#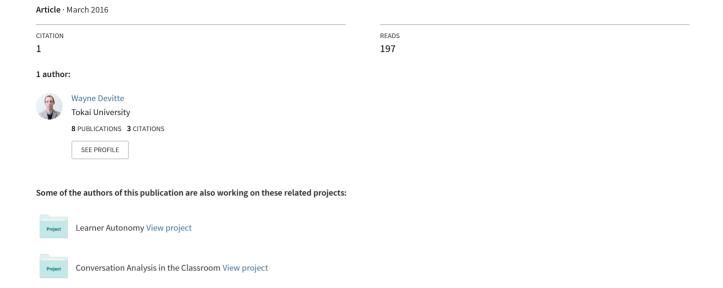 Conversation Analysis in the Classroom: Guiding Learners to Self-assess using Classroom Interactional Competence Guidelines

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Vol. 8

March 31, 2016

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Conversation Analysis in the Classroom: Guiding Learners to Self-Assess Using Classroom Interactional Competence Guidelines

Wayne Devitte

Abstract

Teachers and learners often evaluate learner's language use, focusing on grammar or vocabulary usage in language classrooms, by focusing on the learners' accuracy or fluency, without examining in any real detail the interactional patterns that are present in classroom activities, especially those activities which emphasize spontaneity or fluency (Willis, 2014). Classroom interactions are the means through which learners acquire knowledge, develop skills, build relationships and further their understanding of the topic of study. The language used by learners and teachers in classroom interactions is a rich source of data for researchers interested in conversation and discourse analysis. This paper explores the potential of conversation analysis, specifically Walsh's (2011) Classroom Interactional Competence (CIC), as a means for learners to self-assess their language output and become more aware of the interactional strategies they use during classroom activities, thus increasing the learning opportunities in class.

CIC that examines the effectiveness of language usage in interactions between teachers and learners by focusing on the interactional strategies which teachers employ in interactions with their learners. This paper uses a CIC framework to examine the interactions and conversation strategies of two first year Japanese university learners during a pre-task fluency activity and presents suggestions for using the classroom interactional competence analysis method in classroom activities as a means to provide learners with an opportunity for self-reflection that incorporates more than just a grammatical or lexical self-correction paradigm.

Introduction

Effective communication between teachers and students is the central theme in Walsh's (2011) discussion on 'Classroom Interactional Competence' (CIC). CIC, a method of conversation analysis, focuses primarily on teacher-learner or native

speaker/non-native speaker interactions, as a means of evaluating how effectively teachers and learners work together. By examining classroom language in interactions, the intention is to improve future teaching and learning. Language in interactions is the central means through which new knowledge is gained, skills are developed, problems are understood, and relationships are established and maintained (Walsh, 2011). Walsh makes the argument that teachers should attempt to make effective use of their language. For Walsh, effective use of language is language that "helps rather than hinders the learning process' (Walsh, 2002, cited in Walsh 2011, p. 3). In the opinion of the author of this paper, CIC can be a useful tool for teachers to determine the effectiveness of learners' spontaneity in use of language during classroom activities to enhance their fluency and accuracy development through cooperative learning.

This paper examines and attempts to understand the potential of examining learner-learner interactions using a classroom interactional competence framework. As CIC focuses on language interaction and examines the approaches teachers and learners use when interacting (Walsh, 2011), this paper analyzes data taken from a fluency-based classroom activity. The analysis will examine to what degree the learners paid attention to the local context of the task, understood what they said to each other, and worked cooperatively to accomplish their goal. Specifically, the strategies of clarification, repair and negotiated interaction, in regard to accomplishing the task will be examined. This paper will conclude with suggestions for how CIC analysis might be used by teachers to enhance the learning environment for their learners.

Literature Review

The primary goal of (CIC) is to analyze the patterns participants make use of in negotiating interactions with each other. Walsh defines CIC as "teachers' and learners' ability to use interaction as a tool for mediating and assisting learning" (Walsh, 2006, p.132). Classroom interactional competency can be translated into distinct strategies which a learner exhibits during a communicative act. Based on Walsh's (2011) discussion of teacher-student interactions, a number of points of analysis for student-student interactions and how well they engage in mediation and assistance learning can be derived. The strategies of clarification, repair and negotiated interaction which learners use can be characterized in terms of topic management, engagement,

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turn management, learner-learner echo, pausing, and overlaps. In Walsh's (2011) discussion of CIC, he emphasizes teacher-student interaction, and for teachers he provides a number of observations of which teachers should remain aware:

1) All classroom discourse is goal-orientated and thus teachers should remember that they are primarily responsible for setting goals and establishing the agenda.

