

Title: Classroom Discourse Versus Casual Conversation

Assessment Task Number: Classroom and Spoken Discourse SD 00 04

Assessment Task:

The 7 sub-headings in Unit 8 have provided a framework for exploring what distinguishes a lesson from other speech events. Use the same headings to summarize the distinguishing features of

- a) a language classroom activity that you use in your teaching.
- b) casual conversation
- c) which of a) or b) has the features which are easiest to identify, and why?

You should include short real-life examples to illustrate distinguishing features but you are not advised to collect and analyze extensive quantities of data.

The 7 sub-headings are:

8.4.1 Setting

1. Space
2. Time

8.4.2 Participants

8.4.3 Purpose

8.4.4 Key

8.4.5 Channels

8.4.6 Message content

8.4.7 Message form

This assignment consists of approximately 4,660 words excluding appendices and references.

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Teaching conversational English in an EFL context involves certain difficulties. The most important is how to prepare learners to use the English language so as to be able to participate and take part in conversations outside the class. The Korean university where I work has large class sizes (50 to 60 students). Most students are at a beginning level in conversational English. They have typically been textbook- and teacher-centered learners and are shy of speaking English in front of their peers. They fear making a mistake and losing face. A recent study by Kim and Margolis (2001; 9) found “Korean university students, on average, have less than 220 lifetime hours of English listening and speaking exposure in a formal setting”. These are mostly with recordings of conversations made for textbooks. This paucity of discourse practice is partly responsible for their hesitation. It must be remedied for students to learn how to effectively communicate outside the class.

“Pedagogical innovations suggest that acquiring the tools of discourse analysis is a valuable enterprise for English language teachers” (Coffin, 2001: 119). ELT teachers need to know how discourse works in both casual and structured situations, in order to assist their students in approaching effective communication outside the pedagogical setting. The literature in this module supports this need. Coulthard (1996: 146) says that, “students may be taught to produce answers that are grammatically correct but unusual or even deviant in terms of discourse rules”. Their speech might then little resemble natural language use, causing further communication problems.

This paper contrasts the distinguishing features of discourse inside the

classroom with real-world discourse outside the class for the purpose of self-education, with the goal of improving lesson preparation which, in turn, would help students become more effective real-world language users. It will begin with a literature review and then explore the distinguishing features of a language classroom activity. Subsequently, it will explore comparable features of a casual conversation. It will consider which situation contains features easily identified, and why they are identifiable. Finally, it will discuss implications for the language-learning classroom.

2 Literature Overview

This part of the paper will look at the pertinent literature presented in this module and some arguments why ESL teachers should understand discourse analysis.

2.1 Setting

Conversation setting affects language usage. Circumstances surrounding the production, environmental factors, social conventions, relationships between participants, and shared experience are important factors to consider in the analysis of discourse. Cook (1997: 9-10) further develops this idea by stating that:

“when we receive a linguistic message, we pay attention to many other factors apart from the language itself. If we are face to face with the person sending the message, then we notice what they are doing with their face, eyes, and body while speaking: maybe they smiled, or shook their fist, or looked away. In a spoken

message we notice the quality of the voice as well: maybe the speaker's voice was shaking, or they had a particular accent, or hesitated, or slurred their words.... We are also influenced by the situation in which we receive messages, by our cultural and social relationship with the participants, by what we know and what we assume the sender knows”.

Paralinguistic factors are pertinent in discourse analysis, in the classroom or in the 'real world'. These introduce some of the major points of discourse analysis.

2.2 Participants

Interactions between strangers and friends differ in the degree of shared knowledge. Strangers spend more time establishing common ground and exploring boundaries. Coulthard (1996:8) writes of the “crucial importance of shared knowledge in conversation” and how speakers draw on their knowledge and understanding of the world, as well as linguistic knowledge, in exchanges. In casual conversation between friends, both participants assume a “shared awareness of the language system, a shared awareness of what has been said before, a shared awareness of cultural events, and a shared awareness of very local events/circumstances” (Cauldwell and Allen, 1997: 21). In the EFL classroom however, the teacher assumes students do not know the information being presented and, in certain situations, do not share backgrounds and language systems.

