CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The classroom is the place where teachers and learners exchange their experiences of learning and lifethrough complex social interaction (Allwright,1991). Classroom discourse plays a dynamic part in the acquisition and organisation of knowledge as both teachers and students seek to enrich, enlarge and refine their understanding of the world (Alvermann, O'Brien & Dillon, 1990). In actual classroom situations, the success of interaction depends on inter-individual communication (between individuals), that is, the teacher and students co-operating and discussing together collectively (Cazden, 1988). One of the goals of such interaction is intra-individual change (within individual) and student learning. According to Cazden (1988), classroom discourse may influence the unobservable thought processes of each participant, and thereby, assist in the understanding of what students learn. It is, therefore important to consider how spoken discourse in classrooms affects the outcomes of education.

In most classroom settings, discussion is a recognised feature of classroom life (Alvermann, O'Brien & Dillon, 1990). It is a part of the larger communication system called classroom discourse (Alvermann, O'Brien & Dillon, 1990). To be noted is that in the traditional structure of teaching and learning (Cazden, 1988) , the communication pattern is planned and controlled

by the teacher who may permit only one person to talk at a time. In such cases, authority is centralized in the teacher and information is channelled towards, and out from, him. Most discourse of this nature is used to control not only students' behaviour but also the content of students' talk (Cazden, 1986; Stubbs, 1983 quoted by Alvermann, O'Brien & Dillon, 1990). It is not surprising if under those conditions, students listen passively and volunteer minimum responses even when coaxed. Cazden (1988) has summarised two kinds of social settings which may dominate the classroom scenario. They are :

1. Traditional large group instruction, with the teacher controlling the class in front of the room.

2. Individualised instruction, with students working individually on assignments, and the teacher monitoring their progress either at the student's desk or her own.

Information is limited to what transpires during interaction in the ESL classroom and on the use teachers and students make of written materials during discussion (Stubbs, 1983 quoted by Alvermann, O'Brien & Dillon, 1990). This problem has been highlighted by Stubbs (1983) quoted by Alvermann, O'Brien & Dillon (1990):

> We still know very little about what actually happens in the classroom between teacher and pupils, and have little basic descriptive information about teacher-pupil dialogue in different teaching situations (p. 143).

In addition, very little is known about what students experience in their interaction with each other and the language curriculum (Stubbs, 1983 quoted by Alvermann, O'Brien & Dillon, 1990).

In contrast to the teacher-centred classroom model is the learner-centred model also known as collaborative learning. According to Trimbur (1985), collaborative learning is a generic term encompassing a range of techniques such as reader response, peer critiques, writing groups, joint writing projects and peer tutoring in classrooms. It attempts to decentralize the teacher's authority and to shift the locus of knowledge from the domain of the teacher to the social interaction of the learners (Trimbur, 1985). It offers a style of leadership that actively involves the participants in their own learning. Trimbur (1985) stresses the point that learning is fostered through the social relations among students. He says that the influence of collaborative learning has not been systematically assessed. It is thus the aim of this research to compare a teacher-centred or teacher-led approach to learning versus a peer-led or a student-student approach.

The traditional view in which social interaction affected learning focused on the adult as the provider of information. According to Lauren Resnick (quoted in Cazden, 1988) an alternative perspective towards learning is gaining increasing attention. This view has been metaphorically referred to by Bruner and his colleagues (Cazden, 1988) as 'scaffold' and is frequently linked to Vygotsky's construct of the 'zone of proximal development' (Cazden, 1988) (mentioned later in another section). Scaffold refers to the adjustable and temporary support provided by the proficient helper to the learner to perform and ultimately gain independence in new tasks. If the learner takes over more and more responsibility for the particular task, then it can be inferred that

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support is well timed and that the learner is doing with initial guidance what he can later do alone (Cazden, 1988).

In the classroom, the teacher can provide support to the students by not only helping them to get a particular answer but also by helping them gain some conceptual understanding of the methods from which answers to similar questions can be constructed at a future time (Cazden, 1988). One way teachers can guide students to get the answers they want is through questions. At this point, it is important to reflect on the purposes of teachers' questions. According, to Fitch (1880) quoted by McNamara (1981), the reasons for framing questions are:

> .... to discover what the child knows and his misconceptions and difficulties in order to prepare for further instruction, to secure the activity of the child's mind and develop rapport with him, and to test the results of what has been taught. (p. 104)

Fitch (1880) quoted by McNamara (1981) stresses that the major criteria for good questions and questioning are : that they should be in clear language and not permit ambiguous answers, to avoid general inquiries which admit many answers, to avoid questions permitting 'yes or no' answers, to match questions to students' knowledge and abilities, to put a set of questions in logical and coherent order, to be aware that successful answering by a group of students is not a measure of the progress of all the students in the class. He stresses that questioning must set the students thinking when answering.

