PART I: A FRAMEWORK FOR UNDERSTANDING COMMUNICATION IN SECOND LANGUAGE CLASSROOMS

1 *Communication in second language classrooms*

In second language classrooms, the language, whether it is English or another language, is the medium through which teachers teach, and students demonstrate what they have learned. Acquiring that language is the ultimate instructional goal of second language education. Yet, how teachers and students use language to communicate in second language classrooms mediates between teaching, learning, and second language acquisition. Therefore, understanding the dynamics of classroom communication is essential for all those involved in second language education. However, understanding communication in second language classrooms is not a simple task. Classroom communication in general has been described as a "problematic medium" (Cazden 1986: 432), since differences in how, when, where, and to whom things are communicated can not only create slight misunderstandings, but can also seriously impair effective teaching and learning. Moreover, if that classroom is filled with students from a wide variety of linguistic and cultural backgrounds who possess a range of second language proficiency levels, then teachers cannot assume that their second language students will learn, talk, act, or interact in predictable ways. On the other hand, if teachers understand how the dynamics of classroom communication influence second language students' perceptions of and participation in classroom activities, they may be better able to monitor and adjust the patterns of classroom communication in order to create an environment that is conducive to both classroom learning and second language acquisition.

The overall goal of this book is to enable teachers to recognize how the patterns of communication are established and maintained in second language classrooms, the effect these patterns have on how second language students participate in classroom activities, and how their participation shapes the ways in which they use language for classroom learning and their opportunities for second language acquisition. This book puts forth an integrated view of classroom communication, by acknowledging that what makes up the whole of classroom communication is the interrelationship between what teachers and second language students bring to classrooms and what actually occurs during face-to-face communication within class-

rooms. The framework for understanding communication in second language classrooms presented in this book represents a lens through which teachers can begin to recognize this interrelationship and how it shapes the dynamics of communication in second language classrooms.

The classroom as a communication context

All communication occurs in a context. For example, on the surface, Excerpts 1.1 and 1.2 appear similar.

Excerpt 1.1
What time is it?
It's ten o'clock.
Oh, OK, thanks.

Excerpt 1.2
What time is it?
It's ten o'clock.
Right! Very good. *It's* ten o'clock.

In both excerpts, the participants alternate turns speaking, appear to understand each other's intentions, and frame their responses accordingly. However, it is obvious that these exchanges take place in different contexts. In Excerpt 1.1, the first speaker is genuinely seeking information about the time, and the second speaker provides an acceptable answer. In Excerpt 1.2, the first speaker is interested not in the actual time but in whether the second speaker could correctly produce the contracted form of "it is." Hence, the meanings communicated between the speakers in each excerpt are determined, in large part, by the context within which they occurred.

The communication context can also determine the rules that govern how speakers communicate, or the structure of communication. In classrooms, the structure of communication is easily recognizable. Teachers tend to control the topic of discussion, what counts as relevant to the topic, and who may participate and when. Students tend to respond to teacher-directed questions, direct their talk to teachers, and wait their turn before speaking. Teachers can ignore students who talk off-topic, or listen patiently and then direct them back on-topic. They can allow students to call out during a lesson, or insist that they wait to be called on before speaking. Teachers can place their students in small groups so they have more opportunities to control their own talk, to select which topics to talk about, and to direct their talk to whomever they wish. At any point, however, teachers retain the right to regain control over the structure of classroom communication. Thus, teachers, by virtue of the status they hold in their classrooms, play a dominant role in determining the structure of classroom communication.

Differences in the meaning and structure of communication are also determined by the ways in which participants perceive themselves in a particular context (Barker 1982). Such perceptions include a lifelong accumulation of experiences through which people interpret and construct their own representations of the world (Britton 1970; Bruner 1983; Piaget 1957). These experiences have been described as the basis of knowledge, or the frames of reference through which people are able to construct new and unique understandings of what they experience by relating it to what they already know. Learning, therefore, is a matter of changing, expanding, and/or reconstructing the frames of reference through which people interpret new experiences.

In second language classrooms, how teachers perceive their students and how students perceive their teachers can shape both the meaning and structure of classroom communication. Differences in these perceptions tend to result from differences in prior formal-schooling experiences, or the norms and expectations that in the past governed how to talk and act in classrooms. In one of my own graduate seminars, I was reminded of the subtle nature of these differences during a discussion on the topic of class participation. A Chinese student explained that it took her several semesters to figure out why a certain percentage of her course grade was allocated to something called "class participation." She admitted that before coming to the United States to study she thought if she listened quietly and took notes she *was* participating in class. Of course, this surprised the American students, since their conception of class participation was to raise questions or share their ideas during class discussions. Clearly, this Chinese student held a very different understanding of the concept – an understanding based on years of formal schooling according to norms and expectations different from those of the American students.

