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“I’m going to split you all up”: examining transitions to group/pair work in two primary English classrooms

Abstract

Lesson transitions are important units for analysis not only for establishing the presence of group/pair work but also for examining the contextual conditions for small group learning. Scholars have suggested that the ‘open’ or ‘closed’ contextual conditions set up through the teacher’s use of language to introduce group/pair work influence the quality of pupil’s talk and interthinking, i.e. the use of language for thinking together and collectively solving problems (Mercer 2000; Corden 2000). The nature of transition, however, has not been fully characterized in the research literature for us to understand what these conditions are. In this paper, we present the findings from an analysis of teachers’ discourse when the teachers introduced their pupils to group/pair work in two Primary English classrooms in Singapore. Our analysis shows the extended and recursive nature of lesson transitions in these classrooms, as well as how the two teachers orchestrated conditions of entry into group/pair work and how the pupils were (un)successfully inducted into such tasks. These preliminary findings about transitions can have pedagogical implications for the ways teachers can create conditions that will support learning when they introduce group/pair work to their pupils.

Keywords: lesson transitions; group or pair work; small group learning, primary English classrooms

Introduction and background

Classroom-based research has produced a variety of models for describing and analysing the discourse structure of a lesson. Most of these studies have revealed the recurring Initiation-Response-Feedback (IRF) sequence as the prototypical mode of teacher-pupil interaction, with the teacher normally making the first and third moves in the sequence (e.g. Bellack et al.

1966; Sinclair and Coulthard 1975). Mehan (1979) and Cazden (1988) call this three-part sequence Initiation-Response-Evaluation (IRE). While there has been much research in classroom interaction, particularly in the description of IRF/IRE sequences, less attention has been given to the study of transitions in lessons and how these might influence learning in the subsequent phase of a lesson.

Mehan (1979) identified the opening phase, instructional phase and closing phase as the three sequential component parts of a lesson and explained how the boundaries between these phases were marked verbally (e.g. through the use of directives and informatives in the opening phase), paralinguistically (e.g. through shifts in gesture and conversational rhythm) and kinesically (e.g. through changes in postural configurations). His study has been useful for understanding the verbal and non-verbal features that demarcate the continuous flow of interaction into more discrete segments and the implications for what is communicated when the teacher and pupils are engaged in whole-class teaching. However, the nature and implications of lesson transitions have not been examined, particularly from whole-class teaching to group/pair work.

Transitions from whole-class teaching to group/pair work are important units for analysis for two reasons. Firstly, a study of transitions can help to establish the presence of group/pair work where pupils can potentially engage in interthinking, i.e. the 'use of language for thinking together, for collectively making sense of experience and solving problems' (Mercer 2000, 1). Secondly, by examining the quality of transitions that teachers set up for group and pair learning, we can examine the 'open' and 'closed' contextual conditions created through the teacher's use of language which may influence the quality of pupil's talk, interthinking and level of engagement with one another's ideas (Corden 2000). In open contexts, pupils are explicitly told to focus on engagement through talk and thinking while

keeping the outcome in mind. In closed contexts, pupils focus mainly on the outcome that they believe their group should achieve (Corden 2000; Mercer 2000).

In what is now widely regarded as seminal work on school children's talk during group work, Douglas Barnes and associates examined the impact of such talk on learning across the curriculum (Barnes et al. 1969; Barnes and Todd 1977). This work has since been developed by other educational scholars notably Neil Mercer and Robin Alexander. Mercer, with a specific focus on small group work, studied the process of interthinking as promoted by group talk and other kinds of oral discourse in the classroom (Mercer 2000; Mercer et al. 1988; Mercer et al. 1999). Similarly, by drawing on a large-scale comparative study of various ways classroom talk is conceptualized and used by teachers in different countries, Alexander (2006; 2008) suggested a pedagogy that uses the power of talk for shaping children's thinking and for securing their engagement, learning and understanding.

Research of a similar nature has been conducted in Singapore, a multi-lingual nation state where pupils are concerned with high-staked examinations and teaching and learning occur typically in classrooms with an average size of 40–45 pupils. Singaporean pupils have consistently performed well in international tests such as TIMMS (Third International Mathematics and Science Test) and PIRLS (Progress in International Reading Literacy Study), and more recently, PISA (Program for International Student Assessment) (Mourshed et al. 2010). Currently, however, much of our understanding of classroom discourse in the Singapore classroom is based on analyses of data on teacher talk in mainly teacher-fronted teaching. Critically, classroom interaction is characterised by dominant teacher talk and short pupil responses (Hogan et al. 2006, 2007; Vaish 2008). Scholars have argued that classroom talk that is controlled by the teacher is rarely the kind of literate talk that can promote knowledge construction and development of high-order thinking skills (Chang and Wells 1988; Wells 1987, 1992). While some teachers do attempt to engage a whole class of pupils

in some form of collaborative and literate talk, they face many constraints, not least the huge class size and the limited time allocated to the delivery of prescribed topics for the subject (Kramer-Dahl et al. 2007). In this context, teachers can potentially maximise pupils' opportunities to develop their language and cognitive abilities by including in their lessons opportunities for pupils to engage with one another through collaborative small-group talk. Teachers can also promote their pupils' learning in small groups or pairs through an open learning context set up prior to the start of group/pair work (Corden 2000).

