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Parallel Activities in the Classroom

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This paper reports on a study of classroom interaction as a multi-party and multi-activity phenomenon. On the basis of video-recorded lessons in secondary education schools in the Netherlands, observational records were made of the behaviour of individual students throughout lessons. The main argument in this paper is that when students engage in parallel activities, and in spite of their very different ways of doing this, they show an orientation to the activity in which the teacher is involved as the central activity. It is argued that one aspect of what makes a lesson recognisable as a lesson is this common orientation to the teacher's activity as the central activity.

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Classroom Interaction as a Set of Parallel Activities

Classroom interaction takes place between over 20 participants who are potentially engaged in different activities. Yet, an educational perspective has often lead researchers to analyse classroom interaction as a single interactional activity with only two participating parties, the teacher and the class. In these analyses, each individual student is treated as an instantiation of the participant category ‘student’, and classroom interaction is analysed not as multi-party interaction, but as two-party interaction. Interaction between the teacher and any student is treated as interaction with ‘the’ student, and this interaction is tacitly treated as the only activity that is going on at that moment.

Studies that have become ‘classics’ in the field of classroom discourse such as McHoul (1978), Mehan (1979), Sinclair and Coulthard (1975), and in the German speaking world, Ehlich and Rehbein (1986) were all specifically interested in the interaction between the teacher and ‘the’ students. Also, studies that focus specifically on classroom interaction as a social and communicative process (e.g. Canstanheira et al., 2001; Santa Barbara Classroom Discourse Group, 1992a, 1992b) tend to treat the students as one party to the interaction. Student ‘participation’ is analysed as student behaviour in a single teacher–student activity (e.g. Green et al., 1988). Studies of student–student interaction often focus on group assignments (e.g. Ford, 1999; Koschmann, 1999; Tuyay et al., 1995) rather than on students who talk together while the teacher is teaching. Reviews of classroom interaction studies such as Cazden (1988), Edwards and Westgate (1994), Hicks (1995) and Mehan (1998) confirm this perspective on classroom interaction as a one-at-a-time and two-party activity.
Researchers of classroom interaction may have good reasons for focusing on teacher–student interaction. A major ground for an interest in classroom interaction is after all educational. And from an educational perspective it seems only logical to be concerned with the teacher’s teaching and the students’ learning. Moreover, researchers were not unaware that all students do not behave in the same manner. Most prominently, there is the anthropological tradition of studying differences in student participation in relation to culture differences. Classical examples from this field are Philips (1983), who was concerned with the educational problem of native American children who would not speak as much as their Anglo classmates, and Heath (1983) who investigated comparable issues in Anglo and Afro-American communities. Also, there are studies on student participation in relation to language difference (e.g. Heller & Martin-Jones, 2001). All these studies investigate differences in behaviour between students, and yet in all these studies, these are sought and found in the interaction with the teacher.

Two groups of studies have explicitly recognised that classroom interaction is not a single activity. One group of studies is concerned with the observation that even when a student is interacting with the teacher, this student may be doing another activity. These studies are concerned with student ‘resistance’ against the teacher’s activity (Candela, 1999), or forms of mock participation (Gutierrez et al., 1995; Rampton, 2006). A student who replies to a teacher question with a ‘funny’ answer may be making an interactionally coherent contribution but obviously disengages from the teacher’s activity.

A second group of studies is concerned with simultaneously occurring activities, in particular simultaneous talk. The research aims of these studies are diverse. Alton-Lee et al. (1993) looked at student–student talk as cognitive and emotional responses to the ongoing lesson. Most studies however are more descriptive in nature and are concerned with the organisation of classroom interaction in more than one activity. Bloome and Theodorou (1988) analysed simultaneously occurring teacher–student and student–student discourse, and focused on the demands that are made on students when they have to orient to organisational features of both types of discourse. Sahlström (1999) made a detailed analysis of the manner in which students diverge from interaction with the teacher, to talk with another student. He followed conversation analytical work on ‘schisming’ (Egbert, 1993, 1997; Sacks et al., 1974: 713–714) to analyse how multi-party classroom interaction breaks up into separate interactions. Also, Jones and Thornborrow (2004) were interested in organisational features of concurrent classroom activities, in particular classroom talk. And most recently, Rampton (2006) analysed how students withdraw from interaction with the teacher into ‘private talk’.

