

Exploring English Language Teaching

Routledge Introductions to Applied Linguistics is a series of introductory level textbooks covering the core topics in Applied Linguistics, primarily designed for those entering postgraduate studies and language professionals returning to academic study. The books take an innovative “practice to theory” approach, with a ‘back-to-front’ structure. This leads the reader from real-world problems and issues, through a discussion of intervention and how to engage with these concerns, before finally relating these practical issues to theoretical foundations. Additional features include tasks with commentaries, a glossary of key terms, and an annotated further reading section.

Exploring English Language Teaching provides a single volume introduction to the field of ELT from an applied linguistics perspective. The book addresses four central themes within English language teaching: ‘Classroom interaction and management’; ‘Method, Postmethod and methodology’; ‘Learners’; and the ‘Institutional frameworks and social contexts’ of ELT. For each, the book identifies key dilemmas and practices, examines how teachers and other language teaching professionals might intervene and deal with these concerns, and explores how such issues link to and inform applied linguistic theory.

Exploring English Language Teaching is an indispensable textbook for language teachers, and for post-graduate/graduate students and advanced undergraduates studying in the areas of Applied Linguistics, Language Teacher Education, and ELT/TESOL.

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Routledge Introductions to Applied Linguistics

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Exploring English Language Teaching

Language in Action

Graham Hall

Exploring Classroom Discourse

Language in Action

Steve Walsh

‘The innovative approach devised by the series editors will make this series very attractive to students, teacher educators, and even to a general readership, wanting to explore and understand the field of applied linguistics. The volumes in this series take as their starting point the everyday professional problems and issues that applied linguists seek to illuminate. The volumes are authoritatively written, using an engaging “back-to-front” structure that moves from practical interests to the conceptual bases and theories that underpin applications of practice.’

Anne Burns, *Aston University, UK*

Exploring English Language Teaching

Language in Action

Graham Hall

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To Helen, Georgia and Rosa

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Series editors' introduction

The Introducing Applied Linguistics series

This series provides clear, authoritative, up-to-date overviews of the major areas of applied linguistics. The books are designed particularly for students embarking on masters-level or teacher-education courses, as well as students in the closing stages of undergraduate study. The practical focus will make the books particularly useful and relevant to those returning to academic study after a period of professional practice, and also to those about to leave the academic world for the challenges of language-related work. For students who have not previously studied applied linguistics, including those who are unfamiliar with current academic study in English-speaking universities, the books can act as one-step introductions. For those with more academic experience, they can also provide a way of surveying, updating and organizing existing knowledge.

The view of applied linguistics in this series follows a famous definition of the field by Christopher Brumfit as:

The theoretical and empirical investigation of real-world problems in which language is a central issue.

(Brumfit, 1995: 27)

In keeping with this broad problem-oriented view, the series will cover a range of topics of relevance to a variety of language-related professions. While language teaching and learning rightly remain prominent and will be the central preoccupation of many readers, our conception of the discipline is by no means limited to these areas. Our view is that while each reader of the series will have their own needs, specialities and interests, there is also much to be gained from a broader view of the discipline as a whole. We believe there is much in common between all enquiries into language-related problems in the real world, and much to be gained from a comparison of the insights from one area of applied linguistics with another. Our hope therefore is that readers and course designers will not choose only those volumes relating to their own particular interests, but use this series

to construct a wider knowledge and understanding of the field, and the many crossovers and resonances between its various areas. Thus the topics to be covered are wide in range, embracing an exciting mixture of established and new areas of applied linguistic enquiry.

The perspective on applied linguistics in this series

In line with this problem-oriented definition of the field, and to address the concerns of readers who are interested in how academic study can inform their own professional practice, each book follows a structure in marked contrast to the usual movement *from theory to practice*. In this series, this usual progression is presented back to front. The argument moves *from* Problems, *through* Intervention, and *only* finally to Theory. Thus each topic begins with a survey of everyday professional problems in the area under consideration, ones that the reader is likely to have encountered. From there it proceeds to a discussion of intervention and engagement with these problems. Only in a final section (either of the chapter or the book as a whole) does the author reflect upon the implications of this engagement for a general understanding of language, drawing out the theoretical implications. We believe this to be a truly *applied* linguistics perspective, in line with the definition given above, and one in which engagement with real-world problems is the distinctive feature, and in which professional practice can both inform and draw upon academic understanding.

Support to the reader

Although it is not the intention that the text should be in any way activity-driven, the pedagogic process is supported by measured guidance to the reader in the form of suggested activities and tasks that raise questions, prompt reflection and seek to integrate theory and practice. Each book also contains a helpful glossary of key terms.


