‘Becoming’ in classroom talk

PAUL DUFFICY – The University of Sydney

ABSTRACT
The nature of the talk between teachers and children is highly significant in a pedagogy that seeks to assist all children in their progress towards both individually and socially productive learning and development. In the long term, such progress is made difficult, especially for bilingual children, when talk is characterised by tight teacher control and relatively narrow and predictable patterns of participation. And while these restricted patterns of communication afford little opportunity for children to develop both linguistically and cognitively, they also frame for the child the kind of learner they are considered to be. Similarly, children also learn about themselves in more open forms of classroom communication, and these forms only come about when teachers loosen the reins on the minds of the children in their classrooms and assist them to move into challenging new cognitive domains through dialogue.

This paper will look at a sample of talk, between a teacher and a small group of children, taken from a larger action research project that sought to expand the talk opportunities for all the children in a combined Year 3/4 multilingual classroom. The suggestion will be made that, in expanding talk roles and responsibilities in classrooms, teachers not only engage children more effectively with the language and content of the curriculum, they assist young people to come to see themselves as capable doers and thinkers. It is this ‘gift of confidence’ (Mahn and John-Steiner 2002) that encourages children to engage with the next challenge that teachers place before them.

Introduction

It is senseless to claim that things exist in their instancing only. The template for the world and all in it was drawn long ago. Yet the story of the world, which is all the world we know, does not exist outside of the instruments of its execution. Nor can those instruments exist outside of their own history.

Cormac McCarthy, Cities of the plain

Children learning English as an additional language in Australian primary classrooms face the dual challenge of learning both the language itself and simultaneously using it to learn the subject matter of the primary curriculum. In addition, they must also learn to negotiate the social milieu of the classroom, which includes learning new patterns of expected social and linguistic behaviour. With this in mind, the well-recognised silent stage
for beginners can be seen to have as much to do with the emotions involved in this negotiation process and issues of identity formation in the face of these challenges (Igoa 1995), as it does with simply the degree of linguistic proficiency in the new language. From this perspective, as Toohey points out, for bilingual children ‘part of constructing voices for themselves is coming to be seen as particular sorts of “selves” in their school community’ (2000: 16).

Lave (1996) goes further and suggests that we must ask ourselves the fundamental question of what kinds of people, or ‘selves’, are ‘becoming’ in our classrooms? This question is demanding because it requires that we come to some clear sense of the kinds of ‘becoming’ – or ‘becomings’ – we want for our classrooms and, as well, it asks how these developmental journeys can be fostered through the approaches we take and the content we teach. So we need to be conscious of both the processes and possibilities for engagement that our teaching provides for children and young people.

Lave’s question also recognises that our students, too, are active in the process of ‘becoming’ kinds of people. They have a vital role in the fabric of the learning at hand – they are not pre-configured entities that simply need the addition of facts, figures, theorems, generic structures and attitudes in ever-increasing layers of complexity. Rather, they shape and are shaped by the processes in which they engage. This means that when we teach history, for example, an important goal is to assist young people to become historians – to appropriate the texts, the ways and the dispositions of history and historians. But it also means that in the process of becoming historians (or scientists, mathematicians, geographers, soccer players, family members, artists, life-long learners and so on) young people are, potentially, becoming critical, fair-minded, optimistic, curious, courageous and angered by injustice. However, not only can history be taught in a way that rarely asks young people to genuinely take on the role of a historian, it can also be taught in such a way that fosters uncritical acceptance of fact, a competitive view of learning, a pessimistic view of ability and potential, boredom, fear and ignorance of injustice. These unfolding processes, which include skill development, the appropriation of ideas, the taking up of dispositions, and the realisation of self, are largely ‘constituted in and through talk’ and so it is extremely important that we look closely at how talk is carried out in classrooms to ‘reveal the very constituting processes themselves’ (Edwards and Westgate 1994: 15).

Teachers in multilingual classrooms are also challenged because, to begin with, they need to design multidimensional environments for learning that integrate ongoing language exploration and development (and hopefully
bilingualism) with the requirements of the various content syllabuses. Second, they need to do so in ways that engage bilingual children productively and equitably so that they see themselves, and are seen by others, not as ESL learners but as capable contributors to the community’s endeavours. Third, and possibly most difficult of all, is the task of re-engineering the way the talk between a teacher and groups of children is enacted so that the ‘constituting processes’ are ones that give voice to children rather than ones that constrain. The diversity of backgrounds and experiences in the majority of contemporary classrooms makes this last challenge demanding enough, but it becomes doubly so when considered in the light of how classroom talk is generally characterised.

