

Talking to Think in Small Group and Whole-Class Discussion

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Although small group work is popular in L2 classrooms, especially in contrast to teacher-fronted discussion, research has raised questions about the effectiveness of peer-to-peer talk in developing academic discourse. To investigate the issue, I carried out an action research study in a set of English seminars taught at a Japanese university. Data included student comments as well as audio recordings of whole-class discussion that were analyzed qualitatively, delineating patterns of interaction and quality of expression. Findings suggest that while small groups offered reduced pressure and opportunities for friendly collaboration, teacher-guided discussion was critical to supplement peer talk and develop sustained engagement with academic discourse.

本研究では、学級全体や学生の少人数グループにおける発話の仕組みについて追求してきた。少人数グループでの発話活動は一般的である反面、学術的な力をつける事ができないと言う指摘もある。この課題を研究するため、大学レベルの英語ゼミにおけるアクションリサーチを行なった。データには、学生のコメント・学級で録音した会話等も含まれている。研究データの分析により、話し方の仕組みにおける2つの集団それぞれのパターンや考え方が見られた。少人数グループでは、プレッシャーを感じることなく学生同士が協力して発話活動を行えるが、それを補い、学術的な言語使用の力をつけるには、教師指導のクラスディスカッションを取り入れることが重要であると判明した。

According to a sociocultural understanding of learning, students acquire language by participating in sustained, content-rich discussion in the classroom (Mercer, 2016; Wells, 2015). This situated engagement is critical for L2 acquisition and is particularly relevant to university classrooms, given the limited opportunities in many high schools to use English communicatively to construct and exchange ideas (Kikuchi & Brown,

2009). One of the central aims of the tertiary EFL classroom is thus to promote active participation and, in this effort, many teachers rely on small group activity. Research suggests, however, that peer talk, while popular and potentially effective, does not always promote expressive skills (Mercer & Littleton, 2007), whereas teacher-guided dialog, also difficult to implement, may be effective in stimulating critical thinking (Reznitskaya, 2012). In hopes of better understanding the issue, I undertook an action research investigation of student attitudes toward discussion in both small group and whole-class contexts. Data analysis employed qualitative principles of interpretive inquiry (Patton, 2015), and findings suggest that students were positive about small group talk but also endorsed whole-class discussion. Analysis of audio recordings found both disjuncture and collaboration in small group work and more academic accountability (Michaels & O'Connor, 2015) in whole-class discussion.

Literature Review

There has been a great deal of research on peer talk in EFL classrooms, with many studies showing positive effects of small group interaction (e.g., Johnson & Johnson, 1999; Kato, 2016; Webb, 2009; Yu & Lee, 2015). Peer talk is seen as an ideal means to maximize the negotiation of meaning, which increases comprehensible input (Long, 2014; Lightbown & Spada, 2006) as well as pushed output (Swain, 2000). It is widely held that talk among learners creates a positive social atmosphere while avoiding the “lockstep” practice of teacher-fronted instruction (Long & Porter, 1985, p. 208). Group work builds best on an information gap among participants, allowing active and authentic negotiation (Webb, 2009; Willis, 1996) and focused attention (Robinson, 2011), although success depends upon reciprocal participation and careful task design (Johnson & Johnson, 1999).

A sociocultural perspective also views peer interaction in strongly positive terms, because “what is experienced in a social setting becomes harnessed as individual cognition” (Palincsar, Marcum, Fitzgerald, & Sherwood, 2017, p.1). The interaction

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among speakers working collaboratively on a task is seen to facilitate linguistic development (Donato, 1994), because learners engaged in shared activity appropriate new voices and identities (Pavlenko & Lantolf, 2000), building knowledge and skills collaboratively (Wells, 2015). Peer interaction is considered a primary locus of learning vocabulary and structure (Nystrand, 2006). Although the teacher is conventionally considered the source of expertise, learners may actually offer more “effective” and accessible language “expertise” (Brooks & Swain, 2009, pp. 79-80), and peer talk may promote more acquisition than teacher-fronted instruction (Guk & Kellogg, 2007), with more scaffolding taking place in group interaction than in teacher-fronted talk (Storch, 2017, p. 74). It is learners not teachers, the argument goes, who “have most control over their language development” (Long, 2014, p. 24).

