Talking, Listening, Teaching

Understanding Classroom Communication

Peple communicate in various formal and informal settings, from making a presentation in a business meeting to chatting at a cocktail party. These settings are familiar to us, and we think we know how to communicate in both situations; however, we also encounter other settings in which we must communicate in a more ritualized manner, such as in a court of law or in a classroom. Ah! But you say, since we all went to school, we are all familiar with classrooms and know how to communicate in them. That is the problem for teachers: we teachers take this knowledge of communicating in classrooms for granted and assume *all* children who enter our classrooms also know how to communicate effectively. We also assume that, as teachers, our communications in our classes are always clear and foster an effective learning environment. I beg to differ, and that is why I wrote this book on classroom communication. To illustrate, let's consider a class where I observed and transcribed a classroom communication.

MARY'S CLASS: AN ILLUSTRATION

Mary, a fifth-grade teacher, is about to begin her class. What follows is the opening (the first 21 turns) of the reading lesson in which she is trying to get the students ready for the main topic: reading fantasy books.

Turns

1: Mary: OK, remember we were talking about some of the characters you can find in fantasy books. OK, I'm sure some of you have read, OK. Fantasy books which include . . . can you name me some of the characters you can find in fantasy books or stories? Anyone?

2: Student 1:   Witch.

3: Mary: A witch. Very good.

4: Student 2:   Red Riding Hood.

5: Mary: Is Red Riding Hood a fantasy? Red Riding Hood is a . . .

6: Student 2:   Fairy tale.

7: Mary: Very good. Red Riding Hood is a fairy tale. We are talking about witches, OK.

8: Student 3:   Dragon.

9: Mary: Dragon. Very good.

10: Student 4:   Goblin.

11: Mary: Goblin. Yes.

12: Student 5:   Elf.

13: Mary: Elf and dwarf? Excellent! Anyone else know anymore?

14: Student 6:   Knights.

15: Mary: Knights! Yes! Right, OK now, look at the pictures on page 80. Today, we are going to learn some words, OK, that we can find in reading books. What words can you see? Please write them on the page.

[Students work alone.]

[Mary notices that John is not doing anything, so Mary goes to his desk.]

16: Mary: Is everything OK? Is anything the matter?

17: John: *[Silence]*

18: Mary: You aren't doing your work. Are you sick?

19: John: *[Silence]*

20: Mary: If you do not join in, I will have to ask you to stay after class.

21: John: *[John gets up and leaves the class.]*

[After class, Mary reports John to the vice-principal.]

The first 15 turns of this episode show us that the lesson was probably a typical one for Mary in terms of encouraging her students to read on their own during class time. However, around Turn 11 (although this is not indicated in the transcript until after Turn 15), she noticed that one of her students, John, an African-American student, was not reacting to any of her questions and was just sitting silently at his desk with his arms folded. After Turn 15, when all the students started to work alone, Mary went over to John. After this incident (when John walked out), Mary reported John to the vice-principal and said that he had disrupted her class and should be disciplined. In fact, Mary demanded that the vice-principal talk to John's parents because this was not the first time John had remained silent and unwilling to answer her questions. Many teachers may sympathize with Mary because, on the surface, it can be perceived that John was not a willing participant in her class and was not willing to communicate directly with her when she asked him questions. Mary even told the vice-principal that John was one of the very few students in her class who acted like this; he also happened to be the only African-American in her class.

Behind the Scene: The Real Story

When we examine all the issues in this example, we see that there is much more here than meets the eye in terms of what we take for granted in our classroom communication. One of the first issues we must consider here is that John is the only African-American student in Mary's class. It may be the norm in John's cultural background (African-American) not to respond to "wh" questions, and silence may be appropriate when being spoken to by an adult. In other words, John's unwillingness to talk during classroom events

may have been a direct result of the different verbal conventions in his home community and those of the school community. John is from a cultural background that suggests that communication is more implied than direct and where explicit verbal messages are not necessary for understanding. Mary is from a cultural background where groups require communication to be detailed and explicit, and as such, Mary became frustrated with John because his communication is indirect and even circular. What this example shows is that the interpersonal relationship between the teacher and the student has an impact (dramatic in this case) on what happens in the classroom and that differences in and a lack of awareness of different communication styles can lead to misunderstandings. As Powell and Caseau (2004) suggested, "The further students depart from these communication conventions, the more at risk they become" (p. 47).

