WHOLE-GROUP INTERACTION DURING CONVERSATION GROUPS:

What language production opportunities do preservice ESL teachers create?

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Abstract

This study investigates the whole-group interaction that occurred between preservice teachers and ESL participants during conversation groups that were organized as part of an English for academic purposes (EAP) program. Twelve conversation group sessions were facilitated by six preservice ESL teachers over a one-month period. Quantitative analysis of the whole-group interaction focused on the language production opportunities created by the preservice ESL teachers as reflected through the amount of talk and questioning styles in four interactional contexts: communication, content, management and explicit language. Additional insight into the preservice teachers' conceptualization of the conversation groups was gained through a qualitative analysis of their lesson plans and instructions for small-group activities. The findings indicate that although the preservice teachers produced more talk than the ESL participants, interactional contexts oriented toward content elicited the greatest amount of ESL participant talk. Implications are discussed in terms of the organization of conversation groups and the training provided to preservice teachers who facilitate conversation group interaction.

Theoretical perspectives differ in terms of the extent to which language production is believed to facilitate the linguistic development of second language (L2) speakers (for a summary see Muranoi, 2007). Among theories that acknowledge that language production serves important functions in L2 acquisition, two main orientations are apparent. The first orientation is associated with cognitive psychology, such as skill acquisition theory (Dekeyser, 2001, 2007), in which language production is considered a form of practice. In this model, learners first acquire declarative knowledge about form-meaning connections, and then develop procedural knowledge and eventually automatization, through

meaningful practice activities that target a variety of skills and modes. Without practice, learners are not able to develop procedures for accessing their declarative knowledge during spontaneous L2 use. The second orientation is associated with interactionist and social-cultural approaches, which hold that language production in socially-situated, interactional contexts is a source of learning. In these approaches, language production is inseparable from the social act of communication, and learning occurs as a result of the conversational adjustments that occur when interlocutors are engaged in the communication of meaning (Gass, 2003; Gass & Mackey, 2007; Long, 1996) or from the other- and self-mediation that occurs during the joint construction of knowledge (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006; Swain, 2006).

From a pedagogical perspective, the importance of language production for L2 learning is reflected through numerous approaches to instruction, such as communicative language teaching and task-based language teaching, which emphasize use of the target language in meaningful contexts in the form of "conversations" (Thornbury & Slade, 2006) or "instructional conversations" (Ellis, 2003). The perceived value of conversation for L2 learning is also apparent in extracurricular programs which are designed to provide L2 speakers with opportunities to interact with target language users in non-classroom settings. Some programs, such as community partnerships (d'Arlach, Sanchez, & Feuer, 2009) and tandem learning (Cziko, 2004), bring together groups of L2 speakers who are learning each other's languages. For example, d'Arlach et al. (2009) described a program in which university students studying Spanish as a foreign language regularly met Spanish-speaking members of their local community to enable both groups to communicate using their L2. Other programs have created opportunities for L2 speakers to volunteer in community organizations where there is a need to interact with the public using the target language (Hillyard, Reppen, & Vásquez, 2007). Similar partnerships have been arranged by programs within universities or between universities and schools to bring together L2 learners and more proficient speakers for tutoring, academic literacy, or assistance with service encounters (Ariza, 2003; Vann & Fairbairn, 2003; Williams, 2009; Young & Holmes, 1997). Finally, conversation groups, ranging in formality from drop-in language clubs that meet in coffee shops to organized meetings with a designated facilitator, also provide L2 speakers with language production opportunities outside the formal classroom (McDonough & Hernández González, in press; Ziegler, Ammons, Lake, Hamrick, & Rebuschat, in press).

Despite the prevalence of such extra-curricular programs, few empirical studies have analyzed the interaction that occurs among L2 participants or between L2 participants and community members. Instead, previous empirical studies have focused on L2 speakers' perceptions about the value of the experience (e.g., Williams, 2009, Young & Holmes, 1997) or have described how the activities facilitated the professional development of the participating preservice teachers (e.g., Johnson, 1996; Zainuddin & Moore, 2004). In light of theoretical and pedagogical claims about the role of language production in L2 learning, we believe it is important to identify the language production opportunities created during these extra-curricular programs. In particular, we investigate the nature of conversation

group interaction to determine whether it shares characteristics with informal conversation or classroom discourse, particularly in terms of the amount and type of language production opportunities it provides.