Although several studies have examined the use of group/pair work in Singapore primary and secondary classrooms (e.g. Silver 2008; Kramer-Dahl et al. 2007), the importance and complexity of conditions set up by teachers while moving from whole-class teaching to group/pair work has not been fully characterised. Likewise, these conditions for classrooms with pupils of different abilities have not been studied. In Singapore primary schools, students in the recent past were streamed into high (EM1), middle (EM2) and low (EM3) ability classes based on their Primary Four academic results. Lesson content as well as the ways in which lessons are conducted for pupils in different ability classes may also differ in order to address the needs of different categories of pupils. Consequently, the ways group/pair work are introduced may also be expected to be different. Although the terms EM1, EM2 and EM3 are no longer used, students who are weak in each subject remain a distinct group which is taught using a different curriculum, classroom management techniques and teaching approach to match their learning pace, ability and inclinations (Ministry of Education 2009). The purpose of our study is to gain insights into the nature of lesson transitions to group/pair work in two Primary English classrooms – a high ability class (HA) and a low ability class (LA). We aim to answer the following questions for these two classrooms:

1. What did the teachers in a HA class and a LA class focus on when introducing their pupils to group/pair work?
2. How did the teachers orchestrate conditions of entry into group/pair work? What were the similarities and differences between the two classes, if any?

Lesson transitions to group/pair work

From a survey of the literature, it was found that lesson transitions are generally identified by a change in the interaction pattern to IRE from another pattern in the discourse structure, or vice versa. For example, Mehan (1979) identified transitions from the opening phase to the instructional phase through a shift from directive and informative sequences to the instructional sequence which is primarily composed of initiation, reply and evaluation (IRE). The boundary between the instructional phase and the closing phase was then explained as a mirror image of that between the opening phase and the instructional phase. Cazden (1988), on the other hand, regards the three-part IRE sequence as the ‘unmarked’ or ‘default’ pattern of classroom discourse, and claims that when more marked non-default patterns of teacher-student interaction occur, the changes that follow can have considerable cognitive or social significance. One of the interaction patterns that has been contrasted with the common IRE sequence is that of open group discussions, where pupils initiate and take control of the discourse (Corden 2000; Markee 2000, 2004). As these two are distinct forms of classroom interaction, the end of an IRE sequence may indicate the start of a new pattern in the discourse structure of a lesson, e.g. the beginning of a transition to group/pair work.

Mehan (1979), Bernstein (1990) and Alexander (2008) have observed that the teacher’s selection of a particular interaction or discourse pattern has implications for what is communicated during the lesson. Mehan (1979) claimed that the interactional activity that the teacher engages in during the opening phase with the students serves to mark off the lesson

from other classroom events. Similarly, Alexander (2008) highlighted different interactive possibilities during a lesson as components of the organizational repertoire or an important aspect of pedagogic interaction, and asserted that a competent teacher needs to be able to manage different kinds of interaction, including whole-class teaching, collective group work and collaborative group work. Bernstein (1990), on the other hand, theorized pedagogic discourse as involving two discourses – regulative and instructional. Specifically, in relation to the classroom context, Christie (2004) builds on Bernstein’s claim about regulative discourse being the precondition of any pedagogic discourse, and explains how regulative discourse (or regulative register in her terms) organises and shapes pupils’ behaviour while instructional discourse (or instructional register) concerns the activity and/or information to be dealt with by the pupils as they learn. Christie also claims that:

[w]hatever the manifestations of the two registers, these both help shape, and are shaped by, the spatial and temporal conditions that apply in the classroom which the teacher has a significant role in determining. (2004, 180)

This implies that teachers use pedagogic discourse to dominate, manipulate and shape the thinking and reasoning habits of their pupils (Bernstein 1990, Christie 2004). It is our assumption, therefore, that by examining teachers’ discourse, as they introduce group/pair work to their pupils, we can throw light on the conditions created by each teacher for their pupils to learn and think together in groups/pairs.

One aspect of discourse that has been analysed for the quality of contextual conditions set up through the teacher’s use of language during a lesson transition is the Zone of Interactional Transition (Markee 2000, 2004). Using Conversation Analysis as a theoretical framework, Markee (2004, 583) defined Zone of Interactional Transition as ‘talk that occurs at the boundaries of different classroom ... speech exchange systems’. Markee (2000) noted that pedagogical talk in teacher-led whole class teaching is characterized by a considerable

amount of pre-allocation of turns, with the teacher reserving the right to maintain control over the moment-by-moment content and direction. In other words, teacher-pupil talk is ‘massively, though not exclusively, achieved as an unequal power speech exchange system’ (Markee 2000, 68). In contrast, in small group-oriented, task-based teaching, the teacher has less direct control over what learners say and how they talk.