Throughout this book, the classroom is viewed as a unique communication context, one in which the meaning being communicated and the structure of that communication are shaped by the perceptions of those who participate in classroom activities. Differences in teachers' and students' perceptions of the classroom context can lead to different interpretations of and participation in classroom activities.

Classroom communicative competence

Understanding the dynamics of classroom communication is essential since how students talk and act in classrooms greatly influences what they learn. Mehan (1979: 33) suggests that "students need to know with whom, when, and where they can speak and act, they must have speech and behavior that are appropriate for classroom situations and they must be able to interpret implicit classroom rules." Full participation in classroom activities requires

competence in both the social and interactional aspects of classroom language – in other words, classroom communicative competence (Wilkinson 1982). Just as communicative competence is considered to be essential for second language learners to participate in the target language culture (Canale & Swain 1980; Hymes 1974), classroom communicative competence is essential for second language students to participate in and learn from their second language classroom experiences.

Differences in students' linguistic and cultural backgrounds inevitably influence how, when, where, and why they communicate in second language classrooms. If students are unaware of the social and interactional norms that regulate participation in classroom activities, they may learn little from their classroom experiences (Cook-Gumperz & Gumperz 1982; Wilkinson 1982). Hence, knowledge of and competence in the social and interactional norms that govern classroom communication are essential components of successful participation in second language instruction.

For students operating in a second language, classroom communicative competence is also believed to be an essential component in the process of second language acquisition. Recent classroom-based research suggests that "the processes of classroom interaction determine what language learning opportunities become available to be learned from" (Allwright 1984: 156); therefore, "any second language learning that takes place must in some way result from the process of interaction the learner takes part in" (Ellis 1990: 91). For second language students, classroom communicative competence means not only successfully participating in classroom activities, but also becoming communicatively competent in the second language. To understand the communicative demands placed on their second language students, teachers must recognize that the dynamics of classroom communication are shaped by the classroom context and the norms for participation in that context.

Introducing the framework

The framework for understanding communication in second language classrooms used throughout this book has been adapted from a model of communication and learning put forth by British researcher Douglas Barnes (1976). Barnes characterizes the patterns of classroom communication established and maintained by teachers as determining not only the ways in which students use language but also what students ultimately learn. He disagrees with the notion that students are passive receivers of knowledge and claims this to be an inadequate account of what actually occurs in classrooms. He challenges educators to examine classroom communication in its entirety, including the role students play as active participants in the creation of knowledge.

Barnes supports the notion that teachers and students interpret classroom activities through their own frames of reference. Moreover, since these frames of reference tend to be different, teachers and students are likely to have different interpretations of the activities in which they participate. Therefore, Barnes believes that classroom learning is a negotiation between teachers' meanings and students' understandings – a sort of give-and-take between teachers and students as they construct shared understandings through face-to-face communication. Barnes argues that classroom learning is based primarily on the relationship between what students know and what teachers offer them in classrooms. Ultimately, he recognizes the patterns of communication in classrooms as representing a crucial aspect in the learning process in that they constrain, to a greater or lesser degree, students' participation in learning and in the construction of knowledge.

In this book, Barnes's model of communication and learning acts as a point of departure for explorations into the dynamics of communication in second language classrooms. Thus, classroom communication is examined not only in terms of what actually occurs in second language classrooms, but also in terms of what teachers and students bring to second language classrooms, and how that shapes what occurs there. To do this, it is necessary to acknowledge that there are two dimensions to how teachers and students talk, act, and interact in second language classrooms. The first represents the moment-to-moment actions and interactions that constitute what actually occurs in second language classrooms. The second represents what teachers and students bring to the second language classroom. The interrelatedness of these two dimensions implies that what resides within teachers and their students (who they are, what they know, and how they act and interact) shapes how they will communicate with one another in second language classrooms. The challenge set before teachers is to recognize both the obvious in their classrooms and the not so obvious within themselves and their students. Put another way, understanding the dynamics of communication in second language classrooms means recognizing how that which is hidden merges with and shapes that which is public.[1]

The framework for understanding communication in second language classrooms is presented in Figure 1.1; it is adapted from Barnes's original model. The box at the left acknowledges that second language students possess knowledge and use of language, both their native language and what they have acquired of their second language; these guide how they understand the world around them, participate in social interactions, and organize their learning. This knowledge is acquired within the linguistic, social, and cultural contexts of their real-life experiences and, thus, represents an important aspect of the frames of reference through which students

1 I acknowledge Donald Freeman for recognizing this point and helping to launch my own thinking on the dynamics of classroom communication.

