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Towards the creation of critical communities of learners

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## **Negotiating Communication Rights in Multilingual Classrooms: Towards the creation of critical communities of learners**

### ***Abstract***

The paper aims to show how the language learning classroom can be reconfigured as a critical community. It argues that the optimisation of communication rights, continually negotiated by teacher and learners, helps to build critical classroom communities characterised by “quality talk”. Such talk acknowledges uncertainty in the construction of knowledge while making transparent the basis of its claims. In doing so, it offers space for typically less powerful participants to challenge and redirect classroom discourse. I focus on two classes of adults in the U.K., consisting of second-language learners from a wide range of language and cultural backgrounds: the first is a class of intermediate to advanced language learners attending a university course on critical reading; the second is a general English intermediate-level class in a Further Education College, consisting of learners from a wide range of educational backgrounds, nationalities and ages. What the students in each setting share is that they are adults with an interest in gaining membership into new and diverse English-language-speaking communities in a global age. -

### **Introduction**

The paper explores the manner in which communication rights are negotiated moment to moment in classroom interaction. It argues that such rights, collaboratively agreed and adjudicated, involve access to opportunity for

not just quantity of talk but *quality* talk. What this means is considered in the course of this paper but one key feature is the valuing of uncertainty. As Paulo Freire put it in dialogue with Donaldo Macedo, “educators should stimulate students to doubt” (Freire & Macedo, 1987, p. 57). The teacher becomes less a repository of correct answers than a fellow enquirer (see Young, 1992). The question then arises as to whether the teacher’s authority is compromised by such a stance. Even more problematic is that, in opening up the classroom to a diversity of views, offensive opinions might derail the goal of the creating a rationally based critical community. These issues and dilemmas are explored by way of two case studies. In these I point to examples of both the frustration and relative fulfilment of student communication rights, drawing on Goffman’s principle of footing (Goffman, 1981), as a way of characterising the communicative options available to classroom participants, and Halliday’s systemic/functional grammar (e.g., Halliday, 1994) as a tool for carrying out more fine-grained analysis of the detail of classroom talk.

### **Rights and language rights**

What is the nature and extent of participating rights in classrooms? Are we concerned merely with the right to a turn at talk, perhaps minimally interpreted, or the right to equality of participation? Are we talking of the right to assert a point of view, or indeed the right to remain silent? Some classroom research suggests that positive forms of participation do not have to include talk. There is powerful evidence from classroom studies in countries such as Singapore that the highly verbal, interactive classroom does not have to be equated with

high-quality learning (see Luke, 2005). However in language classrooms of the kind explored in this paper, talk is the major work of the classroom.(see Roberts & Baynham, 2006). That is, language is both medium and content: students are learning language, learning about language and learning through language simultaneously. Initially denied the floor, some language students may simply never get the talking time to allow them to be proficient enough to take on the range of roles potentially available to them as users of the second language—English in our case. A valued role for adult learners is that of a competent speaker of what I have elsewhere called “literate English” (Wallace, 2003a) which serves as a vehicle for discursive rather than personal talk. I wish to advocate that second-language learners have the right to maximise and extend their current linguistic and intellectual resources through the medium of English; that the exercise of this right cannot wait on the achievement of so-called native speaker language proficiency, a notion now, in any event, being widely challenged (see Rampton, 1990).

In critically oriented classrooms, there is a necessary tension between the assertion of students’ rights to express possibly controversial views and the authority and knowledge embodied in the teacher, as skilled professional. In addition, a difficulty with addressing contentious issues is that passions can run high. What limits do we set on the right to express a point of view where one person’s opinion might possibly enflame and offend the feelings of others? This has occurred in strongly rights-focused critical pedagogy ( e.g., Ellsworth, 1989). In response, I have argued ( see Wallace, 1999) that the articulation of rights and identity around single issue politics can lead to an over-particularised, personalised view of rights; that it is possible and desirable to

see social justice issues around empathy with the other, rather than as advocacy for groups with which one personally identifies. At the same time, the right to a point of view is not unconditional: steered by the teacher, learners can explicitly agree to certain boundaries and rules which ensure opinions need to be supported by warrants, hedged out of respect for fellow members of the classroom community. Indeed the talk which negotiates rights and the boundaries to these rights will be part of what I intend to mean by “quality talk” and has concrete expression in the form of expanded utterances, by both students and teacher, where qualification, elaboration and exemplification are required to accompany point of view. (see Wallace, 2003b, pp. 127–129). This follows the Habermasian principle of the obligation to provide grounds in what he calls “constative speech” ( Habermas, 1979, p. 64).