The series complements and reflects the *Routledge Handbook of Applied Linguistics*, edited by James Simpson, which conceives and categorizes the scope of applied linguistics in a broadly similar way.

Ronald Carter
Guy Cook

Reference

- Brumfit, C. J. (1995) 'Teacher Professionalism and Research', in G. Cook and B. Seidlhofer (eds) *Principle and Practice in Applied Linguistics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 27–42.

Note

There is a section of commentaries on a number of the tasks, at the back of the book from p. 235. The  symbol in the margin indicates that there is a commentary on that task.

Part I

**Classroom interaction
and management**

1 The language classroom

Roles, relationships and interactions

The classroom is the crucible – the place where teachers and learners come together and language learning, we hope, happens.

(Allwright and Bailey, 1991: 18, citing Gaies, 1980)

This chapter will:

- consider the social as well as pedagogic character of English language teaching classrooms;
- explore how teachers assume a variety of roles in class, and investigate how these roles may affect language learning and ‘classroom life’;
- investigate how patterns of classroom interaction, including teacher and learner talk, error and error treatment and teachers’ questions, may affect opportunities for language learning;
- encourage readers to reflect on their own beliefs and classroom practices, while acknowledging possible alternatives.

Introduction: thinking about the ‘ELT classroom’

English language classrooms are complicated places. Common sense tells us that classrooms are places where ‘people, typically one teacher and a number of learners, come together for a pedagogical purpose’ (Allwright, 1992: 267). However, in addition to their physical (or virtual) location and pedagogic function, Tudor notes that classrooms are also *social* environments (2001: 104), that is, language lessons can be understood as social events based upon social relationships and social interaction (Erikson, 1986; Allwright, 1989). The beliefs and expectations of parents, institutional managers and governmental agencies *beyond* the classroom and the relationships between the participants *in* the classroom (i.e., teachers and learners) affect classroom practices and behaviour. Thus:

The classroom is not a world unto itself. The participants . . . arrive at the event with certain ideas as to what is a ‘proper’ lesson, and in their actions and interaction they will strive to implement these ideas. In addition the society at large and the institution the classroom is part of have certain expectations and demands which exert influence on the way the classrooms turn out.

(van Lier, 1988a: 179)

Clearly, therefore, *diversity* and *complexity* are fundamental elements of language teaching and learning, and of language classrooms (Tudor, 2001). Given the number of participants who in some way affect what happens in a language classroom, and the varied local contexts in which English language teaching (ELT) takes place, each classroom is unique; and it is this human and contextual complexity (Tudor, 2001) that makes classroom language teaching ‘messy’ (Freeman, 1996, in Tudor, 2001). What goes on in a classroom is inevitably much more than the logical and tidy application of theories and principle; it is localized, situation-specific, and, therefore, diverse. Indeed, using the metaphor of ‘coral gardens’ to convey their socially complex and diverse nature, Breen (2001a) has suggested that individual language classrooms develop their own specific character and culture. (As we shall see in Chapter 3, where we shall examine the image of ‘coral gardens’ in more detail, metaphor has proved a particularly useful way in which teachers and applied linguists have characterized and explained language classrooms and language teaching.) Recognizing the complex and diverse nature of ELT classrooms around the world, and the social as well as pedagogical aspects of classroom life, is the starting point of our exploration of roles, relationships and interactions in second language (L2) classrooms. How might teachers organize and manage their classrooms and learners, and what practical dilemmas do they face when doing so?

Before we proceed: teacher beliefs and classroom practice

Much has been written about the links between teachers’ beliefs (also sometimes labelled ‘personal theories’) and their classroom behaviour (e.g., Crookes, 2003). Borg (2001: 186) summarizes a belief as:

A proposition which may be consciously or unconsciously held, is evaluative in that it is accepted as true by the individual . . . [and] serves as a guide to thought and behaviour.

Although terms such as ‘rules of thumb’ or ‘teacher lore’ (Crookes, 2003) may appear to downplay their importance, as Crookes remarks

(47), 'it is impossible to act, as a teacher, without having theories (including values) that inform teaching actions, at least to some degree'.

Equally notable is that teachers' beliefs are derived from and influenced by a range of sources including the perspectives of others (e.g., colleagues, teacher-trainers and educators, and academic research and researchers) and their own practical experience of what is and is not successful. This suggests that a two-way relationship exists between beliefs and practice, with beliefs informing (but not determining) practice and, vice versa, practice informing what an individual may believe.

