



Classroom Interaction as Activity Type: A Study of Social Interaction at Abdul Wali Khan University Mardan

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ABSTRACT

The main aim of the study was to investigate Activity Type (AT) as an approach towards classroom interaction and highlight its limitations and delimitations. For this purpose, a formal teacher-student interaction in academic setting of about 30 minutes was recorded, transcribed and then coded. The interaction was qualitatively analyzed. The study revealed that the interaction has outlined the main features of AT including goals orientation, activity specific context, inferencing system, constraints on participants' contributions and most obviously the overriding role of setting, over-shadowing all the other features

1 INTRODUCTION

The study of language as social activity/interaction is not something new but has been studied since decades under different names such as *social situation*, *social episode*, *social occasion*, *social events*, *speech events*, *language game* etc. (Yueguo 2010, pp.75-76). Different researchers/scholars have approached these social interactive activities from different perspectives. Levinson (1979) has approached it from institutional perspective and introduced an approach for its study and analysis known as *Activity Type* (AT). He has outlined some common features, which are shared by most of these institutional interactive activities i.e. activity specific context, goals oriented, socially constituted, constraints on participants' contributions and setting etc. (1979:368). However, in all of these features the role of context is of prime importance. He further elaborated that in order to understand and analyse social interaction it has to be studied in its activity specific context, which in a way is an attempt of combining interactional sociolinguistics with pragmatics. In other words, the role of context (embedded within the activity specific culture) is central to unlocking the true meaning potential of social interaction. Although Levinson in his approach of AT in general and context in particular is influenced by a number of scholars/researchers including Wittgenstein (1958), Hymes (1964) and Goffman (1974) but it can be distinguished from other approaches by its vast range, flexibility and openness to accommodate a number of concepts and ideas. He has categorized institutional interactions/activities by placing it on a continuum ranging from formal-informal, pre-packaged-unscripted, verbal- non-verbal and so on.

The current essay is an attempt to analyze a formal institutional activity (teacher student interaction) in an academic setting from the perspective of AT approach with a focus on the role of context and setting along with its advantages and disadvantages. First AT has been compared and contrasted with other approaches, where emphasis has been made on the role of context, which is followed by advantages and disadvantages of the approach and a short review of classroom interaction. Then after having a few words on methodology, the interaction has been analyzed and discussed in details from AT perspective. Here emphasis has been made on the role of academic setting with an eye on the advantages and disadvantages of AT. At the end the essay is rounded on a short conclusion.

1. 1. Activity type in relation to other approaches

Levinson (1979) in his AT has taken language as a social activity and divided these interactive activities into different categories on the basis of level of formality, structure, function etc. He elaborated that each activity is governed by activity specific context/norms, which is essential to be taken into consideration for proper comprehension and analysis of the activity. Moreover, each activity has specific goals, constraints on participation, setting and so forth but it is the context, which links all the other features on a central point. Various scholars/philosophers/researchers have investigated social interactions and characterized it differently depended upon his/her intellectual background.

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Wittgenstein (1958) who has been frequently referred and drawn upon by Levinson in connection with his concept of *language game*, compared social interaction (language) with a game emphasising that as each game is governed by certain norms, which need to be understood in order to follow the game properly, similarly, an interactional activity can only be properly understood when it is studied/seen in its activity specific context. Levinson has elaborated Wittgenstein's concept of language game but in comparison to him Levinson remained a bit more spacious and flexible in his approach. Then, Hymes (1964), who has not only influenced Levinson in his AT but has been a regular source of reference for writers/researchers working in the area of social interactions; his model *Ethnography of speaking*, specifically his concepts of *speech event*, *speech situation*, *goals*, *setting* etc. have been widely cited/quoted all around. Although Hymes' model is comparatively more elaborate and comprehensive but it happened to be more stable and tended openly towards the cultural and social paradigm in general and in the case of context in particular. Levinson on the other hand believes in a dynamic/ fluid context with an orientation towards activity specific inferencing scheme, where the participants sometime can go beyond the *Allowable contributions*. The difference between AT and Sarangi's model can be that the former sees the context as shaping the events while the latter takes it as a constraining factor checking the performance of the participants (Thomas 1995).

