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Inquiry Dialogue: A Genre for Promoting Teacher and Student Speaking in the Classroom

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Orientation

This chapter focuses on issues related to the macro skill of speaking in a specific English Language Teaching (ELT) context in Australia. The main issue concerns the opportunities that the international students have to use spoken English whilst in Australia taking English Language Intensive Courses for Overseas Students (ELICOS). These opportunities are often not as readily available as one might expect. Suggestions are presented for managing the type of talk that goes on in classrooms with a view to improving oral skills development in programmes such as these.

Background

International students face a range of difficulties in adjusting to life in their adopted English-speaking country. Recent research indicates that chief amongst these difficulties is language (Sawir 2005: 569).

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> Of all the social and academic issues and problems facing international students that are cited in recent studies - differences in learning style, culture shock, homesickness, social difficulties - the problem they themselves most often refer to is difficulties with English.

Sawir's (2005) study involved interviews to investigate the 'learning biographies' of students who had transitioned from high school in their home countries to university undergraduate study in Australia. Students reported that a significant reason for their language difficulties was their limited experiences of learning English at high school, describing these experiences as didactic in style, focusing on grammar exercises and lacking in communicative opportunities both inside and outside the classroom. Upon arrival, they did not feel prepared for the demands placed on their speaking and listening abilities in both educational and social contexts (Gibbs and Feith 2015).

In itself, this is important information for ELICOS teachers, as it is for those teaching in similar international student programmes in other English-medium countries, for it highlights the need to induct students into modes of teaching and learning that emphasise processes of building knowledge through spoken interaction (see Pang and Burri, this volume, for ideas about speaking in an EAP program). However, what makes the issue of even greater import is that students do not automatically make use of opportunities for social interaction once they arrive in their country of study. Students of lower proficiency levels tend to have greater problems interacting with their new learning, work and social communities and often congregate in same-culture groups, especially out of class, to avoid loneliness, stress, anxiety and frustration (Mendelson 2004; Sawir et al. 2012).

In Australia, added to this dilemma is the tendency for ELICOS courses to neglect oral language use in social settings outside of the classroom (Ngo et al. 2012). Further, a discussion with any ELICOS teacher about their students' out of class lives will very often raise concerns about missed opportunities to engage in a range of conversations in English that can provide valuable impetus to develop listening and speaking skills.

My own experiences of working in academic management roles in ELICOS, and most recently as a university academic conducting research in ELICOS classrooms, have allowed me the great privilege of visiting many classrooms over the past few years. Despite the pressures that many ELICOS teachers face such as weekly intakes and departures, narrowly defined syllabi based on course books, and the insecurity of casual employment, teachers persevere and do wonderful things for their students. However, one area that presents itself as an opportunity for ongoing professional development

is improving the quality and quantity of speaking opportunities for students inside the English language classroom (see also Tante, this volume).

Classroom Talk: Developing Speaking and Thinking

It is now widely accepted practice in many language teaching contexts to integrate the macro skills into lessons (Grabe and Zhang 2013). However, there is still a clear opportunity to develop pedagogical innovations for improving the quality of the classroom talk between teacher and students as these lessons unfold. Recently, I analysed a large database of second language classroom talk (Chappell 2014a) from lessons that met the criteria for Dogme ELT's conversation-driven methodology, which was born out of teachers' misgivings that their language lessons relied too much on materials and not enough on genuine communication. These materials are said to hinder such communication and take the focus away from learner language, which should constitute a large part of the syllabus (Meddings and Thornbury 2009). The underpinning of Dogme ELT is the conversations between the students and the teacher from which the learner language emerges, which is then the focus of instruction. Despite finding significant amounts of discussion between students, I noticed that much of the talk was transactional. That is, it involved brief interactions with short turns aimed at sharing information rather than developing dialogue. There was also a surprising amount of talk by the teacher that functioned to tightly control what the students could say and do. I refer to this teacher talk as recitation and elicitation (Chappell 2014a: 4), citing Alexander's (2008: 110) definition:

> [t]he accumulation of knowledge and understanding through questions designed to test or stimulate recall of what has been previously encountered, or to cue students to work out the answer from clues in the question.

