Learning in contexts. Four cases in higher education.

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6. SUMMARY AND DISCUSSION OF RESULTS: IMPLICATIONS FOR TEACHER EDUCATION AND CLASSROOM RESEARCH

6.1 Summary of results

Collectively the case studies in chapters two to five argue that for a proper understanding of face-to-face interaction in educational encounters, we need to take into account the contextual basis of participants’ utterances and joint actions in the situation. In line with a tradition of ‘ethnography of schooling’ that has been prominent in the USA from the 1960s onwards, it is emphasized that the insights of pedagogy, methodology, applied linguistics and cognitive psychology do not apply in a social void, nor do they concern what happens in the heads of individuals only. Learning is a socio-cultural process, which is discursively constructed in specific social situations and historical contexts. The institutional situations that mediate learning have a complexity all their own, which can be made analytically more transparent. Below we will summarize the main findings of each of the chapters of this thesis and trace some of the implications for teacher education.

Chapter two illustrates the type of dilemma that almost inevitably arises in counselling sessions with individual students. In face-to-face communication with a student, tutors maintain a delicate balance between default cultural speaking roles and politeness systems (providing friendly support and guidance; respecting their students’ autonomy) and the interests of the professional community, of which they are the current representative and ‘gatekeeper’ (cf. Erickson & Schultz 1982). The two roles do not always mesh and may result in

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1 An excellent overview of this multidisciplinary tradition by one of its early practitioners, Hugh Mehan, is accessible at: http://www.umich.edu/~psycours/561/mehan.html.
double binds for both parties involved. Since a tutor may briefly speak for non-co-present others - the academic peer group in the world beyond the interaction - tutorial sessions always involve more than one set of cultural and interactional roles and necessitate ‘trade-offs’ (c.f. Thonus 1999) between effectiveness and solidarity, symmetrical and asymmetrical politeness systems. A discourse approach to these issues can articulate the dilemmas involved more precisely and suggest strategies of dealing with them, an obvious one being the possibility of metacommunicating about them in more informal roles and episodes bracketing the narrowly task-oriented one (c.f. Bateson 1972; Watzlawick et al. 1967).

Chapter three concerns the language classroom and Second Language Acquisition theory. In the dominant input-output paradigm it is generally assumed that linguistic development takes place as a result of negotiations of meaning that learners engage in so as to make the target language input directed to them comprehensible. Such negotiations, it is argued, are best fostered by conversational speaking and listening roles; hence the emphasis in SLA methodology on pair and group work in the language classroom (e.g. Long 1985). By definition research instruments that screen learner data for isolated instances of such (verbal) negotiations of meaning, are unable to identify their significant absence: we cannot look into learners’ heads and therefore do not know when such a negotiation would have been relevant. Upon close inspection of the data it turned out that an advanced learner who initiated a clarification request in the context of a ‘trouble item’ had allowed exactly the same item to go by unnegotiated earlier on during the group discussion. It was only when preparing for her institutional role as speaker for the whole group that she insisted on having its precise meaning clarified. A similar instance is mentioned by Firth (1996: 244). These examples strongly suggest that neither the learner as a monolithic individual nor the ‘task’ as such are by themselves significant variables in explaining the presence or absence of negotiations of meaning. Only a discourse framework that does not involve an a priori selection of what are the relevant data is able to trace the highly context-sensitive nature of the occurrence of such negotiations over the course of successive classroom episodes. It identifies structural features of the speaking slots that motivate learners to negotiate meaning: it is therefore a valuable tool in refining insights in SLA.

In chapter four the setting has shifted to internationalization and in-service teacher education projects. It was shown how a mismatch of the cultural norms and expectations between members of the home and target cultures could be exploited to topicalize precisely the – often implicit – assumptions that hinder the large-scale implementation of new methodologies in different parts of the world. Methodology is not culturally-neutral. The assumption in communicative methodology that interaction results from students expressing their individual opinions and feelings is alien to cultures in which group membership and reaching consensus are primary
goals that are inherited by classroom situations. The (authentic) materials used became a source of reflection on these cultural roles and values. Cultural artefacts (film; video) elicited spontaneous remarks about discrepancies in normative expectations of how teachers should act and dress. The culturally-marked attributes and behaviors became metaphors for the possibility of locally importing more symmetrically-organized interactional roles in the language classroom – in play or through reframing practices – while maintaining global cultural congruence.

The issue of cultural identity crops up again in chapter five. Mainstream western assumptions about communication and learning as based in discrete individually-owned speech acts and dyadic conversational interactions (e.g. Levinson 1983), have caused some generalizations about novice teachers’ classroom behaviors to be overlooked. We showed how existing micro-teaching techniques were successfully used as an instrument of reflection (Korthagen 1995, 1998), not on individual ‘models of teaching’ but on interactional constraints that globally apply to all formal classroom situations in which participants have asymmetrical roles. We reframed the micro-lesson itself as a co-authored product, and elicited novice teachers’ pre-lesson opinions of what constitutes ‘good’ classroom practice. Participation of students had high priority in all groups. In spite of that consensus three out of the four lessons that were prepared yielded teacher monologues. In the feedback session it turned out that the student teachers had in no way anticipated this discrepancy: they had counted on spontaneous participation based on self-selection, which is the norm in informal conversational settings. The infelicities that had surfaced in the peer-teaching sessions – long teacher monologues; the absence of student feedback – were due, not to individual students’ shortcomings, but to shared cultural expectations. All of the novice teachers had only been dimly aware that turn-taking systems vary from situation to situation and that this has important consequences for participation in classroom settings. In the first planning session following the micro-teaching episodes (that were part of a half-open curriculum) there was general consensus that finding out more about the complexities involved and strategies for dealing with them – both encouraging and suppressing ‘conversational’ turns at talk – should be high on the agenda for the coming weeks. The communal experience yielded an action-based, group-generated topic for that agenda, and also emphasized the shared cultural rather than individual parameters of novice teachers’ classroom behaviors and expectations – thus creating a safe and empowering learning environment.
6.2 Implications for classroom research and teacher education.

The discourse approach to the study of face-to-face interaction in educational settings as exemplified in this book has its intellectual roots in linguistics, anthropology and (micro)-sociology. There is a growing realization that learning and thinking, educational success and failure, are discursively constructed in social situations as a result of the sense-making processes that participants bring to bear upon them. From such a perspective what happens in classroom situations – ‘practice’ – is primary: not the locus where the merits and insights from various contributing disciplines (Educational Theories; Linguistic Theories; Cultural Theories; Pedagogy; Methodology; Language Acquisition Theory) are tested and contested. There is a risk that the compartmentalized research questions and the results they yield are not empirically valid: congruent with the concerns and common-sense knowledge of practitioners about everyday institutional situations. The recommendations of experts – often based on results obtained in laboratory situations – may therefore be irrelevant, impossible to implement, or ineffective. The history of educational innovations in Holland over the past decades hardly serves to ward off those suspicions.

