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2 Opening-up classroom discourse to promote and enhance active, collaborative and cognitively-engaging student learning experiences

Jan Hardman[1]

Abstract

This paper places classroom discourse and interaction right at the heart of the teaching and learning process. It is built on the argument that high quality talk between the teacher and student(s) provides a fertile ground for an active, highly collaborative and cognitively stimulating learning process leading to improved learning outcomes. High quality classroom talk is characterised by the use of open and authentic questions and formative feedback whereby student contributions are probed and elaborated on. An example of this is illustrated in a detailed transcript analysis of an extract of classroom discourse derived from a university seminar. It is argued that there is a need to create dialogic space and open up classroom discourse to enhance students' active learning, particularly in language classrooms.

Keywords: classroom discourse, teacher-student interaction, dialogic teaching, collaborative learning, language learning.

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1. Introduction

Research has shown that classroom interaction is central to teaching and learning, not only functioning as a pedagogical tool but also a medium for active learning and thinking. Classroom interaction refers to how teachers interact with students during whole class, group-based and one-to-one teaching. It is seen as a competence, termed by Walsh (2011) as "classroom interactional competence, which refers to teachers' and learners' ability to use interaction as a tool for mediating and assisting learning" (p. 158).

Classroom interaction has been widely accepted to underpin key domains of learning engagement. As defined by the Higher Education Academy[2] – a UK body responsible for the quality of learning and teaching in universities – and included in the UK Engagement Survey (www.heacademy.ac.uk), learning engagement includes such indicators as critical thinking, collaborative learning, staff-student interaction, reflecting on and connecting learning to real-world problems and issues, and creativity and communication skills development. Learning engagement has been shown to have a positive effect on student learning outcomes (Fritz, 2002; Hattie, 2011) as it fosters development of students' skills in thinking and writing (Bonwell & Sunderland, 1996; Neubauer, 2011; Zepke & Leach, 2010) and deep learning and learning autonomy (Gibbs & Coffey, 2004; Morgan, Martin, Howard, & Mihalek, 2005).

Positive links between learning engagement and outcomes are also supported by research into how the brain learns. Research with university students shows significant levels of retention and understanding being achieved through active approaches to learning that include discussion, learning by doing and teaching each other, compared to lecturing and demonstration, and individual student tasks such as reading (Sousa, 1995). This reflects the socio-cultural perspective "where learning is regarded as a social activity [...,] strongly influenced by [... active] engagement and participation" (Walsh, 2012, p. 1). Learning is especially

2. http://www.heaacademy.ac.uk/ research/surveys/united-kingdom-engagement-survey-ukes

enhanced when a student‘s current knowledge and understanding is scaffolded by an expert teacher (Larsen-Freeman, 2000; Vygotsky, 1962; Wells, 1999).

Despite the strength of theory and empirical research demonstrating the power of classroom discourse as a pedagogical tool and its critical role in improving the quality of the student learning experience, there is a widespread problem with student passivity and disengagement in the classroom, which is largely attributed to poor and restrictive tutor-student interaction (Hardman & Abd-Kadir, 2010; Herrmann, 2013; Rocca, 2010). Classroom discourse has been shown to be dominated by lengthy tutor monologues and recitations, characterised by short, quick-paced and closed question-answer sequences (Boyle, 2010; De Klerk, 1995, 1997; Hardman, 2015). Such teacher-led recitation often takes the prototypical form of a three-part exchange (Sinclair & Coulthard, 1992), consisting of an *initiation*, usually in the form of a tutor closed or recall question, a student *response,* which tends to be brief, and a *feedback* move, which is usually in the form of a low-level evaluation of the student's response, such as ‘good’ and ‘well done’.

Such strict Initiation-Response-Feedback (IRF) teaching exchanges have been shown to place severe limitations on the contributions that students can make to the interaction and, hence, stifling their development of communicative competence (Garton, 2012; Nunan, 1987; Van Lier; 1996). It is “an unproductive interactional format’ whereby students are “not provided opportunities for developing the complex interactional, linguistic and cognitive knowledge required in ordinary conversation” (Kasper, 2001, p. 518). The classroom discourse is controlled and dominated by the tutor at the expense of student active participation and less creative language use (Walsh, 2012).

It is recognised that there are numerous reasons for the pervasive use of the restrictive IRF teaching exchange. For example, there is a tendency by teachers to focus on the acquisition of knowledge as opposed to an acquisition of skills and attitudes, often reinforced by exam-oriented assessments (Bonwell & Sutherland, 1996). However in the case of language classrooms, open and high quality interaction is critical to how learners acquire a second language and

operate as effective second language users. For example, as Macaro, Graham, and Woore (2016) argue, “pedagogy should be about developing language skills and therefore the teaching of linguistic knowledge (e.g. knowledge of grammar and vocabulary) should act in the service of skill development, not as an end in itself” (p. 5).

