

## Part 1 Society and the school classroom

The relationship between society at large and events in school classrooms is investigated in Part 1 of this volume. Keith Chick's focus of attention is mathematics teaching carried out through the medium of English in schools in KwaZulu, South Africa, whilst Virginia LoCastro examines the teaching of English as a foreign language in schools in Japan.

Chick begins his discussion by highlighting the widely recognised phenomenon that, in schools for black people in the former apartheid South Africa, classroom interaction was characterised by teachers playing highly authoritarian roles and with students initiating very little. Most student contributions to classroom events were in the form of chorus responses to teacher prompts.

Chick argues that the features of 'teacher volubility' and 'student taciturnity' which he found in the South African middle school (or 'senior primary') classroom may also characterise classrooms in other parts of the world. On the other hand, the very high frequency of chorusing, in Chick's view, is 'not found ... in classroom discourse throughout the world.' (In fact, LoCastro, in her contribution to this volume, also identifies 'choral reading aloud sentence by sentence' of English texts to be a common feature in Japanese language classrooms. Coleman 1988 has observed what he calls 'the completion chorus phenomenon' in secondary school English language lessons in Sénégal, and Ikranegara 1981 has found a very similar mode of interaction, which she calls 'echoic responses', in rural primary schools in West Java, Indonesia. Nevertheless, we need to be extremely cautious in assuming that there are any structural or functional similarities between phenomena which are superficially similar. That is to say, there may be many different types of classroom chorusing and each may play a different role in its own context.)

Chick was prompted to investigate chorus responses because so many classroom teachers and students appeared to be reluctant to give up this mode of interaction and because they were resistant to what he considered to be 'more egalitarian' forms of interaction associated with

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the communicative approach. He describes the ‘tortuous paths’ which he followed trying to make sense of classroom behaviour. Chick’s original hypothesis was that trying to impose a communicative approach was ‘possibly a sort of naive ethnocentrism.’ His interim analysis of the data indicated that the characteristics of the classroom behaviour of both students and teachers reflected culturally specific Zulu patterns of interaction; concurrently he felt that these patterns of behaviour had unfortunate pedagogic consequences for the learners.

Later, however, Chick was obliged to revise his interpretation of the observed classroom behaviour. He placed this behaviour in its wider social context – a society founded on strict segregation between people of different races where resources for education and other services were allocated differentially (see also Peachey 1989 on teacher-student ratios in black South African primary schools). Eventually, Chick came to the conclusion that the fundamental explanation for what he had found was not, after all, that Zulu interactional styles had simply been transported into the classroom. Rather, he found that teachers and students were jointly creating a pattern of classroom co-existence which enabled them to avoid the ‘oppressive and demeaning effects of apartheid ideology.’ Whilst this pattern of behaviour – which he terms ‘safe-talk’ – helped the parties involved to maintain their dignity, the tragic irony is that it also reinforced the social inequalities which lay at the heart of the apartheid system.

The significance of Chick’s contribution to this discussion lies in his rejection of a simplistic link between what we find inside the classroom and what occurs in wider society. Instead, he obliges us to consider the possibility that the relationship between what happens in society and what occurs in the classroom is a highly complex one. In this case study, what takes place inside the classroom must be seen as an effort by those involved to maintain some self-respect when society at large grants them no respect at all. Collusion in the classroom, then, masks inequities in society at large.

Chick uses a mathematics lesson as a neutral site for an examination of the context into which he has been trying to introduce communicative language teaching concepts. LoCastro, meanwhile, focuses explicitly on English language teaching. Her scope is very broad, since she looks at classroom behaviour not only in the context of late 20th century Japanese society but also in its historical perspective.

LoCastro succeeds in identifying the external and historical influences on the ‘gross’ features of classroom behaviour, but also – even – on the central pedagogical concerns of teachers and pupils, including for example punctilious attention to correctness in grammar. She argues, therefore, that in order to make sense of the behaviour found in the Japanese secondary school English lesson, we need to take both a diachronic view of Japanese society since the 1860s and a synchronic

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view of contemporary Japan. This is an important contribution to the discussion of the relationship between society and classroom events.

