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LANGUAGE USE AND INTERACTION IN THE HISTORY CLASSROOM

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ABSTRACT

History is a logically complex subject. It is more propositional than procedural in nature (Nichol 1984), and involves adductive thinking (Booth 1983), where historical evidence and facts are ‘teased out’ and a convincing account of the past is then reconstructed through speculation, imagination and empathy (Nichol, 1984; Booth, 1983). Thus the teaching and learning of history is not just transmission of knowledge alone but involves a process whereby students and teachers interact in order to analyse evidence, raise questions and hypotheses, synthesise facts, communicate their ideas, understand others’ viewpoints, consider values, reflect and engage in moral reasoning (Brophy, 1996). Further, it is this interaction that helps the development of thinking in history (Coltham, 1971).

This paper reports on an in-progress PhD study in which the main focus of the research is on the language used during "critical episodes" in the history classroom, that is when teachers and students appeared to be engaged in the process of historical thinking. This research is particularly concerned with higher order thought embedded in the language used in history classrooms. To investigate this, both high and low inference coding systems were adopted to code, describe and analyse verbal behaviour that occurred.

The data was gathered from six classes from schools in Singapore. They constituted two classes of above average students (Special stream), two classes of average students (Express stream) and two classes of below average (Normal stream) students. Audio and video recordings were made of two lessons from each of the six classes. These lessons were transcribed, coded and analysed to ascertain which contexts were more conducive for the production of higher order thought. It was found that a complex interrelationship of factors including pedagogic activity, type of teacher talk and student talk, and the interaction patterns between them determined whether or not higher order language was used.
Language use and Interaction in the History Classroom

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History is a logically complex subject and a "unique encompassing" discipline (Gawronski, 1975, p.20; Hirst, 1974). It is more propositional than procedural in nature (Nichol 1984), and involves adductive thinking (Booth 1983), where historical evidence and facts are ‘teased out’ and a convincing account of the past is then reconstructed through speculation, imagination and empathy (Nichol, 1984: Booth, 1983). Thus the teaching and learning of history is not just transmission of knowledge alone but involves a process whereby students and teachers interact in order to analyse evidence, raise questions and hypotheses, synthesise facts, communicate their ideas, understand others' viewpoints, consider values, reflect and engage in moral reasoning (Brophy, 1996). Further, it is interaction that helps in the development of thinking in History (Coltham, 1971).

This research is an exploratory study of the nature of talk and the patterns of interaction generated in twelve history lessons in Singapore as teachers and students engaged in the discussion of historical concepts and ideas. A special focus of the research is on the language used during "critical episodes" in the history classroom, that is when teachers and students appeared to be engaged in the process of historical thinking. This research is particularly concerned with the higher order thought that is appeared to be embedded in the language used. To investigate this, both high and low inference coding systems were adopted to code, describe and analyse verbal behaviour that occurred.

Literature Review

The role of talk in the learning process has been extensively researched over the last twenty years. Some of this work includes that by Barnes, Britton & Torbe (1986), Britton (1970a) and Wells (1985). They report that talk is the very essence of educational activity. With respect to the discipline history, educationists are also interested in exploring the relationship between language and learning about the past (Husbands, 1996).

In classroom talk, form refers to the surface features of the language and function to the meaning or purpose of the situated talk (language use). The concept of function and language use in oral speech is explained by Bakhtin and elaborated by sociolinguists including Halliday (1973), Stubbs (1976), and Hymes (1972). Bakhtin (1973) cited in Morris (1994) describes "primary or simple speech genres" and suggests they are based on the functions of language.

