

Form and Meaning: Multiple Perspectives

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CLASSROOM TALK: FORM, MEANING, AND ACTIVITY THEORY

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Thomas: ... les phrases ne peuvent pas présenter un sens complet tout en étant vides de sens.
Dick: Vous nous créez des difficultés. Si vous ne voulez pas faire des phrases avec les mots que vous devez apprendre aujourd'hui, je vous donnerai une mauvaise note.
Thomas: Bien, Dick, je vais essayer. Le pupitre est dans le cahier. Le professeur est dans la poche du gilet de la montre. Le tableau noir écrit la copie sur le maître...

—Ionesco 1974

Subject: Abdurakhm., age thirty-seven, from remote Kashgar village, illiterate.

The following syllogism is presented:

In the Far North, where there is snow, all bears are white. Novaya Zemlya is in the Far North and there is always snow there. What color are the bears there?

Subject: There are different sorts of bears.

Failure to infer from syllogism.

The syllogism is repeated.

Subject: I don't know; I've seen a black bear, I've never seen any others . . . Each locality has its own animals: if it's white, they will be white; if it's yellow, they will be yellow.

Appeals only to personal, graphic experience.

But what kind of bears are there in Novaya Zemlya?

Subject: We always speak only of what we see; we don't talk about what we haven't seen.

The same.

But what do my words imply?

The syllogism is repeated.

Subject: Well, it's like this: our tzar isn't like yours, and yours isn't like ours. Your words can be answered only by someone who was there, and if a person wasn't there he can't say anything on the basis of your words.

The same.

But on the basis of my words—in the North, where there is always snow, the bears are white, can you gather what kind of bears there are in Novaya Zemlya?

Subject: If a man was sixty or eighty and had seen a white bear and had told about it, he could be believed, but I've never seen one and hence I can't say.

—Luria 1976, pp. 108–109

Everyone—both within the literature and far removed from it—notes that classroom discourse is peculiar. Historically, foreign language educators have focused less on the socially situated mediational nature, that is, the cultural meaning underlying its singular peculiarity, than on achieving quantifiably assessable and exportable strategies for reforming the classroom. These typically include cunning or elaborate strategies to naturalize the talk that takes place there. Even with reforms fully in place, however, classroom talk remains, even in the best of times, occasionally absurd, somewhat inauthentic and artificial.

In positing a need for research on the socially and historically situated reasons why classroom talk is so peculiar, this paper invokes some socio-historical influences on speech in classrooms, emphasizing in particular the category of discourse that is usually associated with focus on form.

To clarify the sociocultural reasons why classroom talk presents manifest peculiarities requires a change in analytical stance: Analyses of classroom discourse are typically performed in an ahistorical, socially isolated way. The features of classroom talk may be exhaustively described, but, without research into or reference to their origins, they cannot be adequately explained. When the implicit rules of classroom talk are not linked to broader social categories, their significance to learners is poorly understood and frequently underestimated.

In the implicitly shared value and belief system of language researchers and teachers, such hidden rules may be construed as impermanent, insubstantial, and susceptible of technical abatement or modification. In applied research, solutions to the problem—or milestones on the path leading to solutions—are to be proposed: technical recommendations for broadening classroom discourse options. These are typically grounded in a panoptic social view according to which classroom activity is centrally controlled, either by the persona of the teacher or in tasks devised and distributed by the teacher.

In fact, research rather suggests that teachers and materials developers may and do propose tasks, but those tasks are interpreted and carried out by learners according to their own criteria: Both control of the classroom and definition or negotiation of the meaning of tasks are inherently socially distributed among all the participants. Within our pragmatic tradition of applied research as problem solving, this paper offers no new technical solutions. Rather, it argues that in observing foreign language classroom discourse, invoking socially embedded actions and histories

may lead us to understand better the nature and meaning of learners' classroom talk.

The Search for Context

Educational linguistics has in recent years moved toward increased scrutiny of the complex relationship that obtains among learning, ideological motivation, and participation in socially situated discourse. Analyses of linguistic phenomena are frequently linked to categories used by social theorists. These movements occur within a broad trend toward legitimizing social theory within linguistics (Gee 1990; Fairclough 1995). This trend was evidenced during a recent plenary address by Courtney Cazden (1998), situated in comments on changes that have occurred in the commonly accepted meanings of the term "discourse."

Within linguistics, orthodox discourse analysis has traditionally concerned itself with the structural organization of naturally occurring samples of language use. In recent years, however, following Gee (1990), the term "discourse" has come to refer to: (1) broader categories of socially situated meaning, so-called "constellations of repeated meanings" (Stubbs 1996, p. 158 as cited in Cazden 1998, p. 12); or (2) "ways of understanding" (Cazden 1998, p. 11). The latter emerge from histories of participation in particular kinds of institutionally sanctioned language use and are linked to explicit or implicit ideological stances. Cazden accordingly categorizes approaches to discourse along two lines: Discourse that is principally concerned with naturally occurring language use, or *Discourse 1*; and discourse that analyzes "ways of understanding," or *Discourse 2*.

