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Group Discussion: The Teacher's Role?

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Group discussions are a popular way of increasing the opportunities for authentic talk by language learners. However groups can also present problems: one or two learners may dominate talk or teachers may have difficulty in adapting to a less up-front teaching role. This article reports a small action-research project which shows how teachers can monitor and adjust their roles. The teacher-researcher wanted to adapt her directive teaching style to a more facilitative role with small groups. She analysed her own language and its effects on learners' talk over three sessions in which three different groups of students were discussing a movie. On each occasion this analysis led to her modifying her language in the next session. This study suggests a process whereby other teachers could carry out action research in order to monitor their teaching. The actual effect of a teacher reducing her own intervention suggests that while a decrease in teacher talk may be helpful, this is not the only consideration. Teacher intervention may sometimes be important to maintain interaction levels.

Introduction

Based on a large number of studies, Chaudron (1988) estimated that about 60% of classroom talk comes from the teacher. Teachers monopolise the time with a combination of display questions, affirmations of student answers and, of course, instructions. Van Lier (1996) argues that the traditional classroom interaction of teacher initiation, student response and teacher feedback (IRF), as identified by Sinclair and Coulthard (1975) as making up over 30% of classroom interaction, should be used only in the initial stages of second language learning for a number of reasons. This pattern inhibits students from taking the initiative and benefiting from alternatives such as peer-feedback. Furthermore, the unequal relationship

between students and teachers blocks more authentic communication in which negotiation of meaning occurs. In the IRF sequence the teacher has all the answers and no negotiation is necessary. More specifically, the quality of teacher questions has been criticized by van Lier (1988), who points out that some teachers use closed and inauthentic questions such as "Did you stay at home yesterday, Martha?".

By contrast, definitions of natural conversation refer to spontaneity, cooperation and fluidity. Tsui (1994) says that "'natural conversation' is usually associated with out-of-class talk and occurs spontaneously, without any planning or prompting …" (pp 5–6). Furthermore, it involves at least two participants. McCarthy (1991) describes spoken English as a "picture of dynamism, fluidity, variability, mixing and negotiation" (p. 30) where people's goals may emerge during a conversation. More specifically, non-classroom discourse has been described as having "two-part adjacency pairs … or two-part exchanges with an optional third part …" (Tsui 1994, p. 25), although Tsui believes that the third component is an important element which endorses the satisfactory outcome of the exchange. If it is absent, participants may feel that it was deliberately withheld for social or strategic reasons.

Small Group Interaction

Small group interaction is often recommended as a more helpful means of acquiring oral language proficiency than the up-front teaching model. Johnson (1995) summarises the work of Barnes (1975, in Johnson, 1995), who "proposes that small group activities are more conducive to using language for learning since they tend to distance teachers' control over the patterns of communication"(p. 156).

Research into small group interaction gives insights into turntaking and the quality of students' talk as shown by the range of functions used, and by their discourse level competence. Groups are said to give students "the opportunity to practise a much wider range of speech functions" than regular class work (Tsui, 1995, p. 96) and to encourage them to move beyond sentence level competence to discourse competence (Long & Porter, 1985). According to Ellis (1994) "the research suggests that learners will benefit from interacting in small group work. They will have more opportunity to speak, to negotiate meaning and content, and to construct discourse collaboratively" (p. 601).

However, these claims do not always match reality. Students may not

use a range of functions or take up the opportunities for discourse competence; instead of teacher domination, one student may take a lead role, monopolising the talk time and the topic choices. Students may need some guidance to use a greater range of functions in groups. Barnes (1975, in Johnson, 1995) mentions that a willingness to participate depends on whether students think their comments will be accepted by others, on having some common ground, on having their attention focussed on specific points, on having sufficient time to put their ideas into words and on being able to use exploratory talk before speaking publicly.

What is the teacher's role in modelling a range of functions? Seedhouse (1996) doubts that " a non-institutional form of discourse" (p. 18) is possible within classroom lessons. He believes that even with training, teachers produce not conversation, but classroom discourse and recommends "viewing classroom interaction as a variety of institutional discourse" (p. 22). The teacher's role as a participant as well as a facilitator in small groups seems to have received little attention in the literature. Wajnryb (1992) suggests that when observing a teacher in pair/group work, one can comment on how and in what circumstances she/he speaks to a group. In her opinion, "a teacher monitoring a group is there to listen, help and monitor, but not to teach" (p. 112).

