

应用语言学习丛书

# Classroom Discourse and Teacher Development

## 课堂语篇与教师发展

Steve Walsh

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## 出版说明

对于中国这样一个英语教学大国，和语言教学相关的话题一直受到语言学界的关注。应用语言学作为一个涵盖范围十分广泛的研究领域，尤其受到我国学者及语言学方向师生的重视。本世纪初，外教社陆续引进出版了“牛津应用语言学丛书”、“剑桥应用语言学丛书”等国际优秀学术成果，因其内容权威、选择精当而受到外语界的好评。

近年来，应用语言学研究取得了很多新的进展，如何引导我国语言学方向的研究生快速便捷地了解这一领域的发展全貌和研究热点，成为我国语言学界老师面临的一个重要问题。有鉴于此，我们又从爱丁堡大学出版社、Multilingual Matters 等国际知名出版社精选了一批图书，组成“应用语言学研习丛书”，以更好地满足广大师生和相关学者的需求。

本丛书的各分册主题均为近年来应用语言学研究领域的热点话题，其中既有对所论述主题的理论回顾和梳理，也有对较新的发展和应用所做的阐释和分析，脉络清晰，语言简洁，共同反映了这一领域过去三四十年间的成果和积淀。

相信本套丛书的出版将为国内应用语言学研究带来新的启示，进一步推动我国语言学研究的进展。

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# Classroom Discourse and Teacher Development

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Steve Walsh

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# List of Abbreviations

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CA	conversation analysis
CIC	classroom interactional competence
CLCA	corpus linguistics and conversation analysis
CCDA	critical classroom discourse analysis
CL	corpus linguistics
CMC	computer mediated communication
DA	discourse analysis
IC	interactional competence
IRF	initiation, response, feedback
RP	reflective practice
SETT	self-evaluation of teacher talk
SLA	second language acquisition
ZPD	zone of proximal development

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# Introduction

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In this chapter, the case is made for putting an understanding of classroom discourse at the centre of any second language teacher education programme, whether it is a formal programme under the guidance of a teacher educator or a more informal, self-directed programme of teacher development. It is argued that in order to improve their professional practice, language teachers need to gain a detailed, up-close understanding of their local context by focusing on the complex relationship between teacher language, classroom interaction and learning. In order to do this, I suggest, there is a need to revisit and reconceptualise the notion of reflective practice by giving teachers appropriate tools which allow them to reflect on and improve their professional practice.

In this first chapter, the aim is to sketch out the landscape of the book by describing and critiquing its key components, each of which is developed in the sections below:

1. In section 1, the notion of teachers as researchers is both described and analysed from the perspectives of action research and reflective practice (RP). A critique is offered of the place of RP in second language teacher education, and the case is made for a revitalisation and reconfiguration of RP.
2. Section 2 offers a theoretical perspective, outlining the importance of socio-cultural theories of learning to second language teacher education and development.
3. In section 3, as the backdrop to the present book, I offer a critique of studies which have placed classroom interaction at the centre of teacher development and consider future directions.
4. The next section provides a perspective on future challenges for learners and teachers from the position of classroom interaction, learning and professional development.
5. Finally, an overview of the book is presented.

### 1.1 TEACHERS AS RESEARCHERS

Under the notion of second language teacher *education*, as distinct from second language teacher *training* (Richards and Nunan 1990; Wallace 1991; Edge 2001), the

focus of attention is on the need to enable teachers to develop themselves. There is clearly more to teacher preparation than skills training; teachers need to be equipped with the tools that will enable them to find out about their own classrooms and make adjustments (Bartlett 1990). In short, teachers must learn to change their role from teacher to teacher-researcher, a logical extension of what Wallace terms 'the applied science model' (1991: 8) of teacher education, first proposed by the American sociologist Donald Schön (1983, 1996). Schön put forward a model of *reflection in action* under which teachers and teachers in training are involved in critical thought, questioning and re-appraising their actions in the second language classroom (1983). More recently, there has been a call for the concept of *reflection in action* to be re-interpreted as 'reflection after action' (Eraut 1995), since teachers cannot reflect as they teach; instead, a cycle of action-reflection-further action is preferred, with a slight distancing between each of the stages.