Similarly, Levinson shared a good deal of common ground with Goffman (1974, 1981) and Gumperz (1982) on both the fronts: context and inference making. Goffman's dynamic concept of *frame*, referring to participant's understanding of situation and his notion of *footing*; participants' alignment with situation, are to a greater extent converging with Levinson's concept of dynamic context and activity specific inferencing system. Similarly, Gumperz (1982) has shown somewhat similar approach to context and inference making. He emphasises on the dynamic aspect of social context and the importance of linguistics details in evoking them but at the same time shows a bit more inclination towards the social and structural side of social interaction (Drew and Heritage, 1992). Besides, Sarangi (2000) while acknowledging the fluidity of social interaction in general and institutional interaction in particular has added a new element to the current debate by bringing into notice hybridity, which exists between activity types and discourse types. He elaborated that sometime we observe a mixture of discourse types in a single activity (e.g. in a classroom the teacher quite often resort to the telling of a joke/anecdote etc.) or one activity is embedded in another activity etc. In other words, Sarangi (2000) has not only endorsed the dynamic aspect of context but has also highlighted the overall fluid nature of social interaction.

Then the conversationalists specifically mentioned be made of Harvey Sacks et al (1974) the pioneer of conversation analysis (CA), share a good deal of common ground with AT. Both the approaches emphasis on the exploration of interaction from internal dimension but differences between the two have also been observed as CA emphasises on mundane conversation with its sequential organization and treats context both as the project and product of participants own actions, while AT is marked by its focus on activity specific context, goals' orientation, constraints on participation, setting and so on (Drew and Heritage 1992; Levinson 1979; Sinclair and Coulthard 1975 etc.).

1.2 Advantages and disadvantages

AT like any approach has both advantages and disadvantages. But its advantages outweigh its disadvantages. The most favourable aspect of AT is its broad range, openness and flexibility (Sarangi 2000). Comparatively AT is broader in range and focus, while other approaches such as speech act theory etc. are limited in one way or the other in its range and focus (Drew and Heritage 1992, p.10). Another point which can be taken both as an advantage and disadvantage is the hybridity, which exists between discourse types and ATs (Sarangi 2000). It has been observed that sometime during the course of an activity we come across different discourse types or within one AT we see another activity, which quite often happened to be untypical of the activity and its setting .Now the question is how to see that activity within an activity. Similarly, some of the studies specifically in reference with formal institutional interactions have raised the point that in AT there is a feel of over emphasis on constraints on the contributions of the participants. (e.g. Yueguo 2010). But approaching this constraining factor from another dimension, it may be taken as an advantage in situations where there are a large number of participants and if there are no such restrictions/constraints (e.g. turn taking etc.), it will be difficult to achieve the desired goals of the interaction. Another reservation about AT is that it mostly remains vague and obscure, several aspects such as relation between activity types, their physical milieu, complexity of multiple goals, goal attaining scheme, relation between activities and its participants have not been fully explained (Yueguo 2010, p.78). To be realistic, social interactions have a vast range and it seems impossible to cover its

different dimensions in a single framework, only an attempt can be made to address it broadly and that is what Levinson has done and remained successful to a greater extent.

