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Some Issues in Analyzing Classroom Interaction: An Interview with Deborah Poole

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PROFILE

Deborah Poole is an Associate Professor in the departments of Linguistics & Oriental Languages and Rhetoric & Writing Studies at San Diego State University. She began researching the discourse of classrooms while earning her Ph.D. in Applied Linguistics at the University of Southern California and has studied both junior high school social studies classes and ESL classrooms at the university level. Her work on the junior high classes has focused on testing and test review activities, including the ways test performance affects the interactional differentiation of students, and the view of knowledge which is constructed and displayed in testing events. Her work on ESL classrooms has explored the ways the talk of many ESL teachers in the U.S. is similar to the language used by middle class American caregivers. Her current interests include the interaction of speaking and writing in classroom literacy events, and classroom discourse patterns in non-English speaking environments. In the last several years she has also been actively involved in the area of intersegmental articulation (i.e., the continuity between segments of public high-school, adult school, community college, and state university) as it affects the English language learners of California.

INTRODUCTION

This interview explores the research paradigms Dr. Poole has found useful in her research of classroom discourse as well as her insights into cross-cultural classroom interaction and the differences between L1 and L2 classrooms. Dr. Poole discusses her current interest in using the notion of the literacy event for understanding the interdependence of spoken language and written texts in classroom discourse. Dr. Poole also discusses the need for close interactional study of ESL classrooms as well as non-English medium classrooms across a variety of cultures.

INTERVIEW

Olsher: *You've done a lot of research in language classrooms and drawn on various literature of classroom research, discourse analysis, and anthropology. Can you comment on the way you draw from various research paradigms?*

Poole: I think that probably the framework that I use for any particular study has to come from the data itself or from whatever purposes I have for looking at a given set of data. And my primary questions are educational ones and not linguistic ones. I'm interested in the kinds of social phenomena that are going on in the classrooms; I'm interested in the learning that's going on and the teaching that's going on, so those kinds of questions drive me to a certain research paradigm. Having said that, I have found the notion of a speech event to be particularly useful because, for one thing, if you look at classroom data you see that classes are organized into identifiable units that fit very well within a speech event paradigm. In most classrooms you find one event after the other, so the speech event paradigm gives you a framework for looking at what's going on and acknowledges that any kind of social situation is fraught with complexity, so that you've got to take account of the different layers and dimensions of what's going on.

Olsher: *One thing I've found interesting in your work is the way you take up the traditional IRE [initiation - response - evaluation] structure that has been written about so much and you then look at it in a speech event frame. That seems to have been very fruitful in you work.*

Poole: Yes, it's based a lot on Mehan's (1979) work on the hierarchical and sequential organization of interaction in lessons, so what I want to do in the classroom or what I have done is to take an event and then look at the organization of interaction within that event, which then provides a frame for comparing multiple instances of the same event or comparing event A to event B, and so on.

Olsher: *Do you look for what's driving the organization?*

Poole: First I usually look at how it's organized and then from that maybe move to other dimensions. Another thing that the speech event framework offers is the notion of goal. That's been one of my real interests in speech events. Duranti writes — in the Socio-Cultural Dimensions of Discourse (1985) — about ends or goals and the notion that events can have individual goals and societal goals. I think that we can analyze the language in depth, and that's one of the ways that we can access the societal goals of an event. That's what I found in my work on testing. When I've presented my testing study to teachers, I've found a resistance where people say "no, nobody goes over a test in order to separate the students from each other. People go over a test so that students will learn what they missed." I think that's a classic example of the difference between societal and individual goals — as a teacher when you go over a graded test, you go into that activity with the idea that you are going to help students or assist students in learning what they didn't learn before the test, but there's this other mechanism at work at the same time. I guess what I'm getting at is that we have underlying goals driving us through the kinds of events that we engage in and the classroom is no exception.

These kinds of underlying societal goals are going to be evidenced through the language that we use and not just the sequence or organization, but all dimensions of language, so we might see them in the grammar as well.