Towards the end of this paper, and with these challenges in mind, I will give an example of interaction between a teacher and a small group of children where moves are made by the teacher to expand rather than constrain dialogic participation. Before doing so, however, I will look briefly at how talk frequently plays out in classrooms and at some recent initiatives that seek to break the ‘default’ pattern of interaction (Cazden 1988). With this backdrop in place, I will draw upon sociocultural theory, particularly in terms of its emotional dimension, to assist in the development and interpretation of talk between teachers and children.

Classroom talk

Tharp and Gallimore (1991) note that while the 20th century saw profound change, one area that remained static was the interaction between teachers and students. They refer to the dominant form of this interaction as ‘recitation’ and it consists of:

The teacher assigning a text (in the form of a textbook or a lecture) followed by a series of teacher questions that require students to display their mastery of the material through convergent answers. (Tharp and Gallimore 1991: 1)

This default pattern of teacher question – student response – teacher response (often evaluative in nature) has been noted for over 140 years (Hoetker and Ahlbrand 1969) in both general education (Hardman, Smith and Wall 2003) and second language education (van Lier 1996).

Frequently referred to as Initiation / Response / Evaluation or Feedback (IRE/F), there has been considerable concern expressed about this tightly framed participation pattern from a number of different perspectives. Nystrand and Gamoran, referring to secondary school, argue that this kind of teaching–learning exchange is at the heart of why life in schools is ‘emotionally flat’ (1991: 257) and while classrooms may be orderly they are
frequently ‘lifeless’ (1991: 258). Van Lier notes that children come to school with both ‘curiosity and a spirit of exploration’ but that it is ‘gradually killed off there’ (1996: 48), and cites Maslow who argues that ‘the present school system is an extremely effective instrument for crushing peak experiences and forbidding their possibility’ (Maslow 1971: 195).

Children begin to learn the ways of the secondary classroom from their earliest days in kindergarten (Willes 1983), where they are often required to ‘leave their life situations at the door’ (Neisser 1976: 137), which for bilingual children can be bewildering at best.

Wood (1992) is also critical of an over-reliance on this constrained pattern of participation. While not referring to the complete initiation – response – follow-up (IRF) pattern, he notes both the prevalence of questions in the initiating move of the teacher and the generally limited or ‘closed’ form such questions often take. In terms of question frequency, there is little doubt that teachers do ask a lot of questions. Tollefson (1994), drawing upon a study by White and Lightbown (1984), cites the case of an English as a Second Language (ESL) teacher who asked 427 questions in a 50-minute lesson, while Dillon, in a comprehensive review of questioning research, notes that ‘teachers traditionally ask an average of several and even many questions per minute’ (1982: 152). In one example, from a sample of 27 lessons, teachers asked 80 questions per hour, while only 2 questions were asked by all students combined over the same time period. These lessons dealt with the demanding issues of capital punishment, divorce and child custody, and sex, where questions from students might be expected (Dillon 1988).

Wood (1992) goes on to argue that modern day teaching-as-questioning, while having roots leading back to Socrates and in spite of numerous training schemes based on various cognitive taxonomies, has remained ineffectual as a means of increasing pupils’ varied participation roles in lessons. One of the reasons for this is that continual questioning, which tests knowledge or requires children to guess what the teacher thinks (Young 1992), is such a relentless process of ‘cognitive takeover’ (Edwards and Westgate 1994: 144) that it virtually eliminates the possibility of the authenticity and symmetry (Cummins 1996) necessary for real dialogue. Indeed, if the ‘default mode’ of classroom interaction is representative of most children’s experience most of the time, then it is little wonder that such a seemingly benign force as the IRE/F could be the educational equivalent of ‘wind and rain, that doubtless contribute to the slow weathering of the pupil’s psyche’ (Jackson 1992: 48).
Talk initiatives

Against this backdrop of almost monolithic proportions, recent initiatives to make teaching more interactive and conversationally based (among other things) might appear a little quixotic. The Productive Pedagogy framework developed by the Queensland School Reform Longitudinal Study (1999) and recent material published by the New South Wales (NSW) Department of Education and Training (2003) both emphasise the important role to be played by substantive conversations between teachers and pupils. According to the NSW material, this element of quality teaching is made operational in classrooms when ‘students are regularly engaged in sustained conversations about the concepts and ideas they are encountering’ (New South Wales Department of Education and Training 2003: 11). Such sustained engagement, however, has indeed turned out to be quite difficult to achieve. For example, in a Queensland sample of 975 teachers, the score on a 5-point scale for substantive conversation, across the cohort, was 2.27, a score below the theoretical mean of 3 (Gore, Griffiths and Ladwig 2001).