At the same time, research has raised questions about the overall effectiveness of small group discussion. Storch (2002), for example, pointed out that not all groups are created equal. Students always negotiate social relationships while discussing ideas, so that when group dynamics are balanced “in terms of equality and mutuality,” a shared orientation results in successful learning, but when peer interaction is characterized by dominance or passivity, little acquisition takes place (Storch, 2002, p. 147). Consequently, Storch recommended that teachers always monitor the interactional dynamics of group discussion to ensure that negotiation takes place. Interestingly, there is colloquial evidence that many students do not like group work, although teachers generally endorse it as good for students (Taylor, 2011).

Furthermore, there are significant reservations about the value of group work to engage reasoning and argument. Mercer and Littleton (2007), for example, contended that in many cases, students who work in groups do not always talk collaboratively: “Even when children are set joint tasks, their interactions are rarely productive” (p. 26) in generating critical thinking (see also Hardman, 2008; Reznitskaya, 2012) or eliciting academically accountable talk (Michaels & O’Connor, 2015) promoting what Alexander (2010) called learning discourse. Rather, teacher-fronted discussion employs such strategies as recasts and clarifying questions to extend reasoning and strengthen argument, collaboratively engaging critical thinking and accountable talk (Gibbons, 2009).

In many Asian contexts, small group work is associated with communicative language pedagogy, which teachers rely on to challenge widespread passivity. Li, Zheng, Tang, and Sang (2015), for example, found that the frequency of talk increased with small groups, and Kato (2016) pointed out that many EFL teachers employ small groups as a class management tool. Bagherzadeh and Farhesh (2014) reported that

pairwork positively influenced student attitudes, so that “the more EFL teachers [took] advantage of pair work. . . the higher the motivation of the student” (p. 6). Harumi (2011) similarly argued that small group work is a culturally acceptable means to facilitate active participation.

Method

To investigate differences between small group and whole-class discussion, I carried out a small-scale action research study (see Burns, 2010) drawing on principles of reflective practice (Walsh, 2011). The scope of investigation included student attitudes as well as discursive practices, and the goal was to document not only what students thought about expressing ideas in English but also how they actually talked in small group and whole-class contexts. The study primarily involved two 1st-year advanced proficiency content-based English communication seminars that I taught at a private university in the Tokyo metropolitan area. Supplementary data was collected in two 2nd-year communication seminars. All four classes were yearlong and carried required graduation credit, with roughly 20-24 students in each. Enrollment was based upon scores on the oral component of the TOEIC test, which was used as a placement measure. Students had noticeably advanced language proficiencies, many with near-native conversational fluency. Students were academically talented and reliably enthusiastic about English study.

Opinions about small group and whole-class discussion were measured on a series of anonymous surveys, beginning with preliminary open-ended questions included on 1st-year class evaluations distributed at the end of the spring semester, and subsequently an expanded 25-item forced-choice Likert scale questionnaire also given to 1st-year students, distributed in October of the autumn semester. In addition, 10 single-item open-ended surveys were carried out across the two terms (seven in 1st-year, three in 2nd-year classes), asking what students thought about discussion, both small group and whole class. In total, over 200 open-ended comments were collected from all four classes. Care was taken not to let a concern for grades influence the data, and there was no way to tell who wrote which comment. Oral and written permission were granted prior to data collection. Students also agreed that comments should be edited slightly for grammar and readability. To measure student talk, digital audio recordings were made in seven class sessions (five 1st-year, two 2nd-year) over the two semesters, capturing both small group and whole-class interaction. Data are summarized in Appendix B.

