

## CHAPTER 5

### DISCUSSION

This concluding chapter will include a summary of the findings, pedagogical implications, limitations of the study and directions for further research. The findings and implications of the present study must be viewed with the limitations of the study in mind.

#### 5.1. SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

The aim of this study was to examine the use of questions to improve students' ability to elicit information and the effects of class discussion on students' performance.

The findings revealed that both teacher-led and peer discussion enhanced students' ability to elicit information to answer the task question. Although the teacher-led discussion was 1.5 times more effective than student-student discussion, peer tutoring was found to be equally as effective in facilitating exchange of knowledge and learning. This was reflected in the higher mean scores of 3.66, 3.37 and 1.6 respectively for high, average and low proficiency students after peer discussion, compared to the mean scores of 3.0, 0.75 and 0.8 respectively before discussion. This clearly suggests that value and emphasis should be placed on peer tutoring in enhancing the learning process and in

involving students as participants in their own learning. This finding corroborated the work of Trimbur (1985) who found that peer tutoring was able to tap the potential of peer group influence.

In terms of the different forms of questions used to elicit information, it was found that when the teacher employed questions that were too general and repetitive, the discussion tended to be long and convoluted. However, when the questions were more specific, the discussion tended to be shorter and the relevant points were obtained quickly. In addition, the wide range of questions used by the teacher enabled students to explore, discuss and comprehend issues in greater depth. However, students were not so adept in tapping and using the different forms of questions employed by the teacher as the range of questions forms students used were limited. Moreover, students often asked questions that orientated fellow students to obtain supporting points first rather than the main points. At times, the answers were quoted from the passage rather than being a genuine attempt to answer a question. Students did not seem to be able to assimilate the questioning skills and, hence, were not able to assist one another to explore issues, probe and clarify ideas, engage in in-depth discussions and systematically integrate supporting points around appropriate main points.

It appeared that the strategy employed by the students was still at the embryonic stage. In other words, the skill has yet to mature and develop. This phenomenon seems to support and extend Vygotsky's (1978) ideas concerning the 'zone of proximal development' where the mental abilities of the students are still in the process of maturation. The students have yet to learn to independently

perform the task of guiding one another with questioning skills. Perhaps, this situation accounts for the relatively lower mean score in peer discussion compared to teacher-led discussion. It is probable that the teacher can only release the full responsibility of a discussion to the students themselves when students are more adept in using different forms of questions,.

In terms of the effects of discussion on students of varying proficiency levels, it was found that both teacher-led and peer discussions had only a marginal influence on the performance of high proficiency students. Surprisingly, both teacher-led and peer discussions benefited average students more than low proficiency students as the mean scores for average students were 1.35 to 2 times higher than low proficiency students (Table 4.4 & 4.6). This showed that average students were able to internalise the experience of learning and the values implicit in the discussion (Trimbur, 1985) better than low proficiency students.

In this study, it was of interest to compare the effects of teacher-led versus peer discussion on students of different proficiency levels. It was found that low proficiency students benefited more from teacher-led rather than peer discussion. The mean score of the low proficiency students in a teacher-led discussion was almost twice as high as the mean of the low proficiency students in a peer discussion (Table 4.8). This may be due to the fact that low proficiency students needed more structured and systematic guidance to help them synthesise and develop their ideas. A teacher-led discussion would have provided a more structured approach of orientating the students to the main

issues first and then developing the supporting details around the main points. In contrast, peer discussion was loosely structured as students lacked skills in posing questions and orientated their peers to the specific details instead of to the main points first. Though this strategy enhanced students understanding of the passage, it did not enable students to systematically organise and integrate the supporting ideas around the main points. The points were, thus, loosely structured.

To summarize at this point, we can say that peer discussion while helpful need not necessarily be considered as qualitatively superior especially when the students involved are of low proficiency. In short, the study has provided evidence that a teacher-led discussion can have a greater influence on the learning processes of low proficiency students in particular. On the other hand, peer discussion has similar impact on the learning processes of high proficiency students as teacher-led discussion. This means that peer discussion is equally beneficial and should not be underestimated in the teaching-learning process.

## 5.2. PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

The findings of the study have several implications for teaching instruction. Here, an important point to make is that the findings of the study offer important insights into classroom pedagogy.

An examination of the data revealed that although there is little variation in performance among students who are of varying proficiency levels, the higher

scores obtained by the students after following a teacher-led discussion clearly ascertained the special role of the teacher. Since teachers have a greater influence on the quality of learning, the ultimate responsibility rests on teachers to play a greater role in the formation and practice of students' learning. While we encourage students to adopt a greater degree of responsibility for their own learning, the teacher's authority and centrality in the classroom need not be down-graded or sacrificed. The higher mean scores obtained by the students in the teacher-led discussion are clear indications that the guidance or assistance of the teacher is essential support. This means that the learner-centered model of instruction need not necessarily be superior to a teacher-centered model. To some extent, the findings of the study may explain the issue raised by Hoetker & Ahlbrand (1969) that teacher-directed talk may not be such a poor pedagogical method as is generally assumed to be. However, this implication requires further investigation.