However, even establishing what teachers (indeed, anyone) actually believe is extremely challenging, involving, as it does, issues of consciousness (e.g., have I ever consciously thought about a topic before? do I really know what I think about it?), the ways in which peoples' ideas change over time, how articulate a person is at expressing their beliefs, and social pressures and expectations on speakers that cause them to modify what they may reveal. Several researchers have also found mismatches between what teachers say they believe and what their classroom practices actually seem to demonstrate (e.g., Phipps and Borg, 2009). The potential role contextual and institutional factors might have in affecting and constraining teachers' behaviour should also be acknowledged (as we shall see in later chapters).

That said, at some level, teachers' classroom practices are informed by their personal theories in areas as broad as 'what is teaching?' and 'what role should the teacher and learners take in the classroom?', through to the more specific 'how should learners be organized and seated in classroom activities?' and 'how should language be elicited . . . and corrected?'. Sometimes, this is through deliberate and explicit thought and reflection; sometimes, however, it is through implicit, taken-for-granted assumptions, or beliefs that were previously learned or instilled on teacher training programmes and which are now realized through routine (and routinized) teaching practices.

Thus, teachers should not be viewed as 'skilled technicians who dutifully realize a given set of teaching procedures in accordance with the directives of a more or less distant authority' (Tudor, 2001: 17). Instead:

Teachers are active participants in the creation of classroom realities, and they act in the light of their own beliefs, attitudes, and perceptions of the relevant teaching situation . . . we need to be aware of 'the unique contribution which each individual brings to the learning situation' (Williams and Burden, 1997: 95).

(Tudor, 2001: 17–18)



Task 1.1 Thinking through 'beliefs'

- What are your beliefs about the ideas that 'errors in the language classroom should be corrected as soon as they are made' and 'getting learners to work in pairs or groups is the most effective way of promoting learning in the ELT classroom'?
- What other beliefs do you have about how English is taught? For example:
 - What is/are the most appropriate role(s) for the teacher and learners in the L2 classroom?
 - How much should teachers and learners talk in class?
 - What is the most effective way of arranging the desks and seats in an L2 classroom?
- Have your ideas and beliefs about how to teach English changed over time? How? Why?
- Can you think of an example where what you do in class seems clearly related to what you think you believe about how to teach English?
- Can you think of another example, this time where what you do in class seems to contradict what you think you believe about English language teaching? Why do you think this is?

Thinking about classrooms: exploring teacher roles

We can see, therefore, that how teachers manage classrooms, and the roles that they and learners enact in class, will vary according to their beliefs and their teaching context. For example, Harmer (2007: 107) asks:

If you were to walk into a classroom, where would you expect to see the teacher – standing at the front controlling affairs, or moving around the classroom quietly helping the students only when needed?

Although teachers (and learners) may be more comfortable with one particular way of organizing teaching and learning compared to

another (e.g., ‘teaching from the front’ compared to group-based discovery activities), they are likely, of course, to take on more than one role in the classroom, switching between them as required. Additionally, how teaching is conceptualized – as the transmission of knowledge from teachers to learners, or as the provision of opportunities for learners to discover and construct knowledge for themselves – will also affect the role teachers assume in the classroom. We shall discuss differing approaches to teaching in more detail in the next chapter, examining broader philosophies of education in Chapter 12; now, however, we shall turn to examine the practical implications of ‘role’ in the L2 classroom.

First thoughts: teachers and students . . . teachers and learners

Observing that *role* can be defined in a variety of ways, Wright (1987: 7) suggests that it is ‘a complex grouping of factors which combine to produce certain types of social behaviour’, while Widdowson (1987) emphasizes the importance of social expectations and norms in prescribing (or constraining) the personas and behaviour (i.e., the role) of teachers and learners. Widdowson characterizes the classroom as a ‘social space’, and both he and Wright recognize that teachers need to balance both social and pedagogic purposes within their classroom behaviour (as we have seen).

Thus, Wright highlights the job or *task-related* (i.e., pedagogic) elements and the *interpersonal* (i.e., social) elements of the teacher’s role. Likewise, Widdowson suggests that teachers are obliged to function as representatives of institutions and society, leading to clear, fixed and hierarchical relationships in the classroom between teachers and *students*; but teachers also engage in more pedagogically oriented relationships with *learners*.

By using different terms for the same group of classroom participants, Widdowson highlights the dual nature of the teacher’s role and teacher-student/learner relationships. Teacher authority is derived from social and institutional position (*‘do this because I tell you and I am the teacher’* (1987: 86)) and from pedagogical knowledge and expertise (*‘do this because I am the teacher and I know what’s best for you’* (ibid.)), and teachers can be as authoritative when guiding a learner-centred activity as when ‘teaching from the front’, albeit in a different way. However, teachers may face difficulties if pedagogical practice and development runs counter to social norms and expectations (e.g., the introduction of ‘learner-centred’ or ‘humanistic’ pedagogy in deferential and hierarchical social and institutional contexts, or vice versa).