Analysis of the surveys and audio recordings was carried out according to principles of qualitative inquiry, with the goal to generate a theoretically grounded interpretation of the data (Patton, 2015). Audio recordings were reviewed iteratively to identify

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particularly salient passages, which were compared with survey responses to construct interpretive categories. There was no attempt to determine statistical significance, nor was triangulation sought; rather, the goal was to construct a situated understanding of ways that students participated in small group and whole-class discussion, to determine which aspects went well, which did not, and for what reason. Data analysis continued until axial categories were identified and a grounded interpretation synthesized. Key findings are presented below.

Results

Comfort of Small Group Work

On the whole, there was strong agreement among students that speaking English to classmates created significant anxiety. Many said they lacked confidence and were concerned about making embarrassing mistakes in front of peers. Consequently, there was strong preference to speak in small groups. Almost all 1st-year students (91%, 39 of 43) responded on the Likert questionnaire that it was easier to express ideas in the less conspicuous position afforded by small groups. Students wrote:

I prefer to have discussion in small group because that way, I can express my ideas without feeling afraid of making mistakes. (W-20)

Small group discussion makes me convey my opinions and ideas more frequently and get ideas from another point of view. (W-16)

Small group discussions allow me to gather my ideas and build upon them...to self-reflect and figure out ideas at my own pace. (W9)

At the same time, most students agreed that the anxiety associated with addressing the whole class was an acceptable, even necessary part of language practice. A strong majority (81%, 35 of 43) agreed that the pressure generated in speaking to the class was useful to prepare for using English in the future. That is, the aspiration to speak was stronger than the anxiety it caused. There was also general agreement that whole-class talk increased motivation:

I like that every person has at least one chance to talk in front of many people. It will help us get used to making a speech in front of an audience. (SQ4-1)

Sometimes my mind goes blank in front of the class, but it is actually a kind of good pressure. (W-17)

It gives me pressure, though in the future, I will face many pressures, so class is a good place to practice. (FQ4-18)

In other words, the pressure of speaking publicly to the class was something that few students enjoyed, but nearly everyone embraced as advantageous and a pragmatically useful part of English study.

Both Is Best

Small group talk was typically framed as preparatory rehearsal for whole-class discussion. Nearly all students (96%, 41 of 43) responded that they preferred to use the discussion styles together:

The best system is the current system having time to prepare ideas before presenting in front of the class. (W-9)

SG discussion is useful because you get a wider view before you talk to the class. The comments from the class are at a higher level after SG discussion. Also, it gives you courage. (IICT-10)

I build up my opinion through small group... and sharing it with other classmates helps me to make the idea bigger or say the same meaning in appropriate vocabulary. (IICT-2)

In effect, small group discussion gave students “courage to talk” (W17) and the chance to develop ideas, which reduced the anxiety that speaking generated.

There was near universal recognition of the value of whole-class talk. Almost all students (98%, 42 of 43) agreed that teacher-fronted discussion helped expand ideas. In addition, students expressed a sense of belonging and acceptance due to the receptive class atmosphere that reassured nervous students and made expressing opinions easier over time:

At first, I was afraid of speaking in front of people because I didn't know much about my classmates, but now I'm not afraid. I know my classmates better than last semester and some people became my friend. (FIIW-10)

I used to be extremely nervous spring semester and thinking about this class every day. After the summer vacation, however, my nerves went somewhere and I don't have that feeling compared to last semester. I overcame my nervousness thanks to time and also the atmosphere in this class. (FIIW-4)

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On the whole, students felt that in teacher-fronted class discussion, they encountered new ideas and perspectives they would otherwise not have encountered, which helped them reconsider their own thoughts and opinions. In brief, students recognized through whole-class talk that other people's thoughts were tied up with their own.