2) The primary goal of what is said in a classroom is also the responsibility of the teacher. Teachers should control the discourse through establishing speaking rights and controlling who speaks and for how long.

3) Learners follow what the teacher does. If the teacher exhibits initiation, response and feedback (IRF) styles of interaction, the learners will mimic the teacher.

4) Interaction should be varied and not emphasize IRF patterns.

5) And finally, understanding IRF sequences can enhance opportunities for creating more relevant and authentic interactions for dialogues, role-plays and practicing conversations. (p. 20)

Walsh's discussion (2011) further points to challenges that learners should be made aware of namely 'to both ask or answer questions, to interrupt where appropriate, to take the initiative, to seize the floor, to hold a turn, and so on' (p. 22).

In order to assist in defining interaction as a tool of mediation and assistance learning, Storch's (2001) typology of pair interactions as a means to classify the types of interactions used by learners is also relevant. Storch (2001) outlines four types of pair interactions; collaborative, dominant/dominant, dominant/passive and expert/novice. Though her four pair types are useful for the purposes of this analysis as they provide easy to categorize typologies to provide explanation for pair interactions, it should be noted that pairs of learners seldom display singular types during any interaction. In fact, they are likely to mix between different types depending on background knowledge, familiarity with topic, personal feelings about topics.

Topic management as explained by Young & Milanovic (1992) is an essential characteristic of pair interaction as topic management substantiates a speaker's engagement with the topic and shows the speaker's sustained interest in communication. For good classroom interactional competence, learners should demonstrate an ability to stretch out conversations and interactions for an appropriate amount of time or for the duration of an activity. The difficulty with this definition is that it is challenging to

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determine what an appropriate amount of time means. One way to interpret this notion is that a long stretch can be explained as a length of conversation that is extended, with little or nothing else that can be added by the interlocutors thus ending in a natural conclusion (Young & Milanovic, 1992). A natural conclusion can be characterized as the speakers having accomplished the required task or completed the task to some degree of success. A more accurate way to define 'a long stretch of talk' is to define it as an extended stretch of talk co-produced by both participants that concludes when the participants exhaust their knowledge of the topic and move on to the next.

When considering how well learners can manage topics, differing proficiency levels between learners should also be considered. Watanabe and Swain (2007) looked at the frequency of Language Related Episodes (LREs) during collaborative writing tasks and post-test performance, their analysis of pair collaborative dialogue, in terms of LREs and patterns of pair interaction, suggest that patterns of pair interaction are not a reflection of differences in proficiency as the lower level learners produced more LREs when they interacted with higher-level interlocutors. Learners, when interacting in writing with peers who are of a higher proficiency, produce more language with greater lexical variation.

As such, the research outlined above serves as a means to better understand the collaborative nature of the learners within this study. Defining interaction within these different frameworks serves to establish an understanding of the collaborative nature of the learners within a CIC framework and assists in defining the more difficult to clarify concepts and terminology used in this analysis and serve to formulate the research questions for this study.

1) How does learner collaboration manifest in their spontaneous use of language to complete a task?

2) What strategies do learners employ in their negotiation of language?

3) How might CIC be employed in classrooms to enhance the learning opportunities?

Description of Participants

Both of the participants are 1st year (19 years-old), full-time Japanese university students majoring in International Understanding, which is a course

consisting of a mix of sociology, anthropology, geography and language subjects. The English proficiency of the participants was evaluated using the universities in-house assessment procedures. This particular class is 6/6, being the highest level proficiency for the department. As a rough guide, the learners were questioned about their most recent TOEIC scores which they indicated that they had achieved around 500 of 990. One learner is male (TJ) and the other is female (MJ). Both learners describe themselves as highly motivated to learn and use English but lacking in confidence due to a lack of chance to use English in day-to-day affairs. At the time of the recording, they had been in the same class for 12 weeks and worked together three or four times on different speaking activities. TJ is quite an active member of the class. During class discussions, he is willing to answer questions directly asked of him, encourages others when they are not participating and is generally a friendly and helpful student. MJ is somewhat more reserved, but equally friendly. She is likely to initiate conversations when given pair-work.