In parallel with Fairclough (1995), Cazden notes that there is rich potential in studying the interaction between Discourse 1, traditionally the purview of linguistics, and Discourse 2, traditionally the focus of social theory. These two categories, in fact, constitute a dyadic system, wherein the two forms of discourse are mutually constitutive: Ways of talking construct ways of understanding, and they are also engendered by them.

The importance of this kind of analysis for understanding classroom language use is illustrated in the work of Wertsch (1990). Wertsch has pointed out the ways in which the "voice of decontextualized rationality" is accorded a privileged status, both in formal schooling and more generally throughout modern society. That predominant voice, intimately associated with modes of rational Enlightenment discourse, such as

utilitarianism, accompanied the rise of literacy in Europe. Yet it is often accorded the status of a “primordial existence that underlies our ability to use language in discourse” (Wertsch 1990, p. 120). As Scribner and Cole (1981) have demonstrated, much of the activity taking place in schools is related to mastering the discourse of rational decontextualized representation. Rational discourse in school is indeed a “way of understanding” that can be characterized, in Cazden’s taxonomy, as a Discourse 2. This paper explores the mutually constitutive relationship between this Discourse 2 (abstract rationality) and samples of naturally occurring speech and writing in the foreign language classroom (Discourse 1).

Theoretical Background

Explaining the mutually constitutive interrelation between Discourse 1 and Discourse 2 has long been a goal of Vygotskian sociocultural theory. As summarized by Wertsch, “the task of Vygotsky’s sociocultural approach to mind was to specify how human mental functioning reflects and constitutes its historical, institutional, and cultural setting” (Wertsch 1990, p. 115). Vygotskian theory makes two specific and powerful claims about the fundamental nature of the Discourse 1/Discourse 2 relationship: (1) that higher mental functions in the individual have their origins in social life, and therefore the origin of thought is to be sought in the external, historical, and social forms of human activity; and (2) that in analyzing mental functioning, semiotic mediation should be assigned primacy: Higher mental function assumes form mediated by tools and signs and cannot be understood or meaningfully discussed apart from them.

Within sociocultural theory, activity theory analyzes the “why,” “what,” and “how” of participants’ activity. The specific task of activity theory (Leont’ev 1981) is to examine the genesis and relevance of motives for mental activity. According to Lantolf and Appel (1994, p. 21), “human sociocultural activity that gives rise to higher forms of cognition, is comprised of contextual, intentional, and circumstantial dimensions.” For language research, this kind of analysis provides links—via semiotic systems, especially language—between the institutionally and socioculturally defined motives of participants and their concrete actions and operations; that is, between Discourse 2 (which encompasses ways of understanding) and Discourse 1 (which comprises naturally occurring language use in a particular setting).

Activity theory replaces the individual as locus of development (and inquiry, within experimental research) with an analysis of activity defined as purposeful social action in context (Leont'ev 1981; Lantolf and Appel 1994). As Lantolf and Pavlenko (1995) remind us, activity theory is not so much interested in explaining the *causes* of behavior as in explicating the *dispositions* people adopt toward mental activity under certain conditions. Thus in the foreign language classroom, teachers' assignments and directives do not directly compel learners to behave in specified ways; rather, because mental activity is always goal-directed, learners do respond, but they clearly do so according to social predispositions arising from sociohistorically generated motives. These motives certainly include ingratiating themselves with teachers (or otherwise) for culturally apparent reasons, but they equally include motives such as a broad, implicit, and frequently conflictual understanding about the meaning of school (Tharp and Gallimore 1988), and, by extension, of *schoolwork*.

Motives are associated with participation in Discourse 2s; they are "culturally constructed and validated discourses that organize our world according to certain meanings and not others" (Lantolf and Pavlenko 1995, p. 110). The formation of motives is thus crucially dependent upon the kinds of access people have, and have had in the past, to particular semiotic resources, and these resources, as Wertsch (1998) states, offer both affordances and constraints. According to Harré and Gilette:

Ultimately there will be customary and widely endorsed practices that do, in fact, constrain someone in that he or she is an agent with a certain historical, cultural, and mental position; these will both form the person and influence what he or she can become (Harré and Gilette 1994, p. 122).

Text-Based Realities: Form and Meaning within Rational Discourse Processes

In *Negotiating Sense in the Zone of Proximal Development*, Wertsch and Minnick (1990) attempt to synthesize and correlate observations from social theories of modern life with accounts of psychological and developmental discourse in schools. Specifically, following Weber and Habermas, they note the ubiquity of rationality as "a criterial feature of modern human consciousness" (Wertsch and Minnick 1990, p. 72). This is reflected in its

status as “a dominant, privileged mode of thinking and speaking in formal schooling” (p. 85). The classical activities of schooled learning form instances of *rational discourse*, a way of speaking that is mutually constitutive with the institutional organization of modern society. Both manifest the “fixed, unquestioned goals, technical rules, context-free language, and problem-solving orientation” characteristic of rational discourse (p. 72).