Macro issues of social justice serve as an overarching rationale for a critical language classroom and were central to the first class in particular, which drew on the work of critical educators and theorists such as Luke (2004), Pennycook (1994, 2001), Fairclough ( e.g., 1989) and Chouliaraki and Faircough (1999). The present paper, however, focuses on communication rights at the micro level. This allows us to see how criticality is engaged with in classroom discourse on an ongoing basis. Only at this level of detail can we begin to discover the true potential of education to change rather than to reproduce dominant ideologies and practices. It means looking at critique not as product so much as process.

## Critique as Process

As Cazden (2002) pointed out, critique is not just a product or goal, but a process which depends not so much on teachers revealing “critical” truths but on students and teachers inter-subjectively negotiating and exploring interpretations and judgements.

In looking at critical processes, we are addressing the *tenor* of discourse in Halliday’s terms (1994), that is, the *interpersonal* function, as much as the *field* of discourse, or *ideational* meaning, that is the topics or discourses addressed. Tenor is linked to ongoing constructed interpersonal meaning. One way of looking at the dynamics of classroom interaction, which resonates with Halliday’s use of tenor, is provided by Goffman’s notion of *footing*. Goffman (1981:28) used the term to mean “an alignment we take up to ourselves and the others present as expressed in the way we manage the production or reception of an utterance”. I follow Kramsch (1993) who drew on Goffman’s notion of footing to characterise teachers and students aligning themselves in different ways to the classroom community, taking on the various roles of what Goffman calls the *principal*, *animator* or *author* of classroom discourse. As principals, teachers orchestrate classroom events, playing out an institutional role; as animators, they activate prescribed syllabuses and the textbook and their underlying ideology. They are ventriloquating rather than authoring their teaching. Only when teachers have claimed authorship of their classroom procedures, in particular their talk, can students in turn author rather than animate their turns at talk. Overall, through uncustomary adjustments of footing by both students and teacher, classroom discourse can be “reaccentuated”, as

Bakhtin put it (1986, p. 79). In this way the *mode*, in Halliday's terms, or the overall textual meaning of classroom episodes, can be adjusted. The classroom genre is unsettled if not dismantled, pointing the way to change, as customary power relations between teacher and students are mitigated.

The data here are taken from two studies. The first, fully reported in Wallace (2003b), was a one-semester course which was specifically concerned with reading and criticality and aimed to use Halliday's systemic functional analysis and critical discourse analysis to analyse both classroom texts and classroom interaction. Each session was audio-recorded by the teacher/researcher. The second forms part of a case study of two teachers where the aim was to explore how reading was interpreted in two London classrooms. (see Cooke & Wallace, 2004). The researchers, acting as participant observers, made a total of 19 observations, which included 16 hours of audio-recorded data.

What both settings share is the attention to quality talk, on the assumption that, as noted above, talk is the main work of the language classroom, but also that there are a range of ways in which the text and the teacher will mediate to provide variably "critical" classroom communities. The questions which guide this paper are: *what does quality talk look like within a critical framework?* and *what are the constraints and possibilities in the negotiation of communication rights in critically oriented classrooms?*

## **Talk in the Language Classroom**

As long ago as the 1960s, educators such as Douglas Barnes, James Britton and Harold Rosen (1969) argued the case for talk as integral to learning. This seminal work has been taken forward by Wells (e.g., 1981), Wells and Chang- Wells (1992), Mercer (1995, 2000, 2002) and most recently by Gibbons (2006), in the case of second-language learners. However, in adult second-language learning, emphasis has tended to be on the production of talk which characterises everyday contexts. Communicative Language Teaching and contemporary versions of this such as Task-Based Learning emphasise contextualised language close to the everyday experience of learners. (see Ellis, 2003). Yet everyday conversational talk is, by definition, not best acquired in classrooms. Nor can we readily adapt it to further contexts which demand more considered, discursive talk. Finally, it rarely addresses matters of social or intellectual significance in ways which foreign language learners might reasonably aspire to – particularly adult learners—if they wish to be members of the new global English using communities of “literary, critical and philosophical practice” (Said, 1994, p. 370).