At the beginning of the activity, the learners were randomly assigned numbers and instructed to work with the partner with the same number. At the beginning of the lesson, the teacher-researcher asked any learners who were interested in participating in the study to approach him at the end of class. From the learners who expressed interest in participating, TJ and MJ were selected randomly from a potential of four pairs of learners who approached the teacher-researcher at the end of the class.

Class Task Description

The two participants were instructed, along with the other learners in the class, to think about and describe the story of Tanabata in a preparation for a jigsaw reading on the topic. The timing of the topic coincided with the 7th of July and was the conversation topic assigned for the lesson in the course curriculum. Each pair of learners was asked to carefully consider, as they described the story, what nouns, and verbs were necessary to tell the story of Tanabata. With a picture as a memory enhancer to help them recall the story, they were instructed to try to recreate the basic information of the story within a ten minute time limit. They were not required to tell the complete story as that would be the final product of a three part task. The first task, which was a preparation task, was to discuss what the learners recalled about Tanabata. The second

task used a jigsaw reading which incorporated several difficult and unfamiliar vocabulary items. The final task entailed the learners telling and retelling the complete story, using the necessary vocabulary. The learners in each pair were to act as peer checkers and were to provide repair and point out to their partner any omitted vocabulary or important points. All of the learners' conversations during the preparation task were audio recorded for later review and reflection. They were asked not to use a dictionary and were not provided with notes or other guidance beyond their knowledge of the story, their knowledge of the English language and the picture prompt.

Results

Engagement

Storch's (2001) four types of pair interactions; collaborative, dominant/dominant, dominant/passive and expert/novice provide insight into these learners' interactions as will be discussed later in the results. Although this paper does not have the space to afford a discussion of the advantages and disadvantages of different pair types, the clearly collaborative pairing in this analysis is demonstrated early on in lines 2-6 as the learners think over together what Tanabata is and what they know about it, with TJ, in line 3 offering a clarification of MJ's line 2 utterance. This elicits a response from MJ to indicate that Tanabata has something to do with the Milky Way. In line 6, TJ further adds the names of the characters as he remembers them. From the start of the activity both learners are engaged with each other, working together to solve a common goal and participate fully in the conversation throughout. Line 61 and 62 indicate MJ's acknowledgment that they have concluded their recalling of the topic but still have time remaining. As a result, she offers a referential question to her partner in order to maintain the conversation and keep the pair on task.

Although throughout the conversation the pair continues to assist each other, MJ takes a more dominant role at times with TJ taking turns offering up his thoughts less frequently. In lines 13, 18, 30, 46 and 56 MJ uses "I think", "say, I have a question" "Let me think" and "I think that" to direct the conversation towards avenues that she recalls as being important to the story. In contrast TJ, in line 39 uses "I think so too" to display agreement that they are correct in their description and line 29 is the only indication of his usage of "I think" to give his opinion. In general, TJ is more direct

about giving his opinion, although he does this less frequently. Lines 56-57 indicate TJ's acceptance of MJ's knowledge of the role of birds (magpies) in the Tanabata story and tells her, "I didn't know that". As Watanabe and Swain (2007) point out, differences in language proficiency do not necessarily affect the nature of peer assistance and L2 learning, and in the case of lower proficiency learners, having more proficient interlocutors may actually enhance their output. Engagement and participation are factors that influence learning as a social activity, and as such, it is clear that both learners are engaged and participating equally as demonstrated from the extensive and equal turn-taking as indicated in the transcripts. It is possible that the level of engagement of the learners can be attributed to their similar linguistic proficiency and metaknowledge of the topic.

Turn Management and Pausing

Turn-taking between the participants in these transcripts is reminiscent of classroom turn-taking with an almost equal distribution of utterances. (Seedhouse, 2009).

