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Contributions and silence in academic talk: exploring learner experiences of dialogic interaction

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Abstract

The benefits of dialogic interaction which engenders academic talk are greater understanding of concepts and ultimately higher educational standards. However, recent research suggests students, both home and international, face certain challenges in contributing to dialogic interaction in a higher education context. This article reports on a study which explored learner experiences of dialogic interaction and reasons for contributing or remaining silent. Data were gathered from a one-semester postgraduate module at a UK university through interviews, audio recordings of sessions, stimulated recall sessions and course assignments. Results suggest that sociocultural factors such as confidence in language, confidence in knowledge, previous educational experiences, and expectations of roles influenced the learners' willingness to contribute to the academic talk.

Key words: dialogic interaction; academic talk; exploratory talk; accountable talk; learner perspectives

1. Introduction

This paper stems from research carried out into the learner experiences of dialogic interaction as part of seminar discussions in an MA Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) module (Second Language Acquisition) at a university in the UK. The students were all speakers of English as a second language. It became clear during the module that the students were interacting in the seminar discussions in different ways. There were instances of highly active discussions, and periods of very little contribution. It is not my intention to analyse the interaction in this paper as in-depth analyses of teaching episodes and dialogic interaction have been well documented in the literature in mainstream classrooms (Jones, 2010; Mercer, Dawes & Staarman, 2009; Reznitksaya, 2012) and ESL classrooms (Chappell, 2014; Seedhouse, 2004). Instead, the aim of this paper is to explore why students contribute and why they choose to remain silent.

2. Background

2.1 The role of talk in learning
The theoretical foundation of this study is that talk is situated in particular social, cultural, and educational contexts (Alexander, 2001). In a sociocultural framework, talk, and importantly dialogue, support learning and development (Mercer & Littleton, 2007; Simpson, Mercer & Majors, 2010) as talk "has the power to shape knowledge through participant engagement with a range of processes: hypothesising, exploration, debate and synthesis" (Barnes, 2010, p. 7), all crucial skills in educational discourse. The dialogic interaction between student and teacher are situated in and construct particular social, and cultural practices (Alexander, 2001; Fisher &

Larkin, 2008) which may support or constrain verbal participation. Dialogic interaction is essentially:

- Collective, i.e. teachers and learners address learning tasks together.
- Reciprocal - teachers and learners listen to each other, share ideas, and consider alternative viewpoints
- Supportive - children articulate their ideas freely without fear or embarrassment, and they help each other reach common understandings
- Cumulative - children build on each other's' ideas
- Purposeful - teachers plan and guide learning activities with specific educational goals in mind

(Alexander, 2005, p. 14)

Dialogic interaction is not conversation (Alexander, 2008; Skidmore, 2000) but instead a purposeful dialogue in which students and teacher co-construct meaning. Mercer (2000) uses the term "exploratory talk" to define the purposeful dialogue among students in which they make their reasoning visible. While most studies into dialogic interaction and exploratory talk have been carried out in primary schools in the UK, it is fair to say that the issues are relevant also to a higher education context (Doherty, Kettle, May & Caukill, 2011), where there is considerable emphasis on the learning of concepts.

In a higher education context, the idea of accountable talk or academically productive talk (Michaels, O'Connor & Resnick, 2008) is particularly relevant. Academically productive talk is accountable in the following ways:

- Accountable to the community: all participants listen and build on each other's' contributions
- Accountable to reasoning: participants explain and justify their ideas
- Accountable to knowledge: participants base their talk and contributions on fact and evidence.

It is this third characteristic of talk which is highly applicable to a higher education context where it is expected that learners refer to literature and evidence in the discussions. Academically productive talk engenders "rigorous academic learning" (Michaels et al, 2008, p. 285), a goal of higher education. An aim of seminar discussions is that students refer to evidence and "registrally appropriate" terminology (Hammond & Gibbons, 2005, p. 22).

In this study the students are operating in a second language which makes the need to engage in dialogic interaction more important. Walqui (2006) argues that second language learners need to find their voice in a content learning context and develop their academic identity. Through engaging in interaction they can become legitimate participants of the academic community. Haneda and Wells (2008) argue that particpation in dialogic interaction is especially important as it offers students the opportunity to participate in different academic registers and develop social and communication strategies. In short, second language learners need to learn both the disciplinary knowledge and language. In a postgraduate module, the talk must help students proceed from talking about everyday concepts (general terms) to talking about "academically correct concepts" (Michaels, O'Connor, Hall & Resnick, 2010, p. 184).