In summary, there has been a relative neglect of the likelihood that many adult foreign language learners want and expect not replication of real-life communicative opportunities but the opportunity to engage in talk where “reasoning is more visible” as Mercer (1995, p. 37) put it, where, unlike free and spontaneous conversation, we are expected to give an account of ourselves. I call this talk “literate” in that it shares many features of formal written language, though is not necessarily conducted in standard English (Wallace, 2003a). It is a *discourse* rather than a particular language variety, generalisable to further contexts and is, in Bernstein's terms, elaborated for an

audience which may not share the same knowledge or premises as the speaker. It is also intersubjectively produced, built by communities of subjects. It involves the creation of a reservoir of strategies by members of the classroom community, rather than of individual repertoires developed by a member in response to a particular habitat (Bernstein, 1996, p. 171).

Mercer has used the term *dialogic talk* to describe such collaborative talk “in which both teachers and pupils make substantial and significant contributions and through which children’s thinking is helped to move forward” (Mercer, 2003, p. 74). In drawing on the principle of dialogicity, Mercer has followed the influential studies of Robin Alexander (2000, 2004) who has challenged the favoured methodologies of Western (particularly U.S. and U.K. classrooms) where, he claimed, unstructured and casual talk is privileged. Alexander argued for dialogic talk which is: collective, reciprocal, supportive, cumulative and purposeful. (Alexander, 2004). He noted, regarding the final requirement: “if the talk engages, yet leads nowhere its appeal will soon diminish”. (p. 45). While I subscribe to the first four of Alexander’s principles, I would challenge the “purposeful” condition. The inherent quality of the talk itself *is* significant, especially in the language class, as noted earlier. Quality talk within a critical community may remain exploratory, defying closure. John O’Regan (2006) drew on Derrida to argue a position which prevents closure of the text through what Derrida describes as an “essentially interminable questioning” ( Derrida, 1995, p. 239).

Of course, endlessly deferred closure of a Derridean kind runs counter to the current outcomes-based ideology in many parts of the world, which specifies learner outcomes not merely at the end of a course of study but frequently lesson

by lesson, along the lines of “by the end of this lesson you will have...”. Indeed, in school systems it may not be feasible to challenge this orthodoxy. However, classes of older learners offer such possibilities, especially as there is less need to control unruly behaviour and unpredictability is more readily countenanced. Teachers and learners are able to co-construct and reflect on knowledge and the manner in which they situate themselves towards that knowledge. The resulting talk is tentative, self-reflective, featuring metadiscourse which comments on the talk of oneself and others. Provisionality is privileged over certainty.

### **The Classroom as a Critical Community**

The notion of “classroom as community”,—let alone *critical* community—is an idealisation, a goal to aspire to rather than concretely realisable. Nonetheless certain expectations are in place. One is that, all class members—not just selected participants—take responsibility as authors for their contributions as well as acknowledging and building on the contributions of others. Cazden, drawing on the work of Resnik and colleagues at the University of Pittsburgh, called this discourse “accountable talk, where students and teacher are expected to be accountable to knowledge and to standards of reasoning” (Cazden, 2002, p. 170). A sense of responsibility to the community goes some way to addressing the issue of a class member articulating offensive views. Rights to an opinion need to be tempered with the responsibility to offer warrants for views expressed and an adherence to respect as a *sine qua non* condition of classroom membership. The “hot” responses may occur but a key role for the teacher is to

acknowledge and note such views which may be put on hold, opened to investigation and reflection at a future occasion at a more critical distance. It would be naïve to claim that open dialogue does not carry risks of derailment when feelings run high; the teacher may then need to shift footing rapidly into her institutionalised role of principal.

The use of questions is key to the maintenance of an open, reflective classroom. Typically, teachers use questions to steer students to a predicted “correct” or expected answer. In a critically oriented classroom, on the other hand, not only may correct answers not be the relevant criterion for a satisfactory outcome, but the questions asked may either not be answerable in terms of correct or incorrect answers or not be readily answerable *at all*. Questions may be “exploratory” in terms used by Young(1992), with participants exchanging a series of questions rather than acting out question/answer adjacency pairs which move towards closure.

