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Author
Luk, Jasmine

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The Dynamics of Classroom Small Talk

Jasmine Luk
The Hong Kong Institution of Education

This paper illustrates how classroom small talk between a teacher and students constitutes a distinct interaction pattern which varies significantly from pedagogical discourse of an institutional nature such as the initiation/response/feedback (IRF) pattern described in previous literature (Mehan, 1979; Sinclair & Coulthard, 1975). By presenting a piece of extended small talk in an ESL secondary classroom in Hong Kong and contrasting it with a piece of typical teacher-orchestrated institutional classroom talk, I show how the teacher and students demonstrate more dynamic and less asymmetrical roles during small talk with clear evidence of active contributions to the exchange by the students in terms of topic setting, turn initiation, turn development, and negotiation of meaning. Features of the small talk resemble everyday social discourse. Implications of this kind of classroom talk on the learners' L2 language development are explored.

Small talk and classroom talk initially seem incongruent. Small talk is related to the notion of *phatic communion* developed by the anthropologist Malinowski (1923, cited in Coupland, 2000). The fundamental construct of phatic communion as a kind of ritualized and purposeless social interaction which aims to establish human bonds or communion has given small talk an image of being "aimless, prefatory, obvious, uninteresting, sometimes suspect and even irrelevant" (Coupland, 2000, p. 3). There seems to be a common perception of small talk as a communicative code that is non-institutional and non-strategic.

Classroom talk, on the other hand, has been characterized as a speech exchange system which is institutional in nature with highly predictable patterns. For example, the teacher is the initiator of language exchanges; the students' job is to respond to the teacher's initiation; and the teacher is the arbiter of acceptable student performance (Long, 1975). This three-part structure – teacher initiation/student reply/teacher feedback (IRF) – has been identified by Mehan (1979) and Sinclair and Coulthard (1975) as the dominant pattern in most classroom interactions. Behind this institutional discourse sequence, there are always "restrictions on who may speak, when they may speak, and sometimes in what order they may speak" (Psathas, 1995, p. 36). Therefore, the free flowing nature of small talk seems to be incongruent with formal and systematic pedagogical discourse in classroom settings. Its occurrence in classrooms may only carry a marginal function as a type of rapport-building talk which tends to take place during pre- and post-lesson phases, that is as a kind of warm up and wrap-up talk.

The present paper, however, attempts to explore the value of small talk in classroom settings. By presenting recorded excerpts showing the emergence of

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small talk between a native English-speaking teacher and her Cantonese-speaking students in a Hong Kong ESL classroom, I will show how the use of small talk results in dynamic interaction with distinct social and linguistic significance for the roles and identities of the students and teacher as language users in interethnic communication.

To illustrate how classroom small talk may differ significantly from typical institutional types of classroom discourse, I will first examine the changing perspectives on pedagogical discourse over the last two decades.

CHANGING PERSPECTIVES ON PEDAGOGICAL DISCOURSE

The identification of the IRF sequence as the unmarked or default pattern in classroom discourse (see Mehan, 1979; Sinclair & Coulthard, 1975) was a significant discovery. Analysis of classroom talk in terms of this sequential pattern, as opposed to using the Flandersian approach which counts the frequency of speech acts (see Allright, 1988; Kumaravadivelu, 1999), has better enabled classroom researchers to explain why and how certain communication behaviors emerge in the classroom (e.g., Heap, 1992).

However, a number of subsequent analyses of classroom discourse have revealed that a rigid IRF structure as a form of classroom talk is rather restrictive due to its teacher centeredness and lack of flexibility for students to negotiate meaning and express their true voices (Long, 1975; van Lier, 1996). In addition, some classroom language researchers are concerned about the gap between the rigid IRF pattern students experience in the classroom and patterns that they need to use in everyday situations outside the classroom.

Social discourse mainly differs from classroom discourse in the appearance and function of the feedback move (F-move). In classroom discourse, the F-move is essential because its prime purpose is to *evaluate* the quality (in this case the linguistic and sometimes semantic appropriateness) of the response move (R-move), in most cases produced by the students. The F-move is the major means through which students receive information about the correctness of their responses from the teacher. However, an F-move does not normally appear in social discourse, and does not perform a linguistic evaluative function as it does in classroom discourse. These features of social discourse point to the need for teachers to generate different interaction patterns in the classroom to better equip students to meet the varied demands of the less predictable, more variegated, and context-sensitive nature of everyday social discourse, as well as to enable students to experience language use with different roles and identities so that "student's initiative, independent thinking, clarity of expression, the development of conversational skills (including turn taking, planning ahead, negotiating, and arguing), and self-determination" will not be reduced (van Lier, 1996, p. 156).

