English as one may argue that teachers are not qualified enough to teach through communicative means or that students lack the linguistic proficiency that allows them to interact in the target language. The reasons for the unidirectional transmission of knowledge are deeply rooted in how religious and Arabic knowledge is passed from the teacher to students. For example, classical Arabic has been and is still taught through prescriptive methods passed from the teacher to students. By the same token, religious books have been passed through generations through knowledgeable scholars who are able to understand these books and pass them along to students. In the process, the secret to student success is unfettered attention and note taking. This methodology has transferred throughout
history to sciences and social studies and English is no exception. What I have observed in this class closely resembles the realities of traditional education I just mentioned. The teacher has been demystifying the book through explanation of vocabulary meanings and students have been listening and taking notes. Although he is not from the students’ country, nonetheless he shares them the same religion and tradition. Even those students who were critical of traditional teaching preferring open discussions and interactive teaching cited diligent hard working teachers as the ones who made turning points in their English study. What do these apparently effective teachers do according to Salman, Ibrahim, Waleed and others?

Excerpt 6.4

S They concentrate on the important things. He makes sure that students understand the lesson…

I He cared for the student and tried to explain everything

(Salman & Ibrahim interviews)

The two statements share one thing in common. It is the apparent role of the teacher to demystify and make students understand. Their role is limited to taking in what they receive. Some of the students do not know any other way and so belittle what they know and can bring to their classrooms. (This will be discussed below under students’ expertise).

Despite constant efforts to change the educational philosophy to the modern interactive exchange of knowledge, the one way transmission of knowledge is still the norm. Since pictures are sometimes more expressive than words, I will use a picture to make this point. In one of the top fleet newspapers in the country, Hesan (2004) discussed student preparation for the beginning of the school year with educators and students. Along with it was a picture of young learners that represents an image of an interactive classroom.
Students in the picture are facing each other supposedly talking to each other and exchanging what they know about the topic. However, something else is taking place as all the students are actually looking down at their books reading and writing notes. Nonetheless, the physical setting itself is a promising beginning towards learner-centered classrooms.

**Emphasis on Accuracy**

During the cyclic analysis of classroom talk, I found that the teacher emphasized accuracy over fluency. Students were constantly reminded to use short and complete sentences even at the cost of being pragmatically odd. Ellipsis, which is the omission of known information, is not accepted and a full answer is called for. For the same reason, spontaneous and elaborated responses were rejected because they were not concise and grammatical. Among the categories of language use discussed in chapter four, emphasis on accuracy and revoicing were the two highest ones. There were 102 exchanges containing direct and indirect emphasis on accurate language use. By the same token, 97 revoicing turns served to encourage and engender a specific kind of talk and discard all others.

Revoicing, which is rebroadcasting student answers to the whole class giving them more voice and public acceptance, served an indirect way of limiting student talk. It had an indirect
effect on those listening to the revoice. Because revoicing has only been used in response to correct answers, it sends a clear message that student responses will be revoiced by the teacher only when it passes the accuracy requirement. All other student contributions are ignored, corrected, or openly rejected as incorrect. When students perceive the stringent requirements for participation, they are quite likely to avoid getting involved.

**Teacher’s Questions**

Student talk has been elicited exclusively through questions in the IRE sequence. I found that the teacher asked two questions per minute. One would expect that this large number of questions resulted in student talk. On the contrary, the ratio of student to teacher talk was found to be 1:7.8 and the mean of students’ word per turn was found to be 3.2 compared to the teacher’s 22.9. An imbalance existed despite the large number of teacher’s questions, which all aim to elicit student talk. Clearly questions are not an effective method to make students talk in this class. Rather, they tend to create a tensed atmosphere as they place students on the spot especially when accuracy is preferred over fluency. They create a constant reminder that students are not able to use the language they spent years studying. I am not suggesting that questions are inherently ineffective and should be avoided. On the contrary, questions used in ways that open up discussion and probe further into issues of interest to students are essential in a language classroom.

**What Counts as Knowledge?**

The discussion of all the above subsections on the paucity of student talk feeds in one way or another into the major question of ‘what counts as knowledge’ in an EFL classroom. Simply stated, the ability to provide a word definition, answer a reading comprehension question, and produce an error-free short sentence is considered knowledge in the classroom under study,
anything else is not. This requirement for what is considered knowledge has its toll on students’ expertise and opportunity for self-expression. These issues will be taken up next.

