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Dialogic interaction

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DIALOGIC INTERACTION

Helen Basturkmen

Introduction

This chapter focuses on academic events that involve spoken interaction between students and their lecturers, teachers or tutors, and between students. In particular, it reviews research that has led to descriptions of discourse in dyadic and multi-party interaction, such as in seminars, tutorials, question–answer exchanges in classes and in one-on-one encounters, including office hours. Such descriptions play an important role in helping English for academic purposes (EAP) practitioners understand the nature of the linguistic demands that students face in dialogic speaking in academic contexts, and why such speaking may be an area of concern for learners using English as an additional or second language in their academic studies.

Dialogic interaction plays a very important role in teaching and learning. At tertiary level, some speaking events, such as seminars, classroom discussions and office hours, may consist almost entirely of dialogic (two or multi-party) interaction. Some largely monologic events, such as classroom teaching and lectures, may include interludes of dialogic interaction; for example, in the form of question and answer exchanges that arise incidentally during teaching or at the end of lessons and lectures. Spoken events based on or involving dialogic interaction also play a very important role in professional academic communication. See, for example, studies of discussions following conference presentations (Wulff, Swales and Keller 2009) and expert-to-expert, or peer, seminars (Aguilar 2004). However, the focus of the present chapter is limited to dialogic interaction in student learning contexts, primarily in higher education.

This chapter examines the literature on dialogic interaction in academic events in disciplinary study, mainly in higher educational contexts. Most studies reported in the EAP literature have concerned dialogic interaction in higher education rather than school settings, although there are some exceptions. See, for example, the school-based studies of Bunch (2006) and Bruna, Vann and Escudero (2007). The EAP-oriented research has led to the development of a body of knowledge about types of academic speaking events involved in academic study and their concomitant features of interaction and discourse. This knowledge is drawn on by EAP teachers, and course and materials developers to devise pedagogical descriptions of the discourse and identify the linguistic knowledge and skills, or competencies, that EAP or English as a second language (ESL) students need in order to participate in speaking events.

Learners of academic English exist on a continuum which includes non-native speakers, speakers of non-standard varieties, and native speakers with limited exposure to academic
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English (Anstrom et al. 2010). Most EAP research has examined discourse in spoken academic events in order to develop understanding of the linguistic competency needs of non-native speaker students, although recently some research has been set out to develop understanding of the linguistic competency needs of international teaching assistants (Reinhardt 2010). The main, but not exclusive, focus of the present chapter is on dialogic interaction in relation to the English learning needs of non-native speaking students.

Studies of dialogic interaction in ESL or EAP classrooms have not been included in this review of the literature as the field of EAP is primarily concerned with helping language learners with their target situations; that is, study in disciplinary areas. It is also because the kinds of teaching and learning activities in ESL or EAP classrooms may be distinctive, and the forms of interaction they involve dissimilar to those in disciplinary study settings.

The remainder of this chapter is organised into seven sections. The second section describes characteristics of the topic in EAP. The third introduces educational perspectives on the role of dialogic interaction. The fourth section identifies critical issues for EAP practice. The fifth section examines current contributions (major strands of research interest) and is followed by a section that describes the main research methods involved. The sixth section draws on ideas presented in earlier sections to make a number of suggestions for EAP pedagogy and this is followed by a section that identifies gaps in the literature and makes suggestions for the future research agenda.

Characteristics

Most attention to academic speaking in the EAP literature to date has been on lectures (Feak 2013; Swales 2001), possibly due to the role of the lecture as the predominant method of university teaching around the world (Nesi 2012). In EAP, there has been considerable research to describe the discourse features of lectures or to understand the nature of students’ difficulties in understanding lecture content. The aims of lectures compared to seminar- or discussion-based classes are generally distinct, and this impacts on the nature of the instructional discourse involved. A major aim of lectures is to convey a body of information and ideas, whereas a major aim of seminar or discussion type classes is to engage students in considering and discussing information and ideas as a means of developing in-depth understanding.

