

# LSIS Practitioner Enquiry: Comparing the effectiveness of student talking time and teacher talking time in ESOL lessons

## LSIS Research



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### Background

Birmingham Metropolitan College is a large FE organisation offering a variety of learning provision to a diverse range of learners across north and central Birmingham. The Directorate of Skills for Life and ESOL comprises nearly 3,500 learners and offers provision on six main campuses plus a host of community and outreach venues. Following the successful piloting of Supported Experiments in 2011-12, leading to a week's worth of teaching and learning experimentation, it was decided to formalise the process in the form of an enquiry and, by working with CUREE, produce reports and case studies on our findings.

A core of 9-10 staff members were involved in the process from start to finish, but the entire Directorate were

involved in 'Something New Week' 2013, in which teaching and learning strategies formulated as a result of the enquiries were uploaded to a centralised database for tutors to experiment with themselves during the designated week and beyond. The focus of the enquiries was generated from key identified areas for development for the Directorate, and also from our own experiences as tutors.

As part of a new mentor/observer programme, we have been observing lessons in the Skills for Life Department of the College since October 2012. We noticed that some of the teachers (approximately a third) were not performing well on one of the criteria needed for an outstanding lesson. This was 'learner independence'. In some lessons, learners were not speaking to one another enough. As observers, we

made comments such as, *'Teacher talking time could have been reduced'* and *'All tasks were delivered teacher to student.'*

In ESOL teaching methodology, speaking time is considered to be an integral part of any lesson. Penny Ur, the well-known EFL writer and trainer (1991, p.232,) says of group work:

*'In a class of twenty learners, [they] get five times as many opportunities to talk as in full-class organisation. It also has other advantages; it fosters learner responsibility and independence, can improve motivation and contribute to a feeling of cooperation and warmth in the class.'*

Our observations and knowledge of research about the value of student talk prompted us to undertake some research into the time

spent talking in lessons by both ESOL teachers and students. Doing this research has made us much more aware of the time we, as ESOL teachers, spend talking in class, possibly depriving our learners of valuable opportunities to practise speaking themselves.

## Starting point

We drew up three questionnaires for ESOL teachers and their learners.

- Questionnaire A: The first questionnaire asked teachers to measure the time they spent speaking during a 45-minute session in the classroom. They were also required to break talking time down into four areas: explaining a task, giving instructions, giving feedback, and general chit-chat.
- Questionnaire B: The second questionnaire asked learners to measure the time they spent talking in a 45-minute session. They broke talking time down into three areas: answering the teacher's questions or asking the teacher questions, speaking to a partner, and speaking in a group.
- Questionnaire C: The third questionnaire asked learners what they liked doing when working on speaking skills. They were asked to rank a total of six tasks from one to six (1= like very much; 6= strongly dislike).

We had a good response to the questionnaires from both teachers and learners

in the ESOL department. Nine teachers, teaching at levels ranging from E1 to L1, responded to Questionnaire A. Eight classes responded to Questionnaire B, however, the level range was more limited (five E1 classes, two E2 classes and one E3 class). Learners in four E1 classes, an E2, an E3 and a L1 class responded to Questionnaire C.

According to our survey, teachers reported talking for 23 minutes on average in a 45-minute session, that is about half of the session. Most of that time (on average 8 minutes) was spent giving feedback. The least amount of time was spent giving instructions for tasks (3 minutes). However, we are not sure if these results are accurate as it is difficult for teachers to measure for themselves exactly how much time they spend talking whilst they are teaching and some of them may have given us an estimate.

Also, the time of the session played a role. In the first session of the day, the teacher is likely to need to spend time doing 'housekeeping' before the learners get down to the day's work. In fact, one teacher timed himself for three sessions on the same day and found there was a 12-minute variation between the shortest and longest times (20 minutes and 32 minutes). Further, the questionnaire asked teachers how much time they spent giving feedback. We had feedback to the whole class in mind, but, if this was interpreted as monitoring students and giving individual feedback, it could legitimately take up the whole session.