Teachers in the classroom: a range of roles

Harmer (2007: 108–10) lists the key classroom roles of the L2 teacher as *controller*, *prompter*, *participant*, *resource* and *tutor* and similar frameworks are outlined by most other applied linguists (Wright (1987), for example, lists *instructor*, *organizer*, *evaluator*, *guide*, *resource* and *manager*). Harmer (2007) observes that the role teachers take will depend on what they wish learners to achieve, but will also depend on the learners' attitudes to teacher/learner roles and relationships (see van Lier's view quoted in the introduction to this chapter).

Interestingly, Harmer (2007: 108) avoids identifying teachers as 'facilitators', suggesting that this term is usually used to describe teachers who are 'democratic' rather than 'autocratic', and who favour knowledge construction rather than knowledge transmission (see Chapter 12 for further discussion of these concepts). He argues that, as all committed teachers aim to facilitate learning, labelling those who adopt a particular classroom role as particularly effective 'facilitators'

Task 1.2 Teacher and learner roles in the ELT classroom

Think of your own English language teaching context.

- What do learners expect of teachers? For example:
 - How are teachers expected to dress?
 - How do teachers refer to learners? e.g., given name, family name . . . and as students or as learners?
 - How do learners refer to their teachers? e.g., given name, sir, Mr/Miss/Ms . . .
 - Are teachers and learners socially 'distant' from each other?
- To what extent do learners expect teachers to be controllers and managers or prompters and guides? Why might this be so?
- To what extent do you as a teacher share learners' perceptions and beliefs about what are and are not appropriate teacher and learner roles in the ELT classroom?
- Have you ever experienced difficulties in the classroom or adjusted your teaching 'style' and the roles you enact to accommodate the beliefs of others (e.g., learners, managers, parents)?

and others less so is a value-judgement that does many teachers a disservice.

Notwithstanding Harmer's argument, the notion of 'facilitation' (rather than 'facilitators') retains a key place in many ELT training courses and reference books (Thornbury, 2006: *xi*, 79), as it recognizes that teachers do not cause learning *directly*; instead they provide the conditions for learning to take place. As Thornbury comments, 'the learner should not be seen as the object of the verb *to teach*, but the subject of the verb *to learn*' (ibid.: 79). Thus whether or not 'facilitation' is the most appropriate terminology, teachers who facilitate learning may be required to act as a prompt for learners, take account of interpersonal relationships within the classroom and provide language resources when appropriate; the ways in which teachers achieve this will depend, of course, on factors such as the learners' age, L2 level, preferred learning styles and motivation, which we shall examine in more detail in Part III. (The idea that teachers do not 'directly cause' learning has major implications for classroom language learning and teaching, of course, summarized by two questions, both of which acted as titles for two articles published in the 1980s – 'Does second language instruction make a difference?' and 'Why don't learners learn what teachers teach?' (Long (1983a) and Allwright (1984) respectively.) We shall return to these questions in later chapters.

From teacher role to teacher talk . . .

We have already noted the diversity and complexity of ELT classrooms around the world: cultural contexts, institutional curricula, teacher and teaching styles and beliefs, and learner needs and expectations differ from country to country (Mercer, 2001). Yet despite this variation, the way language is used in the classroom remains broadly similar because:

Wherever they are and whatever they are teaching, teachers in schools and other educational facilities are likely to face some similar practical tasks. They have to organize activities to occupy classes of disparate individuals. . . . They have to control unruly behaviour. They are expected to teach a specific curriculum. . . . And they have to monitor and assess the educational progress the students make. All aspects of teachers' responsibilities are reflected in their use of language as the principal tool of their responsibilities. (Mercer, 2001: 243)

Thus how teachers talk and how teachers talk to learners is a key element in organizing and facilitating learning. This is particularly

important in an L2 classroom where the medium of instruction is also the lesson content, that is, language is both ‘the vehicle and object of instruction’ (Long, 1983b: 9). This contrasts with other subjects such as physics or geography where the content (or message) is separate from the language (or medium). And, despite the emergence and theoretical dominance of Communicative Language Teaching, Task-based approaches and learner-centredness within ELT (outlined in Chapter 5), teacher talk still takes up a great deal of time in many classes (for example, Chaudron (1988) summarizes evidence suggesting that in some bilingual education and immersion classes, over 60 per cent of class time is typically given over to teacher talk).