LoCastro's discussion (like the study of education in China by Cortazzi and Jin in Chapter 9) takes a national perspective, rather than concentrating on a particular classroom or institution in detail. Essentially, LoCastro is concerned to demonstrate that the new English language curriculum issued by the Japanese Ministry of Education in 1989 and 1990 – although at first sight appearing to be well founded in that it takes into account the most recent thinking on curriculum design – actually shows 'a gross mismatch between the supposed aims and the socio-cultural context.' The aims of the new syllabus appear to have been determined not on the basis of an analysis of the needs of Japanese students but, rather, on an assumption that applied linguistic concepts developed in the Anglo-American applied linguistic context can be adopted uncritically into a very different situation. If LoCastro's analysis is correct, then her case is a perfect illustration of what Holliday (in Chapter 5 below and 1994) describes as the hegemony of the 'BANA' (British, Australasian and North American) model. And, as Holliday (1991) has warned us, if curriculum innovation is not sensitive to its socio-cultural context, then 'tissue rejection' – the failure of transplanted ideas and procedures to flourish in a new environment – is likely to occur.

LoCastro suggests that one of the dangers of deriving a new syllabus from Western models is that it is deceptively easy to translate terminology without successfully transferring meaning. She goes so far as to propose that there is a 'possibility that "communication" itself may not be a universally shared concept'; if this is the case, what, then, does 'the communicative approach' mean? LoCastro's warning about the risks involved in borrowing terms from one sociocultural context for mapping onto indigenous concepts in another context, resulting in semantic mismatches, is also taken up by Coleman in Chapter 4.

The very important conclusion to LoCastro's chapter – which in fact mirrors one of the central arguments of this volume – is that 'language classrooms, as part of the overall educational system, may be the context for the learning of other things.' Even more starkly, it appears that English language teaching is 'subordinate to the learning of culturally valued, normative behaviour.'

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## 2 Safe-talk: Collusion in apartheid education<sup>1</sup>

J. Keith Chick

### Introduction

#### *Background to the study*

There is widespread agreement amongst observers about what were the essential characteristics of interactions in schools for black people in South Africa under the former apartheid system: highly centralised, with teachers adopting authoritarian roles and doing most of the talking, with few pupil initiations, and with most of the pupil responses taking the form of group chorusing. Schlemmer and Bot (1986: 80) report a senior African school inspector as stating that black pupils were discouraged from asking questions or participating actively in learning and explain that it was regarded as impolite and even insubordinate to ask questions or make suggestions in class. Thembela (1986: 41) refers to classroom practice being characterised by rote learning and teacher-centred instruction.

Most observers, moreover, agree that the educational consequences of such interaction styles were unfortunate. Schlemmer and Bot (1986) and Thembela (1986), for example, argue that the use of such styles oppressed creativity, initiative and assertiveness. MacDonald (1988) claims that there are aspects of metacognition and disembedded thinking crucial to advanced learning and to effective functioning in a technological society which these styles of interacting and learning did not promote.

I became very aware of the possible negative educational consequences of the overwhelming preference for such styles of interaction in schools for black people in South Africa, through my involvement with in-service teacher education projects which had, as one of their primary objectives, the fostering of communicative approaches to the teaching of English in KwaZulu schools. (KwaZulu was a patchwork of geographical areas on the eastern seaboard of South Africa which, in terms of apartheid policy, was designated a 'homeland' for Zulu people. At the

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time of the study reported here, the total population of native speakers of Zulu was almost seven million; they thus constituted the largest language group in South Africa. Zulu speakers live in many parts of South Africa, but at that time approximately five million of them lived in KwaZulu.)

A number of the implementors of the in-service teacher education projects complained about the reluctance of many of the teachers, and even some of the students, to adopt the more egalitarian, de-centralised ways of interacting associated with these approaches to language teaching. This reluctance was pervasive enough to make at least some of those involved with the in-service projects, including myself, question whether the choice of communicative language teaching as a goal was an appropriate one. Given that communicative language teaching approaches had their origins chiefly in Europe and the USA, contexts very different from those which obtained in KwaZulu, I began to wonder whether our choice of communicative language teaching as a goal was possibly a sort of naive ethnocentrism prompted by the thought that what is good for Europe or the USA had to be good for KwaZulu. I reasoned that, in order to discover whether the goal of communicative language teaching was appropriate or not, it would be necessary to discover why students and teachers in KwaZulu schools found it so difficult to transfer to styles compatible with communicative language teaching. With this goal in mind, I encouraged Marianne Claude – who, under my supervision, was engaged in action research/in-service education with teachers in a peri-urban area of KwaZulu – to collect, by means of participant observation, interviews and discussions with the teachers, relevant ethnographic data, including classroom interactional data. I supplemented this with my own participant observation and discussions with teachers during visits to classrooms elsewhere in KwaZulu. In this chapter, I report on my analysis and interpretation of some of this data.