One of the central arguments of this book is that reflective practice in the fields of applied linguistics, TESOL and education has become an accepted and respected professional activity without a corresponding data-led description of its value, processes and impact. Essentially, while RP is now a key element of almost any teacher education programme, recognised for its value and significance, it has also, arguably, become a tired and overused institutional requirement. Although it is regarded as a crucial element of most teacher development programmes (Clarke and Otaky 2006), there is evidence to suggest that many teachers (and teacher educators) do not know how to reflect, nor are they, in most cases, taught *how* to reflect. The consequence according to Grushka et al. is that teachers produce 'metacognitive rambles ... focused on minor technical aspects of their teaching' (2006: 239). One of the key issues to be addressed in this book is the extent to which RP, seen as being central to teacher education and development and advocated by many professionals (including myself), can be refocused by getting practitioners to place classroom interaction at the centre of their reflections.

Recent attempts to critique RP (see, for example, Borg 2002; Akbari 2007) show it in a rather negative light, regarded as something of a luxury, and even viewed as irrelevant. For busy professionals, RP is not given space or priority, leading many to become members of a community of 'disbelievers' who are highly critical of the notion (cf. Hobbs 2007). There is a strong sense that for many in the field, RP is seen more as an institutional requirement which prioritises its written form over a spoken version. McCabe et al. (2011), for example, found that many student-teachers on initial teacher education programmes benefited more from discussions about their teaching with peers and teacher educators than they did from completing written report forms. Murphy (2012) calls for a move towards a more 'dialogic' approach to reflective practice, while Walsh (2011) considers the role of teacher educators in 'shaping' the reflections of teachers through spoken feedback.

It is fair to say, then, that there is some consensus that there needs to be a refocusing of RP as both a written and spoken process. Some of these issues were given an airing at a recent BAAL/CUP conference (Spiro and Wickens 2011); one of the papers (Mann and Walsh 2011) presented concerns about the predominance of

written and institutional forms of reflection, arguing the need for reflective tools which can be tailored to specific contexts and facilitate detailed, up-close, 'ecological' (cf. van Lier 2000) professional understanding. This argument is developed in Chapter 6.

Despite these rather critical observations, one of the main arguments of this book is that RP is both positive, necessary and key to teacher development, but that it needs to be refocused if it is to survive. For teachers to become researchers of their own practice, I will argue, they need appropriate tools, data and dialogue with other or more experienced professionals. Central features to be explored in the book are, therefore: the need for RP to be taught on pre-service teacher education programmes; the desirability for more appropriate tools to facilitate reflection; the importance of recognising that RP should be evidence-based using data taken from classrooms; the need for RP to be removed from the constraints of institutional requirements so that it might become a career-long practice; the value of dialogic rather than written forms of reflection. In addition, the whole notion of 'teacher as researcher' will be revisited and reconfigured to incorporate some of the key principles of action research and by re-evaluating what is meant by 'data'.

Currently, and in most contexts where RP is practised, teachers adopt a retrospective stance and reflect on past actions in an endeavour to increase their understanding of the teaching/learning process (Wallace 1998). Competencies are acquired through and by the participants who have an active role in their own development, which in turn is based on two types of knowledge: *received knowledge*, 'the intellectual content of the profession' (Wallace 1991: 14), including the specific knowledge (linguistic and pedagogic) that language teachers need in order to perform their role; and *experiential knowledge*, based on the experience gained in the classroom and reflection on that experience. To use Wallace's terms, experiential knowledge is based on knowledge-in-action plus reflection on that knowledge. Mann makes a similar distinction: 'Received knowledge is the stuff of dictionaries and is more verifiable. Experiential knowledge is not a matter of fact, but a complex mix of feeling, thought and individual perspective' (2001: 58). Clearly, both types of knowledge are important, but it is the second which is of most concern here since it rests on the assumption that teachers can and should reflect on their practices and learn from them. Central to the notion of experiential knowledge is collaborative discussion, where thoughts and ideas about classroom practice are articulated. Put simply, reflection on practice does not occur in isolation, but in discussion with another practitioner, a form of cooperative development, involving a 'Speaker' and an 'Understander', whose role is to enhance professional understanding through dialogue (Edge 1992, 2001).