Thus, teachers must realize that many communities differ from the ways of talking expected in the school, and they must be ready to make allowances for such differences. When these differences are noticed, teachers should try to maximize their students' knowledge and uses of language in the classroom. For example, it would have been helpful for Mary to know about Heath's (1983) study of the different ways of talking and interacting in an African-American community and in two other communities, one of which included a mostly white, middle-class, school-oriented community (see Chapter 2). Mary would have learned that in the African-American community (called Trackton), parents did not use questioning as a mode of interaction with children at home and children were not expected to be information givers or even conversation partners for adults. So when teachers from a European-American background (like Mary) asked questions of their classes that they knew the answer to (labeled *display questions*—see Chapter 5 for more information), the African-American students did not respond because they had never heard that mode of interaction at home. Of course, the teachers perceived that the students from Trackton were being uncooperative, and even unwilling to participate in classroom activities, and gave them lower grades. Heath and her researchers decided to intervene and tried to make the teachers aware of their question types and their effect on the African-American students; they tried to get them to ask more open-ended questions that the students would have been more comfortable answering. Then they attempted to show and explain to the African-American students the types of questions the European-American

teachers used (from a tape recording) so that they could understand them better. In this way, both sides of the communication desk (the teacher and the students, who may have different home communication conventions) can come to a greater understanding of what it means to be communicatively competent in each lesson (see Chapter 2 for more discussion on classroom communicative competence). Teachers tend to have idealized forms (or *schemata*) of classroom communicative competence, or the ways students should participate in their classes, but we should realize that children may not have built up these same schemata—they tend to develop gradually and, as such, must be learned so all students can participate fully in our classes. In other words, clear and consistent lessons may allow all students to attend to lesson content more than lesson procedure and may decrease the stress they experience as they adapt to this new environment. When we really examine the communication and interaction patterns in Mary's class, we can understand how an awareness of the way classroom communication is set up and develops can help teachers better facilitate learning in their classes. This chapter outlines some principles of communication, the nature of classroom communication, and what makes it unique. The chapter also offers a framework for novice and experienced teachers to help them reflect on and manage classroom communication and interaction in today's complex classrooms.

What Is Communication?

To begin, we need to define the terms that will form the basis of our discussion. The term *communication* is used frequently in modern times, but what do we actually mean by this term? There are more than 126 different definitions of communication (Civikly, 1992), and of course, this has resulted in a certain amount of confusion as to the meaning of this term. For example, communication can mean *a process of interaction*, *a discipline of study*, or even *an electronic media system*. However, for the purposes of this book, we will be looking at communication as a process; that is, the *process* of communication in the classroom that involves a "sorting, selecting, and sending of symbols in such a way as to help a listener find in his or her own mind a meaning or response similar to that intended by the communicator" (Ross, 1978, p. 21).

A useful starting point for teachers who are interested in reflecting on classroom communication patterns is this list of six principles of communication (adapted from Civikly, 1992):

1. *Communication is a process in constant change.* This first principle points out that communication is changing all the time.

2. *Communication is a system of rules.* Even though communication is constantly changing, it also has rules (which differ depending on the context—see Principle 6 below) that are usually only noticed when they are violated.

3. *Communication messages are both verbal and nonverbal.* Whenever we speak, we are sending both a verbal and a nonverbal message. Part of communication in classrooms is nonverbal, for the way we express our verbal message often tells a listener how to interpret it. Abercrombie (1968) correctly pointed out: "We speak with our vocal organs, but we converse with our entire bodies. Conversation consists of much more than a simple interchange of spoken words" (p. 55). Nonverbal communication in the classroom will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 8.

4. *Communication is transactional.* As the title of this book (and this chapter) suggests, when we are teaching *and* talking, we are also trying to understand our students' behaviors, facial expressions, and speech, just as they are also listening to us and trying to understand our actions and reactions.

5. *The communication process involves mutual influence.* Following from the transactional view of communication (see Principle 4), we note that how others are responding to us affects how we act and react. We may adjust our teaching actions depending on the level of our awareness; we may speed up, slow down, repeat, ask for a clarification, or make other such adjustments.

6. *Communication occurs in a context that influences the process of communication.* This principle of communication emphasizes the role of context as an influencing force on an interaction. The context is described broadly as the surroundings in which the interaction takes place. For our purposes, the context of communication is the classroom, which has a huge impact on the type of communication that occurs.

THINKING ABOUT YOUR OWN CLASSROOM

- Do you think the patterns of communication that exist in your classroom are providing maximum opportunities for your students to learn? If so, how do you know, and what evidence do you have to back up your claims?
- How do you monitor communication and interaction in your classes?
- How and how often do you monitor your use of language in your teaching?
- What is your opinion of the six principles outlined above? Do you disagree with any? Can you add any more to this list?
- What is your understanding of Principle 4, which states that communication is transactional?