Olsher: *What did your analysis of the 'going over the test' activity reveal?*

Poole: I suggested that when teachers give back and go over a test one of the things that happens is the differentiation of students based on their grades. This gets accomplished through different kinds of interactional and linguistic mechanisms which seem to ensure that there's a pecking order, and that all the students know or can figure out what their place is within that pecking order.

Olsher: *One thing I find interesting in the paper you did on Language Socialization and the ESL classroom as well as the work on testing is the way in which cultural values are found in the details of an interaction, and yet these cultural or social values may not exist on the level of conscious awareness for the participants.*

Poole: I am certainly not the only person to say that. I think it goes along with the notion of a hidden curriculum, that there are social factors beyond the participants in a given classroom that affect the interaction and they stem from the school context and the wider school system. There are values and expectations from that wider context that get played out interactionally or linguistically.

Olsher: *I guess what you've done is you've shown through detailed discourse analysis how these social values are evidenced in the actual talk.*

Poole: I've tried to. I mean I've said that I draw from the notion of a speech event which goes to the issue that events are evidence of how cultures organize experience. So it's interesting to look at how the school culture organizes its experience into classroom events, which by the way can virtually all be considered literacy events. Then within that, I've also drawn heavily from language socialization theory. Sometimes that's been integrated with the speech event framework in my work and other times its been to some extent independent, though I don't really see them as separable. With language socialization what I've been interested in is looking at the details of interaction for evidence of how values and beliefs are displayed to students or how there is a demand that students interact in a way that's consistent with whatever the values of the wider culture are.

Olsher: *So one thing going on in the classroom is students are being socialized into some aspect of the broader culture?*

Poole: Yes, and I've looked particularly at asymmetry and at the process of social-

ization into a view of knowledge. Can I say one more thing about research para-
digms? I think it's important for us as applied linguists to be open to a range of
approaches to language analysis. It depends what our purpose is, but if my pur-
pose is to understand educational contexts better, then I want to draw from ap-
proaches and methods that are going to have enough flexibility for me to answer
the different kinds of questions that I have. So I want to be open to analyzing some
feature of the grammar as well as how the interaction is organized. For example,
I've done a paper on classroom openings where I primarily considered the gram-
mar and how it helped constitute the asymmetry between students and teacher.
As an applied linguist, my goal is to bring my linguistic training to bare on a given
kind of situation. I mean, grammatical analysis is not going to answer every ques-
tion, and sequential analysis is not going to answer every question, so I feel that if
we are trained in linguistics and language-related disciplines, we have a range of
tools for illuminating the kinds of situations that we look at.

Olsher: *This brings up another question. To what extent have your research ques-
tions come out of the actual data?*

Poole: Almost exclusively. When I started working on the testing data, I had no
intention actually of looking at the activity of 'going over the test,' but I was drawn
to it by its very routine nature. It seemed so ordinary and so familiar to me, and the
more I got into it the more interesting it became. Then from that I did go out and
collect more examples of the same kind of event, and it became imperative to use
the speech event paradigm. Eventually that led me into considering it as a literacy
event.

Olsher: *So this grew out of the data collection and reviewing the data you found?*

Poole: Yes, and the same is true with the language socialization in the second
language classroom material. I didn't initially think of it in those terms. This is
also how I work when I guide students in their research: I read the data first. Let
me give you an example — I was working with a Korean student last year who had
some data collected in a Saturday school for Korean students. Originally I thought
she could do a study that looked at the organization of talk and compare it to data
from the US. Then when I looked at it, I found the teacher was saying things like
"Come and sit close to me. Teacher really misses you during the week" and "Don't
talk to so and so because teacher's so lonely without you." It struck me as a
language of intimacy. She ended up doing the study on language socialization and
looking at the teacher role and the juxtaposition of formality and intimacy, which
seems contradictory in our society, but it was right there in the data.