However, critically oriented pedagogy presents its own risks of domination. In a pedagogy committed to matters of social justice, where the teacher makes no claim to value neutrality, teacher questions may take learners beyond “Guess what teacher thinks” (GWTT) questions ( see Young 1992) to “Guess what teacher *wants you* to think”. As noted in Wallace (1995), “teachers in classrooms where resistance is unequivocally on the agenda are open to charges of demanding students’ submission to their own (critical purposes)”. (p. 341). Ultimately, however, the process of creating critical communities involves not the assertion of pre-existing beliefs and values but an ongoing questioning and problematisation of social reality, on the part of both teachers and students. Questions may be responded to not by answers but by further

questions, in an exploratory and interactive exchange where the teacher does not guide students to a pre-envisaged response, as in typically structured Initiation-Response-Feedback (IRF) classrooms.

As the teacher adjusts footing, students too will follow suit, initiating new footings through the use of questions and challenges. The option to challenge must be available to all class participants. Importantly, however, where challenges are posed, these are intended and interpreted not as opposition but as resistance, if we accept the distinction between *opposition* and *resistance* proposed by Giroux (1983). Opposition is strategic, motivated by the wish to gain personal advantage; resistance represents a challenge to longer term, more substantial inequities, beyond individual grievance. Challenges are not personally hostile but are raised to question received views, including the rethinking of one's own earlier expressed opinions and beliefs, as this example from the journal of the students in the Critical Reading class might suggest: *Cathy, you may remember I had claimed that each social class had its own ideology—well I'd like to question that now.*

### **Case 1: The Critical Reading Class**

The two episodes here are drawn from a 15-week course called *Critical Reading* which I taught to undergraduate students from several European countries such as France, Spain and Germany as well as a Japanese student, Yuko, who was preparing for her Cambridge Proficiency examination and several Master's students from China, Germany and Argentina. During the group work which preceded these episodes, students had been discussing a

text, drawing on a framework adapted from systemic/functional grammar (see Wallace, 2003b). The students took turns to represent their own views and those of their partners in the group work. The expectation is that this feedback episode will feature more discursive and extended talk to reflect the fact that students have had the opportunity to gain insights from each other within their groups, as well as the planning time to prepare more considered responses to the texts under scrutiny.

### **Episode 1**

The class have been analysing a set of texts about the release of Nelson Mandela in 1990. This episode opens with an extended commentary by Estelle on one of the Mandela texts, the opening section of which reads as follows:

#### **WHITES-OUT**

#### **Rioters shot dead as Nelson says: Keep up struggle**

*Black fury erupted in South Africa yesterday as freed leader Nelson Mandela vowed that the guerrilla war against apartheid would go on.  
(from the Sun, 12 February 1990)*

- 1 Catherine: Does anyone want to look at how the groups, the participants are grouped together in the other texts? We've already said a little bit about this. Anyone want to say anything more for instance about "Whites Out" Estelle?

2 Estelle: The headline shocked me because “Whites Out” for me it's a reference to something against blacks in fact, because...it could say “Blacks Out” and it will, it would have been a racist headline and it's very shocking because ...I think that this article is racist really, because of the title, because erm “Whites erm - rioters shot dead as Nelson says “Keep up struggle” ... and “Whites were terrorised as young Blacks er celebrated Nelson Mandela's release” All the faults are put on Black people. I think you can say you can say that you can say that it's racist.

3 Catherine: Do people agree with Estelle on this point....

4 Students: Yes, yes....

5 Catherine: About that fourth text in particular from the Sun—no surprise—that the participants are polarised in terms of Blacks versus Whites? And in fact those of you well you've looked at this text most of you. What did you notice? Let's take the Blacks and Whites as two sets of participants. It's quite interesting to look: Blacks versus Whites, police versus crowd, you know, to look at groups in opposition. What did you notice about The Guardian text? About the Blacks versus Whites?

6 Carlos: This is from *The Guardian*?

- 7 Catherine: This is from *The Guardian*, yes.
- 8 Student: It's neutral.
- 9 Catherine: It gives the impression of neutrality but there's a reason, a very clear reason why that is, in terms of the participants in the text, who's talked about simply. Have another look at that in terms of the blacks versus whites. It's quite interesting I think (a pause of about about 20 seconds). Anybody want to comment? It's pretty....
- 10 Estelle: The crowd the crowd is called "supporters" which is positive.
- 11 Catherine: Yes, very good. The crowd are supporters, which is positive, of course, not mobs. But what do you notice about the Blacks and Whites also. (..)
- 12 Student: There's no opposition. (.)
- 13 Catherine: Christine?
- 14 Christine: Hold on a sec.
- 15 Catherine: Hold on a sec. All right. I won't rush you. (..)