This influences turn-taking mechanisms, determining when and how participants speak and how each new speaker is chosen. In most casual conversations, listener and speaker roles are exchanged regularly, with equal speaking rights. Participants can enter – and exit – the conversation, choose the

next speaker, limit the next utterance, or pass the speaking turn to someone else. In a pedagogical setting, the teacher can do these things or choose speakers for several successive utterances. Conversely, students generally cannot. Brazil (1985:130) refers to this “non-symmetrical verbal encounter ... as unequal distribution of conversational rights”.

2.3 Purpose

Brazil sees speech as a purpose-driven activity in which speakers and hearers work together to reach ‘target states’ of shared understanding. Phatic conversation to cooperate or maintain social relationships contrasts with conversation for specific purposes. The function of the conversation is “arrived at with reference to the participants, their roles, and the setting” (McCarthy, 1996: 18). The linguistic forms used must be interpreted with these points in mind; their meaning varies considerably with context. “Utterances are only explicable in relation to the activities ... in which they play a role” (Levinson, 1983: 227). Therefore, in any analysis of discourse, “context must always be taken into account” (Brazil, 1998: 16) if you are to make any accurate hypothesis about the analysis of the conversation.

2.4 Key

Key refers to the tone or manner of speech, and use of intonation to express feelings and attitudes. (e.g., sarcastic, mocking, serious, happy, angry, grateful, etc.) Hymes emphasizes the significance of key observing that, “when it is in conflict with the overt content of an act, it often over-rides it” (Coulthard, 1996:

48). Hence the manner, as much as the content of the utterance, is important. Accordingly, intonation can carry meaning independently and can signal the listener what kind of response is expected. Key can also indicate dominance. It shifts as different participants control the discourse although this is not usually apparent in casual conversation.

Rising and falling tones signal an assumption about the communicative understanding the speaker shares with the listener. This affects communication progress. Although these features may be difficult to distinguish in casual conversation, “writers on discourse intonation have proposed that the falling tone indicates new information while rising tones indicate ‘shared’ or ‘given’ information” (Roach, 1996: 177).

Classroom teachers may use rising tone to indicate that a pupil has made the correct choice. “High-key yes ... discriminates explicitly against no, (and) serves this evaluating function” (Brazil, 1985: 78), reinforcing the student’s comprehension. But here the similarity with casual conversation ends. Teacher intonation differs greatly in lexical selection of prominence. In an EFL class, in emphasizing vocabulary, grammar, or simply being pedantic, teachers tend to indicate distinction of lexical items where they would not in casual conversation. The consensus is that this exaggerated use of prominence is a result of pedagogical rather than communicative aims.

2.5

Channels

Channel is chosen method of communication, oral, written, or encoded. Normal conversation depends on participants cooperating in this choice. In the

classroom, there are two different channels of oral communication, inner and outer. The outer channel is used for the general management of the class; the inner is used for the actual transmission of information and language practice. It thus places limitations on the student's freedom of action and speech. The key or prominence patterns mentioned in Section 2.4 differ in inner or outer speech. Teachers apparently "inadvertently reinforce the tendency" (Brazil, 1995: 65) for learners to use prominence patterns from the inner channel; procedures for correcting wrongly formed inner discourse are different from those we use in actual conversation.

2.6 Message Content

Message content is the 'topic' of the speech event. In an EFL class the topic is chosen by the teacher, and thus is predetermined and invariable; in casual conversation it is relatively unrestricted. McCarthy (1996: 136 - 137) discusses two kinds of discourse, interactional and transactional. Burns (2001: 126) explains the difference:

"transactional interactions are those primarily involving the exchange of some form of good and service, or information, while interactional interactions primarily involve the creation, maintenance and extension of personal and social relations".

Interactional exchanges make up most social conversation.

