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Sinclair and Coulthard Model: Understanding Linguistic Choices and Patterns in Classroom Teaching

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Abstract

This paper explores Sinclair and Coulthard's approach to discourse analysis, widely known as IRF model, as an important methodological tool in language analysis in classroom interactive settings. It focuses on the theoretical underpinnings highlighting its advances over other methods of language analysis especially in a teacher-pupil classroom teaching. The paper distinguishes different units of analyzing interaction between teachers and students that make up the hierarchically organized character of classroom discourse. These units provide a systematic pattern and organization to the talk starting from acts – the smallest unit, to lesson – the largest unit of classroom interaction. In this model the focus is on the units of discourse that provide for the patterned transaction in classroom teaching rather than on language itself. The paper argues that despite many diverse methods and approaches to discourse analysis; the IRF model is most ideally suited to classroom discourse between the teacher and the taught. The model provides an insightful framework to understand exchanges in the classroom that is beneficial to enhance the effectiveness of teaching-learning experience. Although, the model was developed for school classrooms of native English language, the paper argues the relevance and usefulness of IRF model in analyzing many other professional communication contexts. It emphasizes the unique position of the model and valuable insights it can provide in analyzing, understanding and enriching the contemporary classroom experience in non-native contexts by identifying and explaining features of teacher-pupil interaction.

***Keywords*— classroom discourse, hierarchically organized discourse, tri-sequential interaction, IRF structure.**

I. INTRODUCTION

Sinclair and Coulthard's approach (1975) to discourse, widely popularized as the IRF model, is a framework for analyzing classroom interaction between teachers and their students. Sinclair and Coulthard offer a model of analysis of classroom interaction to analyse teacher-pupil interaction in a classroom situation. It is based on the idea that teacher-student exchanges in classroom settings is a tripartite process consisting of a question from the teacher, a response from the student, and a follow-up from the teacher.

The IRF model is descriptive method to study teacher-pupil interaction, in which interactive units are hierarchically organized. It helps in guessing and predicting the structure and pattern of talk which essentially comprises of three parts: a teacher initiation, a student response, and teacher feedback.

II. LITERATURE

Language and communication vary in different domains of their use. A classroom interaction typically involves a teacher-pupil talk in which the teacher has certain tasks to be done by the pupil (Sinclair and Brazil, 1982). Thus, the balance of power is tipped toward the teacher, who wields considerable authority and control over the students. This authority is reflected also in the control of structure of exchange, for instance, the frequency of questions by the teacher is much higher than by the pupil. It is important therefore, to understand the structure of teacher-pupil talk in a classroom for

effective communication. Also, it is a matter of common observation that the teacher dominates the initiations in a talk whereas the students respond to those initiations (Nunan, 1999). Such a pattern of talk is symptomatic of unequal and undemocratic communicative practices. In conversation analysis, a celebrated model of discourse analysis used in natural social situations like telephone exchange, interviews, patient-provider interactions etc, turn-taking is an important structural feature. In IRF model we can see that the turns are mostly controlled by the teacher in the classroom (Brazil, 1995) indicating what structural features are reflective of domination and authority in a classroom interaction. IRF offers a comprehensive framework for the analysis of classroom talk by providing framework of organized hierarchical units.

IRF model points out the "the ambiguity inherent in language" (Sinclair and Coulthard, 1992) which is exploited by people by simply pretending to misunderstand the language. This lack of understanding is because of a misfit between grammar and discourse. Consider the example below:

1. A: Can you pass on the salt, please.
   B: Yes. (ignoring passing the salt on)

In this interaction, 'Can you pass on the salt, please' can be interpreted either as a question, or as a request to pass on the salt.

The interest of IRF is to understand how interaction is organized in a classroom context. It assumes that there is a ranking of structures within interaction between teacher and pupil. Sentences are made up of clauses in such a way that there exists a hierarchical relation between them, in the similar way a hierarchical relationship exists between different units of classroom interaction.

Rank Scale

The IRF model of classroom discourse is based on a hierarchical organized units inspired by Halliday's (1961) rank and scale. Since the model is influenced by Halliday (1961) for its linguistic description (Coulthard and Brazil 1992: 55), it is also called as the rank scale model. This model assumes that the units of language analysis are organized systematically and in relation to each other in a hierarchical fashion. The model assumes that a unit at a given rank is made up of one or more units of the rank below it and combines with other units at the same rank to make one unit at the rank above.

