

What's the Use of 'Triadic Dialogue'? : Activity Theory, Conversation Analysis and Analysis of Pedagogical Practices

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Abstract

Developing research methodologies to both understand and describe instructional communication has been a major topic in the educational research literature. A key area of studies is classroom discourse analysis or classroom interactional analysis. This area covers a wide range of studies which focus on different aspects of classroom phenomena depending on the researcher's interest: e.g., language socialization, negotiation and discursive construction of identities, social construction of knowledge, and so on. Interesting as they are the discourse analysis methods employed in these studies tend to focus more on micro-analysis of teacher-student communication / student-student interactions and relationships than on the holistic description and understanding of pedagogical practices and why they are difficult to change. Other quantitative tools (e.g., various classroom behaviour coding systems) also tend to be piecemeal (or fragmented) in nature and might not help teachers to capture the dynamics or a holistic view of their pedagogical practices. In this paper the analytical tools offered by activity theory (AT) and conversation analysis (CA) will be drawn upon to develop some practical research tools for conducting analysis of pedagogical practices. Examples from Hong Kong classroom contexts will be used to illustrate how some of the AT and CA analytical tools can help educational researchers and teachers to both gain a deeper understanding of their pedagogical practices and to analyse for any inherent contradictions and tensions in their practices which could serve as an entry point for initiating pedagogical change to better achieve the educational goals in specific contexts.

1. Classroom Research and the Search for Effective Pedagogies: Early Studies

The line of research with the classroom as its central focus has its origins in general educational and teacher-training studies in the 1950s, when people wanted to find out what constituted effective teaching—i.e., the search for the most effective teaching methods. For instance, in the 1960s language educational researchers were engaged in comparing the effectiveness of different second and foreign language teaching methods (e.g., cognitive-code, audio-lingual) with the research goal of obtaining a set of global methodological prescriptions for language teaching (e.g., Scherer and Wertheimer, 1964; Smith, 1970; Otto, 1969).

However, no conclusive results were obtained. Fanselow (1977) regarded the failure as a result of using large, inappropriate units for analysis such as ‘school’, ‘skill’, ‘method’ since practitioners of different teaching methods may actually do similar things in the classroom (e.g., requiring students to answer in complete sentences). The early studies assumed that ‘approach’, ‘method’ or ‘technique’ were the independent variables and employed an experimental research design to compare the learning outcomes (i.e., the ‘dependent variable’) of different classes of students. These different classes were assumed to be instances of different teaching methods (i.e., the ‘independent variable’).

The linguistic and discourse turn in classroom and pedagogical research can be said to arrive in the mid-1970s to the 1980s when educational researchers started to focus on analyzing the fine details of interactions in the classroom. Instead of following the experimental research paradigm, this line of research generally follows the interpretive research paradigm (see Lin, 1998 for a delineation of the different research paradigms influencing classroom research) and draws on tools from interactional sociolinguistics and discourse analysis.

Sinclair and Coulthard’s seminal work on classroom discourse analysis (1975) remains today the classical study which has laid down the basic discourse analytical framework and units which subsequent classroom researchers have frequently referred to and built upon. One of the most significant contributions of Sinclair and Coulthard’s work is the explicit, systematic, detailed description of one type of recurrent sequence of utterances in the classroom: the Initiation-Response-Feedback/Follow-up (IRF) exchange sequence which is ubiquitous in classrooms.

In the next section we shall look at key studies focusing on the functions and the debates on educational consequences related to the use of the IRF sequence in the classroom. Then in Section 3 we shall look at what insights we can draw from Conversation Analysis and Activity Theory to have a situated understanding of the use of the IRF sequence in the classroom, drawing on classroom examples from Hong Kong. In Section 4 we shall discuss why pedagogical change needs to be initiated both in the classroom and in the larger context beyond the classroom. In the concluding section we shall look at some directions for future work that link the micro processes of classroom interactions and pedagogical practices to analysis of the larger layers of contexts in which these classroom processes and pedagogical practices are embedded.

2. Recent Research on the ‘Triadic Dialogue’ in the Classroom

Nassaji and Wells (2000) provide a good summary of the research literature and debates on the IRF triadic dialogue which is ubiquitous in many classrooms. The teacher, in his/her twin role as the ‘primary knower’ and the ‘manager’ or ‘facilitator’ in the classroom (Nassaji and Wells, 2000) in general retains the right to ‘have the last word’. For instance, in Nassaji and Wells (2000)’s example of an IRF exchange below, the teacher has the last word on the student’s contribution by evaluating it as correct:

T: Which way did the Wolf go to Red Riding Hood’s Granny’s cottage?

S: He took a short cut through the forest.

T: That's right.

(Nassaji and Wells, 2000, p. 377).

