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Teaching, learning and talking: Mapping “the trail of fire”¹

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ABSTRACT: This paper addresses the current resurgence of interest in classroom talk and its place in pedagogy; in particular the role of teachers in shaping students’ learning through the design of classroom interactivity. The importance of teacher agency with respect to pedagogic design is highlighted in recent studies of pedagogy in the UK (Alexander, 2008; Mercer, 2008) and in linguistically oriented studies of pedagogic discourse undertaken in the Australian context (Christie, 2002; Jones, 2005). The paper presents a case study of classroom talk to explore how such work might be brought into alignment in order to shed further light on the construction of educational meanings through oral language. In doing so, the importance of understanding pedagogy as the dynamic construction of learning contexts through interaction and over time is highlighted.

KEYWORDS: Classroom talk, dialogic teaching, language and learning, curriculum genres

TALKING AND LEARNING

Of all the tools for cultural and pedagogical intervention in human development and learning, talk is the most pervasive in its use and powerful in its possibilities. Talk vitally mediates the cognitive and cultural spaces between adult and child, among children themselves, between teacher and learner, between society and the individual, between what the child knows and understands, and what he or she has yet to know and understand. (Alexander, 2008, p. 92)

Although interaction involves a range of meaning-making resources, the place of oral language in learning has never been far from educators’ concerns. Research into classroom talk has a rich history in the UK and elsewhere; although space prevents an exhaustive review of this research here, there are several important contributions worthy of mention. James Britton’s early investigation of the relationship between language and thinking was to have a lasting influence on English curriculum and policy, most notably in the “language across the curriculum” movement of the 1970s and 1980s (Britton, 1972). This movement found its expression in the oft-cited Bullock Report (1975), which argued for the place of talk alongside writing, reading and experience in students’ cognitive development. Drawing together a range of current thinking, the report noted the dominance of teacher-controlled, tightly scripted classroom talk. The Report advocated, instead, that teachers provide opportunities for what Barnes (1976, 2008) describes as “exploratory talk”; that is, talk most associated with student-student interaction, where students “work on understanding” (Barnes, 2008, p. 5). The National Oracy Project in England (Norman, 1992) sustained this interest in classroom talk during the late 1980s and early 1990s.

¹ A compelling metaphor from an unusual source: “Rock and Roll Babble On”, Robert Forster’s review of Nick Kent’s *Apathy for the Devil: A 1970’s Memoir* which appeared in *The Monthly*, July 2010.

Mercer has continued to build on Barnes’ work to develop detailed descriptions of exploratory talk alongside other kinds of talk, working with teachers in extensive professional development to implement programs in which students, too, are aware of the kinds of talk that promote learning (Mercer, 2000; Mercer & Dawes, 2008). In Canada, Wells proposed the notion of “dialogic inquiry” to describe the way in which students and teachers jointly construct educational knowledge through a range of participation structures, including group tasks and more structured teacher-led talk (1999). Among recent Australian research into classroom discourse is that of Hammond and Gibbons (2005), who have described the close, complex relationship between scaffolding in moment-by-moment classroom interaction and teachers’ pedagogic design. Gibbons has also examined the ways in which teacher-student interactions may be exploited to assist students’ uptake of academic language (2006).

Yet despite such history, official curriculum documents recognise talking and listening as skills (albeit important) but in secondary position to those of reading and writing. For example, an informing document for the draft Australian curriculum recognises literacy as “a flexible, sustainable mastery of a set of capabilities in the use and production of traditional texts and new communications technologies using spoken language, print and multimedia” (Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority [ACARA], 2009, p. 6), yet the concurrent program of national assessment is restricted to the paper-based testing of reading and writing skills. It is ironic that at the same time as classrooms have become increasingly multi-semiotic and polyvocal through the infusion of digital technologies, the information gathered from these sites has narrowed to that most readily observable and testable. Similarly, the recent Cambridge Primary Review (Hofkins & Northen, 2009, p. 22) notes the demise of the kinds of learning experiences which require time for “talking, problem-solving and the extended exploration of ideas” in the contemporary UK national curriculum.

There are many reasons why talk matters in classrooms. Participation in classroom interaction enables learners to gain confidence interacting in an increasing range of contexts, to participate in democratic learning environments and (especially those for whom English is a second language) to acquire verbal fluency. Most importantly however, talk is considered a key resource for learning from the early childhood years on (Alexander, 2008; Christie, 2002; Gibbons, 2006; Mercer, 2000; Painter, 1999; Wells 1999).

Vygotsky believed language to play a key role in cognitive development, enabling a learner and the people in her/his environment to plan and coordinate activity and, as external speech, providing the basis for internal speech or thought (1978, p. 90). The processes by which young children learn about their worlds via interaction with others have been well captured by linguists such as Halliday (1975), Painter (1999) and Hasan (2001). In those accounts, we observe the painstaking work of primary caregivers as their charges “learn to mean” through multiple interactions with others. Although a range of meaning-making resources (for example, gesture, proximity, touch, artefact) is involved, this process is achieved primarily through the resource of oral language. Referring to talk as a “metasemiotic”, Hasan (1996, p. 158) argues that learners’ access to other abstract tools such as writing is heavily reliant on talk.

Thus, talk offers teachers a valuable tool for understanding and shaping learning environments as well as for providing insights into learners’ conceptual development.

At the core of the teaching/learning process is what is to be known and understood: knowledge. Bernstein (1999) argues that there exists a basic distinction between two kinds of knowledge, each of which is realised as discourse. Horizontal or segmented discourse is acquired in home and community worlds, it is associated with commonsense kinds of understandings and is usually tied to a material setting. In contrast, vertical discourses are usually acquired in formal institutional sites such as schools and universities, they are associated with more specialised forms of knowledge that are less dependent on an actual context of situation. Bernstein’s analysis goes further to describe the differences in knowledge structures among disciplines of the humanities and sciences. Because this paper is concerned with the school curriculum rather than intellectual fields, the discussion will be restricted to that of horizontal and vertical discourses.