We argue that the research questions and research designs of the separate disciplines provide us with an incomplete and reductionist view on learning and teaching in institutional multi-party situations. Not everything is ‘the lesson’. The time-outs, interruptions, incoherences, multi-voiced comments from the margin, laughter and collusive behaviors that are the norm rather than the exception in classroom situations cannot be ignored with impunity. Can we be certain, for instance, that the idealized ‘inputs and outputs’ that are studied in classroom acquisition research are ‘the real thing’ or ‘the same’ after the disruptions or ‘irrelevancies’ that contextualize them have been carefully edited out? They provide the backdrop against which lesson agendas have to be implemented. At any rate (novice) teachers have to deal with them: they are part of ‘the data’ to be investigated – not anecdotal extras.

It stands to reason that some degree of abstraction from the ‘noise’ of classroom life is necessary. But the least one could ask from any theory or model for the description of classroom interaction is that it is able to articulate what it is that has been removed, ignored or taken for granted. As Nunan (1996) argues, in a plea for the ‘evolution of a nexus between classroom research and teacher education’ (41):
It seems to me that a great deal of research in our field is conducted in contexts where classroom noise either is unheard or is considered irrelevant and therefore removed from the equation before the numbers are added up and their significance determined.

(Nunan 1996: 41, 42)

In contrast with popular opinion, what is ignored in classroom research does not only address the maintenance of classroom order. Götz (1994) has convincingly shown how, in a ‘Deutsch-als-Fremdsprache’ lesson, Cape-Verdian learners conduct a very effective ‘negotiation of meaning’ parallel to and parasitic on what happens at the level of the official lesson agenda. Time-outs and collusive floors can be exploited for the business proper of the lesson: the participation and learning of all in situations where multiple businesses, both lesson and nonlesson, simultaneously have the floor. Experienced teachers develop strategies to selectively perceive and process the complex input of a class of 25+ human beings who all have their own agendas (cf. Mehan 1979; McDermott & Tylbor 1986). ‘The lesson’ does not resemble a game of table tennis in which only one verbal utterance at a time (‘the floor’) is bouncing back and forth between one individual speaker and one targeted addressee, as is suggested by linear models of communication and learning (cf. Reddy 1993; ‘the conduit metaphor’). Collective time-outs and jokes, often teacher-initiated; co-authored or simultaneous turns; collusive or openly displayed side-play; innuendo and laughter (Goffman 1979) are all part of ‘the lesson’ and of ‘the data’ that classroom research must address. They disclose the often highly skilful orchestration and synchronization of classroom participation and classroom events that, given a coherent, non-reductionist descriptive framework, can be made analytically transparent.

6.2.1 A discourse approach to classroom interaction and learning

The discourse model used to disentangle these issues – the classroom interface – accepts that tasks and interactional roles can be reframed or recursively embedded on a moment-by-moment basis (Polanyi & Schä 1984; Polanyi 1988; Van Dam (van Isselt) 1993, 1995, 1998, in press; Bannink & van Dam (van Isselt) 1998). Meaning is not ‘on the inside of an utterance’ (McDermott & Tylbor 1986). Just as we can quote others we can momentarily embed a different ‘self’ without invalidating the earlier one (speaker roles); or indirectly address co-present ‘targets’ in the interactional situation rather than current interlocutors (hearer roles). Turns at talk can be embedded within other turns-in-progress for a brief interlude of ‘other business’, thus yielding complex values for ‘who is currently speaking in what social role? who is directly addressed and is supposed to answer back?; what others are implicitly addressed or act as if they are not
currently there?’. These subtle shifts in participant structure (‘footing changes’; Goffman 1979) and ambiguities in who is ‘in’ at any moment of the interaction, are often signalled by nonverbal behavior (gaze direction; body language, gesture) and by prosodic and paralinguistic features of talk. Changes in tone of voice, volume, pitch or intonation (e.g. whisper voice); laughter; changes in interactional rhythm are all significant – meaning-bearing – dimensions of ‘what gets said’ in classroom situations. Together with switches between codes and registers they provide the on-line contextualization cues (Gumperz 1984) that guide participants in resolving what ‘frames for the interpretation of event’ (in terms of cultural systems; content systems; classroom systems; gender systems; interactional systems) is currently in force: how any move in ‘the classroom game’ can be assigned complex values and constrains the range of relevant next moves.

The dynamic discourse framework proposed accepts verbal, nonverbal, and paralinguistic dimensions of talk as input, and is able to articulate an emerging and complex notion of context. Frameworks of interpretation change on a moment-by-moment basis over the course of lessons and lesson episodes-in-progress. In order to bring to light significant dimensions of what goes on there, and evaluate the effect and effectiveness of specific interventions, we should make minimal a priori assumptions about what should be going on; what is worth looking at; and what is ‘good’ or ‘bad’ teaching practice. The interpretations of insiders in the situation will guide us to what turns out to be relevant.

Below we will show how the in-depth investigation of specific classroom episodes can bring to light significant features of multi-party interactions and become a instrument in classroom research and teacher education. We suggest that classroom data need to be sorted before the complex cognitive, interactional, and socio-cultural issues they raise can be made analytically transparent and empirically and ecologically valid.

The analysis of the data below then aims to provide a starting-point for a research agenda as well as a programmatic contribution to teacher education curricula.
Learning in Contexts

6.3. Structural features of multi-party interactions: four examples

6.3.1 Structural features of interactions: role and gatekeeping dilemmas

The role and 'face' dilemmas that were identified and discussed in chapter two are not restricted to that single case. They are bound to arise in some guise or other in all counselling sessions that involve individual students – whether of the gate-keeping kind as in the MA-thesis writing situation presented in chapter two, or of a more general nature. It is often necessary and legitimate, for instance, for a counsellor or a teacher to ask a student to speak up, give personal information, or negatively assess (part of) their work; these are intrinsically face-threatening acts. Balancing one's contributions on the axis of deference and solidarity and selecting the appropriate strategies for dealing with them in any specific situation can to some extent be calculated. What the options are is spelled out in Brown & Levinson ([1978]1987) and in section 1.3: bald-on-record without redressive action; with positive or negative politeness strategies; off-record; no FTA (face threatening act). But face and school systems are not context-free. Given a strong sense of co-membership between a student or a group of students and a tutor that has developed over a longer period of time, interventions can be quite direct without involving embarrassment or loss of face. McDermott showed in his account of Amish classrooms in Pennsylvania, how the special combination of high perceived power differences and low perceived social distance makes indirectness strategies unnecessary. In Amish communities teachers dominate their classrooms: there is a high incidence of imperatives and a high degree of direct instruction, the teacher is in total control of student development, and the classroom is a closed community with highly specific routines for everyone to follow. In terms of these routines, everyone is accountable to everyone else:

In this context, instructions are not blind imperatives, but rather sensible suggestions as to what to do next to further common cooperation. There is a warm relational fabric that underlies the instructions and transforms them from orders into sensible ways of routinizing everyday life. What to many appears an authoritarian and oppressive system for organizing a classroom may in fact make great sense to the children and, accordingly, allow them to feel good enough to learn whatever it is to which a teacher directs a class's attention. Outsiders simply miss the cues which ground teacher-student activities in trust and accountability.