As Wertsch and Minnick (1990) demonstrate in their observation of the socialization of children in schools, it is possible to forge a link between the institutional presence of rational discourse and its impact on psychological processes. A precedent for this work exists in early studies carried out by Vygotsky (1978) and Luria (1976). Within the context of early Soviet efforts to build a modern technological society, Vygotsky and Luria had attempted to document society’s evolution by tracing individuals’ routes as they ascended to “higher-level” mental functioning—to “scientific” (Vygotsky 1978) or “academic” (Luria 1976) concepts.

As a mode of discourse, Wertsch and Minnick (1990) view rationality as a language or voice (Discourse 2) whose classroom uses (Discourse 1) can be identified. Children are encouraged to adopt rationality during the literacy practices of formal schooling. Wertsch and Minnick specify that rationality in school is concerned with the use and privileging of *text-based realities*, by which problem spaces are created, maintained, and acted upon through semiotic means. In the case of the logical syllogism, language creates a world apart, one whose boundaries must be known and respected to participate in classroom talk. For example, given that “All the bears in the Far North are white” and further that “Novaya Zemlya is a city in the Far North,” we are expected to accept and apply these bounded aspects of the syllogistic world in an accepted fashion. The implicit purpose is to demonstrate linguistic ability to manipulate abstract signs, demonstrated in action rationally: answering a question about the color of bears in Novaya Zemlya. The purpose is pointedly not to consider the nature of bears or our experience of bears, and any recourse to such consideration will almost certainly doom us to failure. Invoking experiential knowledge external to the syllogistic world—for example, if Ivan has been to Novaya Zemlya and has actually seen a brown or blue or red bear there—can affirm a syllogistically incorrect answer, thereby threatening the structure of a rationalist ideational space founded exclusively on logic. Clearly what is being discussed are words and how to manipulate them effectively, not meanings or experiences; in classroom-based discourse, experience of

bears, therefore, cannot be permitted to inflect implicitly syllogistic discussion of bears.

Another characteristic of text-based realities is the decontextualization of linguistic elements. These elements may at any time be freely abstracted from communicative context and viewed in isolation as objects of analysis: “In this practice, language becomes an object of reflection while simultaneously continuing to be an instrument of communication” (Wertsch and Minnick 1990, p. 75). Wertsch and Minnick argue that the object of analysis within text-based realities can be either form or meaning. Language teachers and students frequently do abandon experiential meaning to analyze the formal properties of language within the text-based realities they create. Without additional signs demanding a context-based response, a student account of personal experience might reasonably elicit classroom talk about the conjugation of verbs. Precisely how the event took place might reasonably lead to a discussion of the *passé composé* versus *imparfait*.

In the wider context of formal schooling, one of the main foci of text-based realities is the abstract meaning of particular words, the analysis of sense relations among lexemes or vocabulary items, where “sense” is the denotative meaning of a word abstracted from communicative context. For example, the relationship between the words “ophthalmologist” and the definition of “eye doctor” is assumed to be one of tautology in ideational space: It must universally obtain, independent of when or how the terms are used in communicative action.

By contrast, everyday communication typically does not involve analysis of strictly formal aspects of language, nor does it treat sense relations. Daily communication instead focuses on communicating about other, ostensibly nonlinguistic topics. But to succeed in school is to learn how to construct decontextualized language in order to manipulate text-based realities. Students learn to respect the boundaries of these realities and to operate on their objects in order to derive the results desired by teachers or instructional materials:

... rational discourse in school can largely be explicated in terms of text-based realities. The problem space of a text-based reality is created, maintained, and manipulated through the semiotic means employed in discourse. Furthermore, a text-based reality is characterized by boundedness and decontextualization. This decontextualization,

which may focus either on the form or on the meaning of an expression, involves making words and other signs into objects of reflection instead of means of communication (Wertsch and Minnick 1990, p. 78).

A well-known early example of research on the rational discourse of schooling can be found in Luria's (1976) studies comparing the performance of literate and nonliterate subjects in Central Asia on a series of tasks involving text-based realities. Luria compared three groups of subjects: those who had no schooling, those who had achieved minimal literacy, and those who had several years of schooling. Luria was interested in documenting the cognitive changes brought about by modernization under the Soviet regime. One of the tasks involved categorizing a series of objects. For example, subjects were shown pictures of four objects and were asked to select the one that did not belong with the others. In the following transcript, with editorial annotations by the researcher underlined, he has shown the series *hammer-saw-log-hatchet* to a 60-year-old illiterate peasant from the village of Yardan:

SUBJECT: *They all fit here! The saw has to chop the log, the hammer has to hammer it, and the hatchet has to chop it. And if you want to chop the log up really good, you need the hammer. You can't take any of these things away. There isn't any you don't need!*

Replaces abstract classification with situational thinking.