2.2 Challenges of dialogic interaction and learner perspectives
Much of the work on dialogic teaching explores talk variables, and the focus remains on the teacher. However, there is a strong need to consider the interaction in terms of the experiences of the learners. Alexander (2013) acknowledges the sociocultural factors which may be at play in managing interaction and organising the classroom. "Teachers and students talk as they do within generic constraints of space, time and power, and in response to the complex microculture of the classroom" (p. 97). He notes that students' attitude towards dialogic interaction may be a challenge as they move from a traditional IRF classroom.

Interest, motivation, and language proficiency are also significant factors in learner contribution. Haneda and Wells (2008) argue that for true dialogue to occur, the students must be interested in the topic, have personal opinions, want to express them, and believe their opinions matter. Although dialogic interaction gives English as an Additional Language learners both comprehensible input and opportunities for engaging in in a variety of academic talk, they highlight the challenges for learners with limited proficiency, such as anxiety and fear of making mistakes. The suggestion is to create effective conditions for participation by encouraging learners to take risks by using linguistic resources available to them (Haneda & Wells, 2008). Basturkmen (2016, p. 155) supports this view by stating that although dialogue plays an important role in "disciplinary acculturation" for English for academic purposes learners, they may find this "daunting" and worry about their ability to participate and contribute.

Studies into learner perspectives on dialogic interaction in seminar discussions reveal that there may be a number of challenges. Aguilar (2016) points out that learners may not participate in a seminar discussion due to language, sociocultural differences (e.g. educational background), individual differences (e.g. anxiety) and the classroom environment. Hennebry, Lo and Macaro (2012) found that international students felt their linguistic resources were inadequate for seminar participation. A study by Remedios, Clarke and Hawthorne (2008) explored why local Australian and international students chose to remain silent in seminars. The data pointed to sociocultural factors such as linguistic, contextual, cultural and personal reasons. One student commented that challenging others was culturally unacceptable. Another student feared getting the information wrong, and others preferred to listen rather than verbally participate. In their study these factors impacted on both native and non-native speakers of English. Nakane (2006) found that Japanese students chose to be silent in seminars as a face-saving strategy when they lacked linguistic resources and feared producing "erroneous speech" (p. 1832). The practices and expectations of the dialogic interaction may not be explicit to learners. Fejes, Johansson and Dahlgren (2005) found that the lack of understanding of structure and expectations of roles added tension to the learners' experience of interaction.

2.3 Tasks
Tasks can influence the type of talk engendered in dialogic interaction. To scaffold academic talk, Michaels et al (2010) outline the need for tasks which have clear academic goals and encourage students to "engage in complex and intensive thinking" (p. 12). Gravett and Peterson (2002, p. 286-287) present four types of task which can structure dialogue and promote learning. These tasks are inductive tasks for initial reflection, input tasks which provide listening or

reading input, implementation tasks for analysis and review, and finally integration tasks which encourage consolidation and address problems. In this study tasks were designed around the main module reading from Saville-Troike (2012). The worksheets were mostly reading guides incorporating the four task types outlined above (Gravett & Peterson, 2002). Students were expected to reflect on their learning experiences, read a section from the main text (Saville-Troike, 2012) with comprehension questions or prompts focusing on the disciplinary knowledge and terminology / scientific concepts to encourage appropriation of terms (Hammond & Gibbons, 2005). Finally students are asked to analyse and relate content with their own learning and teaching experiences. The aim of such tasks is to structure dialogue around the tasks both in the classroom and outside as students work independently (Gravett & Peterson, 2002). Tasks with a questioning stance provide both structure and familiarity of routines (Michaels et al, 2010) in a dialogic classroom.