The importance of work like this is that it recognises that although a teacher may address the class as a whole, the class need not pay attention as ‘a whole’. Students not only have different ways of participating in teacher–student activities, but also, they often participate in other classroom activities than those involving the teacher. This is of interest to researchers concerned with the micro-analysis of the construction of difference between students, and it is precisely from this perspective that most studies of classroom interaction as multi-party and multi-activity are initiated.
Data and Method

The data on which I report in this paper are 15 video-recorded maths lessons in two first grade classes (students aged 12–13) of the Sun and the Rainbow, two urban secondary schools in the Netherlands. The students in these classes have various linguistic and ethnic backgrounds. The data were collected to study how students participate in different ways in classroom interaction. From this research perspective, we wanted to answer the question of the construction of difference in classrooms by treating the class not as one participant category, but as a set of individual students. And this involves paying attention to the multi-activity character of classroom interaction.

In each lesson students sat in three rows; a window row, a middle row and a door row. Each lesson was recorded by three cameras: two in the front of the classroom, directed at the back, and one in the back of the classroom, directed towards the front (see figure 1). This brought all students within constant range of at least one camera, although only the backs of the students sitting in the front of the middle row could be seen. The audio recordings were done by a wireless microphone worn by the teacher, connected to one of the front cameras, and two microphones on the other cameras. Some lessons were also recorded by additional audio equipment placed at the window and door sides of the classroom.

We sat and watched the videos of lessons while observing one student at a time, and made detailed notes on what that student did when, and how this was (or was not) related to what the teacher or other students were doing at that time. If we call one observation like this a ‘student-lesson’, we observed over 50 student-lessons. In contrast to most of the studies of parallel activities discussed above, the majority of our observations had to rely on non-verbal behaviour rather than talk. On many occasions when the student would interact verbally with another student, voices were so low that we were not able to understand what they were saying. On the other hand, we also observed noninteractional activities. Where most studies discussed above divide classroom

![Figure 1](image_url) Positions and range of three cameras
activities into teacher–student and student–student talk, we also incorporated parallel activities such as ‘working for oneself’ in the analysis.

The choice to work with observational records rather than with transcripts has the advantage that these records allow the analyst an overview of student and classroom activities that a more detailed rendering of the data would not permit. The records have also solved the problem of how to transcribe activities that are often largely non-verbal. It is clear though, that if transcripts are to be treated as a first analysis rather than as data (Edwards & Lampert, 1993; Ochs, 1979), this is an even stronger case for using observational records.

The analyses made of the observational records draw on micro-ethnographic (Bloome et al., 2005; Catanheira et al., 2001; Duranti, 1997; Green & Bloome, 1997) and ethnomethodological (Garfinkel, 1967; Heritage, 1984) principles in that I did not approach the records with pre-established, theory-based analytical categories, but have attempted to capture the participants’ perspectives and orientations. The tendency to study classroom interaction as a one-at-a-time, two-party activity is understandable from a perspective on classroom interaction as an educational activity, but in the analysis reported here, I accepted the possibility that students could be doing things that are not educational at all.

In the analysis we made observations of a student’s talk, gaze direction, body posture, hand and arm gestures, facial expression and the use of artefacts such as books and pens. We interpreted these in terms of actions such as ‘bids for a turn’, ‘reads her text book’ or ‘works for himself’.

I want to show some of the ways in which students manage and coordinate their activities in relation to those of the teacher. I will argue that students, when they are engaged in parallel activities, are not just doing something else, but are coordinating their participant roles both in their ‘parallel’ activity, and in the activity in which the teacher is involved. In the first part of the data analysis, I will show the variation in student participation in both the teacher activity and parallel activities and suggest a tentative categorisation. In the second part, I will demonstrate students’ orientation to the teacher’s activity as a ‘central’ activity.

**Data Analysis: Variation in Student Participation**

The first observations are from *the Rainbow* and concern Stahin, a Moroccan-Dutch boy. In this lesson the class starts on a new maths book chapter on graphs, and the teacher asks the class first do an introductory task from the textbook before he discusses the answers with the whole group.

