

# An Analysis of a Book Sharing Discussion

## —The Pedagogical Implication of Exploratory Talk

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### Abstract

The use of group discussion in language classrooms is a well-researched topic. The underlying assumption is that group discussion benefits students in their cognitive development and thus helps learning. However, previous studies show that different types of talk may have different effects on students' cognitive development. In this paper, one type of talk is evaluated for the contribution it makes to students' learning in groups which is defined by Fisher (1993) as exploratory talk. The data recorded was primary students working together on a book sharing discussion, and the analysis is qualitative. From a video of children discussing a book, the author concludes that the children do well in terms of mutual respect and working together. The potential contribution and the limitation of exploratory talk are discussed. She has doubts whether the best can be achieved without teacher guidance. It is concluded that an asymmetric relationship is needed in group discussion and the instructor plays an essential role in modeling, assessing and giving feedback, which optimizes exploratory talk.

### Keywords

Exploratory Talk, Group Discussion, Asymmetric Relationship, Teacher Modeling, Feedback and Assessment

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## 1. Introduction

The analysis of classroom discourse has always been a topic about which researchers are very passionate. According to Cazden (2001), the role of classroom discourse is not only a medium through which teaching takes place, but also an indicator to demonstrate to teachers how much students have learned in classroom. Among all kinds of classroom discourse, discussion is an indispensable part. Mercer (2000) pointed out that discussions help students to consider oth-

ers' opinions, elaborate their own responses, provide evidence to support their thinking and enhance their understanding through collaborative analysis and mutual inquiry. Langer (1995) stated that classroom discussions promote students' literal thinking. In other words, their experience in discussions about text provides benefits in learning from cognitive and social aspects. However, Fisher (1993) and Mercer (2000) both identified the three-type typology of talk, disputational talk, cumulative talk, and exploratory talk. Fisher further claimed that in classroom discussions, only exploratory talk "offers a potential for learning not obvious in the other two types" (Fisher, 1993: p. 255). In addition, teachers' potential contribution to students' learning should be taken into account. Fisher (1993) suggested that the positive influence of a classroom discussion can be more obvious only when a teacher, or a more experienced participant, engages in the discussion and their expertise can serve as a support for learning. Reninger and Rehark (2009) highlighted the need for informal assessment and teachers' feedback to promote students' good thinking and inquiry abilities. In this paper, I would like to explore how exploratory talk is employed in the group discussion, the pedagogical implication of employing it, as well as the influence and the need for teachers' modeling, feedback and assessment of it.

## 2. Literature Review

The purpose of my reviewing the two research papers is to find out the similarities and differences in their attempts to justify the importance of exploratory talk. Fisher (1993) compared teacher-pupil (t-p) talk with pupil-pupil (p-p) talk in his paper and discussed the possible benefit of p-p talk to students' cognitive development. The discourse analyzed in the paper was extracted from the SLANT (Spoken Language and New Technology) Project. From "neo-Vygotskian" perspective, the researcher employed qualitative analysis to examine how cognition is represented in classroom discourse, especially in the form of exploratory talk. He concluded that successful exploratory talk is characterized by suggestions with challenges and explanations, with consensus followed. Given that exploratory discourse strategies need to be enhanced within pupil groups, explicit teaching of exploratory discourse strategies is recommended.

Reninger and Rehark (2009) observed and recorded five fourth-grade boys' discussion practices during the 2005-2006 school year. They transcribed these discussions and then analyzed these transcripts in different ways to explore in which way exploratory talk contributed to promotion of inquiry and good thinking. Three dimensions of the discussions—linguistic elements, psychological dimension and cultural dimension—were analyzed to explore students' engagement with collaboration and inquiry. The students were interviewed about their awareness of the ground rules of the exploratory talk after the discussions had ended. Based on Mercer's (1995, 2000, 2002) ground rules of exploratory talk, the researchers tried to define dialogic discourse and see how exploratory talk helped students acquire dialogic identities.