The logical extension of reflective practice is for teachers to identify and address problems which are specific to their own context, a central concern of action research, which rests on the premise that teachers can and should investigate their own classrooms (Cohen et al. 2011). The starting point is the identification of a problem; the process continues with data collection and analysis, and finally outcomes are suggested. The value and relevance of action research are self-evident: helping teachers to focus on problems in their own classrooms and to identify solutions is desirable

from the position of both professional development and student learning. As Johnson puts it: 'The more research-driven knowledge teachers have, the better their teaching performances will be' (1995: 29; see also Johnson 2009). Under this view, 'research-driven knowledge' is data-led and, more importantly, based on data derived from a teacher's own classroom. According to Nunan (1989: 3), there are a number of reasons why teachers might be interested in researching their own classrooms. Firstly, because teachers have to justify educational innovations; secondly, because teachers are constantly involved in intellectual and social change; thirdly, because becoming a teacher-researcher is a logical stage in the process of professional self-development. From the perspective of this book, then, I am suggesting that teachers' ability to collect and analyse data (derived from classroom interaction) is central to their professional development.

Because teacher-researchers are both the producers and consumers of their research (Kumaravadivelu 1999), since they both own the data and are responsible for effecting changes to classroom practices, the process is more private and, arguably, less intimidating. The concern is to enhance understanding of local context rather than generalise to a broader one, though this may also occur. Following Wallace (1998, above), developing understandings of local context lies at the heart of this book and is, I suggest, central to both professional development and enhanced learning. There are at least three conditions needed for understandings of local context to occur:

- Condition 1: the research takes place in the classroom.
- Condition 2: teacher-researchers reflect and act on what they observe.
- Condition 3: understandings emerge through dialogue.

### 1.1.1 Research takes place in the classroom

According to Nunan, much of the research that goes on in second language teaching is deemed irrelevant, resulting in a 'wedge between researcher and practitioner'. One of the reasons is that teachers' voices are often unheard, replaced by the researcher's perspective; another is that much research is still conducted under experimental conditions in classrooms created for research purposes (Nunan 1996: 42). This startling revelation suggests an urgent need for research that is located in 'ordinary' classrooms, conducted by teachers for their own ends; understanding and professional development can only be enhanced when the process of inquiry is carried out *in situ*, in the teacher's natural environment. Van Lier terms this 'ecological research':

Ecological research pays a great deal of attention to the smallest detail of the interaction, since within these details may be contained the seeds of learning. The reflective teacher can learn to 'read' the environment to notice such details. An organism 'resonates' with its environment, picking up affordances in its activities. This is a different level of understanding than the one based in explicit knowledge or studied facts. It is a deeper sense of reflection in action. (2000: 11)

The main attraction of this view of 'reflection in action' is that teachers work very

closely with the data they collect in their own context, their own 'environment', to use van Lier's word. The understanding they gain from working with the detail of their data is very much their own – personal, private and internal – enabling teachers to read the interactional processes and interactive signals as they arise. Public ownership does not come into question, neither does generalisability; research is a process of inquiry, conducted by the teacher for the teacher. Other researchers have called for class-based research which is conducted in the teacher's own classroom, preferably by the teacher (see, for example, Bailey and Nunan 1996; Wallace 1998). One of the main advantages of action research is that there is a unification of theory and practice since the smallest details can be studied, changes implemented and then evaluated (van Lier 2000). The main reason for the potential for such microscopic analysis is the fact that the research is located in a context which is both clearly defined and familiar to the teacher-researcher.