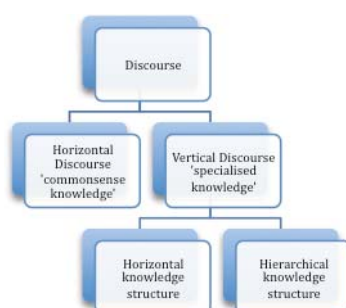


Figure 1. Horizontal and vertical discourse (Bernstein, 1999)

Hasan has explored the ontogenesis of educationally oriented language in young children’s everyday talk. Her “cline of decontextualisation” (2001, p. 54) complements Bernstein’s thinking about the contexts in which knowledge is acquired. At one end of the cline, she positions “actual” contexts or those bound to a material, embodied experience; meanings produced in these contexts tend to be “situation-dependent”. At the other of the continuum lie “virtual” contexts; those contexts created in texts that cannot be bodily experienced, meanings here are termed “decontextualised”. In Hasan’s observations of mother-child dyads, mothers of young children skilfully wove decontextualised meanings into conversations that were overwhelmingly linked to actual contexts. In one example of this from Hasan’s work (2001, pp. 51-52), a mother-child backyard conversation about fruit falling from a tree involved discussion of death and mutability. In other studies we observe parents engaged in interactions which incrementally build children’s capacities to generalise from the specific instance, to learn from text, and to play with language (Painter, 1999; Painter, Derewianka & Torr, 2007). In this way, young children’s first teachers “lay down a trail of fire” that will lead to school contexts and eventually to the specialised meanings favoured there.

However, while we can learn much about the place of language in learning from early childhood studies, there are also limits to what we can apply from the research into young children and their parents to school settings. The discourse patterns of schooling are very different; schooling is a site where different goals, organisational patterns, spatio-temporal arrangements and interpersonal relations prevail. Now pedagogic design must enter into the interpersonal relationships between adult and

child; the conscious, goal-orientated engineering of contexts by the teacher in order to bridge those “cognitive and cultural spaces” identified by Alexander (2008, p. 92).

School success requires learners to be increasingly accomplished at managing contexts toward the virtual end of the continuum. The texts found here feature the technicality, generalisation and abstraction produced, as the vertical discourses described by Bernstein are recontextualised in the distinct curriculum domains of school (Freebody, Maton & Martin, 2008). Students’ ways into the school-based ways of knowing/meaning are primarily via interaction. As Alexander explains, “language not only manifests thinking but also structures it, and speech shapes the higher mental processes necessary for so much of the learning that takes place, or ought to take place, in school” (2008, p. 92).

However, Alexander, too, argues that teachers are not always successful at making the most of the affordances of talk. His extensive study of UK primary classrooms revealed a continued overreliance on brief IRF² sequences, limited opportunity for students to engage in extended content-orientated dialogue, an emphasis on recall rather than thinking and an absence of useful corrective feedback (Alexander 2008, p. 105). Other criticisms of teachers’ interactive practices range from their being too dominant in classroom interactions (Myhill & Fisher, 2005) through to fostering “talk for the sake of talk” (Jones, 2007). Thus, while the importance of talk in learning is widely recognised, it seems that much classroom talk continues to fall short of its pedagogic potential.

To this end, the notion of dialogic teaching proposed by Alexander is promising. Dialogic teaching is described as “purposeful and productive dialogue where questions, answers, feedback (and feedforward) progressively build into coherent and expanding chains of enquiry and understanding” (Alexander, 2003, p. 335). Dialogic teaching is not a one single approach but rather selects from a range of possibilities in terms of pedagogic designs. Importantly, it rests on five principles that are presented briefly in Table 1.

Collectivity	Teachers and students address learning tasks, together, either as a group or whole class.
Reciprocity	Teachers and students listen to each other, share ideas and consider alternative perspectives.
Supportiveness	Children articulate their ideas freely, without fear of embarrassment over “wrong” answers; and they help each other to reach common understandings.
Cumulation	Teachers and children build on their own and each others’ ideas and chain them into coherent lines of thinking and enquiry.
Purposefulness	Teachers plan and steer classroom talk with specific educational goals in view.

Table 1. Principles of dialogic teaching (Alexander, 2008)

The first three principles – collectivity, reciprocity and support – concern the nature of the interactive environment, that is, the tenor or interpersonal ambience of the classroom. Teachers’ understandings of learners as individuals and as members of a

² The Initiation-Response-Feedback sequence was identified by Sinclair and Coulthard (1975) as a dominant form of classroom discourse; for example:

Teacher:	<i>What is the title of this book?</i>	(initiation)
Student:	<i>Pilawuk</i>	(response)
Teacher:	<i>That’s right, Pilawuk.</i>	(feedback)

community are important to these principles. In contrast, cumulation and purposefulness are to do with the field or educational knowledge under construction. These principles rely on teachers’ expertise with respect to curriculum knowledge. Of all of the principles, cumulation, according to Alexander, is the most challenging to achieve because of “its demands on the teacher’s professional skill, subject knowledge and insight into the capacities and current understandings of each of his/her pupils” (2008, p. 118). The next section of the paper considers how all of the principles described above might be applied to extracts from a case study of classroom teaching from an Australian context – to an example of pedagogic discourse considered successful in providing students with access to educational knowledge (Jones, 2005). In doing so, it will pay particular attention to how the notions of cumulation and purposefulness might be rendered more visible by close attention to the unfolding discourse, in particular to the interplay of interpersonal and educational meanings.

CONSTRUCTING LEARNING CONTEXTS THROUGH TALK

The teacher’s art is in tightening and relaxing the classification between discourses and also in the tenor of the teacher/student relationships. (Bourne, 2003, p. 515)

In order to consider how one teacher constructs the learning context through dialogue, we will examine samples of talk from a larger corpus collected in a year 4/5 classroom in a multilingual school in Sydney’s inner west. The analysis of the learning context will proceed simultaneously with the explanation of the research approach. The data is drawn from a doctoral study that investigated the talk and learning practices of two classrooms serving disadvantaged communities (Jones, 2005; 2007). The larger study was particularly concerned with intersubjectivity and its relation to learners’ acquisition of vertically orientated discourses (Bernstein, 1999).