Nassaji and Wells (2000) argue that as the primary knower in the classroom, this triadic dialogue has a built-in mechanism that enables the teacher to fulfill the valuable functions of confirming students' knowledge to be correct or not, evaluating the quality of information contributed by the student(s), making repairs if necessary (e.g., when the information contributed is incomplete or erroneous), assigning speaking rights in an orderly way (e.g., to ensure that the discussion proceeds in an orderly way), and checking students' understanding (i.e., the 'monitoring' function). When the teacher makes good use of the third slot in this triadic sequence, e.g., by asking a follow-up question that requires students to elaborate/expand, exemplify, justify or repair their contributions, the triadic dialogue is serving a good pedagogical function. By using a wide range of options in the Feedback/Follow-up slot of the IRF sequence, Nassaji and Wells (2000) argue that the triadic dialogue can be put to good use by teachers after all. The pedagogical effect of the triadic dialogue thus hinges on how the teacher uses it, especially in the Feedback/Follow-up slot. If teachers use more of the 'negotiatory' type of questions (that require 'substantive responses') rather than the 'known information' type of questions, and if teachers can choose not to foreclose the discussion by giving an answer her/himself but to invite other students to contribute, Nassaji and Wells (2000) argue that the triadic dialogue can lead to fruitful co-construction of useful knowledge through participatory discussion, which is moderated by the teacher in the roles of primary knower, manager/facilitator, monitor and initiator.

Tsui's recent studies (2004a, 2004b) on how classroom interactions impact on the space of learning offer even more interesting findings on the pedagogical effects of different uses of the triadic dialogue (while Tsui does not directly focus on the IRF sequence, her data analysis does speak to the differential effects of different ways of using the IRF sequence by the teacher). Tsui (2004b) convincingly argues that if teachers are sensitive to students' contribution in expanding and enriching the semantic dimensions or different aspects of the object of learning and are able to build on that in their feedback to students' responses, then the space of learning is expanded. However, if the teacher is not sensitive in building on students' responses but follows strictly her/his own teaching agenda, then the space of learning is narrowed, as in the following IRF sequence from Tsui (2004a). The teacher has put on the white board a diary of Mickey Mouse: a 2-column table listing days of the week (Sunday, Monday...) in the left column and the corresponding habits of Mickey Mouse after school (What does he do after school) in the right column. The teacher is now asking students questions about what Mickey Mouse does after school based on information provided in the diary:

T: ... Can you tell me, 'What does he do after school?' Anybody?

[Students raise their hands]. Yes.

S2: He goes to the library on Sunday.

T: Yes, he goes to the library on _____?

S: Sunday

- T: Sunday. Yes, after school, OK? He says he goes to the library after school. 'After school.' OK, how about... What else? How about others?
[Students raise their hands. The teacher looks at one of the students signaling to her to answer the question.]
- S3: He has a piano lesson on Monday.
- T: Yes. We say—we don't say 'on Monday' first, OK? The question is 'What does he do after school?' So he says that he has a piano lesson after _____? School.

(Tsui, 2004b, pp. 171-172)

In this example, Tsui argues that the teacher has not built on students' useful contribution of a critical aspect of the object of learning that is being focused on then: What does Mickey Mouse do on different days of the week, as this is in fact the aspect that is being highlighted in the format that the diary takes (2 columns side by side, one on days of weeks, one on what Mickey Mouse does after school). Since the 'after school' aspect is not new information while the pairing up of which day of week with which activity is new, the students' responses are perfectly appropriate in that context. However, the teacher seems to be fixated on her own language agenda: to elicit answers having the fixed format of: 'He _____ after school'. This kind of practice, Tsui argues, has narrowed the space of learning for the students. The teacher's mis-use of the power (built into the IRF triadic dialogue) to evaluate and shape students' contribution (responses) towards one narrow aspect is viewed in negative light in Tsui's analysis.

It thus seems rather settled in the recent research literature about the status and functions of the triadic dialogue. Armed with research findings in recent research teacher educators should be able to inform teachers on how they can make good use of the triadic dialogue, and about different ways to maximize its benefits and minimize its negative effects. Education reform and pedagogical change should then proceed with teacher training and reflective workshops to draw teachers' attention to the different (positive and negative) ways of using the triadic dialogue. In fact, this kind of recommendation is not new in the research literature. Bereiter and his colleagues (Bereiter, 1986; Bereiter and Scardamalia, 1987) proposed pedagogical change along similar lines almost two decades ago. In the next section we shall first briefly revisit the old debate on the IRF sequence (started by Carl Bereiter and James Heap in the mid-1980s) and then bring in an analysis of some new data from two Hong Kong classrooms to show how research on the triadic dialogue and on pedagogical analysis can benefit from insights from Activity Theory and Conversation Analysis.

3. Situated Understanding of the Use of the Triadic Dialogue: Perspectives from Conversation Analysis and Activity Theory

As mentioned in Section 1 above the early classroom studies were largely driven by the desire to find out the best teaching methods while using a more or less experimental research design. After the linguistic/discursive turn in classroom studies, the overarching desire to use classroom studies to find out about (e.g., to describe) the best practices

(effective pedagogies) and differentiate them from ineffective practices is still pervasive. Broadly speaking we can classify classroom studies into two main types. The first type of studies generally has the overarching research question to describe pedagogical practices and to differentiate them into effective or ineffective ones, usually by reference to some educational principles or norms; e.g., expanding or narrowing the space of learning (e.g., Tsui, 2004a, 2004b), or providing students with opportunities to practise higher-order vs. lower-order thinking and reading skills (Bereiter, 1986; Bereiter and Scardamalia, 1987). On the other hand, the second type of studies generally has the overarching research question to describe classroom interactions and practices to uncover the ‘good sense’ or local rationality of these practices. Their aim, however, is not an apologetic one (i.e., to defend existing practices) but to find out first and foremost how classroom participants are doing what they are doing, with the applied aim to uncover why they are doing it. The first type of studies is usually (but not exclusively) engaged in by researchers with a background in educational psychology (e.g., Bereiter, 1986; Bereiter and Scardamalia, 1987) whereas the second type of studies is usually engaged in by interactional sociolinguists, school ethnographers, or conversation analysts with an interest in analyzing interactions in educational settings (e.g., Mehan, 1979; Heap, 1985). Traditionally these two types of studies seldom interact but when they do in the rare case, it brings into sharp focus their differences in their overarching research interests.