**From the observations of Stahin**

Stahin is looking at the teacher when the teacher explains the task, and then works on the task for about 10 minutes. He looks up when the teacher announces that he wants to check the answers. He looks at the teacher when the teacher speaks. He raises his hand when Barbara gets a turn. He raises his arms in victory, when Barbara’s answer appears to be wrong and a different one proves to be right. He keeps on looking at the teacher, also when the teacher reprimands Samira, and he nods when the teacher accepts another student’s answer.
In the next maths lesson, the teacher first discusses the homework assignments the students have done for today. Then he presents new subject matter on graphs.

Stahin is looking around him while the teacher is checking the homework of four selected students. He opens his book before the teacher tells the class to. He is reprimanded by the teacher when he turns his face towards Khalid, next to him. During the discussion about the homework, Stahin looks at the students who are allowed to give their answers. He raises his hand after Johnny has been selected to answer assignment 2c, and a second time to answer 2d. He keeps his hand raised while Martin is searching for that answer. At 3b he again raises his hand, just as with 3c. Stahin is selected when the selected student does not immediately produce the answer. His answer is accepted. While the teacher is drawing on the blackboard, Stahin is joking with Khalid, and while the teacher fiercely orders the class to be silent, he looks in his book. Stahin looks at the blackboard during the teacher's explanation.

Stahin’s behaviour is an example of student behaviour as it is often portrayed. Even when he is not actively interacting with the teacher, he can be seen to pay attention. He follows the teacher’s instructions, he pays attention when the teacher speaks, or when a student speaks who is given a turn by the teacher, and displays that he has understood what the correct answer is. And in order to be given a turn, he raises his hand and not his voice. In other words, when researchers and educationalist claim that by interacting with one student the teacher is interacting with the whole class, they have in mind a class full of Stahins.

Another example of a student who makes continuous attempts to be engaged in active interaction with the teacher is Maktoub, a Moroccan-Dutch boy like Stahin, but from the Sun class. The observations below are taken from the whole group, teacher-guided discussion of the homework assignments.

From the observations of Maktoub

Maktoub sits in the window row. While the teacher addresses the class, Maktoub is oriented to the teacher, to the blackboard or to the student who has the turn. He often raises his hand, but he almost never gets a turn. When he does get one, his answers are often adequate. He never shouts to get a turn.

Maktoub raises his hand, another student gets a turn, and a minute later he lowers his hand. Following an answer from another student, he raises his hand again, but does not get a turn. This is repeated several times, but Maktoub persists in raising his hand. At one time, when he is the only one with his hand up, the teacher asks the class for more hands, and gives the turn to another student. Now Maktoub lowers his hand. Following the answer, he raises his hand again, and this time he gets a turn.

In the plenary, whole group classroom activities, Maktoub is very active. Not only can he be seen to pay attention to the teacher or to the student who gets a turn, but he also makes attempts to get turns. These attempts however are not very successful. Sometimes it almost seems as if the teacher only gives Maktoub a turn when he has no other option. Moreover, there are several occasions in the recorded lessons where the teacher gives him a turn, but dismisses Maktoub’s answer as a non-serious contribution. Examples of this are discussed in Berenst et al. (2001: 191–194) and van Eerde et al. (2002: 138–142). In the latter case, the
teacher rejects a particular answer when presented by Maktoub, and accepts the same answer a moment later when it is repeated by another student.

The case of Maktoub points us towards the notion that student participation is interactionally constructed. What counts as participation and what does not is established in the interaction between teacher and student. This also shows in the case of Nordin, a Turkish-Dutch boy and a classmate of Stahin at the Rainbow. The observations presented here are again taken from the teacher-guided, whole group discussion of the homework.

**From the observations of Nordin**

Nordin sits behind Stahin and Khalid, next to Azzedine. While the teacher is giving turns to discuss the answers to the homework assignments, Nordin at times looks at his paperwork, or talks with his neighbour, or watches the teacher or the student who has a turn. When Mustafa gives a wrong answer, other students start to yell their answers. The teacher says that they are not allowed to yell. Now Nordin raises his voice and yells ‘it’s 51 sir’ looking at the teacher. He is also reprimanded.