1.3 Classroom interaction as an Activity type

Classroom interaction is one among the formal institutional interactions/ATs, which has been investigated by different researchers from different perspectives. Most of the studies have tried to accommodate classroom interaction within the broader paradigm of CA and did not place much emphasis on its distinct institutional character. They have made focus on the structural and sequential organization of conversation/interaction (e.g. Kruinigen 2012; Kok 2008; Schegloff 1984; Sack et al. 1974; Schegloff and Sacks 1973 etc.). There are research studies, which have focused on classroom interaction in institutional setting and have shown that there exist a relationship between the aims and goals of institutions and the organization of interactions. In other words the institutionality of interactions is reflected by its structure and organization (Hester and Francis 2001; Johnson 1995; Levinson 1992 etc.). Some of the studies have investigated the specific turn taking pattern of classroom interaction and found it to be asymmetrically dominated by the teacher (e.g. McHoul 1978). Sinclair and Coulthard (1975) moved a step further and have come up with a structural model comprising five stages: Lesson, Transaction, Exchange, Move and Act. They elaborated that classroom interaction follow a specific turn sequence: initiation, response and feedback/initiation response and evaluation (IRF/IRE), which have been endorsed by other studies as well (e.g. Mehan 1979 and Drew 1981). Margutti (2000) explored classroom interaction in connection with problem solving tasks to pin point the co-relation between language use and the structure of the activities. He has emphasised on the constraints that academic setting imposes on the participants. Yeng (2009) conducted another very relevant study where he has outlined some basic strategies used by the participants in institutional interaction.

Keeping in view the fact that institutional interaction, particularly classroom interaction, has been widely studied from different perspectives, but, unfortunately, in Pakistan in reference with Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, AT approach has yet to be properly tried in academic setting. Therefore, the researcher being interested in the area intends to explore it further in his studies (a head) deemed it appropriate to investigate it in the current essay.

2. METHODOLOGY

In order to conduct a qualitative analysis of classroom interaction, an interaction between a teacher and student of about 7 minutes was recorded and then by following Seedhouse (2004) transcription's conventions, transcribed. An observational analysis of the transcription informed by the basic principles of AT approach (Levinson 1979) and the framework of CA (Sack et al. 1974) has been conducted. The interaction was recorded in a BS classroom, Department of English, Abdul Wali Khan University Mardan, Pakistan.

3. ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

In the current essay a classroom interaction has been investigated from the perspective of AT with emphasis on the role of academic setting. Moreover, attention has also been paid to the limitations and delimitations of the approach. An observational analysis of the data informed by the framework of AT has been carried out, which reveals that the interaction has clearly outlined the main features of AT. The academic setting and institutional character of interaction restrict the interaction to academic sphere, which is reflected by the structure and organization of the interaction as well.

3.1. The role of setting in formal interaction (teacher-student interaction)

Although setting in the sense of a physical designated place is not an essential requirement in all types of institutional interactions, however, in formal institutional interaction setting plays a very important role (Drew and Heritage 1992, p.3). For example, on a dining table the people quite often switch to interactions, which are institutional in character but taking place around a dining table. On the other hand, in formal institutional interactions such as classroom interaction, courtroom interaction etc., setting plays a pivotal role. Here a lot can be predicted about the nature of interaction from its setting even before the commencement of actual interactive process. For example, certain features are associated with academic setting such as students, teachers, classroom and learning, which enable ones to foresee a lot before seeing the actual interactive activity. This lack of consistency regarding the role of setting in all types of interaction can be an advantage in the sense that it refers to the fluidity and flexibility of AT and the

uniqueness of each activity in itself but can be a disadvantage as well as it stands in the way of generalisation of the approach as a whole. Analysis of the current data reveals that the academic setting steers and guides the overall interactive process. It restricts the teacher-student interaction in terms of goals, range, tone, structure, jargon etc. The taste of academic setting is almost there in every component of interaction including its formal academic goals, specific turn sequence (IRE/IRF), academic jargon, inferencing system and so on.

3.2. Goals orientation and the focus of the interaction

Institutional interactions are goals oriented, which have been endorsed by many research studies (e.g. Sarangi 2011, 2000; Drew and Heritage 1992 etc.). The analysis of data shows that the interaction is fully guided by its institutional goals. The interaction being academic has specific academic goals and the teacher and student have shown a strict adherence to those goals, more evidently brought forth by their formal behaviours, contributions and the overall interactive process. The interaction opens in a formal manner with an adjacency pairs (greeting). The teacher uses an Arabic greeting phrase *Asalam-o-Alaikum* (line 1) normally used by all the Muslims whenever they come across each other, equivalent to English greeting *hello*, which is responded by the student with *good afternoon*.