Although not specifically related to turn-taking, neither learner seems to use the pauses of the other to interrupt or take the floor and instead the learners wait for each other to finish their utterances even in cases where pausing was common. Pausing is commonly associated with learners taking time to process grammar or vocabulary. Line 14 shows TJ taking a 2 second pause to repeat the word "love". The pause can be interpreted in two ways. While it is unlikely to be a vocabulary or grammar processing pause, it could be TJ rather taking a moment to consider what comes next. It could also be seen as a backchannel discourse strategy, which according to Ueno (2004) is a strategy commonly used by male Japanese. Backchanneling is categorized as a strategy that is used to indicate agreement between Japanese speakers (Ueno, 2004). Additionally, the echo could be a result of cognitive processing as tasks that demand multiple cognitive processing, such as this task does, require that learners verbally organize a sequence of events while considering the necessary lexical elements. (Walsh & Sert, 2013). To further illustrate, the pair commits similar act in lines 22-24 where TJ echo's MJ's utterances, however, while it could be taken as correction, in this case, it is also possible that he is considering the choice of MJ's vocabulary.

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TJ's utterance in line 63 "ah (2) i think they're really yah i think peeking" seems to be a blend between considering what is the next sequence and what he wants to say in response to MJ's question in 62. This type of pausing involves consideration of sequencing and is characterized by being longer than other pauses lasting two seconds or more. On the other hand, lines 27, 32, 46, 61, and 66 are clear instances of cognitive processing relating to metalinguistic activities. They are characterized by being short, typically less than one second and averaging around 0.7 seconds.

Learner-learner Echo

One very curious aspect of the conversation is TJ's echo of MJ's utterances in lines 7-8 and 13-14. The initial hypothesis for explaining this phenomenon was that TJ was processing the information being provided by MJ and using the echo to buy thinking time in order to be able to recall the aspects of the story that he had forgotten. It is possible that TJ is signaling to MJ that he is listening to her. In short, it is a signal for her to continue and is a typical feature of Japanese male communication style. This is definitely a possibility and as such an area that requires further research.

Other examples of echo in the transcripts (lines 46-47 and 63-64) are exchanges where one learner indicates non-comprehension of the other's meaning. These echoes serve as request for clarification or to offer peer-repair. In line 47, TJ repeats the word "bard". This could also be his attempt at repair of MJ's mispronunciation of the word /bɒrd/. MJ enquires with "what?" in line 48 showing that she missed the point of TJ's echo, but then they both move on to the next element of their conversation likely realizing that they are having difficulties pronouncing the word "bird" and in fact are not having communication trouble. In further studies of this type, it would be invaluable to have follow-up interviews to clarify what the learners were thinking at the time of the utterances.

Overlaps

Many first-time visitors to Japan conclude that in order to establish and maintain good rapport with their conversation partners, Japanese make extensive use of 'Aizuchi', a Japanese term used to describe frequent interjections used during conversations such as 'soudesu' (I see) 'soudesune' (That is true) 'naruhodo' (That's

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right) and other indicators of agreement (Mamat, & Rahim, 2012). Itakura and Tsui (2004) suggest that gender plays a varied role within conversation and that issues of conversational control and negotiation, such as topic choice and turn taking, should be seen in light of how they interact with other elements of the conversation. How the talk develops and how conversational goals are achieved should also be considered. While male participants in the Itakura and Tsui (2004) study did demonstrate a tendency to dominate the conversations, in this analysis another phenomenon became apparent.

From the transcripts, there are several instances of overlap, though these instances are not likely to be attempts to negotiate the floor from each other. In the cases where overlap does occur (lines 33-34, 39-40, 44-45, 50-51) it is likely that this overlap serves a function other than attempting to take the floor. This will be further examined in the section on overlaps. As noted before, several instances of overlap occurred during the conversation as seen in lines 33-34, 39-40, 44-45, and 50-51 of the transcript. Lines 44-45 are an example of TJ's agreement using an expression that relates to the utterance of MJ in regard to his opinion of Orihime's very sad fate. In lines 39-40, MJ overlaps with TJ to complete her statement regarding weather conditions relating to Tanabata. Lines 50-51 could be an instance of TJ attempting to repair MJ's utterance about the birds making a bridge for Orihime to cross. These instances of overlap - agreement, statement completion and collaborative repair are usual elements of overlaps. According to Walsh (2011), teacher-learner overlaps may not have any particular benefit for the learner or the conversation, as the perceived status difference between teachers and students negates the benefit due to the student's focus on communicating the correct answer to the teacher. However, it could be argued that learner-learner overlaps are an indication of comprehension or agreement depending on circumstances. Since the learners in this study are of equal age and social status as students, in this case, agreement is likely to be the product of the learners attempting to work within the parameters of the task in a collaborative manner.