Given that a defining characteristic of group/pair work is ‘that the balance of ownership and control of the work shifts toward the pupils themselves’ (Blatchford et al. 2003, 155), a Zone of Interactional Transition set up during the shift from whole-class teaching to group/pair work will require the participants to make a transition from ‘the practices of a preallocated, unequal power speech exchange system’ to ‘the practices of a relatively locally managed, peer-based speech exchange system’ (Markee 2004, 585). However, as pointed out by Corden (2000), the organization of pupils into small groups or pairs does not automatically lead to productive collaborative discussion among them. An asymmetrical speech exchange system associated with whole class teaching may still occur, unless the appropriate context for a locally managed, peer-based speech exchange system is created. Alternatively, a vacuum may be created by the absence of the controlling voice of the teacher, and thus no on-task interaction takes place. Markee’s observations of ESL classes have also revealed that problems of various kinds (e.g. misunderstandings of the functions of teachers’ utterances, counter question sequences, off-task talk) commonly occur in Zones of Interactional Transition as members adjust to the turn-taking and repair practices of the new speech exchange system.

The studies discussed above indicate the significance of changes in interaction patterns in classrooms. The complexity of transitions to group/pair work, however, may not have been fully recognized or characterized, as there may be an assumption that transitions are brief and leads directly from one phase of a lesson to another. As the in-depth analysis of

two classrooms presented in this paper will show, some transitions are complex and complicated, are not always explicit and do not always immediately precede the planned next activity, which in this case is group/pair work. This, as we will discuss later in the paper, has implications for the ways teachers create conditions that will support learning.

Methodology

Data

The data for this study were the transcripts of twelve English language lessons that were conducted in two Primary Five classes – one high ability class (HA) and one low ability class (LA). They were selected from a corpus of classroom interactions¹ consisting a total of 197 lessons in 54 units of work for English, Mathematics and Science. A unit of work consists of a series of lessons built around a theme or topic. The twelve lessons selected for this study constitute two units of work. These two units (one from HA and the other from LA) were chosen because each consists of six English lessons, making them approximately comparable in terms of the amount of talk analysed. Mandatory procedures were followed to ensure ethical conduct in building the corpus². For this study, permission was granted to access the data from the corpus as a secondary user. Confidentiality of the participants was observed in each stage of the study.

The teachers of the classes were both female and had Bachelor Degrees in English. The HA teacher had over 10 years of experience teaching English while the LA teacher had over 21 years of experience. The lesson transcripts showed that the teacher of the HA classroom had planned for the pupils to do three activities in small groups or pairs during the six lessons: (a) write a story script, (b) rehearse by reading it aloud (role play) and (c) give a performance. In the LA classroom, the teacher had planned for her pupils to do several activities mainly in pairs: (a) arrange in correct sequence the slips of paper which contained

different parts of a poem she had just read to them, (b) read out the sentences (from a story) written on the picture the pair was sharing, (c) retell the story by filling in the blanks with the words provided, (d) do peer editing and (e) write about all the seven pictures that made up the same story.

We identified transitions from whole-class teaching to group/pair work and compared the features of such transitions between these two classes. We investigated features present in the two teachers' discourse during a specific stage in the lessons, where they introduced pupils to and prepared them for working in small groups or pairs.

Analysing transitions

Transitions to group/pair work were identified through a change in the interaction pattern from IRF/IRE to a new pattern in the discourse structure of a lesson – specifically, from the turn in which the teacher first introduced group/pair work to the pupils until the turn which indicated that the pupils began working in groups/pairs. The three researchers independently located the transitions in the lesson transcripts before an inter-coder agreement check on the turn numbers for the beginning and end of a transition was conducted for each lesson transcript. The number of agreements by all three coders divided by the total number of opportunities for agreement showed inter-coder reliability of more than 90%. All disagreements on locating transitions were resolved through discussion before the teacher's utterances during transitions were analysed in detail.

Next, the functional focuses of teacher's utterances were coded into categories, such as physical configuration, time control, posture and behaviour, content and requirement of the task, and thinking and/or interaction process. Categorization of teacher's discourse was initially informed by Bernstein's theory in which pedagogic discourse was categorized into two discourses – regulative and instructional. However, we found that it is not always helpful

to distinguish rigidly between regulative and instructional discourse as mutually exclusive kinds of talk, since very often the teacher's talk continuously broaches both aspects of educational activity at the same time. Moreover, since our aim is to find out what the teachers focussed on when they introduced group/pair work, we believe there is a need to examine both the regulative and instructional discourse of the teacher at the point of transition to group/pair work. Therefore, we propose a set of categories which are based on the specific functional focuses of the teacher's utterances, e.g. whether the focus is on physical configuration for forming and organization of groups/pairs or thinking and/or interaction process. These categories were first developed for a pilot analysis by referring to the discussions of various functions served by teacher's directives in Malcolm (1986), Iedema (1996) and Christie (2002). They were then refined for the analysis of teacher's discourse focus in all twelve lesson transcripts. Table 1 summarizes our categorization of teacher's discourse focus during lesson transitions to group/pair work.

