The conceptualisation of a research study in language education
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Abstract
In a recent paper about the role of the theoretical framework in educational research (Troudi, 2010) I addressed the nature of this framework and how it is used to state the researchers’ view of the theories that inform his/her understanding of the constructs involved in the study. Also known as conceptual framework (Holiday, 2002), it should not be confused with the researcher’s methodology or the overall paradigmatic nature of the study. In this paper I will address these research concepts and provide a research strategy for novice researchers to distinguish between these abstract terms in educational research. The paper will also provide examples from my own work to illustrate the first stages in the conceptualisation of a study.

The nature and role of the conceptual framework
A common area of difficulty for novice researchers such as doctoral students is developing and using a theoretical framework when conducting qualitative research. Leshman and Trafford (2007) who reviewed a large number of doctoral theses, using qualitative and quantitative research, surveyed doctoral candidates and conducted workshops on the nature of conceptual frameworks, conclude that a large number of researchers experienced difficulties with conceptual frameworks. In one of the very few books that directly address the issue of theoretical framework and the role of theory in qualitative research, Anfara and Mertz (2006) argue that there is still ambiguity and disagreement about the role theory plays in qualitative research. They suggest that the literature on theory in qualitative research offers the reader three positions: first, the view that theory is not related to qualitative research; second that theory is part of the overall methodology chosen by the researcher including the epistemological and ontological positions that inform that methodology (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003); and third, the view that theory is “broader and more pervasive in its role than methodology” (Anfara & Mertz, 2006, p. xix). This view is supported by a number of researchers such as Merriam (1998), and Schram (2003). One of the difficulties identified by Leshem and Trafford is that although candidates were able to clarify research questions and
providing relevant literature review they struggled with “visualising concepts within a framework” (p. 95).

Overall, the literature does not provide a consensus on the nature of what conceptual framework is, its function or where it needs to be located in a study report or a doctoral thesis. One established definition is offered by Miles and Huberman (1984) who describe it as “the current version of the researcher’s map of the territory being investigated” (p. 33). A more comprehensive definition is Maxwell’s whereby he presents a conceptual framework as a system made up of concepts, assumptions, expectations, beliefs and theories that inform one’s research. His definition suggests that “a concept map, like the theory it represents, is a picture of the territory you want to study, not of the study itself. It is a visual display of your current working theory- a picture of what you think is going on with the phenomenon you’re studying” (Maxwell, 1996, p. 37). For example, in the areas of language education and teaching English to speakers of other languages, (TESOL) familiarity with established language learning theories such as community of practice, Vygotskian socio cultural theory or communicative competence can be adopted, modified and applied as lenses to study certain phenomena. A theoretical/ conceptual framework based on any of these language theories can guide the researcher’s investigation of how for instance children learn foreign languages in formal settings or develop attitudes towards language learning and use. Such a theoretical framework is to be distinguished from what Guba and Lincoln (1994) call paradigm. A paradigm is a wider world view or research approach that informs the researcher’s choices of methodology based on one’s understanding of the nature of knowledge, epistemology, and the nature of social reality known as ontology. In a study on the role of parents’ language input in fostering children’s communicative competence, a researcher can be guided by a constructivist/ interpretivist research paradigm to decide on issues of methodology and study design while using a theoretical/conceptual framework based on Hyme’s notion of communicative competence. The selection of a particular theoretical framework can be the result of consultation of relevant theoretical perspectives found in relevant literature. This is often the case in unfolding inductive research. However, a theoretical framework can emerge from the collected data where it serves to “provide theoretical cohesion to the evidence and conclusions from theory-building research” (Leshem and Trafford, 2007, p. 100).

Trafford and Leshem (2002) suggest that the researcher needs to explain and justify his/ her conceptual framework. This entails an elaboration on what has led the researcher to the selection of the framework, the theoretical components of the model, decisions on what elements to include, and how to use the framework to make sense of the data.

In the following section of the paper I suggest a number of areas that a researcher needs to establish before embarking on data collection. The final written report will of course be done after data has been collected and analysed but it is helpful to have identified the elements of the theoretical conceptualisation of the study.
before the field work. These areas are: establishing the research area, identification of a gap in the literature, stating the problem, purpose of the study and research questions, theoretical framework, and the research approach (methodology). The examples are extracted from my doctoral thesis (Troudi, 1994).

