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Agency and contingency in the language learning of refugees and asylum seekers

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Abstract

This paper analyses the contribution of student agency and teacher contingency in the construction of classroom discourse in adult English for speakers of other languages (ESOL) classes for refugees and asylum seekers, for whom the identity of student itself can constitute a stable point in a highly unstable and potentially threatening lifeworld. In contrast to accepted ideas of the prevalence of teacher-initiated initiation–response–feedback (IRF) sequences in whole group teacher-fronted activity, characteristic student-initiated moves for bringing the outside into classroom discourse are identified. These are discussed in terms of the student agency and teacher contingency involved, drawing on the Bakhtinian notion of “answerability.”: teacher and students are robustly claiming interactive space in classroom talk, bringing the outside into discussion. This data, drawn from narrative and classroom data in case studies of Adult ESOL classrooms, points to less docile more agentive and open-ended models of classroom discourse than have typically been evidenced in the literature.

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Why celebrate these moments of resourcefulness? Why pay attention to these improvisations that piece together existing cultural resources opportunistically to address present conditions and problems? Why pay attention to them instead of analyzing the web of constraints that limit people’s activities and possibilities?


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1. Introduction

One of the classic problems of contemporary language teaching in “foreign language teaching” contexts, such as for example the teaching of English in Japan, Korea, Egypt or Oman, is the “contextualization problem,” typically understood as the responsibility of the teacher: to bring into the classroom discourse those everyday uses of language that are the focus of instruction, thus “bringing the outside in.” In the language learning of asylum seekers and refugees, the focus of this paper, a very different issue seems to arise: the potential saturation of the classroom discourse with the urgent issues and crises that are facing these students. Indeed the identity of “student” itself can constitute a stable point in the highly unstable lifeworld of court hearings, appeals, sudden changes of status and moves from one form of accommodation to another. For refugees who have been resident longer, there are the struggles to find work, have their qualifications assessed, and for those with a professional background, manage the bureaucratic processes and for some procedures for gaining professional registration (cf. Roberts & Shrubshall, 2005).

In this sense, the classroom can be understood as a complex communicative space criss-crossed with the traces of other communicative encounters and discourses both institutional and everyday, such as the communicative and physical challenge of racist and abusive neighbors, the acquisition of the legal language surrounding an appeal procedure, interactions with a lawyer, sudden homelessness or loss of benefits. All of these have the potential to interrupt the orderly unfolding of classroom discourse but also to be re-contextualized even if momentarily into productive learning. In this paper, we look at strategies for bringing these issues into discourse, understood in terms of the agency of student protagonists, who interrupt the orderliness of classroom discourse to bring the outside in and the contingency of teacher responses to such “interruptive” moments in the classroom discourse, flagging up a dialogic pedagogy, more perhaps in a Bakhtinian than a Freirean sense, however. The discursive construction of these classrooms can look very different from the conventional language classroom. But they are characterized by high levels of student agency, teacher contingency and in some cases interesting and unexpected re-workings of the distribution of knowledge as well as disputes over what counts as knowledge, which provide opportunities for learning which must be grabbed in passing. The discussion draws on data from case studies of adult English for speakers of other languages (ESOL) classes in the U.K. (Roberts et al., 2004) and is exemplified by narrative and classroom data.

1.1. The social turn in second language learning and teaching

It is more than two decades since literacy studies have taken “the social turn,” in a move away from the hitherto dominant psycholinguistic model of literacy learning. This move has come to be characterized as “the New Literacy Studies” (Street, 1984; Baynham, 1995; Barton & Hamilton, 1998; Baynham & Prinsloo, 2001). This theoretical development emphasizes the social construction of both knowledge and learning (see Roberts, this issue). Currently there are signs that second language acquisition research is also taking the social turn, as exemplified in a renewed interest in the applications of neo-Vygotskyan theory to the study of second language learning (cf. Lantolf, 2000; Pavlenko & Piller, 2001; Block, 2003; Johnson, 2003) and the shift from the psychological focus on motivation towards notions of identity, subjectivity and investment in Norton (2000).

Gibbons (1998) draws on an innovative combination of neo-Vygotskyan theory, systemic functional linguistics and SLA theory to theoretically re-situate classroom based second language learning. Key theoretical constructs in the New Literacy Studies and in sociocultural theory can
also contribute to a re-theorization of second language learning: the notion of literacy and language practices, the notion of discourse communities and communities of practice, of legitimate peripheral participation in discourse communities and the appropriation of discourses. Such constructs can be of use in a project of “re-socializing” SLA. In this paper, I also suggest that Dorothy Holland’s notion of “figured worlds” and “spaces of authoring” can also make a contribution to re-theorizing the language classroom.