A kind of talk that was relatively scarce was inquiry dialogue, which is a type of classroom talk that involves longer stretches of discourse structured in a manner that promotes common understanding and inquiry (Chappell 2014a). Inquiry dialogue also encourages wondering about new and alternative viewpoints and meanings, playing with possibilities and building on one another's contributions in order to develop knowledge and mutual understanding. The main purpose of inquiry dialogue is to engage others

in one's attempt to understand an issue. It is therefore different to other more prosaic forms of spoken exchanges involving information. Inquiry dialogue can be an essential part of integrated skills lessons such as those common in ELICOS; for example, by building content and background knowledge before a listening task, by developing shared knowledge and mutual understanding during a writing preparation task, and by expanding understandings after a focused reading task. It can occur as whole-class talk, or in small groups or pairs. Inquiry dialogue is important for extending the opportunities for students to engage meaningfully with each other, developing their knowledge and understandings as well as their oral/aural language abilities.

Inquiry Dialogue and ELICOS Classrooms

I recently analysed data from ten lessons conducted in ten different ELICOS colleges that offer academically oriented courses to adult international students from a range of backgrounds who were preparing for tertiary level study, mostly at the university. Their proficiency levels were relatively high (B2/C1 on the Common European Framework of Reference) and in general they had clearly defined needs centred on achieving a proficiency level in all skills that would allow them entry to their desired university programme. It would not be unreasonable to expect their lessons to include a significant amount of discussion and inquiry dialogue involving the development of content knowledge, which is a common activity in Australian university tutorials and seminars, at the same time as developing greater proficiency in oral/aural skills.

Overall, there was a surprising display of diversity in teaching methodology whilst at the same time an unanticipated amount of uniformity in the patterns of classroom talk, exhibiting a lack of opportunity for students to engage with each other using inquiry dialogue. Recitation and elicitation, involving the rhetorical structures of initiation-response-evaluation (IRE) and initiation-response-feedback (IRF) patterns, were the most common types of talk. These patterns of classroom talk tend to have the overriding purpose of requiring individual students to provide an answer to the teacher's question so that he/she can evaluate it positively or negatively (usually by phatic praise such as 'good' or a negative evaluation such as 'No. Anyone else?') or provide feedback on the answer already known to the teacher (often affirming it and commenting or eliciting further). The data revealed

that it is common for teachers to use both kinds of talk (IRE and IRF) in the one episode such as in the example below.

Initiation	T	What is this 'ed' called?
Response	S1	Suffix
Evaluation	T	Suffix. Very good. On a roll we are. Very good.
Initiation	T	Over observed? [What part of speech is over observed?]
Response	S2	Adjective.
Feedback	T	How do you know? How do you know it's an adjective?
Response	S2	'ed'
Evaluation	T	'ed' good.
Initiation	T	What is 'ed' called?
Response	S2	Suffix
Evaluation	T	The suffix. Good.

There were also instances where the opportunity for inquiry dialogue presented itself, yet the linguistic choices of the teacher revealed other aims. For example, in one lesson after the students had worked in groups discussing possible research experiments they could undertake into social networking, the teacher moved to a whole-class discussion format to enable the students to share their ideas with the class. The teacher stated the aim in an interview prior to the lesson: 'I'm trying to captivate them by getting them to talk and think'.

The students proposed five topics for inquiry. Each of these was a potential inquiry episode where the talk could open up to meet the criteria for inquiry dialogue noted above. Yet, the way the teacher managed the turns at talk prevented opportunities for this to occur. She initiated the inquiry (with one exception), nominated who should talk, narrowed and then closed the topic of inquiry. She also used restatements to clarify what students had said and corrected several errors in pronunciation or word form. There were several overlaps, all initiated by the teacher. This resulted in a different speaking activity with a different pedagogic aim than was expected. The sequence of talk resembled a complex set of IRF and IRE sequences where the aim was most likely to require students to provide a relatively brief answer that would not be the focus of extended inquiry but would coax the students to display their ideas to the teacher and class.

In contrast, in another lesson a different teacher appeared to have very clear aims and managed the classroom talk in such a way that those aims were at least partially met. This activity had the same interaction sequence as the previous one. Small groups discussed whether or not they agreed

it is possible to make loyal and sincere friends on social networking sites. The teacher then moved the interaction pattern to a whole-class discussion, which was quite different in nature to the one described above. In this inquiry episode, the teacher began by initiating inquiry and then gave the students far more control in: executing the inquiry acts of proposing topics and taking turns at talk without her lead, extending the topic of inquiry, making humorous asides, initiating inquiry, narrowing the focus of inquiry, building on one another's contributions and even closing the topic of inquiry (see Episode 1, Table 7.1).