RESEARCHER: *But in the first example I showed you that the mouse didn't fit in.*

SUBJECT: *The mouse didn't fit it! But here all the things are very much alike [ukhshaidi]. The saw saws the log, and the hatchet chops it; you just have to hit harder with the hammer.*

RESEARCHER: *But one fellow told me the log didn't belong here.*

SUBJECT: *Why'd he say that? If we say the log isn't like the other things and put it off to one side, we'd be making a mistake. All these things are needed for the log.*

Considers idea of utility more important than similarity.

RESEARCHER: *But that other fellow said that the saw, hammer, and hatchet are all alike in some way, while the log isn't.*

SUBJECT: *So what if they're not alike? They all work together and chop the log.*

Here, everything works right, here everything's just fine.

RESEARCHER: *Look, you can use one word—tools—for these three but not for the log.*

SUBJECT: *What sense does it make to use one word for them if they're not going to work together?*

Rejects use of generalizing term.

RESEARCHER: *What word could you use for these things?*

SUBJECT: *The words people use: saw, hammer, hatchet. You can't use one word for them all!*

RESEARCHER: *Could you call them tools?*

SUBJECT: *Yes, you could, except the log isn't a tool. Still, the way we look at it, the log has to be here. Otherwise, what good are the others?*

Employs predominantly situational thinking again.

—Luria 1976, pp. 58–59

With few exceptions, Luria found that his illiterate subjects were unable—or, perhaps, unwilling—to define the situation according to text-based realities. That is, they interpreted the tasks with reference to the concrete realities of their life experience; they refused to respect the boundedness and decontextualization implied by academic tasks. Parallel research demonstrated that the experience of having participated in even a few weeks of formal classroom discourse generally made participants—children and adults alike—far more disposed to accept the ideational space of text-based realities.

Luria assumed that such “situational thinking” was inherently inferior to the discourse of rationalism characteristic of schooled literacy and associated with progress and modernization. The latter, abstract rationalist thinking, was assumed to be a more complex and mediated higher-mental process. In this belief, Luria demonstrated his commitment to a Marxist worldview of evolutionary progress, accompanied by changes in mental stances, that is no longer widely accepted: that the process of constructing a modern communist state was an inevitable step forward in the social and mental evolution of humankind. Contemporary interpreters of Luria's data are therefore quick to remind us that all languages, including

the Uzbek and Russian languages used in Luria's study, have the semiotic potential to create bounded text-based realities.

Nor, of course, is situational discourse inherently simple. Studies of "situational thinking" in a variety of settings have also repeatedly demonstrated the complexity of the semiotic means involved (e.g., Lave and Wenger 1991; Rogoff 1990). Despite the manifest difficulties surrounding their unfortunate interpretation, however, Luria's data remain compelling in their elucidation of the practices of schooled learning in contrast with other modes of discourse: They highlight the peculiarities of rational discourse in schools.

In analyzing children's mastery of rational discourse, Wertsch and Minnick note that the structural features and characteristics of text-based realities are not usually made explicit. Nor do teachers typically explain how to perform within text-based realities in any direct way. They do not, for example, instruct children in the use of metalanguages to guide their performance in text-based realities. Rather, they continually reinterpret students' utterances by exemplary action, restating and resituating them within a scientific paradigm. Teachers also continually participate in creating and maintaining text-based realities with their students, guiding students to redefine experiential situations by representing them in forms appropriate to academic discourse.

The importance of text-based realities is *implicit* within the discourse of the classroom. Equally implicit are the rules for operating within them. As such, they contribute to the construction of a deeply significant background framework for action in school. This infrequently examined framework is, in turn, attached to a "naturalized ideology" (Fairclough 1995) of schooled literacy, one that arose along with the spread of rational discourse within "modern" institutionalized schools, beginning in the nineteenth century. Underlying this ideology is a complex of ideas about literacy that Collins (1996) terms "textualism," the central beliefs of which include belief in the fixity of text, the transparency of language, and the universality of shared, available meaning. The textualist conception is associated with the broader criteria of modern Utilitarian rationalism. It defines the features of literacy as individually owned, quantifiable skills, typically focusing on the formal features of language: "Technical conceptions of literacy define reading and writing as skills, as precise, decomposable, quantifiable things . . ." (Collins 1996, p. 205).