3. Method

3.1 Approach
The examination of the student experience of dialogic teaching is set in within a combination of sociocultural discourse analysis (SDA) and ethnographic techniques. Sociocultural discourse analysis is a methodology which focuses on the use of language as a tool in mediating thinking and development (Mercer, 2004). It is a methodology which is "expressly based on sociocultural theory and in particular, on the Vygotskian conception of language as both a cultural and psychological tool" (Mercer, 2004, p. 137). The purpose of SDA is to understand how spoken language is used to construct meaning within a particular sociocultural context (Rojas-Drummond, Torreblanca, Pedraza, Velez & Guzman, 2013). This research therefore examines transcripts of classroom discourse within the context of a 12-week module. The study of talk within this specific context is supported and enhanced using ethnographic techniques which provide an understanding of the students' experiences and practices. Ethnographic elements of this study include the following:

- The study of talk in the student's' natural setting of weekly sessions.
- The use of a range of sources to provide rich data, and multi-layered perspectives
- An analytical approach which allowed for the interpretation of dialogic teaching to rest in the emerging data
- The small-scale nature of the study (11 students in one module)
- A commitment to the study of interaction and talk as situated practice and a recognition that the context is crucial to understanding the motivations and practices of the participants.

(Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007).

The analysis of talk derives from audio recordings of classes, and the social, cultural and educational world of the students emerged from interviews, assignments, and stimulated recall sessions. The researcher obtained ethical clearance from the Ethics Committee of the university and all students gave informed consent to participate.

3.2 Participants
Participants were 11 full-time students on a 12-month MA TESOL programme at a university in the UK. They were all speakers of English as a second language. They were all international students, five had English language teaching experience, six had no teaching experience. For most of them, the aim of taking the MA course was to improve their professional expertise and give them further qualifications for their roles in their home country (I Spain, 1 Italy, 1 Vietnam, 1 Uzbekistan, 1 Kurdistan, 6 China). The module taken with the researcher was Second Language Acquisition, one of three modules taken in the first semester. In interviews at the beginning of the module many commented on their lack of confidence at participating in seminars in English. Some of the students explained that they had not had the opportunity to take part in discussions in English in their home country and the seminar was a new experience for them. In these interviews they also commented on the roles they felt most comfortable with in a seminar. Some students expressed confidence in being a speaker, but many said they preferred either to listen and follow.

3.3 Design of the approach
The design of the teaching approach and the organisation of tasks were premised on the models of dialogic interaction and accountable talk. These were explicitly introduced to students at the beginning of the module, and reinforced throughout the semester. The tasks were designed in a way which gave purpose to the discussions and encouraged supportive and cumulative dialogue (Alexander, 2008). Similarly, the tasks also required students to refer to their reading of the relevant literature, as well as their experiences (Michaels et al 2008). The concepts of dialogic interaction, exploratory were introduced at the beginning of the module and the researcher reminded students before each discussion of the expectations, with particular emphasis on the need for building on the ideas of each other. In effect, a 'desirable' account of academic talk was explicitly presented and reinforced throughout the module.

3.4 Reflexivity of the researcher
Throughout the research I was aware of my multiple roles, those of module leader, lecturer, participant and researcher. I felt that this privileged position could be a valuable resource (Holliday, 2007), as well as cause possible tensions and conflicts. I managed the dual role of teacher and researcher by making the focus of the research explicit, and giving participants the option of withdrawing from the research at any time. In fact, two participants chose not to attend the stimulated recall sessions. To account for my dual role of participant and researcher, I asked colleagues in a research group to read my data and comment on it as "critical friends" (Sowa, 2009). The feedback from these colleagues was extremely valuable in opening up interpretations I had not considered.

3.5 Data collection

3.5.1 Interview
In week 1 of the course I interviewed the students and audio recorded the interviews. The aim was to find out their experiences of being involved in discussions in previous learning situations,

and also their attitudes and level of confidence in both challenging others and answering questions.

3.5.2 Audio recorded sessions
A total of seven whole class discussions and small group discussions were audio recorded. On listening to them again, certain excerpts were chosen for transcribing. These were extracts in which the student contributed to the dialogue, or extracts in which despite an open question to the class, or direct nomination from the teacher, the student did not contribute. These extracts were used in the stimulated recall sessions.

3.5.3 Stimulated recall
One month after the end of the module I interviewed all students (apart from 2). I gave them a copy of my notes from the initial interview and gave them the opportunity to respond. I used a micro-analysis brainstorm (Lefstein & Snell, 2013) by playing chosen excerpts from classroom discussions in which participants had contributed and also excerpts in which they remain silent. I asked them to comment on their motivations and feelings at the time. Lefstein and Snell (2013) use a similar method working with teachers, but using video extracts as prompts. Giving participants the chance to listen to their interaction can "jog memories, and give answers of 'I did' instead of 'I might have done'" (Dempsey, 2010, p. 350). These conversations were audio-recorded and transcribed.