The focus of each utterance in the two teachers' discourse during transitions to group/pair work was coded by the three researchers independently, followed by an inter-coder agreement check. The number of agreements by all three coders on the focus of an utterance divided by the total number of utterances in the teachers' discourse during transitions showed inter-coder agreement of over 90%. All disagreements were then resolved through discussion.

Table 1. Teacher’s discourse focus during lesson transitions to group/pair work

Focus	Definition	Examples
Physical configuration	Forming and organizing groups/pairs	Alright, go to your partners now.
Time control	Regulating the time parameters of the task	Can you do this in two minutes’ time?
Posture and behaviour	Regulating pupils’ posture and behaviour for optimum learning	Can all of you now face the screen?
Content and requirement of the task	Informing the content or requirement to accomplish the task	Next we’re gonna look at an adventure that one particular boy went through. His name is Jimmy.
Thinking and/or interaction process	Directing how pupils in groups or pairs interact and think to contribute and respond to the knowledge that was generated when working together	In your pairs, you first discuss. Are you for it or are you against it?

Findings and discussion

In each of the two classes, a total of five lesson transitions into group/pair work were identified. In the HA classroom, transitions to group/pair work were identified in the first five lessons (HA Eng 158 to 162)³. Transitions to group/pair work were also identified in the transcripts of five lessons for the LA pupils (LA Eng 130 to 133 & 135). Figures 1 and 2 show the percentages of teacher’s utterances for each category of discourse focus during lesson transitions to group/pair work in the HA and LA classrooms respectively.

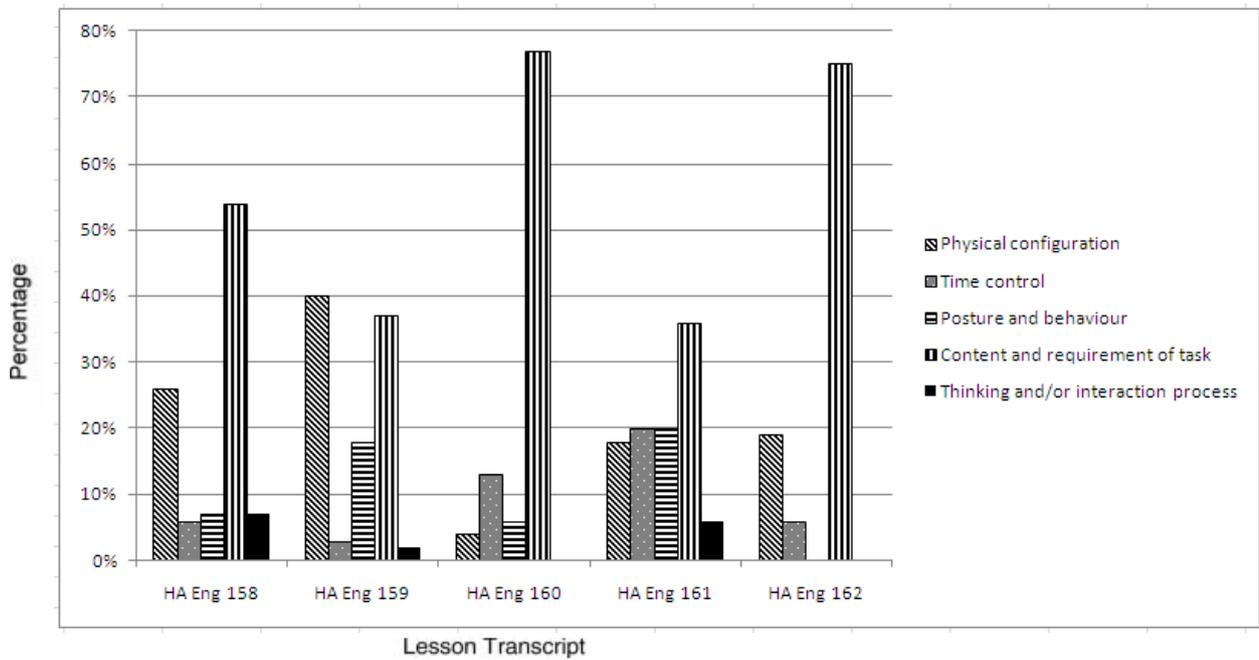


Figure 1. Percentages of teacher's utterances for each discourse focus during transitions (HA)