Text-Based Realities in the Foreign Language Classroom

Discourses on language-learning tasks are typically grounded in a combination of rationalist assumptions about the nature of learning and Utilitarian panoptic assumptions (Foucault 1977; Scollon and Scollon 1995) about the locus of control in the classroom. If learning consists of building internal representations of form within the minds of individual learners, it is legitimate to search for those tasks that will most efficiently advance that process. Thus, for example, researchers such as Pica (1987) have searched for tasks and participant configurations that foster the negotiation of meaning that is presumed to lead to acquisition of form. Pedagogical discourses in textbooks routinely propose sequences of tasks that assume a seamless progression from mechanical manipulation of forms to communicative use of those forms. Underlying both approaches is the assumption that authority and control in the classroom are fundamentally centralizable and that they reside in the teacher's authoritative discourse or in the assignment of the task. Tasks are believed to constitute blueprints for performance: By implication, once the best or most efficient tasks have been discovered, it will be possible to provide all teachers with discrete units of technical knowledge that will enhance the process of language learning.

As Coughlan and Duff (1994) have shown, however, the meaning and outcomes of simple tasks are quite complex. To understand them, it is necessary to separate the abstract rationalist behavioral blueprint from the activity of participants. Coughlan and Duff's study shows how any given learning task will be realized in a variety of ways, depending on how the participants define the task's meaning within a specific situation inseparable from its mediating social and historical context. Studies by Kumaradivelu (1991) and Willis (1996) conclude that learners' interpretation of tasks can differ significantly from teachers' perceptions of those same tasks. A number of additional studies further indicate that how learners interpret the meaning of tasks can be at significant variance with the behavioral blueprint implied by teachers' intentions. When introduced into a classroom informed by historical and social experience, the interpretation of tasks also varies greatly from that predicted by theoretical stances that exist within the ideational space of SLA. For example, in a classroom-based

study of the negotiation of meaning, testing the relevance of SLA tasks in the classroom, Foster (1998) observed no overall effect for task type or grouping. Many students in groups did not speak at all, and many more produced no negotiated interaction. Foster, therefore, concludes that negotiation of meaning is not a strategy that classroom learners are pre-disposed to employ when they encounter gaps in their understanding.

Given such variation in the interpretation of tasks by learners, how then can research attain a reasoned evaluation of teaching practices? *Activity Theory* would suggest that we examine the situation *as defined by the learners, themselves*, this is, as it has been shaped by histories of participation in the sociocultural practices of schooled learning. Within the framework of Activity Theory proposed by Coughlan and Duff (1994), following Vygotsky, Luria, and especially Leont'ev, development is a dynamic, interpersonal, and goal-directed process. Learners approach tasks in ways that are shaped by motives formed during previous participation in sociohistorically generated cultural practices. The outcome of particular classroom activities depends less on the externally imposed parameters of tasks than on the situation definition of the participants, that is, the way they represent the relevant setting, objects, events, and action patterns (Ashton 1996).

Clearly, no approach can account for all of the variation in learners' perceptions of tasks. However, it is also true that one universally relevant context for situating this discussion is institutional learning in schools and that the features of rational discourse pervade that context. Setting aside consideration of personal experience of classroom teaching, it follows syllogistically that, insofar as language education is a particular case of general schooled literacy, text-based realities are pertinent to the analysis of foreign language classroom: Rather than asking whether students themselves or a given task itself focuses on form or meaning, we may ask to what extent the participants' definition of the situation and their actions are shaped by a history of involvement in the boundedness and decontextualization of text-based realities in school, a context that applies whenever students approach a language learning task.

To recall: text-based realities construct a bounded semiotic world within which language is decontextualized and treated as an object of reflection. We can therefore anticipate that text-based realities in the language classroom will manifest a predominant focus on the formal properties of the language, in combination with a textualist emphasis

on quantifiable skills. It is not difficult to find examples of classroom discourse that demonstrate the crossover from the broader realm of schooled literacy into a pervasive use of text-based realities in the foreign language classroom. As the following examples illustrate, text-based realities are invoked in a variety of settings and participation configurations, including both teacher-fronted and learner-learner discourse.

The first example is borrowed from Leeman-Guthrie's (1984) analysis of intake and communication in introductory French classes. Here, the teacher introduces an exercise on the formation of questions by inversion:

Example 1

1. *Teacher: Bon, dans le livre, à la page trois cent quatre-vingt treize, n'est-ce pas, il y a beaucoup de choses au sujet de l'inversion, beaucoup d'exemples aussi.*

[Good, in the book, on page 393, right, there are a lot of things about inversion, a lot of examples, too.]

2. *Faisons très rapidement exercice six, en bas de la page, pour pratiquer l'inversion.*

[Let's do exercise six quickly, at the bottom of the page, to practice inversion.]

3. *Par exemple, il y a deux personnes qui parlent, vous et votre camarade.*

[For example, there are two people talking, you and your friend.]

4. *Ton frère, a-t-il une voiture?*

[Does your brother have a car?]

5. *Ici, l'inversion avec le verbe "avoir."*

[Here, inversion with the verb "avoir."]

