

The Development of Interactional Competence in Group Discussions

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Previous studies in the testing of second-language speaking have shown that students of higher-proficiency levels engage in more collaborative interaction than those of lower proficiency (Galaczi, 2008). These higher-level students were able to develop topics initiated by their interlocutors in more depth, while lower-level students tended to initiate their own topics and respond minimally to those of their interlocutors. This study investigated whether learners in second-language speaking classes engage in similar behavior in group discussions, and the degree to which their interactional patterns changed over the course of an academic semester. While the results were largely consistent with previous research carried out in testing contexts, there were also several important differences, which could be a result of the social nature of language classrooms in which students become accustomed to interacting with their peers.

Key Words : Interactional Competence, Speaking, Second-Language Acquisition, Language Teaching Methodology

Introduction

Over the past two decades there have been many developments in research focused on understanding the teaching and testing of second-language speaking. There have been several comprehensive methodologies and techniques developed for foreign language speaking classes. Two complementary approaches have been advocated (Richards, 1990): the direct approach (Dornyei & Thurrell, 1994; Kehe & Kehe, 1994), which views speaking as a construct that when broken down into components can be taught as discrete skills and strategies, and the indirect approach (Krashen, 1985), in which speaking skills emerge through the practice of engaging in verbal interaction. Furthermore, the fields of pragmatics, socio-linguistics and ethno-linguistics have covered a great deal of ground describing the richness of spoken language in addition to revealing some of the underlying organizational patterns of how spoken interactions are structured.

Despite these advances, very little research has appeared tracing learner development of interactional speaking skills, and similarly, there have been very few studies into the nature of how language learners master speaking (Hughes, 2002). While

there is a significant focus on speaking in the popular communicative language teaching (CLT) approach to second-language learning, speaking is often seen as a means to general language development rather than as a skill in itself to be mastered (Bygate, 2009). As a result, approaches toward the teaching and testing of this skill vary widely (Richards, 1990).

In recent years however, there have been several attempts by researchers in the field of language testing to more accurately describe the features of second-language speakers' interactions, in order to understand in more detail how higher- and lower-proficiency speakers may differ when they communicate (Lazaraton, 2002; Moore, 2011; Galaczi, 2014). The findings of this research has several implications for language teaching, yet perhaps due to the large investment of time required to investigate speaking development, very few researchers have looked at how findings in speaking testing may be relevant to language classrooms.

One area that has been identified as being able to discern higher- from lower-level speakers in paired speaking tests is that of topic development moves, or the degree of mutuality that interlocutors establish and maintain with each other during their interactions. It has been found that speakers of

higher-proficiency levels tend to comment on their interlocutors' ideas when they develop a topic, in contrast to lower-level speakers who often ignore their interlocutors' contributions and initiate and develop their own topics (Galaczi, 2008). In a follow-up study, Galaczi looked at the performance of 84 dyads from four distinct proficiency levels. The results were consistent with her earlier study in that as proficiency level increased, the amount of 'own' initiated topic extensions decreased, and the amount of 'other' initiated topic extensions increased. For a more comprehensive description of the degrees of mutuality that speakers can display, see Table 1, below.

Table 1 : Characteristics of topic development in collaborative talk (adapted from Galaczi, 2008)

Interactional Characteristics	
High mutuality	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Topic expansion of self- and other-initiated topics ● Uptake and expansion of the prior speaker's contributions, not just topic repetition or recycling ● Cohesion and coherence between turns in the form of a) minimal responses as acknowledgement tokens, b) agreement, c) syntactic cohesion, and d) lexical cohesion
Moderate mutuality	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Solo development of topic mainly by one person ● Rare expansion of other-initiated topics ● Unbalanced quantity of talk ● Lack of balance in terms of topic initiation and topic expansion moves
Low mutuality	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Frequent initiation moves and expansion of self-initiated topics ● Limited expansion of other-initiated topics ● Pro-forma ratification (e.g. just "yeah") ● Fast topic decay ● Lack of listener support, e.g. rare acknowledgment tokens ● Few cohesive links between turns (e.g. rare syntactic and lexical cohesion)

When considering the implications of these findings for speaking classrooms, however, it is important to remember that Galaczi's findings could have been influenced by several features of the research context. Firstly, as the data was gathered from recordings of language tests, the interlocutors were not well acquainted with each other. Secondly, the data was gathered from dyadic interactions, and therefore may differ from those of students in larger groups. Finally, the tasks used in the speaking tests contained a large number of potential topics built

into the instruction, which allowed speakers to easily change topic during the course of their discussions.