The similarity of the two papers lies in their analysis method. However, the two papers differ from each other in their framework and pedagogical implications. Fisher (1993) emphasized the importance of the asymmetric relationship between teachers and students as well as the contribution of teachers' guidance. On the other hand, Reninger and Rehark (2009) proposed that teachers' feedback and assessment should play a part in classroom discussion. Whether it is to guide or to assess, teachers' role is considered essential in the two researchers' views.

### 3. Data and Method

In order to test whether without teachers' participation students are able to make a good use of exploratory talk to improve their reading comprehension, to solve problems together, and to promote their cognitive development, I try to analyze a classroom discussion using the same method as Fisher (1993) does. The video I choose is a book sharing discussion on YouTube and the visiting address of the video is as follows: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2zdMsQL6WW4>. In this video, four fifth-grade students from AFM Elementary School share with each other what they have learned from the storybook "Granny Torrelli Makes Soup". The story is about how Rosie and her best friend Bailey grow up together. Bailey is blind and sensitive about his blindness. Rosie's attempt to help Bailey sometimes becomes a burden to him. Whenever Rosie gets upset, she relies on Granny Torrelli to talk her through it. Through cooking and storytelling Granny Torrelli helps Rosie realize that friendship is what matters in life. I transcribe and analyze the discussion to see whether it demonstrates features of exploratory talk and how such a talk contributes to children's cognitive development. Three excerpts are drawn from the 14-minute video. The four students are labeled as B (the boy), G<sub>1</sub> (Girl<sub>1</sub>), G<sub>2</sub> (Girl<sub>2</sub>), and G<sub>3</sub> (Girl<sub>3</sub>).

I present my transcriptions in a non-technical way and I add punctuation and some symbols to make the transcriptions more comprehensible. The transcription symbols include:

1) When the speaker continues after being interrupted, ellipsis is used, as is shown in the following example.

G<sub>2</sub>: Yeah, because she missed Pardo. And then she told Bailey, I mean Rosie, about how she never saw Pardo again after...

B: The train incident.

G<sub>2</sub>: ...Yeah. When she came to America.

2) Nonverbal actions are shown in italics. For example:

B: Like you know that you could do this; nothing could go wrong.

G<sub>1</sub>: (*Nodding her head.*)

3) Unclear or uncertain words appear in parentheses. For example:

B: Bailey doesn't say how he wants to read books. He's fine with what he has. But Rosie wants. Rosie has the, the option to read books and Bailey doesn't. And she kind of (goes gross).

My analysis is based on Mercer's (1995, 2000, 2002) ground rules of exploratory talk. Under his ground rules, students' exploratory talk is presented in the form of stating and evaluating proposals, considering and challenging ideas, backing up claims with reasonable explanations, and giving alternative ideas. Such a constructive process is very crucial to the successful completion of a given task. The significance of using exploratory talk in group discussion is that creative problem solving can be achieved and knowledge can be created through joint mental effort. When I was analyzing the transcripts, I borrowed the method that Fisher (1993) used in his research. He analyzed the classroom talk according to the functions of sentences, which include "initiates", "challenges"/"questions", "counters"/"rejects", "accepts", "extends", "repeats", "explains", "ignores", "corrects", and so on. Through such a classification, the pattern of exploratory talk can be shown clearly and explicitly to the readers.

## 4. Findings and Discussions

### 4.1. Findings: Analysis of the Transcripts

Excerpt 1: Discussion about word meaning

Discourse	Function
G3: I have the word "smug" on page 62. And I thought it meant like "feeling down or upset about something".	initiates
B: Well, I kind of thought that it meant to feel like, uh, like you can't do this, you can't and then you're feeling down after you've been told again.	supplements and explains
G2: I also had the word "smug", but I thought it meant like positive or something you're sure, like you know.	counters with alternative explanation
G1: I had that word too. And I thought it meant like having self-confidence, like you thought you could do it.	extends with explanation
B: Like you know that you could do this; nothing could go wrong.	supplements
G1: (Nodding her head.)	accepts