What Is Classroom Communication?

I know that what a classroom is may seem obvious to all teachers, but I think it best to define what it is so we all know what we mean when we use this word. Tsui (1995) defined the classroom as a "place where more than two people gather together for the purpose of learning, with one having the role of teacher" (p. 1). I like this definition because it contains two important pieces of information: learning is supposed to take place (the reason for the classroom) and one of the participants takes responsibility for ensuring that this learning will take place (the teacher).

What do we now mean by classroom communication? Classroom communication includes the face-to-face interactions and the communications necessary between the participants involved in the classroom to ensure that learning takes place. As Briscoe, Arriaza, and Henze (2009) suggested, it is within these face-to-face interactions that teachers use language to "communicate their expectations of students, faculty, and parents; to discuss policies, praise people, propose changes in curriculum, indicate that they are listening, carry out disciplinary action, and for a host of other actions" (p. 16). That is one of the ways classroom communication differs from normal communication in the community—the main purpose of communication in a classroom is to instruct and inform. In addition, communication in a classroom setting is unique because it has highly regulated patterns of communication between teachers and students, both of whom have a different status (the teacher has the higher status in the classroom if not in society as

a whole). These same roles are not present in any other communication events or settings in society (the closest would be in a court of law or in a psychiatrist's office). The higher status of the teacher allows him or her to conduct the class from beginning to end; he or she can choose the topic, decide how to divide the topic into smaller units, control who talks, and when and where they do so. This does not happen in other normal conversations, such as at a cocktail party where topic changes are unpredictable and uncontrollable (although Chapter 3 will point out that many of our friends who are not teachers may think that we *do* try to control both the topic and when and who talks). So teachers, whether consciously or not, communicate (usually by using language) in order to orchestrate learning events in their classroom. Mercer (1995) suggested that teachers use communication in the classrooms in order to accomplish three things:

1. *To elicit relevant knowledge from students,* so that teachers can see what the students already know and understand and so that the knowledge is seen to be "owned" by students as well as teachers.

2. *To respond to things that students say,* not only so that students get feedback on their attempts but also so that the teacher can incorporate what students say. Teachers can respond to what students say through the use of *confirmations, repetitions, clarifications, elaborations*, and *reformulations*. (These terms will be discussed later in the book.)

3. *To describe the classroom experiences that they share with students.* Mercer (1995) made the argument that "to be effective, any teacher needs to explore the scope of a learner's existing knowledge" (p. 10), and this is achieved through such communication and talk techniques as *eliciting, responding,* and *describing: eliciting* knowledge from the students, *responding* to what the students say, and *describing* the classroom experiences that they both share.

TALKING AND LISTENING

Teachers use *talking* in classrooms as their main communication device, and as Mercer (1995) suggested, it is really through a teacher's response to communication and interaction that meaning

can be created and then shared by all the participants. Much of the remainder of the contents of this book assume that the type of communication that teachers use in their classrooms is mostly in the form of talk, except for the final chapters that discusses how teachers use different forms of nonverbal communication in their classrooms. But in fact, we teachers talk *and* listen at the same time, and as we teach, we also look at our students' behaviors, facial expressions, and speech (while at the same time our students are also attempting to understand our behaviors, expressions, and speech).

When I talk about a teacher listening, I like to emphasize an *active* form of listening where teachers show their students that they are really listening. Such active listening can be achieved by teachers who follow a sequence of interactions in which the teacher as listener restates what the student has said and, through further comments and questions, helps the student clarify any specific issues of concern she or he may have.

Another means of verifying a listener's understanding of a message is called the *perception check* (Brophy & Good, 1991). For example, a student might ask his teacher, "Why do I have to go to gym?" The teacher's questions may help to find out the concerns behind this question. It could be that the student does not feel well, is self-conscious about his or her body, is afraid of the coach, or may be worried about a test after gym class and wants to use the time to study. According to Brophy and Good, when using a perception check, the teacher first states what he or she has heard and interpreted as the student's concern and then asks the student if that interpretation is accurate.

Students also provide certain signals of listening and comprehension failure when trying to understand the teacher. For example, students can use the following (adapted from Brophy & Good, 1991):

- A *focused/directive* strategy, where the student provides specific information to the teacher about what he or she does not understand and then asks for some type of clarification. For example, "Do you mean that *X* assumes change?"
- A *focused/nondirective* strategy, where the student provides specific information about what he or she does not understand but does not request any clarification. For example, "I don't understand the difference between a common future and a common goal."