In most cases, the context of language classrooms will differ in that the learners are usually well acquainted with each other, they often complete tasks in larger groups, and many speaking tasks have open-ended questions that allow learners to contribute their own topics. This study therefore, sought to investigate the patterns of topic development of learners who were familiar with each other while engaged in group discussions. These group discussions were part of a regular classroom activity and contained some open-ended questions. Specifically, the study sought to address the following two research questions:

- (1) When engaged in group discussions, what are the distinguishing features of topic development moves at different levels of proficiency?
- (2) To what degree do these distinguishing features change over the course of one academic semester?

Method

Study Participants

Two intact English discussion classes were used in this study. Because the researcher only had access to the classes he taught, the lowest- and highest-proficiency level classes were selected. Both classes were solely comprised of first-year non-English major Japanese undergraduate students. The lower-level class consisted of three female and six male students, and had a mean of 236.67 on the reading and listening sections of an abridged version of the TOEIC test used for class placement at the institution where the study was carried out. The higher-level class consisted of five female and two male students, and had a mean of 683.57 on the TOEIC placement test.

The discussion class in which the students were enrolled was the second semester of a 13-week compulsory English discussion class taught at a private Japanese university. Classes ran for 90 minutes and were focused on the development of student speaking fluency and interactional competence. The approach to the course was based on Dornyei and Thurrell's (1994) approach to the teaching of conversational skills, in addition to Gatbonton and Segalowitz's (1998) teaching methodology for developing speaking fluency. The course comprised of six topics, each studied for two consecutive weeks, in addition to an introductory and wrap-up class. Each lesson began with form-focused instruction based around controlled practice of formulaic language, followed by semi-controlled practice discussions designed to exploit the language

featured in the lesson. The final section of each lesson was a 30-minute discussion. Approximately a third of this time was devoted to a preparation activity, designed to help students think of content for the discussion. The remainder of the time was used for a 16-minute discussion with no teacher intervention, followed by brief teacher feedback based on the students' performances.

The lessons chosen for this study were the 16-minute discussions from lessons three and eleven. The third lesson was chosen so that students would have time to become accustomed to interacting with each other in English. The eleventh lesson was chosen because the final test was administered in the twelfth lesson, and the final class was structured somewhat differently. For the discussion questions used in the study, see Appendix 1.

Data Transcription and Analysis

The discussions were recorded by the researcher using an IC recorder that was placed in the center of the table around which the discussion participants were seated. These recordings were then transcribed soon after the lesson was conducted. The discussions were coded into the types of topic development moves that each speaker made. Following Galaczi (2014), every turn was classified into one of the five types of topic development moves: topic initiation, extension 'own' topic, extension 'other' topic, minimal extension, and echo (see Appendix 2 for examples of each of the topic development moves). As noted by Galaczi, these terms are mutually exclusive, and therefore, there were no turns that could be coded into overlapping categories.

Findings

While the differences between the two levels was not as pronounced as the findings in Galaczi (2014), a similar pattern was found in that higher-level groups initiated less topics, and tended to devote more time to developing each other's turns. In contrast, the lower-level students tended to initiate more topics, and gave more minimal responses to comments made by other members of the group. Figure 1 indicates the proportion of topic development moves devoted to each of the five categories. As can be seen in the comparison, the higher-level group devoted just over 40 percent of their turns to extending on other's topics. In contrast, the lower group devoted around 30 percent of their turns to extending each other's topics, and spent a much larger percentage of time engaged in giving minimal responses or echoing each other's comments.