1. T: (Asalam-o-Alaikum) (you may be safe and sound) everybody (.)
- 3: to give you some time for answering your question
4. S: good after noon: how are you sir?

Then in the next turn (line 6) the teacher immediately turns to the main goals of interaction i.e. answering questions and update about assignments. The student being unable to submit the assignment in time offers apology (line 7).

6. T: have you done the work Yasir?
7. S: I am sorry sir but I returned late as you know.

This is followed by a discussion revolves around the same topic till the point (line 14 and 16) when a conflict develops between the personal goal of the student (to get a day extension) and the goal of the activity (to make the student to submit assignment in time) both linked to submission of assignment.

14 S: can i submit it tomorrow morning:

16 T: why don't you do it by now (..) it is 6 o'clock and still (.) have

The interaction from lines 1-44 is strictly oriented to the above mentioned goals. Then from line 45-56, the teacher moves to the inquiry about the second assigned task of reading a book. The student replies positively and then the discussion switches back to assignment submission (line 57). Finally, the student makes the teacher agreed to help him in requesting the head of the department for extension. The analysis shows that the interaction strictly oriented to the main goals of the activity. The Institutionality of the goals and the manner of interaction under the umbrella of academic setting guide the participants/analysts in their reading and analysis of the activity. Although Yueguo (2010, pp. 78) points out that in AT there is a lack of clarity, complexity and multiplicity of goals and over emphasis on constraints etc. but the analysis of the current interaction reveals that the activity has very definite and clear goals, however, one gets an impression of over emphasis on formality and constraints.

3.3. Lexical Choice

It has also been observed that the participants in their interaction have used a specific form of vocabulary items quite different from common conversation. The participants specific roles as teacher and student in an academic context restrict them to the use of academic register (Drew and Heritage 1992, p. 28). The use of lexical items such as *question, student, teacher, faculty, read, book, studied, good, application, talented, punctual department, approve, write, strict, policy, guide, authorised, senior, term, seniority*, etc. enact an academic world, guiding and taking the analysts to academic setting, where such lexical items are frequently used. This is a very clear illustration of the activity specific constraints manifested through the use of specific vocabulary items. Besides, the teacher choice of using descriptive terms such as personal pronouns like *I* and *we* is governed by the institutional roles fitted in academic setting. The analysis reveals that whenever the teacher refers to himself, he uses *I* but when he talks as representative of the institution, then he invokes his institutional identity by using *we*.

15. T: no, I am not sure(.) we have policy strictly (..) going by the outline
39. T: it's not the question of seniority (..)we rotate the office on term basis

The use of *I* and *we* also refer to teacher's change of footing driven by the context. It represents the change in frame of the teacher manifests through his change of *footing*, alignment with the situation, which is a reminiscent of Coffman's concepts of *framing* and *footing* (1974, 1981).

3.4. Activity specific context and inference making

The data shows that the participants make remarks, which can only be properly understood when one sees it within the activity specific context and setting. If these remarks/sentences/phrases are taken out of context, they are likely to be misinterpreted (Sarangi 2000). For instance the teacher in lines 6-7 says:

6. T: have you done the work Yasir?
7. S: I am sorry sir but I returned late as you know.

17. S: that's too late sir, and you know that we cannot stay out of home

Now, if we take these lines out of context/activity, it can be interpreted in a number of ways. *Work* is a word that stands for so many things and it can be any kind of work but seeing it in academic context/classroom setting, obviously, it refers to some academic work assigned by the teacher. Moreover, now what is exactly assigned and why the student returns late, is a part of the shared knowledge of the participants. Again in line 7, 10, 17 and 18 there are references to the shared knowledge of the participants. Besides, the analysis also reveals that the participants use some cultural specific phrases, which needs to be seen against the background of activity specific culture for proper understanding and interpretation.

