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The effect of instructor stance on ESL speakers' language production in a conversation group setting



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ABSTRACT

Numerous approaches to second language teaching emphasize the important role of instructors in eliciting extended language production from their students (Walsh, 2011; Wong & Waring, 2010). To shed light on the relationship between instructors' elicitation techniques and student talk, the current study analyzed the content exchanges initiated by preservice instructors ($N = 19$) during conversation group discussions. More specifically, this study examines how the instructor's stance (evaluative or non-evaluative) affected the language production of the ESL speakers. The findings indicated that non-evaluative exchanges elicited more student talk than evaluative exchanges. Additional insight into the relationship between stance and student responses to instructor-initiated exchanges is provided through excerpts from the conversation groups. Implications are discussed in terms of raising preservice instructors' awareness of social positioning and its impact on student interaction.

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The importance of language production for second language (L2) learning has been acknowledged in numerous theoretical approaches to L2 acquisition, including the interaction approach (e.g., Gass, 2003; Long, 1996; Mackey, 2012) and sociocultural theory (e.g., Lantolf & Thorne, 2006; Swain, 2006). In these traditions, language production is a key component of the social act of communication, and L2 learning is driven by the interactional modifications and co-construction of knowledge that occurs when interlocutors engage in conversation. This notion extends to pedagogical approaches to L2 instruction, such as communicative language teaching and task-based language teaching, which emphasize the use of the target language in meaningful contexts in the form of "conversations" (Thornbury & Slade, 2006) or "instructional conversations" (Ellis, 2003). The value of conversation for L2 learning is also reflected in the types of extracurricular activities that language programs offer, including conversation groups that create opportunities for students to interact with other language users in non-classroom settings.

Reflecting the importance of conversation for L2 learning, numerous studies have classified discourse features in terms of how effectively they elicit L2 production. Historically, a range of discourse features have been studied, such as clarification requests, confirmation checks, comprehension checks (e.g., Long, 1981, 1983), the negotiation of meaning and recasts (e.g., Mackey, 1999; Mackey & Philp, 1998), and language-related episodes and scaffolding (e.g., Donato, 1994; Swain & Lapkin, 2001). Due to their prevalence in meaning-oriented interactions, questions have been widely analyzed in terms of how they impact the quantity and quality of student responses, using various classification frameworks based on the linguistic form and discourse function of question types (Banbrook & Skehan, 1989; Brock, 1986; Chaudron, 1988; Long & Sato, 1983;

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Pica & Long, 1986). Among other distinctions, the classification of questions as either display or referential has been used widely to compare the language produced by L2 speakers in classrooms and during informal conversation.

Based on their prevalence in classroom discourse, display questions were characterized by Long and Sato (1983) as having an evaluative function. In other words, display questions allow instructors to determine whether students understand information that they have previously conveyed. The instructor typically has a preconceived answer in mind, and the students' responses are evaluated in terms of how well they approximate the desired answer. In contrast to classroom discourse, informal conversation is characterized by fewer display questions, and a greater occurrence of referential questions in which interlocutors ask questions in order to obtain unknown information. In terms of their elicitation of language, referential questions have been associated with a greater quantity of student talk than display questions. The observation that display questions rarely occur in everyday conversation (Mehan, 1979) has contributed to the assumption that referential questions yield more extended and "authentic" conversations (Thornbury & Slade, 2006).

However, subsequent studies have questioned the prevalence of display questions in L2 classroom discourse and raised doubts about the superiority of referential questions at eliciting L2 student talk. For example, in a Hong Kong classroom setting, Wu (1993) found that display questions were not predominantly used by the ESL teachers, and furthermore, even referential questions elicited very limited quantities of student talk. The association between question type and student talk was also questioned by Shomoossi (2004), who found that Iranian ESL teachers' referential questions did not lead to extended student interaction. Similarly, contrary to the predicted relationship between questions and language production, David (2007) found that display questions fostered more classroom interaction in Nigerian classrooms than referential ones.