### 1.1.2 Teacher-researchers reflect and act on what they observe

The second condition is very much in tune with the broad philosophy of action research: research plus action, not just research for research's sake (Cohen et al. 2011); when participants 'do something' based on their self-observation, the ultimate beneficiaries will be their students. In the words of Kemmis and McTaggart:

Action research involves problem-posing, not just problem-solving. It does not start from a view of 'problems' as pathologies. It is motivated by a quest to improve and understand the world by changing it and learning how to improve it from the effects of the changes made. (1992: 21–2)

The suggestion here is that the very act of 'posing problems' and coming to understand them is, in itself, developmental. Problems may or may not be solved; the real value lies in discussing options and considering possibilities, a process of 'exploratory practice' (Allwright and Lenzuen 1997). Reflection and action result in a kind of 'emergent understanding', an ongoing process of enhanced awareness.

For most second language teachers, this vision of class-based research might appear somewhat daunting – teachers are not automatically equipped with classroom observation skills and may know even less about how to process and analyse data (Nunan 1991). Not only are L2 teachers normally too busy to take on such a commitment, most have not been trained in class-based research techniques. Furthermore, if action research is regarded as something that is imposed, it loses its 'emancipatory' (Zuber-Skerritt 1996) or 'empowering' function (Wallace 1998). In other words, the research has to be carried out following a teacher's *desire* to learn more about a particular aspect of their professional life. Teachers have to have ownership of their research and through collaborative dialogue take actions which they deem appropriate. As described elsewhere in the literature (see, for example, Winter 1996), teacher action is based on self-evaluation, contributing to professional development in the vein of what has been termed 'practical action research' (Grundy 1987: 154).

### 1.1.3 Understanding requires dialogue

Action research has always been regarded as a collaborative process involving dialogue (Walsh 2011; Winter 1996; Zuber-Skerritt 1996). Dialogue is a crucial part of the reflection-action-further action cycle, since it allows for clarification, questioning and ultimately enhanced understanding. Conversation is the means by which new ideas are expressed, doubts aired and concerns raised (Wells 1999). Extending a socio-cultural view of learning to teacher education (Lantolf and Thorne 2006), it becomes very quickly apparent that professional development occurs through dialogue. Dialogue can establish 'proximal processes' or contexts which create opportunities for learning potential (Bruner 1990). There are parallels here in the place of 'dialogic teaching' advocated by mainstream education practitioners and researchers (see, for example, Alexander 2008; Mortimer and Scott 2003; Mercer 2005). Essentially, the argument advocated by this group of researchers is that, through dialogue and discussion, children learn to think and develop together. Based on sociocultural theories of learning and development, where learning is mediated by language, the central claim of researchers like Robin Alexander and Neil Mercer is that learning occurs primarily through dialogue. I am making the same argument in a teacher education setting.

In a teacher education/development context, and from a sociocultural perspective, teachers are 'scaffolded' through their 'zones of proximal development' (ZPD) to a higher plane of understanding through the dialogues they have with other professionals (van Lier 1996). Under this perspective, reflection and action alone are insufficient means of allowing professional development – scaffolded dialogues, where issues are clarified and new levels of understanding attained, are central to reflective practice. A fuller discussion on the place of sociocultural theories of learning in second language teacher development is taken up in the next section.

## 1.2 L2 TEACHER EDUCATION AND SOCIOCULTURAL THEORY

Sociocultural theories of learning emphasise its social nature, which takes place as learners interact with the 'expert knower' 'in a context of social interactions leading to understanding' (Röhler and Cantlon 1996: 2). Under this view, learners collectively and actively construct their own knowledge and understanding by making connections, building mental schemata and concepts through collaborative meaning making.