However, McNamara (1981) felt that there should not be a set of questioning skills which may not be conducive to effective learning. Instead, there should be a recognition that teachers will have a 'natural' or common

sense' ability and that they will be influenced by the circumstances of their particular classroom. This research will examine the questions used by the teacher and students in interpreting and comprehending two passages.

1.1. PURPOSE

The purpose of this study is to examine whether a teacher-directed lesson and a student-student discussion in a second language classroom will lead to different learning outcomes. The aim is three-fold.

First, it will examine the nature of discussion in a comprehension exercise directed by the teacher. Attention will focus on the use of different forms of questions employed by the teacher to guide students to elicit information relevant to answer a question.

Next, the study will examine the nature of collaborative learning among students. It will again look at the different forms of questions students used to enhance each other's understanding of another comprehension exercise. Comparisons will be made between the types of questions adopted by the teacher and those used by the students in their discussions.

Finally, the study will examine whether the teacher-directed discussion and the student-student led discussion will lead to different learning outcomes. The effectiveness of both types of discussions will be assessed in the assignments produced by the students.

Thus, the study addresses two research questions:

1. What types of questions are used to increase students' ability to understand and elicit information?

2. What is the outcome of students' performance before and after class discussion?

1.2 RATIONALE

In most discussions (Cazden, 1988), there is little distinction made between how interaction with experts (or teachers) and interaction with peers (other learners) can affect the development of cognition, learning and knowledge. The capability of students with equal levels of mental development to learn under a teacher's guidance varies to a high degree. For example, one ten year old child (chronologically) can deal with problems up to a twelve year old's level of mental development with a teacher's assistance while another ten year old can only deal with problems up to a nine year old's level (Vygotsky, 1978). This means that the two children are not mentally of the same age and that the subsequent course of their learning would be different. The difference is called the zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1978). Vygotsky defines the zone of proximal development as :

> "....the distance between the actual development level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peer." (p. 86)

Based on this premise, the teacher and other students play pivotal roles in stimulating a student's potential so that the student can reach higher levels of achievement. Vygotsky maintains that speech used in social interaction is assimilated by the individual and internalised (Wertsch's editorial introduction to Vygotsky, 1981, quoted in Cazden, 1988, p. 125). This means that learning begins in social situations where a child shares responsibility with an adult to produce a performance. If a child can perform a function independently, it means that the child has reached his actual developmental level. The adult can then gradually increase the level of difficulty for problems that the child cannot solve independently but only with assistance. To state briefly, the aim of stimulating the child's potential is to enable him to reach higher levels of achievement. This is called the zone of proximal development. Thus, the zone of proximal development defines those functions that have not yet matured but are still in an embryonic stage. This concept helps us to understand the cycles and maturation processes that have been completed as well as those processes that are in a state of formation, that are just beginning to mature and develop (Vygotsky, 1978).

Vygotsky's concept of the zone of proximal development is also supported by McCarthey's study on the internalisation of dialogue from social interaction during writing. According to McCarthey (1994) a knowledgeable member (possibly a teacher) can assist instruction for a learner through dialogue. Furthermore, he maintains that the dialogue itself becomes the means through which the external, social plane is internalised to guide the child's own

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thinking. (Cazden, 1983; Palincsar, 1986; Wiertsch & Stone, 1985 quoted in McCarthey, 1994). The transformed dialogue is referred to as 'inner speech' (Vygotsky, 1986). With the above in mind, it is the purpose of this study to assess the extent to which students are able to internalise the discourse structure used by the teacher in their own discussions. It seeks to delineate the students' potential development process in assuming responsibility for their own learning through the student-student discussion.