Such contradictory findings have fueled debate about the effectiveness of instructors' elicitation techniques for encouraging interaction and student talk (Boyd & Rubin, 2006; Radford, Ireson, & Mahon, 2006; Thornbury, 1996). Several L2 researchers have called for an expansion of the traditional classification of questions as display or referential in order to obtain a more fine-grained understanding of the relationship between teacher elicitations and student talk (Lee, 2006; Markee, 2004; Waring, 2008, 2009). For example, teacher elicitations fulfill a variety of pedagogical functions, and the pedagogical function may impact the amount and type of student talk they elicit. Exchanges which serve to maintain control over classroom discourse (Ellis, 1990), check comprehension, or model appropriate language use (Kao, Carkin, & Hsu, 2011) are unlikely to elicit the same level of student talk as exchanges that serve to create interactive language use situations or stimulate critical thinking (Thornbury & Slade, 2006). In a conversation group setting, where the goal is typically to provide L2 speakers with opportunities to interact in the target language, instructor exchanges that require students to provide information about topics or express their opinions elicit more student talk than exchanges that check their knowledge of language (McDonough & Hernández González, 2012, 2013).

In addition to their pedagogical function, the instructor's stance during instructor-initiated exchanges may affect the amount and type of student talk that occurs. Instructor stance refers to how instructors position themselves with respect to the students' utterances (Johnstone, 2009). More specifically, the amount and type of student talk may be affected by whether an instructor adopts an evaluative or non-evaluative stance toward student contributions. From an interactional point of view, instructor exchanges may positively affect learner production if the instructor withholds an evaluative third move. When an instructor provides a negative or positive evaluative third move, it often contains prosodic elements which signal that the topic is closed (Wong & Waring, 2010). By signaling the end to a topic, instructor exchanges with explicit evaluation limit students' ability to make further contributions to the conversation. Withholding a third move or responding in a non-evaluative manner may help instructors create interactional space for students to take control over the conversation (Berry, 1981; Richards, 2006), encouraging them to produce more and longer turns. Rather than focus exclusively on the types of questions posed by instructors, the current study explores whether adopting a non-evaluative stance supports the occurrence of more complex, meaningful and authentic conversations.

1. The current study

To summarize, a long history of research into the features of informal conversation and classroom discourse has focused on how specific question types impact the quantity and quality of student talk. Whereas a great deal of this research has compared display and referential questions, the limitations of this categorization have been shown by the findings of more recent classroom research. Researchers have begun to emphasize the importance of instructor stance, specifically whether an evaluative position is adopted, on the effectiveness of instructor exchanges at eliciting student talk. Put simply, regardless of whether an instructor is asking what could be traditionally classified as a display or referential question, adopting an evaluative stance may impact student responses negatively. However, studies to date have not investigated whether stance affects the amount of student talk generated during instructor–student interactions. Therefore, the current study addresses the following research question: *Does instructor stance impact ESL speakers' language production during instructor-initiated exchanges?*

To answer the research question, the current study examined the conversation group discussions facilitated by preservice teachers as part of the practical training component of their degree program. The focus on preservice teachers was

motivated by the importance placed on questioning styles in teacher education resources and textbooks used in ESL teaching methods courses (e.g., Dillon, 1981; Morgan & Saxton, 1991; Walsh & Sattes, 2005; Wells, 1999; Ur, 1991). Furthermore, comparative studies of instructors with varying levels of experience have shown that less experienced instructors tend to use fewer techniques to draw learners' attention to language (Mackey, Polio, & McDonough, 2004) and elicit less student talk (Polio, Gass, & Chapin, 2006). By identifying the questioning techniques used by preservice teachers that were most successful at eliciting student talk, we aimed to contribute empirical evidence about novice instructors' questioning styles to teacher education.

2. Method

2.1. Participants and context

The participants were 19 preservice ESL instructors (14 women, 5 men) who ranged in age from 19 to 47 years, with a mean age of 27.5 years ($SD = 8.5$). In terms of their language background, they self-identified as bilinguals ($n = 10$), English L1/French L2 speakers ($n = 5$), or trilinguals ($n = 4$). Although none of the participants had prior formal training, six of them reported having taught English abroad or domestically at summer camps or through tutoring and volunteer activities. They were enrolled in a B.Ed. TESL program which consisted of courses in TESL methods, language analysis (phonology and grammar), and language acquisition and included five practical training opportunities. Three additional students who were enrolled in the same class declined to participate in the research study.