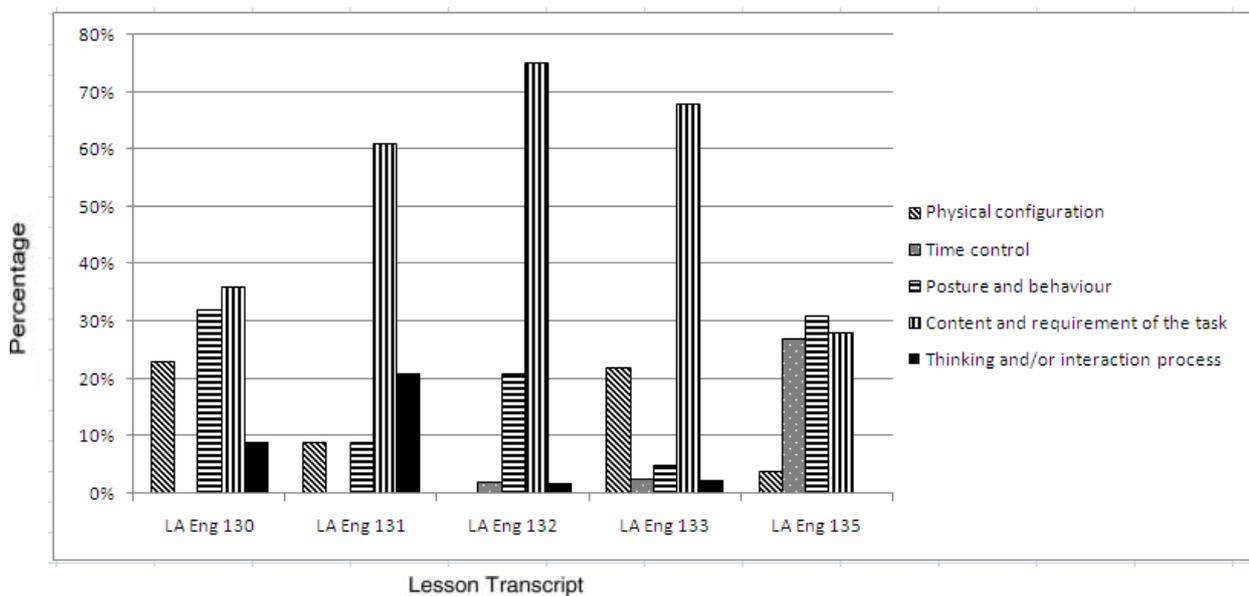


Figure 2. Percentages of teacher's utterances for each discourse focus during transitions (LA)

Teacher's discourse focus

Our analysis of teacher's discourse focus during the lesson transitions to group/pair work shows many similarities and a few differences between the two classes. It can be seen in Figures 1 and 2 that, in both HA and LA classrooms, teacher's discourse focus during the

lesson transitions to group/pair work was mainly on organizing the pupils into groups, controlling their posture and behaviour and explaining the content and requirement of the task, which oriented towards the expected outcome in the finished product. Also in both classrooms, there was little focus on how the pupils should think and respond to one another's ideas during group/pair work. The lack of focus on the engagement of thinking and/or interaction process in both classrooms could be one of the factors contributing to the creation of a contextual condition or working climate which was not conducive to produce collaboration among pupils.

For example, in the lesson transcript HA Eng 159, which shows the highest number of teacher's utterances in total for a transition to group/pair work), although the teacher instructed the pupils to prepare a list of roles and activities for each member, words and phrases such as 'discuss', 'collaborate', 'agree', 'listen', 'work closer', 'give feedback' rarely appeared in her discourse. Through the use of such words and phrases, the teacher's discourse could have focused on setting up the ground rules that encourage pupils to interact, think, contribute and respond to the knowledge that was generated when working in groups/pairs. The focus on interaction and thinking processes in the teacher's discourse could have helped create a condition for 'aligning students with each other and with the content of the academic work while simultaneously socializing them into a particular way of speaking and thinking' (Cazden 1988, 65).

Reasons for the high percentages of focus on the content and requirement of the task (the highest 77% in HA Eng 160, and 75% in LA Eng 132) appeared to be different for the two classrooms. In the HA classroom, it could be due to the complexity and demands of the task which the teacher had planned for her pupils. The task to come up with their own story scripts and dialogues for the characters required rather intensive teaching of the content. In the LA classroom, on the other hand, the tasks that the teacher had set for her pupils were

relatively simple (e.g. arranging in correct sequence the slips of paper which contained different parts of a poem she had just read to them). In spite of this, the teacher of the LA classroom still had to spend time explaining the content and requirement of the task, which could be due to the pupils' weaker ability to cope with the content required to accomplish the task.

In any case, the relative lack of focus on how the pupils should work with one another appeared to be creating a closed context for group interaction in both HA and LA classrooms. The limitations of the closed context for group work became apparent when the teacher moved from group to group in the subsequent lessons and discovered that some groups were not functioning effectively, an example in Excerpt 1 below. It was then that the teacher explained how they could improve the process of discussion while completing the task.

