



The effect of instructor stance on ESL speakers' language production in a conversation group setting



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ABSTRACT

Numerous approaches to second language teaching emphasize the important role of instructors in eliciting extended language production from their students (Walsh, 2011; Wong & Waring, 2010). To shed light on the relationship between instructors' elicitation techniques and student talk, the current study analyzed the content exchanges initiated by preservice instructors ($N = 19$) during conversation group discussions. More specifically, this study examines how the instructor's stance (evaluative or non-evaluative) affected the language production of the ESL speakers. The findings indicated that non-evaluative exchanges elicited more student talk than evaluative exchanges. Additional insight into the relationship between stance and student responses to instructor-initiated exchanges is provided through excerpts from the conversation groups. Implications are discussed in terms of raising preservice instructors' awareness of social positioning and its impact on student interaction.

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The importance of language production for second language (L2) learning has been acknowledged in numerous theoretical approaches to L2 acquisition, including the interaction approach (e.g., Gass, 2003; Long, 1996; Mackey, 2012) and sociocultural theory (e.g., Lantolf & Thorne, 2006; Swain, 2006). In these traditions, language production is a key component of the social act of communication, and L2 learning is driven by the interactional modifications and co-construction of knowledge that occurs when interlocutors engage in conversation. This notion extends to pedagogical approaches to L2 instruction, such as communicative language teaching and task-based language teaching, which emphasize the use of the target language in meaningful contexts in the form of "conversations" (Thornbury & Slade, 2006) or "instructional conversations" (Ellis, 2003). The value of conversation for L2 learning is also reflected in the types of extracurricular activities that language programs offer, including conversation groups that create opportunities for students to interact with other language users in non-classroom settings.

Reflecting the importance of conversation for L2 learning, numerous studies have classified discourse features in terms of how effectively they elicit L2 production. Historically, a range of discourse features have been studied, such as clarification requests, confirmation checks, comprehension checks (e.g., Long, 1981, 1983), the negotiation of meaning and recasts (e.g., Mackey, 1999; Mackey & Philp, 1998), and language-related episodes and scaffolding (e.g., Donato, 1994; Swain & Lapkin, 2001). Due to their prevalence in meaning-oriented interactions, questions have been widely analyzed in terms of how they impact the quantity and quality of student responses, using various classification frameworks based on the linguistic form and discourse function of question types (Banbrook & Skehan, 1989; Brock, 1986; Chaudron, 1988; Long & Sato, 1983;

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Pica & Long, 1986). Among other distinctions, the classification of questions as either display or referential has been used widely to compare the language produced by L2 speakers in classrooms and during informal conversation.

Based on their prevalence in classroom discourse, display questions were characterized by Long and Sato (1983) as having an evaluative function. In other words, display questions allow instructors to determine whether students understand information that they have previously conveyed. The instructor typically has a preconceived answer in mind, and the students' responses are evaluated in terms of how well they approximate the desired answer. In contrast to classroom discourse, informal conversation is characterized by fewer display questions, and a greater occurrence of referential questions in which interlocutors ask questions in order to obtain unknown information. In terms of their elicitation of language, referential questions have been associated with a greater quantity of student talk than display questions. The observation that display questions rarely occur in everyday conversation (Mehan, 1979) has contributed to the assumption that referential questions yield more extended and "authentic" conversations (Thornbury & Slade, 2006).

However, subsequent studies have questioned the prevalence of display questions in L2 classroom discourse and raised doubts about the superiority of referential questions at eliciting L2 student talk. For example, in a Hong Kong classroom setting, Wu (1993) found that display questions were not predominantly used by the ESL teachers, and furthermore, even referential questions elicited very limited quantities of student talk. The association between question type and student talk was also questioned by Shomoossi (2004), who found that Iranian ESL teachers' referential questions did not lead to extended student interaction. Similarly, contrary to the predicted relationship between questions and language production, David (2007) found that display questions fostered more classroom interaction in Nigerian classrooms than referential ones.

Such contradictory findings have fueled debate about the effectiveness of instructors' elicitation techniques for encouraging interaction and student talk (Boyd & Rubin, 2006; Radford, Ireson, & Mahon, 2006; Thornbury, 1996). Several L2 researchers have called for an expansion of the traditional classification of questions as display or referential in order to obtain a more fine-grained understanding of the relationship between teacher elicitations and student talk (Lee, 2006; Markee, 2004; Waring, 2008, 2009). For example, teacher elicitations fulfill a variety of pedagogical functions, and the pedagogical function may impact the amount and type of student talk they elicit. Exchanges which serve to maintain control over classroom discourse (Ellis, 1990), check comprehension, or model appropriate language use (Kao, Carlin, & Hsu, 2011) are unlikely to elicit the same level of student talk as exchanges that serve to create interactive language use situations or stimulate critical thinking (Thornbury & Slade, 2006). In a conversation group setting, where the goal is typically to provide L2 speakers with opportunities to interact in the target language, instructor exchanges that require students to provide information about topics or express their opinions elicit more student talk than exchanges that check their knowledge of language (McDonough & Hernández González, 2012, 2013).

In addition to their pedagogical function, the instructor's stance during instructor-initiated exchanges may affect the amount and type of student talk that occurs. Instructor stance refers to how instructors position themselves with respect to the students' utterances (Johnstone, 2009). More specifically, the amount and type of student talk may be affected by whether an instructor adopts an evaluative or non-evaluative stance toward student contributions. From an interactional point of view, instructor exchanges may positively affect learner production if the instructor withholds an evaluative third move. When an instructor provides a negative or positive evaluative third move, it often contains prosodic elements which signal that the topic is closed (Wong & Waring, 2010). By signaling the end to a topic, instructor exchanges with explicit evaluation limit students' ability to make further contributions to the conversation. Withholding a third move or responding in a non-evaluative manner may help instructors create interactional space for students to take control over the conversation (Berry, 1981; Richards, 2006), encouraging them to produce more and longer turns. Rather than focus exclusively on the types of questions posed by instructors, the current study explores whether adopting a non-evaluative stance supports the occurrence of more complex, meaningful and authentic conversations.

1. The current study

To summarize, a long history of research into the features of informal conversation and classroom discourse has focused on how specific question types impact the quantity and quality of student talk. Whereas a great deal of this research has compared display and referential questions, the limitations of this categorization have been shown by the findings of more recent classroom research. Researchers have begun to emphasize the importance of instructor stance, specifically whether an evaluative position is adopted, on the effectiveness of instructor exchanges at eliciting student talk. Put simply, regardless of whether an instructor is asking what could be traditionally classified as a display or referential question, adopting an evaluative stance may impact student responses negatively. However, studies to date have not investigated whether stance affects the amount of student talk generated during instructor–student interactions. Therefore, the current study addresses the following research question: *Does instructor stance impact ESL speakers' language production during instructor-initiated exchanges?*

To answer the research question, the current study examined the conversation group discussions facilitated by preservice teachers as part of the practical training component of their degree program. The focus on preservice teachers was

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