Data collection occurred when the teachers were enrolled in an introductory TESL methods class, which focused on lesson planning, giving feedback, teaching language skills, giving instructions, and monitoring student learning. The methods class had a practical training component, which was facilitating conversation groups for ESL learners at a community center or university. The preservice instructors worked in two-member teams to lead conversation groups for English L2 speakers. The teams were organized by the methods class professors according to the students' class and work schedules. Once formed, the members of each team remained the same throughout the semester. Each team member was responsible for three, 30-min conversation group sessions over a two-month period, for a total of six sessions per team. Four of the six sessions were videotaped as part of the instructional activities for the TESL methods class. When one preservice instructor was leading a conversation group, the other team member was in charge of the video-recording equipment and did not participate in the session. The conversation groups targeted a variety of general interest topics, including shopping, daily routines, ethical dilemmas, traveling, family, festivals, and technology. They shared the same basic organizational structure, which included an opening activity to introduce the topic, pair or small group activities related to the topic, followed by a concluding activity that reviewed the main points of the discussion.

The partnership agreements with the community center and the university stipulated that the video-camera remain focused on the preservice instructors at all times, and prohibited any additional audio-recording or data collection from the ESL speakers. Based on the general demographics of students at the partner institutions, the ESL speakers who attended the conversation groups were permanent residents of Canada who had emigrated from various countries (including Argentina, France, Iran, Korea, Mexico, Spain, and Syria), international students in Canada on student visas (from countries such as China, Korea, Japan and Saudi Arabia), and native Quebecers. The conversation groups were optional, and the ESL speakers paid a small administrative fee (\$25) to participate.

2.2. Data coding and analysis

The dataset consisted of 38 video-recorded conversation groups sessions, which ranged in length from 22 to 37 min ($M = 29$, $SD = 3.2$). The number of ESL speakers present at the conversation groups ranged from two to 20, with a mean of seven students ($SD = 5$). The video-recordings were transcribed¹ by a research assistant, and then each transcript was verified by two additional research assistants. The transcripts were analyzed to identify instructor-initiated exchanges,

¹ The excerpts include the following transcription conventions:

I	Instructor
S	Student
SS	Students
...	pause
(<i>italics</i>)	transcriber information
—	false start
[c'est bon]	words in another language
okay—	turn ended by interruption
—but	turn begun as an interruption
?	interrogative intonation

which were defined as exchanges in which an instructor asked a question or requested information and a student responded verbally.

(1) Instructor-initiated exchange

I: so everybody has their winter boots now I guess?
S: yes

Exchanges also included an initial question followed by related questions directed to the same student, as shown in (2).

(2) Instructor-initiated exchange with follow up questions

I: um so I would like to know if uh you have ever travelled anywhere in the world?
S: no this is my first time to go abroad
I: abroad ok and umm where did you live before?
S: uh always in China
I: ok how long have you been here?
S: one year almost

An exchange concluded when the instructor shifted focus to another student, began a non-interactive activity (e.g., gave instructions), relinquished the floor (e.g., a student asked a question), or began a pair or small group activity. Interactions in which a teacher asked students to read a text aloud or to perform oral drills were not included in the analysis. Only exchanges that were requests for information or opinions about a topic or idea were included in the analysis, as the conversation group setting did not lend itself to explicit language teaching or metalinguistic discussions.

The exchanges were classified in terms of the instructors' stance, i.e., their social positioning in relation to the students' utterances, specifically whether they adopted an evaluative or non-evaluative stance. Evaluative stance occurred when the instructor provided a 'stamp of authority' (Berry, 1981) or indicated approval or disapproval (Nassaji & Wells, 2000) of the student's contribution. Evaluative stance was evidenced by (a) instructors providing preferred answers to their questions after student responses, (b) evaluative language such as *that's right! you did very well*. An example of an exchange with evaluative stance is provided in (3).