**Establishing the research area**

**Example:** The area of this research project is classroom second language development, which has now been established as part of second language acquisition (SLA) research. Many SLA models and theories have ignored the significance of data extracted directly from classroom activities (Ellis, 1985, Van Lier, 1988). Ellis (1990) argues that until recently the only data used to build SLA models were taken from morpheme studies, error and contrastive analyses, and psycholinguistic research into learning styles and cognitive processes (Ellis, 1985). The study of classroom interaction is now established and recognized as a necessary step towards better understanding of second language development (Ellis, 1985; Allwright, 1988; Edwards and Westgate, 1987; Chaudron, 1988). Van Lier (1988) writes that “classroom ethnography takes the educational environment as the crucial data resource and thus strongly emphasizes the social context in which language development takes place” (p.24).

**Identification of gap in the literature**

This is one way of indentifying a gap in the field and establishing a rationale for the study:

**Example:** In the fields of teaching English as a foreign language (hereafter TEFL) and teaching English as a second language (hereafter TESL) the emphasis has been mainly on product, i.e., the form or quality of linguistic performance rather than on the process of learning language skills. Product is the language output seen as the completed act of communication, whereas process is the underlying ability and skills used in producing this output. An instructional context is not a fixed or planned entity. Contexts are realized through interaction that takes place between participants (Green and Wallat, 1981). Erickson and Schultz (1981) define context as an environment constituted during social interaction. This context can change from moment to moment depending on what participants are doing and where and when they are doing it. There is therefore a need to study the instructional events and interactions learners participate in. Language skills are not only linguistic forms. They include the interactive process learners take part in various classroom situations. A considerable amount of research has been conducted in the areas of writing and reading in English as a second language (hereafter ESL) both at the theoretical and the practical levels (Carrell, 1989).

Many studies have evaluated teaching techniques and methods mainly through
learners’ performance using a variety of testing and observation instruments. These studies have an input-output design with a focus only on what learners knew before compared with what they knew after they had received some language content/materials through a given approach. Generally, pre- and post-tests were administered to measure learners’ performance (Aqeel, 1989). Those studies, however, have not taken into consideration the specific context of the classroom or the interactional process that takes place among students and between the teacher and students while lessons are being conducted. This study focused on the structure of interaction and the contexts created through conversational instruction to show the nature of speaking opportunities in an ESL speaking class.

Statement of the Problem
This section provides an example of a statement of a research problem and a rationale for the study based on literature:

Example: Studies of classroom talk have not been able to identify the communicative potential of the ESL speaking class, the type or genre of discourse generally in use in such classrooms, or the role of the textbook in generating speaking opportunities. The purpose of this research project was therefore to examine an ESL speaking class from a particular social interaction perspective so that the social and academic processes in which the learners participate to reach the communicative goals of the lessons, and the instructional processes that create speaking opportunities, were taken into account. As Canale and Swain have argued:

There is a need for a description of the manner in which and the extent to which communication is focussed on in different second language classes in current general programs. For example, what types of communication activities are used? What are student and teacher reactions to these activities? To what extent are these activities integrated with other aspects of the syllabus? (1980, p. 37).

To date there is little evidence that this call for a descriptive classroom-based research has been taken up. In ESL and EFL Allwright (1988) convincingly argued that the instructional process has so far not been investigated to any great extent. The focus in ESL research has been on students’ linguistic performance, i.e., how they perform on tests rather than on instructional procedures. Allwright argues that the instructional process cannot be fully understood until a much greater understanding of the learning processes in classrooms has been established. He posits that the acquisition of knowledge is not necessarily sequential and that researchers can work on both instructional and learning processes at the same time. He states that through observations of naturally occurring classrooms we can:

- investigate learner behavior, but in so doing we are necessarily involved in trying to make sense of instruction
itself, since, following the view that classroom lessons, like any other form of interaction, are co-produced, learner behaviour is a vital part of what constitutes instruction, of what determines the learning opportunities that learners get (pp.256-257).

This research investigated the ESL speaking class as a whole cultural entity of its own to learn about the social and academic structures of conversational activities as they unfold over time and thus become constitutive of daily life in the classroom (Green, 1983a, 1983b; Breen, 1985; Nunan, 1992). It also looked at the role the textbook played in generating speaking opportunities and how it was used for organizing conversational activities. Nunan (1992) believes that “a great deal of [Second Language Acquisition (hereafter SLA) research is carried out as though language learning takes place in a social vacuum” (p.13). SLA research has focused mainly on the psycholinguistic processes by which people develop proficiency in a second or foreign language. Nunan recommends that researchers study the ESL classroom “as a society and culture in its own right, and the effects of the cultural mores of the classroom on acquisition” (p.16).