3.5.4 Assignments
Students were asked to write about the methodology their lecturers used in the different modules for their English language teaching methods module. Many wrote about SLA and dialogic teaching. I used these assignments for an understanding and learner perspective on the approach, its effectiveness, and their ability to appropriate the scientific concepts covered in the module.

3.6 Analysis
The data were analysed as an iterative process, going back to the audio recordings multiple times, as I read and re-read textual data. I transcribed parts of the audio recordings verbatim (Rapley, 2008). The reason for this is that my purpose was understanding the functions of the talk within dialogic interaction. Word choices and patterns of interaction can evidence the ways that participants are constructing knowledge (Mercer, 2004), and so the analysis of stretches of discourse were crucial to understanding both the process and the outcome of the interaction. As well as the data set of talk, the interviews provided the students' perspective on beliefs about discussions, and the stimulated recall added another layer to interpretations of the talk analysis. The analysis involved looking for examples of, evidence of or references to exploratory talk, accountable talk and the five features of dialogic teaching, as outlined in part 1 of this paper. My initial interpretations and evaluations of the dialogue (or lack of it) were confirmed and further elaborated on by getting the emic perspective of the participants. This was crucial to understanding learner experiences of dialogic teaching and the different motivations for participating. For issues of transparency and trustworthiness, and to mitigate my possible researcher bias, I shared my data with members of the Language and Literacy Research Group who gave feedback and commented on my data.

4. Findings

In this section I describe the main themes which emerged relating to learner experience of dialogic interaction. I demonstrate with excerpts from initial interviews (I), lesson transcripts (L), assignments (A), and the stimulated recall session (SR).

4.1 Linguistic resources
The students were operating in a second language (English). Apart from one student, all had come to the university to study for their postgraduate qualification, having completed their undergraduate in their home country. Due to the expectation of extended verbal interaction, many students referred to anxiety about their English. This was manifested as anxiety of making mistakes, anxiety of not being able to understand the trajectory of the discussion, and anxiety stemming from not understanding their peers. In an initial interview, one student commented on his lack of confidence: *"I don't feel so confident because I have not mastered language, I have to think more"* (I). The student talks about the need to have thinking time to prepare what he wants to say. In the stimulated recall session at the end of the module, the same student explained his lack of contribution was due to lack of appropriate terminology. *There were so many terminologies, I don't understand but nearly through the whole semester but at the end of the semester I suddenly get it so that's why I couldn't participate too much in the discussion about the whole semester but at the end just at the end about one or two weeks I suddenly get it (SR).* Using appropriate register in terms of scientific concepts is a significant element of accountability to knowledge. Appropriation of these terms is an aim of the dialogic interaction (Hammond & Gibbons, 2005) and of seminar discussions in general.

In a stimulated recall session, the student below talked about her anxiety and how it impacted on her ability or willingness to contribute. The researcher had played an excerpt from the lesson in which she tentatively participated. Her contribution was barely audible. When discussing this excerpt, she explained:

R: With my classmates, even now I have the language anxiety,
T: Does it affect the way you contribute?
R: Yes, because I'm, erm afraid of making mistakes or give suggestions to others. (SR)

This comment indicates how fundamental the learners' confidence in their language ability is to their willingness to participate in the interaction. Although writers have discussed the need for ESL learners to be involved in dialogue to develop their language (Basturkmen, 2016; Haneda & Wells, 2008), some learners' lack of confidence impairs their ability to participate at all.

It is important to remember that interaction in Alexander's (2013) terms involves both verbal participation as well as active listening. The feature of reciprocity requires that teacher and learners "listen, be receptive to alternative viewpoints, think about what they hear, give others time to think" (Alexander, 2013, p. 187). Lack of confidence in language ability can create anxiety in performing both skills. In a stimulated recall session with one student, I asked why he chose to remain silent in most of the seminar discussions. He commented "*I couldn't catch up with them each other. When I'm listening I still have to think about what they say and when they*

finish it's over" (SR). For this student the skill of listening took all the attention and the need to follow. He notes that he has to process what he is listening to and is unable to formulate his own thoughts. However, it is clear that the student is carefully following the trajectory of the discussion and is active despite his lack of verbal participation. These comments from students echo the findings of Hennebry et al (2012) that lack of contribution is not necessarily due to cultural differences but may simply be the fact that students lack the linguistic resources to participate and make contributions to the dialogic interaction. This comment also supports Remedios et al's (2008) point that a silent participant is not a passive one.