(3) Evaluative exchange

I: I got a package in the mail last week uh it was from my friend who was travelling in Indonesia and she sent me this (*shows a package of something*)...it's called [kopi look]... does anybody know what that is?
S: spices
I: no it's not a spice...it's an exotic food but it's not a spice...actually it's the most expensive coffee in the world

In contrast, non-evaluative exchanges occurred when the instructor did not respond to the student contributions with positive or negative evaluation. Instead, the instructor response served other functions, such as to nominate another student, to provide a follow-up question, or to extend the discussion, as shown in (4).

(4) Non-evaluative exchange

I: so can you tell me why you chose Chinatown?
S: umm since I am Chinese I want to see how Chinese culture changed since it— since it rooted in American society
I: mhm (*nods*)
S: and I want to see a difference how and it – it uh evolved

All of the transcripts were coded by the first researcher to identify the instructor-initiated exchanges and to classify each exchange in terms of its stance (evaluative or non-evaluative). The researcher then explained the coding categories

Table 1
Distribution of episodes by phase and stance.

	Evaluative stance			Non-evaluative stance		
	Sum	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Sum	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Setting up activities	38	2.00	2.58	26	1.37	1.30
Wrapping up activities	39	2.05	3.01	102	5.37	5.12
During pair and small group activities	19	1.00	1.86	76	4.00	5.73
Opening & closing the conversation groups	2	.11	.32	8	.42	1.07
Total	98	5.16	4.26	212	11.16	6.99

and examples to a research assistant who then independently coded 29% of the transcripts (11 out of 38) for interrater reliability. Cohen's kappa indicated that their reliability was .89. Disagreements were resolved through discussion, with the final coding decision included in the analysis. Once identified, the number of evaluative and non-evaluative exchanges were summed and their distribution across different phases of the conversation groups were examined, specifically their occurrence when the instructors were setting up activities, wrapping up activities, opening and closing the conversation, and monitoring pair and small group activities. To address the research question, the number of words produced by students in evaluative and non-evaluative exchanges was summed up, and proportion scores were obtained to account for differences in the frequency of each exchange type. The proportion scores were then compared using a Wilcoxon-signed ranks test, which is a non-parametric, paired-samples *t*-test. Alpha was set at .05 for all statistical tests.

3. Results

3.1. Stance in instructor-initiated exchanges

There were a total of 310 instructor-initiated exchanges in the dataset, with the exchanges occurring in the following phases of the conversation groups: setting up activities by explaining their purpose, activating schema and giving instructions (20%), wrapping up activities and reviewing (46%), talking to students during pair and small group activities (30%), and beginning and ending the conversation group (4%). The distribution of evaluative and non-evaluative content episodes in different phases of the conversation groups is illustrated in Table 1.

The teachers used more non-evaluative exchanges in all phases of the conversation groups, except while setting up activities. A Wilcoxon-signed ranks test indicated that the teachers initiated significantly more non-evaluative exchanges than evaluative exchanges: $Z = 2.44$, $p = .015$, $r = .58$.

3.2. Stance and student talk

The research question asked whether the stance of the instructor-initiated content exchanges impacted the ESL speakers' responses. Because the number of evaluative and non-evaluative episodes was significantly different, proportion scores were calculated by dividing the number of words by the number of episodes for evaluative and non-evaluative exchanges separately. When considered as words by episodes, non-evaluative exchanges elicited a mean of 33.33 student words ($SD = 25.92$) per episode, while evaluative exchanges elicited only 14.57 words ($SD = 11.29$) per episode. A Wilcoxon signed ranks test indicated that the quantity of student talk per episode was significantly greater for non-evaluative exchanges than evaluative exchanges: $Z = 3.48$, $p = .001$, $r = .84$.

3.2.1. Illustrating student talk

To provide greater insight into the students' responses to evaluative and non-evaluative exchanges, excerpts from two conversation group sessions are presented. In these excerpts, the ESL speakers are university students in both conversation groups, but the two sessions were facilitated by different preservice instructors. In both extracts, the instructors were wrapping up their lessons with open discussions about the topic of the day. Also, in both extracts the instructor employs what could be traditionally categorized as referential questions, that is, questions for which the instructor does not seem to have preconceived answers. In (5), several exchanges occurred when the students were giving advice to someone who wants to marry another person from a different religion. The instructor intervened during their conversation (**in bold**) by acknowledging the student's ideas (line 3) and initiating new exchanges by directing a question to a new student (line 5), but did not express an evaluative stance towards the students' contributions.