The data presented here were collected in a classroom in which ESL-related methodologies³ informed the pedagogy and in which there was a heavy emphasis on teaching literacy in the curriculum domains. Most of the students in the class – indeed 27 out of 28 – were learning English as a second or subsequent language and the teacher worked with an ESL specialist teacher in many of the lessons comprising the curriculum unit. As part of their studies of Human Society and its Environment⁴, the class was learning about “The Stolen Generations” – the generations of Australian Aboriginal children forcibly taken from their families and put into care of the state and church last century. The curriculum experiences were organised around a text entitled “Pilawuk”, an autobiographical account of a young woman’s removal from her family, her subsequent struggle to locate her birth mother and their eventual reunion (Brian, 1996).

The research approach

The research approach adopted in the study was informed by systemic functional linguistics, the theory of language developed by Michael Halliday and his colleagues (Halliday, 1978; Halliday & Webster, 2009; Halliday & Matthiessen, 1999; Martin &

³ English as a Second Language

⁴ Elsewhere variously called Studies of Society (SOSE), and so on.

Rose, 2008).⁵ In this model, language is seen in an iterative relationship to both the broad cultural context and to the specific situation in which it is produced (see Figure 2). The model posits that forms of spoken and written texts have evolved/are evolving in the culture to meet different socio-cultural purposes. These forms or genres have distinct patterns of language. Thus “genres are staged, goal-orientated social processes” (Martin & Rose, 2008, p. 8). “Social” refers to the relationship of genres to the institutions or activities of a culture (such as schooling), “goal-oriented” to the fact that genres achieve some purpose within the culture, and “staged” to the stages a genre moves through in achieving such purposes

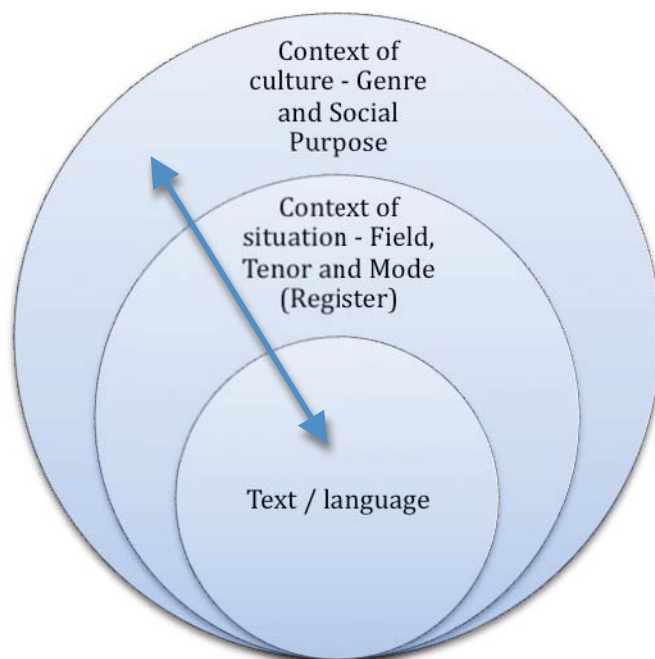


Figure 2. A functional model of language

Further, the SFL model provides a means of describing how socio-cultural activity is played out in a given situation by elaborating the relationship between an individual text and its context. The context of situation or the immediate environment of a text can be described in terms of its register variables: field, tenor and mode. Field is concerned with the nature of social activity that is taking place (“what is happening”), tenor with the social roles and relationships between/among the interactants (“who is taking part?”) and mode with the channel of communication (“what role is language playing in the activity?”) (Halliday & Hasan, 1985, p. 12). A text in its cultural and social context can therefore be described in terms of its genre, field, tenor and mode.

Importantly, the relationship between text and context in the SFL model is not a deterministic one; the use of a double-headed arrow in Figure 1 symbolizes the dialectic of realisation. As Martin has noted, realisation “entails that language construes [realises], is construed by and (over time) reconstrues social context” (1997, p. 4). In other words, the discourse patterns of classrooms realise the beliefs, attitudes

⁵ Space prohibits a detailed explanation of the theory here. Interested readers are directed to texts such as Martin & Rose 2007, 2008 and Halliday & Matthiessen 2004.

and practices of schooling that, in turn, are construed and reconstrued in the discourse. Therein lie both the conditions of reproduction and the possibilities for change.

Early genre theory focused on identifying and describing the written texts valued in schooling with a view to developing pedagogical approaches to enhance educational outcomes for disadvantaged students. Later developments have included Christie’s identification of curriculum genres (2002), which extends to seeing sequences of classroom activities as genres. Through such work, Christie has encouraged educators to adopt a critical approach to routine classroom practices, perhaps most notably that of morning news. Through detailed linguistic analysis of multiple examples, Christie revealed the patterns of language through which this genre operates to achieve its goals with respect to students’ oral language development. In doing so, she has pointed out its limitations in terms of the topics of discussion and their relation to school-based knowledge as well as the opportunities afforded for student participation.

Thus, SFL theory enables the classroom researcher to consider the relations between a single classroom text and the context in which it is produced. As Alexander argues, too frequently accounts of classroom interaction have concentrated on talk alone, without perceiving how it is shaped and constrained by broader features of the socio-cultural milieu in which it takes place (2008, p. 114). Such broader features include school-based policies and practice, curriculum imperatives and culturally situated beliefs and values pertaining to matters such as teaching, learning and the individual. At the same time, the theory also provides a means of describing the knowledge or field under negotiation, the interpersonal/intersubjective relations being enacted and the role of language and other meaning-making resources in play in an instance of classroom practice.