In the first excerpt the meaning of the word "smug" in the storybook is discussed and the language clearly shows some features of exploratory talk. Girl<sub>3</sub> initiates the interaction by stating her explanation of "smug"—"feeling down or upset". The boy supplements the meaning by adding the condition of when "you can't do this". Girl<sub>2</sub> challenges girl<sub>3</sub> and the boy's explanation by saying "but I thought..." and her challenge is followed by an alternative explanation of the word which is opposite to girl<sub>3</sub> and the boy's explanation. Girl<sub>1</sub> extends the meaning of "smug" by relating it to self-confidence. Then the boy supplements the meaning again and a consensus seems to be reached because the discussion of the meaning of "smug" ends here. We cannot see girl<sub>2</sub> and girl<sub>3</sub>'s facial expres-

sion or body language from the video, but we can clearly see that girl<sub>1</sub> nodded her head to show her agreement. From this excerpt we notice that all four children are almost equally involved in this discussion and each member makes contribution to the discussion. No one dominates the discussion and the turn-taking is natural. Their interactions are task-focused and productive. They are mutually supportive and were constructively critical of each other's ideas. In their discussion, language is used as a tool for thinking together and it only focuses on the task in which they are engaged. Thus, their discussion presents characteristics of exploratory talk.

Excerpt 2: Discussion about stubbornness

Discourse	Function
B: And we also found out why Granny was crying.	initiates
G2: Yeah, because she missed Pardo, and then she told Bailey, I mean Rosie, about how she never saw Pardo again after...	explains
B: The train incident.	supplements
G2: ...Yeah. When she came to America.	accepts and supplements
B: And she was stubborn and she never wrote letters. And she explained to Rosie where she got her stubbornness from.	extends
G1: I think Granny Torrelli tells stories about her stubbornness to Rosie so she wouldn't feel as stubborn; so she'd feel a little bit better about her stubbornness.	extends and explains
G3: Or she tried to tell her not to be stubborn, and trying to teach her what will happen like if you're stubborn.	challenges with alternative explanation
B: Yeah. Like you'll never see Bailey again.	accepts and supplements
G3: Yeah.	accepts
B: You two will grow apart and be mad, be more mad at each other in the coming days.	explains
G3: Yeah.	accepts

The second excerpt shows how the four children collaboratively construct their understanding of the story together. In this excerpt the four children talk about Granny Torrelli's personal experience and they discuss where Rosie's stubbornness is from. It is noticeable that there are extensions of ideas, supplements as well as challenges in their discussion. The excerpt begins with the boy talking about Granny Torrelli's personal experience. Then girl<sub>2</sub> extends it by adding the possible reason of Granny Torrelli's crying. With the boy's reminding of some details, girl<sub>2</sub> finishes her explanation of the reason, which is followed by

the boy's extension of their discussion by shifting the topic to where Rosie's stubbornness is from. After that, girl<sub>1</sub> develops the boy's idea and gives her own explanation. Girl<sub>3</sub> challenges girl<sub>1</sub> with alternative explanation and she extends the topic by emphasizing the possible result of Rosie's stubbornness. The boy develops girl<sub>3</sub>'s idea and supplements some examples of the possible results. These ideas lead to the end of their discussion about this topic and their discussion seems to construct a concordant understanding of the story. In their discussion there is an attempt not only to challenge given ideas, but also to justify them with explanations. The problem that needs to be addressed is always the focus of their discussion. We can see that the four children engage in each other's exploratory ideas both constructively and critically. We can also see the four children in this excerpt combining their efforts to solve the problem collaboratively. In this excerpt, through the use of additive and contradictory framing, the children successfully arrive at an agreement. Their discussion presents characteristics of exploratory talk again, in which suggestions, ideas, and explanations "may be challenged and counter-challenged, but challenges are justified and alternative hypotheses are offered" (Mercer, 1995: p. 104). Fisher (1993) claimed that "progress then rests on the joint acceptance of one of the suggestions, or of a modification of what has been put forward" (p. 255).