Following a tradition in language teaching in both EFL and ESL, the reading and writing skills have been attractive areas of research. EFL and ESL professionals have embarked on extended research assessing and developing teaching strategies for reading and writing (Kroll, 1990; Diaz, 1985). Learners’ communicative skills have also been studied but on the whole the speaking skill has drawn less attention than reading and writing. Thus, it remains an area open to further study and investigation.

Since the early seventies classroom language has undergone a plethora of studies and analyses. Most of these ESL studies provided systematic analyses and tabulation of turns and their length, and considered the overall talk structure using predetermined checklists of categories that came from discourse analysis models such as the one by Sinclair and Coulthard (1975). These studies have increased our knowledge about the organization of classroom talk, the teacher’s control of action, distribution or allocation of turns, and the type of questions teachers ask (Long and Sato, 1983). However, these ESL studies have failed to consider the process of teaching and learning in classrooms and the social context of interactions. These studies have not considered speaking in relation to the multiple contexts that are constructed in the classroom. Language was mirrored as an object to be looked at and measured. The assumption was that language could be repeated from a textbook rather than being a part of daily construction of events.

The Purpose of the Study

Example: The purpose of this research was to observe, describe, and study the academic and social contexts in which an ESL speaking class took place. It was
particularly focused on the types of verbal activities, the discourse that they generated, and the role that the textbook played in shaping classroom talk. The study looked at learners’ opportunities for speaking and participating in classroom activities. It also described the academic and social rules that the learners needed to know and follow in order to take part in classroom events. The structure of academic tasks and its influence on interaction was also studied.

The overall aim of the study was to narrow the gap between what is known and what needs to be known about the ESL speaking classroom. The exploratory side of the research shed light on the process of language learning within a formal classroom context. The research has more of a knowledge gathering than a problem solving aspect. Although the aim of the research was not primarily pedagogic, informed insight into the structure of classroom language might help teachers and administrators. The interpretation and description of data might be acted upon by teachers of ESL/EFL speaking classes to check the effectiveness of their teaching methods and to have some data that they can compare with what happens in their classrooms. The ethnographic analysis of classroom interaction can be incorporated into teacher training programs to draw teachers’ attention to how interaction takes place, and to see if there are procedures to be avoided or changed and others to be emphasized. It cannot, however, be claimed that more knowledge of classroom language will automatically result in prescriptions for better teaching.

This research was not an evaluation of the teachers’ style of teaching or classroom management. Neither was it intended to measure the learners’ verbal performance. The aim was to describe the process of language learning in a particular formal context and what learners could do with language, not to put their performance on an evaluative scale.

The research took place at the Centre for Intensive English Studies (CIES) at Florida State University. The centre is part of the Intensive English Programs (IEPs) that are generally part of departments of education, English and linguistics, or continuing education divisions. IEPs operate within the ESL/EFL profession. Their primary goals are to teach college-bound foreign students the English language and to provide them with an orientation to college life and culture in the U.S. The students at CIES are all non-native speakers of English coming from different parts of the world to study English for a certain period of time before generally joining an American University.

**The Research Questions**

The following are the three main questions that guided the investigation of the ESL speaking classroom. The questions are informed by a social interactional theoretical framework described in a later section of this paper.
1. What is the structure of the ESL speaking class?

1.1 What is the nature of the macro structure of events in the ESL speaking class?

1.2 What are the patterns of organizational variability?

2. What is the nature of speaking opportunities in the ESL speaking class?

2.1 What is the nature of formal (teacher-generated) speaking opportunities in the ESL speaking class?

2.2 What are the patterns of interaction in Interaction skills activities?

2.3 What is the nature of informal (student-generated) speaking opportunities in the speaking class?

3. What is the role of the textbook in the ESL speaking class?

3-1 What is the role of the textbook in the structuring of the ESL speaking class?

3.2 What is the role of the textbook in shaping classroom discourse?

3.2-1 What is the role of the textbook in students’ language production during textbook-generated speaking activities?

3.2-2 What is the effect of the textbook on the teacher’s language during textbook-generated speaking activities?

3.2-3 What is the nature of speech-activity during textbook-generated talk?

