

Using ‘exploratory talk’ in a mobile learning enhanced academic writing course

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Abstract

This research project aimed to explore the possibilities that ‘exploratory talk’ (Mercer, 1995, Barnes, 2010) has to offer in order for students to enhance their language skills needed for the development of oral arguments involving reasoning, justifying, challenging and asking questions in a mobile learning-enhanced academic writing course in Zayed University, UAE. The presenter described the second language-learning context in which the research was carried out followed by the principles of exploratory talk. There was then a brief summary of the methodology used. The main focus of the project included the presentation of the data, which emerged from the study, followed by the discussion of findings. To conclude, the presenter argued that the systematic incorporation of exploratory talk principles into day-to-day teaching practices enhances the students’ oral argumentation skills as well as their development of written arguments pertinent to writing persuasive and argumentative essays.

Keywords: exploratory talk, English for Academic Purposes, academic writing, mobile learning.

Introduction

Knowledge and understanding, which are at the heart of all education whether formal or informal, cannot be developed in a vacuum, nor can they be achieved solely individually. Rather, they are shared and transferred among individuals and thus are the outcome of a joint process of sharing and “understanding together”, which is almost always originated by language and talk (Mercer, 1995, p 1-3). At the end of any conversation or stretch of talk, some information will have been shared, making language and talk not only means of communicating ideas, but also means for people to “think and learn together” (Mercer, 1995, p 1-3).

Talk did not seem to have a very high status as an educational priority until recently. After the emphasis on communicative teaching practices and the entry of technological devices into the global education scene in all fields and at all levels and contexts, talk and interaction have regained importance in research. Technology has made the chances for talk and collaborative learning opportunities more available and varied and has necessitated a thorough understanding of ‘21st Century Learning’ and the use of learning tools and theories that need to be reviewed in accordance with it (Stillar, 2012). This brings into the classroom environment the need for the incorporation of more collaborative tasks where students have opportunities to talk to one another, and where language is used as a collective thinking tool, and not necessarily in the presence or guidance of a teacher, the fact that does not often come about in real life situations outside school (Mercer, 2000).

Mercer (2000) identifies talk to be exploratory when “partners engage critically but constructively with each other’s ideas” and offer ideas and information to be considered jointly, which can be “challenged and counter-challenged” (p.153). At the end of the talk, some agreement is reached and knowledge made is accountable while reasoning is made apparent (Mercer, 2000).

The aim of this project is to investigate the possibilities that ‘exploratory talk’ (Mercer, 2000) has to offer in order for students to enhance their argumentative skills for developing oral arguments, including reasoning, justifying, challenging and asking questions in an academic writing course in Zayed University, UAE. It is hoped that the students’ oral argumentation skills will develop significantly.

It is also hoped that this research will in effect benefit the students’ development of written arguments pertinent to writing persuasive and argumentative essays. These skills are highly applicable to other disciplines, and will hopefully be transferred to the future academic and professional lives of the students.

Methods of Research

For the purposes of this study, a set of computer-based discussion materials with tasks that lend themselves to exploratory talk were used over the course of an academic term. Students worked in groups of threes or fours. The students worked with an adaptation of the ground rules and principles of exploratory talk as identified by Mercer (1995; 2000) while they developed oral arguments involving reasoning, justifying, challenging and asking questions through discussion type of activities using their mobile-learning devices or laptops. The researcher projected the ‘exploratory talk’ tasks with a mobile device/laptop. Whenever tasks as such came up throughout the course, the ground rules and principles of exploratory talk were followed and adhered to. The students recorded their discussions and sent them to the researcher via e-mail or Airdrop. The researcher monitored this process but did not lead the discussions.

This was a qualitative study employing several techniques:

- **Audio-recordings:** Sessions of exploratory talk were audio recorded using a variety of applications such as Recording Lite or Explain Everything on iPad, or Voice Memos on

iPhone. Because the researcher was not able to record all the discussions taking place at the same time, students took turns in each group to record them. These files were then saved and sent to the researcher. A total of 5 exploratory talk discussions were recorded over a semester. There were about 3-4 groups in each class adding up to 9-12 recordings each session, and 55 recordings in total from 3 classes.

