# Learning in contexts. Four cases in higher education.

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# INTRODUCTION

This study is an investigation into the socio-cultural and interactional dimensions of learning in four 'educational encounters'. The point of departure for the analysis of the talk that goes on there is a *situative perspective on learning*. This starts from the premise that learning is essentially interactional and emerges from an engagement in a range of interactions in specific situations and in multiple and shifting roles: i.e. that it is a result of *participating in social and communicative practices* (Vygotsky 1978; Lave & Wenger 1991; Greeno 1992).

The middle chapters of this study all address a specific dimension of my own practice as a university lecturer. They are ordered according to – what I perceived at the time as – their increasing discourse complexity: the first two chapters investigate dimensions of foreign language teaching at an academic level – thesis supervision and teaching fluency – the latter two chapters analyse dimensions of L2 teacher education – pre-service and in-service. They are the result of my attempts *to describe and understand* the communicative practices of these educational encounters. The final chapter addresses the implications of the findings of the studies for teacher education and classroom research.

A first incentive for the studies was my desire to analyse more precisely the interactional processes that take place – or are supposed to take place – in foreign language teaching and learning. Over the years I have become increasingly uneasy with a number of claims in second language acquisition (SLA) theory[1] about what should be going on in foreign language classrooms. The communicative language teaching paradigm that has prevailed in foreign and second language teaching for the last twenty years, for instance, argues that during lessons 'priority [should be] attached to understanding, negotiating and expressing meaning' (Shiels 1988: 1). The

1. In this book SLA will be used as a generic term to cover all research and theory in the realms of second, foreign, and additional language learning and acquisition.

materials used in these lessons should be 'authentic' and the tasks set to the students should be meaningful and related to the world outside the classroom. As a result, it is claimed, the discourse in these language classes will also become 'authentic' – in the sense that it will be an expression of what the participants genuinely feel and believe – whereby the baseline for authentic discourse is seen as 'doing conversation' (van Lier 1996). This view of the talk that should be going on in language classes fits in with the prevalent idea among linguists that conversation is the prototypical form of language usage. As Levinson argues:

> ...conversation is clearly the prototypical kind of language usage, the form in which we all are first exposed to language – *the matrix for language acquisition*.
>
> (Levinson 1983: 284; italics added)

But how does one 'do conversation' in an institutional setting like a foreign language classroom (cf. Van Dam van Isselt 1993)? Whatever the teacher says and does, informal episodes will always be embedded in the higher-order formal discourse setting of the lesson event. L2 methodology focusses exclusively on *the task or content domain* of the lesson and does not take the social and interactional dimensions of classroom situations into account. This results in recommendations for classroom practice which lack *empirical validity* and which are consequently often vague or hard to implement.

In the same way I became increasingly aware of my uneasiness with the prevailing paradigm in teacher education in my practice as teacher trainer. Current theories and practices are almost exclusively psychological in orientation. I felt that the emphasis on 'reflection' and 'personal theories and concerns' (e.g. Creton & Wubbels 1984; Korthagen 1988, 1998) addresses only part of the issues which should be dealt with in teacher training and should be complemented by an interest in the socio-cultural settings in which teaching and learning take place: the complex, task-oriented, multi-person interactional processes that go on in the classroom. If we shift the focus of attention to include these dimensions, this might lead us to reframe the personal, individual (novice) teacher 'faults' as dilemmas which have to do with the structural discourse issues involved in handling multi-party interactions.

In this dissertation I will attempt to show that in order to understand the situational dimensions of school learning and teaching more fully, we need to investigate *the socio-cultural, institutional and interactional contexts* in which they are embedded. Therefore, the core of this book will be a more precise articulation of the concept of context. This involves a redefinition of what the data analysed should be: a close look at what has been ignored, overlooked or taken for granted in most traditional research into (language) teaching.