Olsher: *You mentioned earlier that the activity of going over a test which you've
studied can be considered a literacy event. I wonder if you could comment on the
role of written texts in classroom interactions.*

Poole: Well, I think it's a pervasive role and that most of the events you could look at in a classroom you would find to be literacy events. I take that term from Heath (1982). She defined literacy events as any activity where a text is critical to the interactions or interpretations of the participants. In essence what she's talking about is that people use texts as a party to their interactions and so there's some way in which spoken language and written language are interacting. If you go into a classroom from that perspective, you realize — and this goes back to your very first question about paradigms — you realize that virtually every activity, everything that goes on has some kind of print that's connected with the interaction. Maybe the teacher's writing on the board. Maybe the students are looking at a text book. Maybe they're looking at a worksheet. Maybe they're writing something in response to what the teacher is saying, but there's this constant interplay between speaking and writing. In almost any of these kinds of lessons or activities, you'll see that there's a way the text connects with the talk.

Olsher: *How does this fit with other views of classroom discourse?*

Poole: In Mehan's original account he looks at IREs as being grouped into what he calls 'topically related sets'. In other words, these aren't just ongoing sequences of IREs, but they tend to occur in topical clusters, and the more I look at data, the more it seems to me that topically related sets are tied to texts, that the topic is often connected in some way to something that's part of a text. A topically related set could occur around a vocabulary item, or an item number on a worksheet, or a paragraph in a story, so I think that you can look at how talk and texts interact in a way that sort of maps onto Mehan's original account. For example, in the test review — and I've seen other kinds of activities where this works the same way — as the interaction becomes progressively more embedded, the talk is progressively more controlled by the text. By the time you get to an IRE sequence often you have propositional content determined by the text, so that what you are allowed to say is in a sense driven by the text. I think you can look at a lot of classroom events where the text determines what this pool of allowable topics is going to be. Maybe a more general way to say it is that some interaction is organized by texts.

Olsher: *You seem to be saying that classroom activities we don't normally think of as reading or writing, things we might think of as discussion, still could be found to be driven and constrained by texts.*

Poole: Potentially. In looking at classroom interaction, much research has privileged speaking even though we know that classrooms in a sense privilege texts. I am interested in the kind of linguistic analysis that can look at the connection between spoken interaction and written texts. One of the things I've looked at is reference, interactional reference to the text. It's a potential pitfall and a potential

source of lots of repair, where students don't exactly understand what part of the text the teacher's referring to. What goes on in literacy events is that through talking — through interaction — we're referring to some part of the text. It could be a word, a paragraph, an item number, or it can be something like "letter A," but when you look at the way participants actually refer to written texts, you find it's not always clear. Through the data you see that it's not always clear that participants are following what the others are saying when they're referring, yet so many activities are structured around written texts of all different sorts.

Olsher: *Can you say more about how activities are driven by texts?*

Poole: There is a study by Richard Frankel (1990) of poison control center emergency calls. The person who worked for the center had to fill out a form that, so there would be a time lag of several minutes before the caller actually got the information he or she needed. Frankel didn't write about this as a literacy event, but its a similar kind of phenomenon. I think we have all kinds of interactions where we have texts that in a sense drive our actions, but they're really prevalent in schools. If you think of it in a larger sense, the text is determining our activity, sort of specifying in advance what we are allowed to do, what topics are allowed.

Olsher: *As opposed to ordinary conversation?*

Poole: Yes, and what's been interesting to me is that in lots of these literacy events you don't have anything that would look like topic continuity if you took it out of the classroom setting, but everybody behaves as though its perfectly continuous because you let the text constitute the continuity. In other words, we've gone from item one to item two to item three, and because its listed that way on the text, that counts as creating that connection between the topics. It looks fine to abruptly shift from one to the next. Participants don't show any evidence that there's any kind of disjuncture.

Olsher: *It sounds like one thing you're moving toward is a conception of classroom discourse as unfolding on more than one channel of communication.*

Poole: Right, and that brings up the issue of processing and processing constraints. To participate and fully comprehend what's going on, you've got to be taking language in through both channels at the same time and following the links between the spoken and the written.