For instance the intellectual exchange between Heap (1985, 1986) and Bereiter (1986) helps to bring out key differences in their research concerns. Bereiter (1986) launched a serious critique of the IRF triadic sequence, arguing that this way of running the lesson deprives students of opportunities to practice higher-order cognitive skills (e.g., in reading lessons). Heap (1986) in response argued for the cultural function of the IRF discourse format, which allows for the teacher to socialize students into the cultural models of a community by providing culturally appropriate feedback and by shaping students’ contribution towards co-constructing acceptable cultural knowledge and values. Heap’s classroom research (e.g., Heap, 1985, 1990, 1991) provides a good source of examples of how Conversation Analysis (CA) can be applied in the detailed description and analysis of classroom and pedagogical practices. Below I shall outline CA’s contribution to a procedural analysis of classroom practices and how the ‘point’ of a lesson (Heap, 1985) can be uncovered through a procedural analysis.

3.1 Procedural Analysis and Uncovering the ‘Point’ of a Lesson

In this section we shall look at the Conversation Analytical tools that can be used to capture the dynamics of a lesson and to uncover the ‘point’ (or thrust) of a lesson (Heap, 1985). The ‘point’ of a lesson refers to what the lesson ultimately does for the teachers and the students (or the purpose of the lesson), not as self-reported by the teacher or students themselves but as manifested in what they actually do in the lesson, and in the sets of *recurrent procedures* (or symbolic/discourse tools) that they use to accomplish the ‘point’ (or purpose) of the lesson. One must bear in mind that the point of the lesson is not usually explicit (or completely available) to teachers and students consciously—so they may not be able to tell you directly if confronted by such a question—they might tell you something else which they think they are doing: e.g., teaching and learning reading

skills. But what counts as ‘reading skills’ is not always completely transparent to them; the analyst has to look at what teachers and students actually do (and what recurrent procedures they employ) in the classroom to find out or ‘uncover’ what actually (implicitly) counts as ‘teaching and learning reading skills’ for them.

But before we embark on our lesson analysis, let us revisit some basic concepts or observations on how people (teachers and students) go about doing a lesson. Below are some typical organizational/structural features of classroom lessons:

1. Classroom lessons constitute one example of recurrent ‘speech events’ in (e.g., debates, public speeches) sociolinguistic terms with often implicit, unspoken, but shared norms or conventions governing *who* (i.e., participants in different roles) can speak *what* at *what times*. For instance, participants in a formal debate cannot all speak at the same time. They occupy different roles (e.g., team members, team chair, and they are divided into two opposing teams, members of which taking alternate turns to speak, etc.). So, according to their roles members have different speaking rights and there are conventions governing their turn-taking practices. Likewise, we need to see classroom participants as occupying different roles and each role has different (and differential) speaking rights; e.g., the teacher can assign speaking rights to students; s/he can occupy most speaking turns; s/he is the one who ‘chairs’ or ‘directs’ the lesson—i.e., s/he sets the agenda, sets the tasks, assigns time for tasks, assigns different students to do different things and answer different questions. The teacher role gives the teacher a lopsided domination over the agenda of the lesson and over *who* can speak/do *what when* all through the lesson.
2. The teacher occupying the position/role of the ‘chair’ of the lesson also bears the burden of driving the lesson forward, moving along the pre-set agenda of the lesson. Usually teachers see themselves as ‘covering’ this unit, ‘teaching this passage’, ‘doing this exercise with the students’, ‘going through this worksheet (e.g., doing answer-checking) with students’, ‘helping students to complete this task, to get all the answers correct, enabling students to do their worksheets at home’, and so on. Usually, in a teacher’s mind, a lesson is organized into a sequence of tasks/texts/worksheets to ‘cover’ or ‘go through’ with students.
3. Usually when asked about the lesson objectives of the lesson, teachers will say this is a reading lesson, a grammar lesson or a writing lesson. In this sense, to teachers, the nature of a lesson is given by its major task—students are to do reading, writing, and grammar tasks, and so on. While globally students practise these language skills, both the topics and the contexts for language use are set by teachers or the assigned textbook/worksheets. Students are usually induced or dragged into doing these ‘language uses’ willingly or unwillingly by the teacher.
4. The teacher usually employs two basic ‘tools’ to drive a lesson forward, or to move students along a pre-set agenda: (1) one tool is the Initiation-Respond-

Feedback (IRF) ‘discourse format’ (Heap, 1985). A discourse format is a sequence of utterances each of which has a specific function, and the sequence recurs in a predictable pattern or format; (2) another tool that the teacher often employs is the worksheet or the textbook. Below we shall focus on the functions of these two basic tools in the teacher’s repertoire to get a lesson moving towards her/his pre-set teaching goals or to get students moving along a pre-set lesson agenda. Examples from two Chinese language classrooms in Hong Kong will be used.