In the following sections, I will present examples from a community based Adult ESOL class for refugees and asylum seekers, highlighting two theoretical constructs that have been significant in this current theoretical re-framing of language learning and teaching, contingency and agency, drawing also on the notion of the classroom as figured world:

By “figured world” then we mean a socially and culturally constructed realm of interpretation in which particular characters and actors are recognized, significance is assigned to certain acts, and particular outcomes are valued over others (Holland et al., 1998: 52)

Figured worlds are populated and constructed by actors, cultural artefacts and practices. In classroom contexts, the actors are both the human actors, students and teachers, but there are also artefacts such as textbooks, work sheets, pedagogical routines which shape, enable and constrain teaching and learning. Like other sociocultural approaches, such as the contributions from neo-Vygotskyan theory mentioned above, activity theory (Leont’ev, 1981) and indeed actor network theory (Latour, 2005) this enables us to understand the complex and interacting roles of teachers, learners and classroom artefacts in shaping teaching and learning, creating what Holland et al. (1998), in the neo-Vygotskyan tradition, term “hybrid actors.”

1.2. Contingency

The term contingency has been particularly associated with the work of classroom-based researchers in the sociocultural tradition, such as Van Lier (2001) and Mercer (1995). It refers to the situated, responsive adaptation in interaction typical of casual conversation, but in pedagogical contexts often involving a departure from the script of the lesson plan in local response to some intervention from a student involving, as we shall see below, agency.

When talk is contingent, utterances are constructed on the spot, rather than planned in advance. (Van Lier, 2001: 99)

We can usefully think of this in terms of improvisation or scripting of interaction: contingent interaction is improvised not scripted. It is locally responsive, answerable in a Bakhtinian sense, as we shall suggest below. We would like, however, to take the notion of contingency a little further than it is typically taken in the neo-Vygotskyan literature. In the neo-Vygotskyan work, we would suggest, the focus is on the role of contingency in conversational micro-interaction (Van Lier, 2001, pp. 98–100). In this sense, teacher contingency is typically deployed within the framing of a task set by the teacher, what might be called teacher-led contingency. In this data, we are examining contingency at the level of topic, in instances where a student contribution can change the direction of a topic or indeed interrupt it, challenging the teacher’s topic control in ways that can be understood in terms of Bakhtin’s notion of answerability and the dialogic:

The world must be answered . . . . but the form of the answer is not predetermined. It may be nearly automatic, as in strictly authoritative discourses and authoritarian practices (thus
nearing Bakhtin’s monology), or it may be a matter of great variability and most significant to a single person’s address. . . . Human agency comes through this art of improvisation; the space of authoring also includes Vygotsky’s zone of proximal development. The “voices” that make up a space of authoring are to an “author” as Vygotsky’s instructing adults are to the neophyte: they do not so much compel rote action as extend, through their support, the competencies, the “answerability” of persons to operate in such a diverse yet powerful universe.

(Holland et al., 1998: 27)

The Bakhtinian distinction between monologic, authoritative discourses and the dialogic which Holland et al. (1998) and Holland and Bartlett (2002) invoke, with the corresponding concept of responsiveness or answerability, provides a way of envisioning both the active contestation and involvement of students in the learning process, understood in terms of agency and the contingency of teacher responses.

1.3. Agency

Agency is typically evoked as a response to and challenge to the determination of social structuring. Social theorists such as Giddens (1984) have tried to theorize the interrelationship of structure and agency. Connell (1987: 95) writes of people as constituting the social relations they live in, yet with human action seen as involving invention within structural constraints (he makes a connection here with “invention within limits” in Bourdieu’s terms). Such a position presupposes both the person as agent and the formative role of structure in shaping and constraining possible agency. Practice in this sense is specific, historical and constrained by structure, but also able to transform it. Connell argues that to describe the constraints of the particular situation to which the active individual responds is to describe structure:

Structure is more than another term for ‘pattern’ and refers to the intractability of the social world. It reflects the experience of being up against something, of limits on freedom; and also the experience of being to operate by proxy, to produce results one’s own capacities would not allow (Connell, 1987: 92).

Cooke’s paper in this volume gives a good account of the factors that shape and constrain ESOL students’ agency, what in Connell’s terms they are up against. On the other hand, the notion of “operating by proxy” brings us close to the notion of the Vygotskyan tool, opening up another window on practice: structure both constrains and enables. Learning a new language, a new semiotic tool, opens up possibilities for agency in the sense described by Norton (2000) and recent work by Relaño Pastor and De Fina (2005).