In recent discussions on classroom discourse, researchers are therefore keen to explore deviations from the conventional pedagogical discourse structure and

how these deviations reveal "considerable cognitive or social significance" (Cazden, 1988, p. 53) which may contribute to effective language learning. Wells (1993), for example, argues that conventional IRF triadic sequences can be made more conducive to the co-construction of knowledge by teacher and students with an *extended feedback move* to "extend the students' answer, to draw out its significance, or to make connections with other parts of the students' total experience" (p. 30). Poole and Patthey-Chavez (1994), in their study of assisted student performance in various settings, find that *negotiations of meaning*, which usually lack the default IRF pattern and which are conducted in a setting with *peripheral institutional status* (i.e., in a computer lab with the lab assistant instead of in a formal classroom with the teacher) occur in interactions with a different student-teacher participant structure (i.e., in groups instead of teacher-fronted). Hughes and Westgate (1998), in their examination of a 30-minute teacher-led talk with a group of four five-year-old kindergarten students, find that even children this young are capable of displaying communication skills such as interpretation and speculation. They claim that this result can be achieved by the teacher allowing the students to take up *more initiating roles*, avoiding any direct evaluation of their responses, and appearing to build upon students' previous contributions. Hughes and Westgate urge teachers to avoid playing the role of "expert-evaluator-examiner" (p. 179) but to give support to the students with a more collaborative tone. These findings reveal that deviations from the default IRF format, by mitigating the asymmetrical power relationship between teachers and students, have promise for inducing more authentic and creative uses of the target language in language classrooms.

In recent decades, the increasingly complex and unruly structure of classroom discourse is gaining representation in many current classroom studies of English language instruction in Hong Kong (Lin, 1997, 1999, 2000; Pennington, 1999a, 1999b). With the promotion of the Communicative Approach to language learning, classroom dynamics are beginning to change and studies are now more thoroughly investigating the effects of less structured discourse on students' language output. The characteristics of this less structured classroom talk resemble those of daily conversations in being "locally managed, party-administered, and interactionally controlled" (Sacks, Schegloff, & Jefferson, 1974, p. 727). In particular, teachers cannot overlook the power of students in intervening in the direction and structure of the discourse (Candela, 1999). Pennington (1999a) shows that Hong Kong secondary school students attempt to move

> the classroom agenda off institutional purposes and towards their own agenda of creating a local discourse in which they can find a place [to challenge] rules of appropriate behavior and assert their *right* to speak their mother tongue in the face of official English-medium instruction (p. 107).

In other words, students may not be satisfied with being given only opportunities for institutional talk in the English language classroom.

With the emergence of a sociocultural model of education and increasing

awareness of the classroom as a *sociocultural ecology* (Erickson, 1996) with multiple voices and constantly adjusted status and power between teacher and students, it is becoming more and more difficult to expect classroom discourse to be patterned neatly and predominantly under the control of teachers.

NON-INSTITUTIONAL SMALL TALK

It is against this backdrop of changing perspectives on classroom discourse that small talk finds a place. As a register, small talk functions to promote what Schneider (1988) calls sociopragmatic competence in language learning. He notes that small talk is rule-governed linguistic behavior in terms of word choice, topic selection, and topic linkage. As argued by Coupland (2000), small talk is socio-linguistically significant because it provides the best everyday language data, it highlights the centrality of the relational function of talk, and it often reveals the changing orientations, framings, and footings of the speakers.

Though it takes place in an institutional setting, the classroom small talk I explore in this paper is non-institutional in nature. By non-institutional, I mean that it involves informal interactions between teachers and students that are not intended for formal pedagogical purposes. In educational settings, this type of talk has also been referred to as *social talk*, which, according to Biggs and Edwards (1994), has much in common with open-ended interactions in its function of developing "mutual trust and respect between students and teacher [in a] friendly non-threatening atmosphere" (p. 86).

Apart from this function of forging positive interpersonal relationships, small talk also has potential in developing learners' interactional competence. Van Lier (1988) proposes a framework to capture four different types of interaction in the classroom based on different degrees of topic and activity orientation, ranging from conversation-like discourse to drills and repetition. These four types of interaction assign different rights and duties to the participants and consequently to different kinds of contributions to the interaction. In this framework, small talk is taken as an example of conversation. According to van Lier (1988), participants in small talk are free to show their individuality and creativity within a loose kind of *frame,* or sets of rules for talk. All conversationalists will find "a certain amount of leeway to do what they think they are best at, but at the same time conform to the basic unstated rules" (p. 151). Therefore, small talk may allow interactants to perform their speaking roles with a high degree of flexibility while not being completely directionless.