In the following section I shall analyse two Chinese lessons for the ‘point’ of the lesson using procedural analysis. Then I shall draw on the analytical concepts of Activity Theory to account for why the IRF triadic format is used in these lessons in ways that might lead to educationally undesirable consequences and yet is still used by the teachers in these lessons with ‘a good sense’ (i.e., serving local rationality) in the Activity System in which the lessons, teachers and students are all situated.

3.2 Analysing Two Chinese Language Lessons in Hong Kong: What is the ‘Point’ of the Lesson

The researcher conducted class observations of two Chinese language lessons, among other lessons (including English language lessons), on the same day in a low-banding (i.e., low academic-standard) co-educational secondary school in Hong Kong as part of a larger literacy research project in February 2006. No audio or videotaping was conducted (at the request of the teachers concerned) but detailed observation notes were made by the researcher during the class observations. The teachers conducted their lessons as usual and the purpose of the research was to compare English and Chinese language lessons. The researcher started off without any preconceived hypotheses about these lessons and adopted the methodological stance and tools of Applied Ethnomethodology and Conversation Analysis (Heap, 1990); i.e., to see how (e.g., to describe the recurrent procedures with which) people are doing what they are doing and then to interpret why they might be doing it (e.g., to interpret the ‘point’ of the lesson). Below I shall attempt a procedural analysis of the two Chinese language lessons (all the utterances and text questions and answers are English translations; originals are in spoken Cantonese and written Chinese).

Chinese Listening Lesson: Form 2 Class, 16 students, Teacher A

This is a small Chinese language class at the Form 2 level (i.e., grade 8 in the North American system). Both the teacher and students are Cantonese-speaking and Chinese language lessons in Hong Kong are mostly conducted in the spoken medium of Cantonese but the aim of Chinese lessons in Hong Kong is to teach students Standard Written Chinese (SWC). In this lesson the teacher is doing listening, using the listening exercise book and tape provided in the course book for this subject. The topic of the listening text is Chinese White Dolphins in Hong Kong. The lesson follows a standard pre-listening, listening and post-listening 3-stage format. Below is a procedural

description of the different lesson stages (the utterances are English translations; original utterances are in Cantonese) followed by an analysis of the ‘point’ of the lesson:

Pre-listening Stage:

1. The teacher starts off by announcing the topic and task of the lesson: ‘Today we shall do listening, and the topic is Chinese White Dolphins in Hong Kong.’
2. The teacher then uses the IRF triadic discourse format to elicit answers from students to her questions about the topic. These questions revolve around some background information on Chinese White Dolphins. The elicitation seems to serve the purpose of activating students’ background knowledge on and interest in this topic.
3. The teacher then reads aloud the listening comprehension questions in the listening exercise book. As she goes through the questions, she highlights what students need to pay attention to when they listen to the tape on this topic.
4. The teacher also explains some test-taking skills; e.g., ‘When you listen to the tape for the first time, if you know the answers to the questions you can write them down immediately, and if you cannot get some of the answers the first time, you can wait for the second time of listening to fill in those gaps.’

Listening Stage:

1. The teacher plays the tape for the first time. Students all listen attentively and they try to fill in the answers to the questions in their listening exercise book.
2. The teacher plays the tape for the second time. Students all listen attentively and they try to fill in the answers to the questions in their listening exercise book.

Post-listening Stage:

1. The teacher praises some of the students: ‘Some of you can do it quickly’ (meaning can fill in the answers to the listening comprehension questions).
2. The teacher uses the IRF discourse format to elicit answers from the students to the listening comprehension questions, thus starting the ‘answer-checking sequences’.
3. The answer-checking sequences consist of series of IRF, with the teacher asking the comprehension questions (based on the listening exercise) and trying to elicit students’ answers to the questions. After a student has (or some students have) given his/her (their) response(s), the teacher, in the Feedback slot of the IRF sequence elaborates or re-shapes/rephrases students’ response into an acceptable format, which is then written on the blackboard as certified true answers to the questions. Students copy these down onto their exercise books as the model answers to the questions.

For this listening exercise, the following aspects of the topic are focused on: problems (threatening the survival of Chinese White Dolphins) and solutions to these problems and students are to list out the problems and solutions. In the answer-checking phase, the teacher writes on the blackboard a table with two columns, one with the heading ‘Problems’, and the other with the heading ‘Solutions’. She then elicits answers from the students and then asks follow-up questions to get more elaborate answers and then re-shapes/re-phrases students’ answers into acceptable answers, which she finally writes down in the table (see Table 1 in Appendix). Most of the time the teacher’s work seems to be that of rephrasing students’ fragmented, Cantonese answers into more elaborate

answers phrased in Standard Written Chinese and then writes them down on the blackboard for students to copy onto their listening exercise books. This process becomes a bit repetitive and tedious towards the end of the lesson that one student is heard to shout out, 'Miss, you can just copy the model answers from your book onto the blackboard!'. The student's meaning seems to be: 'Don't bother to go through the asking and answering question procedures; just give us the model answers from the teacher's book!'. This remark of the student is ignored by the teacher and she goes on with the answer-checking sequences using the IRF triadic format until all questions have been gone through. Then it is also the end of the lesson.