- **Transcriptions:** The audio-recordings were transcribed by the researcher and thematic analysis was applied.
- **Questionnaires:** The students answered questions reflecting on their experiences of exploratory talk and why they found them (did not find them) useful.
- **Reflective Essays:** At the end of the semester, the students wrote reflective essays about their overall experience of the course. Although not asked specifically, a number of students reflected on their experiences with exploratory talk sessions as well. These were noted and categorized.
- **Data analysis:** The transcripts were analyzed by looking at the types of argumentation skills and language produced by the students/ sequences of talk while they interacted with one another during collaborative tasks. The transcripts were compared over time to see if progress occurred in the production of target skills and in what way. Emerging and repeated patterns were noted and categorized.

Findings

In this section, highlights of the main themes, which emerged from the data, will be discussed. The language in student responses has not been changed except for spelling mistakes.

I. Questionnaire Results

A questionnaire of 8 items in total was devised for this study. The questions ranged from asking students to define exploratory talk to what they liked the most or least about sessions involving these talks. 47 students in total responded to the questionnaires. This section will focus on the participants' responses on the usefulness of exploratory talk for students.

1. **Usefulness for the current course:** When asked whether they found the exploratory talk (ET) sessions useful or not, 100% of the students responded that that they found them to be useful or very useful. Emerging themes in the responses were that the sessions were relevant to argumentative essay writing, that they helped students share ideas and collaborate, and that they helped improve students' discussion skills. Below are some responses which exemplify these themes:

- **Relevance to improving argumentative essays:**

They helped me hear out others' opinions, especially before turning in my assignment. I was able to make changes.

It helped me to see the others' opinions towards my essay topic, it helped me with my outline and essay.

My group gave me a lot of advice to improve my argumentative points.

I get to see other picture by listening to my colleagues and tried to see things from their point of view.

I heard different opinions & perspectives from my fellow group members that made me adjust my essay & better it.

- **Sharing ideas and helping each other:**

It gave all the students a chance to express and share their ideas.

It helps us get more information and if we are confused about some ideas, we help each other.

It teaches you how to listen to others' opinions because your opinion is not always right. I've learnt to communicate effectively with my peers and they helped me know my mistakes.

It helped me get feedback from my friends.

We get some information from others. We learn how to exchange ideas and think in other ways.

It gave us equal and fair time each to state our opinion. Knowing that they are listening and trying to understand the ideas and thoughts.

- **Improving discussion skills:**

It helped me use argumentative key words and phrases to use in my discussion and essay.

In each session, we noticed that our speaking and discussion skills improved.

It initiates a conversation between classmates in an academic way. It benefits girls who are shy.

It develops our debate skills...

... it gives the students the opportunity to hear each other, unlike what happens in traditional classes. These discussions are like a breath of fresh air compared to normal classes and assignments.

2. Usefulness for other courses

When asked whether they found ET sessions to be useful for other courses or not, 43 students out of 47 responded that they did while 3 students responded that they did not, and 1 student said that it depended on the course:

I do think the whole concept of ET sessions will be useful in other courses for more ideas are always shared when in a group.

It improves many skills that we have to gain, mainly speaking, being good in grammar and critical thinking.

It will be useful for other classes that required debate skills.

Yes, so all students get involved and are given a chance to participate.

It depends, like in courses where we have things to be discussed, but in other courses, no.

No, not every course needs this. For example, math courses can't be recorded and discussed.

3. Usefulness for careers

When asked if they found ET sessions to be useful for their future careers, 43 of the students responded that they did, 1 student responded that she did not and 1 student responded that it depended on the type of career. 2 students did not respond to this question. Below are some examples from the responses:

Yes, because it helps in developing communication skills, helps in gaining confidence while talking, and become an open-minded person.

Yes, it will help me communicate better with employers and keep in touch with them...

Because it is helping us communicate with our colleagues and understand more about their opinions.

Yes, to help you be aware of all the sides, get answers for the questions on your mind and to be polite in accepting others' opinion.

Yes, it will boost our confidence when it comes to expressing our opinions.