EAP-oriented research into discourse in seminars and other forms of dialogic interaction is fairly limited. However, dialogic interaction in academic settings is an important topic for EAP. In disciplinary study, question–answer type interaction enables lecturers and teachers to assess their students’ understanding of instructional content. It can enable students to consolidate their understanding, for example, by asking clarification type questions, or contribute to discussion, for example, by suggesting ideas or questioning ideas presented by others. Dialogic interaction plays an important role in disciplinary acculturation (Hyland 2013) and as a means by which students form relationships with their lecturers, teachers and peers. EAP practitioners are often keenly aware that some of their learners have difficulties in or concerns about participating in academic discussions and question–answer exchanges. As a result, many EAP courses include some instruction on discussion or seminar skills.

Conventionally, EAP teaching has used a study skills type approach to help learners develop speaking skills. EAP speaking skills are typically broken down into two categories, presentation skills and participation skills (Fielder 2011). The latter are dialogic interaction skills, and EAP instruction in these skills often includes a focus on functions, such as ‘asking questions’, ‘asking for clarification’, ‘agreeing’ or ‘disagreeing’, ‘initiating comments
or responding to comments’ (Jordan 1997), ‘criticising/objecting’ and ‘presenting reasons’ (Fielder 2011). Other areas targeted in instruction may include turn-taking and information about participant roles and their functions (for example, the role of discussion leader in encouraging people to participate or keeping the discussion on track).

The language description provided in instruction typically takes the form of useful expressions, such as, *I'm not sure what you meant* or *Could you please explain what you mean* for the function of asking for clarification, *I really don’t agree with you* or *I'm not sure that I agree with you* for the function of disagreeing, or *Let's find out what some others have to say on this* or *What do others think about that* for the role of the discussion leader in encouraging people to participate. Methodologies used in teaching often include discussion practice activities followed by teacher or peer feedback or student self-reflection on performance.

**Educational perspectives**

Most EAP practitioner interest in dialogic speaking has concerned learning to speak (development of EAP learners’ discussion skills) rather than speaking to learn (the role of dialogic interaction in learning). Be that as it may, the role of dialogic interaction in learning lies at the heart of endeavours in EAP teaching. It is because speaking is generally understood to be integral to disciplinary learning and socialisation that EAP instruction focuses on developing learners’ discussion skills.

In education, the role of learners is no longer seen as being mainly one in which students simply receive information transmitted to them by their lecturers or textbooks. Generally, the transmission view of teaching in which students are seen as receivers of knowledge from teachers and lecturers has come to be replaced with a view in which students are seen as needing to be actively engaged in the learning process. It is now generally recognised that learners need to be involved in processing, creating and shaping knowledge. This changing view has implications for instructional discourse. If students are be actively engaged in learning, they need opportunities for participating in and contributing to classroom discourse. Dialogic interaction between teachers and students is, thus, an important means by which students can become actively engaged in learning events. The ability to communicate in and follow academic discussion and spoken interchanges is seen as a critical area for academic success. As such, the development of this ability is seen as critical for academic success.

Haneda and Wells (2013) describe a sociocultural view of learning as one that emphasises students being actively engaged and participating in the co-construction of knowledge through dialogue with their teacher and peers. They describe the functions of such participation in terms of enabling students to clarify, modify and extend their understanding of course content, and providing opportunities for students to formulate their thinking through speaking. This view of the role of dialogic interaction reflects a social constructivist theory of cognitive development in which learning is achieved first through social interaction, and second through internalisation by the individual.

**Critical issues**

Teaching EAP seminars or discussion skills is not an entirely unproblematic endeavour. Two important issues for EAP practice concern the relative importance (or not) of dialogic speaking skills for learners, and the disparate nature of events (and concomitant variation in interaction and discourse) in higher education that go under umbrella terms, such as ‘seminar’ or ‘discussion’ class.
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How important are dialogic speaking needs?

Findings about the importance of dialogic interaction and discussion skills from needs analyses have been mixed. In some contexts, dialogic speaking or discussion skills may be relatively unimportant. Speaking can be seen as the least important linguistic skill for undergraduate study (Skyrme 2010) especially in the first years of study (level one and level two). At these levels, listening and reading skills (lecture and textbook comprehension) are often seen as being more important. EAP instruction has tended to focus more on developing learners’ listening and reading comprehension skills or on developing their writing skills since the students are usually assessed by their subject lecturers by means of their writing.

