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SUMMARY

The socio-cultural perspective in classrooms views education as a dialogic process in which students and teachers work within settings that reflect the values and social practices of schools as cultural institutions. Different studies have investigated how people use language to combine their intellectual resources in their pursuits of a common task.

Specifically, research on the use of collaborative peer talk in the classrooms has been conducted for several decades (e.g. Barnes & Todd, 1977, 1995; Dawes, Mercer & Wegerif, 2003; Edwards & Westgate, 1987; Howe & Tolmie, 1999; Kumpulainen & Wray, 2002; Mercer & Littleton, 2007). But what do students actually do when they participate in peer talk? Do they engage in talk that is collaborative and beneficial for learning?

This thesis focuses on primary school students’ talk while they worked on collaborative activities during English reading comprehension lessons. Prior studies have provided some evidence on the success of peer interaction on reading and writing (e.g. Sweigart, 1991; Nystrand, Gamoran & Heck, 1993; Storch, 2001) and in enhancing students’ learning in subjects like Mathematics and Science (e.g. Howe & Tolmie, 2003; Mercer, Dawes, Wegerif & Sams, 2004; Mercer & Sams, 2006). The specific aim of this study was to fill a gap in research on classroom interaction especially in the Singapore primary education context.

Collaborative activities provide students with opportunities to interact and advance their individual thinking and understanding through joint effort. Mercer (1996, 2004) elaborated a typology that offered a useful frame of reference for
making sense of the variety of talk in the classroom context. Three types of talk were identified, namely Cumulative, Disputational and Exploratory Talk. The analysis in this study identified Talk Types present in students’ peer interaction. It also examined the use of negotiation strategies that students engaged in. Types of negotiated interaction were based on earlier works by Pica (1994), Lyster and Ranta (1997) and Van den Branden (2000). To further understand peer interaction, this thesis also used a coding scheme developed by Soter, Wilkinson, Murphy, Rudge, Reninger & Edwards (2008) and the Quality Talk framework (Wilkinson, Soter & Murphy, 2010). Both the coding scheme and the Quality Talk framework were used to identify indicators of ‘quality’ talk in peer interactions.

There were two stages of the study. The purpose of Stage 1 was to find out the extent to which Talk Types, negotiation strategies and Quality Talk features was used in students’ peer interaction without any explicit teacher instruction. Stage 2 included an intervention which was an adaptation of the Thinking Together Programme (Wegerif et al, 2004) in which students were taught to engage in Exploratory Talk. Both Stage 1 and Stage 2 were conducted in a local, government-funded primary school involving Primary 4 students as participants.

The findings for both Stage 1 and Stage 2 confirmed that students engaged in various Talk Types, negotiation strategies and Quality Talk features. The participants in this study were observed to prefer engaging in Cumulative Talk. However, the occurrences of such talk features were not significantly different before or after the intervention. The results also showed that negotiation for meaning was more frequently used than other negotiation strategies. Qualitative analysis indicated that as students worked together, they did not work through their
disputes. Thus, although the students were able to engage in various talk features during the discussion, the interaction was neither rich nor conclusive.

Other aspects of analyses such as ability of students and factors that could have affected the results of the intervention were analysed and it was found that students’ ability did not lead to significant difference in the interaction. However, it was noted in the qualitative analysis that the type of tasks students worked on had an impact on the types of talk features that were used. In addition, it was interesting to note that students were more focused on getting the tasks done rather than engaging in a more productive discussion.

Several implications of the findings are discussed. One implication is the importance of grouping students well for collaborative work. It is recommended that teachers know the learners well and be deliberate in pairing students to facilitate productive discussions. A systemic approach towards re-inventing students’ ideologies towards learning and collaborative work is recommended so that the objectives of programmes such as Thinking Together can have a place within the Singapore Education system. Suggestions for future research are also put forth.