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# **Teacher Talk, Pedagogical Talk and Classroom Activities**

Galyna Kogut & Rita Silver

## **Introduction**

This paper provides an overview of the activities teachers use in teacher-students interactions in Singapore English language classrooms at primary level and how activities, planned and chosen, work with teacher talk during the lesson to shape the interactions and activities reciprocally. Data are drawn from the “Expanding the Teaching Repertoire: Rethinking Group Work and Language Learning” project (CRP 07/06 RES), a professional development project on classroom interaction and effective use of peer work. In this analysis, we examine classroom interactions in 28 lessons of 7 teachers at one school involved in the larger study.

We show how type and quantity of teacher talk is linked to activities. Further, we show how teacher talk not only organizes classroom activities but is also determined by the activities intended, undertaken and unfolding.

## **Literature Review**

This paper analyzes teacher talk as one of the components of classroom interaction. Relations between teacher and students in class are a complex combination of language, social interactions and learning. Communication in the classroom influences students’ perception of and participation in classroom activities (Farrell, 2002). Analyses of classroom talk cannot be limited to words and sentences but must take into account the use of linguistic resources within the surrounding socio-cultural environment and context (e.g. beyond the level of sentence or utterance) (Riggenbach, 1999). Based on these notions, we examine teacher talk as part of classroom talk, in relation to classroom activities and within two types of participation patterns:

whole-class teacher fronted participation (T-led) and teacher talk to groups when students are engaged in pair or group work (Peer work).

The way teachers use language with students is important as the main purpose of a school as a social institution is achieved through communication (Barnes, 1976). The way a teacher plans, carries out and controls classroom talk influences the whole educational process. While doing classroom activities, teachers use talk for a variety of purposes and these purposes shape the talk used. Thus, teacher talk is socializing as well as social, instructional as well as organizational, and purposeful in relation to the socializing and instructional goals of education.

In thinking about classroom talk, we can image the teacher as the conductor or controller of the interaction: the teacher sets the topic, orchestrates the responses, determines who contributes, when, and provides feedback. In general, the teacher tends to talk much more than the students making classroom talk “asymmetrical” with students offering contributions which are bounded before and after by the teacher (Myhill, Jones, & Hopper, 2006).

Cazden (2001) notes that the most common pattern for enacting such asymmetrical interactions is the IRE (or IRF) pattern – initiation, response and evaluation (or feedback). This may be thought of as the “traditional” classroom interaction pattern whereby the teacher not only dominates in terms of quantity of talk and number of turns taken but also makes the lesson going, the lesson on topic, and manages the students. It tends to be a teacher’s “default option” unless the teacher makes a deliberate change and uses some other interactional patterns. Certainly we find this pattern in our classroom data.

In addition to the IRE/IRF as the traditional, default interaction pattern, Cazden (2001) describes “sharing time” as a common classroom interactional pattern. In “sharing time” the teacher calls on students to share information, the teacher then provides feedback/evaluation in a

sequence that is very similar to the IRE/IRF. However, sharing time provides students with more opportunity to talk and explore their ideas. Both IRE/IRF and sharing time usually involve teacher questioning. However, as Myhill, et al. point out, “Questioning in school is a very particular kind of questioning” (2006: 17). Teachers might ask questions more oriented toward factual information or reasoning, more ‘open’ or ‘closed (cf. Barnes, Britton & Torbe, 1986) and the different question types might elicit student responses that are quantitatively and qualitatively different (Allerton, 1993; Edwards & Mercer, 1987). However, control over classroom talk remains with the teacher throughout. Developing interactive classroom talk during teacher-fronted activities (as well as during small group work) relies on the teacher’s ability to ask “quality” questions and to use questioning techniques effectively (Corden, 2000).

The fact that teachers tend to talk more during the whole class teaching is one of the reasons why use of more pair work and group work during a lesson has been studied and advocated (Christie, 2002; Silver, 2007). Emphasizing the importance of the use of group work and pair work at English language lessons, Walsh (2006), however, argues that teachers have to retain their role of managers and controllers of students’ contributions instead of just “handing over” this task to the students.