Informal conversation consists of genuine communication in which interlocutors decide when and how to make contributions, check that meaning has been communicated successfully (such as through efforts to clarify and confirm), and nominate and change topics (Nunan, 1987). Previous comparative studies of informal conversation and classroom discourse have found that informal conversation is characterized by efforts to exchange unknown information and to clarify or confirm message content, which leads to a predominance of referential and clarification questions (Long & Sato, 1983; Pica & Long, 1986). In contrast, classroom discourse is often characterized by teachers' frequent use of display questions to elicit and evaluate learner knowledge and comprehension questions to verify that students have understood key content (e.g., Muscumeci, 1996; Nassaji & Wells, 2000). Empirical studies carried out in other educational settings have reported that interaction during face-to-face writing conferences shares similarities with classroom discourse, particularly the prevalence of tutor talk (Ewert, 2009; Patthey-Chavez & Ferris, 1997; Williams, 2004).

Differences in the interaction associated with instructional talk and informal conversation raise interesting questions about conversation groups. One possibility is that conversation groups may be similar to the interaction found in other educational settings, in which teacher talk during whole-group interaction is prevalent, and display and comprehension questions are the primary methods of eliciting learner talk. An alternative possibility, however, is that conversation groups share similarities with informal conversation due to the overarching goal of providing L2 speakers with opportunities to engage in meaningful, genuine communication. In this scenario, learner talk may be more prevalent, with the preservice teachers eliciting talk through referential questions. The current study aims to clarify these possibilities by identifying the types of language production opportunities that preservice ESL teachers create during conversation groups, focusing primarily on the interactional contexts and questioning styles that occur in whole-group interaction.

Method

Conversation Group Program

The conversation groups were organized in an English for Academic Purposes (EAP) program to provide optional, extra-curricular oral communication opportunities to any ESL speaker enrolled in a degree program at the university. Although the program offered two oral communication courses that could be taken for course credits, ESL students had expressed interest in less formal and expensive options for developing their oral communication skills. This was particularly true for students who were paying international tuition or whose programs did not allow the oral conversation course credits to count toward their degree requirements. The ESL participants paid a small administrative fee

($25) to participate in the conversation groups. Five conversation groups were organized, with one group held per weekday. All five groups met for ninety minutes (from 11:30 to 1:00) over a ten-week period. The EAP program hired university students from the MA Applied Linguistics and BEd TESL programs to monitor the conversation groups.

The EAP and TESL programs collaborated to incorporate the preservice teachers into the conversation group program, recognizing the experience as the practical training component of their first TESL methods course. The methods course covers general topics in ESL pedagogy, such as lesson planning, giving feedback, targeting language skills, giving instructions, and monitoring student learning. It was taught by a team of two instructors who collaborated throughout the semester. One instructor was responsible for delivering course content through lectures and assessing the preservice teacher's understanding of that content. The other instructor, who was the second researcher, helped the preservice teachers prepare for the conversation groups and facilitated peer and self-evaluation of the conversation group sessions. The TESL methods course instructors worked with the EAP program director to place teams of two preservice teachers with a monitor, whose conversation sessions the preservice teachers observed at the beginning of the semester. Each team of preservice teachers was responsible for facilitating 45-minute segments in four of the ten 90-minute conversation groups. For the four sessions when the preservice teachers facilitated the groups, the monitor began each session, led the first 45-minutes, and remained in the room after the preservice teachers took over. When one team member was facilitating, the other preservice teacher was video-taping, which was required as part of the assessment of the TESL methods course. The partnership between the TESL and EAP programs required that (a) the video-camera remain focused on the preservice teachers at all times, (b) only the ESL participants in the immediate proximity of the preservice teachers would be video-recorded, and (c) no additional audio-recording or data collection from the ESL participants be obtained.

Participants

The participants in the study were six preservice teachers who facilitated the conversation group sessions and the ESL participants who attended those sessions. The preservice teachers (3 men, 3 women) were enrolled in the TESL methods course described previously. Five teachers were in their late teens or early twenties, while the other teacher was in his early thirties. In terms of their self-reported language background, four teachers were French-English bilinguals, one was an English monolingual, and one was an English-French-Italian trilingual. All but one of the teachers reported having studied at least one second language previously, which included French, German, Spanish, Italian, Chinese, Vietnamese, and Polish. Two teachers reported prior experience teaching English or French through summer camps, individual tutoring, or volunteer activities, while four teachers reported no prior L2 teaching or tutoring experience. None of the preservice teachers reported any experience teaching ESL at the tertiary level or for adults.

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Due to the partnership agreement between the EAP and TESL programs, the researchers did not have access to individual ESL participant's personal information, and could not administer research tasks, such as biographical information questionnaires, during the conversation groups. However, general information about ESL participants was obtained through an interview with the EAP program director and the personal information that they shared during the conversation group sessions. The ESL participants were students enrolled in undergraduate and graduate degree programs at the same university as the preservice teachers. Some of the ESL participants were concurrently taking courses in the EAP program, but others had fulfilled all language requirements and were taking courses only in their degree programs. While some of the ESL participants were international students from a variety of countries (e.g., China, Korea, Japan, and Saudi Arabia), others were permanent residents of Canada or native Quebecers.