The Theoretical Framework

Example: The theoretical framework supporting this research is that the classroom is not only an academic context but a social one, too. This conception of the language classroom as a unique “culture” is relatively recent (Breen 1985; Green and Weade, 1987; Erickson, 1991; Collins and Green, 1992). It is the direct result of the adoption of ethnographic and sociolinguistic principles by classroom
researchers and applied linguists. Researchers are concerned with identifying the social aims and social relations in the classroom. This focus has its foundations in sociolinguistic perspectives, which include the argument that to understand the phenomenon of “learning a foreign language to communicate” researchers should consider two theoretical notions: the nature of social interaction as a learning environment, and the nature of communicative competence (Erickson, 1991).

**Components of the theoretical framework**

1. A social Interaction Framework. The research questions and procedures were guided by a social interaction theoretical framework proposed by (Green 1983a, 1983b; Green and Smith 1983) and a discourse analysis (Green and Wallat, 1981, Green, Harker and Golden 1987) as a descriptive framework. Within this social interaction framework the classroom is viewed as “a community with its own rights and obligations, norms and expectations, and roles and relationships” (Zaharlick and Green, 1991, p. 210). The classroom is considered to be a communicative environment where the learners and the teacher co-construct the activities and the speech events that take place there (Green, 1983a, 1983b; Green and Smith, 1983). Green and Weade (1985) state that a social interaction perspective on classroom research focuses on identifying and explicating interaction as situation factors wherein the units of analysis are the social and academic rules that govern student-teacher and student-student interaction. These social and academic rules are constructed and shared by members of the classroom community. There are multiple contexts in the classroom that are constructed during interaction with respect to what might develop as shared set of rules. Brooks (1989) (see also Green, 1983a, 1983b) points out that within this social interaction perspective, developing new knowledge of the teaching/learning process is based on two assumptions. The first is that “classrooms are dynamic communicative environments in which interactions between and among the participants have multiple outcomes and meanings and have both social and academic consequences” (p.155). The second assumption is that instruction is a goal-oriented process that takes into consideration the learners’ understanding of what they are doing and how they make sense of that portion of their everyday life spent in the classroom. This approach is an attempt to achieve a convergence between the researchers’ and the participants’ perspectives. This view of the classroom derives from the wider framework of ethnography of communication, where the focus is on daily face-to-face interaction between members of the same community who share a set of beliefs and attitudes (Hymes, 1982). Saville-Troike (1982) writes that:

> The focus of the ethnography of communication is the speech community, the way communication within it is patterned and organized as systems of communicative events, and the ways in which these interact with all other systems of culture (p.3).

It is beyond the scope of this research to study how classroom life relates to outside culture. For ESL classroom-based research, a social interaction
framework provides a rationale and a process for the investigation of recurring patterns of interaction and the conditions under which they occur. The macro structure of life in the ESL classroom, consisting of events that occurred inside the classroom, were studied from this perspective. In addition, the participants’ view of the goal of the speaking activities, how they unfold, their outcomes, and the conditions under which they occur were investigated. The classroom was studied as a setting with a multitude of social actions. Within this framework Erickson describes the language classroom as a small-scale speech community (1991) where the learner has to interact socially to acquire and use language in the different situations provided by the classroom. Learners take risks and encounter different opportunities to use language. This phenomenon might be related to those informal situations that take place outside the classroom.

2. A Discourse Analysis Framework. Discourse analysis was used for the investigation of the organization of talk at the level of individual learners’ turns and how these turns and individual utterances fit within a stretch of discourse to form a coherent conversational transaction. The particular discourse analysis scheme that was used in this research is called Descriptive Analysis System (Green and Wallat, 1981). It is a system grounded in the theoretical framework of a social interaction perspective used in this research. Discourse analysis was used as one method of data analysis through the use of the available technical tools. This analysis had a descriptive as well as an interpretive purpose. Because of the overall ethnographic approach to the research, classroom interaction was not analyzed through a predetermined checklist of categories, which was the method of early classroom discourse analysis studies (Sinclair and Coulthard, 1975). The researcher did not, for example, use any classroom interaction structure such as the Initiation, Response, Feedback model (Sinclair and Coulthard, 1975). Discourse analysis techniques were used to help uncover both macro and micro features of talk. Although discourse analysis can go into detail and study language at a phonological, lexical and syntactic level, words were not analyzed within a narrow sentential frame. The study of these levels is undertaken with a focus on how words are related across sentences and within different social and interactional contexts (Brown and Yule, 1983).