Based on two contrasting pieces of talk that take place in the same classroom, I will show in the following sections how small talk deviates from the default IRF sequence, re-defines the roles and identities of the teacher and students, and shows significant potential in promoting dynamic bilingual interactions.

THE PRESENT STUDY

The following data were collected as part of my doctoral dissertation on classroom interaction practices of native English-speaking teachers and Hong Kong students. Assuming the role of a non-participant observer, I video and audiotaped the English lessons of one teacher for five consecutive school days in the second half of the school year. This classroom was a first year secondary school class (equivalent to Grade 7 in the North American system) consisting of 12 girls and 8 boys in a school for students of average ability. In a normal secondary school class in Hong Kong, there should be 40 students. This year one class was assessed to be weaker in English ability and was therefore split into smaller groups during English lessons so that more attention could be given to individual students. The teacher, Ms. Berner (a pseudonym), came from the United Kingdom and was virtually a monolingual English speaker with the students. That is, the teacher had very little knowledge of the students' L1, though she demonstrated a keen interest in learning the language. Having been in Hong Kong for four years, the teacher had picked up some Cantonese words and phrases from the students. However, her knowledge of Cantonese was not sufficient for her to communicate with the students in extended dialogues.

EXCERPT 1 – INSTITUTIONAL PEDAGOGICAL DISCOURSE

During my visits, Ms. Berner taught seven 35-minute lessons with this first year class. Excerpt 1 below presents a typical example of the institutional pedagogical discourse she used in her classes. (Please refer to the Appendix for transcription conventions.) The IRF components are marked in brackets.

Excerpt 1

The lesson is about comparatives. After presenting the concept of comparatives with students in class as examples, Ms. Berner asks the class to make sentences comparing themselves and their classmates on different attributes; she then invites some students to report their comparisons to the class.

1	T:	alright, who wants to read me one of their sentences?
2		Jim, let's hear one of your sentences. read me one sentence, yeah. [I]
3	J:	Ehh (.) Fanny is older than me. [R]
4	T:	okay, good. Fanny is older than me. Louis, (???) [F, I]
5	L:	Danny is noi-, noisily than Louis. [R]
6	T:	he's what? noisier? [F, I]
7	L:	yes. [R]
8	T:	noisier, okay. Is Louis right? [F, I]
9	B:	[bidding for the turn] I'm cleverer than Morris. [R]

10 T: cleverer than Morris. okay, Jane. [F, I]
11 J: Jessie hair is longer than my hair. [R]
12 T: right, good, Jessie's hair is longer than my hair. [F]
13 how can you shorten that? Jessie's hair is longer than? [I]

Excerpt 1 shows a series of typical IRF triadic sequences commonly used by many teachers. This pattern recurs in this lesson and many other lessons taught by Ms. Berner and other teacher-participants in my study. The labeling of this excerpt as containing typical IRF sequences, of course, is not to say that this interaction pattern has no pedagogical value. It is clear from the data that the students respond promptly to Ms Berner's initiation and are provided many opportunities to produce spontaneous output. However, as has been discussed, this pattern is restrictive in nature, tends to be teacher-centered, and may not be conducive to preparing students to meet the demands of the variegated interaction roles in real-life social interactions. In the excerpt, the students usually speak only when called on. Ms. Berner's focus seems to be mainly on language form rather than meaning. For example, it might strike somebody as rather odd if their conversation partner were to simply repeat what they have just said verbatum (as Ms. Berner does in lines 4 and 10). In normal conversations, if a need arose for a conversation partner to echo the speaker's turn, they would certainly change the pronoun and say something such as "Fanny is older than you, Jim," and "Jessie's hair is longer than yours." The teacher's feedback to the students' responses shows that she may only be responding to students' utterances mechanically.

Let us now turn to Excerpt 2, which shows very different interaction formats and teacher-student behavior when compared with those in Excerpt 1. (Excerpts 1 and 2 are taken from the same lesson.)

EXCERPT 2 – NON-INSTITUTIONAL SMALL TALK

The piece of talk presented in Excerpt 2 took place early in the lesson, well before Excerpt 1. At the beginning of the lesson, the class was asked to complete a questionnaire collecting information on their language use patterns. It should be mentioned that unlike other regular English lessons, this one took place in a function room[1] where students were seated around five large tables instead of in rows of individual desks and chairs. This setting, to a considerable extent, enabled the students to interact with one another more easily. The excerpt begins when a group of female students sitting near the teacher's desk, having finished the questionnaire early, start talking to one another and to the teacher.

Excerpt 2

1 FS1: [talking to her classmates] **jaau hou do jan tai gan bou zi** *<many people are reading newspaper>*.
2 FS2: [in anglicized tone,[2] to the teacher] **tai^ bou^ zi^** *<read*

newspaper>.