- A *personally qualified* strategy, where the student's response takes the form of "mazes of questions/ideas" (p. 38) that the teacher must work through in order to respond. For example, "How is what she said different from what I said? . . . That's what I meant to say, so maybe I just didn't say it right."

THINKING ABOUT YOUR OWN CLASSROOM

- What does active listening mean to you?
- How do you show you are really listening to the students in your classroom?
- How do students show they are listening to you in your classroom?

A FRAMEWORK FOR UNDERSTANDING CLASSROOM COMMUNICATION

This book looks at *how* and *why* patterns of communication are established and maintained in classrooms. The chapters are all based on a framework for understanding communication in classrooms adapted from the work of Hugh Mehan (1979) and Douglas Barnes (1976). I am influenced by Mehan's (1979) work because he suggested that the classroom is a unique environment because it is the teacher who decides the speaking rights within a classroom as he or she holds all the authority and all the rights to speak and no other person in the room has the right to object. This, he said, affects the underlying communication structure of classroom communication depending on how the teacher wants to distribute these rights to the students on when, how, and why they are to speak. In a descriptive study of a first-grade classroom in the United States, Mehan used two types of units of analysis to describe teacher and student face-to-face verbal interaction: an *elicitation act* consisting of the teacher's inquiry (an *I*), followed by the student's response (an *R*), and the teacher evaluation (an *E*). In addition, Mehan (1979) identified four categories of teachers' elicitations (*I*):

- *Choice elicitations,* which call on students to agree or disagree with the teacher's inquiry, or choose one from a set of alternatives

- *Product elicitations,* which ask students to provide a factual response
- *Process elicitations,* which call for students to give an opinion or interpretation
- *Metaprocess elicitations,* where students are asked to explain their reasoning

This classic *IRE* sequence was changed slightly in the United Kingdom by the work of Sinclair and Coulthard (1975), who suggested that the lesson consists of *exchanges* and said "the typical exchange in the classroom consists of an *initiation,* followed by a *response,* from the pupil, followed by *feedback,* to the pupil's response from the teacher" (p. 3), or *IRF.* I use Mehan's (1979) *IRE* sequence as the usual underlying communication structure for most classrooms that operate within three broad phases: an *opening phase* to orient students, an *instructional phase,* and a *closing phase.* The opening and closing phases will vary from teacher to teacher with the use of informatives and directives; however, the instructional phase is a joint production between the teacher and the students in the form of an *initiation, response/reply,* and an *evaluation/feedback,* as outlined in the beginning of this section (see Chapter 3 for more of Mehan's ideas).

Barnes's (1976) classic work on classroom communication and interaction suggested that patterns of classroom communication are established and maintained by teachers, and these determine not only the ways in which our students react and respond but also heavily influence what our students ultimately learn. Most important, it is teachers and students *together* who attempt to interpret classroom communications and activities through their *own* frames of reference, and if these frames are different, then there are likely to be outcomes that are different from what was anticipated by both teachers and students. So the framework that is presented in this book maintains that classroom learning is really a negotiation between teachers' *intended* meanings and their students' *actual* understandings. This learning is a construction of shared meanings through face-to-face communication and is the core of what teachers and students bring to the classroom. As Barnes (1976) pointed out, classroom communication as a system "is a matter not only of how the teacher sets up classroom relationships and discourse but also of how the pupils interpret what the teacher does" (p. 33). Thus, classroom

communication is examined not only in terms of what actually occurs in the classroom, but also in terms of what teachers and students *bring* to the classroom—and how that shapes what occurs there. When I say *bring,* I mean the background belief systems of both the teachers and the students.

Students must be able to perceive and respond to what their teachers say and do in class. How are students to respond to teachers? This and other similar questions will be discussed in later chapters of this book. However, it is the teachers who must take most of the responsibility for controlling the patterns of communication established in their classrooms. Barnes (1976) suggested that the language a teacher uses performs two functions simultaneously: it carries the message that a teacher wants to communicate and, at the same time, it conveys certain information—who the teacher is, to whom he or she is talking, and what the teacher believes the situation is (i.e., the teacher's frame of reference). The way a teacher organizes patterns of classroom communication depends on

- the teacher's prior experiences as a student,
- the teacher's theories about how a subject should be learned, and
- the teacher's beliefs about how a subject should be taught.