The 'point' of this lesson thus seems to be the establishment of a corpus of certified true answers (c.f., Heap, 1985, 1986) to the listening comprehension questions on the listening text. The ways these answers are organized (e.g., conceptual organizer; see Table 1 in Appendix) and the linguistic format (e.g., in Standard Written Chinese) in which these answers are formulated follow the teacher-directed (and also pre-set in the text-book) ones and there is no encouragement of students to venture outside of these organizers; e.g., encouraging students to come up with alternative conceptual organizers (see Table 2 in Appendix for a possible alternative conceptual organizer to extract information from the text). Likewise, the teacher has been doing the bulk of the conceptual (e.g., providing the organizer for extracting information from the listening text) and linguistic rephrasing work for the students (e.g., rephrasing students' Cantonese answers into acceptable SWC answers).

Chinese Reading Lesson: Form 5 Class, 30 students, Teacher B

This is a Form 5 (grade 11) class who is faced with the imminent public exam in three months: Hong Kong Certificate of Education Exam (HKCEE), which is like the 'O' level exam in the British system). The lesson is part of a series of lessons focusing on one of the classical Chinese texts included in the public exam syllabus. The text was written by ancient Chinese Daoist philosopher, Zhuang-zi, and it is about how a cow butcher dissects cows with ease, as a parable for life: how to face life's difficulties by going along 'the natural way', like the butcher going along with the natural body structure of the cow when doing his job of dissecting a cow. The philosophical content of the text is actually quite deep and the narrative utilizes dialogues between the butcher and other people, like those in a fable story. The public exam paper will contain questions about the key arguments (content) as well as the rhetorical/writing styles and techniques of the texts. Students need to prepare to answer these types of questions on all the texts specified in the exam syllabus for the Chinese language in the HKCEE.

In this lesson the teacher seems to be doing the post-reading activities with students. The students have read the text in previous lessons. Below is a procedural description of the lesson:

1. The teacher uses the IRF triadic discourse format to elicit students' answers to her list of questions, which follows the public exam paper question format and she puts the headings on the blackboard and then uses sequences of IRF to elicit answers

from students under each heading and sub-heading until in the end she has furnished a complete corpus of notes fitting into the headings and subheadings (see below).

- Key Points of the Text

- i. Text type:
- ii. Philosophy of life:
-

- Writing Techniques (Expository)

- i. Good use of metaphors
- ii. Good use of contrast
- iii. Good use of dialogues
- iv. Progressive intensity to reach the climax
- v. Good use of a fable to teach a moral lesson

2. Typically the teacher acknowledges students' answers and asks follow-up questions that lead students' answers towards her model answers. The teacher does most of the rephrasing, e.g., from the students' Cantonese style Chinese into Standard Written Chinese, before she puts the answers onto the blackboard. For instance, in the following exchange, we see how the teacher uses IRF to elicit answers to a question and then in the Feedback slot rephrases the student's Cantonese expression into a Standard Chinese expression:

T: What's the moral lesson of the text?

S: Life can be lived in a fulfilling way, or can be lived in a sloppy way. {'sloppy' in the student's original Cantonese colloquial expression is: 'fih-li-feh-leh'}

T: {smiling; looks amused} Yes, or can be lived in an unreflective way... when you speak you can say 'fih-li-feh-leh' but when you write you need to write 'wuh-leuih-wuh-touh'... {'unreflective' in the teacher's High Cantonese expression which is close to Standard Written Chinese is: 'wuh-leuih-wuh-touh'; i.e., 'hu-li-hu-tu' in Putonghua/Standard Spoken Chinese}

So, by using the IRF triadic format the teacher is able to re-shape/re-phrase students' Cantonese answer into an acceptable SWC answer for the question on the text. The teacher also uses the IRF dialogue to control the final format and content of the acceptable answers. For instance, to the question on the gist of the text, a student answers by quoting two phrases (8 words) from the text and the teacher says that students need to use their own words to answer the question and then the teacher provides the answer herself using 4 words: 'sheuihn-keih-jih-yihn' ('follow the natural way'), which, to my mind, is much more abstract than the original answer provided by the student. Then the teacher explains to the class that in answering exam questions they need to use their own words and need to be precise and succinct, not using too many words. All through the lesson, the teacher seems to be orienting students towards how to answer exam questions and explaining to students the techniques in answering exam questions. The teacher also seems to be using the exam as a motivating force to get students focused on the task in hand (which is to furnish answers to a set of exam type questions on the text). There is no question or discussion on how students can relate their everyday

experience to what is conveyed in the text, or on how they think they can ‘follow the natural way’ in their own everyday life. The ‘point’ of the lesson is thus not so much on reader response to text or reader appreciation of text but on how a HKCEE (public exam) candidate can prepare her/himself to answer the types of questions set on the text.

Towards the end of the lesson, a student (the same student whose exchange with the teacher we saw above) makes an unusual remark, which is a critical comment on the text:

S: The whole text is self-contradictory! Dissecting cows is not natural at all!

T: {laughing} Well, you can say in the food chain, we eat cows and cows eat grass, and the food chain is very natural.