3 FS1: [to the teacher] we read newspaper.
4 T: you read the English newspaper?
5 FS: yes
6 T: fine, very good.
7 do you read the cartoons?
8 I'll show you my favorite bit. [flipping through the newspaper]
9 FS1: fa-favorite **dim gaai** <*what's meant by- >*?
10 T: my favorite bit.
11 FS2: **zeoi zung ji tai** <*likes to read most*>.
12 T: the bit I like best.
13 FS1: this?
14 T: no. (..)
15 [FS talking in Cantonese while the T flips through the pages of the newspaper]
16 T: it's Garfield. Garfield? no Garfield?
17 oh, no Garfield, (.) cat for Garfield, (.) cat.
18 FS1: pets?
19 T: there's a cat and you find him on pictures, on birthday cards.
20 FS1: birthday card? //cat?
21 T: //yes. he's a cat and he's called Garfield.
22 FS1: on the birthday card?
23 T: uhuh, and also on pens and pencils and, Garfield.
24 [T keeps flipping through the pages.]
25 FS3: **hai mai go di me ju aa** <*isn't it a kind of fish*>*?*
26 FS2: birthday card? **saang jat kaat** <*birthday card*>*?*
27 T: on Monday on Monday I'll bring you a picture of Garfield.
28 FS2: OOCH! **<<GAA FEI>>** <*GARFIELD*>*!*
29 FS2: [talking to her classmate, sounding very annoyed] **m HAI gaa fei aa** <*it ISN'T Garfield*>.
30 FS1: Garfield cat?
31 T: Garfield, that's a Garfield.
32 FS1 it's a cat, //orange.
33 T: //Yes, and looks like this.
34 [T makes a funny facial expression and Ss laugh.]
35 T: [with amused voice] it's very naughty**, hou jai** <*very naughty*>*!*
36 [the Ss laugh, then talk about other things for about 30 seconds.]
37 FS2: Ms Berner, **jat baak ling jat** <*one hundred and one*>.
38 T: one hundred, yeah, **jat baak** <*one hundred*>.
39 I know that, yeah.
40 FS2: **jat baak ling jat** <*One hundred and one*>.

41	T:	[following the student, with a slightly anglicized tone] **jat^ baak ling jat^** <*one hundred and one*>.
42		one two one.
43	FS1:	one oh one.
44		[repeating the phrase with a slightly anglicized tone] **jat^ baak ling jat^, jat^ baak ling jat^, jat^ baak ling jat^** <*one hundred and one, one hundred and one, one hundred and one*>.
45		[T begins to laugh]
46	FS2:	**jat ling jat** <*one hundred and one*>, **jat ling jat baan dim gau** <*one hundred and one Dalmatians*>.
47		[some Ss begin to bark like dogs]
48	T:	what? **gau** <*dog*>*?*
49		it's **gau** <*dog*>?
50		what did you say before?
51	FS1:	**gau** <*Dog*>. **jat ling jat baan dim gau** <*one hundred and one Dalmatians*>, one hundred and one=
52	T:	[excitedly] =DALMATIANS!
53		white dogs with black spots. Dalmatians, RIGHT.
54		have you seen that film? very GOOD.
55	Ss:	[very happily] yes, yes.
56	T:	[laughing and continues to repeat in anglicized Cantonese] **jat^ baak ling jat^**
57		<one hundred and one>.

In this excerpt, the conventional IRF three-part structure is not evident. The T seems to have made an F-move in line 6 ("fine, very good") to assess the appropriateness of FS1's response ("yes"), but unlike the IRF sequences identified in Excerpt 1, T in this example seems to be responding positively to the practice of the students (reading newspapers) rather than to the linguistic accuracy of FS1's response. Throughout the excerpt, the interactional practices of the teacher and students are notable for several features, which will be discussed in the next section.

Abundant Student-Initiated Teacher Responses

The conversation is initiated by two students in two languages. FS1's Cantonese initiation in line 1 is made to her classmates. FS2's similar expression in anglicized Cantonese draws the attention of the teacher, even though FS2 does not explicitly call out the teacher's name as a form of address (unlike her utterance in line 37). In this interaction, apart from the formal initiation moves by the teacher in lines 7, 50 and 54, all other initiation turns are made by the students of their own accord (lines 3, 9, 13, 18, 20, 22, 25, 30, 32, 37) with subsequent teacher or peer responses. This amount of self-directed student initiation is not a common feature

in a Hong Kong English classroom.