(McDermott 1977: 157-158)
Learning in Contexts

That the selection of ‘face’ strategies is context-related has consequences for the empirical validity of teacher education instruments like ‘Leary’s Rose’ which is widely employed in the Netherlands to assess teacher behavior (cf. Creton & Wubbels 1984). Without taking into account the shared discourse histories of teacher and students in specific interactional and socio-cultural circumstances it is impossible to decide whether a teacher utterance or interactional move should be interpreted as residing in the ‘opposition/dominance’ section that negatively influences her relationship with the students and the global classroom atmosphere. We need to trace the reception and consequences of these types of moves in the social settings in which they occur – including paralinguistic markers as chuckles, etc. – which could contextualize them in the situation as ‘sensible ways of routinizing everyday life’. In isolation their ‘meaning’ cannot be determined.

6.3.2 Structural features of interactions: the interactional construction of an outsider

In teacher education and educational policy overwhelmingly the ‘communicative approach’ to language teaching and language learning has been adopted. In this section we will discuss the need to refine the global recommendations of communicative language teaching (hence CLT) and current educational theory on the basis of a classroom episode that occurred in a first English lesson (van Dam van Isselt 1993). It addresses three assumptions in CLT and educational theory.

• Making English the medium of instruction and interaction throughout the lesson – the ‘English-only’ strategy (e.g. Ellis 1994; for critical comments cf. also Auerbach 1993) – is globally a ‘good’ teaching strategy in that it creates a rich input-situation for learners.

• Teachers should be trained to increase ‘wait time’ when a student fails to come up with a correct answer, in order to allow them more time to think (Cooper 1982; Rowe 1986).

• Codeswitching to the students’ L1 in the English language classroom is ‘bad practice’. Monolingualism is the norm. Switched utterances introduce a discontinuity in the structure of the lesson that is potentially confusing for students (cf. Wong-Fillmore 1985).

2. Adendorff found that this view is shared by Black teachers and students that he interviewed in Kwazulu: ‘they imply that codeswitching is an indecent, forbidden form of behavior. It seems that code switching is something many teachers are afraid to admit to.’ (1996: 389).
Learning in Contexts

The data below involves the most researched structure in classroom talk: the Question-Answer-Evaluation structure or Initiation-Response-Feedback-structure (cf. Sinclair & Coulthard 1975; Cazden 1988; Van Lier 1988: 149 ff.). We argue that structural features of its interpretation in classroom situations have been underanalyzed in acquisition research.

Introducing the data. The setting is a first English lesson in a Dutch classroom involving mainly middle-class ‘white’ students. The teacher has introduced English as the medium of instruction and default language of interaction – in accordance with the recommendations mentioned above. She addresses the class in a classroom variety of English clearly accommodated to these beginning learners: a simplified English (‘teacher talk’) register, not unlike the ‘foreigner talk’ register (cf. Cazden 1988: 159-181). It is characterized by long decoding pauses, emphatic articulation, exaggerated prosodic contours and frequent repetitions and reformulations. These features mark the fact that she does not expect the learners to have ‘conversational’ competence in English. The ‘pseudo-English’ lesson sub-domain has been constructed specifically for the purpose of providing target language ‘input’ to language learners. It is a ‘classroom game’, not an interactional domain that presupposes L2-indexed cultural knowledge. By the same token, in case of an emergency – for instance if a fire were to break out – everyone would immediately switch back to Dutch.

The students have just been taught a cultural routine: to ‘say’ the English numbers up to a hundred. The next item on the lesson agenda is to learn and practise spelling the letters of the English alphabet. In making the transition to this new topic, the teacher creates an opportunity to display ‘transfer’: the students can show that they now ‘know how to say ‘26’ in English’ in a new context.

(Data 1)


S Vic  — [long silence]

Ss  [hands raised]

T  [to Victor, very fast native speaker register] are you going to COUNT them all?

S Vic  —

T  [slow, low pitch] WELL – we’ll come back to you later =

Ss  = [hands raised]

T  [turns to Rosemary, allocates turn] YES?

S Ros  twenty-six

T  you’re quite RIGHT – it IS twenty-six – ABSOLUTELY
What we intuitively understand about this data is that here is a student who fails—and is framed as both incompetent and inarticulate. The teacher's strategy seems to be 'politically-correct' in all respects: she creates a maximum input situation; allows the learner addressed plenty of time to think; and locally resists the temptation to switch code to the shared L1. In order to verify that judgment, however, we need an instrument to interpret silence. Pedagogy does not provide us with the tools to do so. Neither does mainstream linguistics. Sandwiched between a teacher question and the teacher's evaluation of a student's (zero) answer, what it is a learner does not know is often equated with what it was the teacher intended to ask or wanted to hear. What the meaning of a turn-not-taken is, however, can only be determined by investigating its reception in the social classroom situation: what the teacher does in next turn; the off-record reactions (laughter; half-loud comments) of the peer group. We have to systematically investigate the various discourse contexts involved in establishing a 'reading' for Victor's silence.

When a 'student answer slot' in a canonical classroom Q-A-E structure remains empty, the floor automatically returns to the teacher. It is up to her to interpret the silence and initiate a negotiation of its meaning or scaffold whatever it was the particular student did not know or understand. In order to know what to do next she has to construct feedback on the nature of this student's problem (the feedback dimension of learning). This is not an easy thing to do in a first lesson if she sticks by the self-appointed rule of addressing the students in English exclusively. But it can be done as we know from similar situations in ESL settings (see also next section).