The Study: Investigating the Role of Small Group Facilitator

This article reports one teacher's monitoring of her own developing role with a series of learner groups. As a Chinese teacher she had been accustomed to taking a directive role in students' learning. Now her aim was to improve the quality of students' talk as defined in the literature by the range of functions they use, and their ability to initiate topics. The research took place at a university self-access center (SAC) where approximately 75% of the students are enrolled in pre-university language courses. The other 25% are undergraduate and graduate university students and people from outside the university. The pre-university students come primarily from China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Korea, and Japan. Small numbers come from other countries. In the SAC the learners approach a teacher when they encounter problems. As a result of these reported problems and because of limited opportunity in the SAC for authentic opportunities for interaction, teachers decided to initiate some group sessions. Learners could sign up for a "Movie Club" where a facilitator-

teacher would suggest techniques for watching a movie and students would practise speaking about it. Furthermore the language level within each of the three groups could vary from lower- to upper-intermediate, although most students were at an intermediate level.

The study took place over three months, with one session per month. These learners differed from the normal small groups in a regular class. Because the context was a self-access centre, where students attended for short, irregular visits, each session was attended by different students who had never met before and might never meet again. This allowed time for discussion between the three researchers: the teacher, the SAC director and a lecturer who had worked with the researcher during her postgraduate studies. Each two and a half hour Movie Club session had three parts. First there was an explanation of techniques for watching a film. Then students completed traditional vocabulary exercises and comprehension questions with the help of the blurb on the cover of the movie. (These two parts were not recorded and did not form part of the study). Thirdly, each group watched the movie together and had a discussion which was recorded on Minidisc® and later analysed as follows:

1. The amount of teacher and student talk was calculated by counting the number of seconds for each utterance.
2. The teacher's and students' talk was analysed for turn-taking, topic initiation and function (such as initiation, response, or feedback).
3. In addition, an observer was present at each session.

This allowed the researchers to detect differences between the sessions and allowed the teacher to attempt a change in her approach in the next session.

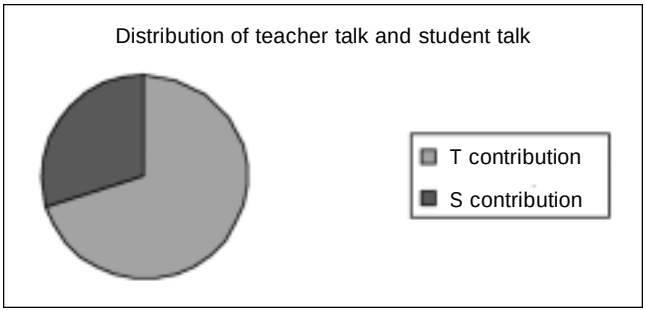
Results

SESSION 1

Number of students: 12
Length of discussion time: 11 minutes 45 seconds
Name of movie: "You've Got Mail".
Focus of analysis of transcript: What is the teacher's normal talking style during small group discussion?

The results show first (Figure 1) that the proportion of teacher-student talk was quite high at 70%, in fact higher than the 60% mentioned by Chaudron (1988).

Figure 1. Distribution of Talk in Session 1



In terms of the quality of her talk, the teacher asked mainly closed, recall questions. This led to the traditional IRF classroom pattern which left no place for students to initiate topics or direct what was going on in class as the following sample shows:

T *Who owned the shop?*
S *Her mother.*
T *Yes, her mother, Catherine's mother.*

This pattern was repeated six times.

Furthermore the student talk also followed traditional patterns. Little discussion of any kind and little peer-to-peer interaction occurred: 7% was student-to-student interaction and 93% student-to-teacher. Only once did a student spontaneously raise a question:

T *If you were Joe, would you fall in love with Kathleen? Why or why not?*
S *I have a question. If Joe and the email person are two different persons, which one will she choose?*
T *Yeah, what do you think? This is a good question.*

Almost all exchanges included the teacher but there were two exceptions. For example:

T *She has had sixth sense before they meet. So when she sees him she says these things in the film. What do you think?*

S1 *I think she realises this when she is sick.*
S2 *I think when she is sick and lies in bed, before Joe leaves the room, they have a talk. Then she realises. I think so.*

Reflection

Clearly there was room for improvement. With these results in mind, the teacher made the following plans.

1. To increase student participation by
   - approaching students before the session and inviting a volunteer to lead the discussion for each question.
   - telling students that they could discuss the questions freely among themselves without the teacher being present.
2. To change the teacher's input by:
   - changing from closed to more open questions.
   - acting as one of the participants and intervening only when there was a long pause (of about four seconds) or, if there was silence, to raise a counter argument to keep the discussion going.
3. To reduce the number of questions to be discussed so that all students would have a chance to contribute to all questions.