Classroom talk is rich in oral genres. These include such things as the teacher presenting information, giving direction, asking narrow questions, asking broad questions, accepting ideas, rejecting ideas, students initiating questions and students raising hypotheses. When a
student makes an utterance in the classroom he/she is using language to express his/her thoughts. In other words, from the language use of the student one can identify the thinking that might be taking place. One may be able to tell whether the student is hypothesizing, reflecting, monitoring his/her thoughts or, qualifying a statement. However, the meaning behind the utterances are complex in nature and depend very much on the context, on what the thoughts of the person may have been and on the interpretation of the addressee. The complexity of the meaning of talk is also discussed by Wertsch (1991, p.67; p.93) and described as the "multivoicedness" and the "heterogeneity of voices" in talk. In addition, this concept is explained by Bakhtin (1974) as the interaction between the "inner thinking self" and the "outer speaking self." Bakhtin (1973, cited in Morris, 1994) in his discussion on dual voicing sees language as meaning and he proposes two levels of interaction which is relevant to this research. Knoeller (1998) has also developed and used Bakhtin's notion of voice and the influence of other voices on the learner in his research on the learning of literature. This concept of voice helps in the understanding of the history classroom events as teachers and students mediate between the past and the present and the "voices" of the historical characters. It is through this talk, which is brought about by interaction, that students engage in historical understanding and exercise empathy. Thus a careful analysis of utterances of interaction between students and teachers may explain the thinking processes that have gone on in the "thinking self" as opposed to the "speaking self" (Bakhtin 1973, cited in Morris, 1994).

When students generate ideas, remember facts, gather information or integrate ideas, these activities are classed as cognitive activities involving general forms of thinking. When students interpret, analyze or manipulate information, and are involved in reasoning and decision making and problem solving tasks, and go beyond simply applying previously learned knowledge, they are involved in the complex forms of cognitive activities that make up higher order thinking (Newmann, 1987; 1990; Ericksson & Hastie 1994). Contemporary approaches to the study of thinking make the distinction between general forms of thinking and "complex" forms of cognitive activities (Ericsson & Hastie, 1994 p. 37). Performing at a higher level requires them to use talk as a tool to engage in joint thinking with others and so there is an interplay of communicative and cognitive functions in the interaction (Barnes & Todd, 1995).

Barnes and Todd (1995 p.79) have captured the functions of talk that takes place in collaborative activities. They suggest that the social and the cognitive functions interact when students communicate with one another. The social functions include such things as initiating, extending, qualifying, eliciting, expanding, requesting, responding and accepting. These are distinct from the cognitive functions which include such things as constructing questions, raising new questions, setting up hypotheses, using evidence, expressing feelings, reflecting and monitoring thoughts. A closer study of the interaction of the social and cognitive functions of classroom talk may depict the thinking processes of students as they are engaged in talk.

Other researchers investigating the teaching and the learning of history, for example Brophy (1996), Schemilt (1983) and Lee (1983), advocate a student centred pedagogy with an explicitness of learning purposes and metacognitive concerns. They believe that children must ask historical questions and assess evidence in a critical, constructive way in order to reach historical understanding.

Teachers also adopt different genres in the classroom. They can transmit or interpret information. Transmission of information may be achieved through recitation whereas interpretation may be achieved by the asking of open ended questions, and adopting various strategies. For example, interpretation can be achieved through the strategy of "uptake"
(Wilen & White 1991) and through teacher scaffolding as they take the students up the spiral of understanding.

Lately much prominence has been given to the teaching of history through interpretation, but this has presented problems and challenges for teachers (Haydn, Arthur & Hunt, 1997). For the development of thinking in history classroom, social interaction, or the verbal interchange between teacher and students is essential as it promotes and develops thinking. It is necessary for the teaching of history through interpretation (Coltham, 1971). In order to adopt this approach the teachers can assist students in a series of low-order questions followed by high-order ones and back again to low-order questions. This is a form of scaffolding. Through this process of scaffolding and responding to the students’ learning efforts the teacher can generate higher order thinking and this will be reflected in the talk.

There also can be other variations in teacher talk. A teacher can initiate interaction, perpetuate interaction and terminate overt interaction (Coltham 1975, p.28). The function of teacher talk has been listed by Good & Brophy (2000), by King, Barry, Maloney & Tayler (1993) in their MAKITAB instrument, and by Young (1992) in his ‘functions of teacher questions’. The Verbal Interaction Category System devised by Amidon and Hunter (1967) contains categories of teacher and student verbal behaviour that include for example the initiating responding-evaluating cycle; asking product questions; choice questions; praising students; and affirming correct answers.