- 16 Christine: He's more, in a way he's more em I would say compared to the others one there's more objective. He just says actually what's happening and he's not like telling you that, like the last one, that as soon as you just have a look at it you know that, which side it is. The other ones is more more more relaxed in a way.
- 17 Monica: I think he talks about "apartheid" and the others don't, I mean I'm not too sure, but I think....
- 18 Catherine: Well what I was thinking of- I don't want you to guess what's in my head - it's simpler than that really. The fact is I think in *The Guardian* text that Blacks and Whites are not mentioned at all. Maybe that was too obvious to you. It's quite important that the crowd are not identified as Black.

## **Comment**

In terms of field, the most significant turn is Estelle's in Turn 2. She expands on her initial response by hypothesising what the effect of a different wording would have been. In doing so, she honours the paradigmatic principle of critical text analysis which draws on systemic/functional grammar, by imagining the effect of different substitutions, that is: "In what other way could this text have been written?" She justifies her judgement that the headline is racist by inviting her co-participants to imagine the effect of a

replacement of the actual words in the text—*Whites*—with the word *Blacks*. Overall, in this stretch of discourse Estelle’s reasoning is “visible in the talk”, in Mercer’s terms (1995). It is an example of what I have called literate English, elaborated as public discourse.

However, the strong authorship claimed by Estelle is weakened by a series of redundant interventions on my part, which prevent students from building their own line of argument arising from Estelle’s contribution. The sequence of turns beginning “What did you notice about *The Guardian* text—about the Blacks versus Whites?” signals the start of a string of “guess what teacher thinks” (GWTT) questions. The exploratory and reflective stance of Estelle’s discourse gives way to a different kind of tentativeness and uncertainty, attributable to the students’ desperate bid to “find out what teacher thinks”. The pattern of turn-taking consists of rather futile bids from the students, which are noticeably brief and relatively unexpanded, as they struggle to come up with the expected answer. This sequence reveals how GWTT questions may close down opportunities for discursive, reflective talk, disallowing the co-construction of new or differently inflected knowledge.

Overall we can see that a distortion of tenor, one which denies rather than opens up communicative space, accompanies a diminution in the quality or substantive content of the interaction. At the same time, in terms of mode of discourse, it is striking that nearly all turns here revert to the teacher via the IRF model.

## **Episode 2**

This episode is extracted from a lesson towards the end of the Critical Reading class and features two students, Yuko and Victoria, who have been looking specifically at salient ideational features in a text about a childminder, accused of being racist for possessing a Golliwog and also, as it emerged later in the article, for reading *Noddy* books by Enid Blyton to the racially diverse group of children she was caring for. I have previously shown the group one of these books, and Victoria referred to this in the course of this discussion. This is the opening section of the text, to which Yuko was drawing our attention

**Support floods in for childminder who refuses to get rid of 'racist' toy**

### **Council seeks compromise over golliwog**

*SUPPORT is growing for the childminder who faces another confrontation with social services this week over her refusal to give up a golliwog ( from The Times, January 1994)*

- 1 Catherine: So Yuko are you going to be?
- 2 Yuko: Oh yes.
- 3 Catherine: Report back on your discussion?
- 4 Yuko: Yes we found lots of participants here er the main

participant is the council.

- 5 Catherine: Mmm, well, I think the council, I suppose yes the council...
- 6 Yuko: And childminder yeah, and childminder Mrs Newton and also in relation to “support” the parents and other childminders are very important as well we thought.
- 7 Catherine: Yes do you want to say a bit more about why why the parents come into the picture—not the children so much but the why—yes because the other noun, the noun that leads the whole article is “support” isn’t it? Do you want to say something more about it, whose support and what kind of [support?
- 8 Yuko: [Yes erm what we found confusing is a bit like erm support for what? - we are talking about. Is it...well because this Mrs Newton's attitude...it’s not so clear, - clearly said here, we don't know if she's a real racist or just doing her job as a childminder. We don't know that. We have to know that first and “This support” meanings become a different meaning as well -is it supporting her being racist or is it supporting her being a childmind, good childminder? We don't know yet (laughs).
- 9 Catherine: That's very interesting yes. What evidence is there in the

text for those positions do you think. or why - lets put it differently why is it ambiguous?