SESSION 2

Number of students: 8
Length of discussion time: 19 minutes 58 seconds
Name of movie: "Austin Powers".
Focus of analysis of transcript: What is the effect on student talk of

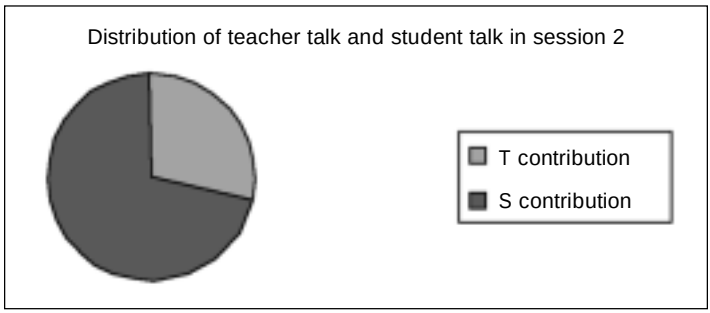
a. reducing the amount of teacher talk?
b. improving the quality of teacher questions?
c. having a student leader?

The results in terms of the distribution of talk were encouraging. As shown in Figure 2 the teacher reduced her talk to 29%.

Furthermore, of the student talk, 71% was student-to-student interaction and 29% student-to-teacher.

In addition, this student-led discussion resulted in longer answers to questions than in the first session. Interactions were almost entirely

Figure 2. Distribution of Talk in Session 2



student-student, with only occasional teacher intervention to start the discussion or to keep it going. For example:

T *We'll go to the last part of the activity, the discussion.… Shall we discuss number 2?*
S1 (Looks at the teacher.) *So I ask the question?*
T *Yes, number 2.*
S1 *Do you agree to cloning human beings? Why or why not?*
T *Yes. Please we try to face each other.*

(The teacher tried to direct and help students to sit in a circle.)

S1 *Okay, do you agree to cloning human being? Why or why not?*
S2 *I think I could not agree to it because if you just copy yourself you could not copy your mind. Just, just how do you face the copied guy?*
S1 *Hm, terrible, I think.*
S3 *And I don't agree with this about clone human beings because we are developing these areas. If we can take a good gene, or the best genes from human beings we may make only good people. So there is no distinction between good and bad people.*
S4 *I agree with this.*
S1 *Okay. Any more? Any more ideas?*

Reflection

The increase in student talk was encouraging, as was the amount of student participation and student-student interaction. There were, however, six IRF sequences, all of them in the second half of the discussion, where the

teacher had obviously slipped back into a slightly more directive role. At this stage she made a decision for the next session not to intervene unless unavoidable and to try and avoid the IRF pattern entirely.

Another feature of this session was that the group seemed to have enjoyed the discussion, as noted by Researcher 2, who observed part of the session. People seemed eager to participate as evidenced by the relatively short pauses between student contributions. Furthermore here was plenty of laughter and frequent joking.

Student 5: *I think it may be very common to clone people after 100 or 200 years.*
Student leader: *Maybe in our age.*
Student 6: *I don't think so. There is the moral issue that people disagree to cloning …*
Student 7: *Maybe cloning people can solve some problems. For example, if two men were in love with one woman. Copy one is Okay.*
Student 8: *No.*
(Many students laugh.)

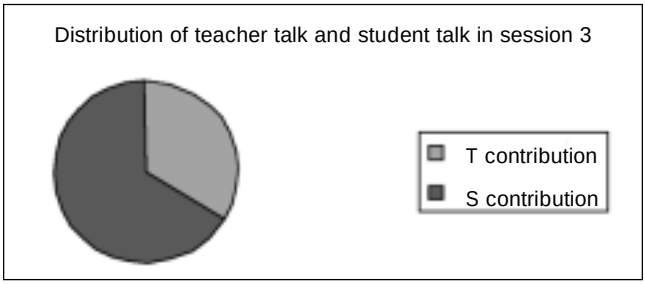
SESSION 3

Number of students: 7
Length of discussion time: 17 minutes 36 seconds
Name of movie: "Billy Elliot".
Focus of analysis of transcript:
Has the amount of teacher talk and the quality of her questions improved over the 3 sessions?
Are any changes reflected in student talk?

The results of Session 3 are encouraging compared with Session 1. This time, as shown in Figure 3, the teacher talked for 33 % of the time, compared with the original 70%. However, this was higher than in session 2 (29%). Furthermore, of the student talk, now only 33% was student-student interaction and 67% student-teacher against 71% and 29% in the second session.