Similarly, in recent policy-led initiatives such as the National Literacy Strategy (NLS) in England, interaction is considered crucial in the effort to raise literacy standards, and pupils’ contributions are to be ‘encouraged, expected and extended’ (Department for Education and Employment (DfEE) 1998: 8). If anything, however, the reverse has occurred. It would appear that since the introduction of the NLS there has been an increase in the kind of whole-class teaching where the teacher is interactively dominant (Mroz, Smith and Hardman 2000; English, Hargreaves and Hislam 2002) and that:

far from encouraging and extending pupil contributions to promote higher levels of interaction and cognitive engagement, the majority of the time teachers’ questions are closed and often require convergent factual answers and pupil display of (presumably) known information.

(Hardman, Smith and Wall 2003: 212)

In fact, according to Galton et al, it would appear that in England ‘today’s teachers devote even more of their time to telling pupils facts and ideas or to giving directions than their counterparts of twenty years ago’ (1999: 67). One possible reason for this is that the policy call for more interaction is coupled with a drive for ‘well-paced’ lessons where there is a ‘sense of urgency, driven by the need to make progress and succeed’ (DfEE 1998: 8). Other reasons may relate to the issue of time constraints in the classroom, and the demands of explicitly specified learning objectives. In such a context, according to English, Hargreaves and Hislam, teachers working within the NLS considered interactive teaching ‘as something of a luxury’ (2002: 21).
English as an additional language and a sociocultural perspective

Amidst all this talk about interaction and conversation sits the child learning English as an additional language in the multilingual classroom. Until recently, research within the field of Second Language Acquisition tended to concern itself with an individual’s acquisition of discrete aspects of the language and employed the notion of input and output as a central organising metaphor. Constrained by this metaphor, language was seen to contain meanings which, when transmitted by speech or writing, could be ‘emptied’ into the mind-as-container of the recipient. Such a view saw input as merely a triggering mechanism (van Lier 1996) and largely ignored the child’s role in active social, emotional and cognitive engagement with the task at hand. Van Lier makes the point that:

> it is this linear cause-effect view that needs to be replaced by a more complex view in which cognition, language, learning, and consciousness are in themselves dialogical constructs. (van Lier 1996: 50)

This dialogic notion that learning is first and foremost a situated, interpsychological phenomenon (Vygotsky 1978) suggests that we take a social and possibly ecological perspective (van Lier 2002; 2003) rather than a predominantly psychological theory of learning. Such a view has particular relevance for work in multilingual classrooms because, as Lave points out, theories which ‘reduce learning to individual mental capacity/activity in the last instance blame marginalised people for being marginal’ (1996: 149).

An emphasis on the social nature of learning, though, requires that before (or as) we look closely at, say, a teacher talking to an individual child, or to a small group, or a whole class, we widen our lens in such a way, as Rogoff suggests, that includes ‘the active and dynamic contributions from individuals, their social partners, and historical traditions and materials and their transformations’ (1995: 140).

This widening of scope leads to the view that learning, rather than being a process of transmission and individual acquisition, is a situated practice (Lave and Wenger 1991) within a community of others (Rogoff 1994; Toohy 2000) where the less-experienced participants are engaged in a social, linguistic and cognitive apprenticeship (Rogoff 1990; 1991) and constructive transformation (Lave 1996) through legitimate peripheral participation (Lave and Wenger 1991), which sets up conditions for the appropriation of the social world to restructure individual mental functioning. Or, as Lemke succinctly puts it, ‘what we eventually come to feel as something within us begins first as something between us’ (2002: 34).
A related idea that has important implications for classroom talk is that human social and psychological processes are best understood by exploring the tools and signs used to mediate them (Wertsch 1990) and, in relation to this, Vygotsky (1981) made the distinction between technical and symbolic tools. Technical tools, for example, a hammer, are mediators of human influence on the surrounding environment. However, the taking-up of higher psychological processes from the social, and the appropriation to the individual, plane is accomplished through the use of symbolic tools – the most important of which is language. Following on from this, Vygotsky and Luria considered that the greatest change in child development occurs:

when socialised speech, previously addressed to the adult, is turned to himself; when, instead of appealing to the experimentalist with a plan for the solution of the problem, the child appeals to himself. In this latter case the speech, participating in the solution, from an inter-psychological category, now becomes an intra-psychological function.