If we start our investigation from the surface of the discourse a plausible explanation for Victor's silence is that he did not hear or understand the question that was put to him in English. The English word 'alphabet' sounds very different from its Dutch equivalent; what was the question asked cannot be inferred from 'the' context, because it initiates a new lesson episode and topic. In this interpretation the absence of the answer does not give any information about what it is a learner does or does not know or does not know how to say.

In fact, this is only one of an array of possible explanations that all address structural dimensions of classroom situations and current speaker/hearer roles. Victor may have had any of the following speaker problems (the list is by no means exhaustive):

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3 This learner was the only one that the teacher mentioned at the end of the lesson as being rather 'odd'. In the course of the lesson he had three turns in which he gave answers that were not only wrong but that clearly were outside the range of errors anticipated by the teacher.
Learning in Contexts

- he is too shy to speak up in public in a new group;
- he knows the Dutch alphabet has twenty-six letters but is not sure whether he remembers how to say ‘twenty-six’ in English correctly;
- he knows Dutch has twenty-six letters and knows how to say ‘26’ in English, but is afraid to speak up because he also knows his pronunciation is not up to scratch; etc.

Alternatively, he may have a cognitive problem owing to the complexity of the discourse situation and the ambiguity it raises in ‘what it is the question asks’:

- he does not know what ‘the’ alphabet refers to: did the teacher mean the English or the Dutch alphabet? The question has ambiguous parameters: it was asked in English but since it presupposes competence it probably targets an embedded L1-Dutch knowledge domain.
- he knows the Dutch alphabet has twenty-six letters but does not automatically assume that all alphabets – in cases the English one – have the same number.

All of the above are possible interpretations in the nature of conjectures only. Without further information they cannot be resolved: we have no access to what goes on in Victor’s head. But from the teacher’s next move – in the fast ‘native speaker’ English register – it seems she is unaware that the ‘output’ conditions this particular teaching strategy created might themselves be the source of the trouble. Instead, she frames his silence as both a classroom and a cultural fault: it is long overdue and the delay – she flippantly suggests – is probably caused by his having to go through the cultural procedure of counting ‘the’ letters in his head rather than drawing the answer ‘ready-made’ from memory – which would have been ‘normal’. Her hypothesis constructs cultural incompetence rather than classroom floors as the reason of Victor’s failure – although it is doubtful whether either Victor himself or the peer overhearers co-present in the situation were able to catch the innuendo (cf. Goffman 1979) which, unlike the earlier question, was uttered in the fast, native speaker English register.

The intra-code switch to this conversational English register provides Victor with even more difficult ‘input’ and another ‘question’ he is unable to answer on top of whatever problems he already has. Given his status as beginning learner and the current classroom situation it is an incoherent codeswitch that does not have a floor: it presupposes competent native speaker listeners. It thus constructs a speaker-only floor. The ‘joke’ falls flat: there are no reactions or appreciative chuckles from overhearing peers. A problem-solving approach would have necessitated a different type of switch: an invitation to Victor to metacommunicate in Dutch about the nature of his problem, with a follow-up scaffolding move. Considering that she does break her own rules and switch to Dutch later on in the lesson when there is a ‘real’
Learning in Contexts

problem, i.e. when classroom discipline is at stake, such a move is significantly absent here.

So in the second instalment of his silence, Victor’s problems are aggravated. He is forced to either make a fault or be at fault: switch to Dutch and break a classroom rule or remain silent and thus be exposed as ‘dumb’ and incompetent. He cannot save face and react to the blame implied in the teacher’s metacomment. In the absence of a legitimate code and floor, he chooses to say nothing at all. A simple ‘ik weet het niet’ (‘I don’t know’) might have saved his face. Otherwise shifting to the nonverbal channel is the only way out of the horns of the dilemma: a grimace of sorts with which he communicates his predicament and distances himself from the classroom Victor who is at fault (see Goffman 1979; van Dam van Isselt 1995). As it is, he remains inarticulate (McDermott 1994) and a different student is invited to ‘say the right answer’.

It is time, after all this, to construct face for the teacher’s strategy, also in terms of the contextualization of classroom moves.

• The reason she asks the question at all, is probably that it constructs conversational coherence with the preceding classroom task and provides students with an opportunity to apply recently acquired skills: a beautiful ‘transfer’ move. Since Dutch and English have an equal number of letters in the alphabet, she was probably not aware that the question might be a ‘difficult’ one. It is easy to overlook that target language strategies may introduce a potential complexity and ambiguity in ‘what it is a question asks’. These structural issues are seldom explicitly and systematically addressed in discussions about language teaching methodology.

• Given the assumptions under 1, a conversational ‘aside’ on the nature of Victor’s predicament in order to fill in his ‘wait time’ and the interactional vacuum that it creates for the rest of the class may even be intended to defuse any stigma attributed to long silences in the western – and classroom – worlds. The point is not so much that what she does is ‘wrong’ but that it is impossible. In this classroom situation ‘conversational’ utterances in English do not count as ‘input’; codeswitching is taboo. Again, an awareness of the structural issues involved in the introduction of a new normative codes and its impact on classroom interaction and meaning should be part of the teacher education curriculum.

• The episode also raises questions about cultural issues in education and intercultural communication. We named this section ‘the interactional construction of an outsider’ because it shows how an average Dutch student’s silence is interpreted through its reception in the classroom situation as a ‘cultural fault’ rather than a classroom problem. Victor is a ‘white negro’. His predicament
is not dissimilar to that of minority children who sometimes have to figure out exactly what cultural information a teacher question selects or overlooks. Rather than being a stable attribute of specific groups of individuals, the status of cultural outsider may be a feature of classroom situations and current interlocutors.

6.3.3 Structural features of interactions: the interactional construction of insiders

With the growing number of ethnic minority students in schools in the Netherlands there is an increasing concern for the relatively poor educational achievement of some of these students and for the high drop-out rates among these groups. One of the theories hypothesized to account for discrepancies between the school performance of native and immigrant students is the ‘cultural (dis)continuity’ between home and school environments (cf. Mehan 1998). The discontinuity hypothesis holds that achievement problems of ethnic minority students are caused by differences in cultural procedures between classroom and home settings, a clear obstacle being the language used in schools, which is ill-fitted to mediate learning and linguistic growth in these groups of learners. It suggests that educational success and failure as parameters of individuals should be recast as social ‘facts’ that are collaboratively, discursively, constructed in educational settings. Mehan puts it as follows:

Analyzed interactionally, ‘ability’, ‘intelligence’, ‘learning disability’ and ‘incompetence’ are no longer what they are. These are not the states or traits of an individual person. They are a dynamic, mutually constitutive and reflexive relation between individual and environments populated by other people, and may change from moment to moment, situation to situation.