Teacher talk, then, is the language teachers typically use in the L2 classroom. Teacher talk can be conceptualized in two ways – specifically as a language that is similar to the *foreigner talk* L1 speakers use when talking to L2 learners or the *caretaker talk* parents use with children, slower and grammatically simplified (but not grammatically inaccurate); or as the general term for the way teachers interact with learners in the language classroom. As Lynch (1996) points out, attitudes to classroom teacher talk vary widely – is it a valid concept, should it be used in the L2 classroom, and, if so, when? Although understandable and inevitable, especially with lower levels, many applied linguists and teachers suggest that teacher talk should not be over-simplified as learners require challenging language input for their language to develop (see Chapter 6 for further discussion of this issue).



Task 1.3 Teacher talk in the L2 classroom

- ‘Language is both the message and the medium’. In what ways might listening to teachers and the language they use help learners learn?
- When you talk to learners in class, do you modify the way you speak? If so, what do you do?
- What do you think are the benefits, and the potential disadvantages, of modifying your speech to learners?
- Chaudron (1988), Tsui (1995) and V. Cook (2008) suggest that teacher talk might account for more than 60 percent of L2 classroom talk. Do you recognize this from your own experience?
- What do you think is an appropriate balance of teacher talk and student talking time in the classroom, and why?

The balance of teacher talk and student talk (or teacher talking time (TTT) and student talking time (STT)) is also a matter of some debate. Typically, communicative and interaction-based approaches to ELT have suggested that teacher talk should be minimized in the classroom (as suggested above), thereby providing opportunities for learners to talk, and to practise and produce language. However, learners also require language *input* and opportunities for language *comprehension*, both of which teachers can provide. Clearly, the roles teachers adopt in the classroom, and their beliefs about how L2 learners learn, will affect the amount of teacher talk learners are exposed to. Equally, teachers need to consider not only the *quantity* of teacher and learner talk but also its *quality*. We shall return to these points in Part II.

... and classroom interaction

It is evident that the roles teachers (and learners) take on in the language classroom also affect not only the amount and quality of teacher talk, but wider patterns of *classroom interaction*, ‘the general term for what goes on in between the people in the classroom, particularly when it involves language’ (Thornbury, 2006: 26), or, as Malamah-Thomas puts it, ‘the social encounter of the classroom’ where ‘people/things have a reciprocal effect upon each other through their actions’ (1987: 146).

What kind of questions might teachers ask?

Questions, particularly questions asked by teachers and answered by learners, tend to dominate L2 classroom interaction. Indeed, Chaudron (1988) suggests that questions constitute 20–40 per cent of classroom talk, while Tsui (1995) refers to a class in Hong Kong where almost 70 per cent of classroom interaction could be accounted for by the teacher asking a question, a learner or learners responding, and finally the teacher providing feedback to the response (i.e., the *Initiation-Response-Feedback* exchange (Sinclair and Coulthard (1975), discussed later in this chapter). V. Cook (2008) supports this figure. Questions help teachers elicit information, check learners’ understanding and keep learners’ attention. They also provide learners with a language practice opportunity when they answer. Teacher questions, therefore, fulfil a clear pedagogic purpose and also enable teachers to exert *control* over learners (an issue we shall return to shortly).

Apart from the generic functions of questions identified above, different types of questions generally lead to qualitatively and quantitatively different responses from learners, some questions thus leading learners to ‘work harder’ with the language. Question types include:

- ‘Closed’ and ‘open’ questions, whereby questions with only one acceptable answer, usually factual, are ‘closed’, whereas questions with a range of possible answers, usually ‘reasoning questions’, are ‘open’. Tsui (1995) suggests that closed questions are more restrictive (and less likely to encourage continuing interaction) than open questions.
- ‘Display’ and ‘referential’ questions refer respectively to those questions to which teachers already know the answer as they ask them and those to which they do not. Tsui (1995) notes that referential questions are more likely to lead to genuine communication in the classroom, while Nunan (1987) suggests that referential questions also result in learners using more complex language. Display questions are also very unusual in communication outside the classroom (Nunan and Lamb, 1996).

There are clearly good reasons to use all question types in the ELT classroom, Walsh (2006a) suggesting that different question types will be more or less appropriate according to a teacher’s immediate goal:

The extent to which a question produces a communicative response is less important than the extent to which a question serves a purpose at a particular point in a lesson. In short, the use of appropriate questioning strategies requires an understanding of the *function* of a question in relation to what is being taught.

(Walsh, 2006a: 8, citing Nunn, 1999;
original emphasis)

We shall return to the possible linguistic and social effects of teacher questions as a potential classroom intervention in the next chapter.