(Vygotsky and Luria 1994: 119. Emphasis in the original)

The domain, or intellectual space, for this transference was described by Vygotsky as the now well-known zone of proximal development. The practical outcome of this conception is that the Piagetian-derived adage to teach ‘where the child is at’ is turned around. Rather than development leading learning, Vygotsky argued that learning must lead development. This proleptic orientation in a classroom presupposes that children understand an idea or a concept or a skill as a ‘precondition for creating that understanding’ (Cole 1996: 183). Such an idea is not foreign to many of our everyday practices of child rearing. A good example of a proleptic orientation in action can be observed with parents and newborns. While a baby might be only minutes old, parents immediately welcome the child to the culture by talking to it with the presupposition that it will learn language (Macfarlane 1977).

Such an orientation lies at the heart of the task facing both classroom and ESL teachers and, indeed, could be seen as the catalyst for substantial changes to the opportunities and means in and by which bilingual children currently engage with classroom talk.

This proleptic orientation, along with the idea of mediation and the primacy of inter-psychological processes, leads us to a third and less commonly discussed aspect of Vygotskian-inspired sociocultural theory and that is the role that emotion plays in learning and development. Vygotsky was keenly aware of the role of affect in learning and at the time of his death was working on a manuscript titled *The teaching about emotions: Historical-psychological studies* (Mahn and John-Steiner 2002). Furthermore, at the conclusion of *Thought and language* Vygotsky states, ‘Thought itself is
engendered by motivation, i.e. by our desires and needs, our interests and emotions’ (1962: 150) and, as del Río and Álvarez (2002) point out, Vygotsky considered feeling a more powerful distinguishing feature between animals and humans than reason. According to DiPardo and Potter, Vygotsky ‘condemned the tendency to separate intellect and affect into distinct fields of study, believing that this separation had created the false illusion’ (2003: 318).

Furthermore, recent neurological research (Damasio 1999) increasingly supports the view that ‘emotion has an integral, and perhaps the most crucial, role in shaping the intellect’ (Greenspan 1997: 9). Most teachers recognise this, to some degree intuitively, especially English as an additional language (EAL) teachers, but in educational approaches and models that focus on the rational Piagetian view of learning and development, there is little room for a discussion of how we might go about integrating not just head and hand, but heart as well.

Moving out of the constraining, predictable patterns of classroom talk towards the less-chartered waters of ‘educated discourse’ (Mercer 1995) in order to take children and young people on an ‘excursion’ into a variety of kinds of talk (Northedge 2002) as a ‘discourse guide’ (Mercer 2000), is not simply a matter of technique – asking open-ended questions, waiting a few extra seconds for a response, re-voicing children’s responses and so on. While helpful, these techniques would be overly mechanistic and probably destined to fail without strong relational and emotional resonance between teacher and child. An open question, for example, is only open if it is perceived to be so by the child to whom it is addressed. And if we intend to challenge children and young people productively then trust, honesty and authenticity must be the bedrock of our interactions. Once in place, this affective foundation allows children and young people to feel interactively secure and as a consequence they are assisted to dip their toes, so to speak, into a discursive pool, and to take cognitive and linguistic risks in the company of others, and in so doing come to see themselves as capable doers and thinkers.

Somewhat paradoxically, it is in the teacher-directed and controlled default mode – which is essentially a testing mode – where wrong answers are often not treated as such. As Alexander points out, in this context teachers:

strive to avoid exposing children to the embarrassment of making a public mistake, and if they do, their feedback may be decidedly ambiguous (‘Ye-es’, meaning ‘No, but I don’t want to discourage you by saying so’).