Small talk "has as its primary function the lubrication of the social wheels, establishing roles and relationships with another person, confirming and consolidating relationships, expressing solidarity, and so on" (McCarthy, 1996:136). Classroom practice does not tend to include this form. Interactional talk is rarely

represented in ESL textbooks; the emphasis seems to be on transactional dialogues. Unpredictable social talk must be inserted in cassette transactions to give students a better balance of listening activities. Students can then be instructed to include some interactional dialogue in their transactional role-plays.

Grice's maxims on relevance, quality, quantity, and manner (Brazil, 1985, 1995; Burns, 2001; Coulthard, 1996) are not presented nor discussed in ESL classrooms. I imagine that for beginning students, these concepts are irrelevant; they require more understanding of the language than that possessed by the average learner.

2.7 Message Form

Message form looks at the structure of the utterance and how interpersonal factors influence the speech act. These factors, directed towards speaker or hearer, create an enhanced shared emotional environment. Hymes says "it is a general principle that all rules of speaking involve message form, if not by affecting its shape, then by governing its interpretation" (1972: 35). This can be perceived in many ways; here we will only look at whether utterances are 'face threatening' or not.

The form of the message may cause either speaker or hearer to lose face and is adjusted to minimize this. Utterances threatening to the speaker include apologies and invitations, where refusal is a possibility. For the hearer, imposing or belittling speech, negatives, or direct imperatives can cause loss of face; so the speaker adjusts the form of the message, using circumlocutions to reduce pressure or inconvenience to the hearer. Degrees of politeness are used to minimize

potential for loss of face.

For ESL students, this can be a particularly difficult feature as different cultures and languages vary the “weight they give to positive or negative politeness and the amount of politeness they require in informal situations” (Coulthard, 1996: 53). Learners must distinguish different discourse types and adjust to these differences in culture while learning what is appropriate considering setting, participants, circumstances, etc.

This may be hampered by the way that ESL is taught in Korea. It is offered in only scripted recordings and transcripts, giving students an impoverished input. Authentic recordings of casual conversation are generally considered ‘messy’ and so are very rarely used as dialogues for students. Learners, it is thought, would have difficulties sorting out overlapping, utterance completion, and unordered turn-taking in natural conversation. Idealized speech is reflected in the rigid turn-taking patterns language learners practice in ESL classrooms. Teachers must decide how far idealized language may help their students, then go beyond with more natural exchanges and activities, to help students develop natural turn-taking and a wider variety of discourse.

3

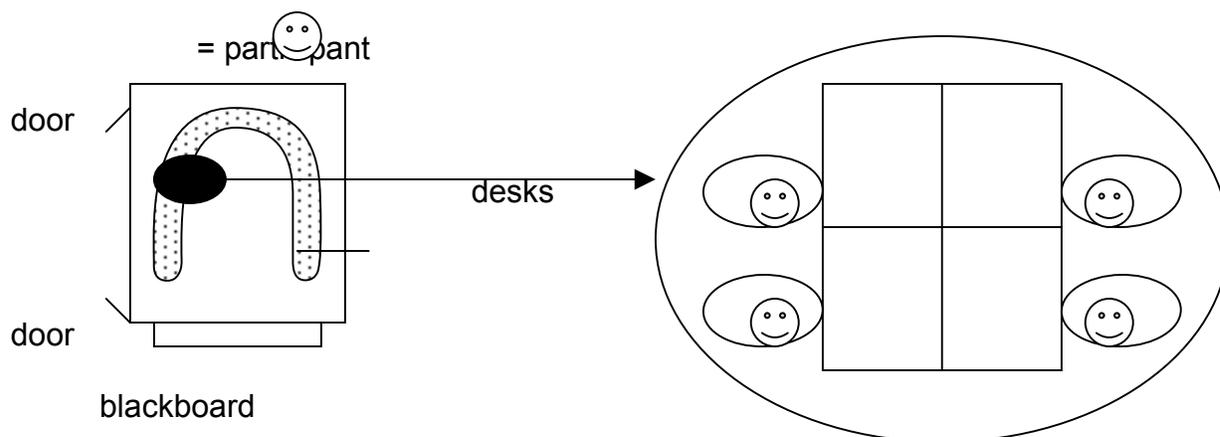
Language Classroom Activity

The required textbook at Hoseo University is *Fifty – Fifty Book One: A Basic Course in Communicative English*. Each unit has a dialogue students can read, listen to, and practice. “Once the students are familiar with its language and content, they can practice the dialog using substitutions that are provided” (Wilson

and Barnard, 1998: vi). The first unit has an eight-line introductory dialogue to be done in small groups. Appendix A shows this page, including presented dialogue and substitutions. The teacher controls the frame, focus, and opening moves of this activity; however once the exchanges get underway, the teacher no longer restricts student interactions.