He looks at the paperwork on his table, talks to his neighbour, sometimes he raises his hand, just as often he shouts his answer after a wrong answer has been given or comments on something the teacher says. When the teacher explains a graph on how far and how fast a runner runs, Nordin comments: ‘that’s fast’. He regularly drops his pen and picks it up again or throws something at another person or at our camera.

Nordin’s case documents in the first place that classes are not ‘full of Stahins’. Nordin is very active. He engages in parallel activities such as talking to his neighbour Azzedine or throwing pens, but at the same time he raises his hand at appropriate moments, or gives alternative answers when a wrong answer has been given. With his powerful voice he is very present in the class, very often giving answers (most often correct ones) when he was not given a turn.

A similar pattern can be seen with his neighbour Azzedine (male, Iran). Azzedine is also very actively involved, both in activities with his fellow students, and in the teacher’s activity. Just as Nordin, Azzedine frequently raises his hand, but just as frequently he shouts his answers or comments through the class. Perhaps as a result of this, Azzedine is extremely unsuccessful with his hand-raising. It does not get him a single turn in all of the nine maths lessons we recorded in this class. Rather, Nordin and Azzedine are very frequently rebuked or punished by the teacher for talking with neighbours or shouting through the class, even though the shouting mainly concerns their responses to maths assignments.

Secondly, Nordin’s and Azzedine’s cases are two more examples of the interactional construction of participation. In the period when their math lessons were recorded, Nordin and Azzedine were also observed in two biology lessons. There the teacher treated the same behaviour very differently (Haarhuis & van Spronsen, 2002). The maths teacher treated their shouted answers as interfering, and therefore not allowable, while the biology teacher instead often responded to their answers as serious contributions to the teacher activity. This shows how the same behaviour can either be made to be part of the same activity (the biology teacher), or to be part of another, parallel activity (the maths teacher).
These different treatments also proved to be consequential for these boys’ subsequent behaviour in the class. In the maths lessons, they kept shouting. Sometimes when the teacher told him to be silent, Azzedine would protest, ‘But you never give me a turn’, which was true. It seems that he and his maths teacher were caught in a vicious circle in which the teacher did not give him turns because he shouted, and Azzedine shouted because he never got a regular turn. In contrast, in the biology lesson, treating their volunteered answers as serious contributions allowed the teacher at other times to tell them successfully to be silent by saying that they had already had a turn.

There are other students who act much less involved in whole group activities. Take for example Barbara, a European-Dutch girl at the Rainbow.

From the observations of Barbara

After entering the class Barbara starts to joke with Samantha and to make funny faces at the camera that is standing in front of her for the first time today. The teacher tells the class to do the introductory test of the new chapter on graphs, and shortly introduces the test. When he is doing this, Barbara opens her book and starts working. After the students have worked for some time, the teacher announces that he wants to check the answers with the class. Barbara keeps on writing but many students stop working and look up at the teacher. The teacher selects her to answer one of the assignments in the test. Barbara gives her answer and then writes on again.

In a sharp contrast to her classmates Stahin, Nordin or Azzedine, or to Maktoub in the other class, Barbara makes no attempt to participate actively in the interaction with the teacher. She does not raise her voice, she does not raise a hand, but works at her maths assignments at her own pace.

Yet a different pattern of behaviour is displayed by Nouzha, a Turkish-Dutch girl in the Sun class. The observations were made during a teacher-fronted discussion of homework. At first sight, her behaviour looks like Barbara’s, with the exception that Nouzha’s parallel activities are not concerned with maths at all.

From the observations of Nouzha

Nouzha sits right before the teacher’s desk, in the front seat of the window row. For minutes she is engaged in getting herself a pen while the teacher addresses the class, standing next to Nouzha’s seat. Nouzha turns to her bag and to her neighbours to get one. Then she starts to polish and clip her nails, and talk to her back neighbour Patricia.

Another student whose parallel activities during whole group class activities do not involve maths is Tatjana, a European-Dutch girl in the Rainbow class, who is seated just like Nouzha in the front seat facing the teacher’s desk.

From the observations of Tatjana

When Tatjana enters the classroom, she walks (or better: dances) towards Meryem in the back of the classroom and writes something in Meryem’s notebook. Together they walk to the front of the classroom where Tatjana writes in the notebook of her neighbour Malika. When she sits down, her back neighbour Farouk pulls at her sweater. Tatjana
yells out at the teacher. She shouts ‘shut up’ at the class. The teacher tells Tatjana and her neighbour to move their tables apart to which Tatjana responds angrily.