- 10 Victoria: She never says she's not a racist. She never says that. I think she's so convinced of the way she's been brought up and everybody's been reading these stories for a long time er well maybe we're all racist and we don't realise. It's a part of our conscience - consciousness.
- 11 Catherine: What is racist? This is the thing...
- 12 Victoria: ...and maybe the council is trying to reject this and trying to...trying to erm separate the concepts and tell you that this is racist, I don't know.
- 13 Catherine: Who's trying to say that? Sorry?
- 14 Victoria: The Council—the Inspector, but its also funny that the Inspector is Lorrie Lane—they give us the name and they also straight away they say that he is a Rastafarian..
- 15 Catherine: (reads) “Lorrie Lane, a Rastafarian” , [that's right.
- 16 Yuko: [Yes.

- 17 Victoria: Yes. It's maybe they are saying that he is, erm, he considers the toy a racist toy because he's a Rastafarian not because he's an Inspector. It's like he's not objective.
- 18 Catherine: Mmm.
- 19 Victoria: Maybe.
- 20 Catherine: That's an interesting point. That the first desig, desig, well it does say "because one of its inspectors Lorrie Lane a Rastafaria" but then you might say is that relevant? Do we need to know whether he's a Rastafarian?
- 21 Victoria: Yes, that's why - why do they say it?
- 22 Catherine: Sure and it's always an interesting thing when you're looking at participants, what information is selected er and what is relevant?
- 23 Victoria: It's like when we were talking about "the naughty black face" (referring to an expression in the *Noddy* book we looked at together).
- 24 Catherine: Yes.

25 Victoria: The same.

26 Catherine: Yes, that's right you can make that connection Why mention something? Because one of the...we don't state the obvious.

### **Comment**

In terms of field, Yuko's Turn 8 problematises the text under scrutiny, resisting a hasty or straightforward interpretation. Knowledge building is acknowledged as provisional: "We don't know that. We have to know that first." Judgement is reserved. A surface hesitancy here masks a confident toleration of uncertainty as she offers an extended and elaborated enhancement of her position in "because this Mrs Newtons's attitude...we don't know yet". She thereby acknowledges the principle inherent in critical text analysis of textual ambiguity. My question "why is it ambiguous" is not of the GWTT kind as exemplified in Episode 1, but is an exploratory one. I have no preconceived view on either of the related ambiguities here: whether or not Mrs Newton is genuinely racist and, secondly, whether the support is for her possibly racist stand defending her possession of a Golliwog or more generally for her role as a good, experienced childminder. Uncertainty sets the scene for a series of turns which problematise the concept of racism more generally.

The high degree of control which characterises the Mandela episode is less evident here, as I have largely abandoned the reformulating or evaluative role which is part of the "teacher as principal" footing. My response in Turn 9 (e.g., "that's very interesting") is authored. Typically such teacher comments

are phatic, classic ways in which she interprets the feedback slot in the IRF structure. Here my response is not to validate the expected or “right” response. I do indeed find Yuko’s response interesting. Her observation of the textual ambiguity in the title is not one I had previously noticed.

Victoria infringes norms of classroom interaction by responding in effect not to my question on ambiguity in Turn 9, but by pursuing the theme which effectively Yuko has introduced: that of whether or not the childminder is racist. In the subsequent series of turns, between myself and Victoria, who self-selects to take the floor, there is a further shift in teacher role towards what Young (1992) called “fellow enquirer”. The tenor is characterised by uncertainty, evidenced, as with Yuko’s contributions, by the assertion of not knowing as much as knowing and questions which are exploratory; that is they are neither intended nor received as requests for answers to specific questions, as in “What is racist?”. Questions are responded to not with answers but with expressions of uncertainty or with further questions, as in “Do we need to know whether he’s a Rastafarian?” and “Yes that’s why—why do they say it? Sure.” This exchange is less status-marked than most classroom interaction in that it is hard to identify teacher or learner roles. This is apparent too in Victoria’s comment : “It’s like when we were talking about the naughty black face”. Here the “we” refers to the classroom community, that is our earlier shared discussion of one of the *Noddy* books by Enid Blyton. This intertextual manner of referring to texts and discourse ( as in “remember when we...?”) is usually in the gift of the teacher. Finally, there is also a relative absence of the evaluative or feedback move. The three short turns of mine (Turns 11,13, 15)

can be seen as supportive or clarificatory rather than an attempt at reasserting control, in view of the fact that Victoria's continuations are not responses to my interventions, but rather spontaneous expansions on her own train of thought.