The outcome was far greater involvement of the students in inquiry dialogue evidenced by the significant overlaps in talk, the accumulation of ideas through building on other contributions to the talk and a degree of freedom given to the students to initiate a new turn and propose a new topic for inquiry. By encouraging the students to take the initiative and allowing them to manage the talk by initiating, building on and closing inquiry acts, the teacher provided fertile opportunities for the learning of 'complex and sophisticated interactional work' (Garton 2012: 42).

As is evident in Episode 1, there is an important relationship between classroom language use and teaching and learning goals. When they are in synergy, language learning opportunities are maximised. When there is a divergence between the two, there are missed opportunities for language learning (Walsh 2002). Episode 1 illustrates how inquiry dialogue was achieved at a particular point in time for one class. Inquiry dialogue is a genre of classroom talk that can be developed over time provided the teacher's goals for that episode of the lesson are clear (Chappell 2014b). However, managing the talk of the classroom to achieve a goal-oriented sequence of interactions needs to be achieved through explicit instruction in and modelling of inquiry dialogue. This idea of goal-directed classroom activity focused on oral skills that takes place through inquiry dialogue is explained further in the following section.

A Genre Perspective

Up to this point, the goings on in the lessons discussed in this chapter have been described rather loosely as activities, genres, episodes, sequences of talk and sequences of interactions. There is a benefit, however, in being more explicit and precise about how lessons and elements of lessons are referred to. The use of the term *genre* has not been accidental; in fact, it is a very

Table 7.1   Episode 1: Promoting inquiry dialogue

Classroom Talk	Analysis
Student 5: OK. My opinion is it's difficult but it's not impossible to find a er a good er person	Initiate and propose topic for inquiry (4)
Teacher: Hm Hm	
Student 5: from the Internet. Even if you are in classroom, how do you know if I'm not a [3 attempts to pronounce psycho killer]	
Unknown Students: Psycho killer	
Student 5: Psycho killer [class laughs loudly]	
Unknown Student: I didn't know!	Humorous asides
Teacher: We've all been secretly thinking that since the day we met you. [laughter]	
Student 5: You can you can er see just my just my face and you can see oh my clothes are you I I can see his behaviour OK that's all a simple guy you know	
Teacher: So you so put on an act	Narrow focus of inquiry (4)
Student 3: What's your opinion?	
Student 5: So my opinion is it's possible to find. It's difficult, but it's not impossible	
Teacher: Yes. Even in real life people can put on an act	
Student 6: It's really important the way that one people behave one the person behaves so you can er realise from that if you are just chatting if you have{	Extend topic of inquiry (4)
Student 3: {Yeah it's more difficult	Build on other's contribution
Teacher: {It's more difficult	Build on other's contribution
Student 6: {So you can find friends but not loyal or really sincere friends	Close topic of inquiry—conclusion (4)
Student 3: OK. Another point. What is loyalty? How can you define loyalty? [laughter]	Propose topic for inquiry (5)
Teacher: Oh! That's a deep philosophical question	
Student 3: Yes it is. It's a complicated topic	

useful term when the discussion is centred on types of talk and goal-directed classroom activity.

In Australian language education, genres are commonly referred to as 'staged, goal-oriented social processes' (Martin 1997: 13) to reflect the production of spoken or written text that has a purpose and a desired outcome. Genres are not one-off events; rather, they represent patterns of social activity involving language that have evolved in particular cultures over time (for a discussion of genre-based writing instruction, see Villas Boas, this volume). They provide an 'economy of effort' (Berger and Luckman 1966: 71) whereby people avoid the need to make completely new language choices each time they undertake a socially and culturally established activity. Expected stages of meaning and ways of expressing those meanings unfold in fairly predictable ways to achieve the goals. This is the case for many social activities in which people engage as members of their culture, including, for example, telling stories, recounting past happenings, instructing others in how to do something, explaining how something works, and of course, carrying out many classroom activities. In this sense, it is possible to refer to a 'classroom genre' where activities and interactions unfold in predictable patterns. Indeed, the IRE and IRF sequences are well established in many educational contexts and make up the majority of stages of teaching and learning activity in many classroom lessons. However, this chapter is about moving beyond these typical sequences to expand the potential for students to engage in meaningful and extended episodes of talk; therefore, attention will turn to the genre of inquiry dialogue.