During this lesson, as during the other lessons, Tatjana hardly ever works on her maths tasks. Just as with other students discussed above, her behaviour can be called ‘parallel’, but Tatjana more frequently involves others in her parallel activities, such as her neighbour and even the teacher.

The observations reported so far from the two classes were all made during whole group parts of the lessons. However, in both classes these plenary activities were followed or preceded by a phase in which students were supposed to work individually on their maths assignments. During this phase, students could ask the teacher for help or explanation. At the Sun, the teacher would walk around the class and come to students to help; at the Rainbow, the teacher would sit at his desk and have the students come to him (Elbers et al., 2002).

The teacher-fronted and individual activities show how variation in student participation is not just variation across students, but can also be variation with a single student. Some students who are strongly involved in the teacher activity during plenary interaction use the phase of individual work for non-maths, parallel activities. Maktoub is a case in point.

From the observations of Maktoub

During the phase in which students are allowed to work on their homework assignments, Maktoub is doing all sorts of things but maths. He is messing around with his neighbours and with the recording equipment next to him.

Tatjana shows behaviours in the two types of classroom activities that may be regarded as two tokens of the same type. Both in the plenary activity and in the phase of individual work, she is oriented to involving other students in parallel activities. Tatjana sits at a table next to the teacher’s desk where students queue to ask the teacher questions.

From the observations of Tatjana

When students queue at the teacher’s table with questions, Tatjana listens to their conversations. One of the students says something to Malika and Tatjana. Tatjana responds very angrily, ‘shut the fuck up’. The teacher attempts to silence her and she tries to make clear to him what the problem is. When she again starts to respond to another student’s remark, the teacher calms her, ‘don’t respond, don’t, don’t, keep your mouth shut’. And privately he adds that if she does not respond to other students she will not be punished. But Tatjana responds by telling the teacher all the bad things they said to Malika and adds, ‘if she is abused, I am abused’.

And during the same phase of the lesson,

When the teacher is sitting at his table, Tatjana gets up and says in a sweet voice, ‘you are the teacher so you should explain this to me’. This is the first time in this lesson that she seems to be concerned with maths. The teacher laughs and explains. Tatjana sits down again, works for a short moment on the assignment but is readily distracted again.

Also Nouzha, whom we have seen engaged in non-content parallel activities during plenary classroom phases, sometimes uses the phase of individual work to involve the teacher in her non-content activities. On one occasion she tells
the maths teacher quite elaborately about her visit to a former primary school teacher who has had a baby.

These observations can be categorised along two continua: one from teacher to parallel activities and another from content related to not content related. Student behaviour can be classified on both continua at the same time. In Figure 2, I have placed the observations reported above on these continua.

Figure 2 categorises the behaviour as displayed by Stahin (1) and Maktoub (2) during plenary activity as content-related behaviour and part of the teacher activity. Barbara’s behaviour (4) is just as content related, but takes place as a parallel activity. Nouzha and Maktoub (7) during the phase of individual work display non-content-related, parallel activities. Finally, Nordin (3) and Azzedine occupy a middle position since their behaviour switches between content and non-content related, and between teacher and parallel activities.

Our observations show that content-related activities do not always coincide with teacher activities. A student or a teacher may initiate a non-content topic as part of the teacher activity, and this may be picked up by the other participants. We saw an example of this in Nouzha’s baby story to the teacher. Neither do parallel and non-content activities coincide, as we have seen in the case of Barbara, who sat actively working on maths while the teacher was engaged in a plenary activity with the other students.

Students’ Orientation on a ‘Central’ Activity

In this paper I have used the term ‘teacher activity’ for activities in which the teacher is involved, and ‘parallel activity’ for behaviour that occurs concurrently with the teacher activity. I will argue that the students in these classes display a normative orientation to the teacher activity as a ‘central’ activity. In line with the analytical orientation of micro-ethnography and ethnomethodology (see Section Data and Method), I mean to show that this is a participants’ orientation, rather than an assumption of the analyst. As I said above, it is understandable and important that classroom interaction should be analysed from an educational
perspective, with a specific interest in teacher-involved interaction. Yet, it is equally important to show whether students orient to classroom interaction as an educational activity, or indeed to teacher-involved interaction as different from student–student interaction. In order to do this, we need to show that students observably treat teacher-involved interaction as a point of orientation, also when they are involved in parallel activities.