It might be argued that in this exchange the emotional stakes were not high; none of the participants were themselves black. However, very recently, with a class which included three Afro Caribbean women, I discussed a contemporary newspaper report which featured a Golliwog within a discourse similar to that in the childminder text. The women's distaste was strongly articulated. However none felt that this issue should not have been raised. A rationally based anger, shared by the rest of the group, was directed at the popular press, where in Britain at least, a fabricated outrage at what is seen as political correctness regularly emerges.

## **Case 2: A Reading Class on Anti-social behaviour**

This episode is taken from a study of adult learners of English as a Second Language to Overseas Learners (ESOL) in the U.K. (Cooke & Wallace, 2004). The transcript features a class of learners who are mainly asylum seekers or refugees from countries which include Armenia, Burundi, China, Iran, Kosovo, Croatia and Iraq. The teacher is doing whole-class work with a group of about 12 who have been in the class for some months and so know each other fairly well. The students range in age from 16 to 40 and several have been educated to university level in their own countries. Anthony Block, the teacher, has chosen a topical issue: anti-social behaviour, against the background of new proposals by the then British Home Secretary David Blunkett. As this is a reading class, the class was first introduced to the topic. Then they worked in groups to generate some key vocabulary which might arise in the subsequent texts which deal with the issue. At this point in the classroom event, each group is feeding back to the whole class, contributing their list of what constitutes anti-social behaviour. A sensitive issue for Anthony arose when two of the students wish to argue that they find anti-social the behaviour of certain kinds of women, usually with children, approaching them to ask for money. Although it is not suggested that they intend to be racist, their characterisation of these women as “gypsies” is challenged by two Croatian students.

- 1 Anthony: Shall we report back to see if we've got any new ideas from different groups? Perhaps Mina and Jali, could you very briefly tell the class what's on your list?
- 2 S: One thing is the gypsy people you can see, gypsy, is it correct, gypsy people?

- 3 Anthony: Gypsy people.
- 4 S: Is that how we call them, gypsy people?
- 5 S: [We call them gypsy.
- 6 Anthony: [Yes, we have..g...gypsy people yes.
- 7 S: And we can see them, especially in Oxford Street I saw them and they come to you and-
- 8 Sandra: They are not gypsy, you can't tell that they are gypsy, gypsy people are ( ) you have special people who are gypsy and they are not BEGGAR.
- 9 S1: You think about beggars?
- 10 S3: No, no they come to you and push you, give me money, give me money.
- 11 S: [No no.
- 12 Students: [No no. ( )
- 13 Anthony: [People begging yes yes.
- 14 Students: [( ) No they are...they are not begging.
- 15 Anthony: We can't say they're gypsies, we can say people begging, all sorts of people beg
- 16 S: Beggars
- 17 S: Now it's a crime
- 18 S: ( ) They wear long dress, it's only woman, bring their children.
- 19 S: [On the TV, on the TV the police call them gypsy people that's why, it's because...it's....
- 20 Anthony: OK gypsy, shall we

21 S: It's not anti-social behaviour in our community... ( ) we haven't got any gypsies. ((laughing))

22 S: It's not anti-social.

23 Anthony: Have you never seen any beggars around Acton?

24 S: No, no not Acton.

25 Anthony: Never? Nobody's ever asked you for money on the street?

26 S: Yes, but there are cameras...cameras.

27 Anthony: [Yes.

28 S: [Now it's a crime...£40.

29 S: [No not sitting down, Safeway.

30 Anthony: [Outside Safeway.

31 Students: [( ) Now it's a crime...yes yes.

32 Students: ( ) Now it's a crime, it's not anti social behaviour.

33 Anthony: Shall we put begging up? That's a good one OK.

34 S: You know Anthony, there is new law now that begging is going to be crime.

35 Students: ( ) (( students talking at once))

36 Anthony: OK.

37 S: I heard.

38 Anthony: We're going to read about that, fantastic Suzanna, good.

39 Suzanna: ((to other student)) it's going to be a crime.

40 Anthony: So we've got begging, and I'm not saying that it is anti-social but we'll make a list of our ideas, and what else did you think of?