Using the concept of classroom genres provides an opportunity to be explicit about the synergy between the goals of an activity and the type of classroom talk best suited to working towards achieving those goals. Providing a taxonomy of classroom genres and types of talk is well beyond the scope of this chapter but would be a worthwhile research programme to pursue in many ELT contexts. For present purposes, however, it is helpful to consider the implications that goal-oriented classroom activity has for promoting oral skills in classrooms such as those found in ELICOS programs as well as in similar programmes in other international contexts.

Inquiry Dialogue Genre

Spoken classroom genres are identifiable by the different stages of meaning that accumulate whilst the classroom activity is being carried out. These stages are distinguished by a variation in the language used by the teacher and students from one stage to the next. Each stage represents a shift in

the way language contributes to achieving the overall purpose of the spoken activity—the goal of the genre. The product of the activity is the spoken text, which is a short-lived instance of language use, unless it is recorded and transcribed, as in the case of the examples presented in this chapter. Successful enactment of a particular genre is the accomplishment of each of the unfolding, functional stages of the text. Returning to Episode 1, the key stages of this inquiry dialogue are:

Initiate inquiry > Propose topic for inquiry > Develop topic > (Close topic) where > indicates a shift to a new stage and parentheses ( ) indicate an optional stage. This is a 'serial structure' (Martin and Rose 2008) in which each stage depends on the preceding one and where the series is repeated in slightly varying patterns five times. Individual stages can consist of a series of spoken utterances or even a single utterance. An analysis of the rhetorical structure of this activity is presented below. In the interest of space, only the stages are listed. Examples of the type of language each stage consists of are presented in the final column. Inquiry acts are numbered from 1 to 6, and those stages marked with an asterisk (*) are initiated by a student. Those not marked with an asterisk are initiated by the teacher. LRE is a language-related episode involving an intervention by the teacher to clarify meaning, correct an error in grammar, pronunciation, etc.

Ways to Promote Inquiry Dialogue in the Classroom

From the stages of the text in Table 7.2, it is clear that the teacher and students are engaged in a form of inquiry aimed at considering alternative viewpoints to develop knowledge and mutual understanding. Within each rhetorical stage, there is a variety of strategic considerations that the teacher needs to make in order to achieve the outcome of that stage and thus be able to move to the next. Based on the range of successful activities that I have analysed across a variety of classrooms, I can suggest the following procedure for teachers to follow in order to successfully conduct dialogic inquiry in their classrooms. Importantly, notice that the utterances used to extend the talk are often *not* in the form of questions (in the interrogative form). Inquiry dialogue makes extensive use of statements that function to ponder over and explore possibilities (see Chappell 2014a for more details).

Table 7.2 Rhetorical structure of an example of inquiry dialogue

Inquiry act	Rhetorical stage	Example
Initiate inquiry (1)	Initiate New Inquiry	What do you think about …?
Propose topic for inquiry (1)	Propose Topic	I think that …
Clarify concept (restatement)	LRE	(Recast)
Narrow focus of inquiry (1)	Develop Topic	OK. Sure. So you (summarise proposal)
Error correction (grammatical)	LRE	(Recast)
Initiate inquiry (2)	Initiate New Inquiry	And how about (names a student)?
Propose topic for inquiry (2)*	Propose Topic	I don't think … actually, for me, …
Close topic of inquiry—conclusion (2)	Close Topic	Yeah, (concluding statement)
Propose topic for inquiry (3)*	Propose Topic	My opinion is different. I think that …
Extend topic of inquiry (3)*	Develop Topic	But do you think …
Extend topic of inquiry (3)*		
Propose topic for inquiry (4)*	Propose Topic	OK. My opinion is, it's difficult …
Narrow focus of inquiry (4)*	Develop Topic	But what's your opinion? It's really important (re-state proposal)
Narrow focus of inquiry (4)		
Extend topic of inquiry (4)*		
Build on other's contribution*		
Build on other's contribution		
Close topic of inquiry—conclusion (4)*	Close Topic	So, you can (summarise topic)
Propose topic for inquiry (5)*	Propose Topic	OK. Another point.
Close topic of inquiry (6)	Close Topic	It is (summarise and conclude)

Initiate Inquiry (Getting started)

- Ensure all students are familiar with the topic of inquiry. The topic may be generated from an informal talk at the beginning of class (a highly effective way to initiate inquiry dialogue) or it may be built up through other classroom activities such as reading or viewing multimedia.
- Formulate a question or a statement that stimulates students to think about possibilities (e.g. 'What do you think about this lifestyle' or 'I wonder how we could solve this problem').
- Allow time for students to consider their responses.