1. T (Asalam-o-Alaikum) (you may be sound and safe) everybody (0.2)
4. S good after noon: how are you sir?
12. S. I swear: by God

The use of phrases like *Asalam-o-Alaikum* and *Swear by God* are very commonly used in Pakistani culture in particular and in the Muslim world in general. The former serves as greeting while the latter as endorsement. These inferences evoke the cultural background of the activity and can be termed as *contextualization cues* (Gumperz 1982). Keeping in view the importance of the activity specific cultural knowledge for understanding/comprehension purposes, a number of scholars/researchers have emphasised that social interaction should be studied along the lines of activity specific culture (e.g. Sarangi 2000; Gumperz 1982 ; Hymes 1964 etc.).

3.5. Member categorisation/constraints on participants/asymmetry and turn sequence

The analysis reveals that the academic setting and institutional character of the interaction (classroom interaction) restrict the contributions and choice of lexical items of the participants to the academic sphere. The use of academic jargon and the nature of formal discussion takes us to the heart of the activity and make the process of categorisation easy and predictable, e.g. *question, student, teacher, faculty, read, book, studied, good, application, talented, punctual department, approve, write, strict, policy, guide, authorised, senior, term, seniority*, etc. From the very beginning till the end of the activity both the teacher and student remain very formal and the interaction proceeds in a formal way, which is quite typical of most of the classroom interactions (Sinclair and Coulthard 1975). The student use of the word *sir* time and again and the teacher calling the student by the first name *Yasir*, the teacher's feedbacks, evaluative remarks (e.g. *you are lazy, no, good* etc), tone, topic introduction/change (lines: 3 and 45), opening and closing of the interaction (lines: 3,61-56) and the student submissive role (e.g. *ok sir etc.*) throughout the interaction are indicative of the asymmetry that exists in the roles of teacher and student, quite typical of most of the classroom interactions (McHoul 1978). The analysis also shows that mostly the sequence of interaction has been IRE/IRF and adjacency pairs (question/answer format). But, the dominant pattern remains IRE/IRF (e.g. lines: 45-54), which has also been reported by other studies to be dominantly used in classroom interaction (e.g. Mehan 1979; Sinclair and Coulthard 1975 etc.). The IRE/IRF pattern in itself is asymmetrical. The teacher in most of the cases initiates a move and then after the reply of student gives feedback/evaluation indicative of the typical asymmetrical relationship between teacher and student. In short, the formal institutional character of the activity is predictable and it facilitates both the participants and analysts in categorization of the situation and activity.

The analysis of the current interaction reveals that the formal nature of the activity gives a feel of over formality and over emphasis on constraints and probably it is this formal tone and constraints, which make some of the researchers to call AT an approach emphasising too much on constraints (e.g. Yueguo 2010 etc.).

4. CONCLUSION

As discussed before, language as social activity or interaction is studied from different perspectives and thus addressed with different names such as social situation, social episode, social occasion, social events, speech events, language game etc. (Yueguo 2010, pp.75-76). The most favourable aspect of the approach i.e. Activity Type, is its flexibility and openness. It is not fully tended either towards the ethnographic paradigm or conversation analysis or any other framework but instead taking certain elements from different frameworks and combining them into its fabric. The ethnographic elements are shown in its partial orientation towards cultural specific activity concept, which necessitate familiarity with the activity specific culture for understanding and analysis of the activity as brought forth by the current study as well. Similarly, CA's inclination is shown as its emphasis on the exploration of interaction from internal dimension and activity specific context/inferencing system etc., which is endorsed by the current study as well. Hybridity, which exists between ATs and discourse types, is another element, which can be taken both as an advantage and disadvantage. On the one hand, it refers to the dynamic and flexible aspect of social interaction but on the other hand creates complexity and confusion regarding the placement of discourse types in activity types and vice versa.

In short ATs approach has both advantages and disadvantages but its advantages including openness, durability/dynamism, flexibility etc. outweigh its disadvantages including its lack of explanation regarding different feature and over-emphasis on constraints etc.

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