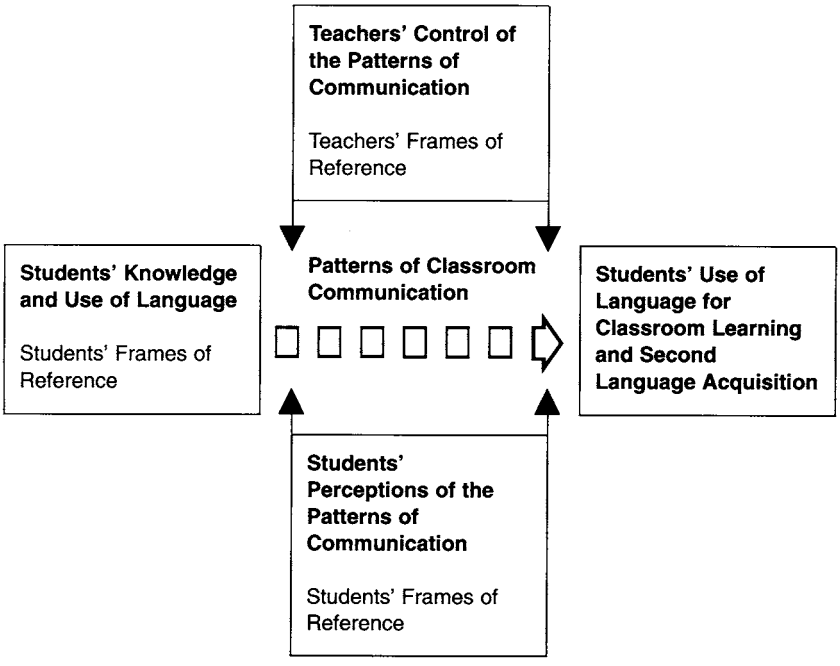

Figure 1.1: A Framework for Understanding Communication in Second Language Classrooms. (Adapted with permission from Douglas Barnes, *From Communication to Curriculum,* 2nd ed., Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook Publishers, 1992.)

use language to make sense of and interact with the world around them. However, the extent to which second language students are willing or able to demonstrate this knowledge can be constrained, to a greater or lesser degree, by the patterns of communication that are established and maintained in second language classrooms.

Thus, the central area of the framework represents the patterns of classroom communication, or shared understandings of how, when, where, and with whom language is to be used during second language instruction. These patterns are not permanent, but are continually constructed and reconstructed by teachers as they control the patterns of classroom communication (represented by the downward-pointing arrows) and by students as they interpret and respond to what their teachers say and do (represented by the upward-pointing arrows). Teachers' control of the patterns of communication is shaped, in part, by their frames of reference – that is, by aspects of their professional and practical knowledge that shape how they interpret and understand their own and their students' communicative behavior within the classroom context. In addition, students' perceptions of the patterns of communication are shaped by another aspect

of their frames of reference: the norms and expectations they hold for their own and their teachers' communicative behavior based on their prior experiences as students in classrooms. Finally, as indicated by the box at the right, the patterns of classroom communication that are established between teachers and students can work to either foster or constrain the ways in which students use language for classroom learning and their opportunities for second language acquisition.

Throughout this book, this framework can be used as a lens through which to cultivate an integrated view of classroom communication, one that helps to converge the obvious with the obscure and alter the way in which teachers understand the dynamics of communication in second language classrooms.

An overview of the framework

An overview of the framework for understanding communication in second language classrooms follows. Specifically, each component of the framework is defined, and its contribution toward the dynamics of communication in second language classrooms is evaluated.

Teachers' control of the patterns of classroom communication

Probably the most important component of the framework for understanding communication in second language classrooms is teachers' control of the patterns of classroom communication. Teachers control what goes on in classrooms primarily through the ways in which they use language. Typically, they retain this control through a question–answer mode of interaction. Belleck et al. (1966) describe the language of the classroom as a game with rules, both implicit and explicit, that direct the nature of classroom communication. The object of the game, they explain, is to carry on talk about subject matter, and success is based on the amount of learning displayed by students after a given period of play. The teacher sets up the rules of the game, is the most active player, and acts as the solicitor while students act as respondents.