In addition, most of the student initiation turns in Excerpt 2 are different from typical initiation acts in the classroom, which are usually realized with interrogative and imperative structures. Most initiation acts by the students in this excerpt are presented with informative structures (lines 3, 37) or by repetition of the teacher's utterances with rising intonation (lines 13, 18, 20, 22, 30, 32). In daily conversations, it is not uncommon that we initiate a conversation with an informative, or elicit more information by repeating a previous utterance with rising intonation, thus performing the function of an interrogative. In Excerpt 2, most interrogatives function as clarification requests (something like "Do you mean…?") and as asides as the students self-process the data coming from the teacher. I believe that under formal institutional lock step pedagogical circumstances, the teacher would not make so much effort in responding to and developing individual students' utterances. Some of these students' utterances (particularly the anglicized Cantonese utterances) might be treated as language play (see Lin, 1999, 2000) or self-verbal processing of the students and in most cases, would not be attended to by the teacher. However, in a small talk situation, the teacher probably perceives the context as non-institutional and tends to treat the students as conversation partners rather than as target receivers of pre-planned pedagogical discourse.

It is also interesting to note that FS1's utterance (*one oh one*) in line 43 made in response to T's inaccurate attempt (*one two one*) to translate FS2's Cantonese can be said to function as a repair initiation, correcting T's utterance. The nature of FS1's utterance reflects features of an "exposed correction" as discussed in Jefferson (1987, p. 97): An exposed correction is contrasted with an *embedded correction* by being an interactional turn in its own right, breaking up the flow of conversation, rather than being embedded in another turn. Even though T does not repeat FS1's corrected form in English, but rather repeats the full version of "one hundred and one" in Cantonese (line 44), it is highly likely that FS1's correction has resulted in T's accurate understanding of the Cantonese phrase *jat baak ling jat* ("one hundred and one" instead of "one hundred and twenty one") which T has been repeating after the students since line 41. FS1's correction may provide an important platform and clue for T to interpret the students' barking noises (line 47) and achieve understanding with the students about the topic under discussion[3] ("One hundred and one Dalmatians"). This kind of student repair initiation and correction in response to a prior utterance from teachers is very rare in a second language classroom in Hong Kong.

Actually, the small talk between the teacher and the students did not stop at the Dalmatians. After the topic of Dalmatians, three more episodes of small talk followed with distinct but probably related themes. First, they discussed Halloween, and then the Chinese New Year, and then a male student sitting at a neighboring table asked how much the teacher earned every month (not shown in the transcript). In these situations, the students initiated the conversations either by anglicizing the Cantonese terms, or with ungrammatical English sentences. The teacher not

only responded actively and positively, but also cheerfully attempted to pick up the Cantonese phrases from the students. Such positive responses from the teacher might have reinforced the students' motivation to initiate further. When the teacher finally remembered her institutional role and announced the beginning of the lesson, some students shouted out "No, we talk." This appears to illustrate how valuable and precious these moments of small talk were to the students.

Prevalent Self-Selected Student Turns

In Excerpt 2, while most teacher turns are student-initiated, almost all student turns are self-selected without any formal teacher nomination or turn bidding signals such as raised hands by the students. The following turn taking analysis will illustrate this point.

While FS1's Cantonese expression in line 1 seems intended for her classmates, FS2's anglicized Cantonese statement in line 2 can be understood as an invitation to the teacher to join in the conversation because it is a common practice of Hong Kong students to anglicize their Cantonese to sound English. The teacher should be selected as next speaker. However, perhaps due to T's lack of sufficient Cantonese knowledge to understand FS2's utterance, she fails to take up the turn. In view of this, FS1 seizes the turn at the "turn transition relevance point" (Sacks, Schegloff & Jefferson, 1974) and glosses FS2's Cantonese with proper English. This is understood by T who initiates the next turn which is addressed to all the girls in the group.

In the rest of the interaction in Excerpt 2, the three female students and the teacher take turns freely. The students' self-selected turns are sometimes directed to T and sometimes to their classmates; the latter turns are usually marked by a code switch from English to Cantonese (lines 9, 11, 25, 26, 29). None of the teacher-centered turn allocation techniques (e.g., individual nominations, invitations to bid, and invitations to reply) mentioned in Mehan (1979) are used in this piece of discourse. This happens probably due to the perception of the context of talk as non-institutional by the teacher as well as the students. In daily non-institutional interactions, conversation partners usually have greater freedom to initiate, surrender, or take up turns. The teacher's and students' discursive practices in Excerpt 2 thus reflect features of everyday interactional patterns.