In terms of the flow of conversation, there were more and longer pauses. On seven occasions they were seven seconds or longer. In contrast,

Figure 3. Distribution of Talk in Session 3



Session 1 had only one long pause (six seconds) and Session 2 had two (five and six seconds respectively). For example:

S Leader *Question number 3: In what way does the political situation in his country influence Billy's career as a ballet dancer and his life in general? In my opinion, the political situation influences Billy's behaviour. At first, he also goes to the boxing class and does some men's sport. But after he finds out that he enjoys dancing he chooses ballet … He saw his father going back to work only to get the fees for the ballet school, when other workers continued to strike. Sometimes Billy wants to give up dancing. That's all. I just think about … (inaudible).*

T *I think that Billy wants to give up dancing when his brother is arrested. It is on the same day when he should have gone to the ballet school with his teacher, Mrs Wilkinson. But instead he goes to the court with his father to see his brother. He has not gone to the ballet school.*

(Pause 20 seconds)

S1 *Because there is a strike, I think it's more difficult for Billy's father to decide whether he should let Billy go to the ballet school or not. I think it is more difficult because they don't have income.*

(Pause 7 seconds)

S2 *I think Billy's brother also influences Billy's behaviour very much …*

Reflection

Although the session was successful compared with session 1, it failed to reach the standard set by Session 2. The teacher's decision not to intervene unless absolutely necessary resulted in some very long pauses. On the other hand the number of IRF sequences was further reduced.

A further feature of this session was that the group seemed less eager to participate. The observer noted that the discussion was less lively and students seemed to want to avoid commenting on other students' contributions.

Summary of the Three Sessions

As shown in Table 1, the amount of student talk increased between Sessions 1 and 2 but then decreased slightly in the final session. Session 2 was also more successful in the quality of the student talk. Percentages include pauses.

Table 1. Amount and Quality of Talk

SESSION	1	2	3
student talk (total number of times students spoke)	41 (30%)	94 (71%)	50 (67%)
student talk (type)	Mainly answering T's questions one by one.	Students took the lead, giving and inviting opinions.	Fewer student contributions and more pauses.
Student-student talk	7%	56%	33%
ratio of student/ teacher topic-initiation	1/25	8/20	4/15
IRF interaction: number of sequences	25 (Over 90%)	6 (18%)	3 (10%)

Discussion

The study shows the effects on a series of different student groups of the teacher's modifying her talk. Her efforts to increase student interaction were measured in five ways: the occurrence of the traditional IRF pattern,

the ratio of student-teacher talk, the amount of student-student talk, the length and number of pauses, and the 'engagement' as noted by the facilitator and the observer.

The decrease in the IRF pattern over the three sessions from over 90% to 18% and then 10%, was encouraging in view of the Sinclair and Coulthard (1975) figure of over 30%. In Session 2 the teacher spoke for only 29% compared with 70% in Session 1. This second result compared favourably with Chaudron's (1988) report of 60%. The decrease to 33% in Session 3, however, is less pleasing. Furthermore student-student talk also peaked in the second session (56%) but it too dropped (to 33%) in the third session. In the first two sessions there were one and two pauses respectively but Session 3 had seven pauses of seven seconds or more. These exceed the four to five seconds reported on in previous research by Hayashi (1996) as normal in turn-taking in small groups. Finally, the engagement that was noted in Session 2 by the facilitator and the observer was absent in the final session. In summary, the second session was the most successful but this success was not sustained the third time.

In searching for a reason we wonder whether the eagerness of the teacher not to speak too much prevented her from intervening in ways that might have been helpful. In support of this hypothesis, when the researchers compared the tapes of Sessions 2 and 3, they noted that a teacher prompt, far from inhibiting talk, actually encouraged it. Another hypothesis is that the teacher's non-participation may have seemed threatening to the students, as if she were an observer rather than a participant and a helper. Perhaps students expect or even need the teacher to intervene at crucial times. A third possible reason for the non-engagement in the final session is the content of the movie. Movie 3 was a drama which touched upon a number of serious topics, whereas the Session 2 movie was a comedy.

What can be learned from this study? First, we need to replicate it with the same teacher but with the choice of movies more consistent in their type. With hindsight, it was not a good idea to compare sessions following a comedy and a more serious drama. (While repeating the same movie might lead to better research, it would not fit the policy of the SAC, which provides fresh programmes regularly.) It would help to monitor in addition the pre-activity activities which students were given. We also need to record the teacher's developing ability to ask enough but not too many questions in line with Wajnryb's (1992) suggestion that "a teacher monitoring a group is there to listen, help and monitor, but not to teach"

(p. 112). It seems that the "help and monitor" function may have been underplayed in session 3. This further research will include analysing the small group talk by asking more specific questions about the data. For example:

How was talk distributed between students?
  How many students spoke?
  How often?
What sort of spontaneous questions do students ask?

Conclusion

We have reported a self-evaluation exercise by one teacher. On the basis of this small study we cannot draw generalisations. We were aware from the start of the limitations of our study. Apart from modifications made by the teacher, there were two major variables for each session: a change of movie and a change of students. These were inevitable, given the nature of the SAC's work. Nevertheless, the methods and results seem to be of wider interest as an example of research which must fit into the actual teaching and learning requirements of an institution. We have shown that the opportunities for evaluating one's own talk and its effects on students can lead to modification but that the results of the modified teacher input must also be examined carefully.

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