To illustrate this point, 33-34, 53-54 show MJ completing TJ's statements. This behaviour is not unusual with Japanese females during female-female conversation and is a reflection of underlining Japanese desire to have "wa" or harmony between people (Ide, 1982). These repetitions characterize a participant's support toward another member of the group through their desire to agree with them and often takes the form of

one woman completing another's sentence (Barke, 2000). This is done to show agreement and solidarity in a similar manner to the use of 'desuyone'. This particular behaviour is also demonstrated by both TJ and MJ in the final lines of the conversation 75. TJ: now and then 76. MJ: they are (   ) 77. TJ: £ (laughing) old people. This completion of each other's sentences is a strong indication of collaboration and pair interaction taking place.

Topic management

Topic management is defined as an extended stretch of talk where both participants contribute to the topic (Young & Milanovic, 1992). The primary goal for the two learners was to recall, as much of the Tanabata story as possible from memory. While the language produced is highly inaccurate in terms of syntax, both participants discussed the topic in the manner dictated by the teacher-researcher for the duration as they had been instructed.

In the case of topic management, both of the learners continue to produce utterances related to the topic and maintain a highly goal-orientated conversation with limited tangents. While the goal of this task was to take 5 minutes to discuss the story of Tanabata, the learners both avoided the notion of quickly doing the task and then side tracking to another topic. Even as they came to the end, in order to maintain their goal of discussing Tanabata, they offered their own ideas and expressed their own opinions (lines 62-77). This is where they begin discussing the attractiveness of the characters in the story. What is interesting to note is that MJ's expansion of the topic to increase the duration of the conversation is immediately brought to a point that TJ feels may be of interest to MJ. This could further be evidence of cooperative intensions on the part of TJ. While "Peeking" is not comprehensible in this context and the participants were not questioned as to their intended meaning in a follow-up interview, it serves as a focal point that both of them clearly understand and thereby directs the topic to the physical appearance of the characters in the story. This creates personalization and allows the learners to offer of their own ideas and extend the conversation to meet the task length requirements as outlined by the teacher.

Discussion

It is a common misconception of both teachers and learners that real-life conversation mimics the highly structured, perfectly sequenced, and edited sentences present in dialogues in course books (Willis, 2014). As such, little if any attention is paid to the communicative strategies inherent in conversation during classroom activities. Drawing learners attention to the strategies they use during such conversations, such as topic management, engagement, turn management, echo, pausing, overlaps, and seeking clarification, has the potential to not only make them more aware of how they speak, but also to guide them to understand the benefits of working collaboratively during tasks and activities.

In order to accomplish this end, teachers can have learners record their classroom interactions either on their smartphones or by using other recording devices. By reviewing the learners' audio files, teachers can better understand what strategies their learners are employing during activities and thus create activities that are specifically designed to focus on communicative strategies that the learners need to develop. Through analyzing and listening for elements as directed by the teacher, learners can raise their awareness of the differences between their L1 and L2 communication styles through review of audio recordings which serve as a means of encouraging learners to self-correct and self-reflect on their language usage. The teacher can have the learners transcribe sections of their conversations and correct the language and then compare their written text with their partner's. Through having learners analyze their use of these strategies, learners can be made more aware of the reality of conversation and gain insight into the meaning of being communicatively competent while at the same time engaging in activities that provide effective and self-reflective feedback that is immediately useful to the learner.

Engagement

Teachers may present the categories (i.e. engagement, pausing, echo, etc.) to learners in stages, first by focusing on engagement and having learners assess their overall contributions to the interaction through having them evaluate if they performed the task in a manner as described as either a collaborative, dominant/dominant, dominant/passive, or expert/novice pattern of interaction. Questions such as "Who did the most talking?" or "Who changed the subject the most?" could be used to draw

learner's attention to the interaction types they used during conversation.