3.1.1 Setting: Space

Desks are in two rows, arranged in a “U” or horseshoe shape, leaving a clear area in the center. The “U” opens toward the blackboard. Students are in groups of four, two in the front row and two in the back, with the front pair facing the students sitting behind.



This arrangement allows easy communication and encourages interaction while facilitating teacher access to all students.

3.1.2 Setting: Time

Classroom time is constrained to the lesson period of an hour and a half. Each lesson is planned to use this time effectively. As this introductory dialogue

occurs on the first day of the school year, and the students are strangers to each other, I dedicate most of the period to this activity so that the students can meet and get to know each other.

3.2 Participants

Participants in a classroom discourse are usually a teacher and the students. Normally the pupil has few rights to contribute unless the teacher assigns him/her the role of next speaker (Sinclair and Coulthard, 1992: 23, McCarthy, 1996: 19). However, in the aforementioned activity there is no bidding for speaking rights from the teacher. Students are encouraged to participate in their own groups as they take turns being addressee and addressor. Initially, practicing the dialogue and substitutions, they are only manipulating the language as expected in the exercise. However, as they move on to “freely” asking and answering questions about themselves, students take some responsibility for the communicative value of their utterance. Also, as turns pass around the group, students take a controlling role in speech and have an opportunity to initiate, follow up, and react to utterances. This gives them practice in manipulating the turn-taking system. McCarthy (1996: 122) talks about the “impoverished range of utterance functions” students practice. It is hoped that this activity at the beginning of the semester will offer larger opportunities for the students.

In most classroom situations, teachers ask questions to which they already know the answers. However, in this Fifty-Fifty exercise, neither the teacher nor the students know the answers to the questions asked. The only shared knowledge is culture-specific rules, social norms, and a limited knowledge of the English

language. This then enables students to expand their areas of shared understanding in a realistic manner.

3.3 Purpose

Usually classroom discourse is for the purpose of transmitting information from teacher to students. In this case, students are pursuing a speech event to elicit information about each other. They are, ideally, progressing beyond the basic exchange in the course book to a more natural discourse where they will support, follow up, and acknowledge each other's replies. Asking questions to which they do not already know the answers makes exchange of information more than simple pretence. Although the context is a classroom exercise, it is hoped that the students' discourse will turn into a phatic conversation, giving practice of a conversational process not normally presented in ESL textbooks.

3.4 Key

ESL teachers tend to overuse high tones and sense selection in classroom discourse. They are trying to help students understand all the communication, rather than selecting certain words from contextual factors. This is helpful for beginners, but can lead to an "excess of prominences" (Brazil, 1995: 107) as learners copy the speech patterns of their teachers. It deprives them of examples of regular speech patterns and intonations.

At the beginning of this exercise, the students listen to actors perform the dialogue on tape. The recording is their model for intonation; nevertheless, when students are simply reading and practicing the dialogue, mechanical, robot-like

speech (usually used by Korean students working in English) is prevalent. They have no other intonational model unless they question the teacher. Nevertheless, as they move beyond practice to a speech act that is no longer a simulation, but an actual exchange of information with their partners, it is hoped that appropriate tone and intonation will naturally be inserted. It is most likely these will be Korean tone and intonation; however, without more modeling, I believe there is little hope of them acquiring natural English tone and intonation. Roach (1996: 135) supports this. He states that “learners of English who are not able to talk regularly with native speakers of English, or who are not able at least to listen regularly to colloquial English, are not likely to learn English intonation”.