(Alexander 2003: 31)
Furthermore, as Rymes and Pash (2001) have noted, in whole class talk of a restrictive IRE/F kind, children learning English as an additional language can quite easily pass as one of the ‘knowing’ group because they are able to track the answers of classmates around them. In fact, this is a further powerful pedagogical argument against a steady diet of restrictive classroom communication - it is easy to learn the game because in the initial stages you can play by following and echoing those about you, and once you know the rules you are normally only asked for factual recall. Bilingual children in this situation are severely restricted in terms of both role and tool use (recall only). As a consequence, whole class or group talk of a restricted kind inevitably gives teachers little insight into language development and virtually no insight into thinking.

On the other hand, in a more expansive picture of a classroom’s interactive potential, there is no need to hide mistakes, or divergent points of view, because the focus is less on ‘what do the children or young people know’ and more on ‘what do we need to think about’. The former has to do with tight teacher control and right or wrong; the latter more with teacher guidance through agreement and disagreement (Dillon 1990).

**Interactive snapshot in a Year 3/4 multilingual classroom**

I have reported elsewhere some of the ‘action for change’ that took place in a Year 3/4 multilingual classroom (ages ranging from eight years to ten years) in an inner-suburb of Sydney. This included an interactive analysis of a learning sequence conducted with the whole class, where children thought and talked their way through some complex issues (Dufficy 2003), and a pair-work investigation that looked at the language a particular task pre-disposed children to use (Dufficy 2004). In this paper I now turn my attention to teacher-led small group talk.

Of the 29 children in the class, 16 came from backgrounds where English was not the first language. The children in the class were learning about the arrival of the British in Australia in 1788 and the impact of this event on the Indigenous population at the time. This was complex and demanding content for children of this age because in order to engage with the issues surrounding first contact, they needed to develop some sense of Aboriginal society as it was 217 years ago. To assist in this process, a considerable period of time, initially, was devoted to learning about Aboriginal society, in particular the tools and weapons used at the time, and how disputes were settled.

Naturally enough, much of this was carried out as a whole class and it soon became quite clear, not unexpectedly, that children were participating
differentially. And so, with the different levels of participation we found, we set about developing other contexts – providing additional assistance – where the less-practised children might get the space to expand their dialogic experience. This frequently took place when we had the support of another teacher (usually the Support Teacher Learning Assistant or the ESL teacher) or parent in the room. On these occasions we divided the class into groups to talk about texts we were going to read together. These talking times before the reading of content texts served to make links to the children’s ‘funds of knowledge’ (Moll and Greenberg 1990: 320) and frequently integrated these particular ‘everyday’ funds with the subject knowledge at hand (Bourne 2003b), as well as giving a preview of the texts to be read. And they also served to give some of the children not yet comfortable with talk in larger groups the opportunity to participate more fully.

What follows are some reflections upon the nature of the talk in one teacher-led small group during the course of the unit, with particular reference to affect and the role it might play in the kind of educated discourse discussed by Mercer (1995; 2000) and envisioned by the various State initiatives mentioned earlier. In this class, children were not assigned to groups based on ability but, rather, assignment to a group reflected efforts to provide appropriately calibrated assistance to deal with the variety of challenging tasks that were a feature of the unit. In this instance there were six boys and one girl (Chau). Apart from Mark, all the children were at various stages of learning English as an additional language. Manh, for example, was a recent arrival to Australia and was in the beginning stages of learning English. While he was unable to participate fully in such a context, he was assisted by the small size of the group, the spatial arrangement, the variety of images provided to depict the content of the written text, and the inclusion of Hai, a close friend, who spoke Vietnamese. The expectation here was not that Manh would now be able to talk, but rather that he would be a participant in the talk. Bourne (2003a) notes that in not allowing for what is outwardly silent participation, we run the risk of:

denying [EAL learners] the opportunity to take part in the ‘chaining’ from familiar and concrete experiences to the new language and conceptual framework of the subject, which is every child’s entitlement under the national curriculum. (Bourne 2003a: 63)

Elsewhere, Bourne (2003b) argues for the value of a more collectivist approach to classroom talk activity and that striving for equal participation by all is less important than creating and developing opportunities where one student might ‘represent’ the thinking of the class, as Alexander (2003)
has described as a common practice in Russian classrooms. Similarly, in our groupings, we expected and supported differential participation.