However, this may vary in different contexts. A survey of first and second year engineering students in an English-medium university in the Middle East (Basturkmen 1998) found that the students ranked speaking as the second most important skill for academic study (following listening). In this engineering studies context, speaking was perceived by students to be more important than writing. Needs analyses conducted in the Hong Kong context (Evans and Green 2007; Hyland 1997) suggested that across disciplinary areas, undergraduate students ranked academic speaking just behind academic writing in terms of perceived difficulty. However, students reported that they were ‘more comfortable’ with planned speaking, such as presenting information, compared to unplanned forms of speaking, such as participating in discussions (Evans and Green 2007: 13). Based on findings from a needs analysis, Fielder (2011) suggested oral skills (presentation and participation skills) as the second main area (following aural skills) for syllabus development in a pre-sessional EAP course setting in a German university context. Needs analyses conducted in the US (Ferris 1998; Ferris and Tagg 1996) showed a widespread expectation that students in higher education would interact orally with their teachers and peers, and participate orally in classroom events. The views of many hundreds of ESL students (mostly undergraduates) in different higher education settings in the US showed that students’ views varied in the different contexts. The study found that in general, students were more concerned about participating in whole-class than small-group discussions.

There are often strong expectations that higher level and graduate students will interact orally in classroom contexts (Morita 2000). Investigation of East Asian graduate students’ listening and speaking skills for non-science and non-engineering university studies in the US (Kim 2006) indicated that for this group three out of the four most important skills that would enable them to meet requirements in their content courses were concerned with dialogic speaking. (These were asking questions during class, small-group and whole-class discussions.) Leading class discussions and participating in whole-class discussions were areas of particular concern, whereas asking questions before or after class or in office-hour meetings were of limited concern. The literature suggests that participation in seminars and discussions often remains a persistent problem for non-native speaker postgraduate students who often experience specific difficulties in articulating and expressing ideas, formulating a contribution quickly, entering the discussion and being uncertain about the value of a contribution (Jordan 1997).

Although speaking in seminars and discussions may in some settings be seen as the least required skill, it may nevertheless be the skill area that ESL students find most daunting (Furneaux et al. 1991; Skyrme 2010). As language learners may feel anxious about their ability to participate orally in their disciplinary classes, EAP instruction may prioritise the development of discussion skills on the basis of this subjective need, not only because of their objective importance for academic study.
Do event types vary?

A second critical issue concerns the variation in dialogic event types and speaking. Swales has noted (2001: 34–5) that academic speaking is ‘much more variable in structure, function, and style than academic writing’. This variability has implications for identifying students’ dialogic speaking needs. One factor in such variability is the range of event types that exist – seminars, tutorials, classroom teaching, discussion groups and so forth. Often a range of disparate events are subsumed under umbrella terms, such as discussion classes. The kinds of seminars and discussions held in different institutions and disciplines vary considerably. There are also differences in the objectives or functions of different event types. For example, tutorials often have different objectives than seminars, the proportion of time spent in free discussion can vary (tutorials or seminars in some settings may involve a high proportion of teaching with only occasional opportunities for student questions) and the nature of discussion involved can vary (a group discussion may centre on a problem-solving task in which the aim is to reach a convergence of opinion or on issues in which a divergence of opinions would be expected) (Jordan 1997).

One study in a UK university context (Furneaux et al. 1991) found four types of seminar events: student-group work (such as a problem-solving activity), the lesson (such as reviewing prepared answers to a case study), discussion (such as talking about a set reading) and seminars involving presentations. A study of discussion-based classes on an MBA programme in a UK setting (Basturkmen 1996) found three event types (discussion following a presentation by a guest speaker, discussion following a presentation by a class member and tutorials). The variety of event types is a critical issue for EAP practice in that learner difficulties can be related to the nature of the event. For example, learners may feel less anxious about their performance in student group-work type seminars compared to presentations or discussion of issues type seminars.