Prior research has examined classroom discourse in whole class teaching and learning activities such as IRE/IRF, sharing or questioning fairly extensively (eg., Cazden, 2001; Christie, 2002; Corden 2000; Fitch & Sanders, 2005). In this study, the focus is on teacher talk during various types of activities occurring not only in whole class teaching but also in peer work within primary English language lessons in Singapore.

Learning is a social communicative process which happens through interactions of students with a teacher and with peers. Teacher talk, apart from organizing learning activities of

a lesson, is also a tool for setting up relationship and communication system within the classroom and studying classroom talk in a broader sense is studying of that communication system. The role of a teacher is to establish and manage the interactions within that communication system so that students learn through talk. Thus, in addition to transmitting knowledge, teacher talk must also provide cognitive assistance and challenge at an appropriate level for children to progress in their learning (Myhill, et al., 2006). In our study, we examine that type of teacher talk and how that links to classroom activities, we also consider how this might provide cognitive assistance and challenge to students in these lessons.

## **Methodology**

The data in this analysis were collected as part of a larger project on use of peer work in Singapore primary level English language classes. All observations were planned for lessons in which the teacher intended to use group or pair work. Three groups of teachers, one control group and two experimental groups, in three different primary schools, participated in the larger study providing a total of 126 classroom observations in 4 school terms throughout 1 school year. All lessons were audio and video recorded. This paper provides the analysis of a subset of 28 lessons conducted by 7 teachers from the experimental group. These teachers engaged in a series of 10 workshops on the use of peer work for language learning; the workshops were not focused on teacher talk and the analysis presented here is not comparative (i.e. experimental v. control groups). All 7 teachers were at the same school: three of them at P2, one at P4 and three at P5. In total, 28 teacher transcripts were analyzed.

Participation patterns (PPs) and activity types were established based on the Peer Work and Peer Talk Coding Scheme (Silver, & Kogut, (n.d.). (See Appendix 1 for a list of PP and activity types). These were identified through classroom observations and verified with the video

recordings. Coding was done by trained researchers who consistently coded at 80% agreement or higher on a subset of 20% of the data from the larger study. Descriptive statistics were compiled to identify the most common PPs and activity types.

All teacher audio recordings were transcribed by trained transcribers and analyzed by two members of the research team who were trained in coding for teacher talk. Two transcript types were prepared: a ‘teacher transcript’ of the teacher talk to the class and a ‘peer transcript’ of student talk to peers during peer work. In both cases, broad transcription indicated with limited marking of pauses and other discourse features was used. Since the purpose of the larger study was to look at how teachers used peer activities within the lesson, selective transcription was used for the teacher transcripts: only teacher talk at the beginning of the lesson and just before and after peer work was included. If there were multiple peer work activities, teacher talk before and after each peer activity was included. This means that the teacher transcript included only talk during teacher-fronted activities. Peer transcripts included all student speech within one group during peer activities as well as any teacher talk to that one group during the peer activities.

For the analysis of teacher talk, each teacher utterance (in the teacher transcript or the peer transcript) was coded based on a pre-determined coding scheme drawn from Luke, et al (2005). As with the analysis of PPs and activities, coding was done by trained researchers who consistently coded at 80% agreement or higher on a subset of 20% of the data from the larger study. The categories for teacher talk included:

*Curriculum-related* – any talk about the actual content or skills to be taught.

*Organizational* – talk to organize activities and participation patterns, to frame activities, provide general instructions, to set up, to move bodies; to manage time,

space, to tell students what is coming next, to manage transitions, etc.

*Regulatory* – disciplining, behavior management, class and student control by teacher. Generally with a negative connotation (cf. organizational).

*Test-strategy* – explicit reference to testing, exams or test requirements; it might include advice on how to take tests.