4.2 Content
Having something to say and contribute was a major theme in the data. In a similar way to language resources, knowledge or experience resources also impacted on willingness to contribute. In one stimulated recall session, the researcher had played an excerpt from class discussion in which the student had contributed several times and interacted with peers and teacher. After playing the excerpt, the researcher asked about her feelings at that time.

T: What makes you so comfortable and confident about sharing?
A: Because I am sure what I am saying. If I'm don't [sic] sure or something I doubt of course I keep silent (SR).

The student refers to being "sure" about the topic. Students tended to participate more when specific material from the course was being discussed, or when sharing their own experiences. Before all discussion, students were expected to prepare a guided reading activity. This is what the student means by "sure". Students contributed less when there was an opportunity to share opinions. Accountable talk, where students are accountable to knowledge (Michaels et al, 2008), can be a powerful scaffold in a discussion. Although students are summarising or reiterating a knowledgeable "source", they are appropriating the content and refining it in their own words. Content can also refer to experiences. Students talked about willingness to contribute when sharing their own experiences of second language learning. The same student as above explained her contribution in this way: *"It's clear in my life, I learn the second language like that, a simple example to support the content that we were in"* (SR). Talking about experiences removes the pressure of giving "wrong" answers (Nakane, 2006).

Giving divergent opinions cannot be judged wrong (Skidmore & Murakami, 2012). A particularly shy student had commented in a stimulated recall session that his lack of contribution in that discussion was due to his lack of understanding of the topic: *"I didn't understand the questions. I prepared but I'm not sure about it" (SR)*. However, when he was asked about interaction in which he contributed, he explains his participation as due to having an opinion to share: *"When someone they talk about their opinion before me they already includes my ideas so but for this one I can this one no one talked about that before" (SR).* Clearly then, as Tan (2003) reminds us, for students to contribute to the dialogue they must have something to say. This may be referring to evidence in the content, sharing experiences, or giving an opinion. The comment above however also reveals a belief that an opinion can be owned and articulated by one person only. This is a shame as the student is missing out on an opportunity to contribute

his own experience and thoughts. The student does not see that there can be many versions of an opinion.

Content knowledge was often the result of having preparation time. As mentioned above, tasks involved students reading specific articles or chapters and completing a reading guide. This guide gave students the opportunity to make notes and use the notes in class. In a stimulated recall session, a student explains their contribution by saying: *I was feeling more confident because we had time to prepare it (SR).* For most students in the group, confidence to contribute was a result of preparation time to collect ideas and thus have something to say.

4.3 Expectations of processes and roles

Expectations of classroom processes and roles stem from factors including previous learning and teaching experiences. Dialogic teaching and accountable talk impose certain expectations on students in that they will be active participants in the dialogue and will engage and ask questions (Mercer, 1995, 2000; Reznitksaya, 2012). Dialogic interaction encourages more flexible relationships and shared responsibilities. The power and authority is no longer vested only in the teacher (Reznitakaya & Gregory, 2013). Nevertheless, some students may not be comfortable with these fluid roles. In the excerpt below, a student is talking in a class discussion with peers and T about how she prefers to discuss with a peer rather than the teacher as she is better able to identify her role.

(*Students and teacher are discussing the topic of peer mediation and teacher mediation in language learning)*
J: And er because if we communicate with our peers and we don't have to consider our teacher and you have a higher social status (Mmm) I think that's true
T: So are you talking, is it because of anxiety then?
J: Not about the anxiety
T: What do you mean then
J: Status
T: About status?
J: Social status about, because, if in, if we communicate with our peers and we don't need to consider whether our teacher will be angry, or whether that, because   we tend to follow our teachers and we don't, I don't like to challenge our teacher. (L)

The student refers to the teacher being "angry" and talks about "status". Clearly she is conscious of status and is not happy to confront the teacher in a discussion. Although it is not necessarily expected that the students do challenge the teacher, she is not comfortable with less prescriptive roles, as she believes the differing statuses of teacher and student do not allow any type of questioning. In other words, she does not want to take on some of the authority in the class.