## Comment

With regard to field of discourse, it is made clear that this is an arena where students' ideas and points of view are welcome: "Shall we report back to see if we've got any new ideas from different groups?", says Anthony. There is initially no indication that the aim is to reproduce a finite pre-envisaged set or list of such "ideas". However, a future authoritative text is foreshadowed in Anthony's later response to Suzanna in Turn 38: "We are going to read about that, fantastic Suzanna". This is teacherly talk with Anthony in the role as principal as he validates her alignment with class procedures (she has correctly guessed what is coming), rather than responding substantively to her knowledge that begging is to become a crime.

Of particular interest in terms of tenor and footing is the spontaneous initiative which comes from Sandra in Turn 8. One of the Croations, she intervenes to point out the misunderstanding about gypsies and beggars. The turn can be judged powerful on several counts: first, it is an uninvited contribution; second, she does not so much change topic as redirect and reinflect it, bringing in an angle to the discussion which challenges the stereotypical association of beggars with gypsies. Finally, for Sandra, the intervention does not represent a personal rights issue so much as a wish to intervene on behalf of an oppressed group in a manner which I have proposed as a long-term goal of critical pedagogy.

As the teacher, Anthony has a range of footing options: to intervene immediately; acknowledge Sandra's point (she is, after all, factually correct); to deflect her contribution by shifting topic in order to avoid conflict; or to allow, as

he does for some seconds, a slightly ragged, free exchange of turns between Mina and Jali and the two Croatia women. Finally, in Turn 15 he comes in more decisively, concurring with Sandra: “We can’t say they’re gypsies, we can say people begging, all sorts of people beg”. While not explicitly acknowledging his climb down (he had earlier, albeit tentatively, appeared to endorse the use of “gypsy”), he shows the kind of reassessment of an earlier position which privileges openness and typifies quality, discursive talk.

Only at Turn 33 does he reassert his role as principal, in charge of public space represented here by the blackboard. He invites consultation before writing *begging* on the board: “Shall we put begging up? That’s a good one. OK.” At the same time, his use of inclusive “we” suggests a community-based consensual agreement. However even when *begging* has been added to the list on the board, Anthony wants to make clear that such a judgement (namely that begging is anti-social) remains provisional. The list is a “list of our ideas”, neither definitive nor received knowledge, and consequently remains open to challenge. At the same time, when he says: “I’m not saying that it is anti-social”, Anthony draws on a reflective metadiscourse which is self-conscious, in what I have argued is the spirit of literate, exploratory talk.

It is noticeable that the infringement of typical classroom discourse rules in field and tenor, particularly in tenor, leads to a dismantling of the IRF pattern which is not maintained beyond the opening three lines. Even though this is a plenary phase of the class where we might expect a high degree of teacher control, Anthony’s reluctance to impose his views by providing the third part of the usual IRF sequence allows him to stay in the role as fellow enquirer and resonates with his open questioning elsewhere in his teaching. Anthony is,

while accepting responsibility for adjudicating classroom tensions, concerned about maintaining a classroom community which fosters mutual respect for points of view, and offers spaces for challenges such as that offered by Sandra.

## **Conclusion**

It is clear that when students are still in the process of acquiring proficiency in a second language such as English, as is the case of all the students in this study, communicative and linguistic skill will be necessarily limited. This disadvantages them in claiming rights to equal participation in classroom discourse. However, given opportunity to participate in exploratory talk in the classroom, second-language students are enabled both to maximise and extend their current linguistic resources and to participate in the creation of critical communities, which assume that all participants, especially adults or young adults, have cognitive and experiential resources to contribute. As author, the teacher asserts some right to a voice which then affords greater opportunity for students too to produce authored discourse. Spaces for such contributions may be provided when teachers release their hold on privileged forms of knowledge or are prepared to retreat, to relax framing, as is the case with Anthony, allowing students to author the classroom discourse rather than merely respond to a prepared, teacher-controlled script. Or they may be made available when the teacher abandons her customary footing as principal or animator of classroom curriculum and materials. Once students and teacher are engaged in jointly authored communication where individual contributors

are valued and acknowledged substantively, we are able to move a little closer to the kind of discursive, exploratory talk where communication rights are respected within a critical community

**Notes on transcription:**

Overlaps: [

Pauses over one second: (.), the number of dots indicating the number of seconds

Emphasis: -

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