*Informal* – digressive whole class talk with teacher, e.g., teacher talks about the weather when it has *no* bearing on the topic taught or calls for time-out and chats with students; it does not include a group of students chatting in the classroom.

*Uncodable talk* – talk that does not fall into any category defined above or if the utterance or the context of the utterance is not clear.

Teacher talk was analyzed and collated with the help of MMAX2 annotation software which allows for electronic annotation (Müller, & Strube, 2003; Müller, n.d.) and tools developed by the CRPP SCoRE team (Hong, 2005; Sim, Hong, & Kazi, 2005).

## **Findings**

### Quantity and Frequency

The first, and most obvious finding, is that quantitatively, there was more teacher talk than student talk. Since the transcripts under study included only the beginning of the lesson and the beginning and the end of peer work—all teacher-fronted activities—it is not surprising that teacher talk dominates. Of course, prior research has shown that teacher talk tends to dominate throughout classroom lessons. It is a truism that when an activity is led by a teacher, he/she is the one doing most of the talk (e.g., Cazden 2001; Myhill, et al., 2006).

Three types of talk were used quite infrequently: regulatory, informal and test-strategy. As explained above, regulatory talk refers to disciplining, managing of students' behavior or



controlling of the class during any classroom activities, whether teacher-led or peer. This type of talk was perhaps the most spontaneous in that it occurred based on student behavior in the class. Informal teacher talk was practically non-existent in any of the lessons. Test-strategy talk was also quite uncommon though it did occur in the few instances when teachers were specifically addressing assessment issues. Uncodable talk was also quite rare. When coding of teacher-talk was questionable, it was discussed by the two coders and generally they were able to resolve the coding by consensus.

As there was relatively little informal, regulatory, test-strategy or uncodable talk, our discussion focuses on use of organizational and curriculum talk. Of these, curriculum was the most frequent type of teacher talk overall, even though the transcripts were taken only from the beginning of the lesson, before and after peer work when we might expect organizational talk to dominate.

Out of 510 analyzed turns of teacher talk, 423 turns were curriculum (83%) and 87 (17%) were organizational (Table 1). In general, turns with curriculum talk were also longer. The average word length of turns with organizational talk was 26.4 with a mode of 5 (1201 words total). For curriculum talk, on the other hand, the average words per turn were 31 with a mode of 7 (14606 words total).

	Curriculum-Related Talk (Turns)	Organizational Talk (Turns)
T Exposition	149	4
T Questioning	85	2
Instructions*	107	21
T correction/ Answer checking	45	8
Classroom Management (both T - fronted and group work)	25	51
Various comments during group work activities (e.g. "Good")	3	0

Reporting	5	1
Other (e.g. "Teamwork. That's very good"; "Okay, anyone else has anything to add on?")	<u>4</u>	<u>0</u>
TOTAL	423	87

\*(including 39 turns with instructions during group work)

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Table 1. Total turns for Curriculum-related and Organizational Talk

Curriculum-related talk refers to any talk about the actual content or skills taught. As in Example 1, curriculum-related talk can include examples, questions, explanations, and directives.

#### Example 1

*Now, listen, what I am going to tell you today is that if you actually write a good character description, it's just like painting pictures with words, okay, that's why the first activity what I want you to do. It's to actually draw out without me giving you much information, and you realize that your picture doesn't coincide with the, the how this Miss Sunshine look like, am I right? Okay? So if I give you, let's say I give you a lot of information, right? And then I gave you so much information, I am sure that someone, in this class, will be able to draw something similar. Do you understand? Because you already can picture the character, okay? Now, let's look at this character. Okay, listen, you look at this character, now I don't want you to make any comments yet, just look at him, observe.*

In our analysis, curriculum-related talk can also include talk about procedures when those procedures are specific to a learning activity in the given lesson as in Example 2. The teacher is giving instructions for peer work. She is telling the students what they need to do in their groups (procedures). In the teacher talk, she addresses procedures that should be followed (i.e. look at all the questions first, before answering). She is also teaching them skills for reading

comprehension (to read for specific information). In all of this, she also emphasizes the content of the questions and how those relate to the reading which the students must comprehend.