Code-Crossing by the Teacher

It was mentioned in the previous section that instead of repeating FS1's corrected form of *one hundred and one* in English, T repeats its full version in Cantonese (line 44). T's behavior seems to be different from the correction uptake[4] described in Jefferson (1987). However, T's repetition of the Cantonese version may reflect T's willingness and desire to learn the Cantonese phrase. This practice also constitutes an interesting example of "code-crossing." Code mixing or code-alternation has been a common phenomenon in Hong Kong ESL classrooms (see Lin, 1990, 1996; Pennington, 1997). To assist student understanding, the students' L1 is

often used by the teachers to further elaborate teaching points previously presented in English (Lin, 1990). Unlike these types of code alternation, code-crossing, as explicated by Rampton (1995), focuses on "code-alternation by people who are not accepted members of the group associated with the second language they employ. It is concerned with switching into languages that are not generally thought to belong to you" (p. 280). There is ample evidence that code crossing by the teacher takes place in line 35 and from line 38 onwards. The teacher, a native English speaker and an English teacher, is not normally considered an in-group member of the speech community of Cantonese speakers. As a native English-speaking teacher, she carries the mission of creating a favorable English-speaking environment in schools and therefore is institutionally expected to not use Cantonese in her teaching, or to allow her students to use Cantonese among themselves.[5] However, as shown in Excerpt 2, Ms. Berner allows the use of Cantonese by her students, shows her understanding of the students' Cantonese, and even practices a Cantonese phrase after the students. According to Rampton (1995), the emergence of code-crossing can be influenced "by local social relationships and by specific interactional dynamics" (p. 281). In this case, the social nature of the talk and unconventional T-S interaction patterns seem to have contributed to such relationships and dynamics.

It is interesting to note that there were instances later in the same lesson in which the teacher stopped the students' use of their L1 in an authoritative manner, even though the students were in fact discussing the teacher-set task, a situation quite similar to what has been reported in Guthrie (1984).[6] I can say that the teacher in Excerpt 2 has temporarily shed her institutional role as the "language police;" she not only does not quiet the students when they use Cantonese to her or to their classmates, but even amuses herself by picking up the Cantonese from the students, and glossing the word "naughty" with Cantonese of her own accord (line 35). These phenomena reflect the behavior of a second language *learner* more than a second language teacher.

THE PEDAGOGICAL SIGNIFICANCE OF CLASSROOM SMALL TALK

The discourse features illustrated in Excerpt 2 in this study show a close resemblance to everyday social discourse. These features have important implications for the roles and identities of the teacher and students as second language teachers and learners. In this section, I attempt to explore the implications of these findings by positioning classroom small talk as a communicative event with effective pedagogical significance. I will also discuss how L2 learners and their teachers can be made aware of code crossing as an effective strategy in ESL classroom communication.

Small Talk Promotes the Speaking Rights of Students

Since the advent of the Communicative Approach to language teaching,

getting students to talk has been an issue about which teachers have expended much time and energy. However, they do not always report success. In the case of Hong Kong, according to some local studies, there seem to be two major reasons for this difficulty. The first is a largely teacher dominated and transmission style of classroom discourse (Evans, 1996). In a study of two ESL classrooms in Hong Kong, Tsui (1996) found that in both classrooms, teacher talk took up more than 80 percent of the total talk and that there were no instances in which the students initiated a question. The conventional asymmetrical power relations between teachers and students seem to be inhibiting students' active participation in the language classroom. The second reason is language classroom anxiety, which is a widespread phenomenon leading to students' reticence, self-consciousness, fear, or even panic regarding L2 performance (Tsui, 1996). In Tsui's study, students refrained from performing in the L2 for fear of making mistakes and inviting criticisms and negative evaluations. To the majority (70%) of the thirty-eight ESL Hong Kong teachers examined in Tsui's (1996) paper, getting more students' oral responses was identified as one of their major problems in teaching.

However, the data presented in this study have depicted a rather different classroom situation. Excerpt 2 has shown students and teacher contributing to the interaction in a more egalitarian relationship when compared with institutional pedagogical discourse. Instead of having the teacher fully dominate and steer the interaction, the students manifest their *agency role* (Zimmerman & Boden, 1991) in the conversation by initiating the topics, shaping the direction of the talk, cueing the possible next turn of the teacher, seeking clarifications, making conjectures, confirming and disconfirming. Throughout the interaction, the students do not display a regular and routine institutional student role in the classroom by only responding passively to teacher's display questions. Even though their mastery of the target language is limited, they are seen to be actively engaging in the interaction with a dynamic negotiation of meaning to make input comprehensible, as evident in FS1's hypothesis testing of the teacher's elaboration of Garfield. This ability to negotiate meaning to make input comprehensible is felt to be essential for the development of the learners' second language (Long, 1983; Pica, 1987; Varonis & Gass, 1985).