Small Group Talk

Audio recordings of small group discussion reinforced the impression that peer interaction was often characterized by unproductive talk. Although small group talk was generally collaborative and highly coordinated, whole-class discussion illustrated strategies that challenged students to deepen their thinking, providing the kind of productive engagement that was not seen in small group interaction.

There were several instances when group talk was marred by unproductive dynamics that got off the rails, evident in the following excerpt with Hideo (H) and Yane (Y):

1. Y hhh okay so number two , , ,
2. s hello *thunk thunk* (student hits recorder)
3. H help me think of the parable
4. Y huh
5. H help me think of the parable
6. Y parable is like , , parable parable parable like , , people get angry hhh , when they are insulted , , (W5b, 43:00)

An intrusion occurred when the neighboring group interrupted (turn 2), but the discussion itself lacked coordination and productivity, as Hideo's commands (turns 3 and 5) generated little but confused and uncoordinated response from Yane (turns 4 and 6).

Not all small group work was ineffective, however. Some groups engaged in discussion with focus and insight. In the following excerpt, Nora (N), Hanako (H), and Sachiko (S), discussed how friendships are mediated by technology:

1. N the technology actually helps people to like, it gives the chance to=
2. H [communicate
3. N =meet new people, but like their relationships aren't as strong as
4. S face to face communication/
5. N yeah

6. H oh yeah
7. S yeah (W4b, 59:00)

The three spoke collaboratively, with enthusiasm and commitment. Both Hanako and Sachiko, for example, completed Nora's sentence (turns 2 and 4), reflecting the adoption of a shared perspective. There was explicit agreement, with three almost simultaneous "yeahs" delivered in rhythm (turns 5-7). The excerpt was taken from an 8-minute exchange in which the students generated an astonishingly coordinated discussion, with a high degree of agreement and synchronized rhythm. As the three students laughed jointly, they affirmed each other's speaking position and helped complete their partner's thoughts and ideas.

Whole-Class Interaction

There was, in general, more formality when speaking to the whole class, with expanded explication and elaborated reasoning. Interaction shifted from informal talk among friends to addressing the class in an academic tone. The difference is seen in the following excerpts. In the first, Risa (R) was trying to explain the connection between starting a business and making friends, but she struggled to articulate the point to her groupmate, Makiko (M):

1. M so the theme is , ,
2. R capitalism and, broken relationships
3. M irony , , [writing] friendship/
4. R about what we can learn/ but, I- , ,
5. M and also it says about information, like, when Erika, said that to Mark,
6. R yeah
7. M it was not written in pencil, it was written=
8. R =in ink, (W4b@12:45)

Risa was trying to connect capitalism and friendship (turn 2), but Makiko, who was taking notes (turn 3), wanted to introduce an example from the plot (turn 5), to which Risa simply agreed (turn 6). Risa's accommodation was evident when she supplied the word completing Makiko's statement (turn 8). When the discussion shifted, however, and Risa addressed the teacher before the whole class, her discourse demonstrated a

significant modification in both formality and elaboration:

1. R I had another take on the irony . . . Mark's capitalistic pursuit is what led to broken relationships, so he was trying to reach, or create a social network, that was focused on making friends, he lost his friends, as a consequence
2. D Risa what does it mean when you say his capitalistic pursuit, . . .
3. R so that kind of means you're trying to make money, you're trying, , now that I think of it, he said he didn't really care about money-
4. D right! now that you think about it (W4b@25:30)

In orienting to the teacher (D) and larger audience, Risa framed her ideas with focus, articulating the causality that she was unable to express in the small group. What is more, Risa was challenged to explain her idea (turn 2), which served as a push to rethink her earlier interpretation and propose a better reasoned answer (turn 3). As a whole, the interaction reflects a shift in discursive complexity, associated with a more elaborated, more academic style.