#### Example 2

*Now, I want you all to look at the questions okay. There are five questions here. First question, don't do the er ... don't do the work first. First question, what are the warning colours in nature? Second question, how do some beetles warn birds? Okay. Third question, why do birds leave some butterflies alone and not all? Okay how does a flower mantis catch its prey? And lastly what does a flower mantis eat? (PWPT 352)*

Organizational talk is used to organize the lesson, the participation pattern, or the activity. It can be used to give general instructions, frame activities, and transition from one part of the lesson to another. As noted above, it was often brief as in Example 3, sometimes just a few words (Example 4).

#### Example 3

*Okay, can we face here? Can we face it over here? MSG, okay, HQI come and present first. It will be a short presentation because we have not much time, okay? Now pass it to HQI and HQI will tell you about the character. Come in front a bit so that people can see.*

#### Example 4

*Okay, listen.*

### Talk Type and Activity Type

We also found that certain types of activities were more likely to be dominated by teacher talk or by student talk (Figure 1). Again this is not surprising as some activities are either defined as peer activities (e.g. 'information gap') or tend to be used as peer work (e.g. writing, sharing/telling). As a general rule, if a teacher wants students to have more time to talk, use of

peer work is suggested. As long as activities are teacher led, teacher talk will dominate (Cazden, 2001; Pica & Doughty 1985). Though, of course, there is more to effective peer work than simply quantity of talk.

Teacher talk	Both	Student talk
Assessment		
Admin matters		
Classroom management		
Elicitation and discussion		
Instructions		
T correction/answer checking		
Teacher exposition		
Teacher questioning		
	Brainstorming	
	Opinion/debate	
	Reading aloud/recitation	
	Role play/drama	
	Sharing/telling	
		Decision making
		Game
		Hands on/experiment
		Information gap
		Peer editing/correction
		Reading silent
		Reporting
		Writing

Figure 1. Who is talking in classroom activities?

In terms of activity–talk type connections, curriculum-related talk was most likely to occur when the teacher was explaining the material or topic of the lesson in teacher-led activities such as Teacher Exposition, Teacher Questioning, or Elicitation and Discussion. Curriculum-related talk was also common during Teacher Correction/Answer Checking, a teacher-led activity. However, curriculum-related talk also occurred in peer work when the teacher was clarifying instructions for the activity or providing evaluative comments (eg., “Good”). Organizational talk was most likely to occur during Classroom Management or Instruction activities. Figure 2 provides an overview of the most common types of teacher talk in different activities.