The students may also be uncomfortable with challenging their peers. According to the rules of exploratory talk (Mercer, 2000), students are expected to challenge their partners. However, this involves learning how to challenge in a way that does not seem confrontational. In the excerpt below, I have replayed a section from the lesson in which the student seems to disagree with a peer but instead of explicitly stating her disagreement, she laughs nervously and then makes her

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contribution. I tell her in the lesson to explicitly state that she disagrees, in my attempt to encourage exploratory teaching, but again the student laughs nervously. When playing back this section we have the conversation below.

T: Mmm, yea well it makes sense. Did you notice I said " say I disagree with, listen to this bit again (plays section)
E: (Laughs)
T: But you still don't say I disagree, do you (E laughs) you don't want to, you laugh
E: I don't want to, yea, I don't want to have the conflict, no its not conflict, but I want to show my respect, to others' experience, so I don't want to say it directly.
T: So you don't want to say I disagree
E: yea, I don't want to say I disagree (SR).

The student talks of the avoidance of "conflict" because she believes she should "respect" her peers' "experience". Her experience is that challenging a peer may suggest a lack of respect for their credentials, and may create a challenge to identity. Using the phrase "I disagree" is too bald, and too "direct". In the lesson she uses laughter as a mitigating strategy, and again in the conversation above she uses laughter to deflect from a sense of conflict or challenge, as I am challenging her decision not to use the phrase "I disagree". So, contrary to Mercer's (2000) suggestion that learners explicitly challenge each other, and be explicitly accountable, there is room for shame, embarrassment, and a desire not to lose or threaten face. Skidmore and Murakami (2012) note that contrasting opinions need to be carefully managed by the tutor.

Fejes et al (2005) argue that often seminar discussions are challenging because the rules of behaviour and practice may not be explicit. This is true also for the roles that students are expected to take on. In explaining reasons for contribution, some students referred to their beliefs about their roles. One student who had considerable teaching experience said "*I contribute when nobody else wants to and I had some ideas and I played the teacher role so know it from both sides" (SR)*. This comment came after listening to an awkward section of a seminar discussion where no one had responded to the tutor's question, so after some time this student responded. Her experience as a teacher gave her empathy into the tutor's position at that time. Another student who often contributed, and often responded when a nominated students remained silent said she felt her role was to be active in order to support the tutor. *Truly speaking in the class I'm always active person, active student and from my high school I have the habit that in a class to support my teacher (SR).* She describes herself as "active" demonstrating this through many lively contributions.

Participating in seminar discussion involves an affective dimension and Alexander (2013) highlights the importance of establishing an appropriate ethos for dialogic interaction to take place. In the data it became clear that the ethos was a powerful enabler and disabler for contributing. Firstly, many students commented on the "atmosphere" of the class and how their perceptions of the atmosphere at that moment supported their willingness to contribute. On being asked why a student had contributed at a specific point in the interaction she responded with *"Because the atmosphere is relaxed and everyone is expressing their idea, so if I think I have the opinion I should express" (SR).* The evidence from this comment suggests that the student felt

encouraged to participate for two reasons, one was she had something to say (an opinion) and that the atmosphere was relaxed. Another student explained her reason for contributing was *"the atmosphere that was created was more, it was like we're actually discussing about something maybe you forget for a second that you're having a class" (SR)*. This comments highlights the importance again of having a purposeful discussion with a clear goal and topic.

4.4 Tasks
From the transcripts of the dialogic interaction the role of task and its influence on participation become evident. Many of the discussions were centred around a particular task, mostly reading guides with questions or prompts. In the excerpt below it is possible to see how the talk takes place around the task (Hammond and Gibbons, 2005). Students are in groups discussing the prompts on a pre-session reading task. The task required students to answer comprehension questions and then relate the concepts to their own experience of learning a second language.