It is clear from the observations reported above that during plenary activities, students such as Stahin and Maktoub are focused on teacher-involved interaction as the central activity. But what about the students involved in parallel activities? Let us first look at Maktoub at the Sun during the phase in which the teacher walks around the class to help students:

**From the observations of Maktoub**

The teacher corrects Maktoub’s behaviour when he is playing with the curtains. In response, Maktoub sits up straight, and then continues with the curtains and laughs at his back neighbour. When the teacher gets close again, Maktoub quickly moves into working position, and afterwards continues his joke with the student behind him.

A phenomenon that can be observed throughout my data is that students who engage in non-content parallel activities orient to the teacher’s activity while doing their own things. It may seem a rather superficial observation to note that a student corrects his behaviour when the teacher is close, but for this argument it is an important observation. It shows that Maktoub treats his own behaviour as outside the teacher’s order. Elsewhere I reported how students increase their ‘misbehaviour’ as soon as the teacher turns from the class as a group to address an individual student (Koole, 2003). We also see this orientation to the teacher’s present activity in Nouzha’s behaviour.

**From the observations of Nouzha**

Nouzha looks up from her nails when the teacher asks one of her classmates how he played against an Ajax youth (soccer) team the day before. She turns back from Patricia when the teacher summons a student somewhere else in the class not to sit turned around.

It is interesting that Nouzha’s observable orientations to the teacher’s behaviour are concerned in particular with his non-content behaviour: making a social question to a soccer-playing student and calling a student to order. Yet, I would like to argue that for her to respond to non-content teacher remarks, she must have monitored more than just these.

It is not only in non-content parallel activities that students display an orientation to the teacher-involved activities. Also, students engaged in content-related parallel activities such as Barbara show such orientations.

**From the observations of Barbara**

Barbara responds happily when the teacher selects her as one of four students who must show him that they have done their homework. She immediately walks with her opened workbook to his desk. While the teacher is checking the homework with the class, Barbara is writing again. We can see on the video that she is working on the next section of the maths book. When the teacher makes a joke, she laughs while writing.
teacher finishes the homework check and starts to draw a graph on the blackboard for explanation, Barbara stops writing and looks at the board.

She responds adequately when she is invited to come to the teacher’s desk to show her homework, and also when the teacher gives her a turn to give an answer. Sequentially adequate that is, an immediate response; the answer she gives is wrong. Apart from these occasions where the teacher invites her to participate, she displays an orientation to the teacher’s activity while she is working on her maths assignments. There are several ways in which she responds to something the teacher does, while she is writing.

**Discussion**

I believe these cases show us two interesting aspects of classroom interaction. In the first place, the observations make clear that indeed classroom interaction is not one single activity. Students are simultaneously engaged in various kinds of activities, such as doing something individually or doing something collaboratively and interactionally with a fellow student or with the teacher.

At the same time we see that students, also when they are engaged in parallel activities, have a clear orientation to the activity the teacher is involved in. Also when they are not engaged in the teacher’s activity as either speaker or addressee, they can be seen to participate in that activity in participant roles such as Goffman (1974, 1981) distinguished when he spoke of participation frameworks. Thus, students appear to be capable of participating in **different activities at the same time**, be it in different participant roles.

As far as participation in the teacher’s activity is concerned, we have seen students behave in very different ways. Students such as Stahin, Azzedine, Nordin and Maktoub participate very actively, making attempts to engage in direct interaction with the teacher. At the same time, we have seen that participation is an interactional category, and does not depend solely on what a student does, but also on how it is treated by the teacher. Student behaviour that is treated as disruptive by one teacher may be treated as cooperative by another. And an answer that is treated as not cooperative when coming from one student may be treated as cooperative when coming from another.