Data Coding

At the end of the semester, the video-recordings of the 12 conversation groups were transcribed by paid research assistants. The whole-group interaction between the preservice teachers and the ESL participants was analyzed quantitatively in terms interactional contexts and question types. The whole-class interaction was coded for the four interactional contexts identified in previous classroom research (Oliver & Mackey, 2003): explicit language, management, content, and communication.

Explicit language. The first context, explicit language, is interaction in which the preservice teachers provided or elicited knowledge about language form, which could include vocabulary, grammar, or pronunciation, and the ESL speakers asked or answered questions about language form. In (1), the teacher is introducing the topic of "habits" and stopped to clarify vocabulary.

(1)   T: *if I'm talking about habits in the past—a habit you know? You guys know*

what habits are?

S: *yeah*

T: *yeah? Give me an example of a habit*

S: *soccer*

T: *yeah playing soccer*

Management. Management refers to interaction in which the preservice teachers talked about the organization of activities, such as starting and ending the conversation groups, giving and clarifying instructions, allocating turns. In (2) the teacher is giving instructions.

(2) T: *so we just spent a few minutes reviewing winter clothing, right?*

What we're going to do today is I'm going to have you guys go through a system

of buying and selling winter clothing

S: *oh really?*

T: *right yeah exactly*

Content. Content refers to interaction in which the preservice teachers provided or elicited information about the topic, theme, or language use context that was the focus of the conversation group session. They often checked whether the ESL speakers understood key terms and concepts and then asked them to discuss a topic or theme. In (3) the teacher is eliciting opinions about the ethics of keeping money found in a lost wallet.

(3) T: *so even if you know you're going to go to jail for stealing*

S1: *you didn't steal it, you found it*

T: *oh is that a difference? What do you think about this?*

S2: *I think he should take the money*

Communication. Communication is interaction in which the preservice teachers engaged the ESL participants in an exchange of information that did not directly support the topic or activities that were the main focus of the conversation group session. Communication segments occurred when the teachers created opportunities for follow-up questions, the ESL participants nominated topics, or the teachers shared personal information or gave an opinion to illustrate a concept. These contexts included the exchange of information about topics that arose during the session, such as shared interests and personal information. In (4), the teacher has concluded the main activity of the session, which involved a search for words with affixes in newspaper articles, and is chatting with the ESL participants about books and movies.

(4) T: *Have you read Harry Potter?*

S: *yeah*

T: *in Chinese or English?*

S: *in English*

T: *oh that's hard. There's a lot of silly words in Harry Potter*

The whole-group interaction was also coded in terms of the types of questions asked by the preservice teachers. Four question types previously reported in comparative studies of informal conversation and classroom discourse (e.g., Brock, 1986; Long & Sato, 1983; Pica & Long, 1986) were coded: referential, comprehension, display, and clarification.

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Questions that elicited information unknown to the facilitators were coded as referential. They occurred as yes/no questions (e.g., *do you guys agree? did you find this activity helpful?*), *wh*-questions (e.g., *what do you think are good qualities for a doctor? why do you think it's a disadvantage?*) and declarative sentences with rising intonation (e.g., *same two again? she's your only friend?*).

Comprehension questions are a subset of referential questions that served to establish whether the ESL speakers had understood something previously mentioned by the facilitators, such as a word, concept, or instructions. They occurred as yes/no questions (e.g., *do we all understand what an adjective is? do we all understand that?*) and declarative utterances with rising intonation (e.g., *everyone knows what it means? everybody understands?*).

Display questions are those that elicited information already known to the facilitators in the form of *wh*-questions (e.g., *what is an adjective? what's another word for sadness? what's the noun form?*) or declarative utterances with rising intonation (e.g., *the adjective is? another synonym for that?*).

Clarification questions verified information previously supplied by an ESL speaker in form of single word utterances (e.g., *sorry? what? Russia?),* declarative utterances with rising intonation (e.g., *you said you wanted to be a lawyer? I'm sorry?*), yes/no questions (e.g., *is that what you said?*), and *wh*-questions (e.g., *what exactly do you mean by looks friendly?*).

Finally, the pair and small group activities that were implemented by the preservice teachers could not be analyzed quantitatively in terms of the quantity of talk or question types. Instead, we carried out a qualitative analysis of the teachers' lesson plans, instructions for pair and small group activities, and whole-group comments after the pair/small group activities to gain further insight into conversation group interaction. We identified four types of pair/small group activities that were implemented in the conversation group sessions: service encounters, careers, personal interest topics, and language practice.