6. *Et puis on peut répondre, "Oui, il a une voiture," "Non, il n'a pas de voiture."*

[And then you can answer, "Yes, he has a car," "No, he doesn't have a car."]

7. *Okay?*

8. *Brian, posez la question à John ici.*

[Brian, ask John here that question.]

9. *Avec numéro un.*

[With number one.]

10. Student A: *Ta soeur, a-t-elle une voiture?*
[Does your sister have a car?]
11. Student B: *Oui, elle a, uh...*
[Yes, she has, uh . . .]
12. Teacher: *Une voiture?*
[A car?]
13. Student B: *Oui, elle a une voiture.*
[Yes, she has a car.]
14. Teacher: *Est-ce que vous avez une soeur, oui ou non?*
[Do you have a sister, yes or no?]
15. Non, il n'a ...
[No, he doesn't . . .]
16. *Mais il faut, il faut dire oui ou non, n'est-ce pas?*
[But you have to, you have to say yes or no, don't you?]
17. *Oui, elle a une voiture.*
[Yes, she has a car.]
18. *Donc, ta soeur, a-t-elle une voiture?*
[So your sister, does your sister have a car?]
19. *Oui ou non.*
[Yes or no.]

Leeman-Guthrie's analysis focuses on the difficulties students may experience in interpreting the teacher's utterances due to a "constant fragmentation of focus between linguistic rules, the mechanics of accomplishing the lesson, and the 'real world' of the things and people present in the classroom" (Leeman-Guthrie 1984, p. 42). However, she notes with interest that students do not seem "in the least confused by the constant shifts in topic," citing a number of minimal cues available in the classroom and the textbook that allow the students to participate. Typically, the interaction begins with an element of absurdity: Students are required to accept an untrue proposition (that Student B has a sister) in order to participate.

If we situate this interaction within the broader context of schooled learning, it becomes clear that there is nothing unusual about this teacher's construction of a text-based reality. If the students and the teacher fail to achieve intersubjectivity within a common (or at least overlapping) definition of the situation, this dilemma is brief and easily overcome—*once the*

students recognize and accept that the teacher is organizing the discourse as a bounded semiotic world involving decontextualization of linguistic elements. Student B may, in fact, have entered the interaction without having recognized the boundaries of the text-based reality, but he is experienced in matters of schooling: He very quickly asserts that his nonexistent sister has a nonexistent car, thus demonstrating his understanding of and compliance with the teacher's implicit directive. Hence, as an example of Discourse 1, this interaction demonstrates the significance of text-based realities and illustrates the ongoing processes of socialization linked to and inherent in their use. These social and historical processes are continuous through learners' experience in school and across different kinds of classrooms.

A second example demonstrates how text-based realities come into play as learners in a small group perform a task intended to elicit everyday, or "situational," (Luria 1976) discourse. This example is taken from data gathered for a study of learner interactive practices in intermediate French language classes (Kinging 1990). Three learners, Abby, Bess, and Caleb, are performing a task involving conversation cards. Abby and Bess are ostensibly to ask one another questions about their lives in French, questions inscribed in English on the cards. Caleb is holding a card with correct versions of all the questions in French. His task, as instructed, is to assist Abby and Bess in posing their questions.

Example 2

1. C: ta question.

[Your question.]

2. A: um où est-ce que tu... passe um... ta um... ta... tas enfance?

[Um where do you . . . Spend um . . . Your um . . . Your . . . Yours childhood?]

3. C: tu as compris?

[Did you understand?]

4. A: ton enfance?

[Your childhood?]

5. B: oh. oui. je... je... je passais je... je passais mon enfance à Washington D.C.

[Oh. Yes. I . . . I . . . I used to spend I . . . I used to spend my childhood in Washington, D.C.]

6. C: quelle forme de verbe as-tu utilisée? pour la question.
[What form of the verb did you use? For the question?]
7. A: tu.
["tu."]
8. C: tu. où est-ce que...
["tu." where did . . .]
9. A: vous vous.
["vous. vous"]
10. C: all right où est-ce que tu...
[All right where did you . . .]
11. A: passe?
[spend ((present tense))]
12. C: c'est la c'est quelle forme? quelle forme de verbe passé.
[It's the it's which form? Which form of the verb "passé"?]
13. A: oh oh um.
14. C: c'est la forme... la question...
[its the form . . . the question . . .]
15. A: passe est est present mais passé et...
["passe" is is present but past and . . .]
16. C: et tu dis... comment dis-tu la question au passé composé?
[and you say . . . how do you say the question in the "passé composé"?]
17. A: oh ok c'est ça. où est-ce que. où est-ce que tu... um tu es?
tu...
[oh ok that's it. where. where you . . . um you "es"? ((incorrect choice of auxiliary verb)) you . . .]
18. C: avec avoir.
[with "avoir" (correct auxiliary verb)]
19. A: um uh tu as. Où est-ce que tu as passé uh ton? enfance?
[um uh you. Where did you spend uh your? childhood?]
20. C: pas ton.
[not "ton."]
21. A: uh... ta?
[uh . . . "ta"?]