Barker and Galasinski (2001: 45) ask, summarizing many years of debate on this question: “If subjects and identities are the product of discursive practices, if they are social and cultural ‘all the way down’, how can we conceive of persons as able to act and engender change in themselves and the social order?” Here the social order in question is the well-studied organization of classroom interaction to privilege the voice of the teacher over that of the students in a monologic authoritative discourse. As Collins writes, there are ways out of the structure/agency binary:

We need to allow for dilemmas and intractable oppositions; for divided consciousness, not just dominated minds. . . for creative, discursive agency in conditions pre-structured, to be sure, but also fissured in unpredictable and dynamic ways. (Collins, 1993: 134)
The prestructured conditions are the figured worlds of the classrooms and also the discourses which are played out in them, the cultural artefacts (worksheets, whiteboards, table layout, textbooks, procedures and routinized interactions) which populate them, while the creative discourse agency refers both to the ways that students make their place and take their place in the classroom and the ways that teachers contingently and responsively open up spaces where this becomes possible, and respond to interactive demands for space. Agency is more typically considered in relation to the construction of identity (e.g. Norton, 2000; Pavlenko & Lantolf, 2000; Pavlenko & Piller, 2001; Lin, 2001), here we consider it from the perspective of how it provokes contingent responses from the teacher, its role in the unfolding textual dynamic of the classroom.

I would like to make clear that I am not presenting contingency and agency as the only or even the dominant organizing principles of these or indeed any other classrooms. Gibbons (1998: 36–37) suggests the need to relate moment-to-moment contingency to broader levels of planning. In the data I examined, there were ample instances of the teacher bringing the class back to a planned activity after an instance, momentary or extended, of contingent responsiveness. It is also worth making clear at this point that these are relatively ordinary classes and that we are not proposing a new teaching and learning methodology on the basis of our research, simply a different way of seeing (cf. Roberts, this issue). However, as we will suggest below, this has implications for how we theorize the discursive construction of the classroom and understand the nature of classroom participation.

2. An intensive ESOL class for asylum seekers and refugees

As I suggest in the abstract to this paper, the impact of racist and abusive neighbors, sudden re-housing or homelessness, refusal of benefit, loss of an appeal case are part of the everyday texture of life for those seeking asylum as the following incident illustrates:

It is an early summer evening, an ESOL teacher is called in from the garden to the phone. It is one of her students, an asylum seeker housed with her family on a white, working-class housing estate in inner Leeds. She is cowering under the table with her six-year-old son while her house is being bombarded with various kinds of missiles from racist neighbors who have discovered they are asylum seekers. Their next-door neighbors, an elderly Scottish couple who have befriended them, are out for the evening and cannot intervene. The police are on their way but she is scared her English will not be sufficient to explain what is going on.

Alongside the “safe” world of the classroom are unsafe and unstable worlds where being identified as an asylum seeker can make you vulnerable to racist abuse or even assaults, the experience of being, in Connell’s terms “up against something” in the crudest possible way. How can access to language open up new possibilities of agency in such extreme situations? This question provides an agenda that is, to say the least, challenging for the ESOL teacher: that what happens in the classroom should end up making a difference outside the classroom. Yet making this kind of difference in communicative spaces outside the classroom is a basic commonplace presupposition underpinning current approaches to language teaching. Is dealing with racist attacks from neighbors on the curriculum? Do we find it as a topic in textbooks? We find in this extract both evidence of crude racist hostility, but also of fragile yet visible networks of

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1 An earlier version of these ideas was presented in Baynham (2005).
support, evidenced by the caring neighbors, the ESOL teacher herself, all of which are mediated through language as the threatened family is able to mobilize different kinds of support.

In the following narrative, Hafiz\textsuperscript{2} a student from Afghanistan seeking asylum in the U.K. describes, at first hand, similar experiences in Glasgow, before a happier re-settlement in Leeds.

H: And they took us and bring us to immigration in the city Kent – near to France. And we were about one year in hotel ... Hampstead Hotel. And then after that, they send the list from immigration and give us flat in Scotland.

H: In Glasgow and they sent us after one month to Glasgow. We were about seven month in Glasgow and the situation of Glasgow is very bad. The Scottish people don’t like foreign people and they hate us...they insult us few times. Drop stones and bad eggs. We were living in a flat on second floor when we went outside they drop eggs or a piece of ice...it doesn’t matter. They kill four or five Kurdish people. They don’t like foreign people and they were several times strict about foreign people. After that, I make decision and went to refugee council and told them I came to U.K. to save my life, now I want to kill myself. Please change my place. Send me another city, please—any city. Just I want to save my life because I have wife and my kids. I don’t want to lose them. He told for me which city you chose...prefer? I told him I don’t know because I’ve never been in England. But what do you think? If you think another city...Nottingham or Leeds? Good, fine, send me there. They told for me it is up to you. I choose just like this (randomly pointing) Leeds; it’s o.k. They send me to Leeds. I give flat key to receptionist and told them I want to leave the flat. You can check the flat. Everything is o.k. I want to go. And they give me permission to leave and I come to Leeds. At that time my wife was pregnant and my son nearly two...

S: So your wife was with you and your two-year old son?