Service encounters occurred in two conversation groups in which the preservice teachers asked the ESL participants to assume defined roles and simulate interaction between shoppers and salesclerks or between customers and wait staff. Career-oriented pair/small group activities occurred in two conversation groups in which the preservice teachers asked the ESL participants to carry out a debate of the personal attributes needed to succeed in different careers and a decision-making task to select the most qualified applicant for a specific position. Pair/small group activities involving topics of general interest were implemented in five conversation groups, in which the preservice teachers nominated topics such as music, celebrities, vacations, daily routines, and hobbies for the ESL participants to discuss. Finally, language-focused pair/small group activities were implemented in three conversation group sessions, during which the preservice teachers asked the ESL participants to locate words with prefixes and suffixes in newspaper articles or to construct

sentences or paragraphs involving specific language forms (e.g., adjectives and past tense).

After establishing the coding categories, we independently coded one conversation group and met to clarify definitions and identify examples of each interactional context and question type. An example of the coding of interactional contexts across turns is provided in (5), in which the preservice teacher is facilitating a report of the narratives that the ESL participants had written during a pair activity. The first turn (a), in which S1 begins to read his narrative, was coded as content. In response to background chatting (turn b), the preservice teacher asks the participants to pay attention in turn c, which was coded as management. S1 continues reading his narrative in turn d, which was coded as content. The teacher's feedback move and the student's responses in turns e, f, and g were coded as explicit language. The teacher's comments about the student's narrative and the confession that he didn't remember the next team's name was coded as communication (turns h & i), after which he requested that the next group to read their narrative (turn j), which was coded as management.

(5) Interactional contexts across turns

a)   S1:   *when I woke up yesterday, I got a letter which was written by my friend--*

b)   SS: (background chatting)

c)   T: *Shh! Guys, listen, ok?*

d)   S1:   *--who usually, uh wrote letters In that letter, he told me that his favourite soccer team won the game. My favourite team lost the game. I couldn't understand how it happened. After that, I tore the letter and throw it to the garbage.*

e)   T: *threw it <u>into</u> the garbage!*

f)   SS: (laughs)

g)   S1:   *<u>into</u> the garbage*

h)   T: *It's good. I feel bad—I feel sorry for your friend! Okay, team J, right? Because I don't remember your name.*

i)   SS: (laughs)

j)   T: *Uh please read your uh your—whatever you have in front of the class*

Because the preservice teachers often took long turns with more than one interactional context, we decided to take contexts, rather than turns, as the unit of analysis. In (6), the example begins with the preservice teacher wrapping up a practice activity by reviewing the language form the ESL participants had been using (adjectives). This explicit language context continues through the first three lines of turn e, after which the context shifts to

management (*okay so now…*) when the teacher starts to describe the next activity and give instructions.

(6)   Multiple interactional contexts within a turn

a)   T: *so uh what would you say we were practicing the most? What words?*

b)   S6:   *adjectives*

c)   T: *adjectives!*

d)   SS: (laughs)

e)   *Okay good did you forget the word? Okay so that was adjectives so that was— those were all different forms of adjectives, so you can have uh ones that uh mostly focus on senses…Okay so now we're going to go on to another activity. And this is going to be an activity where we describe a celebrity, ok? So we're going to go into groups of two, so if that's you two right there, and then you and then you two. Uh and we're going to describe celebrities. So here's the paper and it has some celebrities and uh on the back, there are four spaces per celebrity. And you're going to write the four adjectives that first come to your mind when you're describing these celebrities, ok? Is that good for everybody? Alright, so you're going to be in pairs, and you can just discuss and come up with mutual consensus* (hands out papers)

After establishing contexts as the unit of analysis and discussing context boundaries, we then independently coded six transcripts and met to compare our analysis. If one researcher missed an interactional context or question that had been coded by the other researcher, then it was considered a coding omission (rather than a disagreement) and was subsequently included in the dataset (5% of the interactional contexts and 2% of the questions were missed by one researcher). Simple percentage agreement between the researchers was 97% for interactional contexts and 98% for questions. Disagreements were resolved through discussion, and the final decision was included in the dataset. Having established agreement as to the coding categories, the first researcher then coded the remaining six conversation groups.