In addition to the social nature of learning, sociocultural theory emphasises the fact that the mind is *mediated*. In his sociocultural theory of mind, Vygotsky (1978, 1986, 1999) maintains that human beings make use of symbolic tools, such as language, to both interpret and regulate the world we live in and our relationships with each other. Lantolf explains mediation as follows: 'we use symbolic tools or signs to mediate and regulate our relationships with others and with ourselves and thus change the nature of these relationships' (2000: 1). Our relationship with the world

is an indirect, or *mediated*, one, which is established through the use of symbolic tools. (Lantolf 2000; Lantolf and Thorne 2006). Understanding the ways in which human social and mental activity are organised through symbolic tools is the role of psychology, under a Vygotskian perspective. While thought and speech are separate, they are 'tightly interrelated in a dialectic unity in which publicly derived speech completes privately initiated thought' (Lantolf 2000: 7). In other words, understanding and knowledge are 'publicly derived' but privately internalised. Language, under Vygotskian theory, is 'a means for engaging in social and cognitive activity' (Ahmed 1994: 158). From a teacher education perspective, we can easily extend these ideas to demonstrate how teachers first gain new knowledge, new ideas or new understandings through interacting with colleagues or educators. This 'publicly derived' new knowledge is then privately internalised as the same teachers take ownership and apply new practices to their own context. The process is both dialectic and dialogic: it entails dialogue with other professionals which then becomes a personal or individual practice.

Although it is important to remember that Vygotskian theory was originally conceptualised in the L1 context and is directed at mother-tongue language development (Gillen 2000), it has considerable relevance to enhancing understandings of both SLA (second language acquisition) (see, for example, Lantolf and Appel 1994; Lantolf 2000; Lantolf and Thorne 2006) and teacher development (Johnson 2009). Here, I would like to develop some of the ideas put forward in the previous section and argue that a sociocultural theory of learning has much to offer in developing a more dialogic approach to teacher development.

The discussion begins with an outline of three key Vygotskian principles:

1. The social nature of knowledge.
2. Learning takes place in the zone of proximal development.
3. Learning is assisted by scaffolding.

(Please note: in the discussion which follows, learning and development are regarded as being equivalent, while 'learners' are seen as either teachers following a structured teacher education programme, or teachers working on their own professional development.)

### 1.2.1 The social nature of knowledge

The dynamism of social interaction and its effects on development are central to Vygotsky's work. Unlike many other theories of self-development, or ontogenesis, which consider the individual as an enclosed unit, Vygotsky stresses the importance of social interaction to an individual's development: 'In this view, the "dynamic edge" of development consists of interactive processes that take place between the child and others' (Hickman 1990: 237).

Learning, in the first instance, is regarded as *interpsychological*, occurring between those members of society who have already mastered skills and knowledge and those who are in the process of acquiring them (e.g., a teacher and his learners, a teacher

educator and her students). Learning, under this perspective, is defined as a social activity like others such as reading a book or listening to music – activities which have an inseparable social dimension whether performed alone or with others. According to one of Vygotsky's better-known followers, participation in even the simplest activity, such as reading a newspaper, is a socially constructed process (Leont'ev 1981). Learning a language too is regarded as a mental process which is inextricably linked to our social identity and relationships. But there is more to this argument: Leont'ev is making the point that whatever the object of our learning is, it is also socially constructed. So, for example, learning a language is socially constructed both as an activity (the learning process) and construct (the language). This is a perspective echoed in a different, linguistic context by Halliday (1978), who asserts that language itself is interwoven with social structure and system.