H: My daughter...my daughter was there...my son not born...my wife was pregnant. The city council housing advice center in the City Center they help us a lot because my wife was pregnant and we had one child. They told for us we send you to hostel for few days maybe few months, but not up to us. We’ll find you house inside the Leeds. You have to choose one part of Leeds where you want to live. And that time the city...how the city there was lot of people and two people were from Afghanistan. And I went to them and ask, “Hello, how are you? I want to find good area. I want to live near city center because I’m disabled. I can’t go outside of Leeds. Where do you prefer because you know about Leeds you live before.” They told for me if you want near the city center...everywhere...Hyde Park area is good area or Rowley Road or Little London. I choose Hyde Park and we went to hostel about two months we were in hostel. And the hostel people were lovely people. One worker was...name is...Carol. She is still our friend now. She visits us all the time and she find after...uh...last year...after Christmas...finds us house in Hyde Park. First choice we got this house. We were very lucky. We come to here last January 14th of January this house.

S: Just this January?

H: Last year...not this January.

S: So you’ve been there a little over a year.

This narrative provides another example of the uncertainty and instability, the continual circulation between agencies statutory and voluntary, the instances of racist hostility, the typically

\textsuperscript{2} Pseudonyms are used throughout this article.
atypical world outside the classroom that can be assumed as an Adult ESOL group of refugees and asylum seekers assembles routinely for the morning lesson. We can reconstruct from it traces of the communicative encounters that were key to Hafiz and his family in their settlement in Leeds: interactions with the Refugee Council in Glasgow, handing over the key to their flat in Glasgow, interactions with the Housing Advice Center in Leeds, a chance encounter with other Afghans who suggest an area of Leeds to live, interactions with the hostel worker Carol who becomes a friend. It is not hard as well to reconstruct the potentially challenging communicative spaces opening up for Hafiz’s wife, having a baby “in a second language.”

What I’m interested in discussing in relation to this classroom data are the ways that such traces of other communicative encounters, other discourses are brought into the classroom, not only through the efforts of the teacher to contextualize the curriculum, but through the agency of students, examining how these alter and affect the orderliness of classroom discourse and provide opportunities for contingent responses from teachers. Some are more mundane and everyday, addressing “bread and butter” linguistic issues, while others represent some moment of crisis demanding an urgent response.

2.1. Extract one

The data I consider here is drawn from an intensive ESOL class, mainly attended by refugees and asylum seekers in an inner city area of Leeds. The class is attended by students from China, Iran, Afghanistan, Syria and Ethiopia. Hafiz, whose story we examined above, is one of them. Class is beginning and Karen, the teacher, opens the session by asking the students to share something about their week (such recognizable routinized interactions being a cultural artefact in Holland’s terms, part of the characteristic figured world that makes up her classroom). Fatimeh (1–5) begins talking about a joke she heard the day before.

1  F: Yesterday Haroun he told us comic things.
2  T: Comic things?
3  F: Yes
4  T: Oh, o.k.
5  Sh: Co-mic things.
   [Cell phone rings]
6  J: It’s emergency.
7  T: O.K., o.k., o.k., outside then.
8  J: Hello?[Jade leaves the classroom.]
9  J: I’m o.k. I’m just upset about this surgery.
10 T: This?
11 J: Surgery () surgery for doctor. This place is for hom () homeless.
12 T: Homeless people?
13 J: Yes. Where I live so I have to got to that place. This place very strange. They told me they open morning ten o’clock finish twelve o’clock. After that afternoon between three o’clock to four o’clock. Yeah? I have two () three times gone to there after two o’clock and have no doctor in there! And also because I told them I have to go to school, yeah? But doctor only work in the morning. But they told me open afternoon. What point with open afternoon? I want prescription but my doctor say I have to see him. I don’t want to see him. I want prescription [crying].
14 T: Yeah, but in England you can’t have prescription without seeing the doctor, unless it’s a repeat.
15 J: No! This kind of pill () this kind of pill, yeah?
16 T: The pills ()
17 J: Sometimes they give you only before, so now I say I want to change surgery to some place else.
18 T: Somewhere else?
19 J: So doctor call me now and I say I want. She say yeah for me, so now I’ll come this afternoon.
20 T: O.K., so they’ve organized it now for you?
J: Yeah, because they don’t open in afternoon (.) very strange. They told me earlier appointment ten o’clock [in the morning.

SH: They always take] half day. Wednesday always take afternoon off.

T: I don’t know.

J: So I go some place else. Some place open all day so I get two doctor now.

T: O.K. I’ve got two doctors now. You’ve got two doctors now. Oh, well.

C: Post office every Wednesday afternoon is closed. This is very traditional English, you know?

T: We used to have what was called half day closing.

SH: Yeah, half day closing(.) [other voices] half day.

N: You need at the office (.) uh (.) you need write time tables what time open.