Results

Whole-group Interaction: Talk, Contexts, and Questions

The conversation groups ranged in length from 27 to 50 minutes (rounded to minutes), with a median length of 46 minutes. In terms of the distribution of time, the preservice ESL teachers spent a median of 26 minutes engaged in whole-group interaction (range = 21 to 45 minutes) and asked the ESL participants to carry out pair/small group interaction for a median of 15 minutes (range = 3 to 25 minutes). In other words, the preservice teachers spent approximately two-thirds of each conversation group leading whole-group

interaction. The number of ESL participants ranged from three to 11, with a median of eight participants per conversation group. In terms of the types of language production opportunities provided through the conversation groups, we first considered the amount of talk in turns and words produced by the preservice teachers and ESL participants. When the quantity of talk was considered in terms of turns, there was close to equal distribution of turns taken by the preservice teachers (51%) and the ESL participants (49%). However, when considered in terms of words, the preservice teachers produced 70% of the words that occurred in whole-group interaction (31,850/45,279), while the ESL participants produced only 30% (13,429/45,279) of the total words. This indicates that the preservice teachers took much longer turns than the ESL participants.

Next, we identified how frequently the four interactional contexts (explicit language, management, content, and communication) occurred in whole-group interaction. A total of 463 contexts were identified in the data set. The number of interactional contexts ranged from 10 to 76 with a median of 35.5 contexts per conversation group. The variation was due to differences in the preservice teachers' styles, as some teachers frequently switched between contexts, such as alternating between commenting on content and managing the ESL participants' turns, while other teachers spent more time in a particular context. Management contexts occurred most frequently (45%) followed by explicit language (26%) and content (23%), with few communication contexts occurring in the data (9%).
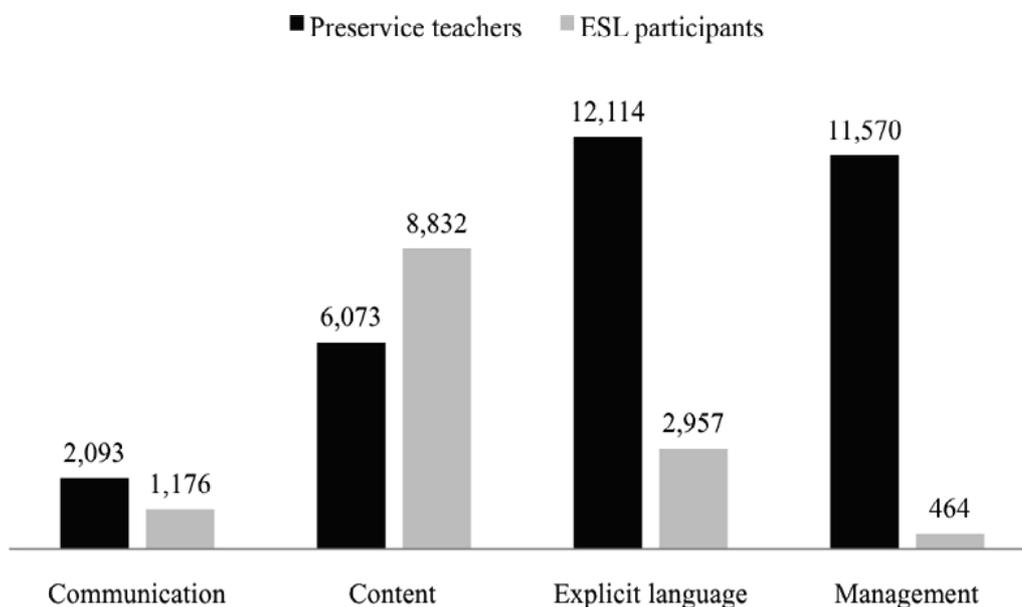

Figure 1. **Number of facilitator and ESL participant words by interactional context.**

We next considered whether the preservice teachers' tendency to produce more language than the ESL participants was consistent across the four interactional contexts. As shown in Figure 1, the preservice teachers produced more words during communication, explicit

language, and management contexts. The gap between the amount of talk generated by the preservice teachers and the ESL participants was greatest during management (96% and 4%, respectively) and explicit language (80% and 20%, respectively) but was less disproportionate during communication contexts (64% and 36%, respectively). However, during content interaction, the ESL participants generated more talk (59%) than the preservice teachers (41%).