(Mehan 1998: 8)

Just as the incompetence and inarticulateness of learners can be discursively constructed in a classroom situation – as shown in the previous section – so can competence and empowerment. Below we will analyze two episodes from a multicultural classroom, which illustrate how the other end of the ‘smart-dumb continuum’ (McDermott & Tylbor 1986: 132) can also be constructed by exploiting the structural features of classroom speaking roles (see also Van Dam (van Isselt) 1998).

Introducing the data. In 1997 we videotaped lessons of Dutch as a second language in a school for refugees in Haarlem, over the course of one day. The student population consisted of fifteen children between the age of six and nine; some had lived in the Netherlands for ten months, others had arrived just ten days previously.
Learning in Contexts

Their language abilities varied widely as did their cultural backgrounds; some had received formal tuition in their home country before they came to the Netherlands, others had never seen the inside of a school before. Therefore, they could not be expected to know any set of cultural conventions and procedures for behavior that apply in schools ('classroom competence'; Mehan 1980), either in their home country or in Holland. We might safely say that this was the multi-cultural, multi-lingual classroom situation par excellence.

On the basis of the literature on intercultural communication one could expect that the interaction in such a heterogeneous group would be laborious and rife with misunderstandings and miscommunications (cf. Gumperz 1992; House 1997; Scollon & Scollon 1995). This, however, turned out not to be the case. The students demonstrably understood very well the procedural instructions that were given during the different parts of the lesson. Reactions to teacher requests for action were highly ordered and synchronized. All students performed more or less the same tasks, participated enthusiastically and were allocated both individual and collective turns. Below we will trace the discourse strategies on the part of the teacher which were responsible for this result. They crucially address complex dimensions of speaker and hearer roles in institutional settings and the coordination of verbal, non-verbal and prosodic features of talk.

During the first part of the morning the students are seated in a circle (common practice in Dutch primary education). The teacher looks around the circle and asks a number of the more experienced students to stand up and step forward. They collectively 'have the turn' and function as 'modellers' who name concepts and actions which are part of daily routines such as waking up; washing; dressing; eating, etc, while miming them at the same time. The teacher herself participates enthusiastically and now and then elicits new vocabulary through elaborating on these 'primal' scenes: 'you also have to wash behind your ears', for instance. Newly introduced words and phrases are prosodically marked as less important. The key-items remain in focus throughout, but there is also new input for those who are already familiar with the particular word or phrase. The teacher continuously, visually subtitles the interaction with gestures and movements. All students participate in the miming, including those in 'second row', and the latter occasionally – on a local basis – do a mixture of inner speak and outer speak: they half co-speak. Since most activities take time – you cannot eat your breakfast in three seconds – there is ample time to repeat the keywords and add variations.

What is the relation between what gets said by the teacher and the children in the inner circle vis-à-vis the outer circle sub-floor that does not involve the children as 'official' speakers? For them an ambiguous, 'off-record' interactional domain has been created in the context of the collective act-and-say classroom game. Its most
striking feature is that it is based wholly on the conversational principle of self-selection. For every item and from moment to moment all students may select the participation format they feel most comfortable with, in accordance with their current abilities and confidence. Those who are not yet competent or confident enough to speak, may just look and listen, while the language is made meaningful for them in the situation (a condition for ‘input’ to become ‘intake’; cf. e.g. Ellis 1994). Fast learners may softly try to say or lip-model frequently repeated chunks. Their utterances do not fill a public turn at talk: nobody listens, nobody answers or evaluates, everybody participates in the interaction: together they are a multi-vocal echo-floor which does not get noticed, which does not count on the official classroom floor. There are also more experienced children in the outer circle who scaffold the turns of the others. Thus newcomers are in a position to compare their output immediately, almost simultaneously, with their neighbours, and self-correct in case of a mismatch. Feedback loops are short and efficient. Fear of failing or loss of face are not at stake — precisely because students’ ritual output does not construct a current conversational interlocutor or classroom evaluator. It is a ‘hatchery’ for language rather than a floor (see also Goffman 1981: 151 note; ‘a teething-ring for utterances’).

During the second part of the lesson the teacher takes a group of six students to another room for a ‘Total Physical Response’ (Asher 1977) episode. Now the students are allocated individual turns: they receive instructions to perform certain actions. One would expect differences in knowledge and abilities to show up in this lesson format. But again this does not happen. The teacher knows each of her students’ abilities which allows her to exploit the differences among them, while at the same time making them inconsequential in terms of displayed competence. Her procedure is as follows: she first asks the more experienced children to perform certain acts; shortly after, one of the newcomers is unobtrusively requested to do more or less the same. In this way she does not draw on existing knowledge but only on the ability to pick up words in the situation, immediately after they are contextualized. Only close analysis shows that turns for inexperienced students occur later in a particular sequence and do not contain any new words or acts: turns and tasks seem distributed evenly and at random, but in fact they are carefully positioned in the discourse.

The teacher’s body language shows that she is very alert during the ‘production’ of every turn. At the slightest hitch or hesitation she immediately supplies an extra hint, for instance, ‘Walk to the blackboard’ — [Rovi hesitates] — ‘where Zuhrab is standing’ (of course the students know each others’ names). This last addition is a structural move within a turn-in-progress: the teacher anticipates Rovi’s possible not-understanding by supplying extra information before next turn — performing the act becomes current. Snappy timing makes it hardly noticeable that her instruction
Learning in Contexts

originally did not consist of two components: it sounds as if she had intended all along to give this compound instruction. At another occasion she coaxes one of the students inconspicuously in the right direction, while she is giving her instruction. This fine-grained network of verbal and non-verbal scaffolding moves (Bruner 1978; Edwards & Mercer 1987; Van Lier 1988) can only be made visible through detailed observation. A sharp eye, sharp timing and very short feedback loops are characteristic of this teacher’s classroom behavior. Both problems in understanding and out-of-frame behavior are signalled at an early stage and nipped in the bud. The result is a very structured, orderly and therefore harmonious learning environment, which does not only cater for the needs of the newcomers but also provides challenges for the more competent student. Nobody fails, is excluded or noticeably less competent than the others. A lot of learning gets accomplished in a safe environment.

What this data shows is that, while conversational fine-tuning of input at the level of large heterogeneous groups is not feasible, it is possible to make input finely-tuned in the situation. The teacher successfully employs collective speaking formats and the structural dimensions of speaking slots to mediate the role shift from (over)hearer to (co-)speaker. At the same time those who were already competent can improve and increase their output. This configuration of floors promotes the learning of all students. As Van Dam argues:

Such participation frames that are organized strictly on a voluntary, self-monitored and partial basis iconically construct affordances for linguistic development for students of different abilities and confidence. They synchronize learning in the off-record niches of institutional talk that can also be exploited for play and metacommunication.