As an example, from the transcripts of the activity used in this study, learners could evaluate the number of times and how each of them took the initiative in forwarding the conversation to complete the task. TJ initiated the conversation and offered suggestions for what Tanabata might mean in English

1) TJ: tanabata. japanese festival,

2) MJ: japanese festival?

3) TJ: festival of stars

4) MJ: yes it means we can see milky way,

5) TJ: milky way

6)   orihime and kyoji   *(the names of the principle characters in the story)*

Topic Management

Ensuring learner make the most of their time during activities and keep on task is a potential problem, especially for larger class sizes. As such, having the learners assess how long it took them to complete the task, or having them count the number of times that they spoke about the topic could serve as a means of guiding them to focus more or become more aware of how they manage their time during activities. In this study, the participants almost equally contributed with TJ making 37 utterances and MJ making 35. They also competed the task within the ten minute time-limit.

Turn taking, Pausing, Echoing & Overlapping

There are times during classroom activities where learners seem to have processing difficulties that could be classified as trouble (Seedhouse, 2009). To guide learners to evaluate these instances, teachers can have learners listen to their interactions and take note or transcribe instances where they make use of turn taking, pausing, echoing or overlapping to draw their attention to their usage of these strategies. The learners can then write out longer responses and use the transcriptions to expand on what they intended to say thus creating extended conversations that are self-reflective. The learners can also be asked to take note in their L1, of what they were thinking at the time of the utterance that resulted in their pausing, echoing or overlapping. For instance,

in lines 24-29, the participants say:

24. MJ: yeah (.8) and only this july 7th they can meet

25. TJ: hmmmm they are kowaiisou

26. MJ: lonely?

27. TJ: unnnn they are poor (.9) poor

28. MJ: poor

29. TJ: they are poor i think

The learners can be asked to evaluate the repeated word 'poor'. The learners could be posed with a question, "Why do you think you repeated that particular word?" and have them discuss whether or not lonely or poor are the best ways to express the expression Japanese 'kowaiisou' in English.

Self-reflection

For personalized feedback, learners can be required to listen to their recordings and make note of vocabulary, grammar and other instances where they were unsure of what to say or were having difficulty articulating. They can spend time discussing with a partner why specific utterances were difficult and search for the necessary language in their dictionaries such as in the case of line 46, where MJ says 'and let me think (.8) the bard bard bird will make bridge.

As an additional form of self-reflection, learners can keep a diary of their interactions in order to see their communicative interactional development. As Willis (2014) says, teaching spontaneity in conversation is particularly difficult especially for elements such as pausing and rephrasing. However, drawing learners' attention to the use or, as in the case of the participants in this study, the non-use of rephrasing discourse markers such as "erm", "umm", or "okay" by having them record and reflect on their classroom interactions can and should be a focus for speaking-based classes.

Conclusion

The analysis examined the degree to which the participants paid attention to the collaborative context of the task, understood what they said to each other and worked cooperatively. The learners specifically used overlap, pausing and echo to provide clarification and repair to each other when they felt it was appropriate or when they

were having difficulty finding the necessary language to articulate what they wanted to say. It was clear from the transcripts that the participants negotiated their language interaction to accomplish the task in a cooperative manner, demonstrating communication strategies to manage situations which might otherwise be characterized as trouble

Several of the elements of the participants' utterances could be identified as possibly being culturally orientated communication strategies, such as the use of 'desuyone'. Examining CIC was helpful for classifying elements in a manner which can be made available and accessible to learners for feedback. Future research in the area of using conversation analysis as a tool to guide learners to become more aware of their language use and interaction should include follow-up interviews, as they would provide insight into what learners are thinking during pair work activities.

The elements of a language that are the most difficult to acquire are interactional and conversation analysis approaches offer a means for teachers to entice learners' to become more attentive to their use or non-use of communicative strategies. Considering the cognitive demands of processing language, completing teacher assigned tasks and activities and having to interact with other learners, the benefits of learners being provided with insight into their language and strategy usage are high. By examining classroom language in interactions using CIC and conversation analysis, teachers can improve both the teaching and the learning that take place in the classroom

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