_students’ expertise_

The students in the classroom under study are all enrolled in the computer networking department in the college. They attend computer networking classes and receive hands-on training in workshops and computer labs. Since the English course is offered for students studying and expected to work in computer-related jobs, a choice was made by the college for a textbook that is rich in technology content. However, the information, topics, and technology are dated. Students’ knowledge and expertise is more up to date than most readings in the book but cannot express them given the accuracy requirements placed by the teacher. The over-reliance on the textbook to carry out classroom activities and the class as a whole have stripped the students the chance to refer to their knowledge and express their understanding of topics talked about in class. I discussed a long excerpt in chapter five (Excerpt 5.15) in which a student was not allowed to involve his knowledge of the topic to solve a matching activity.

Some of the topics covered during the semester were computer viruses and networking. In these topics, students have more expertise than the teacher because they attend specialized classes and workshops. Some of them also have working experiences related to computer networking. However, the teacher stands out in his ability to express and talk about topics in the book in English. Prior to the study, I anticipated that students’ expertise would be capitalized upon during discussions. However, I found that I made an invalid assumption since I did not find a single exchange in the data where the teacher tried to build on students’ expertise in the development of classroom talk. On the contrary, they were discouraged from doing so since this would most likely entail violation of the accuracy requirements.
The overall objectives of courses offered under the umbrella of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) is to provide students with English instruction using their content area as themes for discussions and activities. This means that the language and topics will be familiar to students making them at ease talking about it and sharing their expertise, which are in most cases deeper than most teachers. Because one may wonder, how much computer or networking knowledge would a teacher with a degree in English literature, language education, TESOL, or Linguistics have? What is the depth of that knowledge, if any? In many situations, the teacher can handle what the textbook can offer using his/her linguistic resources and world knowledge to present materials to students. However, such knowledge lacks the specialist details and insider’s understanding that students have through the instruction they receive. As such, presentation of technology related themes is dated since it relies on an old textbook. Furthermore, discussion of such issues is for the most part shallow lacking the sophistication and specificity usually associated with computer technology. The following excerpt illustrates the teacher’s views on using computer content for teaching English:

Excerpt 6.5

1. As I told you before, I’m not concerned with the technical details, I will not ask the all
2. configurations, this and that. I will not, I mean I'm not interested in, I'm interested in how
3. you know or how you can use the language. Do you know how to use the language? Do
4. you know the meanings of some words? So this is going to be our important business
5. here. Because our exam will be in English, so when it is an English examination, you have to
6. come prepared to answer all the meanings, usage, what is the use of this, what is the use of
7. this. Not about network or configuration or protocols or a or a: firewalls. I’m not
8. interested in all these things because there is a department, separate department for that.
9. networks, protocols, firewalls. ok. what is our business here? what do we do here? we study
10. what?
11. ss  language
12. Tchr language, yes you must study language the way it should be. suppose you are
13. my teacher in Arabic, you say sorry うすた[teacher] this is not the way it work.
14. either come prepared or don't come. yes or no?
15. ss  yes
16. Tchr so for tomorrow, I want you to be I mean on your toe, you must be knowing
17. each and every word (reading event, emphasis added)

The above excerpt taken from a reading event on ‘networking’ in which the talk about language use was prompted by the teacher’s explanation of ‘instead of’ that surfaced in the reading. The excerpt is rich in explicit statements (in italics) the teacher makes on what is considered knowledge in the class. I will begin by laying them out then discuss their relation to students’ expertise. First of all, he makes it clear that he is not interested in the technical details (1) mentioning examples of networking-related components in (7). Second, in (4-5) language use is defined as the ability to express the meaning of vocabulary items. This is later reiterated in (9-12) through stating that the purpose of being in class is to study language, which is made more specific in (16-17) as language study is defined as ‘knowing each and every word’. Third, knowledge of word meaning is for the purpose of passing the exam (5-6).

What is the relation of statements like the above to students’ expertise? I believe that they send a clear message that students’ knowledge about their content area does not belong to their English class, which is only concerned with word meaning. I find such statements quite ironic since they seem to defeat the whole purpose of teaching English through the students’ content areas. In effect, this tells students that the readings they spent the whole semester on count only as a medium through which exam words are memorized. Such a statement can explain why so many students stated in the interviews that they only look at the new words in the reading without knowledge of the content.
Throughout my observation of classroom interactions, I noticed that the teacher’s technology related talk comes mostly from the textbook. The fact that most teachers of ESP do not necessarily have specialized knowledge can be used as an advantage since this can switch the expert/novice roles between the teacher and students. It can be used as an asset to make students use their specialized knowledge to explain to the teacher and discuss with their peers what they know about a topic like network configurations. However, this was not the case in the class under study. What is considered knowledge in this class has a clear effect in limiting students’ self-expression since the definition of knowledge is not flexible enough to allow for student contributions expressed through the linguistic resources they have at their disposal.