(5) Advice column: Non-evaluative stance

- I: –what was your story? (*refers to S2*)
 S1: S2 has most difficult story...I think
 I: **uh-uh ok**
 S1: umm–
 I: –what was it? (*to S2*)
 S2: in a situation...a girl
 I: **uh-uh**
 S2: is going to marry uh her boyfriend
 I: **hm hm**
 S1: but she doesn't agree with the boyfriend's religion...and she's not going to raise their children umm in the same religion
 I: **uh-uh**
 S1: the advice we are going to give is umm both umm the girl and the boy
 I: **uh-uh**
 S1: Should be patient to this uh diff – difference in religion...and to communicate more and well and the best thing is uh they can finally agree to this religion that raise their children in this religion
 I: **ok...so...so**

The students' responses to the instructor-initiated exchanges in this excerpt were substantial in that they had opportunities to state their opinions and engage with their peers' ideas. Self-allocated turns (lines 2 and 10) and more elaborated answers (lines 10 and 15) show greater engagement and longer turns.

In contrast, student responses to exchanges in which the teacher took an evaluative stance tended to be more limited. Differences in the quantity of language produced by the students and their level of engagement with the topics are apparent in Excerpt (6), as shown by the shorter answers, the lack of elaboration, and the absence of self-allocated turns.

(6) Ranking important human qualities: Evaluative stance

- I: we'll start with you...can you – we'll start with you (*smiles*)...can you – can you tell us what your most important quality is? (*to S*)
 S: ok
 I: **just the most important**
 S: skills – skills to create motivation and not to lose...which you probably already have
 I: **ok... can you repeat it?**
 S: maybe skills of creating?
 I: **sure...skilled at creating**
 S: skilled? No no skills
 I: **oh ok skills at ok**
 S: skills at creating motivations and not losing...which probably you already have
 I: **ok and not losing what you already have**
 S: uhuh
 I: **that's perfect**

The instructor's evaluative stance can be observed as initially limiting the scope of possible answers (line 4), and the assessment of student contributions (line 8). Compared to (5), the exchanges in (6) contained shorter responses that did not go beyond the scope of instructor's question (lines 5 and 12). A general lack of engagement can be seen when the student repeated the same answer and downgraded his contribution twice by saying that the idea had been mentioned previously. Even though the instructor appeared to misunderstand, she gave positive evaluation (lines 14 and 16) and the student simply acknowledged it rather than clarifying (line 15), showing a lower level of investment in the success of the exchange of information.

4. Discussion

To summarize the findings, the evaluative stance of instructor-initiated exchanges influenced the quantity of student talk that occurred during conversation group discussions. More specifically, non-evaluative exchanges elicited significantly more student talk than evaluative exchanges, possibly by creating more interactional space for students to share their own knowledge and opinions (Cullen, 1998). From a social positioning perspective (Harré & van Langenhove, 1991), greater student talk in non-evaluative exchanges confirms the benefits of instructors assuming a non-expert role in the interaction (Nassaji & Wells, 2000; Richards, 2006) and avoiding positive explicit evaluation (Waring, 2008). The results may help clarify the contradictory findings of studies that compared display and referential questions (David, 2007; Shomoossi, 2004; Wu, 1993), in that in addition to their question types, instructors' stance may impact student engagement. More specifically, although display questions may be more likely to invoke evaluative stance, referential questions can be associated with either evaluative or non-evaluative stance. When referential questions occur with evaluative stance, then student contributions may be limited.

The focus on authentic conversations in conversation group setting may be at odds with a traditional role of instructor as an evaluator who elicits student contributions in order to validate their accuracy (Sinclair & Coulthard, 1975). When discussing topics in the conversation group setting, the instructor may need to set aside their evaluator role in order to create space for students to express their own opinions and critically engage with each other's ideas. Certainly, their role as language instructors cannot be disregarded, but their status as an evaluator of content or world knowledge could be suspended so that students feel more invested in their contributions. Although an analysis of language exchanges was beyond the scope of the current study, we did observe in the transcripts that the ESL speakers did not challenge the instructor's evaluative stance when the focus of talk was about language, as opposed to content. When the discussion centers on content, however, students may be more likely to claim equal access to knowledge. In other words, the instructor's role of evaluator may be negotiated turn-by-turn, and thus can be claimed and challenged as the interaction unfolds.