The specific text to be read was about the nature of disputes between Aboriginal groups and the manner in which they were settled. The text described both group fighting and one-to-one fighting. Earlier in the unit, the children had seen a video depicting first contact between a group of Aboriginal people and two escaped convicts and, as it turned out, the video proved to be an important frame for future thinking. Immediately prior to this reading we looked at various images of Aboriginal warfare and talked generally about some issues, after which we would read a section of text and explore the issues. The goal here was to grapple with the big ideas being raised, to practise having a dialogue with the text – not facilitated by the teacher but guided by the teacher. In so doing, the bilingual children were getting practice at articulating their thinking about ideas that both challenge and fascinate. Space does not allow for a full description of the talk that unfolded here; however, I will take as a starting point a question asked by Chau.

**Transcript conventions**

[] = overlapping talk

(...)= inaudible

… = pause

Ss = more than one child responding at the same time

T = teacher

**TRANSCRIPT I**

1 Chau But how do they get a fight, like won’t they become friends and … how do
2 they get a fight, or do they just meet each other and fight?
3 T No, it’s maybe a bit like the playground … sometimes
4 acquaintances fight in the playground … sometimes.
5 Mark Yeah but these ones they have like whole people and group
6 but there’s
7 T usually ever (...) only one people, just one person.
8 Hassan [but …
9 T any groups fighting at present in the world somewhere?
10 Mark Yeah.
Prospect Vol. 20, No. 1  April 2005

As Edwards and Westgate point out, for a child to ask a question amidst classroom talk she must:

first locate a potential juncture, make a bid, gain the floor, quite possibly change the topic, and have the topic accepted as relevant.

(Edwards and Westgate 1994: 145)

Chau does this successfully, as the response from the teacher suggests. She is practising more than interactive competence here – she is also
grappling with how she might express her puzzlement, in English. But more is potentially at stake. She may well be risking demonstrating ignorance (or in the case of a bilingual child, lack of competence in English), or being ignored or, to paraphrase Edwards and Westgate (1994), being seen as a 'try hard' for showing an interest. Subsequent talk demonstrates to Chau, interpersonally, that these are of little concern, and consequently a further thread is woven into her identity as a valued thinker and contributor.

In line 5, after the teacher pauses, Mark makes the distinction between individual and group fights, which in turn is picked up by the teacher using 'yeah' as an acknowledgment. In fact, the choice of 'yeah' over 'yes' by all participants is very common here and is a feature of casual, interactive talk (Eggins and Slade 1997: 96), as well as signalling the relatively informal nature of the situation. It is this informality, this ease of talk, that allows the children greater access to more demanding thinking.

Hassan’s contribution (line 13) is assisted by the teacher (line 18) and then is used by the teacher to connect with a key concern of the unit (line 21). In line 25 Hassan talks simultaneously with the teacher and gets a response from both Chau and the teacher, again simultaneously. Chau is having some difficulty in expressing herself and the ‘yeah …?’ (line 29) from the teacher seems to prompt her reply, which is connected by Hai (line 31) to a video they had all seen earlier. As the teacher responds, so does Hassan and it would seem that the teacher defers to Hassan’s assertion and supports its continuance (line 34).

There are some aspects of this interaction that are worth noting. First, there are numerous examples of simultaneous contribution much like everyday conversation (Eggins and Slade 1997). Second, the teacher seems to defer to, and support, the children’s contributions where possible, while at the same time keeping in mind the key issues of the unit of study. Third, both Hassan and Chau are quite fluent socially (Cummins 1996) but show here that such fluency is no longer sufficient when dealing with the oral expression of more complex ideas. Finally and more intuitively, these features combine to assist these nine year olds to continue to come to see themselves as people who are capable in the business of generating a shared understanding of a complex idea.

The text about Aboriginal fighting also described how, if a one-to-one fight got too out of hand, it was not uncommon for elders to intervene and make light of the situation in order to avoid serious injury to the combatants. The children found this intriguing and it led to the issue of anger being raised, again by Chau.
**TRANSCRIPT 2**