This study then explicitly does *not* discuss cognitive, psycholinguistic theories of L2 teaching and learning. It starts from the premise that since learning is intimately bound to communication in social practices we should first investigate the *surface structures* of the encounters in which learning is supposed to take place, before venturing to speculate about psychological processes that go on 'in the head' (cf. Van Lier 2000). The study proposes person-context relations as a basic unit of analysis and as an alternative to isolated individuals, and defines both structure and cognition in relation to the social environments in which they occur (Mehan 1998).

**Research issues: methodology.**

All social researchers feel the tension between conceptions of science modelled on the practices of natural science on the one hand, and ideas about the distinctiveness of the social world and the implications of this for how it should be studied on the other. Often this tension is presented as a choice between the *positivist* and *naturalist* paradigms (cf. Hammerley & Atkinson 1983). In the 'positivist' approach quantatively measured variables are manipulated in order to identify relations among them. In this way hypotheses, which are formulated beforehand, are tested. In this paradigm there is a great concern for systematic sampling and data collection procedures, since a premium is placed on the generalizability of findings. This type of research often results in recommendations about, in our case, e.g. methodology or learning.

The positivist approach obviously has advantages: research designs are often elegant and systematic. But there is also a distinct disadvantage to this research perspective: the theory the research builds on determines the data and the selection of phenomena taken into account, which may lead to tunnel vision. The preconceptions the researcher brings to the research may cause her[2] to miss important information – one only finds what one has set out to look for.

'Naturalist' research approaches, on the other hand, make use of qualitative analyses of data. They do not test hypotheses, but try to contribute to the development of the theory on which hypotheses might be tested: they do not ask questions like 'what would happen if...?'; they ask 'what happens?'.

[2] In this book the feminine embraces the masculine (in fond remembrance of Paul Werth).

Nunan, in an extensive overview of classroom-oriented research, argues that:

> ... in carrying out research, the issue or question one wants to address should form the point of departure, and the research method or methods one chooses should be consonant with what it is one wishes to discover: in other words, research should be driven by issues rather than methods. Methods themselves are neutral, only taking on value in relation to the problems or issues under investigation, ..'
>
> (Nunan 1991: 250)

Since the studies in this book are concerned with trying to find out 'what's going on there', the research approach adopted in this book is naturalist, and more specifically *ethnographic.* It attempts to answer the question 'what happens?' by detailed observations of activities or perspectives of actors in the situations under investigation. The selection of the data is made by insiders. In this way the *surface structure* of human behavior may be scrutinized.

*The ethnographic perspective refined.*

The middle chapters of this study consist of four case studies with different interactional and socio-cultural parameters: individual coaching sessions of tutors with students writing their MA- thesis; the multi-party setting of fluency teaching at an academic level; the complexities of teacher education, which structually entails the embedding of lessons-within-lessons; and micro-teaching, which embeds lessons within lessons about lessons.

The approach to the communicative practices investigated is essentially *emic* (cf. Van Lier 1988). The emic principle presupposes a view from the inside that notices those features of the scene that are marked as significant by internal criteria and which aims to result in a unified framework that *matches the intuitions of insiders*. The insider view allows the researcher to consider the phenomena 'from the functional point of view of the ordinary actor in everyday life' (Erickson 1981: 20, cited in Van Lier 1988: 55), which is traditionally realized by adopting the participant-observer stance. This leads, however, to the classic participation-observation paradox: in order to collect information we need to observe interaction, but to observe interaction we need to be on the scene; therefore, any time we observe we affect what we see because others monitor our presence and act accordingly (cf. Labov 1972). The presence of 'others', by definition, provides *reframing* of the event (cf Goffman 1974) and may be considered a 'ritual fault' in traditional classroom life. However, since all studies concern my own practice in various *roles* – as supervisor, language teacher, and teacher educator I was a *ratified participant* (Goffman 1979; see 1.2.1) in the events analysed: my roles of teacher and researcher coincided in the research.