T: Yeah.

J: I’ve been there three o’clock and I have no one inside.

SH: Yeah, it is. You know it doesn’t matter half day closing need when don’t close.

T: Yeah, well at least you’ve got it sorted.

J: Oh, O.K.

There are two phases of student agency in this extract. The first is triggered when ongoing classroom interaction is interrupted by a mobile phone call to Jade. Jade returns upset by the fact that she cannot make an appointment to see a doctor and from Turn 9 onwards claims interactive space to talk about her problem, in an unusually extensive turn (Turn 13) of 107 words, which the teacher or which Karen contingently affords. She goes with the change of topic introduced by Jade, temporarily dropping the nominated topic and using such moves as echoing her utterances (Turns10, 12, 16, 18) in such a way that supports Jade’s continuing talk as she unfolds her problem. Jade shows frustration with unfamiliar medical procedures in the U.K., where prescriptions require seeing the doctor and with a surgery that doesn’t seem to be open when she needs it. By Turn 22 other students start to become involved, actively contributing interpretations as to why Jade might not find the doctor there. It might be “half day closing” for example. Rather than Karen, the teacher being the “primary knower” as in the traditional construction of classroom discourse, the dynamic shifts as other students intervene with claims to interpret and make sense of Jade’s problem, demonstrating their own agency: knowledge is distributed not the exclusive domain of the teacher. Karen, having responded contingently to Jade’s claim for interactive space, closes the episode in Turn 33, a move which Jade accepts in Turn 34 and classroom interaction moves on. We see in this short extract how agency and contingency are interrelated: realized both in the ways that students make their place and take their place in the classroom and the ways that teachers are challenged contingently and responsively to open up spaces where this becomes possible, responding interactively to demands for space. Momentarily the students are engaged in finding solutions to a real problem, not a manufactured hypothetical example: the outside has been brought in.

2.2. Extract two

In Jade’s case, the mobile phone was the technology that brought the outside into the ESOL classroom. Here in a classroom episode drawing on a teacher-initiated project involving photographing the local area, disposable cameras are a means of bringing the outside in. Mujaben brings in a disposable camera she has been using for the project. Students have been taking pictures of particular places around Leeds and Mujaben took pictures of the supermarket Morrison’s where she does a lot of her grocery shopping. A corner of the camera has been opened, so Karen (Turns 1–15) gives some instructions on how to use the camera properly. Nagmadin (Turns 16–20) then asks how you would “ask” to get film developed.

T: Don’t (.) keep..don’t take this off.

SH: Yes, I know but (.)
Some people take it off and it’s bad, O.K.? So keep that on. It tells you there (.)

Those four things(.) wind, flash, point, shoot.

Wind is the (. ) like [makes a noise] go round and round. Wind. Flash.

Wind is before flash.

Here, here (.) by the green line and you have to switch it on like that. When the light is on (.) look, not ready. . . ready, ok? And then (.) and then you just (.) click, yeah?

Mu: Yes

Then, O.K., and then you put that down again. Good

Or you waste the battery.

When you take out the film (.) and you go for the shop

To the shop

Go to the shop

No, no, no (.) Yeah, look (.) O.K.

You tell this man, the shop, this shop, this one, er (. )[sound of writing on the board] I took the film out. (?) (.) what about the film?

Right, first of all, don’t say “fill-um,” say “film.”

Fil-um [Sound of writing on the board]

Film [Loud distortion]

(.) (?)and I think it’s Urdu, I don’t know, a lot of my Pakistani students say fillum, and they say it’s that in their language. [Quiet laughter]

It is difficult. Say the fill. Can you say fill? Fill.

And then ‘m’, mmm (.)

Perfect

Fil-um [laughter]


Film [General noise of people practising the word]

O.K., film (. ) sorry so ask me the question again.

[noise of other students] (. ) I go to the shop

If I go to the shopm (. )