1. Chau: But Sir, how about if people are angry inside but in the outside they can't really say it out?
2. T: Yes, and so they … Do you think it's good to hold in your anger?
3. Hassan: No.
4. Ss: No.
5. T: No, you reckon you should express your anger.
6. Hassan: Because otherwise you get a headache.
7. T: You get headaches if you hold it in. Have you ever been in situations where you've had to hold in your anger?
8. Ss: Yeah.
9. T: When, Hai?
11. T: What happened?
12. Hai: Like Phoung, Salam and George …
13. T: What …?
14. Hai: I had a fight down there.
15. T: And you had to hold in your anger.
16. Mark: Yeah, I was there too. I was watching.
17. T: Sometimes … what's]
18. Chau: [(…)]
21. T: No, you go.
22. Chau: No, you.
23. T: I forgot what I was going to say. Doesn't matter. Not to worry. OK, other times you've held in your anger?
24. Hassan: When the teacher blames you and you didn't do anything.
25. Mark: That's what]
26. T: [Is that when you hold your anger in?
27. Mark: That's what happened to me yesterday. Hassanine was … shout at Miss
28. T: and I didn't do anything and I had to go outside.
This section of talk deals with the children’s concerns, in particular their experiences with anger. Chau’s question has turned the conversation away from the details of the text towards her own experience. As it happened, the children were also participating in a mandatory unit on child protection, so it seemed timely to follow Chau’s lead. Classroom reality, especially in whole class talk, often limits a teacher’s ability to respond adequately to these kinds of questions, but in smaller groups such questions can provide opportunities for emotional realities to be explored. By recognising these deeply felt realities, often hidden, avoided or ignored in classrooms, there is the chance to build further the trust between teacher and child.

This shift of focus from the text to the children’s lives is accompanied by an increase in personal information questions (lines 3, 8, 11, 13, 15, 25, 29 and 32), where the teacher doesn’t know the answer but is seeking to understand the nature of the children’s experience with genuine interest. The small interplay between Chau and the teacher in lines 20 – 26, while humorous for both, was also a significant marker in the move towards more symmetry in the interaction.

This conversation continued for some time with all group members contributing, except for Manh. Bourne (2003a), while discussing whole class talk in multilingual classrooms, notes that at times the teacher should try and include the less-proficient bilingual child in a way that is commensurate with their current language ability. In Transcript 3 Manh is included.

**TRANSCRIPT 3**

```plaintext
1  T                Manh, do you ever get angry?
2  Hai              Yes [laughing]
3  Manh             Him [pointing at Hai lightheartedly]
4  T                Oh, you get angry with Hai.
5  Manh             Yeah.
6  T                Sometimes.
7  Manh             Sometime.
8  Ss               (…)
9  T                Do you hold the anger in or do you let the anger out [using body language]. Do you hold it in sometimes?
10 Ss                (…)
```
12 T Let Manh answer. Do you hold it in sometimes?
13 Manh Yep.
14 Hassan I sometimes
15 T [And then sometimes you let it out?
16 Manh Yeah.
17 T Yeah.
18 Hassan I sometimes (…) sometimes I get angry with Erdem.
19 T Well, we all get angry with each other sometimes, don't we? That's
20 normal.
21 Chau Sometimes when people get really angry they punch a pillow and later
21 they go really red and get a red face.
22 T That's not a bad … I reckon that's a pretty good way to do things. If
23 you're angry and you go home and you let it out. Maybe go for a run or
24 something.
25 Hai I punch the wall. I like punching the wall.
26 Hassan Sometimes I starve myself.
27 T Because you're angry you starve yourself? Why do you do that?
28 Hassan I don't know.
29 T Does it help you?
30 Hassan Makes me feel better.
31 T Does it?
32 Hassan Or break something.
33 T Or break something.
34 Mark You know what's the best thing to do?
35 T What's the best thing]
36 Mark [If someone's making you angry
37 T Yeah?
38 Mark You just walk away.
39 T Yes.
40 Mark If it still goes on, just tell the teacher.
41 T Yes, or even talk to the person. Tell them very clearly.
42 Chau (…) hate you.
As I have reported elsewhere (Dufficy 2004), Manh can understand more English than he can produce and this is again shown in line 3. Manh's overt participation might be minimal and needs assistance and scaffolding (lines 9, 12, 15) but it also casts him as a group member with something to contribute.

Hassan’s revelation in line 26 was unexpected but made some sense to the teacher, knowing his personal circumstances, and is treated with authentic concern (lines 27 – 33). The teacher’s acknowledgment move in line 33 – repeating what Hassan says – allows Mark to initiate which, in turn, is built upon by the teacher in line 41 and prompts Chau to anticipate what the teacher is about to say (line 42). This is recognised by the teacher who, nevertheless, returns to his intended strategy advice, which is added to by a number of the group simultaneously.

**Conclusion**

From a second language perspective, van Lier notes that in a display/assessment orientation, while the IRF may be effective in regulation and management, it ‘reduces the student’s initiative, independent thinking, clarity of expression, the development of conversation skills, and self-determination’ (1996: 156).