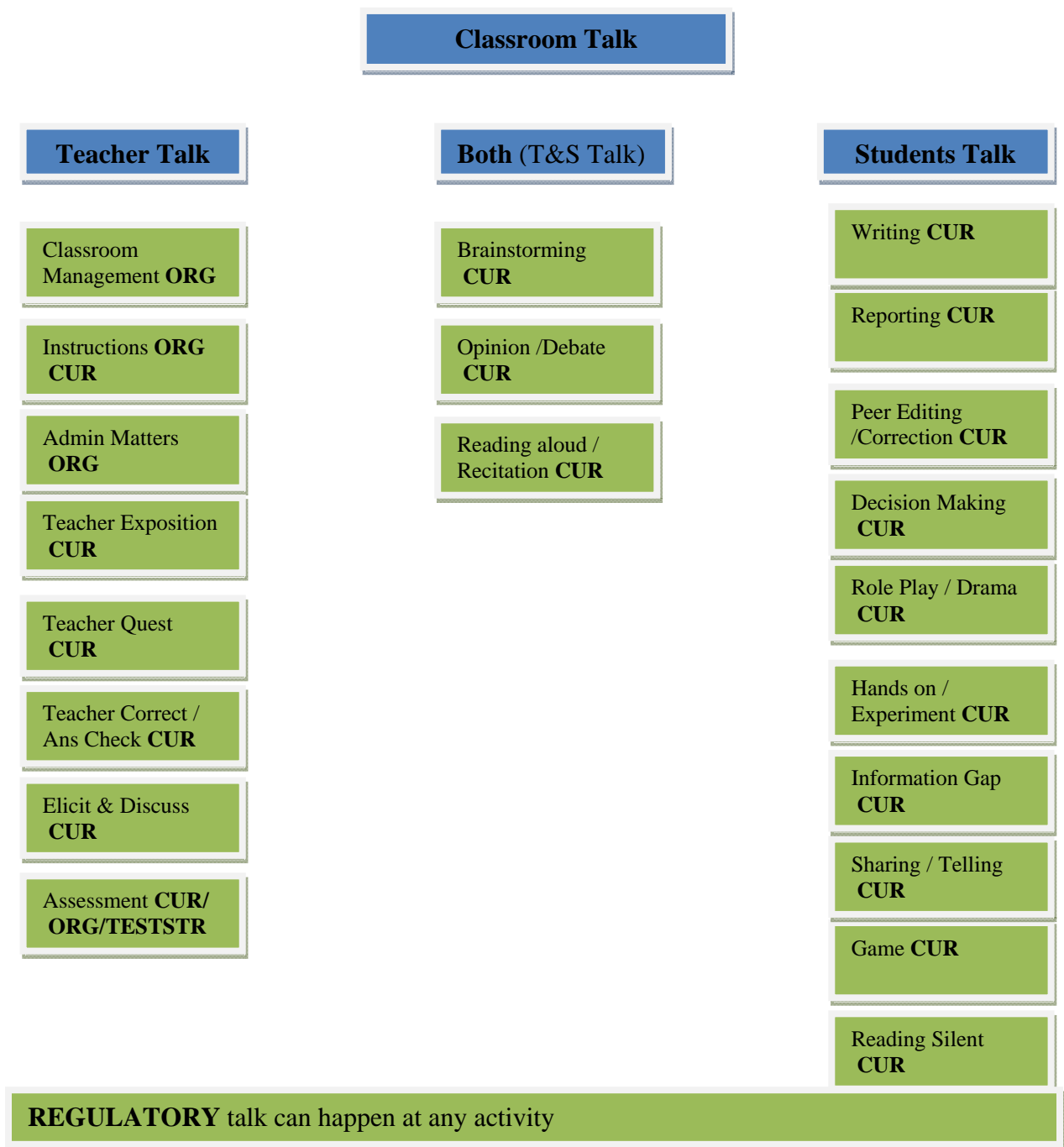


Figure 2. Types of Talk Happening Within EL Classroom Activities

Crucially, Figure 2 shows that curriculum-related talk dominates not only in *quantity*, but also in *distribution*. It occurs throughout the lesson, in a variety of activity types and participation patterns, indicating the strong focus on content-learning throughout each lesson.

Teachers' continuing focus on specific pedagogical points and topics leads to a predominance of curriculum talk. In addition, since teachers tend to plan specific activities and materials for each lesson but not to plan their talk, we suggest that the activities along with teachers' underlying concern for covering the material in a timely manner work reciprocally to encourage the dominance of curriculum-related teacher talk.

While the continuous infusion of curriculum-related talk across activities leads to focused lessons, we also note that tightly structured, teacher-led activities dominate (Figure 3). Out of 345 activities in 28 lessons, Instructions and Classroom Management were most frequent. A similar pattern was reported in Silver (2007), an earlier investigation of Singaporean EL lessons which included peer work. Lessons with peer work were found to be high in Instructions and Classroom management because these activities tended to frame the lesson as a whole as well as framing each peer work activity. This is sensible and we do not consider the frequency of Instructions and Classroom Management to be particularly telling. However, we also note that other frequently used, teacher-led activities tend to be implemented in a traditional and didactic manner with limited opportunity for extended student response: Teacher questioning, Teacher exposition, and Teacher correction/Answer checking all tend to elicit short student responses. Elicitation and discussion, an activity which encourages more open-ended, free-flowing discussion (Kogut & Silver, n.d.) was almost non-existent in these lessons. Sam, et al (2007) noted similar patterns in an analysis of 200 P5, EL lessons at 50 Singapore schools. They suggested that there these patterns have significant implications for current reform attempts towards "a more participatory, dialogic and interactive model of English teaching" (p. 5). We must concur.