For the subject history there are certain domain specific elements which students need to master to enable them to perform at a higher cognitive level. These go beyond the skills of simple recall of information, comprehension and application and involve the skills required for historical interpretations and explanations such as analysis, inference, conceptual understanding of such things as continuity and change. Booth (1983, p.109) refers to the mode of historical thinking as “adductive historical thought”. He explains that the logic of historical thought is more adductive than deductive. This is because historical thought involves imagination and empathy and these cannot be described in terms of logical structures and hypothetico-deductive thinking. They require abstract thinking. Booth (1983) found that students in the fourth and fifth years could think adductively, and therefore, he believes that discursive, open ended discussions in class may allow the students to have a better understanding of History. This is because students and teachers have to negotiate, discuss, raise questions and hypotheses to understand past events and issues. That is to say, teachers and students have to use language to recreate and interpret history.

Therefore, the following research questions were addressed in this study:

1. What is the nature of the talk in the history classrooms in Singapore?
2. What are the patterns of interactions?
3. Are there critical incidents where talk leads to historical thinking processes

Method

The data was gathered from five Singaporean Schools. Six secondary history teachers and one each of their classes participated in the study. Of the six teachers, two were teaching special stream, two express and two normal stream classes. In Singapore schools approximately 10% of students are in Special stream, 50% in the express stream and 40% in the normal stream. The students were aged fifteen and sixteen years.
Procedure

Each teacher was asked to conduct two double period lessons, each lasting for about sixty minutes, with the same class. They were required to conduct lessons that they felt comfortable with and had conducted with other classes before. The teachers were informed that the interest was on the nature of talk in the classroom. Data was collected by observation and field notes.

Analysis

The twelve audio/video taped lessons were transcribed using regular orthography by the researcher. The transcription procedures used in this research were based on those advocated by Bellack et al (1966). A line of discourse was 10cms of type written transcript. All complete utterances of less than one line were counted as one line.

Coding:

The transcripts were coded in the following ways to determine:

i. the nature of talk, the type of teacher and student talk, and the interaction between them

ii. the patterns of interaction

And based on these two,

iii. critical episodes were identified.

To address the first research question the data were coded to determine the nature of talk. The coding was undertaken using a category system that describes the macro moves involved in a) Teacher talk, b) Student talk and c) other classroom talk (e.g., presentational talk, verbalising while writing, and, talk off task). This system of macromoves is based on that outlined by Amidon and Hunter (1966). It also incorporates the questioning genre of Young (1992) and the descriptive categories of student talk described by Barnes and Todd (1995).

The macro moves were coded in the following way:

a. Teacher Talk

Seven types of teacher talk were identified and coded. They include the times when the teacher 1) gives information, 2) gives direction or states procedure, 3) asks closed or pseudo question, 4) asks open questions, 5) accepts ideas, 6) rejects ideas, and 7) disciplines students.

b. Student Talk
In this section five types of student talk were identified categorised and coded. The categories consist of times when, 1) student(s) respond to the teacher in predictable ways, 2) student(s) respond to the teacher in unpredictable ways, 3) student(s) initiate talk with the teacher, 4) student(s) respond to each other, and 5) a student initiates talk with another student.

c. Other Talk

In addition to teacher and student talk, other kinds of talk also occurred in the observed history classrooms. In this study these were coded as the teacher verbalises while writing on the board or when a student verbalises doing a writing task with a group of students, b) a student makes a formal oral presentation in class as required in a group presentation c) students engage in computer mediated talk, and d) teachers and students engage in talk which is "off task". The categories, with examples, are shown below:

Patterns of interaction in the history classroom

As a first step to investigate the patterns of interaction between the teacher and students, a matrix system was used. This was adapted from Amidon and Hunter (1966, p.216). Transcript data were entered into a matrix and the sequence of interaction identified.

From the matrix it was possible to identify the recurring patterns of interaction in the various history lessons. These were grouped according to ten major functions of teacher and student talk. There were also variations within these major categories and they were also identified and recorded. The following are the ten major categories.