Excerpt 1 (HA Eng 159)⁴

Trn0356	Teacher	Okay, come. Come this group. I think we have a problem here.
Trn0357	Class	<i>(inaudible/ unclear statement)</i>
Trn0358	Teacher	Can I have this group here. Come.
Trn0359	Student	Which group?
Trn0360	Teacher	One, two, three, four, five right? We have <student's name>. One, two, three, four, five.
Trn0361	Student	I want all this three.
Trn0362	Class	<i>(inaudible/ unclear statement)</i>
Trn0363	Teacher	I'm going to split you all up.

(Some turns in which the teacher helped with group members' roles follow here)

Trn0716	Teacher	Okay, so if you are group leader, get members to work cooperatively
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(Exchange between the teacher and students continues)

Interestingly, the total percentage of teacher's utterances focussing on thinking and/or interaction process was higher in the LA classroom (the highest 21% in LA Eng 131) than in the HA classroom. A closer examination of the lesson transcripts showed that there were more occurrences of words such as 'discuss', 'collaborate', 'agree', 'listen', 'work closer', 'give feedback' in the utterances of the teacher for LA pupils, compared to that of the teacher for HA pupils. It seems to suggest that the teacher of LA classroom more explicitly

encouraged her pupils to focus on the process of working together. However, it was found that explicit instructions of the teacher for the LA pupils to work together did not necessarily lead to significant instances of pupils discussing and exchanging ideas during the group/pair work that followed. For example, for a task in which the pupils were to retell the story by filling in the blanks with the words provided, the first pair completed the task just a few turns and minutes after the teacher finished giving the instructions. Therefore, although the teacher's discourse during the transitional phase to group/pair work may have attempted to direct the pupils to discuss and cooperate, the task given did not appear to require much cooperative effort, defeating the teacher's purpose to engage the pupils in an interthinking process.

Another similarity between the two classrooms was the lack of clarity in the Zone of Interactional Transitions, which seems to have resulted from the little focus on thinking and interaction processes in the two teachers' discourse during lesson transitions. In the shift of power/control to the students, the role of the teacher during group/pair work was not clearly stated in the transitional phases in either the HA or LA classroom. Hence, many pupils could not move into a mode of group/pair interaction where power and control over the task was transferred to them. Instead of depending on one another to complete the task, they still depended on the teacher to reformulate the expectations and requirements of the task – from checking the spelling of a word to finding the correct word to fill in the blanks. As a result, the interaction during group/pair work remained mostly teacher-led/initiated questions and answer sequences, as shown in Excerpts 2 and 3.

Excerpt 2 (HA Eng 159)

Trn0570	Student	Eh, you ask lah ⁵ , you ask lah.
Trn0571	Student1	Mrs <teacher's name>, can add on characters?
Trn0572	Teacher	Erh
Trn0573	Student	<i>(inaudible/ unclear statement)</i>
Trn0574	Stuedent1	Narrator
Trn0575	Teacher	Like, like what?

(Exchange between the teacher and the student continues)

Excerpt 3 (LA Eng 132)

Trn0447	Student	Capital letter, right?
Trn0448	Teacher	Ah correct. Who is that?
Trn0449	Student1	Teacher, can describe the penguin?
Trn0450	Teacher	Again?
Trn0451	Student1	Can describe the penguin?
Trn0452	Teacher	Yes, you can. But remember you don't have much time ah,

(Exchange between the teacher and students continues)

Trn0607	Student	Oh! He see a Arab go
Trn0608	Teacher	Okay, good.
Trn0609	Student	Teacher, how you spell (<i>unclear word</i>)
Trn0610	Student1	She doesn't know (<i>unclear word</i>)
Trn0611	Teacher	That's B-O, not B-R
Trn0612	Student	You see, you say B-R
Trn0613	Student1	<i>(inaudible)</i>
Trn0614	Teacher	Stop blaming one another.

In both classrooms, when the teacher went around checking each group or pair, the interaction was still driven by the teacher. Most of the interaction was between the teacher and students instead of among students collaborating or negotiating while doing the task. This was particularly conspicuous among the pupils in the HA classroom, where there appeared to have been little fruitful discussion on the task at hand. When the teacher arrived, the control and power immediately shifted back to her to sort out the problems the group was facing. These findings highlight the importance of stating the teacher's role and the interdependency of pupils in achieving the task outcome clearly during the transitional phase to group/pair work.