Current contributions

The research in this area has very largely been in the form of observational studies. Three major strands of research interest are evident. The first strand is description of target language use, which is generally seen as the central focus of research in EAP (Flowerdew and Peacock 2001). Research in this strand has identified types of dialogic events, and described features of language use or discourse. The second strand is investigation into the role of dialogic interaction in second language learners’ socialization into academic communities, and the third strand is study of the ways interaction may be structured to support disciplinary learning.

Event types and discourse features

Studies have shown that at lower levels of higher education, especially in the first and second year of undergraduate study, lectures tend to be the main spoken event type. However, at higher levels of study, especially at graduate level, seminars become a more common major, if not the major, spoken instructional genre (Basturkmen 2001; Hyland 2013; Weissberg 1993). A number of types of seminar event have been identified. These include teacher or lecturer-led discussions, presentations by a guest speaker followed by class discussion (Basturkmen 1996), and presentation by a student followed by discussion, or student-mentor seminar (Basturkmen 1999; Weissberg 1993; Northcott 2001). Additional events include student
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discussion pairs or groups (Basturkmen 2003; Tin 2003) and one-on-one type interactions, such as student–tutor meetings or office hours (Crandall 1999; Farr 2003; Limberg 2007; Reinhardt 2010; Skyrme 2010) and thesis supervision meetings (Tseng 2014).

Researchers have set out to identify the distinctive features of seminar discourse. For example, corpus-based comparison of lecture and seminar discourse indicated that the pronouns I and you were more frequent in seminar discourse whereas the pronoun we was more frequent in lecture discourse, a finding reflecting differences in the ways speakers typically engage with one another in these distinctive event types (Hyland 2013). Some research has provided descriptive accounts of interaction in a particular event type. For example, Limberg (2007) shows a five-phase structure (summon-answer, opening, outlining academic business, negotiating academic business and closing) in office hour meetings.

Other research has compared interaction patterns or the kinds of questions driving interaction in different event types. For example, study of discussion-based classes on an MBA programme (Basturkmen 1996) found that spoken exchanges following presentations typically took the form of question–answer routines (simple or extended), whereas exchanges in tutor-led discussions were often longer and more complex in nature. The study found that students tended to ask more seeking information or clarification type questions to guest presenters and tutors, and more questions that challenged ideas or suggested alternative points of view to other students (see Excerpt 1). Both kinds of questions were, however, evident in both kinds of speaker configuration. A student question that appears to challenge or suggest an alternative point of view is shown in Excerpt 1, which is taken from a small-group case study discussion.

In this part of the discussion, the MBA students are discussing why the company (‘they’) did not opt to develop an innovative system that was available to them. Student 2 challenges the point of view expressed by Student 1 concerning the designer of the system (‘him’).

Excerpt 1
Student 1: Yeah they let him go and they should have told him your idea is very good and so you have to develop it for the company.
Student 2: No I think the fact is that they actually didn’t let him go, they didn’t realise the potential of this invention … they didn’t actually recognise this system as a product.

Some researchers have considered how speakers perform a particular speech function. Félix-Brasdefer and Bardovi-Harlig (2010), for example, examined refusal strategies used by native speaker students to reject the advice of their advisor during academic advising sessions. Crandall (1999) reports an investigation into requests made by native and non-native speaker students to their lecturers during office-hour conversations. Both studies used their findings to inform the development of pragmatics-focused materials for use in EAP teaching.

Socialization

Writers have recognised that participation in interactive academic speaking events depends not only on speaking skills but also on a number of social and identity factors. Feak (2013: 38) describes a number of potential challenges and threats to identity that non-native speaker students may experience in interacting with US speakers in class settings. Such class settings can be ‘particularly stressful for students from non-Anglophone countries who see themselves as less capable but nevertheless eager to contribute to classroom and small-group discussion’. A dominant group of domestic students may set a ‘tone’ that seems to exclude
others, and the international students become reluctant to participate due to feelings of marginalisation and ‘uncertain cultural identity’.