*It will help me prepare for job interview and present in front of my colleagues.
Yes, because there are differences in opinion in the workplace.*

II. Collaborative learning and constructing knowledge together

This section will focus on how students constructed knowledge together during exploratory talk sessions.

Mercer (2000) claims that learners' knowledge and understanding may develop without the guidance of the teacher as "explaining it to someone else may help improve and check one's own understanding with someone treated as a social and intellectual equal" (Mercer, 2000, pg.89) without the fear of judgment from the teacher. Also, joint activities created more opportunities to "experiment and reason with language which would not be the case in teacher-led activities" (Mercer, 2000, p.98).

Accordingly, it was observed that the researcher's not leading the discussions and allowing students to carry on with the discussions without supervision created collaborative learning opportunities where students constructed knowledge together. Some examples of how knowledge was constructed were shown in the way students completed sentences for each other, repeated phrases to stress importance or show agreement, and summarized/concluded ideas for each other which the teacher would have done for them in a typical classroom context. Below are some samples of such sequences of talk:

- **Introducing:** *"OK, so this is going to be our first discussion as a group. Each one of us chose 3 topics. Then we decided to choose just 1 as a group so that we could agree on it... So, yeah, the topic we all chose as a group was: "Is fashion important?" Now let us explain why we chose this topic..."*
- **Summarizing:** *"As a group, we chose three topics. The first topic that we chose was; 'Is marriage the foundation of a society?' We chose this question because we thought that, yes, marriage is the foundation of a society, because marriage is the basic step for society and children will be comfortable if they have a mother and a father and they will achieve and perform well in their education. This is our conclusion".*
- **Completing sentences/repeating phrases to stress importance**

Student 1: OK, the next topic... "Have foreign influences had more positive or negative effects on the youths in the UAE?"

Student 2: I think it's in a positive way.

Student 3: Positive way, yeah.

Student 2: Most members of the group think in a positive way. Maybe more educated youth and...

Student 1: Open-minded generation...

Student 2: More understanding of other cultures and backgrounds...

Student 1: And women have excelled or become more important in society now...

Student 1: ... which is a huge achievement.

...

Student 1: OK the first research question: "Should assisted suicide be legal?" What do you think?

Student 2: I think this topic includes so many reasons, supporting reasons, which you can develop in many ideas and ... many sources on the Internet.

Student 1: Are you with it or against it?

Student 2: So, against it for religious reasons and ...

Student 1: ...And there's a lot of controversy towards it and it's considered taboo in a lot of cultures.

Student 2: ... And it depends on each country and...

Student 1: ... And each person and the circumstance.

Student 2: Yeah, OK. So, the second topic is...

Discussion and Conclusion

Exploratory talk was thought of positively by the majority of the students who participated in this study. In order to ensure further development in students' argumentative skills, the principles of exploratory talk must be incorporated into the curriculum in a systematic way and in a continuous manner. One way to do that is by establishing an agreement with the students about what classroom talk is and the manner in which it should be conducted. It is important that students feel at ease with the way they share their opinions, challenge and refute each other in an academic context without the fear of judgment from their peers or teachers, hence the importance of negotiating the ground rules of exploratory talk among students.

As was observed in this study, students find activities meaningful especially when they are relevant to their studies or assignments. Therefore, a dialogic stance and exploratory talk should be encouraged. However, as with all classroom activities, the rationale for collaborative tasks needs to be made clear to students. Without a clear purpose and an explicit educational goal, classroom talk and interaction do not necessarily lend themselves to collaborative learning, nor do they produce the type of talk that teachers hope their students to produce.

In addition, it should be noted that guidance, modeling, and rehearsing are necessary, especially in contexts where debate-type discussions are not traditionally used. For the purposes of this study, some online videos were used to provide models of exploratory talk and the students discussed the strengths and weaknesses of the arguments of each participant. This was followed by rehearsals of debates before the actual sessions were recorded.

Finally, cultural contexts, social identities and personality differences need to be taken into consideration and the setting of ground rules needs to be monitored at all times as those rules may be forgotten. In second language contexts, providing a guide/aid for argumentative language and vocabulary may also be helpful.

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