Since it was also found that peer discussion could also enhance the overall performance of students, it appeared that more activities which will promote discussion need to be organized. These activities are those which can facilitate collaboration among students. In other words, increased attention should be given to collaborative learning, which essentially encompass the whole range of techniques such as peer evaluation, pair work, writing groups, discussion groups, paired writing projects, and peer tutoring. As pointed out by Trimbur (1985), learning is fostered through social interaction among students as they pool their knowledge and experience by working together. This point is

also supported by McCarthy (1994) where he focused on ways to enhance learning, which, according to him, occurs as a result of the individual's interactions with others.

The study also revealed that students lack skills in formulating their questions which probably accounted for the lower mean scores. The ability to formulate questions lies at the heart of a good discussion. The lower mean scores obtained by the students (all categories) are indications of their inability to formulate the right kind of questions. If students are to be encouraged to assume a greater role in their own learning process they need to be equipped with the necessary skills and tools in formulating questions. Teachers therefore, need to teach students questioning skills instead of just imparting knowledge or monitoring and assessing students' work. This will empower students to determine what, when and how they learn as they take charge of their own learning.

Finally, it is of interest to note the pattern of interaction in a teacher-led and peer discussion. The findings of this study also provide evidence of the important role of the teacher's style of interaction which can be referred to as 'high involvement' style or 'low involvement' style. It was found that in teacher-led discussion, the interaction pattern follows the IRE sequence where the teacher initiates the question, a student responds and then the teacher evaluates the response (Sinclair & Coulthard, 1975). This structure dominates throughout the discussion. Such a structure provides little opportunity for students to initiate, control discussion or engage in meaningful interaction beyond eliciting

the information. The whole discussion is rigidly structured and tightly controlled by the teacher.

On the other hand, in peer discussion, there is a reversal of roles and some release of control by the teacher to the students. Students have more opportunities to initiate questions, another student responds and then the student who initiates a question evaluates the response. There is more variation in the IRE sequence. The teacher functions mainly to invite students to participate in the discussion. Such variation in peer discussion gives students the opportunity to ask questions as well as answer them, a situation that does not exist in most classroom settings. With that in mind, it is possible to draw some important implications. Teachers need to be sensitive to a range of involvement styles. They also need to be open to students' points of view and not only to those of their own even in a teacher-led discussion. As pointed out by Cazden (1988), more frequently, in institutionalized settings, teachers give direction or ask questions and students follow directions or answer questions. The only context where students can reverse interactional roles with the same intellectual content is with their peers. Thus, more sensitivity on the teacher's part needs to be shown to provide opportunities for students to practise different forms of academic discourse and to voice their thought processes.

### 5.3 LIMITATIONS

Despite the findings and implications, the present study has several limitations.

This study involves only a small sample of students in a particular class and college. Within the class, there are some students who have high language proficiency while others have average or low command of the language. There is a need for studies in other classroom settings such as first language versus second language settings. Indeed, there is a real need for more studies on the ethnography of classroom communication.

An additional shortcoming which needs to be addressed in future studies is related to the nature of analysis. Future studies could attempt a fine-grained linguistic analysis of teacher and/or student talk and behavior during discussions.

Moreover, the study is a cross-sectional study. The results are only reflective of the performance of the students at a particular point of time. A longitudinal study may give a better reflection of students' performance, bearing in mind that students change and develop either in general ability or language proficiency. Over time, they may develop and acquire new skills.

In spite of the limitations, the study provides insights into directions for future research.



#### 5.4. DIRECTION FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

The discussion below is not intended to be comprehensive but rather to put across some suggestions for future research.

Firstly, additional theoretical and empirical work will be needed to examine the effects of classroom interaction on students' performance especially over a span of time. This might then provide a better understanding of the impact of classroom interaction on learning outcomes.

Secondly, future research on language in the classroom should focus on teacher talk itself (for example, the questions teachers ask), the questioning behavior of teachers and teacher talk as part of the overall socialization process.

Thirdly, research studies on language in the classroom need to focus on questions and behavior from the perspective of the students. Only then can the researcher identify commonalities between and among perspectives especially between the perspective of the teacher and the perspective of the students. After all, at all times, teachers and students interact with each other, changing and modifying questions, utterances and behavior on the basis of what the other is doing. These perspectives must be understood and considered if the aim is to fully understand the value of classroom discussions.

Another promising direction for research are studies which attempt to explore the underlying process and environment that are most conducive to enhancing language learning.

Finally, future research can focus on 'what, when and how' students interact and behave. An essential area that need to be looked into is 'why' students interact and behave in a certain manner and how different social and cultural context influence discourse pattern and behaviour.