My thinking at this stage was heavily influenced by the findings of research I had completed earlier, working within the interactional sociolinguistic framework developed by scholars such as Gumperz (see, for example, 1982a, 1982b) and Erickson (see, for example, 1975 and 1976). In analysing interethnic encounters between a white South African English-speaking academic and Zulu graduate students at the University of Natal (see Chick 1985) I had identified putative culturally-specific Zulu-English interactional styles. These styles are characterised, amongst other things, by the preference by higher status speakers in asymmetrical encounters (i.e. those in which there are marked differences in the relative status of the participants) for what Scollon and Scollon (1983) term solidarity politeness, including the politeness or

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face-preserving strategy of volubility (much talking), and by lower status speakers for what they term deference politeness, including the strategy of taciturnity (avoidance of talking). I hypothesised that KwaZulu teachers and students found it difficult to transfer to styles compatible with communicative language teaching because these styles, which call on students to be voluble, differ markedly from those which predominate in a wide range of domains within the Zulu-speaking community, and which are transferred to their use of English in academic and other settings.

Incidentally, to avoid misinterpretation, I need to clarify that I am using 'preference' not in its lay sense of speaker's or hearer's individual preferences. Rather, I am borrowing a technical term from ethnomethodology, a branch of sociology concerned with investigating how people organise and make sense of social activities. As Levinson (1983: 307) explains, 'preference' is not a psychological notion but a structural notion that corresponds closely to the linguistic concept of markedness, according to which certain linguistic features are more basic and conventional and occur more frequently ('unmarked') than other features (referred to as 'marked'). Thus, when Zulus who have relatively low status choose deferential politeness, it is not because they like behaving deferentially, or that they 'feel' deferential, but rather because such behaviour is conventional, or as Lakoff expresses it, 'targeted'. She explains (1979: 69) that each culture has implicitly in its collective mind a concept of how a good human being should behave: 'a target for its members to aim at and judge themselves and others by'.

### *Organisation of the study*

Most research reports imply that the research which they are reporting on proceeded in very orderly and logical ways, and that the researchers, from the outset, were more knowledgeable and insightful than they actually were. The false starts, the partial understandings and the dead ends do not feature. In this chapter I will be departing from this tradition, and sharing with my readers the often tortuous paths I followed in exploring the significance of interactional styles widely employed in schools for black people in South Africa.

To begin with, I report on my micro-ethnographic analysis of an episode in a lesson in a KwaZulu classroom. The general goal of micro-ethnographic analysis is to provide a description of how interlocutors set up or constitute contexts that allow them to make sense of one another's messages. My specific purpose was to try to establish why teachers and students in such classrooms found it difficult to transfer to styles compatible with communicative language teaching. The analysis reveals

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interactional behaviour consistent with the putative Zulu-English interactional styles identified in the interethnic encounters referred to above. More significantly, it reveals that such styles served valuable social functions for students and teachers alike. This could account for why teachers and students were reluctant to abandon such styles, despite the fact that the academic consequences of such preference were probably unfortunate.

I then explain how my growing awareness of the limitations of micro-ethnographic research in general, and explanations of pervasive school failure amongst dominated groups in terms of culturally-specific interactional styles in particular, prompted me to re-examine my classroom interactional data. Critics have pointed out that micro-ethnographic studies often take insufficient account of how pervasive values, ideologies and structures in the wider society (macro context) constrain what takes place at a micro level. Accordingly, I give an account of the historical, structural circumstances which contributed to making primary school education for most teachers and students in so-called black education in apartheid South Africa such a traumatic experience. Finally I offer a reinterpretation of the analysed data. I suggest that what is most significantly displayed in this episode is not culturally-specific Zulu interactional styles, but styles consistent with interactional norms which teachers and students interactionally constituted as a means of avoiding the oppressive and demeaning effects of apartheid ideology and structures. Following McDermott and Tylbor (1987) I see the teacher and her students as *colluding* in preserving their dignity by hiding the fact that little or no learning is taking place. While serving the short-term interests of teachers and students, such strategies, I suggest, contributed to the widely documented high failure rate in black education in apartheid South Africa, and made teachers and students resistant to educational innovation. The strategies thus served to reinforce and reproduce the inequalities between the various population groups which characterised apartheid society.