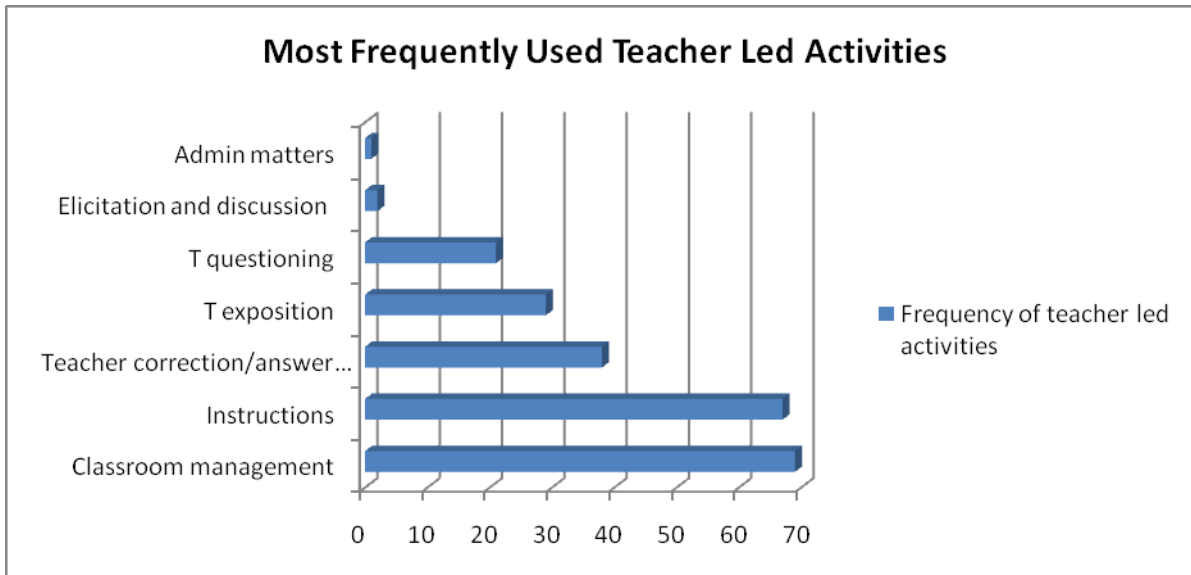


Figure 3. Most Frequently Used Teacher Led Activities

We see the persistent use of curriculum-related teacher talk throughout teacher-led and peer work activities to be a positive aspect of Singaporean pedagogy. In addition, the inclusion of peer work did make lessons more interactive and participatory in classes we observed. However, the highly structured nature of the activities led us to question whether the teacher talk provided cognitive assistance and challenge (cf. Myhill, et al., 2006).

#### Curriculum-related teacher talk, cognitive assistance and challenge

In examining the curriculum-related talk and activity type distribution, we noted that 35% of this talk type occurred during Teacher Exposition activities while 25% occurred during Instructions and 20% occurred during Teacher Questioning. We wondered why the percentage of curriculum-related talk was high during Instructions and whether it was possible for such talk to be not only ‘curriculum-related’, but content rich. We found that curriculum-related talk was frequent during instructions because teachers were very specific and explicit, as in Example 5. This was probably useful to primary grade students. In addition, the teachers frequently linked the instructions and the content explicitly, as in Example 6.