Empirical studies to examine the role of dialogic interaction in socializing second-language students into their academic communities have been conducted. Morita (2000, 2004), for example, has investigated the processes by which the newcomers (English L2 students) became socialised into an academic group culture through their participation in language-mediated activities. In a longitudinal study, Morita (2004) observed whole-class and small-group discussions in graduate seminars to explore the participations of a number of the L2 students, and elicited students’ self-reports to gain insights into how the L2 students constructed their identities in the class interaction and the reasons for any reticence in speaking during discussions. The study found the L2 students’ views of their competency as class members and the reasons for being silent during discussions varied in relation to the local classroom contexts. Of particular relevance to EAP were the findings that indicated a number of interrelated issues at play; not only language issues but also issues concerning culture, identity, the curriculum and pedagogy of the local classroom contexts were found to lie behind the students’ reluctance to engage in dialogic interaction.

Disciplinary learning

Participation in dialogic speaking in class settings is understood to be an important means by which students can develop their understanding of and ability to articulate disciplinary matter. This can occur, for example, when students ask lecturers or peers questions to check their understanding of the content in prior discourse (lectures, presentations or contributions to discussion). The responses to such questions can be important for the learning of the student who asked the question, and also for the learning of other students listening to the question–answer exchange. Observational research shows also that teachers’ responses to students’ contributions can integrate feedback on both language and content. Gibbons (2003: 247) observed teaching in a school science classroom to find multiple occasions in which the teachers, through interactions with ESL students, were able to provide scaffolding to ‘mediate between the students’ current linguistic levels in English and their common sense understandings of science … and the educational discourse and specialist understanding of the subject’. One such form of scaffolding was the teacher recasting (reformulating) a student’s contribution to discussion and extending the meaning in the student’s contribution.

A study of language-related episodes in teacher-fronted classroom teaching in first year tertiary level accounting classes in the New Zealand context (Basturkmen and Shackleford 2015) found multiple examples of language-focused interaction. (In this setting, the classes were a mix of English L1 and non-English L1 students.) Excerpt 2 shows such an interaction in which the lecturer responds to a student’s contribution by extending the content and offering a reformulation of the ideas appropriate to the accounting disciplinary register. In this setting, dialogic interaction appeared to offer opportunities for learning disciplinary content and forms of expression in conjunction. In first year disciplinary study, all students are, to an extent, learning the disciplinary register.

Excerpt 2
Lecturer: What benefit is there to a shareholder if there are no dividends but the business is expanding?
Student: Hopefully in the future though they’ll get more.
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Lecturer: Hopefully in the future there will be dividends yes and…?
Student: They’ll maintain the growth value of the shares?
Lecturer: Yes, we might look for capital growth in the shares.

Dialogic interaction can also play a role in student learning of disciplinary content by students co-constructing ideas and information. Study of patterns of interaction (Basturkmen 2003) showed interaction in graduate student–peer discussion sometimes involved simple exchanges of pre-formed ideas (students appeared to present their existing ideas), and sometimes more complex exchanges in which ideas emerged through negotiation and co-construction. The latter, thus, appeared to offer opportunities for the student speakers to refine and develop their ideas through interaction. See also research findings from Tin (2003), showing how exploratory talk in group discussions seemed to help learners construct ideas and develop their thinking.

Main research methods

Observational and discourse-based studies of dialogic speaking generally include recording and transcribing authentic target events; that is, events in disciplinary study. Transcripts are examined for one or more specific features of discourse. A number of corpus-based studies of academic speaking have been conducted. Some researchers in this area have drawn on large-scale corpora, such as the Michigan Corpus of Spoken Academic English (MICASE). See, for example, Hyland’s (2013) report of a comparative analysis of features relating to interactivity and personalisation in seminar and lecture discourse, and Csomay’s study (2007) of lecturer and student turn-taking in American university classrooms. Some researchers have developed a small corpus of spoken language in a particular setting. See, for example, Farr’s study (2003) of listener response tokens in student–tutor meetings in the discipline of language teaching in one university setting in Ireland.

