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Disciplinary differences in small-group interactions: quantitative and qualitative perspectives on turn-taking in university seminars

The fundamental aim of seminars and other forms of small-group interaction in higher education is to get students to talk, and the underlying assumption shared by educational theorists and university teachers alike is that the more the students talk, the more successful the seminar is. But what does 'more talk' mean - number of words, number of turns, or average length of turn? In this paper we report on a study of the British Academic Spoken English Corpus (BASE), in which we investigate student and teacher contributions to seminars according to each of these three measures. Our main finding is that different knowledge domains perform better according to different measures. Specifically, our quantitative analysis shows that students talk the most in seminars in the social sciences and humanities if we define talk in terms of total words spoken; students in physical sciences talk the most if we quantify talk in terms of number of turns; and students in life sciences talk the most if we measure talk in terms of average turn length. We then argue against the idea that any one of these measures might be inherently better or more desirable than the others. Drawing on qualitative data from the BASE seminars subcorpus, we argue instead that each of these different versions of 'talking more' carries with it a different set of affordances, each of which is more or less well attuned to the particular epistemologies and pedagogic goals of different academic disciplines. We conclude by considering the implications of our analysis for staff development and training programmes in higher education.