(Van Dam in press)

The TPR episode shows that competence can also be constructed for allocated, individually-owned turns. Teachers may recast the traditional IRF-format to accommodate discrepancies in skills and knowledge in heterogeneous groups. A close look at what happens in this classroom shows that prosodic and para-linguistic features of talk (laughter, changes in tone and volume of voice, tempo, intonation, gaze and timing; cf. Scollon 1982) are crucially involved in minimizing the risks of failure and loss of face. The teacher’s considerable skills in this department, and her crafty way of contextualizing student turns, allow her, for instance, to collusively co-author Rovi’s turn so as to frame his move as his sole accomplishment.

The subtle orchestration of individual student turns and classroom floors as displayed by this teacher should be part of the repertoire of every (novice) teacher. More advanced groups will obviously require a different selection of strategies, but
Learning in Contexts

the basic issues involved are not dissimilar: ritual and collusive floors mediate language development quite as effectively or more so than dyadic, conversational ones (see also chapter 4).

6.3.4 Structural features of interactions: classroom management

Classroom management and discipline are traditionally hot items on novice teachers agendas, and understandably so. There are a number of dilemmas here that can be predicted. Teachers’ professional obligation to structure learning tasks requires that they create and maintain coherence at the level of the lesson agenda — which any verbal correction of behavior disrupts. On the other hand, if they ignore off-task behavior and the ‘conversational’ contributions and interruptions of students that are likely to occur in classroom multiparty situations, conditions for learning are equally at risk. Explicitly, verbally, addressing classroom misbehaviors is itself an interactional fault in that, by definition, it interrupts what was going on at the level of the lesson agenda (‘PUSH’) and necessitates interactional work to re-establish the return to that agenda (‘POP’). In the course of the correction sequence, the attention of those students who were on task before may start to wander: it does not concern them. Thus one fault may generate a cascade of faults, as will be illustrated below.

The following lesson episode shows how a novice teacher deals with disciplinary problems in her classroom. During the previous lesson teacher and students have made a list of measures to improve the classroom atmosphere. The teacher has just written this list on the blackboard.

(Data 2*)

SSS [leerlingen zijn aan het praten]

T PSSS — even mij laten praten [...] het valt mij op dat — [Hiba begint te praten; leraar verheft stem] HIBA — nog EEN keer en je staat ook op het bord — dit is de LAATSTE waarschuwing en deze keer zorg ik dat je er niet onderuit komt — yes?

Sx waarom krijg IK geen waarschuwing?

T de waarschuwing is een, twee, drie — net als vorige keer — alleen ik — [maakt haar uitleg niet af] — OK — ik vind dat de meeste van jullie te veel kletsen [stopt even om Hiba’s naam op het bord te schrijven]

Sy ik doe niks dus je kunt mij niks maken

T je kunt wel verder kletsen — dat kan ik ook

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4 We thank Louise van den Berk for this data. See also van den Berk (1999).
Learning in Contexts

SSS  [students talk among each other]
T  PSSS – let ME talk for a minute .. I’ve noticed that – [Hiba starts talking; teacher raises her voice] HIBA – once more and you’ll be on the board too – this is my last warning and this time I’ll make sure you really have to do it – yes?
Sx  why don’t I get a warning?
T  the warning is one, two, three, just like last time – only me [cut-off, she does not finish her explanation] – OK I think most of you talk too much [pauses to write Hiba’s name on the blackboard]
Sx  I’m not doing anything, so you can’t get at me
T  you may go on talking – so can I

It is clear that each of this teacher’s disciplinary moves generates a ‘conversational next move’ on the part of one of the students. The explicit verbal correction of one student provokes spontaneous comments on the part of two other students who were not even addressed (‘overhearer floor’; Goffman 1979). The discourse continuity – such as it was – of the lesson as planned is now completely lost. The episode ends in the authority of the teacher being challenged: the ‘ritual fault’ that novice teachers are most afraid of.

In teacher education, recommendations to deal with these types of situations sometimes focus on the message to be communicated and ignore the interactional consequences of these messages in multiparty situations. Thus ‘ik-boodschappen’ (‘ego-messages’; Gordon 1979) like the one this teacher utters (‘ik vind dat jullie te veel klesten’ – ‘I think you talk too much’) by implying a more informal personal stance or speaking role almost by definition invite informal conversational responses in return. Where matters of classroom discipline are concerned, these types of messages are likely to increase problems rather than repair them.

Expert teachers have developed strategies which enable them to maintain interactional coherence on the level of the agenda. In the following episode an experienced teacher is giving instructions for a ‘spot-the-differences’ fluency task that is to be done in pairs in a multi-ethnic first form classroom. We will focus on the way he manages to re-allocate a turn at talk, a learner question, by shifting to the non-verbal channel, in such a way that it does not interrupt his instructions-in-progress:
Learning in Contexts

(Data 3)

T → de bedoeling is natuurlijk dat je een beetje beter doorvraagt [Rashish steekt zijn vinger op; de leraar kijkt naar hem terwijl hij doorpraat]

T → en bij plaatje twee [kijkt weg van Rashish die zijn vinger laat zakken] heb je een leraar die iets uitlegt voor de klas – right?

T → dan zegt Tara- Uh - is there – a – teacher in your picture? YES – Is he standing in front of the class? – YES – Is he talking to the class? YES – well [zachtjes] that is the same picture – DUS

→ JE WEET - DIE – die is gelijk [Rashish’ hand gaat weer omhoog; de leraar kijkt meteen naar hem en wijst naar hem, maar telt tegelijkertijd zijn kin op ten teken dat hij nog niet uitgesproken is; Rashish laat zijn vinger zakken maar houdt zijn pen op om zijn ‘claim to the floor’ te continueren] – ja? – en je hoeft alleen OP te schrijven de plaatjes die verschillend zijn

→ [geeft beurt aan Rashish die nog steeds zijn pen omhoog houdt] RASHISH?

SR → wat doe je als ze verschillend zijn wat doe je dan?

T → dan schrijf je het nummer van dat plaatje op

T → [you are supposed to keep on asking questions [SR raises his arm, teacher directs his gaze at SR while he continues talking]

T → and in picture number two [averts his gaze from SR, SR lowers his arm] a teacher is explaining something in front of a class – right –

T → and Tara says – UUUH – is there – UUUH – a teacher in your picture? – yes – Is he standing in front of the class? – YES – is he talking to the class? YES.. well [softly] that is the same picture – SO YOU KNOW THIS ONE – this one is the same

→ [SR raises his hand once again, teacher immediately directs his gaze to SR, raises his arm and points at him, tilts his head backwards to show he has not finished yet; SR drops his arm but keeps his pen up in the air to continue his claim to the floor] – ja? – [softly]

→ and you only write down which pictures are different – [allocates turn to SR who still keeps his pen up in the air] RASHISH?