The curriculum macrogenre

Christie (2002) extended her description of the single curriculum genre to enable longer sequences of pedagogy to be described. These are termed curriculum macrogenres; that is, texts comprised of a number of single curriculum genres. “The Stolen Generations” unit of work described above can be seen as an instance of a curriculum macrogenre (Christie, 2002). That is, it is a unit of discourse that aims to achieve particular goals (pedagogic in this case) and has recognisable stages and involves a number of participants. The curriculum macrogenre is a hierarchical construct, composed of a number of lessons or groups of lessons (curriculum genres) comprised of tasks (stages), which are in turn comprised of steps (phases), as follows in Table 2. The description of the pedagogic context here will mirror the hierarchy, proceeding from the macrolevel to the microlevel: from curriculum macrogenre through curriculum genre to task and finally to phase.

Christie distinguishes between linear and orbital curriculum macrogenres. Linear macrogenres unfold in an incremental sense, each classroom text represents activity that builds on what has gone before at the same time as foreshadowing something that is to come. In contrast, orbital macrogenres unfold in an accretive sense, comprising a nucleus text (usually an introduction to the curriculum topic and/or relevant procedures) with a series of parallel tasks clustered around it similar to satellites. The curriculum macrogenre represented in the unit of work described here is linear; that is, each element builds on the previous one, so that we should readily observe something

of the way in which knowledge is built over time through processes of cumulative teaching and learning.

Genre term	Teachers' lay term
curriculum macrogenre	curriculum unit
curriculum genre	lesson or group of lessons
stages	tasks
phases	steps in a lesson

Table 2. Hierarchies in the curriculum macrogenre

The curriculum macrogenre under focus here consisted of nine lessons, varying in length from 30 to 70 minutes depending on the time available, the relationship between tasks and the complexity of the task. It involved three curriculum genres or lessons; the trajectory is captured in Figure 1. After Christie (2002), the three genres are labelled Curriculum Initiation, Curriculum Negotiation and Curriculum Closure.

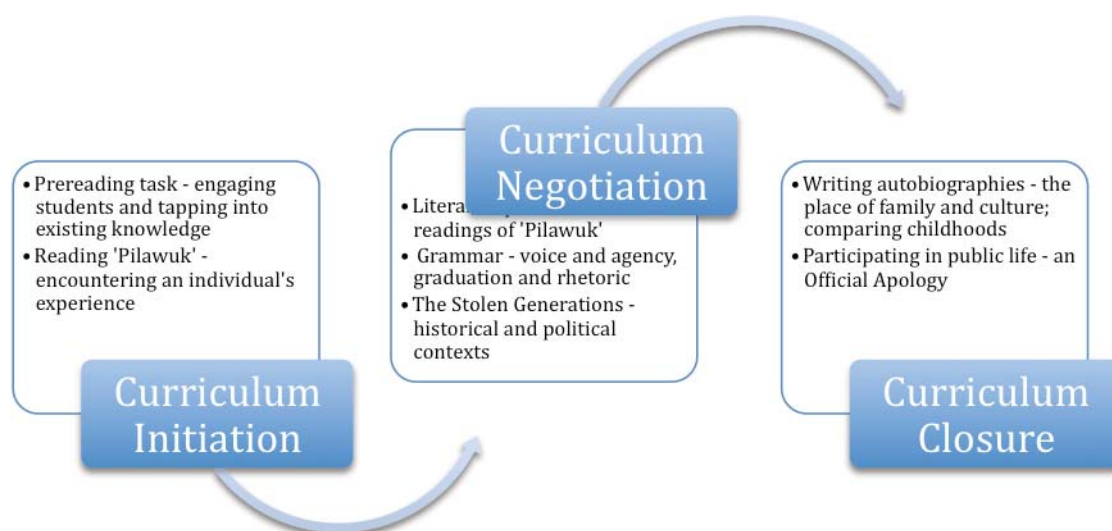


Figure 3. “The Stolen Generations”: An instance of the Curriculum Macrogenre in middle primary school

The *Curriculum Initiation* usually serves to introduce learners to the topic of study and activities for the ensuing unit of work. At this beginning point, the teacher was concerned to build some preliminary shared understandings of the topic through reading a large format version of the text “Pilawuk” together. The lessons comprising this first genre are presented in further detail below.

The second genre is an instance of the *Curriculum Negotiation*, a genre that usually functions to build and elaborate on earlier introduced ideas so that more generalised understandings of the topic at hand begin to develop. In this instance, the teacher and students worked their way through a number of activities which included guided comprehension activities around the text: sequencing events in Pilawuk’s life; considering her growth into agency and its grammatical representation in voice; discussing the historical context of the Stolen Generations and investigating

vocabulary choice through such features as amplification (for example, *taken*, *stolen*, *removed*, and so on).

The third genre – the Curriculum Closure – completed the unit of work. Here students usually present completed tasks, revisit earlier understandings with the purpose of reflecting on and making public new knowledge. In this instance, the Curriculum Closure enhanced the understandings established in the Curriculum Negotiation by encouraging the learners to reflect upon the consequences of the removal of Aboriginal children from their families, through writing and publication of their own autobiographies. This provided students with an opportunity for reflecting on the centrality of family and culture and for comparing their lives with Pilawuk’s experiences. An unplanned move in the curriculum unit saw the students add their voices to growing public opinion and write to the then Australian Prime Minister advocating an official apology to the Stolen Generations⁶.

Thus, through the Curriculum Macrogenre, it is possible to see how pedagogy unfolds over “the long conversation” (Mercer, 2000); that is, how through processes of semiotic mediation (chiefly talk), interactants co-construct the learning context over time. Throughout this particular unit of work, teacher and students engaged in increasingly complex linguistic and cognitive processes; from identifying, describing, recounting and predicting through comparing and contrasting to generalising, analysing and eventually challenging. They worked with texts ranging from event-sequenced recounts of individual experience (such as autobiographies) to ideas-sequenced expository texts based on collective experience (such as the letter to the Prime Minister). Along the way, the familiar discourses of family, home and community were interlaced with those more distant of government, church, history and race in a way that resonates with Hasan’s cline of decontextualisation (2001). Thus, these young learners were given access to important educational ideas, texts and ways of working with these, that they would later encounter in the curricula domains of History and Geography. They were also being prepared to participate in public life.