Yes, with the film
55 T: Yeah (.) good
56 N: What do you say (.) in this shop, (?) (.) in this shop? You tell them drop the film (.) or what?
57 T: You can say (.) you said “drop.”
58 N: Drop, yes.
59 T: O.K. (.) you can say “I want to drop off the film.” It’s a phrasal verb “drop off.”
60 (All) Drop off
61 T: Which means leave. [general clamour] (.) Yeah, one second (.) it’s like to (.) you drop off something (.) it’s like to deliver something (.) or to, er, take something to a place and leave it. Drop off this film. O.K.?
62 N: To make a picture.
63 T: I’d like to drop off this film. But if you want (.)
64 R: (.) something to drop off
65 T: Yeah but er (.) the postman drops off the parcels (.) or the post. Or the delivery man drops off (.).[talking]
66 N: Yes (.) so (.) so I want (.) for example (.) I want to make pictures from a film (.)
67 T: If you want to say (.) the film (.) You know when they take the film (.) and put it in the chemicals, you could say “I’d like this film to be processed.”
68 N: Processed?
69 T: Yeah. Pro-cessed.
70 N: To get the pictures (.)
73 T: (.) Yeah Or developed. To get them developed. I mean there’s lots of ways to say it, you could say “Can you develop this film?”
74 SH: Can you (.) st (.) this
75 T: Can you develop this film for me, please
76 SH: Can you (.)
77 T: (.) that’s perhaps the best one: Can you develop this film for me?
78 SH: Develop?
79 T: I’ll spell it. [writing] Can (.) you –(.) develop(.
80 N: Could you say to (.) just develop for me (.)
81 T: [writing on the board] (.) that’s the best question. But you can use your drop off and the processing as well.
82 R: You can (.) you can use this in photograph shop, and…
83 T: Yes, exactly. If you go to the shop with the film you say “Can you develop this for me please.” And then they’ll say “Yes, of course, do you want it within 24 h, or do you want it in a different length of time (.) do you want small photos, medium photos, or large photos.” They’ll ask you other questions (.) but can you develop…

Nagmadin’s request immediately triggers an extensive teacher-led side sequence (Turns 21–50), involving all the students in the class around the pronunciation of the word film, variously pronounced “film” or “fim.” In Turn 51, the teacher however closes the side-sequence and returns to Nagmadin’s question. We can see quite a lot of teacher work going on in this interaction, for example where the teacher expands and reformulates Nagmadin’s utterance (Turn 53). There is an extended interaction around this, initially focused on the interactions between the teacher and Nagmadin, but latterly involving other students. We see here how the teacher contingently takes up (in Bakhtin’s sense answers) Nagmadin’s question/request while simultaneously and presumably in an improvised way, since there is no sense in which she could have anticipated this, transforming it into a pedagogical routine. In reconstructing the imagined dialogue in the photo shop, thus introducing into classroom talk a trace of this imagined encounter, she is presumably constructing the kinds of things that might typically be said in this context from memory, since there is no opportunity to research the topic.

This is one of the small moments of resourcefulness, to use Holland’s words, which characterize ongoing classroom interaction, opening up another small opportunity for learning. While the teacher is quite robustly shaping the interaction, as evidenced for example in the side-sequence
concerning the pronunciation of “film,” Nagmadin is also intervening to bring a topic into classroom discourse, not this time one of such challenging content as the first example considered, here a more “bread and butter” service encounter. Yet we see a similar pattern of student intervention, teacher response and, as the interaction develops, other students being drawn into the topic. Such sequences in which students initiate the interaction in whole group, teacher fronted activity are not typical of the literature on classroom discourse, which tends to suggest, with Sinclair and Coulthard (1975), that the teacher-led initiation–response–feedback (IRF) exchange is characteristic (cf. Van Lier (2001), for a recent discussion). While there is plenty of evidence of teacher-led IRF exchanges in this data, not least in turns 22–51, student interventions, responded to and taken up contingently by teachers, repeatedly shape the classroom talk in interesting and unpredictable ways.

2.3. Extract three

In the following extract, a student question on the use of “I could,” drawn from a puzzling interaction with a friend, is brought into the classroom. This triggers an extensive and improvised discussion on the grammar and pragmatics of different uses of the modal “could” in which Rahel, Fatimeh and Nagmadin take an active role.

Before students begin the review exercise Rahel asks about the phrase “if you could.”

1 R: I want to ask you one question.
2 T: Yeah?
3 R: My friend she talked to me yesterday, and she wanted to come round my house (.) and she told me if you could, if you could give bath (.) for children.
4 T: If you give (.)
5 R: It’s (.) could is past. You told us that (.) (?)
6 T: (. ) the bus?
7 R: She said (.) if you could say (.) if you could give them bath. It’s what I can’t explain (.)
8 T: If you could give them a bus?
9 R: Yes. A bath
10 T: A bath, ah! If you could give them a bath. You could (.) there are three different uses of could. O.K., could. This is useful for everyone, because people get it wrong, ok, we’ll just do this quickly and then we’ll look at this unit.
11 R: I’m sorry.
12 T: No, it’s ok no problem. Can, could. Can, could. [talking amongst students] Let’s just look at those two.
13 R: Yes. I know (. ) can’t (. )
14 T: Yeah, now can, in the past, is could. When you talk about your ability: I can speak Spanish. O.K., in the past, if I put this in the past, when I was five I couldn’t speak Spanish. O.K.? That one’s quite straightforward. But then, but you can use can (writing) (.) it is nearly the same as could when you want to ask something. O.K., because I could say oh, can I have a pencil? All right?
15 F: Could (.)
16 T: But if you want to make it more polite, you say could. Could I have a pencil? Polite, do you understand?
17 F: Could (. ) better could. [Students talking]
18 T: Do you understand polite?
19 F: Please, more please.
20 T: Yeah, especially if you’re asking someone you don’t know, or you’re asking, erm, your boss, or whatever. Yeah, it’s just a nicer way of saying it
21 F: More polite. . .
22 T: And then she said “If you could (.)” so she was saying, she was like asking you “Could you give your children a bath?” Is it possible, ok? You can use could for possibilities as well. It can get confusing. If you want to ask about (.)
23 R: She used that for polite, not telling me?
N: Could you tell me about (.).