SR → what do you do if they are different?

T → you write down the number

Without yielding the floor but embedded in his monologue the teacher has managed to sustain a collusive negotiation with Rashish that his claim to the turn has been ‘seen’ and ‘registered’ but is not yet in force, is postponed. It is not accidental that Rashish raises his hand again immediately after the possible closure of the instruction sequence that is marked by emphatic intonation and the verbal POP-marker ‘dus’ (approximately English ‘so’): ‘DU S JE WEET’… (so you know...). Once more Rashish’s claim is overruled – by a change in posture – at the same time that it is re-confirmed. When, at last, Rashish gets the floor, his question is no longer relevant. It addresses information that the teacher gave at the very end of his instructions. But at least, by shifting to a different modality, the teacher has been able to finish his instructions without being interrupted.
6.3.5 Summary and conclusions

In the previous sections we have shown that some basic assumptions in acquisition research and educational theory underanalyze what happens in educational settings. Let us summarize the main issues that arose in these sections:

Our first point (6.3.1) addressed the context-dependence of meaning in ‘models for the interactional behavior of teachers’ like the ‘Leary Rose’ proposal (Creton & Wubbels 1984). Whether a teacher-class relationship should be characterized as belonging in the ‘opposition/dominance’ segment cannot be read from isolated instances of what people say and do, without taking into account their shared discourse history. Brown and Levinson’s politeness model predicts that the greater the familiarity between interactants, the more face constraints are relaxed: the need for indirection and mitigating strategies is reduced accordingly. Seemingly blunt or even offensive address terms, for instance, are often interpreted in the situation in terms of in-group games that have their source in long-term trust and affection. By playing upon the ‘given’ asymmetrical power and role relationships and the ritual state of incompetence of learners (cf. ‘the fool’s impunity’; Kramsch 1993), their sting can be defused in banter or laughter rather than aggravated: jokes rather than insults may be at issue. Technically, what is involved is that utterances can take on more complex, structural readings when sets of politeness conventions are nested (recursively embedded). Claims based upon the myth that schematic, ‘flat’ accounts of classroom roles and relationships are literally true, hinder rather than enhance novice teachers’ development into ‘round’ teachers.

In section 6.3.2 we showed how global claims about ‘do’s’ and ‘don’ts’ in classroom methodology can be falsified by in-depth investigations of their effect in specific classroom interactions. What a student’s not-saying-anything means cannot be resolved with the help of any of the models that have been proposed for the investigation of classroom interaction or (language) learning. There is no decontextualized ‘meaning’. The teacher’s switch to the native speaker register displayed an interpretation of the learner’s silence and in doing so changed the

5 This point can be illustrated aptly by a quotation from The growing pains of Adrian Mole by Sue Townsend:

Went to see Bert and Queenie with my mother. ... Bert opened the door, he said, ‘Ain’t you dropped that sprog yet?’

My mother said, ‘Shut your mouth, you clapped-out geriatric.’

Honestly, sometimes I long for the bygone days, when people spoke politely to each other. You would never guess that my mother and Bert are fond of each other. (1984:113; italics added)
context for what was to follow. Under the updated classroom conditions a negotiation of meaning—a necessary condition for acquisition—became impossible: the trouble source could not be unpacked. We argue that a dynamic discourse model that is able to trace and articulate these *on-line* (sometimes incoherent) footing changes is more likely to yield analyses of classroom situations that are empirically valid.

The teacher’s discursive practices in section 6.2.3 allowed her to *create* affordances in the ‘zone of proximal development’ (Vygotsky 1978) for each of her students as the lesson evolved. She was able to do so by making use of co-authored ‘output frames’ that exploit the existing differences in ability in heterogeneous classroom populations without topicalizing them. It appeared that the ritual, much stigmatized ‘chorusing format’ conceals a wealth of (off-record; collusive; ambiguous) participation modes that mainstream classroom research tends to overlook. They allow classroom tasks to be finely-tuned to learners’ current level of ability on a split-second *local* basis: they are based wholly on self-selection and self-selection across modalities and speaker/hearer roles (cf. Damhuis 1995 on the importance of participant role and learner initiative in SLA).

In section 6.2.4 we show what novice teachers, given a *fine-grained* observational matrix, may learn from what their more experienced colleagues do in class. This involves paying attention to verbal, nonverbal, prosodic and paralinguistic dimensions of talk that serve as contextualization cues (Gumperz 1982) and construct a complex notion of ‘what is currently going on’ (cf. discourse POP and PUSH-markers; Polanyi and Schä 1983). They include shifts in tone of voice and pitch, speech tempo, rhythm, loudness; shifts between verbal codes; changes in postural configuration, gaze direction, facial expression, interpersonal distancing. All of these may be used to signal *non-linear features of classroom multi-party floors and subfloors* that contextualize or process learner moves without necessarily having the floor and interrupting the lesson-business-in-progress. These insiders’ strategies need not arise from experience only. They can and should be taught in teacher education curricula.

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6 ‘The distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers.’ (Vygotsky 1978:86)
6.4 Towards a theory of practice

We suggest that a theoretical reassessment of the focus and methods of classroom research is needed. Overwhelmingly the classroom is treated as a ‘black box’: we do not as yet have a precise understanding of what happens in institutional multi-party interactions. The voices and concerns of practitioners are overruled by experts whose claims about what constitutes good teaching practice are often uncorroborated by detailed ethnographic research and therefore premature: not empirically, ecologically valid (cf. Cole et al. 1997; Leather & Van Dam, in preparation).

Behavior is situated, interpreted behavior. If interpreted in a reductionist theoretical or descriptive framework, educational research is likely to reflect the paradigmatic and cultural assumptions that are taken for granted, and miss out on significant dimensions of multi-party interactions – if only because they affect what counts as data in educational settings. We suggest that the disappointing outcomes of some educational innovation and stimulation programs (e.g. ‘Studiehuis’; ‘Taalstimuleringsprogramma’s’) may well be due to the lack of fine-grained observational instruments and refined analytical tools that take into account the contextual parameters of learning and teaching in institutional settings.