Another basis for this study is founded upon the concept of collaborative learning proposed by Bruffee, Elbow, Elsasser, Maimon (quoted in Trimbur, 1985). According to Trimbur (1985), collaborative learning has been operating all along in informal study groups outside classroom structures. Students have always met together in groups to discuss their studies. It was only in the early sixties that educators began to recognise that peer relationships are an important potential source of learning (Trimbur, 1985). They began to organise students in groups to enable them to pool their knowledge and experience by working together. "What is new about collaborative learning is that it attempts to tap the educational potential of peer-group influence and to mobilize that influence in formal academic contexts." (Trimbur, 1985, p. 88). Thus, collaborative learning is different in its approach. It attempts to channel informal learning into the formal structures of the classroom and to formalize what had existed before only informally. Stated in another way, this approach to learning aims at ensuring that students do not easily forget the experience of learning a particular subject and the values implicit in the conventions by which

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it is taught although they may forget much of the subject-matter after the class is over. (Bruffee quoted in Trimbur, 1985, p. 94). Based on the contributions of Bruffee and colleagues, this study attempts to examine the interactional strategies employed in a student-student discussion through collaborative learning and its effects on learning outcome. It will also compare the strategies used in the peer discussion with the strategies used in a teacher-led discussion. For the present, patterns of interaction between students and teacher and how they affect learning is not entirely clear, especially when the students concerned are ESL learners.

1.3. SIGNIFICANCE

A study of the influence of classroom interaction has important significance for language teachers. It is hoped that knowledge of classroom discourse and its influence on learning will help the teacher to conduct her lesson more effectively to meet the needs of students, plan her teaching approach and, at the same time, foster a greater level of interaction between students and teacher and among students themselves. This will hopefully enhance learning and the acquisition of knowledge in the classroom through greater student participation and contribution. According to Barton (1995), there are differences between classrooms where students passively assimilate information and classrooms where students actively contribute in discussions. Students learn and remember when they participate. This is because talk and

self-expression leads to the creation and construction of meaning. In fact, Bloome (1985) pointed out that during a discussion one's ideas or notions about a given text are challenged by conflicting information and may be altered as a result of the social interaction that occurs. This belief is central to the writings of many literacy researchers like Barnes, 1976; Britton,1970; Cazden, 1986; Alvermann et al, 1990 (Barton, 1995, p. 346). According to Barton (1995), during discussions,

> ....the teacher verbalizes an explicit process for thinking about a concept and then encourages students to follow this model. Students learn about a particular concept as they orally practise thinking strategies that can be applied to other concepts in the future. (p. 346)

Student-student discussion is widely advocated primarily because of the rigidities characteristic of most teacher-student interactions. In the classroom, the teacher gives the direction or asks questions and the students carry out the direction or answer the questions. These roles are not reversible. The only context where students can reverse interactional roles with similar intellectual context, giving and following directions and asking and answering questions is with their peers. Although, students interact outside class hours, the content is divorced from school subjects. Only in the classroom do they get to practise forms of academic discourse (Cazden, 1988). Thus, opportunities for such interactions need to be allocated during class time to enhance learning.

In addition, the notion of a zone of proximal development enables us to realise the importance of helping a learner to tap those functions that are still in an embryonic stage and have yet to mature. Learning that is oriented towards a

student's current development limits the student's overall development. It does not promote a new stage of the development process but rather lags behind it (Vygotsky, 1978). Since the teacher often initiates class interaction and students assimilate what is heard during discussion, the teacher can carefully plan her lesson that will guide the students towards tapping and realising their potential development rather than their current development.

Finally, collaborative learning or learning in groups is more effective than learning individually (Trimbur, 1985). In group discussions, students share their perceptions, values, ideas and approaches to a task. Contradictory views may emerge which require them to shift, modify or change preconceived ideas and approaches before arriving at a consensual solution. This process of exploration helps reinforce students' thinking process and foster the development of evaluative judgement (Trimbur, 1985). Students are more aware of their own limited perceptions, are more exposed to a wider range of concepts and methodologies and become more critical learners rather then passive receptacles. They learn to evaluate their own performance in the light of other people's concepts and methodologies, make the necessary adjustment and improvement and assume responsibility for their own learning. The mutual aid and participatory style of collaborative learning are likely to enhance their learning process. This view is also supported by Calkins, 1986 (quoted in McCarthey, 1994). He pointed out that discourse between the teacher and students and among students might be central to helping students become critical readers who monitored their own strategies during writing (p. 201).

1.4. SUMMARY

To conclude, this research focuses on, first, teacher-student interaction and how teachers use language to shape classroom communication. It characterises the nature of the discourse pattern in a teacher-led discussion and how the teacher uses questions to enhance students' learning. Then, the study looks at student-student interaction as they assume responsibility in discussing and interpreting the text. It examines the discourse pattern of the students and the extent they have internalized the questioning approach of the teacher. Finally, the study compares the students' performance before and after class interaction.