Researchers have used a number of analytical approaches and frameworks to analyse speaking. These approaches include conversation analysis (Farr 2003), exchange structure (Basturkmen 2002) and speech act analysis (Crandall 1999; Félix-Brasdefer and Bardovi-Harlig 2010; Reinhardt 2010). Similar to research into speech acts in general, research into speech acts in academic interactions tends to focus on one or two speech acts of particular interest, the extent the speech act is used in one or more speaking events, the kinds of linguistic realisations used and the strategies involved.

To date, most observational and discourse-based studies have drawn on data from face-to-face settings. However, research has begun to examine computer-mediated communication (CMC) given the prevailing trend towards online learning environments. Tseng (2014), for example, investigated CMC supervisory dialogues between supervisors and the students doing masters theses in a Taiwanese context. The study investigated the collaborative nature of discourse between supervisors and students in online environments. Some studies have included an additional ethnographic strand of enquiry into the academic discourse community values and expectations for dialogue in subject teaching (Jordan 1997). For example, Tseng’s study (2014) included interviews with supervisors to enquire into their reasons and expectations for collaborative dialogue with their supervisees.
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Recommendations for practice

This section draws on ideas and issues discussed above in making suggestions for EAP practice. First, given the significant variation in types of event – for example, the range of events that go under the umbrella term ‘seminar’ – an important consideration for EAP course designers is to determine the types of interactive speaking events that their learners will encounter in their target departments. To do this, EAP teachers and course developers can usefully observe events in the target settings in order to try to understand the nature of the events that their students will face, and the interaction patterns and the features of discourse these events entail. EAP teachers and course developers devising instruction to help learners develop the skills and competencies to participate in dialogic interaction in higher education need to clearly identify the type of events that the students are most likely to encounter on their particular programmes of study, and the typical forms of interaction that are involved. As a secondary measure, interviews with disciplinary lecturers, teachers and tutors can enable EAP practitioners to gain an understanding of the objectives and expectations for particular event types as seen by members of academic disciplinary communities. Talking to disciplinary lecturers can be a useful means of finding out about the goals for the events and expectations regarding student participation. An important function of EAP instruction in discussion skills is to familiarise learners with the target events and their objectives (Furneaux et al. 1991).

As described above, learners’ concerns about participating in seminar and discussion in disciplinary classes can vary across contexts. It is recommended, therefore, that prior to developing a new programme or course, EAP practitioners investigate needs to identify, for example, the kinds of dialogic speaking events of concern to the students in question. The postgraduate students in non-science and non-engineering disciplines reported in Kim (2006) were more concerned about leading discussions and speaking in front of others than in one-on-one situations with their lecturers. However, a different set of concerns might be found elsewhere. As described above, the relative importance (or not) of dialogic speaking skills can vary considerably according to context.

As has been noted, conventional approaches to teaching seminar or discussion skills often include some focus on speech functions, such as ‘agreeing’ or ‘disagreeing’. Some commercially produced materials include lists of speech act exponents or typical realisations, for example, formulaic ways of expressing disagreement. However, in some cases the descriptions provided may be fairly restricted (for example, limited to a few useful phrases or possible realisations for certain speech functions). Empirical studies of discourse have tended to show a more complex picture of speech function realisation. As illustrated in Excerpt 1, even a short example can provide a number of insights into how a speech function or interactional sequence can be performed in a particular context. Findings from discourse-based studies of academic events have generally indicated that speaking in dialogic interaction is generally fairly complex. For example, a disagreement speech function is not often realised by means of a simple turn-initial gambit, such as I disagree, and an exchange is often much more than a simple question and answer sequence.

Turns at talk and exchanges in interaction tend to be complex and multi-faceted. It is, thus, suggested that EAP instruction can usefully focus on this kind of discourse complexity. For example, the EAP teacher could lead the class in examining a transcript or recording (or segment from it) to help learners recognise and understand the function of various elements in the discourse. EAP teachers and materials producers could usefully draw on examples in corpora of academic speaking or discourse-based studies to develop more detailed
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descriptions. A further possibility is for the EAP teacher to develop materials or descriptions of discourse using samples of authentic interaction in recordings or transcriptions. They may (following ethics requirements in their institutions) be able to record one or two seminars or discussions in their own institutions.