*Teacher’s Beliefs vs. Practice*

The teacher’s statements about language use during the in-depth interview and advice events can be seen as ones that foster interaction. A phrase like ‘language use’ uttered in a language class is usually understood to mean the ability to use the target language to express one’s self or get things done in the outside world. Furthermore, I discussed in chapter five that the teacher stated that he believes in the “interactive discussion teaching style” and that “…language class needs to be interactive mode only”. He even noted in the interview that he tolerates students’ mistakes. Also, most advice events in the data contain references to the importance of language use. However, references to language use contravene what takes place in the classroom on a daily basis. Why does this mismatch exist? The teacher argued that students’ proficiency level prevented him from doing what he intended to do. He said he made some compromises and adjustments to suit their ‘beginning’ level lowering his expectations from the class as a whole. Viewing students as beginners lacking the vocabulary and linguistic resources to express themselves meant that they could only use “small sentences” to avoid grammatical
mistakes. Classroom talk became limited to mechanical decoding and paraphrasing of the
textbook language. As such, students are discouraged to venture to talk or make connections
between what they read in class and what they already know. The natural outcome of these
restrictions is the extremely low amount of student talk that was shown to take place. To go back
to the teacher’s views on the language class, it seems then that students have to be at a high level
of proficiency in order to have an interactive discussion. This in effect entails that all beginning
level language classes are taught through the IRE style that was shown in previous research to
limit student participation by all measures.

One can safely argue that there are multiple discourses surrounding the classroom and
some are allowed to penetrate classroom walls while others are not. Traditional methods such as
the one-way transmission of knowledge have easily found their way into the classroom despite
clear statements made by the teacher about the efficacy of interactive methods. College staff
including-but not limited to-vice dean, head of department and English teachers (personal
communication) are all aware of the efficacy of interactive classrooms. However, teacher-
centered classrooms remain to be the norm. The empirically tested and data supported evidence
to why this is the case comes from the fact that teachers regard interactive classrooms to be
possible in an ideal far fetched situation where all students have high levels of target language
proficiency. Normal classrooms that are made up of learners with varying levels of proficiency
could only be taught through traditional methods.

What Should Count as Knowledge in a Language Classroom?

According to the theories of language learning discussed at the outset of this project, we
acquire our first language through repeated participation in our everyday activities to accomplish
myriad goals. We observe how others use language, see the consequences of their use, and use
language ourselves for similar goals. The crucial point to be made here is that language is learned through its use. Given the fact that EFL classrooms provide for most students the only opportunity for language exposure and use, language classes should provide ample opportunities for learners to use the target language in meaningful situations. This broadens the definition of what counts as knowledge in a language classroom. Students should be allowed to use their available resources to take part in class activities. In the process, their linguistic needs should be gauged and contingent expert advice should be provided. In concrete terms, if students are engaged in an activity such as asking directions in English, they should be immersed in meaningful role plays to accomplish that activity. Linguistic forms such as the ability to form questions that get the message across should be discussed. Furthermore, pragmatic use of questions such as echo questions or ellipsis of known information should be considered correct language use. Teachers should raise learners’ awareness of their own language use and that of others. Ideally, students will use what was afforded to them in their classrooms in new situations.

At the heart of what should count as knowledge are the learners’ contributions to classroom talk. Chances of finding interesting and unique ideas to be topics of discussion are very likely in large classrooms of young men or women each with a lifelong stories and experiences to share. Classrooms are communities of learners where learning is socially situated and mutually constructed by students and teacher. Therefore, the pedagogical goal is to provide learners with authentic and real life activities and skills that prepare them for efficient participation in target community activities. It could be the target language community, the community of computer specialists, of graduate study, or any community of practitioners.
Conclusion

In this chapter, I presented a number of themes that surfaced as a result of the analysis. All of these themes contribute to explaining the overall nature of classroom talk and attempt to explain the paucity of student talk. A number of topics were raised to address this issue. I argued that the physical set up of the classroom reified the teacher as the sole authority. I further argued that small classrooms are created within large classrooms as teachers tend to work with proficient students to avoid awkward moments of silence. This means that only a handful of students take part in classroom activities. I then discussed two inter-related themes; the textbook as the sole guide for teaching practice that shaped interaction to be the traditional one-way transmission of knowledge. A theme that permeates teaching methodology and shapes it at the same time is the emphasis on accuracy that runs across all classroom activities.