Our next analysis considered whether the quantity of language produced by the ESL participants' across the interactional contexts was related to the preservice teachers' questioning styles. Because they showed similar patterns, management and explicit language (e.g., preservice teachers dominated) were combined as were the communication and content (e.g., more equitable distribution of talk). As illustrated in Figure 2, the preservice teachers used comprehension and display questions during management and explicit language contexts, but these question types rarely occurred in content and communication contexts. In contrast, preservice teachers used referential and clarification questions more frequently in content and communication contexts.
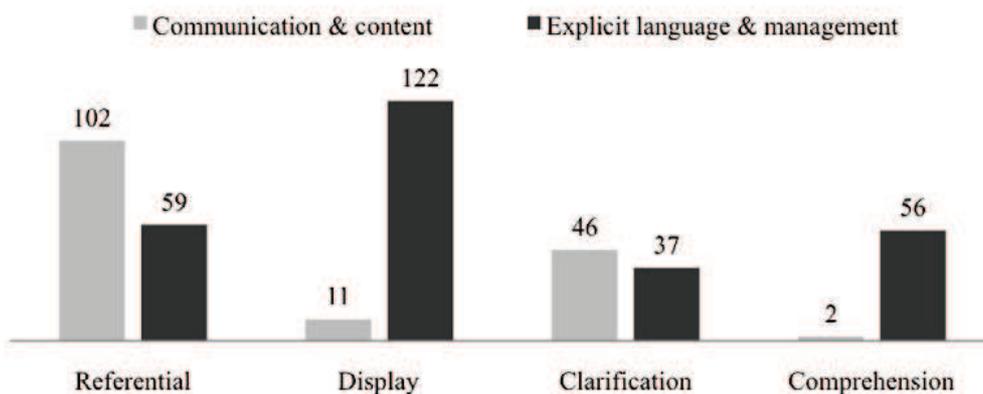

Figure 2. **Number of preservice teachers' question types by interactional context.**

To summarize the quantitative analysis of the whole-group interaction, the preservice teachers produced more language than the ESL participants overall, with this tendency most prevalent during management and explicit language contexts. They elicited more talk from the ESL participants when the whole-group interaction was oriented toward communication and content, during which they asked more referential and clarification questions.

Conceptualizing Conversation Group Interaction

By combining the quantitative findings for interactional contexts and questioning styles with a qualitative analysis of the teachers' lesson plans, instructions for pair/small group activities, and whole-group reports after pair/small group activities, three conceptualizations of conversation groups emerged in the data: language practice, role-plays, and discussions. The conceptualization of conversation groups as language practice was apparent in seven of the 12 sessions. This orientation was evident in the lesson plans when the preservice

teachers stated objectives in terms of learning or practicing specific language forms. For example, one preservice teacher stated that the objective for the conversation group was for the ESL participants to learn "the various prefixes and suffixes that one can add to words to create antonyms." In this approach to conversation group interaction, the preservice teachers began by introducing a language form as the focus of the session and eliciting the ESL participants' existing knowledge. The target language forms included adjectives, past tense, prefixes/suffixes, concrete/abstract nouns, and idioms. The preservice teachers then led whole-group practice activities in which individual ESL participants generated words, phrases, or sentences with the target form. The nature of the whole-group practice is illustrated in (7), in which the teacher asks the ESL participants to provide the past tense forms of various verbs.

 (7) Conversation groups as language practice: Whole group practice

T: *if I'm asking you what you did yesterday and the verb is study what would you*

        say you did yesterday?

S1:   *uh I did uh I didn't uh*

T: *we're using the word study...you're conjugating the verb study not doing*

S1:   uh *okay...just study?*

T: *yeah in past tense yesterday...you're telling me what you did yesterday and the*

        word is study

S1:   *I studied*

T: *perfect okay let's see how we do this...arrive*

S2:   *arrived*

T: *kick*

S3:   *kicked*

T: *watch*

S4:   *watched*

Following the whole-group practice, the preservice teachers gave instructions for pair/ small group activities that involved the manipulation of language form, such as writing sentences using verbs that had been provided, guessing games using the target form, stating whether they liked or disliked nouns that had been provided, jumbled sentence activities, and searching for the target form in newspaper articles. After the ESL participants completed these activities, the preservice teachers led a whole-group report of the language forms that the ESL participants had talked about. In the conversation groups as language

practice sessions, management and explicit language contexts were more frequent than communication or content contexts, and the preservice teachers tended to ask display and comprehension questions.

The conceptualization of conversation groups as role plays was evident in three of the twelve sessions. The preservice teachers stated the objectives of these conversation groups in terms of the types of language use contexts to be practiced. For example, one preservice teacher wrote in her lesson plan that the objective was for the students to "use appropriate utterances to ask and answer basic questions related to purchasing winter clothing." In these sessions, the preservice teachers began by introducing a language use context and eliciting or providing the words and sentences typically used in that setting. The language use settings that the preservice teachers selected were ordering in restaurants, buying clothing, and being interviewed for a job. Functional expressions and useful vocabulary for these encounters were written on the board. The teachers then modeled a role play with the team member who was video-recording or with a volunteer ESL participant. After modeling the role play, the teacher distributed role play activities to the ESL participants to carry out in pairs or small groups. After the ESL participants carried out the role plays, the preservice teachers led a whole-group report. As illustrated in (8), the whole-group report involved the teacher asking individual ESL participants about their role play conversations.