Tenor was indeed at the heart of this teacher’s art because she achieved these discourse shifts by varying the nature of teacher-student relations across the teaching and learning cycle. Sometimes she maintained tight control of the context; at other times she allowed learners more latitude over topics, texts and activities. Because such changing relations are most visible in the talk that emerges, it is useful to closely examine one instructional sequence. To illustrate this point, we will examine interaction between teacher and students from the beginning of the Curriculum Initiation. In doing so, we will also look for evidence of the principles of dialogic teaching as proposed by Alexander (2008).

THE CURRICULUM GENRE: FROM WHOLE TO PART

In the Curriculum Initiation the teacher’s goals were to:

- find out what learners already knew about the issue of the Stolen Generations;

⁶ The official apology to indigenous Australians for the Stolen Generations was finally made in February 2008 by Prime Minister Kevin Rudd, in one of the acts of the newly elected Labor government.

- orientate the students to the topic through the core text “Pilawuk”;
- establish shared understandings about the topic and activities to come;
- provide opportunities for English language use.

This was achieved through two tasks or stages, each of which moved through identifiable steps or phases as indicated in the table below. Phases are smaller units than a task and enable more detailed description of the pedagogy. Changes in phases are often marked by physical movement, changes in student grouping and the use of different classroom resources or artefacts. They are identified by looking for shifts in the language, such as a change in the topic of talk, or in the relationship between speakers, or in the kind of text (for example, oral or written). For example, movement from a teacher-directed phase to one featuring collaborative group work between students will lead to shifts in tenor and hence the language choices made.

Phases in a curriculum macrogenre analysis are labelled according to their pedagogic function. For example, an Individual Contract phase refers to a stretch of pedagogic discourse in which students work independently to complete an activity. An Expose is usually a phase of explicit teaching linked to the teacher’s pedagogic goals. The Task Collaboration is a phase in which students work in pairs or groups to collaboratively complete an activity, such as problem-solving, an experiment, a design brief or a simulation game. Student-to-student interaction is usually at its most dense during the Task Collaboration phase. The Consolidation phase is another whole-class or group event, in which students report back on an activity. It is an opportunity for teachers to monitor understandings and to guide the direction of learning, thus building common knowledge about a particular topic or issue. The Prelude refers to a brief episode in which the teacher gives instructions for completing a subsequent group or individual task. The Prelude phase is usually obligatory before an Individual Contract or Consolidation phase.

Task	Stages	Phase*	Participation structure
1: Prereading task	Introduction – review of group roles	Expose	Tcher: whole class
	Instructions - for completing prediction activity	Prelude	
	“Floorstorming” - prediction activity	Task Collaboration	Student - student
	Reporting back – on prediction activity	Consolidation	Tcher: whole class
2: Reading the text	Reading and discussing the text “Pilawuk”	Expose	Tcher: whole class
	Instructions for completing consensus activity	Prelude	
	Consensus activity – identifying the most significant events of the text	Task Collaboration	Student - student
	Reviewing consensus activity	Consolidation	Tcher: whole class

Table 3. An overview of the Curriculum Initiation (Lesson 1)

Analyses of different classroom settings (Christie, 2002; Jones, 2005) reveal considerable similarity in the features and functions of phases. However, the frequency of the occurrence of the different phases and their patterning varies across

classroom settings. In the Curriculum Initiation of this particular classroom, phases occurred as shown in Table 3 above.

Phase patterning in a single pedagogic task

This section of the paper describes the steps or phases through which the first task, the pre-reading task, achieved its pedagogic purposes. The task comprised four phases in the following sequence: Expose, Prelude, Task Collaboration and Consolidation. Each phase will now be labelled and described according to its function with reference to extracts from transcripts of classroom talk⁷. The description is limited to the first task, the pre-reading task.

Introduction

This phase is an example of an Expose, because it orientates to one of the teacher’s goals for the unit or work, that is, fostering her students’ use of spoken English in a range of classroom activities around the topic. Mindful of the need to be explicit about how to participate in group tasks, our teacher began with a brief review of her expectations for group work.

- Teacher: *what does that role do?*
 S: *the runner goes and gets (stuff)*
 Teacher: *okay thank you. Another one?*
 S: *the recorder um that has to write record everything*
 Teacher: *okay, the third role, Sam?*
 Sam: *the encourager*
 Teacher: *tell me what does an encourager do?*
 Sam: *um tells people like who do good in groups*

The students used labels such as “runner”, “encourager”, “recorder” to identify each of the designated group roles. With prompting, they also identified the related responsibilities associated with these roles. Notably these were expressed as tangible actions (for example, *that has to record everything*). Importantly, opportunities were provided for the students to rehearse what they might say in these roles; for example:

- Teacher: *Can you give us a few examples of how you encourage your group to work faster? What are the things that we need to say to encourage them? Sam?*
 Sam: *“Be on task”*
 Teacher: *Okay yes “Be on task”. What else?*
 Sam: *“Keep going”*
 Teacher: *That’s right “Keep going” too. Great ...*

Later in this phase, the teacher reminded students of the importance of turn-taking and of listening to each other.

- Teacher: *Okay now what are the two most important rules when you are working in small groups? Frank?*
 Frank: *Listen to each other*
 Teacher: *Listen yes*
 Frank: *Take turns*

⁷ Transcription conventions: () brackets represent transcriber’s best guess; S signals an unidentified student; // indicates overlapped turns; UPPERCASE is used when written text is read.