In the next section, I argued that the teacher’s definition of what is considered knowledge and consequently allowed in the classroom limited to a great extent students’ chances for self-expression, free exchange of ideas, and challenged their self-worth as computer networking specialists through rejecting the propositional contents of their contributions because they lack linguistic accuracy. I then discussed teacher’s beliefs that seem to contradict their practice and referred to multiple discourses that surround language classrooms. Despite awareness of interactive discourses, only traditional ones penetrate classroom walls. The chapter concluded with my own views on what should count as knowledge in an EFL classroom.
CHAPTER 7
CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS
Interpretations Drawn from Naturalistic Research

The current study was carried out to investigate teacher fronted-whole class interactions through discourse analytic methods outlined in the analysis chapters. It described the participants, attempted to analyze their language use, and presented their voices. It is about normal people going about their daily classroom activities. As with all qualitative research of this nature, this study attempted to portray the reality of classroom experiences. There is nothing necessarily flashy or glamorous about classroom life or classroom-based research. It is a description of a human experience performed in an effort to investigate a learning environment.

It is common knowledge that most foreign language learners lack the fluency to use the target language appropriately. What makes naturalistic research different from a layman’s observation is the method used in the research. Almost anyone living in the Saudi context can comment that EFL learners’ command of English is low despite years of intensive study. However, this study has shown why this has been the case. Addressing naturalistic research, Freeman (1996) defines research as

A basic process of developing and rendering viable interpretations for things in the world.

On a human level, this is a normal and natural preoccupation…It seems part of our humanity to naturally seek out reasons for the phenomena we encounter. The curiosity that motivates inquiry is universal and leads to myriad interpretations about our world.

Given this natural human process of inquiry we may well ask, How are the interpretations
developed or uncovered by research different? What makes them somehow “better” than the usual forms of interpretation which answer our curiosity about the world ... What gives power to the interpretations of research? Why are they privileged over common sense? (p. 102)

He goes on to argue that the difference lies in the fact that research adheres to method that distinguishes it from mere observation and speculation (Freeman, 1996 citing Shulman). I arrived at my understanding of the data through first graphically representing it by transcribing all video recorded data. Through cyclic viewing of all data sets, a number of patterns of language use emerged. I named them categories of language use. Their main function was to provide a systematic and principled account of the data so that interpretations and conclusions are based on a comprehensive treatment of all classroom events. Furthermore, I made an effort to make my treatment of the data as transparent as possible showing my research ‘workings’, Holliday (2002). For instance, I defined and exemplified the patterns of language use that I saw in the data to make my interpretations open to scrutiny and critique.

**Brief Recap of the Findings**

The study began by establishing the existence seven speech events the purpose of which was to achieve different language learning functions. Language use during these events was quantified through turn count, word count, word per turn count, and ratio of teacher to student talk. Findings showed the imbalance between teacher and student talk in favor of the teacher. A frequency count of teacher questions was carried out and showed an overwhelming number of teacher questions; about two questions per minute of class time. This large number of questions was met with very low student talk. I argued that questions used in a manner that aims at
extracting specific responses are not an effective method to elicit student talk in language classes. Rather, they created a tensed atmosphere.

A second discourse level analysis was carried out to characterize language use. Through investigating teacher-student turns at the exchange level, a set of patterns of language use was proposed to account for all the data. The frequency of these categories helped further explain the paucity of student talk. Teacher’s explicit emphasis on accuracy through corrections was the most prominent category that hindered students’ language use. The teacher also used an implicit method by revoicing only correct responses. Recasts in this way contributed in an indirect way to engender through subtle means only accurate language use. The overall nature of classroom discourse presented through categories of language use and their frequency suggested that what counted as knowledge in class was knowledge of discrete vocabulary items and the ability to answer the teacher’s questions accurately and according to the textbook.