S: But, what that role in the noticing process? So the learner's role, what exactly is the role?
K: I think we we need to do something, you need to pay attention, we need to practice it's not like only passive, not like the teacher say something and we acquire it automatically we need to pay attention, and do something by ourselves, like when you go, that is why you go home and you do your studies and you use your learning techniques to
J: Yea I agree
K: OF course it depends of level of the learner because sometimes you don't know how to, you don't know, some students don't know how to study as well and help themselves. At our stage of learning I think we have the..
T: Yea I think I have a very good example of paying attention or noticing (L)

It is possible to see how the task guides students and allows a structure. In the above excerpt, student S orients the group the the prompts. The prompts ask for experiences based on the reading. Students use appropriate terminology in their interaction, such as 'attention', 'noticing' and 'automatically', all key concepts of the learning theory being discussed. Students are more willing to contribute around a specific task due to the affordances of content, terminology and routines. Gravett and Peterson (2002) argue that tasks which refer to reading or listening texts with questions structured the interaction. The task above requires students to refer to reading and their own experiences, thus providing content for the students and giving them something to say.

The important role of the task in contributing is demonstrated in the excerpts below from assignments. A student has analysed the approach that I took in my SLA module, and comments on their contributions. *Since I started to be involved in scaffolded types of classroom interaction, I feel more comfortable and free to talk and express my ideas, I do not feel judged but encouraged to talk instead. (A)*. The student has referred to "scaffolded" classroom activities meaning here activities which have been clearly guided, such as pre-session reading. These activities required students to prepare their evidence, giving the opportunity and confidence for talk which is accountable to knowledge. Another student commented on the central role of the task in guiding the interaction. The task she refers to was a jigsaw reading activity where two students had different sections of an article to read and then present to each other. *The post task means that each pairs have to present the topic to others. I experienced this kind of activity in an*

SLA module which was so useful for me, because the main goal to the English language to communicate and interact with others confidently. Through this activity the students centred the class, so I have a greater opportunity to express myself and use the target language in the class (A). Data suggests then that the task itself played a significant role in encouraging students to participate in the interaction. Tasks provide a structure to a discussion, which may ease some of the tensions of unclear procedures and practices (Fejes et al, 2005). Tasks also provide a shared understanding of the topic, a "mutual space" (Cairns, 2009, p. 21) to discuss ideas.

5. Discussion

Dialogic interaction which engenders productively academic talk requires learner contributions and is contingent upon teacher scaffolding and learner participation. Classroom talk is situated and as such embodies sociocultural aspects, in particular learner dimensions of self-confidence, relationships, classroom dynamics, and expectations of roles, all of which are constructed in the talk and by the talk. Fisher and Larkin (2008) highlight the importance of exploring the learner voice as it is easy to come to conclusions about what dialogic interaction is, what it should look like, and the roles of the learners. We cannot assume all participants share the same expectations and understandings of the 'rules of the game' nor can we assume that learners can accept rules which may be contrary to their own cultural expectations (Remedios et al, 2008). Similarly, we cannot explain all learner silence as due to cultural differences. Often the reason is that they lack the content (Tan, 2003) or the linguistic resources (Basturkmen, 2016; Hennebry et al, 2012).

Dialogic interaction should be collective, reciprocal, supportive, cumulative and purposeful (Alexander, 2013). In this study the students were postgraduate students operating in a second language. Thus the need to engage in dialogic interaction is crucial to not only support deeper learning of concepts, but also to support learning of linguistic skills such as academic register and communicative skills (Haneda & Wells, 2008). From the data it is clear that sociocultural factors impacted on students' willingness to contribute thus the features of dialogic interaction were often not fulfilled. In this study students and tutor address the tasks together, and in fact it is the task that is often the central feature of the interaction (Hammond & Gibbons, 2005). The students listened to each other, but in a second language it was clear that listening and following the dialogue can present challenges. Although the tutor aimed to keep the interaction supportive, some students were not willing to contribute due to fear of making mistakes in content and language. The classroom dynamics and an understanding and familiarity with participant structures, procedures and roles also impacted on willingness to contribute. Some learners felt that the atmosphere was conducive to discussion, others felt that it is inappropriate to challenge a peer. Learners will come to the interaction with certain expectations about their roles and the roles of others. Lefstein (2010) and Fisher and Larkin (2008) argue that these expectations are created by a learner's already established perceptions rather than by the on-going dialogue, or efforts by the teacher to guide the interaction. These expectations are also based on their own cultural and educational background (Nakane, 2006; Remedios et al, 2008). The interaction was more cumulative when students had content to contribute and the confidence to share this content and tasks played an important role in keeping the interaction purposeful.