#### Example 5

*Ok, shall we put aside these pictures? We go to something very serious. We are going to read a story. Ok, now everybody will have your own story to read. Don't do anything yet, just write down your name.*

#### Example 6

*Alright, now, we are going to do group work. But before you go to your group, let me explain what you are supposed to do. Ok, you have a story here. Now, remember, whenever we write a composition, we always ask what question?*

This sort of explicit talk during Classroom Management activities was also designated as curriculum-related (Example 7).

#### Example 7

*So the rest did not put up your hands; they are saying we did not read this book last week. They read through this book last week?*

Clearly, this sort of teacher talk can be helpful in terms of knowing what to do and how it links to the content, but it can hardly be considered to provide much in the way of cognitive assistance or challenge. Thus, the high percentage of curriculum-related talk in our analysis is to some extent an artefact of explicitness rather than content richness. We did see examples of more challenging content in teacher talk during Instructions and Classroom Management activities. In Example 8, the teacher is giving instructions for peer work. Notably, she not only tells the students what to do (procedures) but also provides them with questions to consider while they decide what to include as part of the development of their composition. This sort of questioning strategy was ubiquitous in the curriculum-related teacher talk. In Example 9, the teacher is



transitioning the students from peer work to individual work (therefore this was part of a Classroom Management activity). The teacher skilfully transitions the students to the new activity, gives additional details on her directions, and provides greater cognitive challenge through reflection on learning. These sort of examples were quite rare in the data.

#### Example 8

*Okay development. After setting a scene, what is the, what happen? What happen? What happen here? Somebody fell. Right? Somebody fell. And then what happen after that?*

#### Example 9

*Okay, now I want you to quietly think on your own and reflect what have you learnt from this lesson and list one thing you have learnt from this lesson. So you don't say now, think for a while. Don't draw, don't do anything else, you are reflecting.*

We would expect more challenging teacher talk during Teacher Exposition, when the teacher is explaining, defining, exemplifying the lesson content. This was certainly true. As we see in Examples 10 and 11 the teacher combines explanations with detailed examples and questions.

#### Example 10

*Now, listen, what I am going to tell you today is that if you actually write a good character description, it's just like painting pictures with words, okay, that's why the first activity what I want you to do. It's to actually draw out without me giving you much information, and you realize that your picture doesn't coincide with the, the how this Miss Sunshine look like, am I right? Okay? So if I give you, let's say I give you a lot of information, right? And then I gave you so much information, I am sure that someone, in this class, will be able to draw something similar. Do you understand? Because you already can picture the*

*character, okay? Now, let's look at this character. Okay, listen, you look at this character, now I don't want you to make any comments yet, just look at him, observe.*

#### Example 11

*Yes, or on Mars. Okay? You are going to; you are going to, okay? You are going to imagine and come out with a city that you think can survive or hold us all in Mars. You must think of things of, okay, for example, what do people need? People need to eat, right? Okay? People need to have places to relax. People need to have homes to sleep in. So your city must have all these things, okay? You can't only have, wow, okay, home, home, home, home, home, more homes, then there's nothing to do except stay at home.*

However, the majority of teacher talk during Teacher Exposition made use of tightly structured questioning, as we see in Examples 12 and 13. In these cases, the curriculum-related talk and questions asked are so structured and didactic, that we suspect students are more railroaded than assisted, and more coached than challenged. We believe our sample is too limited to investigate this thoroughly, but we suggest this would be of interest.

#### Example 12

*Which word you want to change? What did Ai Mei plan? Which word become the past tense?*

#### Example 13

*Planned, very good. What did you do with the word plan? Now change to be the ... past tense. So straight away write the past tense. Ok? See whether there is any one. This one already done. Ok. So every time you have a question, you will see whether you need to change the verb. Ok? Can you understand what you are supposed to do?*

### Conclusion

In our data, classroom talk tended to be determined by the activities teachers decided to use in order to achieve their pedagogical goals during a lesson. Activities chosen by teachers not only determined the types of talk which occurred during a lesson but were also crucial in determining who would do the talk and how much. It might be helpful for teachers to bear in mind that planning for the use of such activities as Classroom Management, Instructions, Teacher Exposition, Teacher Questioning or Teacher Correction/Answer Checking presupposes that the teacher will be fronting the classroom interaction, consequently teacher talk will dominate. Planning for the use of such activities as Decision Making, Sharing/Telling, Role Play/Drama, Peer Editing/Correction or Reporting presupposes that the activities will be done by students which, even though with some intervention on the part of the teacher, will increase student talk and student participation in the learning process.