Small Talk Promotes Anxiety-Free Classroom Interaction

The students in Excerpt 2 also do not demonstrate the reticence and anxiety problems discussed in Tsui's (1996) paper. Quite contrary to what has been reported by local second language classroom researchers (Tsui, 1996), students in Excerpt 2 take the initiative to start a conversation with the teacher, test hypotheses by responding promptly, volunteer to answer questions, and seek clarifications and confirmation from the teacher. These are significant speech acts that students need to master in order to be effective language users. The students carry out these practices voluntarily probably because the teacher and the students have redefined their roles and their expectations of each other. By perceiving the context of the

talk as non-institutional, both teacher and students have freed themselves from the obligations of taking on the conventional roles as teacher and students. Rather, they view their roles as those of conversation partners, engaging in talk for purposes of social interaction. The focus of the teacher is not solely on the language correctness of the students, but also on the *meaning* of the students' expressions. The students respond not because they are obligated to do so under the teacher's instruction, but because of an urge to communicate meaning to the teacher. The reduced concerns by both parties about the need to elicit and display linguistic knowledge, and the freedom to choose what to talk about, seem to have made the interaction experience a particularly enjoyable and meaningful one.

From what has been shown in Excerpt 2, small talk is a form of talk which can promote a kind of anxiety-free context for meaningful student-teacher interaction. The sociocultural traits of Chinese people might have prompted the students to avoid the risk-taking, face-threatening, or boastful acts of speaking in English in public (Tsui, 1995). By communicating with the teacher in small circles, the students' performance in the second language is not made known to all other co-present peers, and that may have increased their motivation to use the second language. Even though classroom small talk does not have as well-defined goals and action plans as other communicative tasks such as information gap, jigsaw, and problem-solving tasks (e.g., Pica, Kanagy, & Falodun, 1993), it performs the function of promoting interaction equally well with its unique value in breaking down the four walls of the classroom and making the use of the L2 a more natural everyday practice.

Small Talk Promotes Code Crossing as an Effective ESL Classroom Interaction Strategy

In the ESL classrooms in Hong Kong, English is the only institutionally legitimate language. The use of L1 by teachers and students is discouraged in the secondary English Language Syllabi written by Education Department officials (Education Department, 1999); the primary goal is to achieve an English-only environment and thus maximize students' exposure to English. Native English speaking teachers were employed on a large scale in 1998 with this purpose in mind. Many people, including the policy makers, only emphasize the provision of more "standard" language models for the students, overlooking the importance of the *communication experience* in the development of L2 learners' communicative competence. Some language education policy makers do not seem to realize that communication is a mutual effort by both interactants. In second language classrooms with elementary learners having only limited target language proficiency, the socio-cognitive functions of the L1 in learning the L2 are often valuable (e.g., Anton & DiCamilla, 1998). The interactions presented in this paper demonstrate that the students and teacher can cross codes to achieve common understanding in a bilingual ESL classroom.

Rampton (1995) argues that language crossings tend to occur at moments of

"liminality." Based on the concept developed by Victor Turner, Rampton defines liminality as the "interactive space where the dominant norms of everyday life are temporarily jeopardized or suspended" (p. 167). The small talk presented in Excerpt 2 shows the emergence of moments of liminality as reflected in (1) the teacher's assuming the role as a language learner and (2) the students' assuming the role of conversation initiator and evaluator of the teacher's responses. Both of these occasions are uncommon in Hong Kong ESL classrooms.

In line 42, Excerpt 2, the teacher's attempted translation of the Cantonese phrase with the English *one two one* is a hypothesis testing strategy commonly employed by second language learners, a status temporarily adopted by the teacher. The inaccuracy of the teacher's translation and FS1's correction reflect a situation in which the linguistic expertise of the teacher and the students can be equal. FS1's rectification of the teacher's attempted gloss is something the teacher cannot verify. She can only take the student's version as true. Even though the linguistic resources of the teacher and the students have very little overlap, they are each utilizing their respective linguistic expertise in achieving successful communication.

Though the status and importance of English in this ESL classroom is beyond question, the teacher's positive response to and even interest in the students' L1 have affirmed the value and legitimacy of the students' indigenous linguistic resources. This has sociolinguistic implications in that the teacher's behavior has promoted the self-esteem of the students regarding their intelligence and competency as language users who have knowledge of more than one language. According to Tsui (1996), this self-valuation is crucial for eliminating anxiety and fear from L2 learners in the L2 classroom. In line 37 of Excerpt 2 when FS2 speaks to the teacher in Cantonese, the teacher, instead of insisting on FS2's repeating the utterance in English (something she had done in contexts perceived to be institutional), uses the student's L1 as a communication resource. The teacher's repetition of part of the phrase in English and in Cantonese (line 38) becomes a friendly gesture to the students and encourages them to continue the conversation until common understanding is achieved in lines 53 to 56. The ability of Ms. Berner to make sense of the students' Cantonese comes with her interest in learning other languages. She is sensitive to the language use of the students, and is eager to try out the Cantonese in authentic communication, seek clarifications and confirmation from other more expert users of the language, which includes the students. As a foreign language learner, Ms. Berner has set a good model for her students.