3.5

Channels

There are three channels used in this exercise. Students listen to a taped conversation and read along. Later, they are required to ask questions of, and respond to, each other. They could be required to write down information from their partners, but I feel that developing communicative competence is more important at this point.

Overhead projectors, videos, and Powerpoint presentations can assist students in their language development. Transparencies, for example, might be covered and parts revealed as the students progress through inductive reasoning. However, used poorly, they could hinder learning, as Brazil (1995: 107) points out in his discussion of channels. Alternatively, students can be asked to bring realia to class to use in their exchanges, opening another channel of communication.

3.6

Message Content

The textbook and the limitations of shared knowledge determine message content in this activity. In a normal classroom setting, the teacher controls the subject matter and development of the discourse. However, in this situation, the students' contributions are admitted as relevant as far as they are in English and expand shared knowledge between participants. Theoretically, almost all student utterances would therefore be admitted as they attempt to discover shared background. Ideally, this exercise turns into a more natural conversation, where students move from the bare exchange of the textbook to more natural discourse, completing each others' moves, following up, and acknowledging responses. This then would become a truly interactional exchange.

3.7

Message Form

In this exercise, utterances are polite, neat, and complete sentences. Students do not interrupt or talk over each other. If they follow the textbook dialogue, their utterances are short and well formed, with standard structures. There is distinct turn taking; other students wait until the speaker finishes. Such scripted, structured discourse is easy to monitor, follow up, and evaluate; however, it is unnatural, unlike any interaction the students are likely to encounter outside class.

Also missing are hesitations, fillers, idioms, and formulaic follow-up phrases such as "oh, yeah", "I see", "mm", "that's interesting", and so on, used in a natural exchange. Burns (2001: 132) points out: "these kinds of follow-up moves are often absent in English language course books where typically question-answer

exchanges predominate". Although not presented in the book, it would be desirable to pre-teach these formulae at the beginning of the class, giving students the opportunity to insert and practice them as pertinent.

Additionally, teaching about challenging, daring, joking, deceiving, and even offering information might help students in participating in more natural discourse. None of these are normally taught; the ESL classroom is too rigid. The social nature of discourse is thus lost. Students need to learn how to participate in less-structured discourse and informal conversation.

As for face, students might relax more, as they are working in small groups and not speaking before the whole class. This grouping also reduces the control and dominance of the teacher. Students manage their own conversations; the teacher moves around spending time with each group, only assisting as necessary. As the students referred to in this paper are all from the same linguistic group, they may rely on Korean social conventions, turn-taking signals, and back channels. Because they can rely on this common ground, they have only to worry about language usage.

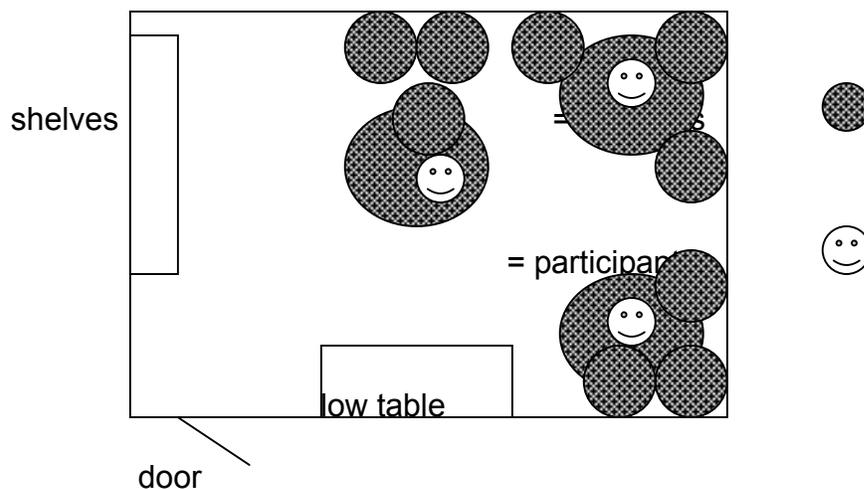
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Social Interaction

The social exchange I have chosen to contrast with the above example of a classroom exchange is also a first meeting; however, it is one between native English speakers. While a New Zealander is visiting the home of a Canadian, a third person from the United States drops by unexpectedly. The two visitors are new ESL staff in a Korean university.