Above and beyond the inter-connection of quantity of teacher talk and activity type, we found that these teachers wove curriculum-related talk into all types of teacher-led activities, effectively creating close links between content, Instructions, Classroom Management as well as Teacher Exposition. However, we wonder if teacher talk is so tightly structured and aimed at helping students achieve the expected answer, that there is little room for cognitive challenge. To highlight this point, we refer back to Example 1, repeated here:

*Now, listen, what I am going to tell you today is that if you actually write a good character description, it's just like painting pictures with words, okay, that's why the first activity what I want you to do. It's to actually draw out without me giving you much information, and you realize that your picture doesn't coincide with the, the how this Miss Sunshine look like, am I right? Okay? So if I give you, let's say I give you a lot of information, right? And then I gave you so much information, I am sure that someone, in this class, will be able to*

*draw something similar. Do you understand? Because you already can picture the character, okay? Now, let's look at this character. Okay, listen, you look at this character, now I don't want you to make any comments yet, just look at him, observe.*

As noted above, in this excerpt the teacher addresses procedures the students need to follow, brings in reading comprehension skills, and weaves these together with content-knowledge. However, this example also shows a heavy use of rhetorical questions, usage which was echoed throughout the examples of curriculum-related talk we analyzed. While these questions might be intended to engage students in thinking, they did not allow students to participate more actively. We also note that when teachers posed questions which students were expected to answer, the questions tended to be closed rather than open and, not surprisingly, elicited short oral responses from students.

We concur with Myhill, et al “...the challenge of making whole class teaching an effective context for learning is not an easy one, and that our social and cultural values may influence the practices and activities we attempt to introduce into the classroom” (2006: 4). Socio-cultural educational values in Singapore, as we found from these observations and our discussions with these teachers, emphasize staying on task and on topic – thus the dominance of curriculum-related talk. The same values drive teachers to cover all materials and complete the scheme of work in time with other colleagues – thus the heavy use of closed and rhetorical questions during curriculum-related talk. While we see the purpose in the way teacher talk is implemented, and we note the often skillful way curriculum-related talk is woven through the lesson, we are left to wonder whether students are assisted and challenged by this type of teacher talk.

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## **Appendix 1. Participation Patterns and Activity Types (Silver & Kogut, n.d.)**

Classroom coding included identifying participation patterns and activity types, following the classroom coding scheme (Silver & Kogut, n.d.). In the scheme, participation patterns are based on the scheme developed by National Labsite for Adult ESOL (n.d.). The participation patterns are:

1. Whole class teacher fronted
2. Whole class student fronted
3. Individual public
4. Individual private
5. Large group work
6. Small group work
7. Pair work
8. Free movement
9. Other

Activity types were based on Silver and Skuja-Steele (2005) and further developed in Kogut and Silver (n.d.) for PWPT projects. The list of classroom activities included:

1. Administrative Matters
2. Classroom Management
3. Instructions
4. Teacher Questioning
5. Teacher Exposition
6. Teacher Correction/Answer Checking
7. Elicitation and Discussion



8. Reporting
9. Decision Making
10. Sharing/Telling
11. Role Play/Drama
12. Brainstorming
13. Peer Editing/Correction
14. Hands On/Experiment
15. Reading Aloud/Recitation
16. Reading Silent
17. Writing
18. Assessment
19. Opinion/Debate
20. Game
21. Information Gap
22. Other