The literature indicates that dialogic interaction has an important role in disciplinary learning and socialisation. Not all learners are necessarily fully aware of this. They may not, for example, be aware of the kinds of scaffolding that teachers or lecturers can provide in responding to a student contribution to discussion (see Excerpt 2). EAP instruction has traditionally focused on ‘learning to speak’ (helping learners develop their speaking and discussion skills). EAP practitioners may wish to consider addition of a further focus, a focus on ‘speaking to learn’ (raising learners’ awareness of the role of dialogic interaction in learning and socialisation). EAP practitioners could, for example, use samples of interaction to highlight specific learning opportunities in segments of dialogue (for example, the kind of learning opportunity provided by the lecturer’s response in Excerpt 2), or arrange for EAP students to observe a target situation event (a disciplinary seminar or discussion class) to consider why this kind of event is held, the forms of interaction involved and how they might contribute to disciplinary learning or socialisation.

Future directions

There has been limited research into dialogic interaction in relation to learning in EAP. Skyrme (2010) has argued that research in EAP has generally focused more on written than spoken genres, but notes that interest in the value of speaking for learning is growing. Gibbons (2003) has suggested that teacher–student interaction in the content-based ESL classroom is an area that warrants further research. Research into lecturer–student and student–student interaction in the disciplinary classroom (in either school or higher education levels) also appears warranted. There is a need to develop understanding of ways that learning, including learning the disciplinary register, a concern of central concern in EAP, can be supported by interaction in disciplinary class discussions and question–answer exchanges. Information on the opportunities that such interaction can hold for learning can usefully inform the EAP speaking curriculum.

Few would dispute that academic language use varies in different disciplines. The language used to write or talk about science is not the same as that used to talk about mathematics (Schleppegrell 2001). Although there has been considerable research to understand the nature of disciplinary differences in academic writing, the same cannot be said of research into dialogic forms of academic speaking. It is generally understood that dialogic event types vary across disciplines. For example, business studies often include case study discussion classes. However, at present there is little information about disciplinary uses of language in dialogic interaction. For example, little is known about the extent that interaction in similar speech events is characterised by different linguistic choices, speech functions or exchange patterns along disciplinary lines. Might the ways students typically formulate contributions to discussions linguistically vary in hard and soft sciences, for example? Might the tendency for use of a particular speech function vary according to disciplinary area? Do exchanges tend to be longer and more complex in class discussions in humanities and social sciences or in natural science and engineering?

Very little research had focused on learners’ development of EAP speaking skills compared to other skill areas (Robinson et al. 2001). This lacuna may be related to the difficulty of assessing the development of interactive speaking skills. Assessment might require setting
up tasks in which students work together in group discussions or observations of students’ performance in simulated or actual seminar or tutorial type events, tasks in which a student’s performance may impact on the performance of another or others. Participation in dialogic interaction is a key skill area for some groups of EAP learners; for example, research suggests this is often the case at postgraduate level. Studies of the value of dialogic speaking for learning within EAP remain scant. Research into how students acquire academic dialogic speaking skills is needed. Research could endeavour to assess the ways that formal EAP instruction supports learning or to identify developmental changes in student performance data (for example, contributions to discussions made by students over time when immersed in disciplinary study). A further possibility might be to search for evidence that students have noticed linguistic features of dialogic speaking. Students might, for example, be asked to keep a learning journal of their observations and developing understanding of features of dialogic speaking in disciplinary events, such as seminars.

To date, most EAP-oriented research in the area has focused on communication in face-to-face interaction. However, with the increasing use of online learning environments, it is expected that there will be more research into dialogic interaction in computer-mediated discourse. Studies may draw on synchronous computer-mediated dialogues, text-based chat sessions, video conferencing sessions and Skype type communications. Depending on the research aims, study could be made of student–student interaction, lecturer–class interaction or one-on-one lecturer–student communication.

Further reading

Bowles (2012); Feak (2013); Robinson et al. (2001)

Related chapters

26 Seminars
30 The academic poster genre
36 EAP pedagogy in undergraduate contexts
37 EAP support for post-graduate students
42 Needs analysis for curriculum design

References

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