Olsher: *To some extent, what you're saying sounds like a re-definition of what interaction is in a classroom. Texts being the assumed dimension of what's going on that is crucial to much of the interaction.*

Poole: I hadn't thought of it that way, but even when I look back at Mehan's work, I look at the lessons that he analyzes and it looks to me as though most of them are

interconnected in this way I'm talking about in terms of written texts. This goes back to Scribner & Cole (1981) and Heath (1982). Fifteen or more years ago they were saying we need to look at literacy in context to see what people really do with it. To me if you take discourse analysis or interactional analysis and make the text and talk part of what you look at — that's a way to really get at what it is we're doing with literacy in the classroom. I think we have some very idealistic assumptions about what we're doing with reading and writing, that we're reading continuous texts and writing continuous texts, but I think that those kinds of texts may take up about five percent of what goes on. Classes are full of different kinds of itemized texts, worksheets and fill-in-the-blank activities — language classrooms and all kinds of classrooms. I think we need a language for talking not just about the events but the kinds of texts themselves. I think the way we treat literacy is very consistent with the whole testing enterprise that's so dominant. We break up literacy into components and that's potentially the most consistent thing that we're communicating about literacy, despite what we say and despite the ideology that's written into our education code.

Olsher: *You've done a lot of your own research as well as advising graduate students studying a variety of classroom contexts. How did you first get interested in this kind of close analysis of classroom discourse?*

Poole: Well, I think education in a sense has always been my focus. I had taught ESL for a long time before I started graduate school and then of course initially most of the research I was exposed to was in an experimental paradigm. Then when I came across interactional analysis and I read a couple of studies it seemed as though the data and analysis illuminated what was actually going on. I was uncomfortable with what seemed to me to be hidden in so much quantitative research. I felt that I could ask and answer the kinds of questions I had by looking at what actually went on in the interaction rather than by setting up some kind of experimental situation which may or may not bare much resemblance to the natural one. There are a couple of papers that were really influential to me personally. One by Griffin and Humphrey (1978) that came out of the lab here in San Diego — it was an analysis of an after school reading program, and full of turn-by-turn analysis but from an educational perspective and I think I was taken by what they were able to show was going on with these kids. It seemed like a more in-depth approach to what people do in a classroom than anything I had come across before. Another paper that I read around the same time was one that Charles Goodwin (1987) wrote about a backyard picnic conversation on an auto race. I read those two papers at about the same time and both of them gave me a sense of what you can accomplish through a very close interactional focus. It seemed like it held a lot of promise. Then when I was exposed to Elinor Ochs' framework and the issues of language and culture that converged in novice-expert situations and the profound things that were going on in language, I saw what she had done by blend-

ing that with the interactional research.

Olsher: *I wonder if you could comment on the influences of culture and language socialization in language classrooms.*

Poole: It has seemed to me over the last few years that we need to do classroom discourse studies outside English medium environments. I understand classrooms to be culturally embedded, so if we are going to understand a language classroom, particularly one where the teacher brings different cultural expectations from the students, we need to look at classrooms in other kinds of cultural settings. Several of my graduate students who are non-native speakers of English have been look- ing at different kinds of non-English speaking classrooms. It's very informative to me to consider the kind of organizational analysis that Mehan originally did, which I think accounts for lots of teacher-student talk in the United States. If you try to take that model and apply it to other cultural contexts, a lot of differences emerge. For example, one of my students who did a study in San Diego of a Japanese Saturday school found the teachers to ask a lot of what she called "rhetorical ques- tions," where no answer is expected and where the teacher actually gives the an- swer. This happened over and over again. She looked at first grade and sixth grade classrooms and in the first grade the kids were still answering, but by sixth grade they virtually never answered. She also looked at a community college where there was a Japanese teacher of American students and she found a lot of overlap in that R-slot of the IRE. The American students would come in and give an answer because that was their expectation, but the teacher wasn't waiting for an answer, so the teacher's answer would overlap with the students'. I have another student who's studying TEFL classrooms in Taiwan and found that instead of IRE sequences, the teacher replies together with the students, so there's usually no need to come in with an evaluation. I think this kind of understanding of the kinds of interactional norms our students bring to our classes can go a long way toward overcoming stereotypes, toward informing teachers and potentially giving them tools for communicating better with their students. You have the kind of stereo- type among ESL teachers of quiet Asian students —that they don't want to talk — but if you look at interactional patterns in the kinds of classrooms where they were originally socialized, it makes perfect sense. I think the patterns of interaction in other cultural contexts are going to be consistent with beliefs and values of that society. Then in ESL classrooms here in the States you get a convergence of different expectations of what's supposed to happen interactionally that can be difficult for the students.