In contrast to students like Stahin, a student such as Barbara does not apply for turns. Yet she can also be seen to participate in the teacher’s activity, in spite of the fact that she is at the same time doing her own work. And even though, especially from an educational perspective, Nouzha’s activity of polishing nails is quite different from Barbara’s activity of doing maths assignments, the ways they participate in the teacher’s activity is very much alike. The unifying activity to which all students and the teacher orient, and in which they can therefore be said to be participants in whatever participant role, is the activity in which the teacher is involved. This is why this activity can correctly be called the **central activity** of classroom interaction. Not ‘central’ because we study classroom interaction from an educational, teacher-focused perspective, but because the participants in classroom interaction treat it as central.

From a methodological point of view, this paper is an argument to add a perspective to the range of methods in use for the analysis of classroom interaction. This perspective involves an open analytical eye for the phenomenon that not all students are doing the same thing at the same time, and that even when the
teacher is engaging them in a teacher-fronted interaction, students are involved in ways ranging from very active to passive, to perhaps not-involved.

And having said this, it must also be clear that if we want to study classroom interaction from the participant perspective of individual students, we cannot only look at how they are, or are not engaged in the teacher’s activity. Then we must not treat the teacher’s activity as default and any other student activity as non-participation, but we must try and understand what the student is engaged in doing. Students’ activities that could be analysed as non-participation in terms of a central activity in which the teacher is involved can also be understood as activities that go on parallel to the teacher’s activity. The teacher is involved in an activity with one or more students, and at the same time other students are engaged in parallel activities. And yet, these latter students also display forms of attentiveness to the teacher’s activity.

From an educational perspective, it is important to observe that in spite of this shared orientation students have different ways of participating. The differences in participant roles indicate that not everything the teacher or another participant in the central activity says is heard or understood by all students. The frequent parallel interactions with other students, or the work they do on their nails or maths assignments, make clear that at the moment they engage in direct interaction with the teacher, the activity or discourse ‘so far’ for the student may very well be different from the central activity. For the teacher, an interaction with a student may be one step in a continuous activity, while for the student, it may imply a shift from one primary activity to another. Thus, when interacting with the teacher, students do not necessarily have a part in the common ground the teacher has established until then with ‘the’ class (cf. Mets & van den Hauwe, 2003).

Also from an educational perspective it is important to note that students do not understand classroom activities solely as educational. It is clear from many things they do, that for them much of what is going on is social identity and social relation work. We have seen this in the example of Tatjana. And as we can learn from that example, students are not only working on their relations with other students, but also on their relation with the teacher. This work on social relations forms an integral part of classroom activities and is probably an essential element in establishing opportunities for learning, both in interaction with fellow students and in interaction with the teacher.

The Rainbow class of Stahin, Nordin, Azzedine, Barbara and Tatjana behaves quite disorderly at times. Still, our observations show that they orient to the teacher’s activities as being ‘central’. Moreover, however disorderly, the data strike one as being lessons. And probably, this is precisely one of the core elements that makes classroom interaction into the recognisable activity type ‘lesson’, namely that whatever parallel activities students are engaged in, there is a shared orientation to the teacher’s activity as being the central activity.

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Notes
1. The studies by Konrad Ehlich and Jochen Rehbein published in 1986 were carried out in the same period (the 1970s) as those of Sinclair and Coulthard, and Mehan.
2. The research project ‘Interaction in the Multicultural Class’ was funded by the Dutch Organisation for Scientific Research (NWO) through its programme ‘the Dutch Multicultural and Multiform Society’ (NMPS). The names of the schools and students are all pseudonyms.
3. The observation of video data was done together with three of my students, Gemma Bierman, Femke Conradi, and Kirsten Schopman. The analyses of their observations were reported in separate papers (Bierman, 2002; Conradi & Schopman, 2002). I am grateful to them for allowing me to use their observational records.
4. I have decided to add information on sex and ethnicity, since I mentioned that the classes are multi-ethnic. Still, in this paper, ethnicity or gender is not part of the analysis.
5. Sahlström (1999), in his study of Swedish classes, discusses this phenomenon and proposes that this is a teacher strategy to increase student participation. The idea is that a teacher waits until a minimal number of hands are raised before (s)he allocates the turn. In order to reward the more reluctant hand-raisers, the teacher selects one of them, and not the first student, in our case Maktoub.

References