According to Duranti an ethnographer has to combine two apparently contradictory qualities:

> … an ability to step back and distance oneself from one's own immediate, culturally biased reactions to achieve an acceptable degree of 'objectivity' and … the propensity to achieve sufficient identification with or empathy for the members of the group in order to provide an insider's perspective …
>
> (Duranti 1997: 85)

This double role of the ethnographer has positive as well as negative aspects. The data analysed in the studies in this book are grounded in long-term participation and in knowledge of the specific real-world settings involved, but identifying with the 'natives' entails the risk of 'blind spots' and might prevent a degree of cultural awareness and distance which are crucial to fully analyse the data (cf. Jackson 1995): in the observation of routine socio-cultural contexts, our own default cultural suppositions as to what are relevant events and what qualifies as data may lead us to ignore or underanalyse potentially significant features of the encounters involved.

The ethnographic approach attempts the 'reconstruction of an observed reality' (Yates 1987: 62), which requires selection, translation and interpretation. The choices made by the researcher in the process of selection remain hidden from the reader, and often depend mainly on practical conditions. But the ethnographic approach may give fresh insights and helps to identify the relevant units for analysis. It is, however, not enough to simply describe the phenomena under investigation. If we take the claim that ethnographic research can help develop theory seriously, we need a fine-grained observational instrument, which does not make any *a priori* assumptions, but is able to analyze *systematically* how people make sense of the, in our case, multi-person, task-oriented event 'LESSON'. Therefore, the methodology employed in this study combines the ethnographic perspective and insights from linguistic anthropology, linguistic pragmatics, face-to-face communication, discourse analysis and classroom language learning (see chapter 1).

## About the organization of the study

Each of the case studies in this book begins with a short explanatory introduction of the theoretical framework it draws on and therefore can be read on its own. All studies share a concern for the interactional complexities of the event under investigation, but they do not directly build on each other. For the book as a whole, this necessarily involves some degree of overlap.

Chapter one presents a brief overview of the theoretical perspectives and research instruments relevant to the issues discussed in this book and introduces the theoretical framework and terminology.

The first case study is presented in chapter two. It reports on an inquiry into the supervision process of MA-theses based on interviews with members of the English department of the University of Amsterdam. It will be shown that although the roles of supervisor and student seem straightforward, the social embedding of the event, the nesting in the cultural and institutional context, yields a complex interactional situation.

Chapter three addresses the dilemmas that arise when fluency is taught in institutional settings. The frame complexity of communicative L2 classes and the interactional paradoxes ensuing are investigated and discussed in relation to recommendations from SLA theories.

An in-service teacher education project in Vietnam yielded the data to be discussed in chapter four. During the courses I taught within the framework of this project communicative language teaching methods were presented which are 'alien' to the cultural and institutional contexts of teaching and learning in Vietnam. The discrepancies between 'home' and 'target' culture were explicitly addressed during the course, which made it possible to topicalize implicit cultural assumptions in L2 teaching methodology.

Micro-teaching as an instrument of teacher education is the focus of chapter five. Data from classes taught to student teachers in an introductory teacher education course are analyzed in order to achieve a clearer understanding of how the structural dimensions of micro-teaching could be exploited to address the cultural dimension in student teachers' personal models of teaching and the interactional embedding of lesson content in classroom situations in the context of teacher education courses.

Chapter six investigates the implications of the issues discussed in the preceding chapters for teacher education and classroom research. It is argued that a better understanding of structural features of multi-party interactions will provide teacher educators and student teachers with a tool to evaluate the effects and effectiveness of local interventions and behaviors in specific classroom episodes, and the complex cognitive, interactional, and socio-cultural issues that they raise. In classroom research, a theoretical reassessment of focus and methods is needed.

Practice should be primary. It is concluded that, in order to understand what exactly happens in classroom situations, a fine-grained observational instrument and refined tools are needed that take into account the contextual parameters of learning and teaching in institutional settings. Only in this way will claims based on the outcomes of classroom research projects become empirically, ecologically valid.