Extended and recursive transitions

With regard to how the teachers orchestrated conditions of entry into group/pair work, we also found that in both HA and LA classrooms, transitions to group/pair work were not neatly demarcated phases that immediately preceded pupils working in groups or pairs, but rather they were extended and recursive. The transitions in the lessons we analysed were complex and not directly linear in relation to group/pair work that followed. For example, the teacher

of the HA classroom had to modify the instructions on group formation during the extended transitional phase because some students were resistant to the groups they were told to form, while others were still confused. An example in Excerpt 4 below:

Excerpt 4 (HA Eng 158)

Trn0261	Teacher	Alright, what you're required to do next, you can work in pairs later, okay, is to come out with the dialogue. Alright, in this case, you're supposed to fill in missing parts of the script. After reading, alright, the story in your course book, you should know where this comes from. Okay, this portion. So here they give you the characters
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(Some turns are omitted)

Trn0292	Student	Do by ourselves?
Trn0293	Student	<i>(inaudible/ unclear elements)</i>
Trn0294	Teacher	Okay, you can work on your own.
Trn0295	Teacher	Yes. If you prefer.

(Some turns are omitted)

Trn0313	Student	Two or three?
Trn0314	Student	Can form groups
Trn0315	Student	Three

(Some turns are omitted)

Trn0336	Student	Miss, can do individual?
Trn0337	Student	Can do individual?
Trn0338	Teacher	Try and do a pair first. Okay, so that you can have a discussion.

The number of turns (from *Trn* 0261 to *Trn* 0338) and the amount of time (from 18:52 to 22:46, or 3 minutes and 54 seconds) in the above excerpt shows that the transition into group work was a protracted event interspersed with the pupils' questioning and comments.

In the lessons for the LA pupils, we found similar instances of an extended transitional phase. However, unlike in the HA classroom, the extended transition in the LA classroom was not due to the need for the teacher to modify the instructions on group formation or the pupils' resistance to form groups. In the LA classroom, the teacher assigned pupils into pairs as shown in Excerpt 5.

Excerpt 5 (LA Eng 130)

Teacher Okay, take one of this. Come on, ah, the two of you please, work together.
Teacher Come on, the two of you please, work together.
Teacher Alright, you can take this chair, ah, <students' names>, you are too far from
 <student's name>.

For the rest of group/pair work in the subsequent lessons, the teacher of the LA classroom let her pupils work in the same pair with the same partner. She also made each pair share the teaching materials, such as a picture and a computer. This seemed to help avoid confusion among the pupils about group formation during the transition phase to group/pair work in the LA classroom. Nevertheless, in both HA and LA classrooms, we found instances of recursive transitions where transitions to group/pair were interspersed with further whole class teaching about the content and requirement of the task. This shift from preparing pupils for group/pair work to whole-class teaching occurred especially when the teacher began reviewing with the pupils what they had been taught so that they would remember to use that content for the task. For example, in the LA classroom, the teacher first introduced a task for group/pair work in *Trn0118* during a lesson (see Excerpt 6). However, in the turns following this introduction (from *Trn0129* to *Trn218*), the teacher continued with the whole-class teaching as she recapitulated the main points of the story the pupils were to retell/rewrite on the computer in pairs. It was only in *Trn0399*, which was more than 280 turns or 19 minutes and 25 seconds (from 11:51 to 31:16) after the teacher's first introduction of the task, the pupils were asked to begin their group/pair work.

Excerpt 6 (LA Eng 132)

Trn0118 Teacher Then I will tell you what you're expected to do. You will have to share, because you are doing pair work again.

(Many turns which show the whole-class teaching are omitted)

Trn0399 Teacher Okay, if there is no time for you to print, I will tell you to save, later on, I will teach you how to save on the desktop. Okay? Some of you may know by now. You may begin your work now.

Similarly, in the HA classroom, *Trn0020* in Excerpt 7 below suggested the beginning of a transition to group/pair work:

Excerpt 7 (HA Eng 160)

Trn0020 Teacher Okay, erh, while waiting, I know you all asked me a number of time last week ah because we stop for English at the script, we actually have got into groups only and we're not started really writing it. Okay, so we wait for the others. I will erm want to go into the script itself. Mention a few things and we get into our groups. Ready?

Our examination of the interaction between the teacher and pupils following the above excerpt shows that instead of the pupils getting into groups, the teacher did further whole class teaching reviewing the content of what the pupils did previously (see Excerpt 8).

Excerpt 8 (HA Eng 160)

Trn0086 Teacher A few years back, like erh, reminder right? Remember in our composition when we write, usually erm, an incident may happen at a particular time, it takes a, a quite a long period of time before erh it's brought up again in court. So many of us when we do our writing, this's just a reminder that we do not immediately say that erh erh, robber is being caught and then immediately sentenced for a number of years.

More detailed instructions for group/pair work were then given to the pupils in *Trn0189*, which was more than 150 turns or 8 minutes and 27 seconds (from 00:48 to 9:15) after the teacher's first introduction of the task. This shows that the class took a long time to move into groups to begin their discussion on how and what to write for the script-writing task they had been assigned. In fact, most of the groups did not formally begin their group discussion until the next lesson. The one which did met outside class time to write the script.