Figure 1

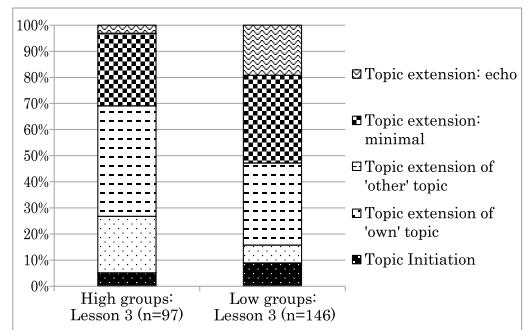


Figure 1: Distribution of the topic development moves in Lesson 3. Note: The n counts indicate the total number of topic development moves observed at that proficiency level.

A closer analysis of the transcripts reveals that the higher-level groups encouraged each other to develop longer turns that answered the questions in considerable detail. In Excerpt 1 below, N asks L's opinion about studying abroad in high school, a topic introduced by C:

Excerpt 1

- L: well I think studying in high school is the best time
 C: tell me the reason
 L: ah because I I see many peoples that speak naturally ah I mean many people that study ah in abroad in high school ah speaks naturally... [continues speaking]
 N: can I ask a question
 L: sure
 N: so if you were high school student do you want to go to abroad or maybe now you think you should go to abroad and study when you were in high school student
 L: if I could I think I I would like to study abroad because if I could go there when I was in high school ah I think I could make many foreign friends

In contrast, the lower-level group asked very simple questions and tended to end topics quickly. Their turns were also noticeably shorter, as can be seen in Excerpt 2, where K agrees with R, but does not extend the topic any further:

Excerpt 2

- R: in high school high school student should do club activities club activity is good and

fun I think high school students shouldn't go studying abroad does anyone want to comment

K: can I make a comment

R: okay sure

K: I agree with you

R: why

K: because

R: because

K: reason is you too

R: okay

K: same

R: same

K: same

R: okay okay okay

The second research question investigated the degree to which the topic development patterns changed over the academic semester. As can be seen in Figure 2 below, the higher-level group's interactions showed increased levels of mutuality, as the extension of 'own' initiated topics decreased, and the extension of 'other' initiated topics slightly increased, from 42 to 45 percent. Speakers also increased the overall amount of topic development moves, from 97 to 156, which could perhaps be an indication of the students becoming more familiar with their classmates, in addition to being more comfortable with the group discussion activity.

Figure 2

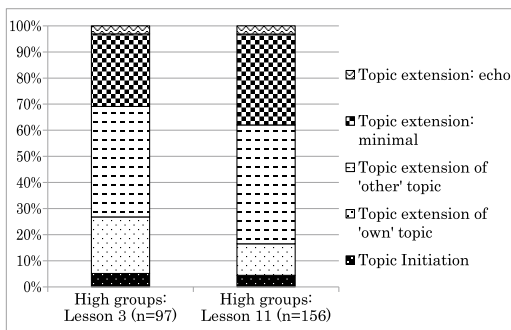


Figure 2: Distribution of the topic development moves for high groups in Lesson 11. Note: The n counts indicate the total number of topic development moves observed at that proficiency level.

Interestingly, the amount of minimal responses also increased, a finding that contradicts the patterns found in Galaczi's study. However, given that both 'other' initiated extensions and minimal responses increased, this finding need not necessarily be

interpreted as a decrease in the degree of mutuality, as students used the minimal responses to acknowledge the speaker extending the topic. Excerpt 3 below, shows all members of the group giving plenty of acknowledgement tokens (in bold) to the speaker that held the floor:

Excerpt 3

M: if if a man or woman have girlfriend or boyfriend

C: **yes**

Y: **yes yes yes**

M: they they they have to can be

Y: they cannot be couple so if so they must be friends

C: **I see**

M: **I see**

The above results were slightly different for lower-level learners. As can be seen in Figure 3 below, the lower-level group's interactions also showed increased levels of mutuality, as the extension of topic initiation decreased to a percentage similar to that of the higher-level speakers, and the extension of 'other' initiated topics slightly increased, from 32 to 35 percent. Again, the speakers also increased the amount of topic development moves, from 146 to 258, which could perhaps be an indication of them becoming more familiar with each other as well as the discussion task itself. However, while the lower-level group did produce noticeably more turns than the higher-level group, it is important to note that the majority of these turns remained very short, as can be seen in Excerpt 4 below.