- Teacher: *Take turns yes*
 Frank: *Talking*
 Teacher: *And the second most important rule Louie something to do with this?*
 Louie: *Hearing*
 Teacher: *And what do you do? You?*
 Louie: *Listen*
 Teacher: *You listen to what is being*
 Louie: *said*

This phase was significant because students would participate in a good many collaborative group activities throughout the unit. Importantly, this initial occurrence provided a link with past work on interpersonal skills, its function to revisit and to foreground these understandings in order to prepare for the new work. The expectations of children as dialogue partners were made very explicit. It was teacher-directed; pacing and topic changes controlled by her use of continuatives (*Okay*) and demands for information (*Tell me*). But it was also dialogic to the extent that teacher and students jointly constructed the labels for group roles and the students were “invited” to participate via cued elicitation (*And what do you do? You ...?*) and the naming of individuals (*Frank?*). While it is recognisable as a series of IRF sequences, there was also some work done by the teacher’s exploitation of the third move in the sequence. For example, through such prompts as *What else?* and raised intonation together with cued elicitation (*And what do you do? You ...?*), she encouraged students to extend their contributions. Throughout this brief early phase, the teacher also worked to establish a communal “key”, achieved in part through positive polarity, overt affirmation (*great*) and use of pronouns (*we* and *our*). Such a key is an important aspect for the interpersonal environment, particularly in terms of supportiveness and reciprocity.

Instructions

This second phase represents an instance of a Prelude. A Prelude is usually focused “locally” rather than on broad curriculum goals as is the Expose. Here, the function of the Prelude is to prepare students to successfully complete the next phase of activity. The teacher was seated in the front of the classroom with a large format copy of the Pilawuk text, a copy of a montage of images from the text and an enlarged copy of a student worksheet containing the following written instructions:

LOOK AT THE PICTURES CAREFULLY, DESCRIBE WHAT YOU SEE.
 WHAT DO YOU THINK THE BOOK WILL BE ABOUT?
 DO YOU KNOW ANYTHING ABOUT THIS TOPIC?
 IF SO, TELL THE OTHER MEMBERS OF YOUR GROUP.

The following extract of text indicates the relatively teacher-controlled nature of talk during this phase.

- Teacher: *Now, our first task this morning is aimed at getting you ready to read your book...at pointing your thoughts in the right direction um for the words and the ideas that you’re going to come across in the book. Now what I’ve done is I’ve put together a collage of some of the pictures from the book and it looks a little bit like this (showing montage). I’m going to ask you to move into small groups that we’ve selected in a little while and we’ll give each group one of these sheets, one of*

these collages.

Now in your group we want you to look carefully at the pictures, FIRST OF ALL LOOK AT THE PICTURES CAREFULLY (reading from montage) they're from the text.

Then we want you to DESCRIBE WHAT YOU SEE, for example this is my picture and that's Pilawuk there ((pointing to cover of big book)). What can we see there? Describe that picture for me please Surayah?

Surayah: *Um, she has long hair.*

Teacher: *Who is she? She is a ...?*

Surayah: *A lady.*

Teacher: *Yep, yeah, a lady or young woman, she's got long hair, what else?*

Surayah: *She's a smile on her face.*

Teacher: *Mmm, okay. Who do you think she might be? Well, you know actually in this case. Who is she?*

Surayah: *Pilawuk.*

Teacher: *Pilawuk. She's the person that this book's about.*

So that's describing, that's the second thing you do in your group.

Okay, so each one of you might choose one of these pictures until you finish them all, talking about what you can see there. Now the third one, this is where lot more thinking comes in...

Here, the phase was as brief as the preceding one. The teacher briskly provided an explicit model of the task requirements and opportunities to rehearse these. Once more, she kept firm control of the pacing and sequencing of the interaction via continuatives (*Now, So, Okay*), stressing collectivity with the plural pronoun (*we*) and employing positive polarity. It was more monologic than the initial Expose; her conversational moves were predominantly statements (*Now in your group we want you to look carefully at the pictures, She's the person that this book's about.*) The students participated in response to commands or demands for action (*Describe that picture for me please*) and demands for information (*who is she?*).

In summary, interactions during the two opening phases of the lesson presented above were tightly controlled by the teacher; the student contributions were brief and for the most part students listened and watched. These phases, however, paved the way for the third and most important phase, that was the students' first sustained encounter with the instructional content in these early stages of the curriculum macrogenre. This phase was also that which provided most opportunities for student-student talk.

“Floorstorming”

The third phase in the pre-reading task represents an instance of the Task Collaboration phase and presented a marked change in the dynamics of the curriculum macrogenre to this point. It was considerably lengthier than either of the earlier phases. The instructional nub of the pre-reading task, the function of this phase was to find out what students knew about the topic, to prepare them for reading the text as well as to provide opportunities for English language use. In order to achieve these multiple goals, the teacher used an English language teaching strategy known as “floorstorming”. Similar to brainstorming, in this strategy learners are usually supplied with pictorial support related to a topic from which they work in small groups to generate a list of related ideas and/vocabulary. The strategy is named so because learners are frequently seated on the floor around the images.

In the extract of talk presented below, five young bilingual learners – Patsy, Sam, Kenneth, Frank and Simone⁸ – were seated at desks around a copy of the montage with the support of the guiding questions and instructions described above (for example, *Look at the pictures carefully. Describe what you see. What do you think the book will be about? Do you know anything about this topic? If so, tell the other members of your group.*) The first extract below represents talk from early in the phase. After a brief exchange to determine group roles, the children began by endeavouring to establish the identities of and relationships between the individuals depicted in the images. While the talk was shaped by the images and guiding questions, students had much more control of the conversation here than they did in the earlier phases. They had more turns, initiated more ideas about the topic and were freer to agree and disagree with one another.

