Using the Discourse Toolkit in Your Classroom
by Christine M. Jacknick and Maureen T. Matarese-Balmat

Interaction lies at the center of everything teachers and learners do, but teacher preparation has often ignored discourse in favor of content and method (Johnson, 2006). As Rex and Schiller (2009) say, however, “talk is key to classroom learning” (p. ix). Recent changes in standards (Common Core) and teacher certification (edTPA) place an emphasis not only on the language students need to support content learning but also on modes of participation that engage students. Analyzing talk in your classroom will allow you to specify terms like rapport and engagement by understanding how your discursive choices affect opportunities for participation and learning.

Why Record?
One teacher reflected, post-observation, that she said “okay” a lot and perhaps should stop saying it so often, without considering what “okay” accomplishes in the classroom. By recording our teaching, we take a step back from it and gain perspective through analysis. Recording is an essential part of reflective practice for a few simple reasons. First, as humans, we are good at remembering the gist or tone of what was said, but even a few seconds later, we quickly forget the details of what was said. Recordings allow us to slow classroom talk down, paying attention to interaction in a way that real-time teaching seldom allows. Second, this slowing down allows us to unpack “good” and “bad” moments in the classroom (e.g., a lively discussion vs. one where no students spoke). Finally, many teacher observations provide only a quantitative overview of talk. While this information is helpful in a general way, quantity does not tell us about quality of talk.

How Do I Record?
How you record depends on what you are interested in, i.e., one camera focused toward the front of the room is sufficient to capture teacher talk. If you are interested in student talk, you’ll want to make sure cameras are placed close enough to students, who tend to be quieter. Video cameras are best, because video allows us to see gesture, eye gaze, and positioning—all of which are crucial for understanding how learning happens (Jacknick & Thornbuty, 2013). Multiple cameras help, but are not necessary. Equipment is readily available through personal devices, like iPhones or GoPro cameras. These small cameras are less intrusive than larger camcorders and more easily transfer videos.

How Do I Transcribe?
Listen to what is said. Write it down carefully verbatim by listening to the same stretch several times in a row. Two things to attend to during transcription are overlaps and pauses. Overlaps can show interruptions and involved discussions, while pauses can tell us when someone is thinking or when a situation is delicate or awkward.

Working with Data
Analysis of classroom recordings can take you in different directions, but here we touch on two areas: lesson structuring and questions.
Lesson structuring. When we think about how we structure lessons, we might be tempted to think about the activities we choose or how we ask students to participate, but we often overlook the small moments in between activities, where we are implicitly telling our students what’s about to happen. As an example, think about what you say when you first walk in. How about when you move into the lesson itself? When you end an activity? Some common examples include announcing shifts explicitly (e.g., Let’s open our books; That’s all for today), using discourse markers like okay, and prosody (pitch and intonation). What nonverbal behaviors do you engage in at these moments? Where is your eye gaze? Are you facing the students or writing on the board? All of these verbal and nonverbal behaviors serve as cues, telling our students when and how to participate.

Teachers and students constantly negotiate for interactional space. Students may more easily initiate between activities or lessons, and because teachers close activities over the course of several utterances, students can use these “seams” for questions of understanding (Jacknick, 2011a, 2011b).

Questions. How do we pose questions in the classroom? “Preference structure” explains the anticipated, or preferred, responses for certain types of statements. For example, after a statement (e.g., “I love teaching!”), the preferred response is to agree; an inquiry (e.g., “Do you want to see a movie?”) prefers agreement, and if you ask a question, the preferred response is an answer. Violating preference structure with an unanticipated response often requires more interactional work (e.g., making excuses). Providing the preferred response generally requires less work (often a simple “yes”).

If students are not providing the preferred response to a teacher’s question, it may reveal some resistance, or there may be other issues that need attention. For example, many teachers end class asking “Do you have any questions?,” often receiving minimal or “no” responses, as “any” prefers a “no” answer (Heritage & Robinson, 2011). Teachers may still say “any questions” when concluding a class, but if you want questions from your students, asking “What questions do you have?” elicits more results.

Final Thoughts

To teachers, who are increasingly under pressure to do more administrative work, professional development, and other side requirements, action research may seem like the last item on their list. Analyzing talk in class, however, will help you understand the “good” and “bad” moments we all have. If you have a problem student or a lesson that falls flat, and you’re not sure why, record it. If you have a lesson that works well and encourages student participation, but you’re not sure how to replicate it, record it.

References


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