

Activities in the Classroom: A Unit of Analysis for Observation and Teaching

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I have proposed that researchers and teachers need to agree upon a unit of analysis, for both observational purposes, and in order to plan and execute teaching, at the highest level within the "lesson". Throughout the history of language teaching methods proposals, and more recently, research on language teaching, many terms have been applied to indicate the events that occur in classrooms: exercise, task, transaction, exchange, work, episode, practice, phase, stage, routine, and so on. I believe, however, that it is important to standardize our terminological usage in order to develop common descriptions of the main sorts of events that we think can take place in classrooms. Through research I have been engaged in for the past few years in Spain (see Chaudron & Valcárcel, 1988), my colleagues and I have developed a set of approximately 40 labels that we use to apply to distinct types of classroom units called "activities". The term "activity" has a sufficiently long history and broad everyday use that I think it merits being considered once and for all as the primary term for classroom lesson units. Our view fits in the general perspective of analysis of classroom discourse outlined some time ago by Sinclair & Coulthard (1975), in which the lesson was made up of "transactions". Many other researchers more recently working in the area of second language classrooms have adopted the notion of "activity" as a major type of description unit (see, for example, the work of Fröhlich, Spada & Allen, 1975; Richards & Rodgers, 1986).

We view the activity as an analytical unit, but not necessarily as the most important unit for teaching, for, taking the perspective of

recent theorists developing the notion of “task-based language teaching” (TBLT) (see Crookes, 1986; Candlin & Murphy, 1987; Long, 1989; Nunan, 1989), the learning task may be the most critical moment for the language learner’s processing and acquisition of the target language. We view tasks as being in some cases the same sort of unit as an activity, but in other cases as only a key sub-unit or phase of an activity, and in still other cases, as being distinct from a variety of other classroom events (such as teachers’ explanations of lesson content, the organization of classroom exercises, student practices, tests, etc.). To recognize that the classroom is made up of a hierarchically related sequence of events is an important way to begin to recognize when certain tasks might occur, and what might precede or follow them effectively in order for the maximum learning effects to occur.

Therefore, using the unit of activity as a way of identifying activity types, just like the research currently underway on TBLT, is a way of identifying within classrooms, and across different teachers and programs, what sorts of classroom events occur in what sequences, and with what consequences. One of the weaknesses of a number of research studies on classroom language teaching is that they failed to identify the commonalities or similarities in teaching events among the selection of classrooms under study, and therefore only general characteristics of the classrooms could be identified, rather than specific locations of those characteristics in certain types of activities (see details of these arguments in Chaudron, Crookes & Long, 1988).

The study of activity as a unit of analysis of teaching, and possibly as a planning unit, will require a considerable amount of research, but more important, it will require greater communication among researchers as to the common terms and descriptions they apply in their studies. In my work with colleagues from Spain, we have started what I hope will be a more standardized way of looking at the teaching event.

[References as on original handout]

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