Giving explanations . . . or causing confusion?

Tsui states that ‘the role of the teacher is to make knowledge accessible to students’ (1995: 30), that is, to provide explanations. There are of course a number of ways this might be achieved, from teacher-led *deductive* explanations to guiding learners through a process of *inductive* discovery (see Chapter 4 for further discussion). However, as Lynch (1996) suggests, from the learners’ perspective, L2 classrooms can be confusing places and ‘“explanations” are only explanations if they are recognized’ (32); similarly, Martin points out that explanations are only explanations if they are understood (1970, in Tsui, 1995: 31). In terms of classroom interaction and teacher (and learner) talk therefore, Tsui suggests that effective explanations require:

- the active engagement of learners in processing new information and linking it to old information.

- effective and linked stages which neither over-explain nor under-explain the issue.

Teachers face the challenge of accommodating these concerns in practical ways that are appropriate for their own teaching context.

Errors in the classroom: dilemmas, possibilities and practices

According to van Lier, ‘apart from questioning, the activity which most characterizes language classroom is correction of errors’ (1988b: 276 in Walsh, 2006a: 10). Yet the issue of error and how errors are treated in the classroom often provokes strong opinions from teachers and learners alike, ranging from a ‘no correction’ stance to an ideal where all errors are eliminated (unlikely in the real world!). Methodologically speaking, these positions can be associated with, for example, the Natural Approach (Krashen and Terrell, 1983), where error correction was avoided, and the Audiolingual approach to L2 teaching, in which correction was highly valued (see Chapters 5 and 6 for further discussion).

At present, however, most teachers seem to be positioned somewhere in the middle of these two extremes, for, as Edge (1989: 1) comments in a deceptively simple analysis of the dilemma teachers face:

Most people agree that making mistakes is a part of learning. Most people also agree that correction is part of teaching. If we agree so far, then we have a most interesting question to answer: if making mistakes is a part of learning and correction is a part of teaching, how do the two of them go together?

How might these questions be resolved in practice?

What is an error?

Errors are an inevitable part of L2 learning and L2 classrooms, but as Allwright and Bailey (1991) suggest, this notion raises many further questions. Why do learners make errors? Are errors a problem or are they a natural and important part of L2 learning? How should teachers react to errors, and does correction actually affect the learners’ progress? (ibid.: 83).

Corder (1967) differentiated between errors and mistakes, a distinction that has, by and large, been subsequently maintained by most applied linguists. If learners get something wrong because their developing internal second language system (i.e., their *interlanguage*) is not yet complete or ‘fully *competent*’, this is a *developmental error*. Errors may also be caused by *interference*, that is, the influence of the

learners' L1 on their L2, which is said to affect the L2 in a range of ways, including grammar, lexis and phonology. Grammatically, for example, the English system of prepositions presents particular challenges for learners whose L1 expresses similar concepts in different ways (e.g., speakers of German, Russian and Arabic); L1 speakers of several East Asian languages experience difficulty with English articles as reference is realized differently in, for example, Japanese, Korean and Mandarin. Likewise, lexical errors may occur where similar sounding words carry different meanings in a learner's L1 and the target L2 – in Spanish, for example, *sensible* means 'sensitive' rather than the English 'to have good sense'. We shall examine how applied linguists have conceptualized developmental errors in more detail in Chapter 9.

Errors, then, are systematic representations of a learner's L2 development and can therefore help teachers (and learners) discover how far the learner's knowledge the L2 has progressed. In contrast, however, *mistakes* are the result of slips of the tongue (where learners actually know the right language but fail to produce it). Mistakes are said to occur when learners 'fail to perform to their competence' (Ellis, 1985 in Johnson, 2008: 335) and, in theory, can be self-corrected by learners.

Corder (1967) suggests that mistakes 'are of no significance to the process of language learning', but acknowledges that determining the difference between an error and a mistake is extremely difficult, especially, we should note, amid the complexity of the L2 classroom. Indeed, Bartram and Walton (1991) go as far as to categorize the error/mistake distinction as 'purely academic' and not relevant for teachers. Allwright and Bailey (1991), meanwhile, suggest that errors are identified in comparison to native speaker standard language norms, which fails to recognize the sociolinguistic reality of learners' exposure to other varieties of English, a point we shall return to in Chapter 12.

Treating error: what might teachers do?

Hendrickson (1978) offers five key questions for teachers dealing with errors:

- Should learner errors be corrected?
- If so, when?
- Which errors should be corrected?
- How?
- And by whom?