Discussion and Conclusion

In the analysis above, I have described how talk generated in small group discussion was limited in terms of quality and scope. The problem was not simply that students veered off topic—though that did happen. There were notable examples of collaborative discussion with a high degree of agreement and affirmation of perspective in an atmosphere that students felt comfortable with. Small group work did not, however, generate the expanded explanation evident in teacher-fronted discussion. Furthermore, challenges to substantiate claims and make reasoning explicit, evident in whole-class discussion, were not seen in small group work (at least in the current data sample), when students were talking on their own.

There is a tendency to frame peer talk in contrast to teacher-fronted instruction, which is often equated with one-way lecture. For example, Webb, Nemer, and Ing (2006) argued that teachers tend to use a “recitation approach” (p. 63), which allows few chances for student talk, a finding that is consistent with other studies of classroom discourse (Cazden, 2001). Small group talk is seen to follow principles of reciprocal dialog, and teachers are encouraged to monitor group dynamics in order to “phase out their support” (Webb et al., 2017, p. 3). This study suggests, however, that the teacher's role in engaging students dialogically was crucial to solicit and extend student talk. It was not in small groups but in teacher-fronted discourse, principally, that the potential to engage high-

level thinking was evident, when reasoning was questioned, explanation probed, and justification solicited. Small group talk generally reflected agreement and collaborative support, which was affirming (and reassuring) but not necessarily academically challenging or developmentally useful by itself.

At the same time, small group interaction served in important ways to prepare students for whole-class talk, suggesting that the two activities were mutually beneficial. Student comments point to the preparatory nature of small group discussion and the recursive way in which teacher-fronted talk developed new expectations, while patterns of whole-class discussion worked from class to class over the course of the two semesters to influence small group discourse, as students became used to the progression from small group to whole-class activity. In an important respect, small group interaction became integrally tied to whole-class talk. In other words, the two activities supported each other. The scaffolded assistance evident in teacher-fronted talk pointed students toward academic discourse, while the peer collaboration and shared agreement of small groups strengthened the social atmosphere of the class as a whole. The analytic heft of whole-class interaction tempered the fluency of peer talk, while the familiarity of peer interaction made students feel at ease in a way that carried over to make the class more relaxed and ideas subsequently easier to express. In sum, a discursive balance was established, and an interactive synthesis of both small group and whole-class discussion was reached.

Bio Data

David P. Shea received a PhD in foreign language education from The University of Georgia in 1993 and has worked in Japan since. Currently, he is Professor in the Faculty of Business & Commerce at Keio University, where he teaches a range of content-based academic English classes. He has published on FL pedagogy and intercultural pragmatics and is particularly interested in dialogic teaching.

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Appendix A Transcription Conventions

- , noticeable pause
- / rising intonation
- hhh laugh
- ??? unclear
- [overlapping
- = connected turns
- abrupt cut off
- ... excerpted from transcript
- ss students
- s individual student

Appendix B Surveys and Questionnaires

| Code | Class | Date | N |
|-------|-------|-------|----|
| W | Wed4 | 6/28 | 23 |
| IICT* | Thur | 6/29 | 21 |
| FW5 | Wed 5 | 10/11 | 20 |
| FN4 | Wed 4 | 10/25 | 20 |
| FN5 | Wed 5 | 10/25 | 17 |
| FIIW* | Wed | 10/25 | 21 |
| FIIT* | Thur | 10/26 | 20 |
| SQ4 | Wed 4 | 7/12 | 23 |
| SQ5 | Wed 5 | 7/12 | 20 |
| FQ4 | Wed4 | 10/18 | 23 |
| FQ5 | Wed5 | 10/18 | 20 |

* designates 2nd year classes

Audio Recordings

| Code | Class | Date |
|------|--------|-------|
| W4a | 1st yr | 6/28 |
| W5a | 1st yr | 6/28 |
| W4b | 1st yr | 7/5 |
| W5b | 1st yr | 7/5 |
| W4c | 1st yr | 10/4 |
| WI1a | 2nd yr | 5/24 |
| WI1b | 2nd yr | 10/25 |