The underlying structure of classroom language has been characterized as following a pattern of acts: an initiation act (teacher), a response act (student), and an evaluation act (teacher), commonly referred to as IRE (Mehan 1979; Sinclair & Coulthard 1975). Notice the IRE pattern in Excerpt 1.3, taken from an actual second language classroom, in which the teacher was conducting a lesson on preposition usage with Yung, a third grade student.

Excerpt 1.3
Teacher: Where is the cup?

Yung: On top of the box.
Teacher: Right, the cup is on top of the box. (T moves cup)
Now, where is the cup?
Yung: In the box.
Teacher: The cup is . . . ?
Yung: In the box.
Teacher: The cup is in . . . ?
Yung: The cup is in the box.
Teacher: Right, very good, the cup is in the box.

In this excerpt, the teacher's initiation, "Where is the cup?" indicates to Yung that she is to name the location of the cup using the correct preposition. Yung's response, "On the box," contains the correct preposition, as indicated by the teacher's evaluation, "Right," but the teacher continues with a complete sentence to cue Yung as to the desired structure of her answer. As the exchange continues, the teacher enforces her request for a complete sentence by restating part of the sentence using rising intonation. Yung appears to miss this cue and instead merely responds, "In the box." After the teacher's prompt of, "The cup is in . . . ?" Yung correctly interprets what the teacher wants and produces a complete sentence. The exchange ends as the teacher evaluates Yung's response and repeats the sentence for emphasis.

As Excerpt 1.3 illustrates, the IRE pattern allows teachers to maintain control over the structure of classroom communication; at the same time, however, students must be able to recognize that structure and learn to speak within it. Hence, knowledge of the rules of the language game and the underlying structure of classroom communication are essential components of classroom communicative competence.

Teachers also use language in the classroom to control the content that is learned during instruction. They can exert this control by using conventionalized language that is specific to a content area but that may act as a barrier for students who do not know its specialized meaning. Notice, in Excerpt 1.4, how the teacher's use of grammar terminology for the comparative and superlative form of adjectives confuses Anna as she attempts to produce the correct answer.

Excerpt 1.4
Teacher: Why did Mr. Smith choose this car? Which form of the adjective should we use? Why did he choose this car?
Anna: It cheap.
Teacher: Can you make a sentence, . . . Do we use the comparative or superlative? What do you think? Why did he buy this car?
Anna: That car, car cheap. He no have much money, so that car cheap, he buy.

Teacher: Right, but, remember we studied the comparative and superlative of adjectives . . . OK, we said to make them we use "er" and "est," remember?
Anna: Yeah.
Teacher: So, which is it, the comparative or superlative?
Anna: Comparative?
Teacher: Comparative?
Anna: Superlative?
Teacher: Right, the superlative, cheapest, it's the cheapest one.

In this exchange, Anna's response focuses on the meaning of the teacher's questions as opposed to the correct grammatical form of the adjective. Her attempts to use more exploratory language are rejected in favor of the conventionalized grammar terminology. In fact, it is not clear if Anna understood this terminology, since she identifies "superlative" only after her first guess was questioned by the teacher. It may be that this teacher's pedagogical purpose was to enable Anna to use grammar terminology as a shared way of talking about this particular linguistic feature of the language. It remains unclear, however, whether the use of such conventionalized language inhibited or enhanced Anna's opportunity to acquire this feature of the language.

TEACHERS' FRAMES OF REFERENCE

The ways in which teachers organize the patterns of classroom communication can be understood, in part, by their frames of reference. These include aspects of teachers' professional and practical knowledge that, to some extent, shape how they interpret and understand their own and their students' communicative behavior. Thus, teachers' frames of reference encompass the range of their prior experiences as students and as second language learners, the nature of their professional knowledge and how that knowledge develops over time, the theoretical beliefs they hold about how second languages are learned and how they should be taught, and the ways in which they make sense of their own teaching experiences. By exploring these aspects of teachers' frames of reference, we can begin to come to terms with what it is that teachers bring to classrooms and how their frames of reference contribute to the dynamics of communication within second language classrooms.

Students' perceptions of the patterns of classroom communication

A second important component of the framework for understanding communication in second language classrooms is students' perceptions of the patterns of classroom communication. If we consider teaching and learning