Phrase/clause

↕

Word

↕

Morpheme

Fig.1: Showing the hierarchical relation between units of language

In the context of classroom interaction, an exchange consists of moves, and a move consists of acts. An exchange combines to form transactions whereas transactions combine to form a lesson (Sinclair & Coulthard, 1975, p. 25). These units – lessons, transactions, exchanges, moves and acts, provide a framework for analysis. This system of hierarchical structure in which distinct units combine to form a bigger unit, which in turn combine to form even bigger units is called as rank scale. Transactions are the units one step below the highest level which is called as a lesson after which there are no larger units in the linguistic rank scale (Raine, 2010).

III. PATTERNS IN IRF CLASSROOM TEACHING

At first, the Sinclair and Couthard take utterance and exchange as the only units of description in classroom interaction. Soon, they identified that the categories are not sufficient to describe all aspects of teacher-pupil talk. Take the following example between a teacher and pupil.

2. T: Can you tell me why do you eat all that food? Yes.

   P: To keep you strong

   T: To keep you strong. Yes. To keep you strong.

   T: Why do you want to be strong? (1975: 21)

In the above example there is a boundary in the mid of the second turn of the teacher. Sinclair and Coulthard realized that there is a unit that is below the utterance. They called it a 'move'. As has already been discussed earlier, that a classroom interaction typically is tripartite system in which there is a teacher's initiation at the beginning, a response by the student in the middle, and finally a teacher's feedback. Words, for example, 'Now', 'Well' 'Right', 'Ok' defines the boundary of interaction. Such words are defined as 'frames.' They are followed by statements about the interaction called as 'focus'. The IRF model considers 'frame' and 'focus' as moves

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necessary combine to form boundary exchanges. Opening, answering and follow-up moves under initiation, response and feedback respectively combine to form teaching exchanges. Boundary exchanges marked the boundary of transactions. It was also realized that moves were made up of smaller units called 'acts.' Acts are defined by their functions in the discourse. 'Elicitation', for instance, has as its function 'to request a linguistic response'. A 'directive' functions 'to request a non-linguistic response'. There are a total of 22 acts in the IRF model. Threse acts speel different purposes and are enumerated as marker, starter, elicitation, check, directive, informative, prompt, clue, cue, bid, nomination, acknowledge, reply, react, comment, accept, evaluate, silent stress, metastatement, conclusion, loop and aside.

Exchange

Exchanges are of two types. One, boundary exchanges, and two teaching exchanges. Boundary exchanges are those exchanges which signal transition from one part of the lesson to another. They are initiated by the teacher. On the other hand, teaching exchanges are those exchanges which are question-answer types. The teacher asks a question, and the students gives an answer as a response.

An exchange is defined in terms of moves. A typical exchange may look like:

3. Teacher: Initiation (opening)

   Student: Response

   Teacher: Feedback (follow up)

Example 4 illustrates a typical classroom exchange between a teacher and a student. It consists of a teacher's initiation, a question from the teacher, for instance, is an initiation. The second part that this exchange consists of is the response from the student as a reply, for instance answering the teacher's question. The final part of the exchange consists of feedback from the teacher as a follow up. This function of the feedback is to acknowledge the student's response, for instance, 'right'or 'very well' to the student's response.

Move

Moves are those units in a classroom exchange which are made up of one or more acts. An act occupies the lowest rank of in interactional discourse (Sinclair & Coulthard, 1975, p. 27) for Sinclair and Coulthard acts are like morphemes (Sinclair & Coulthard, 1975 p. 23) which cannot be further subdivided into yet smaller units.

4. Teacher: I've a thing on the desk. (starter)

   Raise your hand. (cue)

   What is it? (elicit)

In the above example, the opening move is a three-part structure, which includes a starter, which helps the hearer to anticipate the next part. The part that helps the hearer in anticipating the next move is called as a cue, which encourages the hearer to come forward with their answers. The last part is called as an elicit. In the above example it the question that is the elicit and which carries the basic function of the move.

Act

Any classroom interaction consists of three parts. The first part is the elicitation, the second is the directive, and the third is the informative. An elicitation is defined as that part of the interaction which must have a linguistic response, whereas a directive is defined as that part which must have a non-linguistic response, for example standing, writing, paying attention etc. The last one is called as an informative which is used to convey information, ideas, facts, opinions etc. The most appropriate response to an informative is an acknowledgement from the hearer conveying that the speaker is being listened.