T: Ask for (.). Hang on one second, let me make it clear, that’s not very clear [writing] (.). If you want to ask for something, you can I or could I, ok? It’s like a request, if you want to ask for something. If you want to talk about possibilities, if you want to talk about possibilities [sounds of writing] you can use could. All right? So for example, let me think of an example... er, for example my friend is, er, going to have a party on Friday. And she doesn’t know what food to make for the party. O.K., if I want to give her some possibilities, I can say, “Ooh, you could make (.). you could make lots of cakes or maybe, maybe you could do, er, like rice and fish (.).”

R: That’s present.

T: Or maybe you could (.). It’s to say possibly.

R: But you can use for the present?

T: Yeah. It could be in the present, yes. It’s not just (.).

R: It’s not only for past.

T: Yeah, here it’s for the past ability [writing], here, that one there is for the past, but it can be for the present, yeah. It’s like “I’m hot now, could you open the window?” That’s for now. And she’s saying (.). I think she was saying “If possible (.). give your children a bath.” If you could. It’s kind of, she’s used a bit of a question and a possibility, O.K., for now. Is that ok?

R: Yes.

T: And if it’s not possible to give your children a bath, because you don’t have time, that’s ok. Yeah? O.K. Oof, that’s off the top of my head [laughter].

N: You said three.

T: Sorry?

N: You says three, this two.

T: Three. One, two, three. [Laughter]

N: Yes, because this one (.).

T: Just because that’s, when she’s thinking about could you, that’s for the past. These can be for (.). these you can (.). ooh, we might get into complicated things. It can be for now, or it can be in other sentences. [Whispering amongst students]

R: I want to know what we used for past and what is for present.

T: Yes, for possibilities for what you could do and what you can do, and yeah (.), and when you ask something politely.

R: You can use if you could (.). I will (.). we can use that?

T: If you could help me, I will be grateful (.). I would be (.). you’re better off saying if you could, I would. Keep those two together.

R: I know. But that is also correct. Not good English. But that is correct.

T: It’s correct (.). and it’s for now. O.K., O.K.

MU: Karen, when we use this can, we don’t use i-n-g (.). I change past (.). we use this had (.). this uses?

T: O.K., these two can and could. Yes. Good point. Good point. Can and could, after them, you always need a verb, you always need (.). [writing] ok, you always need a verb, you can say (.).

F: Can I get, can I buy (.).

T: Can I buy?

F: Can I see?

T: Could you help me?

SH: You could be (.).

T: O.K., and it’s never i-n-g. It’s never “I can helping.” Or “Could you helping.” “Could you to help?” No. O.K. O.K., after these, there’s never a ‘to’, never, and there’s never an ‘ing’

MU: We change the past, when we use this could. Change.

T: No, it’s what we call the infinitive, the simple verb. So in the past, I couldn’t speak Spanish. Speak. Not spoke, not speaking, not to speak. I couldn’t speak, I couldn’t go, I couldn’t do, or I could do.

SH: For what do we write?

T: For whatever, for any of these, you just need could and then another verb.

SH: Yeah.

T: Because you said she said to your children, if you could bath. Like wash, that’s an action. If you could bath. Not bathed, in the past, not bathing.

F: One minute, please (.). now we walking in the street.

T: O.K., yeah
Together.
O.K.
I speak, I couldn’t or going?
No, I couldn’t go.
I couldn’t go?
Yes. These, can and could are strange verbs.
Mmmm
Their name, if you look up their names in a grammar book they’re called modal verbs, O.K.? And they’re special, because they don’t have going, go, afterwards. They never change never canning, or canned, in the past. They never change them. They’re special. They always have two verbs, can and then second verb infinitive and it never changes. Even when it’s for now, even if it’s for the past, even if no change.
O.K. [Students murmur agreement.]

The whole of this extensive interaction is initiated by Rahel’s move:

1 R: I want to ask you one question.

This develops into a discussion of the puzzling utterance which Rahel brings into the classroom talk, in which a neighbor asked Rahel if she could bath her children, which Karen transitions into a general discussion of uses of “could.” There is a sense in the following exchange of Rahel feeling the need to apologize for this contribution, perhaps in the context of the implied criticism in Karen’s turn:

R: I’m sorry.

