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Contributions and silence in academic talk: Exploring learner experiences of dialogic interaction

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ABSTRACT

The benefits of dialogic interaction which engenders academic talk are greater understanding of concepts and ultimately higher educational standards. However, recent research suggests students, both home and international, face certain challenges in contributing to dialogic interaction in a higher education context. This article reports on a study which explored learner experiences of dialogic interaction and reasons for contributing or remaining silent. Data were gathered from a one-semester postgraduate module at a UK university through interviews, audio recordings of sessions, stimulated recall sessions and course assignments. Results suggest that sociocultural factors such as confidence in language, confidence in knowledge, previous educational experiences, and expectations of roles influenced the learners' willingness to contribute to the academic talk.

1. Introduction

This paper stems from research carried out into the learner experiences of dialogic interaction as part of seminar discussions in an MA Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) module (Second Language Acquisition) at a university in the UK. The students were all speakers of English as a second language. It became clear during the module that the students were interacting in the seminar discussions in different ways. There were instances of highly active discussions, and periods of very little contribution. It is not my intention to analyse the interaction in this paper as in-depth analyses of teaching episodes and dialogic interaction have been well documented in the literature in mainstream classrooms (Jones, 2010; Mercer, Dawes, & Staarman, 2009; Reznitskaya, 2012) and ESL classrooms (Chappell, 2014; Seedhouse, 2004). Instead, the aim of this paper is to explore why students contribute and why they choose to remain silent.

2. Background

2.1. The role of talk in learning

The theoretical foundation of this study is that talk is situated in particular social, cultural, and educational contexts (Alexander, 2001). In a sociocultural framework, talk, and importantly dialogue, support learning and development (Mercer & Littleton, 2007; Simpson, Mercer, & Majors, 2010) as talk "has the power to shape knowledge through participant engagement with a range of processes: hypothesising, exploration, debate and synthesis" (Barnes, 2010, p. 7), all crucial skills in educational

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discourse. The dialogic interaction between student and teacher are situated in and construct particular social, and cultural practices (Alexander, 2001; Fisher & Larkin, 2008) which may support or constrain verbal participation. Dialogic interaction is essentially (Alexander, 2005, p. 14):

- Collective, i.e. teachers and learners address learning tasks together.
- Reciprocal - teachers and learners listen to each other, share ideas, and consider alternative viewpoints
- Supportive - children articulate their ideas freely without fear or embarrassment, and they help each other reach common understandings.
- Cumulative - children build on each other's ideas.
- Purposeful - teachers plan and guide learning activities with specific educational goals in mind.

Dialogic interaction is not conversation (Alexander, 2008; Skidmore, 2000) but instead a purposeful dialogue in which students and teacher co-construct meaning. Mercer (2000) uses the term "exploratory talk" to define the purposeful dialogue among students in which they make their reasoning visible. While most studies into dialogic interaction and exploratory talk have been carried out in primary schools in the UK, it is fair to say that the issues are relevant also to a higher education context (Doherty, Kettle, May, & Caukill, 2011), where there is considerable emphasis on the learning of concepts.

In a higher education context, the idea of accountable talk or academically productive talk (Michaels, O'Connor, & Resnick, 2008) is particularly relevant. Academically productive talk is accountable in the following ways:

- Accountable to the community: all participants listen and build on each other's contributions.
- Accountable to reasoning: participants explain and justify their ideas.
- Accountable to knowledge: participants base their talk and contributions on fact and evidence.

It is this third characteristic of talk which is highly applicable to a higher education context where it is expected that learners refer to literature and evidence in the discussions. Academically productive talk engenders "rigorous academic learning" (Michaels et al., 2008, p. 285), a goal of higher education. An aim of seminar discussions is that students refer to evidence and "registrally appropriate" terminology (Hammond & Gibbons, 2005, p. 22).

In this study the students are operating in a second language which makes the need to engage in dialogic interaction more important. Walqui (2006) argues that second language learners need to find their voice in a content learning context and develop their academic identity. Through engaging in interaction they can become legitimate participants of the academic community. Haneda and Wells (2008) argue that particpation in dialogic interaction is especially important as it offers students the opportunity to participate in different academic registers and develop social and communication strategies. In short, second language learners need to learn both the disciplinary knowledge and language. In a postgraduate module, the talk must help students proceed from talking about everyday concepts (general terms) to talking about "academically correct concepts" (Michaels, O'Connor, Hall & Resnick, 2010, p. 184).

2.2. Challenges of dialogic interaction and learner perspectives

Much of the work on dialogic teaching explores talk variables, and the focus remains on the teacher. However, there is a strong need to consider the interaction in terms of the experiences of the learners. Alexander (2013) acknowledges the sociocultural factors which may be at play in managing interaction and organising the classroom. "Teachers and students talk as they do within generic constraints of space, time and power, and in response to the complex microculture of the classroom" (p. 97). He notes that students' attitude towards dialogic interaction may be a challenge as they move from a traditional IRF classroom.

Interest, motivation, and language proficiency are also significant factors in learner contribution. Haneda and Wells (2008) argue that for true dialogue to occur, the students must be interested in the topic, have personal opinions, want to express them, and believe their opinions matter. Although dialogic interaction gives English as an Additional Language learners both comprehensible input and opportunities for engaging in in a variety of academic talk, they highlight the challenges for learners with limited proficiency, such as anxiety and fear of making mistakes. The suggestion is to create effective conditions for participation by encouraging learners to take risks by using linguistic resources available to them (Haneda & Wells, 2008). Basturkmen (2016, p. 155) supports this view by stating that although dialogue plays an important role in "disciplinary acculturation" for English for academic purposes learners, they may find this "daunting" and worry about their ability to participate and contribute.

Studies into learner perspectives on dialogic interaction in seminar discussions reveal that there may be a number of challenges. Aguilar (2016) points out that learners may not participate in a seminar discussion due to language, sociocultural differences (e.g. educational background), individual differences (e.g. anxiety) and the classroom environment. Hennebry, Lo, and Macaro (2012) found that international students felt their linguistic resources were inadequate for seminar participation. A study by Remedios, Clarke, and Hawthorne (2008) explored why local Australian and international students chose to remain silent in seminars. The data pointed to sociocultural factors such as linguistic, contextual, cultural and personal reasons. One student commented that challenging others was culturally unacceptable. Another student feared getting the information wrong, and others preferred to listen rather than verbally participate. In their study these factors impacted on both native and non-native speakers of English. Nakane (2006) found that Japanese students chose to be silent in seminars as a face-saving strategy when they lacked linguistic resources and feared producing "erroneous speech" (p. 1832). The practices and expectations of the dialogic interaction may not be explicit to learners. Fejes, Johansson, and Dahlgren (2005) found that the lack of understanding of structure and expectations of roles added tension to the learners' experience of interaction.