

Competence, Complexity, and Contingency: Navigating the Challenges of Classroom Interaction

Hansun Zhang Wairng

Teachers College, Columbia University

Abstract

Hall (forthcoming) conceptualizes L2 teaching as “specialized professional work” that requires “a range of complex repertoires” (also see Walsh, 2006; Sert, 2015). Indeed, as micro-analysis of CA research on classroom interaction has shown, the complex professional work teachers do on a moment-to-moment basis goes beyond the macro tasks of lesson planning or activity design and the micro activities of informing, questioning, or assessing. In the second-by-second unfolding of classroom interaction, the teacher allocates turns, builds rapport, maintains order, and promotes or curtails student participation while at the same time engaging a variety of verbal and visible resources to teach pronunciation, explain vocabulary, elucidate tense and aspect, sort out tricky problems of understanding, and work with emerging learner initiatives and responses. Such highly contingent professional work requires the teacher to mobilize a complex interplay of multimodal resources in managing multiple demands such as engaging student attention while attending to technical problems, attending to the individual without neglecting the group, and striking a delicate balance between maintaining the pedagogical focus and encouraging student participation. In this talk, drawing on video-exhibits from actual classrooms, I show how this complex web of challenges integral to classroom interaction may be navigated through embodying three principles of pedagogical interaction: competence (i.e., achieving competence entails assuming competence), complexity (i.e., teacher talk is multi-vocalic), and contingency (i.e., teaching requires being responsive to the moment) (Waring, 2016).