Whether an error should be treated depends, of course, on the teacher first noticing it. Subsequently, Johnson (2008) suggests, teachers may evaluate the seriousness or *gravity* of the error, Hendrickson (1978) prioritizing those errors that affect communication and meaning (i.e., *global* errors rather than *local* errors); those that stigmatize learners, for example, by not attending to politeness and appropriacy in interaction; and those that are particularly frequent.

Whether and when to treat an error also depends upon the context in which the error is made. Looking first at spoken errors, most teacher training and development texts suggest a difference between accuracy and fluency-focused, or, as Harmer puts it, ‘non-communicative’ and ‘communicative’, classroom activities (2007: 142; see also later chapters). Typical concerns include, for example, whether to interrupt learner talk in fluency-focused activities or whether to delay treatment (which is assumed to be more immediate in accuracy-focused activities); how to show that an error has been made (e.g., by asking learners to repeat themselves or via a gesture); how to guide learners to the correct language (e.g., through learner self-correction, help from classmates, teacher explanation, or teacher reformulation (repeating back the correct form)); and how to avoid learner embarrassment and maintain classroom rapport.

The treatment of written errors similarly depends on the purpose of the writing and the teacher’s aims when providing feedback. Teachers might *respond* to written work by providing formative suggestions for learners to consider (e.g., ‘you could . . .’; ‘why don’t you . . .?’); show errors, and types of errors, through the use of a *marking code*; or *reformulate*, that is, provide a correct model by rewriting the learner’s text while attempting to preserve their original meanings (Johnson, 2008).

From ‘error correction’ to feedback and repair

As the above discussion illustrates, error and its treatment is far from straightforward, to the extent that, when describing teachers’ possible responses to errors and mistakes, the term ‘correction’ is perhaps too narrow and we can use the more general term *repair*. This refers to ‘the way that the speaker or listener gets the interaction back on course when something goes wrong’ (V. Cook, 2008: 165); in the L2 classroom, it comprises all types of teacher and learner-instigated feedback.

Linking practice to theory – first thoughts: why treat error?

The theoretical debates that underpin correction and repair are examined in more detail in Part II, where we investigate the importance (or otherwise!) of explicitly *focusing on language forms*, whether learners can and should *notice the gap* between their own language and the target language, and how learners’ *struggle for meaning* (i.e., self-repair)

might assist L2 development. However, in the context of this chapter's more practical focus, what is the significance of repair? Why treat error?

Task 1.4 In your context: making sense of repair

- We have noted the suggested difference between an 'error' and a 'mistake'. Do you recognize this difference from your own experience (as a teacher or as a language learner)?
- How relevant is this concept to your own classroom practice?
- So, how do *you* define error, and how do you identify errors in your classroom?
- English language teachers vary in their attitude to error and repair, from providing little or no correction to providing and encouraging a great deal of systematic repair. What is your opinion? Which kind of teacher are you and how do you compare to other teachers you know and work with?
- In what ways do you consider error correction and repair a useful classroom activity? How might it lead to L2 learning?
- Do you notice more errors than you treat or encourage learners to repair? If so, what kind of errors do you focus on? If 'it depends', what does it depend on? How do you select which errors to correct?
- How are errors treated in your classroom? What strategies and techniques do you use/are used?
- As a teacher, have you ever been in a situation where your beliefs about repair did not correspond to the learners' beliefs? If so, was the situation resolved (and how)? Consider:
 - the amount of correction and the gravity of errors.
 - mechanisms for repair (teacher-centred, peer-assisted, self-correction).

Walsh (2006a: 10) suggests that 'repair, like other practices which prevail in language classrooms, is a ritual, something [teachers] "do to learners" without really questioning their actions'. Noting that this is understandable (and therefore not a criticism), Walsh argues that the consequences of how, when and, implicitly, which errors are repaired are 'crucial to learning':

Teachers are open to many options – their split-second decisions in the rapid flow of a lesson may have consequences for the learning opportunities they present to their learners.

(Walsh, 2006a: 10–11)

Similarly, although we have observed that avoiding embarrassment and maintaining learners' face is an important consideration for teachers, learners generally believe that error correction is a key part of the language teacher's role. As Seedhouse states:

Learners appear to have grasped better than teachers and methodologists that, within the interactional organisation of the L2 classroom, making linguistic errors and having them corrected directly and overtly is not an embarrassing matter.

(1997: 571, in Walsh, 2006a: 10)

We have already recognized that learners and teachers bring with them to class a set of beliefs and expectations, and in Chapter 7 we shall investigate the role of beliefs, and the implications of teachers and learners holding different beliefs, in more detail. But regardless of the pedagogic role of repair, error correction also fulfils the more 'social' role of meeting learner expectations of the teacher's classroom role.