22. C: oh. that's um tu as raison! ton enfance!

[oh. that's um you are right! "ton enfance!"]

23. A: ah parce que... enfance...

[ah because . . . "enfance"]

24. C: oui.

[yes.]

25. A. commence... avec... um

[starts . . . with . . . um]

26. C: e.

[e.]

27. A: e.

[e.]

28. C: e. très bien! très bien.

[E. very good! very good!]

The stated goal of this interaction is achieved by Abby and Bess in the first five turns: Abby asks a question, and Bess answers it. Nonetheless, the stretch of discourse devoted to this question-and-answer cycle is actually twenty-eight turns long because, in turn 6, Caleb assumes the role of teacher. He seizes control of the discourse, reorients the interaction, and reinterprets the preceding turns as a text-based reality. Within that textualized idea space, several textual aspects are analyzed: the correct choice of address form, the conjugation of the verb, and the form of the possessive pronoun. It is interesting to note that as experienced students, Abby and Bess do not object in the slightest to the transformation of their utterances into objects of reflection and analysis. Nor do they seem confused or in any way at odds with this operation, despite the fact that it removes all experiential content from their discourse, appropriating its meaning from Discourse 2 to Discourse 1. Rather, they accept it and actively participate with Caleb as he challenges the formal properties of their talk and directs the refinement of the utterances toward the standard forms he holds on his card. Thus the learners continue to invoke text-based realities in their independent classroom work. In this example, the situational meaning of their dialogue leads them to subject their brief action to a far longer process of rational analysis, in itself a familiar characteristic of textualized academic discourse.

A final example is taken from a database of electronic mail messages exchanged between a class of third-year American learners of French and an advanced ESL class in France. The instructors had assigned all learners an e-mail partner in the companion class for an express purpose: They were to improve their communicative competence and cross-cultural understanding via a series of parallel tasks and texts organized around the topic of French/American intercultural communication (Kingingier, Gourvès-Hayward, and Simpson 1999). In practice, however, the students reinterpreted the exchange of e-mail as a medium for informal socializing. Clearly based on their experience of classroom talk and school learning, they reinterpreted the task to focus on the formal properties of the French language: A typical exchange of e-mail would involve writing about various aspects of everyday life and, in the case of several pairs of learners, correction and rewriting of the American learners' previous messages. The following example is taken from the correspondence of two learners whom we will call Victoria and Raoul. Victoria, the American learner, had sent the following message to Raoul:

Example 3

On Sun, 22 Feb 1998, Victoria wrote:

Raoul,

Salut! Ça va?

Merci pour la lettre en allemand. Je ne suis pas aussi avancé que moi en allemand. Mais j'ai compris assez.

Je vais écrire de ma vie quotidienne. Comme aujourd'hui. Je suis reveillé à 7h30. J'ai travaillé de 8h à 4h30. (Je travaille dans un hôpital. Je suis standartiste. Je travaille 20-30 heures chaque semaine.) Puis, je suis allée (avec mon mari) à l'épicirie pour acheter du détergent de lavevaisselle. Ensuite, Danny (mon mari) et moi sommes allés de la laboratoire d'ordinateur. Ce soir, nous allons manger le dîner et regarder des films. J'aime regarder des films. J'ai vu un peu de films français. Je doit partir maintenant.

A bientôt!

Victoria

Raoul,

Hi! How are you?

Thank you for the letter in German. I am not as advanced as me in German. But I understood enough.

I am going to write about my everyday life. Like today. I woke up at 7:30. I worked from 8 to 4:30. (I work in a hospital. I am a phone operator. I work 20-30 hours each week.) Then, I went (with my husband) to the grocery store to buy dishwashing detergent. Then, Danny (my husband) and I went to the computer lab. Tonight, we are going to eat dinner and watch films. I like watching films. I have seen a few French films. I have to go now.

See you later,

Victoria

On Monday, February 23, Raoul prefaced his response to this message (in English) by copying the original and adding corrections (given here in underlined italics):

On Sun, 22 Feb 1998, Victoria wrote:

Raoul,

Salut! Ça va?

Merci pour la lettre en allemand. Je ne suis pas aussi avancé que
avancée

moi en allemand. Mais j'ai compris assez.

toi *j'en ai compris assez*

Je vais écrire de ma vie quotidienne. Comme aujourd'hui. Je suis
parler (we can say "parler de" but not "écrire de")
réveillé à 7h30. J'ai travaillé de 8h à 4h30. (Je travaille dans un
réveillée (because you're a girl! But the rules about the verbs "se"
something are complicated. Even I don't know them very good. I'll
look them up for you.)

hôpital. Je suis une standartiste. Je travaille 20-30 heures chaque
Je suis standardiste. Je travaille de 20 à 30 heures

semaine.) Puis, je suis allée (avec mon mari) à l'épicerie pour
l'épicerie pour
 acheter du détergent de lave-vaisselle. Ensuite, Danny (mon mari)
acheter pour lave-vaisselle
 et moi sommes allés de la laboratoire d'ordinateur. Ce soir, nous
au laboratoire d'informatique
 allons manger le dîner et regarder des films. J'aime regarder des
 films. J'ai vu un peu de films français. Je doit partir maintenant.
J'ai vu quelques films français.

