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Group work in the second language classroom: where teaching meets learning in pedagogic discourse

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Group Work in the Second Language Classroom: Where teaching meets learning in pedagogic discourse

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degree of

Doctor of Education

in the

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Thesis Certification

CERTIFICATION

I, Philip. J. Chappell, declare that this thesis, submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the award of Doctor of Education, in the Faculty of Education, University of Wollongong, is wholly my own work unless otherwise referenced or acknowledged. The document has not been submitted for qualifications at any other academic institution.

Philip. J. Chappell

30 March, 2010

Abstract

The central concern of this thesis is the nature and the role of small group work in classrooms where the main educational object is the teaching and learning of English as a foreign language. This concern emanated from the author's own teaching praxis whilst engaged as a language teacher, language teacher mentor, language teacher trainer, and member of the main professional association of language teachers in Thailand. As such, this thesis records the author's efforts towards completing a professional doctorate program, which has at its core the following questions: How does small group work contribute to language teaching and learning in an adult, English as a Second Language classroom? How is group work successfully enacted in an adult, English as a Second Language classroom? What roles do the students and the teacher play in the implementation of effective group work?

Although the central concern of the thesis stems from practical pedagogical issues, the focus shifts to theoretical concerns, with a proposed theoretical framework drawing on Vygotsky's (1978, 1986) mediational theory of mind, Halliday's (1978) systemic functional linguistic theory, and Bernstein's (2000) theory of pedagogic communication. Complementarities of these theoretical approaches to human learning and development are established which provide a level of analysis which captures the dynamics of the classroom context in which the group work takes place, thus allowing for comprehensive data to be gathered to enable descriptions and explanations of the nature and the role of group work in the language classroom. Significantly, the dominant theoretical approaches to second/foreign classroom

interaction are critically reviewed, with suggestions for how they would benefit from a shift in emphasis from the individual to the social.

The research is sociogenetic in orientation (Valsiner and van der Veer, 2000), which entails an interpretive, naturalistic approach, adopting principles of ethnography within a compressed time frame. Data comprise video recordings (audio and visual) of all classroom activity over the period of one term, representing a complete curriculum cycle. Data also comprise interviews with the teacher before and after each of the fifteen lessons, field notes, classroom materials, and curriculum documents from the educational institution. The approach to data analysis follows Christie's (2002) curriculum genre/macrogenre model, starting at the longer unit of curriculum macrogenre, then working down to the curriculum genre level, and then discrete segments, or structural elements and phases of lessons, where group work is enacted. The talk is captured holistically by utilising Bernstein's (2000) model of pedagogic discourse, with the talk representing interactions between the teacher and students analysed using systemic functional grammar.

Findings reported include a description of the pedagogic functions of group work revealed in one curriculum macrogenre. Activity directed toward the object of each of these functions represents a variety of interactions all representing intersections of language and cognitive development in the complex milieu of the classroom. An understanding of this milieu involving language and human activity, it is argued, is essential for delving deeply for answers to the central questions focused on the nature and role of group work. The findings also reveal a successful enactment of the foreign language curriculum. This is an exemplar of where an

institute's policy and program has productively recontextualised theory and the policy has in turn been successfully recontextualised by the teacher into effective foreign language teaching practice in the classroom.

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This thesis would not exist without the unceasing commitment of Ross (pseudonym), the teacher who participated in this research. How fortunate I am to have had such an extraordinary teacher to observe so intensively. Ross is a remarkable person in many ways, and his collegiality, friendship and participation over the life of this project and beyond stretched further than I ever expected.

Thanks to my primary supervisor, Dr. Beverly Derewianka, who had faith in me, across the sea, right from the beginning, and who demonstrated a striking ability as a scaffolder, managing contingency support in just the right measures. Thanks, too, to Dr. Honglin Chen, who was there as a secondary supervisor to offer support when needed.

And of course, thanks to the students who, together with Ross, were where all the action was at for this project. They created all the possibilities, and while they have now traversed the roles of young adult English language learners, they are no doubt succeeding in educational and professional contexts where English is the medium of communication. This project is all about creating more of those possibilities, and in its own way creating a slightly more equitable world.

Dedication

The last eight years' efforts and the artefacts that are left behind in their wake are all dedicated to the late John Francis Chappell (1932 to 1994). Dad would have been tickled pink at this.

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