4.1.1 Setting: Space

The seating arrangements in the home are several cushions distributed around the floor of the room. It was noted that each participant adjusted their cushions to suit themselves but that they, perhaps unconsciously, tried to sit in an equilateral triangle. Having direct or peripheral vision of collocutors is important for seeing and interpreting body language, turn-taking signals, and other paralinguistic signs.



This arrangement allows for easy communication and encourages interaction in an informal, casual atmosphere.

4.1.2 Time

This kind of social interaction is free from time and space limitations. However, in this example, time was constrained only by the participants' collective decision to retire for the night.

4.2

Participants

Participants were social equals, about the same age, and had the same jobs. Theoretically they could claim dominant status alternately or competitively. However, dominance in intonation, gestures, boundary markers, or even controlling gestures among the participants was indistinguishable since no one speaker attempted to control the conversation. It was an equal-opportunity conversation, with all three members initiating, responding, following up, and generally contributing at will.

4.3

Purpose

The conversation was entirely for the social value of the interaction. Participants tried to establish friendly relationships. They shared stories and experiences, talked about their jobs and their everyday lives. They established similarities and differences in their histories. They got acquainted, as did the students in the previous exercise. These people, however, talked freely about their lives; they didn't simply answer questions. They volunteered information about themselves. Burns (2001: 126) presents research that "story-telling' genres accounted for 43.4% of casual conversation". People evidently place social importance on sharing personal experiences. It is one way we develop common ground.

In this particular conversation one topic, which revealed a shared sense of humor, was the cultural misunderstandings that occur in their respective classrooms. This enlarged a common knowledge of their classroom activities and teaching styles.

4.4

Key

Most speakers use key to single out those items that represent sense selection when relevant contextual factors have been taken into account. Nonverbal communication--gestures and posture, along with paralinguistic features such as vowel length, aspiration, tempo, loudness, pitch, and voice quality--was jointly used to create affinity and rapport.

Adjacency pairs are a good place to choose examples from for a discussion of key in casual conversation. These are a pattern of discourse that allows a speaker to anticipate the type of response to his/her utterance. The listener will know what is the expected response by the key of the question.

However, one noticeable example of key in use was a high termination question, "Would you like some more wine?" at an early point in the evening. The listeners responded positively. Interestingly, the response to the same question, in a lower key quite a good deal later, was opposite. Perhaps the nonverbal signal of the speaker looking at a clock was a strong hint of the response anticipated. Otherwise, I cannot state that I observed any systematic relationship between proclaiming or referring tones and lexical meanings.

4.5

Channels

The conversation under discussion was not affected by any presentation of items or limitations upon speakers. The oral message progressed on and around the exchange reflecting the participants' interests.

Three-part exchanges evaluating the quality of an utterance are common in

the classroom. Three-part exchanges are also present in casual conversations, as “the acknowledging move is socially required” (Coulthard, 1996: 137). This move lets participants verify their understanding of the exchange. However, note that unlike classroom exchanges, follow-up moves in casual conversation evaluate or react to content, and not the quality, of utterances. In doing so, many initiate further exchanges. As an example from the conversation under discussion, one participant asked another, “Where did you work before coming here?” After a response, the first participant acknowledged by following up with, “Oh yeah, I know where that is.”

Not all exchanges require three moves. It is possible to have long stretches of two-move conversation. However, I feel that in this situation the nonverbal component becomes more important. This may be a nod, eye contact, a shrug, or other non-vocal activities. Although not obligatory outside the class, it is an option to signal acceptance or understanding. In fact, “the utterance following a response may be less obviously a follow-up and may seem to be just getting on with further conversational business” (McCarthy, 1996:16). An example from the cited conversation was the vocalization "uh-uh", accompanied with a nod of agreement, while discussing the job interviews the two new instructors had undergone. This second move could be considered a back-channel to encourage the speaker to continue.