- Patsy: *Yes, well, look at this picture in the corner here* (pointing to the top left corner of the montage)
- Sam: *Yes, Pilawuk that’s a Aboriginal girl, it’s an Aboriginal girl alright.*
- Patsy: *Mm, okay.*
- Kenneth: *O-kay, okay.*
- Simone: *Okay.*
- Frank: *The book is about her, it’s about ...* (writing down notes on the worksheet)
- Patsy: *Okay, Sam, what do you think about this girl? Who do you think she is?*
- Sam: *Don’t ... I don’t know, she funny. I think that she I think that she is an Aborigine white girl.*
- Kenneth: *An Aborigine white?*
- Frank: *Yeah, an Aborigine can be a white or black. It depends whatever colour their skin is.*
- Simone: *No, because there’s Aboriginal thing there* (indicating Aboriginal artwork in another part of the montage) *thing here see...*

Interestingly, in a classroom where diversity was valued, explored and referred to regularly (for example, in a recent art class, students had explored the term “flesh-coloured” and produced a palate of colours which represented the skin tones of class members) difference was a “way in” for the students’ discussion – however awkwardly readers may think it phrased initially.

Of course, the student talk is not “all of a piece”; the nature of participation for individual students varied. In assuming responsibility for getting the task done, Patsy used the language seen earlier in the teacher’s talk; for example, continuatives (*Yes, well; Okay*), use of children’s names and demands for information (*Okay, Sam, what do you think about this girl?*). However in this phase, the other students were able to give extended responses (*I think that she ... I think that she is an Aborigine white girl*) as they “thought aloud”, sought clarification from each other (*An Aborigine white?*) and disagreed with one another (*No, because there’s an Aboriginal thing there*). In this way, multiple lines of inquiry became possible as students built on each other’s contributions.

The talk during this phase continued to unfold as the students conscientiously worked through the guiding questions, first describing the images, attempting to predict

⁸ Pseudonyms selected by the children are used throughout.

something of the book’s content and then exploring what they knew about the content. It became apparent that Patsy had read the book before, hence her claim to the leadership role. Towards the end of the task, the children engaged in a lively discussion about skin colour and genetics. The teacher, who had been moving between groups, joined this group to mediate the discussion.

- Teacher: *Okay, let’s see, you think this is her family here?*
 Patsy: *No, I think that’s the family she was moved to...*
 Teacher: *Right*
 Sam: *No, I don’t think so, because is that black light brown? And she is white.*
 S?: *Look! That’s a drawing.*
 Frank: *Look! That could be her.*
 Kenneth: *That lady was a baby and that’s a baby...*
 Sam: *Yes, I know but a black man or woman can’t have a white baby.*
 Patsy: *Yes, they can, I have seen it in the newspapers because I have seen two black people and their and their babies are fair, they’re white.*
 Sam: *Yes*
 Teacher: *You can have /somebody/*
 Sam: */but they might have married a white person/*
 Simone: *Alright, alright, alright*
 Ss: *sh sh sh*
 Teacher: *Yes, you can. It might ... it might be a family who might be a a dark dark skinned person and a light skinned person and their baby will often be lightish.*
 Patsy: *Brownish (looking around group at her own and others’ skin)*
 Sam: *Like Frank (students look to Frank)*

Interestingly, the open-ended question, *What do you think the book will be about?*, provided a point of departure for this stretch of talk, setting up a context for Patsy and Sam to argue a position, to justify their stances with reference to evidence and for the other children to challenge and support these. Here the students used a range of language resources to express logical relations (*I don’t think so, because is that black light brown? And she is white?*) and employed modality (*could be her, might have married*) to allow for the possibility of different points of view. The Task Collaboration phase here enabled the students to identify a range of possibilities for the text they would encounter in the following task. The intense nature of the students’ involvement here is evident in the overlapped turns and jointly completed utterances (*lightish – brownish – like Frank*). Here the learners were engaging collectively, critically and constructively with one another using language that closely resembled “exploratory talk” (Barnes, 1976; Mercer, 2000). Such talk is an important means for students to “air and share” ideas. Teachers, as they observe students participating in this way, are able to “listen to them think” and to mediate as required.

However, not all lines of inquiry will be relevant to the teacher’s goals. Freebody, Maton and Martin (2008) describe “cumulative learning” as tied to the construction of curriculum-specific domains with their particular forms of knowledge and ways of working with that knowledge. In the classroom example here, the teacher is apprenticing students into historical concepts such as empathy and significance (ACARA, 2010), as well as developing literacy skills. In order to do so, she must assist them to develop what Mercer (2000, p. 102) has termed a “joint identity, a shared intersubjective perspective”. To this end the varied lines of speculation

produced by Patsy’s group and others in the Task Collaboration phase must be mediated further. The next phase of the lesson functioned to do this.

Reporting back

The final phase in the pre-reading task is an instance of a Consolidation phase that is usually an opportunity for students to make public the results of individual or group activity. Here the representatives of each student group reported on the results of group discussions during the previous phase, the completed worksheet providing a useful prompt. The teacher’s purpose was to construct shared understandings out of the different small group responses. The reporting back activity also provided further opportunities for students to use oral language. This time, the spoken text was more formal in nature and closer to that of a written text. Interestingly, several students with responsibility for reporting were observed to quietly rehearse their reports to their groups. In the following extracts of talk from the task below we see something of how the phase unfolded:

- Kenneth: *Um, we think ... we think the book is going to be about this um ...*
 S: *lady* (whispered)
 Kenneth: *lady um Pilawuk um Pilwuk um it’s going to be in Pilawuk’s family and*
 S: *because* (whispered)
 Kenneth: *because because*
 S: *she’s on the picture* (whispered)
 Kenneth: *it shows on the picture.*
 (Later on in the phase)
 Teacher: *Want to add something else?*
... Mase, would you like to add something there?
 Mase: *Um that*
 Teacher: *Oops please start, “We think”*
 Mase: *We think that cause she um some of her family go to school because she*
has a picture of everyone
 (And later still)
 Teacher: *Okay, who’s the reporter?* (to another group)
Mehmet! Lucky you Mehmet!
 Mehmet: *We think the book is about um a woman who is um remembering her*
past (rising intonation) *and um when she was um at school...*

Initially, Kenneth shyly reported back on his group discussions, assisted by other group members’ whispered prompts (*lady, because*); then other group representatives were encouraged to add to the speculation as the teacher recorded these ideas on the chalkboard (*Mase, would you like to add something here?*). The collective and tentative nature of the common knowledge at this point was underscored by the use (and the teacher’s reminder to do so) of the sentence starter *We think*. Such expressions of modality (*We think the book is about...*) provide a space in the dialogue for alternative views about the book’s contents, thus enabling several ideas to remain in play until they could be confirmed or otherwise when the text is finally read. Through such interactive choices as those described above, group contributions were offered, shaped, repeated and accumulated in full view of the class members.