It is true that the food chain theory is one version (or one worldview) of how things can be viewed in the world, but there can be alternative worldviews and philosophies of life such as those of the vegetarian Buddhist who thinks that we should live a natural life by refraining from eating other animals. However, the teacher does not capitalize on such an opportunity to engage students in critical discussion of diverse worldviews and different cultural, religious ways of considering what counts as ‘natural’, with the ‘food chain’ view as just one of the many possible ways of thinking about this topic. After short-circuiting this critical discussion and putting an end to the critical comment by the student, the teacher resumes explaining the exam question format and answering techniques. And then interestingly, the same student shouts out (in a loud but friendly tone) the following utterance towards the end of the lesson:

S: We’re being poisoned by the ‘fo-geui-jai-douh’!

‘Fo-geui-jai-douh’ is the name given to the ancient Chinese public exam system. Under this system scholars recite classical Confucianist texts and regurgitate them in the exam. The student is obviously comparing the current HKCEE to this infamous ancient Chinese exam system. The teacher heard the student’s remark and laughed without responding. I guess the teacher might also agree with the student but she thinks that preparing her students for the upcoming exam (in three months’ time) is her first priority, with which many people would tend to agree under the given circumstances.

The analysis of the two lessons above shows that the IRF format has been used by the respective teachers to co-construct a corpus of certified correct (or model) answers to a more or less pre-set list of questions (within a pre-given conceptual/organizing framework) on texts. The IRF format serves at least two functions for the teachers:

1. The teacher uses it to move the lesson forward, to organize discussion topics tightly around the format and content of the pre-set list of questions. We can call this *the converging function*; i.e., the teacher maintains tight control over the digression (or to minimize it) from the exam questions’ conceptual framework and format.
2. The teacher uses it to do a lot of re-phrasing/re-coding (e.g., from colloquial Cantonese to SWC), to re-shape students’ answer into a form that can fit into the pre-given conceptual/analytical framework for organizing ideas about or content of the text. The IRF format allows the teacher to take material from the students and work it into acceptable answers to exam type questions—i.e., to certify it as correct

and model answers. We can call this *the certifying function*. Most of this higher-order linguistic re-coding and conceptual re-organization work is done by the teachers in the Feedback slot of the IRF format (see Fig. 1 in the appendix for my summary of what seems to be happening, i.e., ‘the point’, of these two lessons).

The converging and certifying functions together serve the overall ‘point’ (or aim) of the lesson: to co-construct with students a corpus of certified correct answers to exam questions on texts. Some students can see through this ‘point’. For instance, in the first Chinese listening lesson analysed above, a student towards the end of the lesson shouts out to the teacher, asking her to just copy her model answers from her teacher’s book onto the blackboard.

If we adopt the criteria of progressive educators (e.g., Bereiter, 1986; Bereiter and Scardamalia, 1987) to measure the performance of these two teachers, we will find them falling short of our expectations: e.g., they do not allow students to critically discuss the text, to venture out of the pre-given questions and conceptual framework on the text, and worse still the teachers do all or most of the higher-order thinking and linguistic work for the students (see my analysis in Fig. 1 in the appendix). The standard recommendation at the end of this piece of classroom research should then be that of providing teachers with more training in the use of alternative discourse formats (e.g., ‘reciprocal questioning’; see Brown and Palincsar, 1989), or to use the IRF format in more creative ways to expand the space of learning (e.g., Nassaji and Wells, 2000; Tsui, 2004a, 2004b). While this recommendation is indeed needed, we also need to look at the overall ‘Activity System’ in which the teachers, students and their classroom practices are situated to understand why teachers are doing what they are doing, beyond the common observation that they might not know better; i.e., they merely do not know how to have alternative practices.

3.3 Contextualized Analysis of Pedagogical Practices: Perspectives from Activity Theory

Activity Theory (AT) has its historical and philosophical origins in the writings from Kant, Hegel, to Vygotsky, Leont’ev and Luria. From the perspective of AT, society is seen as multi-layered networks of interconnected activity systems. These socially shared, collective activity systems serve as units of analysis by the researcher (vs. traditional unit of analysis: the individual teacher’s teaching style or the individual lesson). AT thus provides us with useful tools for conducting a contextualized analysis of pedagogical practices, avoiding the pitfalls of leaving out the contexts of pedagogical practices in our analysis. According to AT, an activity system has the following characteristics (based on Engeström, 1993):

Characteristics of Activity Systems:

- Activity systems are longitudinal, socio-historical-cultural formations, constituted and evolving over time by people and institutions
- Activity systems are self-reproducing / perpetuating until internal contradictions / tensions grow to a point to trigger change / transformation of the system

- Multivoicedness in an activity system: internal contradictions and debates as an essential feature—driving force for change/transformation
- Activity systems are socially distributed / shared and collective.
- Activity systems are mediated by cultural tools / artifacts (both symbolic tools such as signs / language and discourse formats, and physical tools such as teaching equipment and worksheets, textbook exercises, etc.)
- Activity systems are motivated by goals; AT studies processes of goal-formation in an activity system