A bientôt!

Victoria

In reading the rest of Raoul's response to Victoria in English, it is clear that he had little difficulty in comprehending the social and propositional meaning of her e-mail. In response, he offers commentary on French films along with details about his own "day in the life." However, in this example as elsewhere, a routine feature of e-mail exchange for learners is the transformation of personal messages into text-based realities. These objects are then subject to extensive formal analysis. Thus in his corrected/correcting version of Victoria's message, Raoul treats her writing as an object containing elements that can be extracted, analyzed, and commented on in turn. The positive disposition these learners held toward the activity of e-mail exchange, and the apparent positive regard they had for one another, suffered no ill effects from this routine, critical, and predictable scrutiny of message forms. This suggests that on both sides of the Atlantic, the presence of text-based realities is so ingrained a feature of language classroom discourse that it is perceived as normal, nonintrusive, and, in some ways essential.

Discussion

As noted, discourses on language learning are typically grounded in rationalist assumptions about the nature of learning. The distinction between "form" and "meaning," for example, has existed in various guises within the American foreign-language teaching literature of recent decades (and throughout the history of language teaching, according to Musumeci 1997), with divergent understandings of the learner's task

giving rise to debate. A common thread in these discussions is that “form” and “meaning” are construed less as activities in social contexts than as metaphorically substantive acquirable things, and the debate has accordingly focused on the means of promoting individual learners’ acquisition of those things.

In combination with a Utilitarian and panoptic view of the location of social control in classrooms, language-acquisition research generates implications for teaching, which, in recent years, have increasingly emphasized technical solutions to promote meaningful language use and diversify learners’ participation in discourse. The solutions proposed include, for example, task-based syllabi, small group and pair work, and participation formats enabled by communication technologies such as e-mail and videoconferencing. All such propositions predict that changes in teaching techniques will engender changes in learners’ activity.

One objective of this paper is to document a fact of which most teachers are already quite aware: that changes in participation format do not ensure that learners will change their interpretations of classroom activity. The data presented suggest that all forms of classroom participation, including teacher-led classroom discussion, small group and pair work, and international keypal arrangements, are susceptible to interpretation as text-based realities. To understand why this is so will require that researchers attend to the broader contexts of schooled learning, to learners’ histories of participation in those contexts, and to the formation of motives grounded in sociocultural activity.

Such understanding may not lead to new technical solutions, but it does bring the dilemma of communicative teaching in schools into sharper focus. Specifically, it suggests that learners’ understanding of classroom language is likely to include the assumption that the rational discourse of text-based realities is naturally superior and generally more useful than the “situational” discourse practices of everyday life. To challenge this assumption is to question the construct of abstract rationality as it is learned and practiced in schools.

If the goal of communicative language teaching is to promote situationally appropriate language use in a variety of everyday contexts, then it may be necessary to work at reshaping learners’ interpretations of the language classroom. One way to proceed might be via systematic and explicit work on language awareness (van Lier 1995), to enhance learners’ understanding of contextual variation in communication, and thereby to help

them perceive the need to participate in a range of discourses, including both academic work and “everyday” situational activities. In order to facilitate the “disembedding of language learning from the prevailing discourse of lessons,” a key issue for language pedagogy, according to Breen (1996, p. 101) among others, it may be helpful to enlist the informed support of learners directly.

Because text-based realities form a vital aspect of the “natural” discourse of schooling and of the wider society’s definition of rational thought, however, it may not be reasonable to assume that institutional language education can or should always be disembedded from its social context. Therefore the argument presented here suggests a need for continued professional dialogue on the definition of “communicative competence” as that construct applies specifically to the context of schooled language and literacy. As defined by Savignon (1997), “communicative competence” is a “dynamic” and “context-specific” construct (pp. 14–15). Because communicative competence is context-specific, it stands to reason that the abilities developed in school will be characteristic of schooled learning to the extent that learners interpret their work as a special case of institutional education. School talk is highly significant to learners, whether it involves focus on form or the negotiation of sense relations (or focus on meaning). In addition to promoting change and variety in classroom discourses, the profession must account for and work with the opportunities and constraints of classroom language learning. Therefore the profession would benefit from a greater appreciation of classroom language use in its relation to the broader ideologies and practices of schooling as they are appropriated by learners and revealed in learners’ activity.

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