Olsher: *What you're saying is that there's a real complexity to what may be going on culturally in an ESL classroom.*

Poole: Yeah, especially if you have multiple cultures, which is often the case. I

think that in terms of teacher training it's been a real loss that there's so little work on classrooms outside the English speaking environment or any kind of comparison that would illuminate for teachers what kinds of expectations students might bring, or what a classroom is supposed to be in another society.

Olsher: *You raise a very interesting issue of different classroom interactional norms across different cultures. Would you like to comment further about this?*

Poole: We could probably claim that IRE is a kind of dominant sequence in the US and most other English speaking environments, but I am thinking that there may be different dominant sequences in other cultural environments.

Olsher: *So the IRE framework may be an English language or Western norm?*

Poole: At least as we've studied it so far. But some of this research I'm seeing suggests that it's certainly not universal, that there are almost micro-level ways that it differs, but that it does differ. It differs in ways that I think can contribute to inaccurate assessments of students, and it also differs in ways that reflect larger cultural issues and values.

Olsher: *You have studied discourse in both L1 and L2 classrooms. What do you have to say about the similarities or differences between these class environments?*

Poole: It's a huge question. First of all, I'm going to restrict my answer to ESL classrooms in the United States just to narrow it. But even narrowing it that much, there is a huge range of types of L2 classrooms and classes. I'd say to begin with though that there does seem to be an underlying interactional organization that pervades many different types of classes. The organization of talk in classrooms tends to be similar, whether it's a language classroom or not.

Olsher: *What is different about the L2 classroom though?*

Poole: I think there's a fundamental problem in language classrooms. It's that as language teachers we want to enable our students to use language in a variety of ways for a variety of purposes in a variety of situations, but we're stuck in a classroom. Classrooms by their very nature constitute a certain kind of interactional context, so by virtue of it being a classroom you've got that overwhelming IRE sequence at work and the kinds of interactional opportunities the students have in a classroom can be somewhat limited. In some of my work what I've said is that in lots of classes, students mostly contribute only in the reply move slot, so that the kinds of interactional acts that they can construct are necessarily limited. That flies in the face of what we're trying to do as language teachers, and I think that's one reason the communicative approach has taken hold as strongly as it has

—because it does encourage teachers to set up different kinds of interactional arrangements. That's been one of my interests — looking at what it is that students can do when you take them out of the teacher-fronted environment and what kinds of interactional opportunities they have.

Olsher: *Can you say more about the distinction between L1 and L2 classrooms?*

Poole: In a state like California where you've got a huge proportion of students not only in K-12, but also in the higher education segments, whose first language is not English, the distinction between L1 and L2 classrooms gets blurry.

Olsher: *Is there still a distinction to be made between mainstream or L1 classrooms and ESL or L2 classrooms in California schools?*

Poole: There is, but I think the boundaries are becoming increasingly fuzzy. In addition to that you have large populations of students who may not speak the prestige variety of English, and so they're bringing a different sort of linguistic diversity to the classroom. We have an incredible amount of linguistic diversity in California classes and speakers of languages other than English are one sort. Most of them are infused throughout all the classes so that's why I say it's getting more and more difficult to find classes that are purely one or the other. Certainly language teaching needs to occur, but identifying a clearly defined class that is either a language class or not is going to be more and more difficult, at least in the K-12 setting.

Olsher: *How do you think interactional research can contribute to the enterprise of language education, either in California or in a more global sense?*

Poole: We have a lot of assumptions in our field of ESL or TESL and I'd like to see many of them examined. For example, one of my students did of an interactional analysis of a jigsaw reading activity to show what sometimes happens in collaborative learning. The jigsaw study took the kind of activity that the communicative approach advocates and really put it under the microscope and looked at different configurations of it and I think our whole field is just ripe for that kind of analysis. I'd like to see the language and content issue really examined in context, to look at the place of language teaching in the milieu of content-based instruction. The other thing I feel fairly strongly about is that I'd like for this kind of research to be if not immediately available to teachers at least translatable to them so that practitioners can in some way make use of it.