While the teacher sees the need to capitalize on the students' L1 in making meanings, the students also see the need to get meanings across in the L2. The students in Excerpt 2 are eager to receive and disseminate messages from and to the teacher. This is particularly important in cross-lingual and cross-cultural interactions when the interactants do not share the same L1. For communication between two parties to be done successfully, active participation on both sides is essential. The limited English proficiency of the students in this study might have prevented them from communicating their ideas fluently in English, but their attempts to

make conjectures (e.g. lines 13, 30, 32), and employ non-linguistic cues (line 47) are potentially effective communicative strategies in realistic cross-cultural and cross-lingual globalized communication.

CONCLUSION

This study illustrates how conventionally marginalized classroom small talk can actually contribute to the development of communicative competence of L2 learners in participating in cross-cultural communication. By stripping themselves of their institutional roles and responsibilities, the students and teacher in this study were actively engaged in an extended piece of small talk covering a variety of topics, most of which were initiated by the students. The communication practices of the students and teacher show unconventional features (such as teacher acting as learner, and learners acting as evaluators) that break away from the constraints of a rigid IRF triadic sequence. Even though there were no well-defined goals, action plans, or shared expected outcomes, the students employed a variety of communication strategies of their own accord. Due to its unpredictability and to the more symmetrical role relationship between the teacher and students, the experience of classroom small talk may enable both the teacher and students to better realize the need to make an effort to cross codes in order to achieve understanding. Though the particular interaction came about incidentally, the intersubjective contexts (defined by Rommetveit (1974) as shared situation definition, cited in van Lier, 1996, p.161) perceived by the participants and the patterns of talk could recur in most other similar classroom contexts. English language teachers should attempt to open themselves up to more non-institutional talk contexts. Talk of a non-task-related nature should not be sacrificed simply for the sake of covering the syllabus and completing the textbook. Students and teachers alike should have the opportunities of experiencing the joy of using a foreign language for meaningful communication.

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NOTES

[1] A function room refers to a room used when more space is needed to conduct practical work in non-language related subjects such as Geography, Biology, Sciences, Art and Crafts, and Home Economics.

[2] Anglicized tone refers to the use of high pitch to say a Chinese word. Sometimes, the whole word is said at a high pitch and sometimes only the ending tone rises. Many Hong

Kong students use this tone to make Chinese words sound like English. They usually do it in a playful manner in response to the teacher's requests for answers in English.

[3] The tricky point here is the official Chinese film title of "101 Dalmatians" is **jat ling jat baan dim gau** but not **jat baak ling jat baan dim gau**, in which **jat ling jat** is a short version of **jat baak ling jat**. This perhaps explains why T was not able to arrive at the film title after being corrected by FS1 in the first place.

[4] In Jefferson's (1987) examples of exposed corrections, people whose utterances are corrected either accept or reject the correction. When they accept it, they typically repeat the corrected form or provide an account to apologize for or explain the error.

[5] These native English teachers state that they were assured by the Education Department that Cantonese proficiency is not expected and that they were advised not to use Cantonese in teaching.

[6] In his paper, Guthrie (1984) contrasts the language use of a monolingual English teacher and a Chinese-English bilingual teacher teaching a class of Chinese students in America. There were instances when the monolingual teacher quieted the students when they spoke Cantonese to each other even though they were actually on task.

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APPENDIX

Transcription Key:

FS	female student
T	teacher
Ss	students
bold	utterances in Cantonese
<*italics*>	free English translation of the Cantonese utterances
[xxx]	contextual information
(???)	inaudible utterances
CAPS	emphasized utterances
(.)	short pause
(…)	longer pauses
^	utterances said with high pitch (anglicised tone)
//	overlapping speech
=	latching
?	rising tone, sometimes a question
,	continuing intonation
.	falling intonation
<<xxx>>	increased voice volume

Jasmine C. M. Luk is a lecturer in the English department at the Hong Kong Institute of Education, specializing in English teacher education. She obtained her PhD in linguistics at Lancaster University, UK, where she investigated cross-cultural contacts between native-English-speaker teachers and native Cantonese students in Hong Kong.