His argument, then, is that there is a need to foster more contingent forms of instructional interaction which, with a sense of pedagogical ‘mindfulness’ (van Manen cited in van Lier 1996: 185), have a goal of assisting children and young people to become aware, autonomous and capable of authentic engagement with the tasks they face. When responsibility for talk is more equally shared, especially in small groups, the mindful teacher must inevitably engage with what the children consider to be important at the time. In the example given, the talk shifts from the challenging idea of conflict over land to far more personal and emotional issues. The short-term view that time is somehow being wasted and that the ‘content’ must be covered is self-defeating because, in the rush to cover the topic, opportunities to assist children to develop dispositions to engage with challenging
academic work are lost. Van Lier reminds us of Wittgenstein’s dictum that ‘there are remarks that sow and remarks that reap’ (van Lier 2000: 255) and frequently in our talk with children we have sought to reap, rather than sow for a time in the future.

With this longer time-scale in mind, we must remember that in the example we considered, the teacher and the children have had an interactive history and these particular interactions are embedded not just in that history but in an activity history as well. Together, the teacher and the children have co-constructed ways of doing and thinking that allow for a greater symmetry of contribution. The children tend to ‘read’ questions as either assistance mechanisms for negotiating ideas (Transcript 1) or genuine requests for information (Transcripts 2 and 3). The options which the teacher has taken here are significant in that the bilingual pupils have had the opportunity to produce stretches of language; interactively they are able to initiate topics; and the interactive ‘space’ created allows them to begin to make connections between the familiar and the new, the interplay of which can be considered a prerequisite ‘for development and growth in thought as well as language’ (Alexander 2003: 35).

Asking either personal information questions (personal, here, in the sense of an individual child’s understanding or perception) or negotiating questions, which open the floor to additional contributions, sets up conditions for disciplined inquiry, as the children draw upon prior knowledge, pursue in-depth understanding of the issue, and do so using elaborated communication (Newmann and Associates 1996). The teacher, here, is not taking a methodology of questioning to these encounters, nor does he have a taxonomy of questions ranging from simple to abstract. Rather, he approaches these dialogic episodes with a desire to share challenging thinking and guide its development.

Alexander puts forward four conditions for teaching that pursues dialogue. Such teaching should be collective in that teachers and children deal with learning tasks together. It should be reciprocal in that teachers and children listen to each other and share ideas and viewpoints. It should be cumulative in that ideas are connected, or ‘chained’, to form coherent lines of thought. Finally, it should be supportive where children ‘articulate their ideas freely, without fear of embarrassment over “wrong” answers, and they help each other to reach common understandings’ (2003: 36).

Following on from this, it could be said that the story of a classroom is told through its talk. While restricted patterns of communication afford little opportunity for children to develop both linguistically and cognitively, they also frame for the child the kind of learner she is considered to be. This learner is one that doesn’t initiate topics for consideration by others; that is
restricted in the opportunity to question and disagree; and is constrained to
the extent that she must pursue the answer demanded by others. At least
initially, children are learning values of compliance, cognitive passivity, and
uncritical acceptance of the views of others.

More open forms of classroom communication only come about when
teachers loosen the reins on the minds of the children in their classrooms
and assist them to move into challenging new cognitive domains through
dialogue. When this happens, children can learn not only values of critical,
independent thinking, but deeper values to do with respect for others’
viewpoints, courage to put forward an unusual idea, trust in getting a fair
hearing, and resilience as they come to see uncertainty and mistakes in
thinking as the very building blocks of thought itself.

From the very earliest moments, parents and those close to children take
them on excursions into the world. They take them as a participant in the
journey, not as someone who must learn and be tested on what they have
seen and heard. It is assumed they will learn through the active engagement
in the journey itself. In the process, children appropriate the values under-
pinning those journeys. Likewise in classrooms, teachers must continue to
take children and young people, as active partners, on excursions into the
world. The quality of the excursion might well be judged by the nature of
the interactions that take place and these, in turn, should be judged on the
values and dispositions that children are assisted to learn.

**NOTE**

1 These are not the children’s real names.

**REFERENCES**


DfEE – see Department for Education and Employment.


*The Canadian Modern Language Review, 40*, 228–244.


In K. Norman (Ed.), *Thinking voices: The work of the National Oracy Project* (pp. 