In addition, we observed that an instructor's evaluative stance could be evidenced in other ways besides verbal responses to student contributions. For example, writing a student's utterance on the board may convey positive evaluative stance, even if the instructor does not provide a verbal stamp of authority. When planning lessons that provide conversational space for meaningful interactions, instructors might consider the type of the activity as well. Activities such as guessing games, in which the instructor holds an answer and the students' task is to identify it, may automatically assign an evaluative role to the instructor. Across activity types, avoiding evaluation of students' contributions in terms of how closely they align with the instructor's own conceptions and beliefs may positively facilitate student talk.

4.1. Implications for teacher education

The ability to conduct interactive classroom discussion has been recognized as an important skill for teachers of various subjects, including math, science, and English (Applebee, Langer, Nystrand, & Gamoran, 2003; Rosaen et al., 2010). However, even in less formal settings, such as the conversation groups examined here, preservice instructors have been shown to dominate the interaction, which may reflect their difficulty in adopting a role as facilitator rather than a role as knowledge provider or evaluator (McDonough & Hernández González, 2012, 2013). The current study aligns with efforts to identify teacher practices that foster more meaningful and extensive classroom interactions. Based on our findings, it may be useful for TESL methods classes to draw preservice instructors' attention to the impact of social positioning on student interaction. Prior studies have shown that educational activities about classroom questioning facilitates more effective questioning practices (Koivukari, 1987) and has a positive effect on the number and quality of questions posed during whole class interaction (Brock, 1986). Incorporating the concept of stance into teacher education resources about elicitation techniques, which largely focus on question types, may help preservice instructors become aware of how evaluative stance influences the interactions they help to create in the classroom.

4.2. Limitations and future research

As an initial step to investigating the role of stance in instructor–student interaction, the current study demonstrated that exchanges when the instructor adopts a non-evaluative stance elicit more student talk than evaluative exchanges. However, several issues that limit the study's generalizability should be acknowledged. The focus on preservice teachers may limit the findings to similar instructor groups, and may not be applicable to more experienced, in-service instructors. Because previous research has reported differences in the interactional routines of novice and experienced instructors (Mackey et al., 2004; Pica & Long, 1986; Polio et al., 2006), future studies should explore whether evaluative stance also impacts the elicitation techniques employed by instructors with more experience than the preservice instructors investigated here. Future research is needed to explore how stance impacts the student talk elicited by instructors in other educational settings, as the current study focused narrowly on conversation groups. Likewise, the observations presented in this study should be replicated using younger students with more limited knowledge of the outside world in order to explore potential differences in its impact on social positioning.

More in-depth analysis of ESL instructors' social positioning is needed to be able to outline clear guidelines for L2 teachers that can help them elicit more extended, engaging and ultimately fulfilling conversations that can foster learning. In addition to evaluative stance, further studies will require the inclusion of other variables previously linked to student production and engagement, such as the use of follow-up questions, the type of question used, instructor gestures, and the students' proficiency to name a few. Adopting a longitudinal research design would also be useful, as the current practical training program was limited to a two-month period. Consequently, it was not possible to explore changes in the instructors' perceptions and use of elicitation techniques over time. A case study approach in which one or two teachers are tracked over multiple practical training experiences may provide greater insight into how their interactional routines develop over time.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, the findings of the current study indicated that the stance of instructor-initiated exchanges impacted ESL speakers' engagement during conversation groups. When instructors adopted a non-evaluative stance toward the ESL

speakers' contributions, the students produced more language, negotiated their positions, requested clarification, worked to sustain conversation, and approved of each other's contributions. By building on these findings, we aim to clarify how attributes of elicitation techniques can impact student talk in order to help instructors create interactional conditions that promote L2 learning. We hope that future research in diverse educational settings will inform the design, implementation, and evaluation of practical training programs that help preservice instructors elicit genuine communication and encourage more equal participation in the interaction.

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