(8) Conversation groups as role plays: Whole-group report

T: *what did you buy today?*

S1:   *I bought a down vest and--*

T: *--a down vest yes*

S1:   *a down vest yes and a parka*

T: *a parka yes very good*

S1:   *and a sweater*

T: *yes*

S1:   *and leather gloves*

T: *and leather gloves and where did you buy these things?*

S1:   *from Xue's store*

T: *very good, thank you very much, next S2 what did you buy today?*

In the conversation groups as role plays, the most frequent interactional context was content, and the teachers' questioning style included a relatively equal number of display and referential questions.

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Finally, the conceptualization of conversation groups as discussions was evident in two of the 12 sessions. This orientation was evident in the lesson plans when the preservice teachers stated objectives in terms of the task or decision that the ESL participants were to accomplish. For example, one preservice teacher stated that the objective for the conversation group was for the ESL participants to "choose a particular candidate with a set of descriptions and qualities in the context of a work place and provide arguments backing up their choices." In this approach to conversation group interaction, the preservice teachers introduced the content focus of the session and explained the topic for discussion. The topics that the teachers selected were ethical dilemmas in which the ESL participants presented their opinions and discussed how they would respond in various scenarios such as finding a wallet, and occupational qualifications in which they discussed which applicant they would hire for a particular position. After the ESL participants were asked to share opinions, give reasons for their opinions, and respond to the opinions of others in small groups, the teachers then led a whole-group report. During the report phase, the teachers asked the ESL participants to share their opinions and provide reasons for their opinions, as illustrated in (9).

(9) Conversation groups as role plays: Whole-group report

T: *Did anyone choose Gabrielle?*

S4:   *yeah we chose Gabrielle*

S3:   *me too*

T: *why?*

S4:   *because she's very young so she has a lot of energy for work at night and during the day. And for her kids, it's her problem and she need to care about this problem...she choose to have two kids so now she need to manage this*

S3:   *she worked customer service it's uh evidence of high social skills*

S4:   *and she's organized and she has uh good management skills*

T: *uh-oh it looks like Shelly has a problem with her* (laughs)

S1:   *yes I can't hire this girl, because just she's only 25 and she already has two young children, so it means they're going to be sick, they're going to break their legs, uh they going to have problems at school, so it becomes teenagers, so it will have some other problems....*

These conversation groups had more interactional contexts involving content and the teachers' questioning style consisted almost exclusively of referential and clarification questions. Rather than begin the sessions with a preselected language focus, the teachers provided language forms when they perceived the ESL participants as needing assistance. For example, in (10) and (11) the teacher provided lexical items when the ESL participants

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were searching for an appropriate word, after which the conversation between the ESL participants resumed.

(10) Providing lexical items: Multi-tasking

S1:   *I think it's very interesting to somebody who can do…multi…capacity?*

T: *multi-tasking?*

S1:   *multi-tasking it's doing many activities and interests*

S5:   *yeah but many other activities and interests is a negative thing*

(11) Providing lexical items: to fire

S2:   *so if the man is all alone and he has to do his work and he is not doing his work he will be…uh…I will uh…*

T: *fire? To fire somebody?*

S2:   *yes okay I will fire him so he doesn't really have a choice to be lazy*

S4:   *but it's not negative to be lazy*

Another characteristic of the whole-group interaction was the teachers' reformulation of the ESL participants' utterance. In (12) the ESL participant was providing an opinion about whether governments have the right to torture prisoners if the information obtained saves lives. After S6 finished stating his opinion, the teacher reformulated what he had said and sought clarification.

(12) Reformulating ESL speaker's contributions

S6:   *but actually, to come back to the argument, is that really we have the power or we have the rights to torture person in order to say, we keep uh the society uh safe or we keep the security…we ask that uh you love the country or you love the government but it's not justifying saying we can have the rights to take a life of another person*

T: *okay so you think it's okay to torture in this case because you're going to keep the city safe…so we have the right to torture a person in order to keep others safe?*

S6:   *no actually I argue that we don't have the right to torture others*

T: *you don't have the right?*

S6:   *yeah*

In sum, the conversation groups organized as discussion sessions generated language production opportunities in which the ESL participants' ideas and opinions were the main focus and language forms were provided as they arose during conversation.

Discussion

The present study analyzed the type of language production opportunities that preservice teachers created through whole-group interactions during conversation groups. The quantitative findings revealed a prevalence of teacher talk, which is similar to the teacher-fronted discourse previously reported in L2 classroom and writing conference research (Abd-Kadir & Hardman, 2007; Ewert, 2009; Salhberg & Boci, 2010; Williams, 2004). The findings also indicated the preservice teachers' whole-group interaction involved management and explicit language contexts most frequently, with the number of content and communication contexts fewer than has been reported previously (Oliver & Mackey, 2003). These findings are consistent with a view of a teacher as a knowledge holder and discourse manager that has been described in L2 classroom discourse (Nassaji, 2000). However, when the preservice teachers implemented whole-group interaction oriented toward content, the ESL participants produced more language than in other contexts, which parallels the findings of classroom-based studies which reported differences in student participation based on interactional context and content focus (Huang, 2011; Oliver & Mackey, 2003).