How can AT help us contextualize our lesson analysis in Section 3.2 above? Let us look at Fig. 2 in the appendix for a diagrammatic representation of the key elements and their relations in an activity system. At this point it is important for us to understand AT not as an ultimate piece of truth about human activities, but as a heuristic tool, a working model that we might draw upon to add to our repertoire of analytical tools to conduct a more holistic, contextualized analysis of pedagogical practices. Below I shall attempt to apply AT tools to analyse the Chinese lessons we discussed in Section 3.2 above (please see Fig. 2 in the appendix for diagrammatic representation of the bolded key elements of an activity system listed and elaborated below):

Heuristic Tools from AT for Contextualized Analysis of Pedagogical Practices:

- **Subject:** Classroom Participants: Teacher (T) & students (Ss)
- **Object:** Worksheet / textbook exercise (modeled on exam question formats and organizing frameworks) on the listening and reading texts
- **Production:** The co-construction (by T & Ss) of a corpus of answers (to the worksheet questions/tasks) certified to be correct by T (in the Feedback slot of the IRF discourse format)
- **Mediating Tools:** the IRF discourse format used in the Answer-Checking Lesson Stage
- **Outcome:** → Completed worksheets / completed exercises with ‘model’ answers
- **Community:** the school teachers, students, school administrative people who share this system of school practices, participating in forming specific ways of recognizing / counting school work (teaching and learning work) as being accomplished; e.g., how many worksheets / textbook exercises covered; how many students scoring high grades in both internal and public exams
- **Rules / Norms:** The rules / norms of the school community governing how school work is (recognized) to be done and evaluated (e.g., assessment patterns, institutionally defined ways of displaying knowledge or learning).
- **Division of Labour:** Teacher and different students participate together (e.g., through contributing to speaking turns in the IRF discourse sequence) in co-constructing a certified corpus of ‘correct’ answers to the worksheet questions / textbook tasks.
- **Consumption:**
 - Teacher uses the correctly completed worksheets / textbook exercises as an indicator / proof of accomplishment of his/her teaching work → accountable to self and school authorities
 - Students use the correctly completed worksheets / textbook exercises as an

indicator / proof of accomplishment of his/her learning work → in
exchange for scores/grades

In summary then, the teacher uses the IRF and the textbook worksheet (modeled on exam formats) for at least three important functions: to motivate students to pay attention (because they will help students to get good scores in exams), to organize and structure the lesson, and to provide a quick, easy indicator of whether students have learnt what the teacher has taught in the lesson; i.e., using the worksheet as *a motivator*, as *an organizer* and as *a test or displayer* of 'knowledge/skills learnt'. The process of this activity is mediated by both the tool of the IRF discourse format.

4. Initiating and Sustaining Change in Pedagogical Practices: What are the considerations?

How can we initiate change (and sustain it if we ever succeed in initiating it) in pedagogical practices? Remember our recommendation at the end of our lesson analysis in Section 3.2 above? It is now obvious that giving teachers training in alternative pedagogical practices (e.g., using reciprocal questioning instead of IRF, or learning creative ways of using the IRF) is necessary but not sufficient. That is because if we want the change to be sustained in the activity system in which both teachers and students are situated, there should be corresponding change in the key elements of the activity system, thus providing incentives for initiating and sustaining the change in pedagogical practices.

Any activity system has internal contradictions and tensions. In Section 3.2 above, we see that there are some students (although in the minority) who might voice out their discontent with such kind of pedagogical practices. The student who shouts out the utterance, 'We're being poisoned by the exam system' can be seen as evidence of some internal tension in the activity system. The same student who tries to engage the teacher in a critical discussion of the text (e.g., critiquing the text: 'Dissecting a cow is not natural at all!') can provide a good starting point and stimulus for teachers to critically reflect on their own practices: Is this way the best way to teach students about the text? Am I just focusing too much on exam preparation, neglecting the development of critical literacy/reading skills? If enough teachers and school administrators start to critically reflect on what they are doing and what some students are trying to say to them, they might be able to start changing their school norms, cultures and practices. Perhaps we can develop alternative ways of helping students to prepare for exams while at the same time allowing opportunities for critical discussion and use of texts? Perhaps, as a community, we can propose to the government's Assessment Authorities to change their ways of assessment, their formats and frameworks of setting questions on texts; e.g., to set more open-ended kinds of questions that encourage alternative, open-ended answers and diverse conceptual frameworks (e.g., allowing students to critique texts—e.g., to discuss whether it is natural to dissect animals, and to discuss diverse worldviews and philosophies of life).

5. Coda: Research and Praxis Within and Beyond the Classroom

It can be seen from the discussion above that our research on pedagogical practices and classroom discourse analysis will inevitably take us beyond the classroom so that we can understand these micro classroom processes in terms of the larger activity system contexts in which they are situated. These classroom practices serve good functions (or have 'local rationality'; see Heap, 1990) within their activity systems (or their institutional cultures and norms). To change these practices into more progressive pedagogical practices such as those recommended by progressive educators, we need to study the larger activity system and contexts and think of ways of changing key elements in the activity system that will provide new incentives, new cultures and norms that will sustain the new pedagogical practices. Any recommendation to change the classroom practice must also give due consideration to the inter-relatedness of different elements and forces within the larger activity system which shape or motivate the specific pedagogical practice in question. Our classroom research will thus lead us to consider the sociocultural and sociopolitical situatedness of the pedagogical practices that we study, and this is why we are not only researchers but also sociocultural and sociopolitical participants. For instance, our research will lead us to advocacy work: e.g., advocating for change in public exam formats and practices. It will lead us towards research and advocacy for critical literacy and public pedagogy (see Carrington & Luke, 1997). Traditional ways of conceptualizing and conducting classroom research as merely looking at micro classroom processes will therefore need to take a critical and sociocultural turn (e.g., Hall and Verplaetse, 2000; Hall, 2001; Lin, 1999), if classroom research is to have a more far-reaching impact on initiating and sustaining educational and pedagogical change in the schooling system. More future research is needed in this direction.