Figure 3

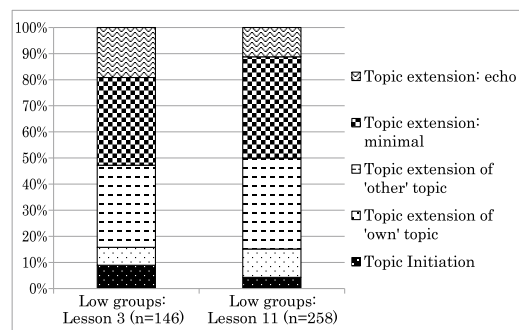


Figure 3: Distribution of the topic development moves for low groups in Lesson 11. Note: The n counts indicate the total number of topic development moves observed at that proficiency level.

Although the number of 'own' extension comments also increased, suggesting lower levels of mutuality, in certain sections of the discussions the lower-level students began to question each other with more frequency, often on a topic which they had initiated in the discussion. Excerpt 4 shows listeners R (topic initiator) and T questioning E, both to comprehend her idea and to learn more about her opinions regarding the topic:

Excerpt 4

- E: I think women are kinder than men
 R: why
 E: because woman I know who I know can give give other people chair in the train
 R: do you mean that man is not bad person bad personality
 E: better better better
 R: I see
 T: do you mean you're very kind

The social nature of language classrooms could account for the differences in the findings from Galaczi's study (2014). That is, because students became relaxed with their classmates, they may have increased their minimal contributions to topic development, in addition to extensions of 'other' initiated topics. Indeed, the higher-level students increased the amount of 'other' initiated extensions from 41 to 72, and the lower-level students increased from 23 to 45. Therefore, while this paper followed the methodology used by Galaczi (2014) as a point of comparison, perhaps looking at the distribution of topic moves proportionally may not be the best method to view the degree of mutuality that a group discussion contains, as minimal responses may seem more prominent than they are in actual interaction.

Conclusion

Due to both the limited number of recordings and the small sample size, the findings of this study should be interpreted with caution. However, the results do suggest that the categorization of topic development moves can indicate student levels of proficiency and speaking development in classroom settings, as the higher and lower groups showed different patterns of interactions at the start of the semester, and developed their mutuality in different ways. This suggests that testing students' use of topic development moves could be a relatively easy method of sorting students into appropriately levelled speaking classes, as measurement of the moves is relatively objective and efficient to carry out. Finally,

while it is beyond the scope of this study, topic development moves may be appropriate as learning objectives for students of speaking classes, and would be quite consistent with approaches such as Dornyei and Thurrell's (1994) direct method. If topic development moves could be taught, they might especially be of use to learners who have some knowledge of English grammar and vocabulary, but have limited speaking experience.

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Appendix 1. Discussion Questions

Topic 1: Studying Abroad (Lesson 3)

1. What are the advantages and disadvantages of studying abroad?
 - in high school?
 - in university?
 - after working for a couple of years?
2. Should all students study abroad?

Topic 2: Gender Stereotypes (Lesson 11)

Below are some opinions about men and women:

Men should never cry

Men are better leaders than women

Women are bad at math and science

Women are kinder than men

Men and women can never be friends

1. Do you think the stereotypes above are true?
2. What other stereotypes of men and women do you know? Do you think these stereotypes are true?

**Appendix 2. Topic development moves
(illustrations are given in bold)**

1. Initiation

C: who thinks it is the best time for students to study abroad in high school high school is **sixteen to eighteen**
(October 8, high-level group, topic – studying abroad)

2. Extension: ‘own’ topic

A: university there there university students have free time **so so university students go study abroad easy university student study abroad easy**
(Lesson 3, low-level group, topic – studying abroad)

3. Extension: ‘other’ topic

Y: in this magazine this is the they have a stereotypes
C: can I comment
Y: yes
C: **in that magazine men and women can’t be friends because do you know Nana**
(Lesson 11, high-level group, topic – gender stereotypes)

4. Minimal extension

E: some some man is not kind
T: **yes**
(Lesson 11, low-level group, topic – gender stereotypes)

5. Echo

N: ah for a long time
Y: **for a long time**
(Lesson 3, high-level group, topic – studying abroad)