A Teacher explanation pattern
B Teacher explanation leading to questioning
C Teacher multiple questioning
D Teacher questioning followed by student response
E Student response followed by Teacher treatment of student response
F Teacher response to student response
G Teacher negative response followed by student response
H Student initiating talk to teacher and teacher response
I Student initiating talk to peer and peer response/teacher response

J Other types of talk and teacher response

To address the third research question the next step in the analysis was to identify the "critical episodes." These were the episodes that appeared to involve talk that focused on historical thinking processes. For this study, critical incidents were those interactions where teacher talk and the student responses reflect higher order thought processes (e.g., adductive, reflective, imaginative, and empathetic thinking). Further, critical incidents only occurred some of the times in these interactions. In order to identify the critical incidents an in-depth fine grained, but high inference, analysis was undertaken. This system was based on the analysis described by Barnes and Todd (1995), Young (1992) and Raths, Wassermann, Jonas & Rothstein (1986), and Brophy (1990).

To undertake this identification it was necessary to consider the paralinguistic features of the teachers and students and the other metacommunication used in the interaction. Features such as "thinking fillers" (cognitive cues like "ah…ah…"), hesitation and self monitoring (as demonstrated in pauses and change of direction) were also used to identify these critical episodes. Overall, however, interactions were coded as 'critical episodes' when the teacher's talk appeared to prompt higher order thought responses by the students.

Findings

Teacher talk appears to be the predominant type of talk in all the lessons. As can be seen in Table 1 below, on average it represents more than 50% of the total classroom talk and in some instances more than 70%. In contrast, the student talk directed at either the teacher or to other students constitute 28% of the class talk. Other types of talk, such as verbalising while writing, making presentations, computer forum discussions, off task talk and code switching takes up only 8% of the talk time.

Table 1

Categories showing the distribution of classroom talk in the twelve lessons(%)
Teacher Talk

Teacher talk in the twelve history classrooms occurs mainly in the form of providing content (28%), talk used in order to manage the class or information (27%), and talk relating to the students’ responses (22%). The asking of closed questions questions is apparent in all the classrooms. Further, more of these types of questions are asked (13%) compared to the open questions which make up only 8% of teacher talk. There is, however, very little teacher talk in the form of explicit rejection of students' answers (1%) or in the form of talk used to discipline students in class (1%).

Table 2

Categories showing distribution of types of Teacher Talk in the twelve lessons (%)
The difference in the teacher talk appeared to vary more according to the different methods of teaching they employed, than according to the stream they taught.

**Student Talk**

The student talk represented on average only 28% of the talk time in the twelve history lessons. This was shown in Table 1. Of this 68% was student talk directed specifically to the teacher. This occurred in the form of predictable responses to the teacher’s questions (27%), unpredictable responses (21%), or the raising of questions by the student to the teacher (20%). On the other hand, the total amount of peer talk (i.e. student to student) was only 33%. Most of this talk involved responding to peers (20%) rather than initiating talk with them (13%). The proportion of different types of student talk are shown in Table 3 below.

Table 3

Categories showing distribution of types of Student talk in the twelve lessons

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Special Stream</th>
<th>Express Stream</th>
<th>Normal Stream</th>
<th>mean</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Teacher one</td>
<td>Teacher Two</td>
<td>Teacher Three</td>
<td>Teacher Four</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I</td>
<td>II</td>
<td>III</td>
<td>IV</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ST1</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ST2</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ST3</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>74</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>76</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Again nature of student talk varied according to the stream and the teaching method employed by the teacher. As with teacher talk, the variation appears to be determined by the methodology employed rather than according to the stream of the students.

Other types of talk

There was some variation in the other types of talk used in the various streams, as shown in Table 4 below. Information Technological assisted talk only appeared in special stream lesson I. Perhaps because of the nature of this talk, the lesson carried the highest percentage for presentation talk (47%). However, special stream lesson IV also had a similar percentage of this type of talk but here, the student was presenting her project to the class.

Table 4

Categories showing distribution of types of other talk in the twelve lessons %
Code switching however, was only apparent in the Normal stream lessons IX, X, XI, XII and in two Express stream lessons IV and V. It occurred most of the time in talk with the peers when the students were involved in group activities such as in Express stream lesson V and Normal stream lesson X. However, in Normal stream lessons code switching occurred both in teacher led lessons and in group activities. For example, there were instances when both teacher and students used "Singlish" terms. There was very little of such talk in the other special stream and express stream lessons.