In turns 10–11, Karen is also demonstrating a sense of the need to do teacher work and generalize this request to something that will be useful for everyone. The interaction is, at times, moved on by Rahel (turns 41 or 43 for example) and as before, more students become involved as the topic develops (e.g. turns 47, 49). In turn 35, Nagmadin reminds Karen of her promise to present three uses of could:

N: You said three
T: Sorry?

While the interaction has a quite clear pedagogical focus on the form and function of “could,” the interaction is, at particular moments, student driven: For example, in turns 40 and 42, the interaction is driven by Rahel. In turn 35, as we have seen, it is Nagmadin’s interpolated question that reminds Karen she has promised three uses of “could” and provided only two. In Lines 61–65, Fatimeh engages in a characteristic teacher activity of generating a hypothetical example to explain a linguistic point. All of these interventions demonstrate moments of student agency and teacher responsiveness, or contingency. At other points, for example Lines 21–23, the interaction demonstrates the more typical and well studied IRF pattern of teacher initiation and student response followed by teacher feedback:
At one point, Karen demonstrates the strain of coming up with grammatical and pragmatic explanation of a complex construction off the cuff, flagging their improvised nature:

Line 43 Oof, that’s off the top of my head [laughter].

In a particularly interesting section (turns 61–65), another student (Fatimeh) engages in something that is normally characteristic of teacher talk: generating a hypothetical situation to contextualize or illustrate a particular utterance, rather in the way that Karen did with the interaction in the photo shop above. In order to understand better the use of “could” in relation to current and future time, Fatimeh sets up a hypothetical situation in which two people are walking together and one says “I, I . . .I couldn’t . . .er . . .going” leading to continued discussion of the non-finite “go” after could.

3. Conclusion

The figured worlds of the classroom we have examined are populated with routines and artefacts explicitly designed to “bring the outside in.” These (the regular news sharing phase, the photography project) I would designate as teacher-led and are characteristic of innovative and inventive ESOL pedagogy. Yet also brought into the figured world of the classroom are the unexpected irruptions of student lived experience which can interrupt and derail the planned pedagogical sequence, yet if the teacher responds to them contingently can provide unexpected opportunities for learning. In the data presented above, we have seen a number of different examples of student agency provoking contingent responses from the teacher. In Extract One a pressing life problem provoked a discussion drawing on socio-cultural knowledge (Getting access to a doctor). In Extract Two, the focus was on lexical choice and to some extent pragmatics (How to get a film developed). In Extract Three the focus was on grammar and pragmatics, the use of “could” in polite requests and the non-finite verb form following could. All of these follow an uncharacteristic pattern of student initiation provoking a contingent response from the teacher. In contrast, the interaction around the pronunciation of “film” in Extract One reminds us of another characteristic type of contingent response, this time teacher led rather than student initiated. Based on such data, I would advocate a more complex and nuanced account of agency and participation in classroom discourse and the contingent responsiveness of teachers.

In classrooms involving refugees and asylum seekers, the outside presses in on classroom interaction, sometimes literally interrupted by mobile phone calls and urgent procedures that will not wait. These students are often pushed into agency by the severity of the conditions they are experiencing. The teacher responds contingently, often trying to generalize and extend the relevance of a particular student intervention to the whole group, sometimes showing the strain of handling conflicting demands in the classroom and generating off the cuff explanations and examples. It should be noted that such contingent response to the outside coming in is not the only possible solution. A case study in Blackburn, Lancashire, conducted by Barton and Hodge (2004), found a teacher working with a group of teenaged asylum seekers who took a
different stance, actively worked to insulate the classroom interaction from the vicissitudes of these external pressures, creating a safe space for students, a respite from pressure. In our forthcoming study (Baynham, Roberts, Simpson, Cooke, & Ananiadou, 2006) we identify a range of different teacher stances on such issues as relating the activity in the classroom to the outside lives of students.

The analysis presented suggests an approach to analyzing classroom interaction which moves from the notion of the authoritative teacher permissively creating space and opportunity for student agency, which is typically implicit in current classroom discourse models, towards one where the classroom is a site of dynamic pushes and pulls, with teacher and student agendas robustly shaping interaction, claiming space. This creates a messier, but arguably a more dynamic, agentive and contingent classroom environment, a space of authoring in the sense of Holland et al. (1998). What are the pedagogic implications of this insight? There is clearly a large step from the ways that students use their agency to make their place and take their place in the relatively “safe” environment of the classroom to those challenging real world encounters which will shape and decide their futures, some of which we identified as traces in the narrative accounts presented above. Yet, arguably, a less docile more open-ended classroom environment will create a space of authoring, providing opportunities for students both to develop strategies for claiming space in ongoing talk, an apprenticeship in “speaking out” which may prove of use in other contexts as well as for bringing into classroom discussion and into the curriculum precisely those challenging encounters which have the potential to block their life chances.

References


