

## Reflecting on classroom research

You have had a chance to look at several different uses of classroom interaction research, both with respect to teacher–learner interaction and learner–learner interaction. Classroom interaction research has addressed a variety of key issues in classroom instruction using a variety of observational and reporting techniques. We have seen that there is such a rich array of these techniques that it is often difficult to find common ground in comparing findings and in getting a sense of cumulative understanding. We have also seen that some teaching axioms that seem reasonably commonsensical and straightforward have been difficult to validate by means of classroom interaction studies. And yet, with these difficulties acknowledged, classroom interaction research is one of the most active areas in contemporary second language learning studies.

Consider some possible reasons that might justify current enthusiasm for classroom interaction research:

- 1 *Universal experience* Almost everyone is a veteran observer of classroom interaction, having spent many years of life as a classroom learner. It is interesting to know something deeper about a topic in which you are an expert and an insider.
- 2 *Importance of educational improvement* Education occupies the biggest budgets of most governmental agencies and almost no one, regardless of their schooling location or the subject of instruction, is fully satisfied with the ways that classes work. So there are almost always, almost everywhere, movements afoot to improve the delivery of education, to make classroom interaction more efficient, more effective, maybe more inspiring.
- 3 *Unsettling findings* Early classroom studies came up with some somewhat startling data. We previously referred to research that suggested that in many classrooms, teacher talk took up most of the interactional time and that most of that time, teachers asked questions to which they already knew the answers. Were the findings accurate and how should they be interpreted?
- 4 *Uniqueness of second language classes* Research in second language classrooms shares many of the same interests and techniques of inquiry



with research in other subject area classrooms. However, classroom inter-action research in second language classrooms is unique in that language is both the medium of instruction and the content of instruction. This overlay of medium and content of instruction provides both special challenges and the opportunity for special insights.

- 5 *Further professionalization of teaching* There has been a growing interest in the further professionalization of teaching, including involvement of classroom teachers in the process of research. This move ties in with other decentralizing trends in both general and second language education. These trends include school-based curriculum development, field-based teacher preparation, and professional self-evaluation projects. The classroom is the teacher's home territory, a place where teachers are experts in their field and masters of their environment. The classroom seems the ideal setting for more rigorous inquiry by teachers.
- 6 *Bridging the theory-practice gap* Some of the citations in our introductory chapter suggest the alienation that some practitioners feel towards 'research'. One of the goals of classroom interaction research is to narrow the gap between theory and practice, allowing teachers to become enthusiastic producers as well as consumers of educational research.
- 7 *The durability of classroom patterns* Classrooms have looked pretty much the same for the last 1,000 years. Despite changes in content, technologies, methods, educational priorities, and professionalization of teaching, school classrooms and the activities that go on within school classrooms have not changed much over the last millennium. The role and orientation of teachers and learners have been maintained although content has varied. So it appears that analyzing what happens in *regular* classrooms involving teachers and learners is likely to stay in fashion and relevant to improving education for the foreseeable future. (One thing that has changed is the importance placed in former times on corporal punishment.)
- 8 *Classrooms as ideal environments for the study of talk* The classroom has features that make it a particularly attractive environment for the study of talk in general. Ethnographers of communication examine how talk is systematically patterned in ways that reveal, or define, how the speakers perceive their relationships and situation. Classrooms represent a strongly marked *local social system* in which relationships and situations are somewhat fixed, allowing researchers intimate looks at the language which marks these relationships and situations.
- 9 *Homegrown nature of classroom research* Many of the techniques for conducting SLA research and even motivation for particular kinds of research typically come from outside the field of applied linguistics. However, with respect to studies of classroom talk, educational researchers acknowledge that the initial impetus behind the investigations of classroom talk came not from educational researchers but from applied

## *Classroom research: interaction analysis*

linguists, such as Hymes, Gumperz, Sinclair, and Coulthard. The widely influential model of *communicative competence* emerged from classroom interaction studies by socio-linguist Dell Hymes (1971), whose research concerns were largely directed towards the problems encountered by children from one cultural background who entered classrooms where communicative demands were defined primarily in terms of another. In a sense, then, critical aspects of the study of classroom interaction can be said to have been *home-grown*, to have been initiated and developed within the field of applied linguistics. Applied linguists writing on the subject of classroom interaction research continue to be widely read and cited by researchers from other traditions.

- 10 *Context for many current controversies* It may seem odd to cite 'controversy' as grounds for significance of an area of research. However, as Hammersley (1986: xii) notes, 'given its recent history, classroom research has been the site for some major theoretical and methodological debates'. These debates take place not only across disciplines, as might be expected, but also within disciplines where many key issues find focus in how classroom research is best done. Thus, educational psychologists, second language specialists, social anthropologists, linguists, sociologists, and ethnomethodologists all assert a multiplicity of views as to how classroom interaction research should be carried out both within their own areas of specialization as well as in the wider context of teaching and learning generally.
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## Summary

In this chapter, you have traveled the path of classroom research from your own experience as the participants being studied to your reflections on designing classroom interaction research studies of your own. You looked closely at two key areas of classroom interaction—the interaction between teachers and learners (when teachers correct learner errors) and the interaction between learners (when learners work in pairs carrying out a cooperative

task). Then you considered different ways of grouping and coding interaction data and saw that there were a rich array of alternative systems that researchers have proposed for carrying out this aspect of classroom interaction research. You also explored ways to code both linguistic and non-linguistic data, both of which play important roles in human interaction.

Researchers make choices about what classroom interactions they observe and report. Only a small portion of classroom interaction is actually isolated for recording, analysis, and interpretation, so both as researcher and reader you found that you need to be critical of drawing conclusions too facilely from tip-of-the-iceberg displays of data. You examined your own beliefs about what effective classrooms comprise and also reviewed candidate topics for research and techniques for examining those topics. Choices here critically shape the kind of classroom interaction study you might do and the results you might obtain.

You then looked at the diffuse range of ways in which *interaction* is used in contemporary second language discussions and noted a variety of the other factors that have contributed to the widespread interest in classroom interaction research. We invited you to consider not only the academic significance of interaction studies but also the very personal benefits that a more focused look at the classroom can bring in the way of insights and ideas to the practicing teacher.