This paper stresses the critical role of classroom talk as a pedagogical tool and argues that tutors can be helped to enhance their classroom interactional competence and open-up classroom discourse so as to promote an active, collaborative and cognitively-engaging learning experience for their students.

2. Opening-up classroom discourse

This paper largely draws on the concept of dialogic teaching (Alexander, 2008), which concerns itself with high quality teaching and learning talk. Dialogic teaching is based on a set of principles, which are as follows (Alexander, 2008, p. 28):

- *collective*: teachers and students address learning tasks together, whether as a group or as a class, rather than in isolation;
- *reciprocal*: teachers and students listen to each other, share ideas and consider alternative viewpoints;
- *supportive*: students articulate their ideas freely, without fear of embarrassment over ‘wrong’ answers; they help each other to reach common understandings;
- *cumulative*: teachers and students build on their own and each other’s ideas and chain them into coherent lines of thinking and enquiry;
- *purposeful*: teachers plan and facilitate dialogic teaching with particular educational goals in view.

The emphasis of dialogic teaching on safe, open, jointly-constructed, cumulative and extended classroom discourse is also highlighted in the recent work of Macaro et al. (2016). They view high quality oral interaction as essential for language learning, where there should be substantial student turns – i.e. learners are encouraged to ask questions, to speak spontaneously and to say things without a fear of making mistakes – and appropriate feedback from tutors. This view in turn reflects two major second language acquisition theories, namely the Output Hypothesis that advocates spontaneous speech production in real communication (Swain, 1995), and the Interaction Hypothesis that supports the view that negotiation of meaning leads to better comprehension and facilitates language acquisition (Gass, Mackey, & Pica, 1998).

In other words, high quality classroom talk requires the loosening up of the tutor's control and breaking out of the limitations of the IRF recitation script through higher order questions and formative feedback strategies. Such question and feedback techniques are presented in Table 1 and Table 2 below, some of which are adapted from the work of Michaels and O'Connor (2012) on academically-productive talk in science teaching. Their feedback techniques are, to a great extent, deemed transferable to all subject disciplines.

It is proposed that tutors can open up the *initiation* move by including a balance of closed/narrow and open/authentic questions and encouraging student-initiated questions. Suggested question techniques and descriptions are presented in Table 1 below.

Table 1. Question techniques and descriptions

Question techniques	**Descriptions**
Tutor closed questions	Tutor asks a closed question – allows one possible response
Tutor open question	Tutor asks an open question – allows various responses (e.g. What's your opinion?, 'What do you think?', 'How would you…?', How do you feel…?')
Student question	Student asks the tutor or another student a question

These question techniques can be used purposefully so as to generate and facilitate communication, encourage student participation, engage students with the teaching content, increase their understanding, develop thinking skills and help to formatively assess student learning.

It is also proposed that tutors can open up the *feedback* move so as to probe and build on students' contributions. Suggested feedback techniques and descriptions are presented in Table 2 below.

Table 2. Feedback techniques and descriptions

Feedback techniques	**Descriptions**
Tutor acknowledge/ reject	Tutor accepts (or rejects) a student's contribution (e.g. nod, repeat answer, 'yes', 'ok', 'thank you', 'not quite the answer', 'incorrect')
Tutor praise	Tutor praises a student's contribution 'well done', 'good', brilliant'
Tutor comment	Tutor remarks, summarises, reformulates, builds on and/or transforms a student's contribution
Tutor redirect question	Tutor redirects the same (preceding) question to a different student
Tutor expand question	Tutor stays with the student and asks to say more (e.g. 'What do you mean by that?', 'Can you put that in another way?', 'Can you give an example?')
Tutor add-on question	Tutor asks students to add on to another student's contribution (e.g. 'Can anyone add on to …?', 'Can anyone follow on from…?', 'Any comments on that?')
Tutor why question	Tutor stays with the same student and asks for evidence or reasoning (e.g. 'Why do you think that?', 'What is your evidence?')
Tutor revoice	Tutor verifies his/her understanding of a student's contribution (e.g. 'So, are you saying…?', 'Then I guess you think…')
Tutor agree-disagree question	Tutor asks if a student or students agree or disagree with another student's contribution (e.g. 'Do you agree/disagree and why?'), 'Does anyone want to respond to that?')
Tutor rephrase question	Tutor asks a student to repeat or reformulate his/her own or another student's contribution (e.g. 'Can you say it again?', 'Who can repeat what X just said in their own words?', 'What did your partner say?', 'Who can explain what X means when she says…?')
Tutor challenge question	Tutor provides a challenge or a counter-example (e.g. 'Does it always work that way?', 'What if…?', 'Is that always true?')