There are a number of ways tutors can increase confidence in learners to participate more fully in the dialogic interaction. One way of encouraging more participation in dialogic interaction is to ensure that the learners have content knowledge and evidence on which to draw. This can be achieved through appropriate tasks such as guided reading (Gravett, 2004; Gravett & Peterson, 2002). Confidence in topic and having something to say may mitigate some of the tensions outlined by Tan (2003). Preparation of content would also afford appropriate terminology and academic discourse (Hammond & Gibbons, 2005; Haneda & Wells, 2008). Accountability to knowledge requires both appropriate content and register. Giving preparation time can also give confidence to second language learners in terms of linguistic resources (Basturkmen, 2016). Aguilar (2016) suggests that tutors give both pre-discussion reviews and post-discussion summaries to support content knowledge.

Linguistic resources refer to both the language of the topic as well as language for participation in interaction, such as communication skills outlined by Haneda and Wells (2008). Tutors can explicitly teach communication skills, such as active listening and asking appropriate questions. Aguilar (2016) highlights the needs of second language learners in a higher education context to be able to manage the discourse through formulaic expressions to take turns, hold the floor and other interactional competencies. One way of doing this is to make explicit the type of talk necessary for fulfilling these functions. Learners also need to be exposed to different types of dialogic interaction, such as small-group activities and whole-class activities. In their practical handbook on accountable talk Michaels et al (2010) propose teaching and using talk frames to encourage academic register. These are explicit language prompts learners can use to introduce a point, ask a question, or challenge a point.

In terms of supporting learners' understanding of the expectations and roles of dialogic interaction it is necessary to be explicit about the importance of challenging and questioning (Skidmore & Murakami, 2012). Aguilar (2016) refers to differences of opinion rather than conflict or challenge. Due to the diversity of educational and cultural backgrounds (Nakane, 2006; Remedios et al, 2008) it is important to openly discuss expectations of learners in an academic setting and highlight the benefits of engaging in dialogue. Learners must know that they can have divergent opinions and tutors must carefully manage these interactions (Skidmore & Murakami, 2012).

Alexander (2013) argues that the fundamental condition for dialogic interaction is the atmosphere and climate of the classroom environment. He sets out the responsibility for teachers to ensure that the atmosphere is created to support learner participation.

> If we want to make the transformation of classroom talk achievable for other than the most talented teachers, we might concentrate first on getting the ethos and dynamics right, that is, making the talk collective, reciprocal and supportive. *In those classrooms where these conditions and qualities are established*, we can then attend more closely to the other two principles (emphasis added, p. 119).

6. Conclusion

My purpose in this article has been to explore the conditions for academic talk, and more specifically, what encourages learners to contribute, and the reasons they remain silent. Much of the literature on dialogic interaction focuses on the teacher and the teaching. Despite work which has explored learner contributions in dialogic interaction (Jahonene & Sarja, 2000, Simpson, 2015), and learner choices in verbal participation (Remeidos et al, 2008) there is a need to further explore the factors that enable or discourage learners from contributing to the academic talk. Tutors in higher education need to be mindful of the challenges that learners experience, both native speakers of English and ESL learners. As studies have shown, tutors cannot assume reasons for silence (Hennebry et al, 2012) as there are a host of sociocultural factors which influence learner participation. "Given the talkative environment that university classrooms are increasingly becoming, it is crucial that teachers understand the demands inherent in classroom talk" (Doherty et al, 2011, p. 37). Learners are more likely to engage in academic talk when they are prepared both linguistically and cognitively. Another consideration in a context as described in this article, with learners whose first language is not English, is to make explicit the importance of a cooperative atmosphere and openly discuss attitudes to language mistakes (Haneda and Wells, 2008). It is crucial to establish an appropriate "emotional climate for learning" (Skidmore & Murakami, 2012, p. 208). We can also be explicit about the cognitive and linguistic benefits of academic talk in a higher education context. I suggest that there be elements of linguistic and interactional awareness in the process of academic talk, such as sharing rules of practice, and agreeing on norms and expectations. Such training has been highly effective in primary school contexts (Mercer 1995, 2000; Mercer & Littleton, 2007) and there is no reason to doubt its application to a higher education context.

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