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Appendix

Table 1: Teacher-provided Conceptual/Analytical Organizer for Extracting Information from Listening Text in Lesson 1 (English translation; original in Chinese)

Problems	Solutions
<hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • • • • • • 	<hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • • • • • •

Table 2: Possible Alternative Conceptual/Analytical Organizer for Extracting Information from the Listening Text

Phenomena	Factors Affecting Survival of Chinese White Dolphins	What Can be Done by Different Parties
<hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • • • • • • 	<hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • • • • • • 	<hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • • • • • •

Fig. 1 The ‘Point’ of the Lesson
(From Lin, in press)

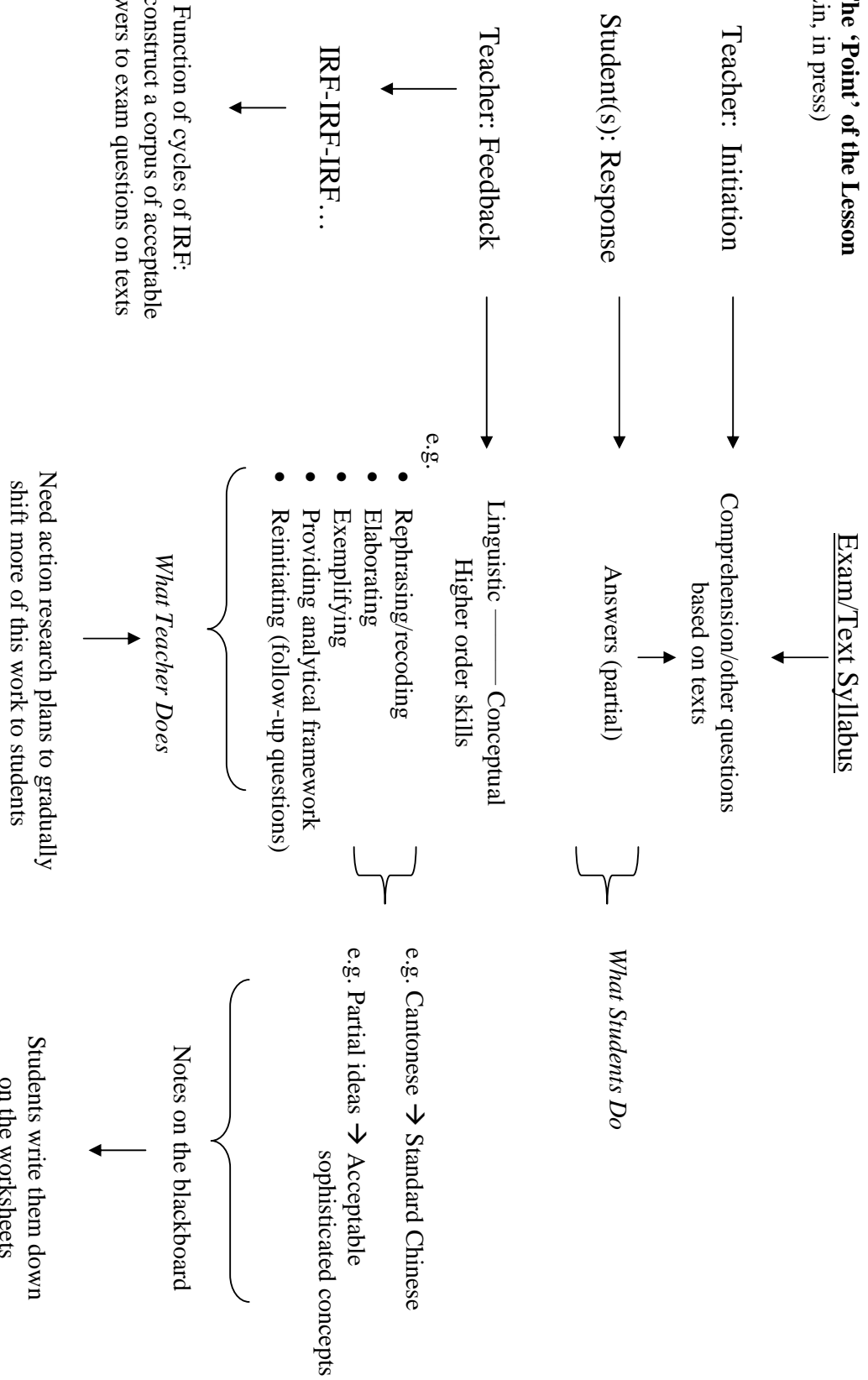


Fig. 2 The Basic Structure of Human Activity (Adapted from Engestrom, 1993, p. 68)