Classroom interaction – a final consideration: 'control'

As we have seen, classroom interaction is shaped by teachers' decisions. For example, learners will reply in different ways using different language when teachers ask open referential questions rather than closed display questions. In general, teachers also direct turn-taking and topic selection in the classroom. Thus, due to their 'special status', teachers orchestrate and control classroom interaction and communication (Breen, 1998; Walsh, 2006a, 2011). (Of course, most teachers deal with issues of disruption and discipline which are also issues of 'control'; for a review of these and other issues of classroom management, see Harmer, 2007; Wright, 2005.)

The *Initiation-Response-Feedback* (IRF) exchange is one of the most typical interactions in L2 classrooms. Here, the teacher initiates an exchange and requires a learner response. Subsequently, the teacher provides evaluative feedback on that response (Sinclair and Coulthard, 1975). For example:

Teacher: Now, who wrote a play called Romeo and Juliet?

Learner: William Shakespeare.

Teacher: Shakespeare. Yes, that's right. Does anyone know any other plays that Shakespeare wrote?

Here, the teacher leads the interaction, confirming and positively evaluating the learner's response before moving on to the next stage of the interaction.

Walsh (2006a) summarizes the reasons for the prevalence of IRF in the L2 classroom – it matches teacher and learner expectations of what classrooms should be like; teachers often want to provide reassuring and positive feedback to learners; asymmetrical power relations in the classroom ensure that teachers 'hold the floor' more often than learners; and it is a time-efficient way of moving classroom interaction forward, albeit via a somewhat limited exchange.

However, in an IRF sequence, the teacher makes two 'moves' for every one made by a learner, thereby contributing to the high level of teacher talk found by Chaudron and Tsui that we noted earlier. IRF sequences have also been criticized for limiting learners' opportunities for interaction, in terms of both quantity and quality, and can be seen as a way in which both turn-taking and topic are nominated and/or dominated by teachers. Thus while potentially meeting both teachers' and learners' social expectations of role and classroom behaviour, IRF sequences reduce learners' opportunities to lead and participate in classroom interaction.

Similarly, the ways in which teachers manage questioning, explanations and repair raise similar issues concerning the relationship between patterns of interaction, language use and control within the L2 classroom. These issues are not solely 'pedagogic' but also concern the nature and distribution of power in the classroom and education more generally, for, as Allwright and Hanks (2009: 65) suggest:

Attractive to most people . . . control can certainly make life easier for the controllers, but it can create problems for the controlled, and for the health of the system as a whole.



Task 1.5 Interaction, control and class size

English language classes vary considerably in size, from one-to-one teaching and small group classes to classes that contain fifty (and more) learners.

- In what ways might teacher and learner roles, classroom interaction and issues of control vary and differ according to class size?
- Although class size is often linked to other contextual factors such as availability of resources and local educational traditions, do you think there are any aspects of role, interaction and control which might not alter according to the size of class?

We shall explore these issues in more detail in the next chapter, in which we shall also revisit the IRF sequence, examining how teachers might intervene and adapt their approach to classroom interaction.

Summary . . . and moving on

At the end of this, the first chapter, it is necessary to both draw together its key themes and to map their place in the wider debates of English language teaching (and the other themes and parts of this book).

The chapter has both investigated some of the key practices and dilemmas teachers experience in the L2 classroom and touched on a wide range of issues that will require further exploration. First, the discussion highlighted the diverse, complex and essentially pedagogic and *social* nature of ELT classrooms. Fundamentally:

A popular notion is that education is something carried out by one person, a teacher, standing in front of a class and transmitting information to a group of learners who are all willing and able to absorb it. This view, however, simplifies what is a highly complex process involving an intricate interplay between the learning process itself, the teacher's intentions and actions, the individual personalities of the learners, their culture and background, the learning environment and a host of other variables.

(Williams and Burden, 1997: 5)

The chapter then explored teacher roles and classroom interaction, and it is worth emphasizing that the focus was explicitly on how teacher behaviour may affect classroom discourse, control and, in due course, L2 learning. In later chapters, we will attend to the management of the social dimensions of learning such as motivation and group dynamics.

But, as we have seen, teacher decision-making and behaviour is constrained by personal philosophy, space, time and available resources, interpersonal and institutional factors, community considerations, syllabus and assessment, and classroom routine (Lynch, 1996). Thus finding potential 'interventions' to the classroom dilemmas outlined here is not straightforward, and it is to possible ways ahead that we now turn.