Excerpt 3: Discussion about the two children's understanding of blindness

Discourse	Function
G2: And Bailey is also blind and it's really hard.	initiates
G1: I think Bailey understands blindness more than Rosie because he technically is blind. And he has to live with that.	extends and explains
G3: Yeah	accepts
B: And Rosie doesn't know how it feels. If she got it then she would.	supplements
G2: Rosie doesn't realize how lucky she is. She's always like "I want to be like Bailey". "I wanna read Braille". But Bailey never says that about Rosie...	supplements
G3: Yeah	accepts
G2: ...And he can't see but Rosie can.	supplements
B: Bailey doesn't say how he wants to read books. He's fine with what he has. But Rosie wants. Rosie has the, the option to read books and Bailey doesn't. And she kind of (goes gross).	extends
G3: I don't really get why Bailey, um, Rosie wants to be blind like Bailey. Like, when she put the tissue over her eyes and went to sleep, like that she wanted to wake up.	questions
G2: Yeah. That's also evidence for friendship.	ignores and concludes

The topic of the third excerpt is Rosie and Bailey's different understandings of blindness. Gril<sub>2</sub> initiates the topic and girl<sub>1</sub> extends it with a brief comparison of Bailey and Rosie's different understanding. Gril<sub>3</sub> simply agrees with girl<sub>1</sub> and girl<sub>2</sub>. The boy supplements with his own assumption. Girl<sub>2</sub> shows agreement by supplementing some details. Gril<sub>3</sub> agrees again. Gril<sub>2</sub> continues to supplement to make her argument more complete. After the boy extends the topic, gril<sub>3</sub> raises her question/confusion to other children but it is ignored by others. At last, gril<sub>2</sub> makes an irrelevant conclusion. Different from the previous two excerpts, the third excerpt shows limited elements of exploratory talk. It seems that this discussion is less successful than the previous two. There are some problems in their discussion which are worth noticing. First, there is a clear disagreement between the topic of discussion and the conclusion. Second, the four children talk about the topic in a superficial way. They fail to dig deeper into the meaning behind the story. Third, there is no sign of questioning, objection or correction. Such features urge us to think about whether the lack of teachers' guidance makes exploratory talk less effective in helping children to learn.

## **4.2. Discussions**

From the above excerpts and the rest of the video we can see that exploratory talk appears repeatedly in the four children's discussion. It can be seen as a proof that children are capable of using exploratory talk in their discussion even if they are young. However, through observation we find that some exploratory talk is less effective in promoting children's literal thinking and constructing their cognitive development. Sometimes even if the discussion exhibits some exploratory features, it occasionally becomes off-task or a superficial discussion of the relevant topics. Some children fail to provide very clear evidence for their arguments. Another problem is that some discussions only involve some of the children. Such discussions are less successful in enhancing students' ability of critical thinking or in stretching their intellect. There is no doubt that exploratory talk offers a potential for learning. But its limitation also brings inspiration to our teaching.

## **5. Implications and Conclusion**

As classroom instructors, how can we help students to make full use of exploratory talk and better play its role to construct valuable knowledge? Although exploratory talk is needed in learning, the analysis in this paper proposes a possibility that it is less effective, especially among young children, when teachers' guidance is unavailable. Teachers should clearly and explicitly provide a ground rule for generating exploratory talk before the discussion begins. In order to elicit exploratory talk naturally, teachers should also raise students' awareness of using this strategy. Without a training of using exploratory talk, students may fail to acquire such a skill or strategy to construct knowledge and improve critical thinking. Another important thing is for teachers to group children with dif-

ferent expertise and knowledge to form an asymmetric relationship. Such an asymmetric relationship can be considered as an alternative to teacher-student relationship and help students to promote exploratory talk.

In the process of approaching their goals, children may make mistakes; they may be confused or lose their way. Appropriate assistance and help from teachers are significant. In this sense, teachers should provide an instant feedback to students after the task is completed so that students can be informed whether they employ the strategy properly and how they can improve their discussion skills next time. The feedback should be given in a cautious manner so that students will not be discouraged from seeking solutions to problems by themselves. Only when a teacher guides students in a discussion task and provides timely feedback on students' performance, can a discussion with better quality be expected.

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