In terms of the different theoretical perspectives about the role of language production in L2 learning highlighted in the introduction, the majority of the conversation group sessions illustrated a view of language production as practice. Ten conversation group sessions reflected this orientation, which was apparent through the teachers' use of display and comprehension questions to establish or review declarative knowledge, and their provision of pair/small group activities that involved language practice. In this conceptualization of conversation groups, form appears to receive greater priority than meaning, as the whole-group and small-group interaction served as vehicles for practicing form. In this model, the teacher functioned to provide and sanction knowledge, check for accuracy, and allocate turns. In contrast, two conversation groups reflected the view of language production as socially-situated learning. These groups were organized around decision-making tasks that required discussion and debate of ideas and reasons, and were characterized by whole-group interaction in which the teacher asked referential and clarification questions, provided lexical items, and reformulated the ESL participants' ideas.

The findings suggest that it may be beneficial for preservice teachers to develop greater awareness of language production as socially-situated learning. Concrete suggestions about questioning styles (such as those found in Abd-Kadir & Hardman, 2007; Nassaji & Wells, 2000) may help preservice teachers become aware of the types of questions that are associated with non-instructional contexts, as opposed to the display and comprehension questions typically found in L2 classroom discourse. Raising their awareness of more diverse roles, such as organizer, prompter, or observer, may also help them create whole-group interaction in which they do not feel responsible for managing the discourse or serving as the primary knowledge holder (Téllez & Waxman, 2006). By adopting more diverse roles, the preservice teachers may be able to create community-driven conversation

groups in which all participants feel able to contribute to the exchanges by nominating and changing topics or serving as a knowledge-holder (Smit, 2010).

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, Lundeberg, Terpstrac, Niu, & Jing, 2010). Huang (2005) reported that successful discussions in university business classes require teachers who have a large repertoire of question styles, including those targeting higher levels of thinking in Bloom's taxonomy of questions (analysis, synthesis, and evaluation), tolerance of silence to allow thinking time, active listening techniques, strategies for encouraging dialogue among students, and techniques for helping students clarify their thoughts. Teachers who engage in successful discussions reflect the conceptualization of language production as socially-situated learning, and awareness of these characteristics may help preservice teachers expand beyond a conceptualization of conversation as a vehicle for language practice.

By structuring conversation groups as content-based discussions, preservice teachers can also help serve the oral academic needs of university students. Previous studies have indicated that ESL students in higher education contexts report difficulty participating in whole-class discussions in their academic courses (Cheng, Myles, & Curtis, 2004; Ferris, 1998; Kim, 2006; Leki, 2001;Tardy, 2004). In discussing her findings, Kim (2006) suggested that EAP programs simulate the academic oral communication tasks that are frequently used in university content courses. In particular, ESL speakers may benefit from consciousness-raising activities that make explicit the value typically attached to active oral participation in university classrooms. Conversation groups that build proficiency in oral academic English and the discourse of specific disciplines may be particularly useful for ESL students who are studying in higher education programs. In particular, knowledge of university lectures discourse can be helpful for university students (Dafouz Milne & Núñez Perucha, 2010); incorporating mini-lectures followed by small-group and whole-group discussion into conversation groups may be helpful for academically-oriented ESL students.

We are currently examining the impact of peer and instructor feedback on the development of preservice teachers' whole-group interaction. We have integrated the findings of the current study into peer and instructor feedback rubrics designed to raise the preservice teachers' awareness of the interactional contexts they create during the conversation groups and how the amount of talk produced by ESL participants is impacted by their interactional contexts and questioning styles. By comparing the interaction that occurred in conversation group sessions before and after the preservice teachers receive feedback and analyzing their reflective essays, we hope to identify which types of feedback were useful for promoting their professional development. Our future studies may also analyze the conversation group interaction that occurred during the session led by the monitors, who were hired by the EAP program, in order to explore how more experienced ESL

instructors facilitate conversation groups. Additional avenues for future research include studies that elicit the perceptions of the ESL participants in order to gain more insight into what types of conversation group activities they believe are most helpful, and case studies that focus on the professional development of the preservice teachers across consecutive practical training experiences. Although it is not possible in our context, using audio-recording equipment to supplement the video-recording would provide insight into the ESL participants' language use during small-group interaction, which would provide a more complete view of the language production opportunities provided to ESL participants during conversation groups.

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