These feedback techniques can help to open up and extend classroom discourse, facilitate knowledge cumulation and a shared understanding, and encourage genuine communication and critical thinking. For example, tutor acknowledgement and praise are commonly used to create a supportive classroom. Tutor redirect, rephrase and add-on questions foster active listening and promote inclusivity and collaboration. Tutor 'why?', agree-disagree and challenge questions help to develop critical thinking.

3. Classroom discourse analysis – illustration

The employment of some of the suggested question and feedback techniques is illustrated below in a transcript taken from a Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages seminar attended by international students in the Education department of a UK university. This extract forms part of whole class teaching which directly follows student discussions in small groups.

Table 3. Extract 1

1	T:	OK, I think we've had plenty of time to talk about it, so let's just see if we can get some kind of ideas about what is the value of the course book for students from your own experience as students?
2	S1:	I think they made the knowledge part more visible. You can look at the words (inaudible 00:20:46) pictures.
3	T:	What do you think? This is what you think, it makes the knowledge point more visible.
4	T:	Any comments on that? Can you see what Wendy is trying to say there?
5	SS:	[silence]
6	T:	Tell us more about this making it visible now, Wendy. In what way is it more visible?
7	S1:	Maybe when they listen to the part they don't quite know, maybe the material can make it more visible.
8	T:	Yes, Lin, go on…
9	S2:	Just like you give us a hand out, it helps us follow what you are saying.
10	T:	So that's the support, that's kind of what you are saying. It's good support to the teaching point
11	T:	Any others, good, any more?

Extract 1 presents a teaching exchange consisting of a stretch of turns, making good use of open questions and a range of types of feedback techniques. The exchange begins with an open question allowing for various responses from students and encouraging them to reflect on and connect to their real-life experiences. A fairly extended response, containing an explanation, is provided by a student (Wendy) in S.2. Rather than moving on immediately to a next student, the tutor stays with Wendy and tries to probe her further *'What do you think?'* in S.3. At the same time, he re-voices the student's response in order to verify his understanding of her contribution and to ensure that other students could hear and follow the discussion. Next, the tutor tries to open up and re-direct the discussion to other students, *'Any comments on that?'* in S.4. However, there is no student response (silence) to that open question in S.5.

The tutor does not close the discussion prematurely and instead returns to Wendy by asking her to elaborate on her previous contribution *'In what way is it more visible?'* in S.6. This is followed by a moderately detailed response from Wendy in S.7. This response seems to trigger a contribution from another student, which is highly encouraged by the tutor '*Yes, Lin, go on*' in S.8. Lin offers a comment *'Just like you give us a handout…'* in S. 9., which subsequently builds on Wendy's contribution. Lin's contribution is again followed by the tutor's re-voicing his understanding, *'that's kind of what you are saying'* in S.10. The tutor keeps the discussion going by inviting other students to contribute *'Any others...any more?'* and, simultaneously, praises the preceding students' contributions '*good'* in S.11. The praise is used as an important motivational strategy and, in combination with other feedback techniques, it reinforces the high value placed on dialogic teaching principles, resulting in high quality classroom talk.

4. Conclusion

Classroom discourse and interaction, if handled effectively and purposefully, can function as a very powerful pedagogical tool, fostering a safe, active, highly collaborative and cognitively stimulating learning experience for students.

There is a need to raise tutors' awareness of the critical role of classroom talk in teaching and learning and to enhance their classroom interactional competence. In particular, tutors should pay closer attention to their use of questions and feedback strategies and to make good use of a repertoire of these techniques that best suits their classroom context, such as in terms of class size, mixed ability group, teaching content and task types. There is also a need to make use of a balance of the teacher-centred recitations and learner-centred interactions. The latter would entail tutors' letting go of their dominance and tight control of the classroom discourse and empowering students to take charge of their own learning. Linked to this is a requirement for tutors to plan their teaching sessions carefully so as to create dialogic spaces where discussion and dialogues can purposefully take place to achieve particular educational goals.

Like tutors, students also need to develop their classroom interactional competence and become better interactants and learners. Therefore it is important for tutors to model to students effective classroom discourse practices and to provide them with ample opportunities to practise in class. This will also have a far reaching impact outside of the classroom in terms of students' transferable skills and learning autonomy.

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