Regarding student talking time, students reported speaking much more than we had expected (37 minutes on average). The longest time reported was the entire length of the session (45 minutes). The shortest time reported was about a quarter of the session (11 minutes). Unfortunately, this data may be unreliable for a number of reasons.

- Firstly, most of the respondents were from beginner classes and, even though we tried to make the questionnaire very simple, they may have misunderstood it.
- Secondly, the amount of time a student spends talking in an ESOL class obviously depends on the nature of the session. It is likely to be less in a writing class and more in a class on pronunciation for example.
- Lastly, from our lesson observations, we know that the amount of time students spend talking in class varies enormously. It ranges from as little as 10 minutes to as much as 35 minutes.

As a result, the results of our teacher talking time and student talking time surveys are contradictory. The former shows us that teachers talk for an average of 23 minutes, whereas the latter tells us that students talk for 36 minutes. This totals 59 minutes in a 45-minute session.

The results for the popularity of tasks were less surprising. The most popular speaking task, at E1 level, was answering

the teacher's questions. What was surprising, however, was that the few L1 learners who undertook the survey also reported liking this activity most. We had expected learners at this level to be more independent of their teacher and to prefer talking to their peers.

## Teaching and learning process

We were expecting our research to show that students were not given sufficient opportunity to talk in ESOL classes. We would then suggest a range of speaking activities which could be used by teachers (hence Questionnaire C). However, the results showed this not to be the case. Therefore, for the College's 'Try Something New Week' in May, we developed a strategy that would enable teachers to reflect on whether student talking time or teacher talking time is more valuable in learning and we invited teachers to try it.

First, we asked teachers to spend about 15 minutes presenting a language point. They should talk for most of the time, using the whiteboard and/or a worksheet. Learners would be passive or would write the answers to an exercise. A few days later, a short written test would be given to assess learning. Then, teachers would present another point, this time enabling maximum student talking time. For example, they could ask learners to do a task in small groups. Again, a few days later, the same type of test would be given.

We tried this strategy with a L1 ESOL group. We presented the grammar point wish + past simple to express current dissatisfaction. For example, '*I wish I had a swimming pool.*' We used a presentation on the whiteboard followed by a gap fill grammar exercise (an adapted version of Murphy, 2004, Unit 39). A week later we presented a similar grammar point, wish + past perfect to express regrets. For example, '*I wish I hadn't eaten so much cake.*' For this piece of language, there was a brief presentation by the teacher and then the learners worked in groups of four, taking turns to pick up cards and say what they regretted to the others. The cards said, for example, '*I ate three pieces of chocolate cake last night.*' The students might convert it to, '*I wish I hadn't eaten so much cake.*' The students spoke for most of the 15-minute time slot.

We chose this language as it was new to these L1 learners, so we were starting from a clean slate. We also chose it because the two items are at a similar level of difficulty, so it could not be argued that the learners remembered one or other of the language items because it was easier. Also, there is no doubt as to what the answer should be, making it easy to mark and then compare scores.

Both language items were tested with separate tests made up of 5 questions each. The same gap fill format was used for each test.

## Impact

Certainly there was greater student interest in and enjoyment of the task involving student talking time. We could tell this from their body language and the cheery atmosphere in the classroom.

However, it was difficult to measure results. That is because the strategy had to stretch over a period of two weeks. By then we were in the post-exam period and some learners had completed the course. Sadly, we have reliable results for only two learners.

One learner scored 5/5 on the tests for both types of presentation, while the other scored 0/5 on the point which involved a lot of teacher talking time, and 4/5 on the point where she had had the opportunity to do a plenty of talking with those in her group. The former is a young person (19 years old), who is usually good at grammar tasks. The latter is a middle-aged learner, who is dyslexic and sometimes finds grammar tasks difficult.

## Next steps

Our next steps might be to measure actual teacher talking time by asking teachers to video themselves for a 45-minute session. Alternatively, they could ask a colleague to note down the time they spend talking. Also, it might be interesting to ask learners at all levels why they find answering the teacher's questions so important.

## Further reading

Ur, P. (1991) A Course in Language Teaching, Practice and Theory. Cambridge University Press.

Murphy, R. (2004) English Grammar in Use. Cambridge University Press

## Contact

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