One of the reasons for such an extended and recursive transition in both classrooms was that, after the first round of instructions for the group/pair task, the teacher appeared to have decided that she needed to review the skills and content the students would need to accomplish the task. As the teacher was shifting from what appeared to be a transition to group/pair work to whole class teaching, she took up a substantial amount of time to do the review with the pupils.

These examples show that lesson transitions to group/pair work were not always neatly contained in a single discrete chunk of discourse that led pupils immediately into the task. It could be an extended piece of discourse with other forms of interactions embedded in it. In terms of setting up contextual conditions for group/pair work, this feature of transition may have one limitation. Because of its recursive nature, many pupils were unable to focus their attention on what was required of them when they worked in groups/pairs. The students might feel confused as to what they had to do since the instructions were not articulated clearly and comprehensively when group/pair work was first introduced. This was especially so in the HA classroom, where the transition did not signal clearly when the students should begin their group/pair work. As a result, some students were confused, as evidenced by the types of questions they subsequently asked their teachers when they were in their groups (see Excerpts 1 and 2). The context that was set up was thus ambiguous, and did not lend itself to encourage focused and meaningful group interaction, except for groups that were highly motivated and self-directed.

Conclusion and implications

Group or pair work provides the opportunity for pupils to develop their thinking and language use while working together on a task. Although the outcome of the task is important, the working together and the talk that is generated through this collaboration is just as important, if not more so. In order to encourage a collaborative environment for group work, teachers need to set up an open context through their use of language that focuses on the merit of interaction and thinking processes, so as to encourage pupils to value one another's ideas and explore these ideas in order to produce new knowledge amongst themselves. Our analysis of teacher's discourse focus during transitions to group/pair work in the two classrooms with pupils of different ability levels showed that both teachers focussed mainly on the content and expected outcome in the finished product. This created a somewhat closed context for

group/pair work in both classrooms which could have influenced the way pupils interacted with one another when working on the tasks. Pupils' resistance to working in groups and misunderstanding or misinterpretation of the teacher's instructions in the HA classroom has also highlighted the challenges in group formation. It underlines the need for teachers to develop skills not only in managing group/pair work but also in *leading* pupils from whole class teaching to small group work. While keeping in mind the ability levels of the pupils, teachers also need to understand the importance of selecting tasks that can encourage greater interthinking and learning. Merely establishing an open context may not be adequate for encouraging learners to develop their interthinking, as suggested in the few instances of pupils working together in the LA class where the task did not lend itself to such educational objectives.

This study was an attempt to describe open and closed contexts created for group work and it has shed some light on the nature of lessons transition, a phenomenon that hitherto has received little attention. It has expanded Mehan's (1979) ground-breaking observations about boundary markers between different phrases of a lesson. It has shown that a lesson transition is not necessarily a single discrete discourse chunk which is a clearly delineated phase in classroom discourse. In this series of lessons at least, we have seen that transitions can be long, extended and recursive. There was a substantial period of time before pupils eventually got into their groups and began working on the task. These characteristics of transitions can influence the way pupils understand the requirements of group/pair work, how they approach the task and the manner in which they will interact with one another when working on the task. In this respect, our findings have offered some interesting insights into how the teacher orchestrated conditions of entry from teacher-centred teaching into group/pair work. Adding to Alexander's (2008) claim about the need for a teacher to be able

to manage different kinds of interaction, the study has highlighted the importance of leading pupils to the interactional pattern of group/pair work particularly during lesson transitions.

A limitation of the study is that it has not set out to examine any direct relationship between transitions and interthinking during group/pair work. Admittedly, this would have been difficult to achieve since the quality of thinking and learning depends on a number of other factors, such as the nature of the task, the time given for interaction and the skills that pupils have in exploring and developing one another's ideas through talk. Nevertheless, the study is an initial step in understanding how transitions, particularly those between teacher-centred teaching and learner-centred group/pair work, may or may not influence thinking and learning when pupils work together on a task subsequently. It also showed that examining discourse features and pedagogical focus in teacher talk is useful for describing and understanding how different contextual conditions are set up for group/pair work. The present study examined only 12 English language lessons for two upper primary classrooms. While it provided rich qualitative data, further research will examine this phenomenon of lesson transitions with a larger set of classroom data from SCoRE so that useful generalisations may be drawn.

Notes

¹The lesson transcripts are from the Singapore Corpus of Research in Education (Doyle and Hong 2009) or 'SCoRE'. The schools were selected randomly.

² Letters were sent to participating schools and the written consent of both the principals and the teachers were obtained prior to the recording of lessons.

³References to lesson transcripts follow the format of 'High or Low Ability level (HA or LA), English subject (Eng), and lesson number'.

⁴Transcript data are from the research projects: CRP7/05AL "Compiling a multimodal database of education discourse in Singapore Schools" and CRP13/05AL "Linguistic Annotation of the SCORE: A supplementary to the corpus project", funded by the Ministry of Education, Singapore.

⁵A pragmatic particle in Colloquial Singapore English.

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