To summarise, the four phases of the pre-reading task represented a range of participation structures and fostered a variety of language use. Together the phases functioned to achieve the teacher’s goals for the pre-reading task. These goals were to do with engaging students with the topic, finding out what they knew about it,

establishing shared understandings in preparation for reading the focus text and providing opportunities for students to use English language related to the topic. In the next section of the paper the extent to which they provide evidence of dialogic teaching will be examined.

APPLYING THE PRINCIPLES OF DIALOGIC TEACHING

With respect to those principles most relevant to tenor relations – collectivity, reciprocity and supportiveness – the pre-reading task as a whole can be said to have exemplified these. However, the extent to which individual phases did so varied, with the exception of the principle of collectivity. Firstly, teaching across the task was collective; the teacher and students consistently addressed the various phases together as a whole class and as groups. Not surprisingly, the principle of reciprocity was most evident in the Task Collaboration phase, when students worked together in small groups. That the Task Collaboration was the most significant and lengthiest phase of the task is indication that listening to each other, sharing ideas and considering alternative perspectives were important aspects of the teacher’s pedagogic design. Interestingly, the few instances of disputation observed in the larger study took place in the Task Collaboration phase, indicating that the extent to which students were able to articulate ideas freely may be limited by their capacity to resolve difference productively with minimum teacher intervention. However, reciprocity and supportiveness did not only occur during group tasks. There was also evidence of teachers and students sharing ideas, listening to each other in other phases such as the Consolidation, Expose and Prelude. And while the display in Table 4 suggests that the Task Collaboration phase was most successful in respect to the principles of dialogic teaching, its success rests upon what is achieved in the phases that both precede and follow it.

Phase	Collectivity	Reciprocity	Supportiveness	Cumulation	Purposefulness
Expose	√	√	√	√	√
Prelude	√	√	√		
Collaboration	√	√	√		
Consolidation	√	√	√		

Table 4. Dialogic principles in phases of the pre-reading task

The content-related principles of dialogic teaching are less readily applied to individual phases in the example of this teacher’s practice. Cumulation and purposefulness tended to sprawl across the task as each phase built on that preceding, and anticipated the phase that was to follow. There is an overriding sense of purpose in all of these phases; their design and sequencing carefully considered in light of the pedagogic goals.

To return briefly to the curriculum macrogenre as a whole, intentional and cumulative teaching is perhaps best evidenced over the longer span of time and activity. The Expose served variously throughout the unit to teach content or skills explicitly and to point out salient knowledge about language. The Expose was the point at which the teacher’s expertise in relation to the content and her knowledge of students’ readiness for further encounters with new ideas came to the fore. With its high degree of teacher control, it appears at first blush irreconcilable with notions of dialogic instruction.

However in this teacher’s practice, it was often followed by a pairing of the Prelude-Task Collaboration phases in which students engaged with the subject matter in a less interventionist more interactive manner. In this way, the Expose was often responsible for creating the conditions for a surge in student uptake of the educational knowledge at stake. The absence of the Expose in pedagogic discourse can inhibit the construction of educational knowledge and leave students stranded in everyday, commonsense understandings (Jones, 2008). As the table above suggests, it is one important driver of cumulative learning.

The Prelude, Task Collaboration and Consolidation phases were critical to this teacher’s pedagogy. The Prelude was a point which provided clear demonstrations and models for subsequent more independent activity visible to students. Informed as it was by English language teaching principles, the Task Collaboration enabled students to use English language for a range of different functions. In doing so it also enabled students to encounter different perspectives on the topic at hand and to enact a range of interpersonal relationships. However, as we have seen, the Consolidation is an important phase in drawing students along a line of inquiry and shaping the forms of intersubjectivity desired by the teacher. It is a critical aspect of collective, cumulative and purposeful teaching.

The relatively late occurrence in this instance of the curriculum macrogenre of the one individual task or Individual Contract – the writing of students’ autobiography – is noteworthy. It took place only after teacher and students had spent a good deal of time exploring the topic of study together. In other classrooms, individual tasks often occurred much sooner but here, because of the age of the learners, their linguistic and cultural diversity and the nature of the topic, care was taken to construct a shared learning context before students were expected to work independently.

To conclude, the dialogic teaching framework proposed by Alexander (2008) signals a welcome return of attention to classroom discourse, particularly to the importance of talk in the acquisition of educational knowledge. The curriculum macrogenre analysis presented here has attempted to map a small section of the trail toward this knowledge. It has focused on one teacher’s contribution, as she worked to support her students acquire facility with the kinds of language and predispositions necessary for its successful acquisition. Interactivity was critical to her pedagogic design as she exploited its potential for negotiating students’ ways between the known and the new. The balance between contextualized and decontextualised meanings was always in play as she and students interacted in various participation structures. For teachers, dialogic teaching with its orientation to both the interpersonal and experiential aspects of pedagogy provides a useful means of reflecting on practice. For the classroom researcher, it provides a useful means of approaching data, but is enriched by a principled discourse-based approach such as that suggested in this paper. As we have seen, not all classroom events can be described as dialogic, yet they may pattern into longer sequences of instruction that meet the conditions of dialogic teaching. Thus it will be important to resist attempts to evaluate single episode teaching and instead focus on tracking classroom interaction over time in order to capture the complexity of teachers’ work as they make their contributions to students’ secondary enculturation through multiple, dialogic encounters.

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