Elicitation (question), directive and informative can be realized by interrogative, imperative, and declarative. However, there is no necessary requirement of one-to-one correspondence between the form and the function of language. A competent language user will comprehend the language not only on the basis of her knowledge of grammatical formal language rule but can also interpret the meaning even when the formal grammatical rules are violated. Consider the example below.

5. 'Can you tell me the time?'

The listener will not merely understand the above sentence as yes/no open-ended question. He may alternately can (and in this example should) take it as a request or a command.

The same function potential can be encoded and expressed by the use of different linguistic forms, consider the examples below.

6. Shut the door
7. Is the door shut?
8. The door is open
9. The door

In the above examples the unmarked imperative form may be used for the directive, 'Shut the door'. However,

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many marked versions to express it are available with the interactant, for instance, interrogative form 'Is the door shut?', declarative 'The door is open' and moodless structures 'The door'.

10. a. Is the weather good today?
Interrogative

b. The weather is good today.
Declarative

c. Enjoy the good weather!
Imperative

d. Good weather today Moodless

Thus, the function specific understanding of language in a talk largely depends on the situation and various associated contextual factors, circumstantial contingencies, socio-cultural norms, and common lived experience of people.

IV. CLASSROOM DISCOURSE

Language and its organization are the key to classroom teaching and learning. It is important that the teacher in the classroom understands the organization of classroom discourse and how various features and patterns of teacher-pupil talk effect teaching and learning. Especially, a teacher in a language learning class is assumed to emphasize not only the knowledge but also the skill of how the interaction is organized and how differently organized interactive patterns are useful in classroom experiences of the student.

Initiation (I) is the first part in the sequence of teacher-pupil interaction in which the teacher initiates the interaction – asking a question or giving a command. The response (R) is the second part in which the student responds to the teacher's initiation. The feedback (F) is the final part of the interaction in which the teacher provides feedback to the student's response, which can be evaluative (e.g., "correct," "incorrect") or elaborative (e.g., expanding on the answer). Look at the example below to understand it in a context.

I: Teacher: "How do you pronounce the word t-h-u-m-b?"

R: Student: "thum"

F: Teacher: "Correct!"

V. SIGNIFICANCE FOR CLASSROOM TEACHING

The IRF model of classroom discourse analysis is useful to study teacher-pupil classroom interaction to understand language choices of teachers and students. The main strength of the model is detailed and systematic framework to analyze and have an inclusive and meaningful awareness and knowledge of classroom interaction. The model provides an in-depth understanding of the interactional order of classroom dialogue that exists between the teacher and the taught. Especially, it is useful to highlight the types of roles the participants play in interacting with each other. For example, who often plays a dominant role in the interaction, who initiates the interaction, who introduces topics of interaction. Central to IRF analysis is to identify features in classroom discourse and their categorization in different hierarchical units like lesson, transaction, exchange, move, and act. Such a categorization helps in offering a systematic and discrete understanding and tools of analysing classroom discourse. The multi-level character of the model can be useful in executing and analyzing different teaching strategies and improves the classroom outcomes. The typical organization of interaction in IRF model as a three-part formula – a teacher initiation, a student response, and teacher feedback, provides a simple analytical framework for classroom discourse.

One of the main advantages of IRF model is that teacher-initiated exchanges for informing, directing, eliciting and checking are claimed to be the parts in which most of the language teaching takes place (Raine, 2010)

While specifically developed for classroom contexts, Sinclair and Coulthard IRF model finds its use in many other professional contexts of communication such as patient-provider communication, courtroom communication, and business communication etc. offering a framework to understand conversation structure. The model provides a robust framework to analyze classroom discourse, identify patterns, and improve teaching strategies. One area of weakness of the IRF model is that it doesn't fully capture the complexity of real-world classroom interactions.

VI. CONCLUSION

Based on Halliday's (1961) rank and scale, IRF model of classroom discourse offers a comprehensive framework to analyze teacher-pupil interaction. The main strength of this model is that it is generalizable and allows flexibility. As Fairclough (1992:15) has also pointed out, "the strength of Sinclair and Coulthard framework is in the pioneering way in which it draws attention to systematic organisational properties of dialogue and provides ways of describing them". One of its main limitations is it "lacks a developed social orientation in

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failing to consider how relations of power have shaped discourse practices, and in failing to situate classroom discourse historically in processes of social struggle and change" ibid. However, this model can contribute to bring to the fore the relations of domination when combined with other discourse analytical tools.

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