Turn taking was smooth; though there was occasional overlap of turns, coherence was not lost. There were many back-channel responses, as well as redirection of the topic, by the different speakers.

4.6

Message Content

Control of the conversation passed between participants symmetrically; no speaker seemed dominant. Special mechanisms are necessary to negotiate topic change, but these were not apparent to me. Participants seemed to make many assumptions about shared knowledge and intentions. They appeared to anticipate the response the speaker wanted even though the relationship between form and function was often indistinct. Brazil (1995:98) calls this “cooperative interpretation”: listeners try to respond to what speakers mean, not what they say. This is exemplified by an example from the conversation: “... you know what I mean, they just freeze”. The speaker was unable to accurately articulate thoughts regarding Korean students’ hesitance in speaking out in class. The listeners understood that the students were not literally frozen blocks of ice, but that they were unable to articulate or participate in the exchange. No ambiguity was perceived between what was said and what was intended.

4.7

Message Form

Many interpersonal factors influenced the conversation under discussion. Participants came from similar cultures and backgrounds but did not know each other. Consideration of form and context was essential to the creation of coherent discourse and communication, but cooperative interpretation eased difficulties when what was said was not what was meant. Listeners responded to the meaning rather than the form of the message, as in the example given in Section 4.6.

Utterances were of varied lengths. Speakers talked over each other and

finished sentences for each other, leaving other sentences unfinished. Jokes were made and all three participants laughed at similar humorous junctions in the conversation. Exchanges were appropriate for a relaxed and casual encounter. There were no overtly face-threatening exchanges. The interlocutors tried to create a warmer, friendlier atmosphere; since they would be working together for at least a year, this was a reasonable and desirable goal.

5 Discussion of the features of a language classroom activity versus a casual conversation

The features of discourse in a language classroom are much easier to identify than those of a casual conversation. Classes are so structured that purpose, key, and content are easily identified. Throughout this paper I have indicated places where these features are notably different.

In the classroom situation the teacher was not asking questions to which the answers were already known and the students were trying to use the target language in discourse as they would in the real world. In a typical classroom, inauthentic materials, redundant questions, and scripted exercises thwart attempts at meaningful communication.

Supports such as “yeah”, “uh-uh”, “mmm”, etc... are conspicuously absent from classroom structured discourse as they are typically not represented in course books. These linguistic elements need to be pre-taught and explained if the students are to successfully participate in real-world discourse. These elements were, however, strongly evident in the casual conversation between the native

speakers.

Another divergence between classroom and casual discourse is the use of inner and outer channels. Because language is used for both instruction and content, channels are important in discussing classroom discourse; however, they are not relevant for casual conversation. This particular classroom exercise was different from most because the questions were real questions seeking real answers. There was more practice in the inner level than usual in this particular classroom discourse.

Students need more exposure to, and practice of, phatic conversation, the sharing of personal experiences, and the use of matching exchanges. The nature of classroom discourse gives very little exposure to these, yet they are important as they seem to make up most casual conversation.

6

Conclusion

As McCarthy (1996:12) states, “with a more accurate picture of natural discourse, we are in a better position to evaluate the descriptions upon which we base our teaching, the teaching materials, what goes on in the classroom”, etc. We must design activities to generate output as close as possible to natural discourse. It is difficult to sustain natural conversation in the classroom for long nevertheless, students need to feel they are engaging in an genuine exchange using authentic language, structures and strategies to simulate real-life discourse. Otherwise the learning experience is not effective. Lee (2001: 23) says that the ESL teacher’s job is “not to implant the ways of native speakers in the learners, but

to inform learners of their pragmatic choices and consequences”. Interactive features of topics should be taught and practiced. Listening activities can be used to raise awareness of native-speaker discourse strategies. Furthermore, ESL teachers can design speaking activities obliging students to use various strategies to complete the task. Finally, ESL teachers need to explain the suitability of utterances in context, explain how speakers cope with a variety of social situations, and explain different roles utterances perform. These need to be practiced through simulation exercises, then incorporated into activities where their use is genuine. We need to empower our students to participate in all kinds of speech events.

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