**Linking the theoretical framework to research design and data analysis**

**Example:** The combination of a social interaction or ethnography of communication approach along with discourse analysis techniques helped in the investigation of the data from more than one perspective. Since even a detailed study of the surface level of classroom discourse cannot adequately reveal the underlying social and psychological forces that generate it (expectations, beliefs, and attitudes of participants), a social interaction approach helped shape the investigation of the learners’ perspectives. The rationale behind this combination of these approaches is that the value of a micro study is enhanced when it is embedded within an understanding of the wider cultural context of the school.
Overview of the Research Approach

Example: This research was not an ethnography in its broad definition. It was an attempt to integrate ethnography theoretically and methodologically with linguistics. The study was confined to the formal setting of one classroom and the institution to which this classroom belonged. Ethnographic techniques and methods of data collection and analysis were used. These techniques were based upon two central principles of ethnography: the emic and the holistic principles (Heath, 1982; Van Lier, 1988). The emic principle states that the researcher goes into the field or the classroom with research questions but not with predetermined models and checklists to impose on classroom interaction. The researcher needs to investigate the classroom from “the functional point of view of the ordinary actor in everyday life” (Erickson, 1981, p. 20.). This means that the main source of knowledge about the classroom is the learners’ definitions of meaning developed during their interaction within the social context of the classroom. The holistic principle stresses that classroom interaction be related to an immediate and a larger context. The classroom is an entity that belongs to a larger context. Learners’ utterances cannot be studied in isolation or categorized and compared in an automatic way. Utterances need to be considered in the context where they are produced. Once the context is taken into consideration utterances can be described and explained (Van Lier, 1988).

With ethnographic techniques it is possible to study the holistic and specific aspects of interaction in an ESL classroom as well as taking the views of the participants into account. For example, learners can be asked about how they see their participation in activities and what they think about opportunities to speak. The ethnographic approach to classroom research can benefit the ESL speaking class because this approach contributes to an understanding of what is happening in the classroom in terms of form and content. The present research was different from studies that have investigated linguistic forms to measure achievement on a pencil and paper test or on an oral interview. Forms were studied only as part of the process of interaction and instructional events. Linguistic accuracy was not the focus of this study and product was considered only as an element of process. Linguistic forms were studied in relation to how talk was functioning for the individual in face-to-face interaction. The approach used for the present study can deal with the different kinds of learning environments provided by the classroom. Erickson (1991) states that:

The classroom has various types of conversational arrangements and these lead to different opportunities for the learner to participate. Classroom research should focus on this aspect not only in terms of the content that is being uttered...but also in terms of the social process by which the talk is done (p. 338).
An ethnographic approach to classroom research considers the learners’ views to be an important source of data and information. The learners’ position and points of view are often accounted for in the process of data collection and analysis. Lutz (1981) suggests that the researcher follow an exploratory model of data collection and analysis. This model is the combination of two other models: the representational and the operational. The former describes and analyzes events as seen by the participants while the latter is based on the researcher’s own interpretation and analysis of interactional events. In this research the exploratory framework allowed for the merging of ideas, concepts, and frames of analysis, which have been acquired from: (a) reading other studies and related literature, (b) the learners’ perceptions, attitudes, and interpretation of classroom life in general, and (c) interactional events and face-to-face interaction in particular.

**Further theoretical justification of methodology:**
Ethnographic classroom research has gained solid ground during the last ten years. Different classroom lessons such as reading and mathematics in English as first language have been analyzed (Green, 1983a; Green and Wallat, 1981; Bloome, 1987). Foreign language classrooms have also been investigated through ethnographic approaches (Brooks, 1989). These studies have increased our understanding of classroom procedures and how teaching and learning as social processes take place. We also know more about the social and academic rules learners follow to be members of the classroom. We also know, for example, that knowing the right answer is often not enough to get the teacher’s approval of a turn. Knowing when to speak is as important as the content of what to say. There is also growing interest in doing ethnographic studies in ESL classrooms mainly in the areas of writing and reading (Diaz, 1985; Rorschach, 1986) but there is still a lack of research concerning the ESL speaking class.

This ethnographic model of research shed light on what happened in an ESL speaking class in terms of interactive events, patterns of talk, rules of participation and the type of discourse generated by different classroom activities.

**Conclusion**
The aim of this paper is to suggest a strategy and a set of guidelines that novice researchers might find helpful in the conceptualisation stage of conducting empirical research. There if fortunately ample and accessible literature on research design, conceptualisation and data analysis that research students and doctoral candidates can consult at the early stages of their research projects. Familiarity with the genres and discourses of educational research can be attained by a critical reading of available theoretical literature and empirical studies.

**References**