In chapter five, I investigated the question of what counts as knowledge in the classroom through concentrating on the interviews with the teacher and students. In essence, I wanted this chapter to set my interpretations against insights of the participants. I turned to the teacher’s interview to triangulate what he says to what takes place in the classroom and found some discrepancy between what he says in the interview and what I observed to have taken place in class. I turned to the literature for answers and previous studies on the topic and found a large body of research that suggests that it is not uncommon to find a misfit between teachers’ stated beliefs and practice. When teachers state their beliefs, they draw on abstract knowledge. In the classroom however, they draw on their practical knowledge to fit the context of the situation. The teacher in this study cited student proficiency level and time constraints as reasons to lower the objectives he expects to achieve in the course.
The interviews with the students provided a chance for their silent voices to be heard. Through their voices, I presented their previous learning experiences and juxtaposed them to the current one. They described it in ways that corroborate the findings of the study as the majority of them noted that what counted as knowledge was limited to knowledge of discrete vocabulary and accurate language use. Through their voices and some excerpts from classroom talk, I showed their scattered resistance to the prevalent classroom practices. However, their coping with the situation was more apparent than their faint resistance even when that meant silencing their voices and expertise in topics their knowledge exceeds that of the teacher. Implicit power relations and lack of mutual interaction between the teacher and students were found to contribute to students’ acquiescence and reticence to get involved in classroom activities.

In chapter six, I discussed the findings offering my own understanding of the reasons that contributed to students’ reticence to participate in classroom talk. I argued that teachers only deal with a handful of students creating in subtle ways classes within the classrooms they teach. I argued that the overall nature of classroom talk is a one way transmission of knowledge and that artifacts like the textbook are employed to that effect. I concluded the chapter with what should count as knowledge in a language classroom.

Limitations of the Study

As with most ethnographic research, this study was limited to one classroom. Research findings cannot be generalized to apply to different learning situations. The quest for the depth ethnographic research is very well known for affected the breadth the study could have covered. In other words, the internal validity of this study sacrificed the external validity found in questionnaire and experimental research.
Another limitation concerns the use of written questionnaire as a source of data that I used after the low turn out for the interviews at the beginning of the study. I decided to use open ended questions for two reasons: (1) I wanted to get responses close to the rich data I got in the face to face interviews; and (2) I avoided predetermined answers so as not to run the risk of getting bogus data (Kagan, 1990; cited in Basturkmen et al., 2004). The majority of the responses were superficial and some were only briefly answered on the first page. After I left the research site and began the analysis, I realized that a few in-depth interviews would have been much better than a large number of written questionnaires. In the same way this is seen as a limitation, it is also a merit to using in depth interviews.

**Implications for Classroom Practices**

A number of implications for classroom practices in general and for ESP classrooms in particular can be drawn from this study. These include interactive teaching, endorsement of student expertise as part of classroom knowledge, the creation of positive learning environments, and student evaluation. Each of these topics will be expanded below. A section on future research and professional development concludes this project.

The traditional physical organization of students’ seats facing the front of the class tends to limit student-student interaction. Therefore, more variation in student seating is called for such as small groups, round table style, or any set up that helps to relinquish teacher control and foster student-student interaction. By the same token, teaching materials should be presented in different ways that appeal to students’ preferences. Furthermore, teaching styles and activities that seem monotonous should be discarded and more appealing ones should be adopted. This can be done through monitoring student involvement in class activities. On another level, mutual understanding between the teacher and students achieved through a friendly classroom
atmosphere can lessen the gap that can exist between the teacher and students. In this study for instance, the teacher feels that students do not speak out their learning preferences while students for the most part try to keep their contact with the teacher to a minimum.

At the heart of interactive teaching is gauging students’ communicative needs and immersing them in interesting activities that provide them with authentic opportunities for language use. Meanwhile, the linguistic resources needed for the accomplishment of these activities are presented as needed. Therefore, the students’ area of interest should be used as the basis for the choice of activities. Their preferences on how the activities are carried out should be taken into account. More importantly, their background knowledge should be the bread and butter of the activities. I argued above that most teachers of ESP have limited knowledge in the technical fields of the students they teach and that the source of their knowledge mostly comes from the texts they teach. Lack of the specialized knowledge that the students have can be used as an asset by turning the tables around and switching the expert/novice roles. Students can enlighten the non specialist teacher on the tools of their trade, which should boasts their confidence and self-esteem and make them comfortable speaking English. The teacher’s efforts can be geared towards watching their linguistic needs. Care should be taken not to overemphasize accuracy over the students’ ability to get the message across. We have seen in this study that emphasis on accuracy had its toll on fluency.

This study has shown that the over-reliance on textbook activities did not allow students to use their expertise to answer questions. As such textbooks should be used as a guide but should not under any circumstances guide the teaching practice.