### **Culturally-specific interactional styles as barriers to innovation and learning**

With the goal, then, of trying to establish why many teachers and students in KwaZulu schools resisted the adoption of egalitarian, decentralised ways of interacting, I carried out a fine-grained micro-ethnographic analysis of an episode in a video-recorded mathematics lesson, initially with the help of Marianne Claude (who had observed the lesson while it was taking place) and, later, independently. I selected



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this episode from the corpus collected by Marianne Claude because it contains features that I had observed in many lessons taught by teachers who were highly regarded either by students or by school authorities in the KwaZulu educational system. In other words, I chose part of a 'good' lesson. I did this to ensure that I would be analysing conventional 'targeted' behaviour in Lakoff's sense. I chose a content subject rather than an English lesson so as to lessen the chance that the teacher's style might have been influenced by Marianne Claude's intervention.

I based the analysis on methods developed by interactional sociolinguists (see, for example, Gumperz 1982a) who, rather than impose their own categories, attempt to access the interpretative or inferential processes of the participants by repeatedly playing the video or sound recordings to the participants and/or informants who share their cultural backgrounds, and by eliciting interpretations from them about progressively finer details of the discourse. I make use of transcription conventions which highlight the nature of turn exchange and which provide information about the supra-segmental phonology of the episode. Latch marks (    ) are used to show smooth exchange of turns without overlap, while square brackets are used to signify simultaneous speech ( [ ] ). Underlining is used to signify phonological prominence such as stress or marked pitch movement. The 'shape' of the pitch movement is indicated above the part of the utterance where this occurs, and so ( ' ) signifies rising tone.

Relevant contextual information is that the class consisted of 38 students of both sexes who were native speakers of Zulu, whose average age at the time was fourteen years, and who were in their seventh year of schooling (the fourth year of the Senior Primary phase). The teacher, whom I shall refer to as Mrs Gumbi, also a native Zulu speaker, was 32 years of age and had completed ten years of schooling and two years of teacher training. Mrs Gumbi conducted the entire lesson from the front of the classroom, making considerable use of the board. The students were crowded into multiple-seat wooden desks arranged in rows facing the board. The lesson took place through the medium of English. (In KwaZulu schools English served as the medium of instruction across the curriculum after the first four years of schooling through the medium of Zulu.)

As the video-recording shows, the focus of the lesson was 'elements which form the union set'. At the start of the lesson Mrs Gumbi introduced the notion of elements of a union set with the aid of the board. Elements were written on the board, and common elements pointed to. She individually nominated one student to answer a question but, significantly, only after the information to be provided had been

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written on the board. The few other student responses took the form of teacher-initiated group chorusing.

The lesson continued:

- 1 Mrs Gumbi: but I know that these two elements are common  
 2 because they are found in set B as well as in set C do you get  
 3 that  
 4 Students: yes
- 5 Mrs Gumbi: now now a let us form the universal set the  
 6 unvers I mean sorry union set is the set which  
 7 has the elements of both sets get it B and [ C  
 8 Students: [ C  
 9 Mrs Gumbi: collect  
 10 the elements of those two sets and write them together  
 11 all them they will form union [ set  
 12 Students: [ set  
 13 Mrs Gumbi: can you try to to list  
 14 the elements of the union set  
 15 Student A: two [ three  
 16 Mrs Gumbi: [ that is two  
 17 Student A: three  
 18 Mrs Gumbi: three  
 19 Student A: four  
 20 Mrs Gumbi: four  
 21 Student A: five  
 22 Mrs Gumbi: five  
 23 Student A: six  
 24 Mrs Gumbi: six  
 25 Student A: seven  
 26 Mrs Gumbi: seven  
 27 Student A: eight  
 28 Mrs Gumbi: eight and eight ...  
 29 what type of set is this now ... it is a [ union set  
 30 Students: [ union set  
 31 Mrs Gumbi: it is a  
 32 union set because we have been listing now at the elements  
 33 of set B together with the elements of set [ C  
 34 Students: [ C  
 35 Mrs Gumbi: to form one  
 36 set which called what ... a union [ set  
 37 Students: [ set  
 38 Mrs Gumbi: but remember  
 39 when you list the union set the elements for for the union set  
 40 do not repeat those elements which are written twice do you get that  
 41 Students: yes