One reason for the underanalysis of classroom multi-party data is the privileged position of ‘conversation’ – involving participants in either of the two mutually exclusive roles of ‘speaker’ or ‘hearer’ – as the default format or ‘interactional matrix’ for ‘interaction’ and ‘learning’ (cf. Levinson 1983: 284). Such a view causes structural features of speaker/hearer roles and multi-party interactions to be ‘not-noticed’ (Goffman 1979; Van Dam van Isselt 1998). Speaking, hearing, and (language) learning – both in the classroom and outside – can take place in any of the interactional and ritual roles that are culturally available, e.g. as overhearer or member of the audience; as performer or animator of other people’s texts or memorized texts (cf. Pallotti 1996); as co-speaker, collusive speaker, recitation-mode speaker or co-author of turns and assignments; as participant in written or virtual ‘conversations’ like classroom passing notes or Internet Chat (cf. Leather & Van Dam, in preparation).

Recent educational innovations in the Netherlands explicitly or implicitly recommend a reduction of the teacher’s direct influence on what happens in class and a shift towards individual work, peer work and ICT. The claim that these formats yield better results have never been corroborated by research results, partly because the instruments to describe and compare teacher-fronted lessons, interactions with virtual interlocutors and informal symmetrical peer interactions have not been available. We do not know what happens during the (supposedly) task-oriented ‘conversations’ between peers that often take place outside the
visual range of the teacher or the ‘conversations’ with virtual others on the net. We do not know exactly what happens during the more monitored, embedded ‘conversations’ that take place during, parallel to, and parasitic on teacher-fronted lessons (cf. Götz 1994) There is no evidence therefore that any format is globally ‘better’ than any other. For the empirical validation of these claims detailed ethnographic research and an interpretive discourse model that can account for all of these different types of data and the interactional roles in which utterances can be produced must be (further) developed.

6.4.1 Recommendations for Teacher Education

Throughout this chapter we have argued that practice is primary and should be given more emphasis in the teacher education curriculum. The interpretative discourse framework described above would enable us to systematically analyze classroom multiparty interactions, counselling sessions, informal interactions with or among peers outside class, board meetings etc. in terms of the same formalism. It could thus help to bridge the gap between ‘theory’ and ‘practice’ and foster both a more open and a more critical attitude to claims and assumptions that reflect the fashion of the day (cf. Drentje 2001).

To some extent the problems that novice teachers experience in classroom situations are culturally-shared, and can be predicted. Dealing with them, in the sense of understanding the complexity of simultaneous talk that is characteristic of these situations and deciding when what strategy is most appropriate, can to some extent be ‘taught’, given a more context-sensitive approach to activities and training instruments in teacher education.

In ‘the Studiehuis’ teachers are supposed to coach rather than teach; their role is to be ‘catalysts of learning experiences’ (VELON-conference 1996) rather than experts. Teacher-fronted lessons (‘the recitation script’; Mehan 1998) and all-class explanations are frowned upon, as are rote learning and memorization7. There is no doubt that teachers have always talked too much – and often over the heads of non-comprehending and bored students. However, before we throw away old shoes for new ones, two main issues have to be cleared up:

7 The merits of these learning formats have been re-evaluated in recent corpus-based acquisition research, in which rote learning: the retrieval of prefabricated ‘chunks’ from memory, plays an important role (cf. Williams 1999; Blom, in preparation)
Learning in Contexts

- Has classroom research-so-far done justice to the skills of experienced teachers who process the complex input of a class of 20+ learners?

- To what extent do peer interactions or individual work floors (ICT) of the type described above provide affordances for (language) learning? Maaike Hajer in her excellent study of the use of Dutch in content classrooms in multi-ethnic schools (Hajer 1996), found that she was unable to analyze informal group work, because the students were often not ‘on task’ and the observational categories she used were not designed to handle the (greater) complexities of ‘conversations’ between equals.

Teachers and students are the primary interpreters of what happens in classroom situations and their insiders’ insights should be taken into account. The introduction of a course on Anthropology of Education or Culture and Learning in teacher training programmes could be a way of raising the awareness of both teacher educators and student teachers about the cultural background knowledge that is taken for granted and the potential bias involved in their interpretations of ‘others’ – not merely ‘newcomers’ – behaviors. The research component of university-based teacher education programmes could also be strengthened. With the help of more experienced teachers ‘action research’ (cf. Sevigny 1981; Van Lier 1988) of student teachers’ teaching practice could be introduced as part of the training programme and serve as an instrument of reflection. Collaboratively, these would yield a data-base of detailed micro-ethnographies over a wide variety of situations as a basis for further research on and generalizations about school-based (language) learning across settings and populations. In this way the novice teacher may become a collaborative constructor of pedagogical knowledge and the teacher-as-researcher model the hallmark of teacher education in the Netherlands.

6.4.2 List of main issues and implications

- A basic problem in (classroom) acquisition research is that overwhelmingly it generalizes from experiments to everyday mundane situations. We firmly believe the momentum should go the other way. Learner data are interpreted data. However complex the classroom interface, it must be the subject of systematic scientific inquiry before the data obtained can serve as input for pedagogical theories or psycholinguistic processing models – and results can be considered ecologically valid.

- ‘The’ context and therefore the meaning of an utterance is determined on a moment-by-moment basis, as a result of the on-line interpretation of the participants in interactional situations. For that reason the meaning of utterances
Learning in Contexts

in multi-party situations takes on an added complexity: they may be ambiguous owing to different readings that emerge in parallel floors and (collusive) subfloors.

- What are relevant issues in mainstream classroom research and teacher education is a non-representative selection of what insiders consider relevant. This results in a reductionist view of 'practice' and an underestimation of the considerable expertise that teachers and learners possess about 'the classroom game'.

- The relation between code switching, code mixing and changing parameters of identity for mainstream as well as immigrant students needs to be investigated in more detail (cf. also Rampton 1995).

- The targeted recipient of an utterance is not always univocally clear. Ambiguous and complex speaker positions may be exploited to bridge the differences in competence between students, by a subtle orchestration of the interaction, which addresses all co-present equally but some more equally than others (pace Orwell).

- Classroom situations are multi-person settings. The complexities of the interactions that take place there have been underanalyzed in traditional models of communication. Improvisation, dealing with interruptions, dilemmas and the half-off-record side comments of peers from the overhearer floor in classroom settings is part of what novice teachers have to learn.

- Ideas about learning are culturally biased. If we wish to do justice to the culturally heterogeneous Dutch school population, we should pay more attention to cultural issues in teacher education programs. We have to identify the cultural component in 'personal models of teaching' of student teachers. They may have to 'unlearn' an ethnocentric stance in the interpretation of their own and their students' verbal and non-verbal behavior – as well as acquiring a repertoire of new behavior.
Learning in Contexts

144