Sociocultural learning theory emphasises the social, dynamic and collaborative dimensions of learning; both Bruner (1983, 1990) and Vygotsky (1978, 1986, 1999) stress its 'transactional' nature, whereby learning occurs in the first instance through interaction with others, who are more experienced and in a position to guide and support the actions of the novice. During this part of the process, language is used as a 'symbolic tool' to clarify and make sense of new knowledge, with learners relying heavily on discussions with the 'expert knower'. As new ideas and knowledge are internalised, learners use language to comment on what they have learnt; oral communication is the 'organising function' (Hickman 1990: 236) used to both transmit and clarify new information and then to reflect on and rationalise what has been learnt – a gradual process of *self-regulation*, explained by Ahmed: 'a linguistically constituted mental process ... through which the locus of control of mental activity shifts from the external context ... to the internal mind' (1994: 158). In other words, cognitive development is realised when an individual's mental processing is independent of the external context; learning moves from the *interpsychological* to the *intrapersonal*. Essentially, new meanings are *appropriated*; that is, learners gain ownership and attach their own understanding. Throughout, language acts as a symbolic tool, mediating interpersonal and intrapersonal activity. This entire process occurs within the *zone of proximal development* (ZPD), the second of the principles presented here.

### 1.2.2 Learning takes place in the zone of proximal development

Vygotsky's original definition of the zone of proximal development (ZPD) is as follows:

the zone of proximal development ... is the distance between the actual development level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined by problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers. (1978: 86)

According to Lantolf, rather than attaching spatial or temporal dimensions to the construct, the ZPD should be regarded as 'a metaphor for observing and



understanding how mediated means are appropriated and internalized'. Lantolf goes on to offer his own definition of the ZPD: 'the collaborative construction of opportunities ... for individuals to develop their mental abilities' (2000: 17). A number of key terms emerge from the definitions of Vygotsky and Lantolf, including 'collaboration', 'construction', 'opportunities', 'development'. Other writers use a similar terminology: van Lier, for example, refers to opportunities for learning as 'affordances' (2000: 252), while Swain and Lapkin talk about 'occasions for learning' (1998: 320). As a construct in the present context, the value of the ZPD lies in its potential for enabling consideration of the 'give and take' in any teacher development process; that is, the ways in which – through dialogue – new understandings are acquired, developed and internalised. Throughout this book, therefore, the 'collaborative construction' of opportunities for learning is examined through the ways in which teachers collectively construct meaning through enhanced understandings of L2 classroom inter-action. The ZPD paradigm is welcomed for its inherent implication that any learning process can be broken down into a series of inter-related stages and that learners need to be helped to progress from one stage to the next through dialogue with others. It is the process of giving assistance or scaffolding which warrants more attention from a classroom discourse perspective; the discussion now turns to the third principle of the sociocultural theories considered in this section: scaffolding.

### 1.2.3 Learners are assisted by scaffolding

The term 'scaffolding' is used to refer to the linguistic support given to a learner. Support is given up to the point where a learner can 'internalise external knowledge and convert it into a tool for conscious control' (Bruner 1990: 25). Scaffolding is 'an instructional tool that reduces learning ambiguity' (Doyle 1986: 3). Central to the notion are the important polar concepts of challenge and support. Learners are led to an understanding of a task by, on the one hand, a teacher's provision of appropriate amounts of challenge to maintain interest and involvement, and, on the other, support to ensure understanding. Support typically involves segmentation and ritualisation so that learners have, in the first instance, limited choice in how they go about a task which is broken down into manageable component parts (Bruner 1990: 29). Once a task has been mastered, scaffolds are removed and the learner is left to reflect and comment on the task.

Clearly, the amount of scaffolded support given will depend very much on the perceived evaluation by the 'expert' of what is needed by the 'novice'. In a classroom context, where so much is happening at once, such fine judgements can be difficult to make. Deciding whether to intervene or withdraw in the moment by moment construction of classroom interaction requires great sensitivity and awareness on the part of the teacher and inevitably teachers do not 'get it right' every time. Similarly, in a teacher education context, teacher educators need to be sensitive regarding how much support to offer at any one time, especially in the feedback meetings which typically follow practice teaching (see Harris 2013).