Students also have a certain responsibility to contribute to and become actively involved in the learning process. As Barnes (1976) suggested, "learning is not just a matter of sitting there waiting to be taught" (p. 18). Students interpret (through their frame of reference) what teachers present them with in class. For example, a teacher might say something during a class that triggers a thought or reaction to something that a student learned five years ago, and this in turn may lead to the student realizing something completely different than what the teacher had intended for a particular lesson. That is why we say there is no one-to-one correspondence between what the teacher teaches and what the students learn from that particular lesson (Cazden, 1988). Again, as Barnes (1976) suggested, every student will "go away with a version of the lesson which in some respects is different from all other pupils' versions, because what each student brings to the lesson will be different" (p. 21). So even though classroom communication may seem haphazard, the works of Mehan (1979) and Barnes (1976) suggest that it is highly

regulated and ritualized and that it has patterns that can be identified. Consequently, the framework outlined in this book offers a means for teachers to reflect on the communication and interactional patterns that currently exist in their classrooms so that they can consider their expectations about appropriate communication in their classrooms in order to provide optimum learning opportunities for their students.

STUDYING COMMUNICATION PATTERNS

Richards and Lockhart (1994) suggested that teachers are often unaware of what they do when they teach and of how their teaching influences learning. This is because teachers are not familiar with the communication patterns that exist in their classes and do not know how to investigate them. However, teachers can reflect on their teaching so that they can understand what is happening in their classroom, and this form of self-inquiry "can reveal important information about one's teaching" (p. 3).

Consider a study by Duff (2002), who examined the communications in a high school classroom composed of Mandarin/Cantonese-speaking students, Korean-speaking students, and local Canadian English-speaking students and looked at oral communication and social interaction in learning. The study revealed some contradictions and tensions in classroom communication as the teacher tried to understand the Asian cultural identity and the Asian students' class participation with the local English-speaking Canadian students. Even the students' seating arrangements reflected their racial origins, and the English-speaking Canadian students tended to dominate the whole-class discussions even when the topic was about Asian culture. Reasons for this included the Asian students' lack of confidence and comfort in using English and the fear of being wrong. However, on paper tests, the Asian students scored better than the Canadian students. Interviews with the students indicated that some Asian students felt no need to speak up, while others felt intimidated by the locals. The teacher had no realization of problems in her classes except that "the Asian students were not participating" and did not go beyond this realization. It was only after interacting with the researcher that the teacher tried to consciously change the communication patterns in her classes.

It is important for teachers to study the communication patterns they have set up in their classrooms because in doing so, they can attempt to seek answers to the following questions (adapted from Barnes, 1976):

- How are patterns of communication set up in class?
- Who has decided these patterns of talk?
- What are the effects of these patterns of talk on student participation?
- How do these patterns change?
- How do the students (and teachers) learn them?
- How much of this communication contributes to student learning, and how much performs other functions (what are these functions)?
- Does the teacher's behavior match his or her stated intentions and beliefs?

It is equally important for the students to understand these established patterns of classroom communications so that they will be able to understand what the teacher expects from them. In fact, students must be able to *read* what the teachers want from them because this is rarely stated directly by teachers; student must be able to read *what, why, when,* and *how* they are expected to communicate in the classroom (Mehan, 1979). Students need to have gained *classroom communicative competence* (explored in Chapter 2) in both the social and the interactional requirements in order to be successful learners in the classroom. Even though research tells us that classroom communications between the teacher and students seem to follow a set formula and many teachers tend to rigidly control it, it should be noted that this book takes the stance that day-to-day classroom communications are actively negotiated between teachers and students and that this daily need to negotiate and renegotiate has an impact on learning. As Barnes (1976) stated: "Classroom learning can be best seen as an interaction between the teacher's meanings, and those of his [or her] pupils, so that what they take away is partly shared and partly unique to each of them" (p. 22).

REFLECTING ON CLASSROOM COMMUNICATION

A classroom is a unique context because it is the only context in which communication structures exist where one person (the teacher) is responsible for establishing the speech event from beginning to end. In a classroom, the teacher, because of his or her unique status, is the sole person responsible for what is said, who says it, and what is to be said (generally speaking). The teacher is responsible for (but may not be successful in) ensuring that the communications are clear and smooth and that the other people in the room (the students) understand these communications and are aware of what is expected of them. It is hoped that by reading and reflecting on the contents of this book, teachers will become more aware of the patterns that currently exist in their classrooms and will be able to evaluate whether these patterns provide opportunities for their students to learn. If they discover that this is not the case, then they may take steps to change the communication patterns so that their students can optimize their learning.