Some teachers use a certain level of intimidation to make students study. In the current study, this was done during advice events and exam reviews. However, this was shown to have
adverse effects on students’ motivation and attitude towards the class as a whole. Therefore, intimidation should be avoided at all times and more positive learning environments should be created. Closely related was the effect of repeated teacher questions and their apparent inefficacy in making students talk. On the contrary, they created a tensed atmosphere that placed students on the spot. In place of questions, teachers should raise issues for discussions and debates among students.

Exams used alone are not a fair measure of student efforts and knowledge. A number of evaluation methods should be introduced such as response journals, small projects and presentations. With the spread of computers and the internet, discussion boards such as Web Ct should be introduced to allow continued interaction and exchange of views among students. The teacher can monitor participation in these boards and a grade can be given on the basis of involvement or the number of posts. These evaluation methods will reduce the use of exams as the sole criterion for student evaluation. In a recent study, Alabdelwahab (2003) introduced the use of portfolio self-assessment in EFL classes at a private intermediate school in Saudi. The method was well received among students, teachers and administrators as worthy of future consideration. Such evaluation methods should be introduced at a wide scale in the educational system as an alternative to using tests as the sole measure of achievement.

Implications for Future Research

A number of implications for future research can be drawn from this study. More classroom-based research is needed to cover a large number of classes in elementary, middle, secondary and college classes to investigate English teaching and learning at the school level. Previous research in the Saudi context documented the existence of a problem despite years of exposure to the target language. What is needed is more ethnographic classroom-based research
to further investigate the reasons behind the apparent over-reliance on discrete language skills and the lack of the actual use of language in language classrooms.

Most language classes in the private language schools spread around the country present in most cases the ‘best case scenario’ (LeCompte & Preissle, 1993). Students find plenty of opportunities for language use and the attested progress of student level there surpasses that of students attending public education at all levels. Therefore, further comparative research is needed between English classes in these schools and in public schools and colleges. What do the private schools have that college classes cannot offer? Why do six months in a private language school yield positive learning outcomes that surpass six years of study in general education? Such a broad question is a good start for a comparative study between the two contexts.

Using the content area in ESP classes is twofold; it is an investment of student prior knowledge and it provides a relevant content they can use in their professional careers. An important question that warrants further investigation concerns how much of the content area (such as computers, engineering, etc.) an ESP teacher needs to know in order to offer an effective class and how such knowledge or lack thereof can be capitalized upon.

The current study has shown that questions used as the sole method to elicit student talk are ineffective as measured by the amount of questions equated with the very low response to these questions. Further research is needed to investigate the effect on participation of using discussion vs. known answer interrogative type questions.

Recasts have been investigated in the literature under different theoretical perspectives. Their relation to learning was investigated from a psycholinguistic perspective in a number of studies (Long, Inagaki, & Ortega, 1998; Mackey & Philip, 1998). From a sociocultural perspective, Ohta (2000) investigated through private speech the positive effect of recasts on
those unaddressed. What is needed is the investigation of recasts when they are used for only correct responses. What are the effects of those recasts on those unaddressed and what subtle messages does such a pattern of recasts send to students about what counts as accepted language use?

Professional Development

The overall picture of reality this study attempted to systematically portray provides a bleak example of English learning in the Saudi context in general and in the classroom under study in particular. Seminars and professional development workshops should be held to improve the current situation and raise awareness among teachers about current research findings on language learning. The fact that traditional modes of learning have penetrated language classrooms does not mean that such phenomenon is intractable. It should be addressed through the practical presentation of current communicative approaches to language teaching. Change is glacial and may take sometime but it is not possible without a beginning somewhere in the institutional milieu. A good start is sharing the findings of this study at the research site with fellow teachers and administrators. This should provide a beginning for improving current conditions and bringing to the open many problems that have always been avoided. By the same token, such discussions can provide an opportunity for instructors to share their good teaching strategies for critique and improvement.

This study has shown that teachers and students are aware of the benefits of interactive classrooms but this was rarely made to actually work. There is always an obstacle that stand in the way such as classroom size, student proficiency level, administrative constraints, etc. Professional development seminars can tackle the issues that stand in the way of having student-centered classrooms.
Language programs (in fact any institution) should have clear broad curriculum goals that are reflected on the objectives set forth for each course. Teachers should be familiar with such guidelines. Their execution in classrooms should be demonstrated through workshops, focus groups, and seminars. Without a guiding principle, each course will be offered in a different way that may not be based on a sound theory of language learning.
REFERENCES