- Encourage a whole-class discussion. This is important in early stages to allow the teacher to model and demonstrate inquiry dialogue. Different interaction patterns (pairs, small groups) can follow in later lessons once the students are familiar with this type of activity.

Propose Topic for Inquiry (Expanding the opportunities for all students to contribute)

- Encourage a response that motivates inquiry and that does not close off further contributions from others. That is, the response will usually not be absolute but will involve hedging, modality, lack of certainty and the like: e.g. 'It might be a little excessive', or 'I'm not sure, but perhaps we could look at the use of wind farms', or 'I wonder whether people are the problem'.
- It is important that the teacher allows the students time to sort out their thoughts and does not jump in to provide feedback or evaluate the response at this stage (i.e. avoid the temptation to turn this into an IRF or IRE sequence).
- A key step here is to encourage the students to 'bid' for a turn at talk, moving the locus of control from the teacher to the whole group. The teacher can use eye contact, gestures and short commands to encourage group participation and contributions from individuals.
- The teacher manages the talk in this stage, possibly by controlling who contributes when and in what way.
- The focus is on using language to open up the dialogue; thus, the teacher should explicitly model the kinds of statements and questions that achieve this.

Narrow Topic of Inquiry (Focusing the talk on a specific issue—optional stage)

- The teacher (although students can also lead this stage) focuses the topic or theme by summarising, e.g. 'OK, so you think that we should build more wind farms. I wonder how that might help'. The teacher might also focus on linguistic aspects such as vocabulary, e.g. 'OK. There are two things you said there [writes on board: bullet point 'nuclear energy'] Everybody. Oat was talking about energy from the sun. What do we call that?'

Develop Topic (Exploring the topic further)

- Encourage students to wonder about/ponder over other possibilities using previous contributions from others to extend the talk. This is a good time to model how to 'think together' and develop cumulative talk, e.g. 'Jan said we should charge more fees. How about this for an additional idea—we could ….?', or 'Wind farms. Yes, great idea, and also maybe we could develop more hydro plants'.

Close Topic (Concluding/Rounding-off the sequence)

- When the discussion has developed to the point where a new topic should be introduced, the teacher can use signals such as 'OK. Let's move on to talk about …'. Try not to use set phrases of praise such as 'Good' as these become unnecessary signals of teacher control of the talk. Encourage the students to 'bid' for the opportunity to close the topic, e.g. by having them summarise the main point of the previous topic: 'So you say that you can find friends, but not loyal or really sincere friends. OK, I'd like to move the topic to …'

Initiate Inquiry or Propose New Topic for Inquiry

- Depending on how the sequence has concluded, the teacher can either shift the focus entirely to a new context for speaking (which would usually be done in a new lesson) or initiate inquiry for a topic related to the current one.

Conclusion

This chapter presents an innovation in the teaching of speaking in the language classroom. It presents a teaching alternative to classrooms that are beleaguered by excessive amounts of teacher talk and low-quality student talk. Because the talk that goes on in language classrooms is fleeting—here one second and gone the next—it is a difficult resource for the teacher to manage. The main contention of this chapter is that teachers can manage the quality of the talk that occurs in their language lessons by thinking about the overall aims of a speaking activity and related stages of meaning it will move through. Inquiry dialogue is all about keeping the interaction moving forward, building on each other's ideas and developing cumulative talk. There are key rhetorical stages for inquiry dialogue, and through

carefully selecting the most effective forms of utterances that will open up, rather than shut down the talk, the teacher can model and gradually hand over to students the management of the inquiry dialogue.

Questions for Reflection

1. Think about a recent class you observed or taught. How much of the talk was IRE or IRF in nature? What teaching or learning purposes do you think it fulfilled?
2. What difficulties do you think teachers may face in implementing an inquiry dialogic approach in their language classes? Thinking about your own teaching context, what difficulties and challenges might you face? How might you overcome them?
3. Think of a lesson you taught recently. Reflect on the extent to which it included steps for modelling, initiating and sustaining inquiry dialogue. How might these steps have affected the lesson? How might they be incorporated in future lessons?

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