Interaction patterns

While the ten main patterns of interaction appeared in most of the twelve lessons the variations of these patterns and other formations within these main patterns were predominant and apparent in the various streams and in methodological approaches adopted by the teachers. The interaction patterns also varied according to the ability of the streams. This was probably due to the fact that there was more verbal dexterity on the part of the students in Special stream. They also seemed to participate confidently with both teacher and with their peers. In contrast the normal stream students provided one-word answers and used instances of home and playground language in their interaction with the teacher and peers.

The most prevalent recurring interaction pattern was when the teacher gave content or procedure information followed by the asking of closed or open questions.

Further, the teacher’s questioning was in many instances multiple questioning with various patterns of interaction being employed. For example, the teacher asked a closed question followed by the provision of procedure of information, a closed question was asked followed by the teacher giving content information. Alternatively some of the closed questions were followed by other closed questions or open questions were followed by other open questions.

Other prominent interaction patterns included when the Teacher’s questioning was followed by student’s response, and where students gave either predictable or unpredictable responses, or raised a question themselves in response to the teacher. Sometimes the teacher called out the name of the student to respond, or asked procedural questions like "any more" to probe students further.

Another common pattern of interaction included those times when a student’s predictable, or even unpredictable response, was followed by a teacher’s response. The teacher’s treatment of a student’s response included either acceptance of the student’s idea, or the
further development of the student's ideas. In turn this sometimes lead to another open or closed question. At other times the student's response can also lead to teacher providing procedural information.

The teacher's further response to student responses resulted in other interaction patterns that occurred regularly in the twelve lessons, but less so than those outlined above. They occurred in active discussions in the classroom as the teacher developed student contributions by giving additional information either content or procedurals or by asking open and closed questions.

Teacher's response on some rare occasions were negative and, in turn, this was followed by a student's response when the students attempts at another answer.

Student's sometimes initiated talk to the teacher after the teacher gave content or procedural information or students raised questions to the teacher may have responded sometimes with another question. Students also initiated talk to peers and their peers responded accordingly, although there were times when the peer responses took the form of another question. This was a common pattern when students are engaged in group activities. At times student initiated talk to peers resulted in the teacher providing the response.

Other types of talk such as a student presentation was often followed by a teacher's response or, alternatively, by another student initiating talk. These patterns only occurred rarely and only occurred in one special stream class when presentation was followed by teacher providing procedural and content information by other students raising questions to the presenter.

**Critical Episodes**

Critical episodes in this research refer to instances in the classroom talk when teacher and students are engaged in the process of establishing a historical understanding through adductive reasoning and empathy. These episodes occurred:

1. when the 'voice' of the teacher mediated between the historical past and made 'contact' with the students (this seemed to generate both historical and empathetic thinking).
2. when in student talk, the student contradicted a statement made by a peer.
3. in interaction when the discourse and social moves of teachers and students accorded in combination with the cognitive strategies. For example it occurred when a question, or multiple questions was asked by the teacher to promote reflection. It also occurred when a student raised a question to challenge or question the teacher.

When these critical episodes occurred in teacher talk, there appeared to be a kind of "disfluency" punctuated by metacommunication features, hesitation fillers, cognitive markers and cues, pragmatic markers, discourse markers that signalled change of direction, and / or fragmented sentences. It was apparent that the teacher was trying to mediate between the historical facts, his/her own thoughts and by his/her attempts to establish contact with the students in order to generate empathy. An example is given below. (The features are in italics).
Example I

In this example Mr Siva, in trying to interprete historical events is not only interacting with the students but has a dialogical interaction with the characters in history, Raffles, Bannerman, Warren Hastings and Farquhar resulting in the teacher recontextualising the discourse to enable students to empathise with the history personalities.

"TT:

Raffles had actually asked for help from the ...governor of Penang...ah...the governor of Penang F.G. Bannerman...but...he had done very little to counter Dutch influence in the east Indies...so...Raffles since the middle manager...alright...wasn't too...ah...helpful Raffles went one notch up ...alright...went up to the head in India in Bengal...ah...the governor general of India in Bengal...ah...the governor general of India at that point of time was Warren Hastings...alright ...and he...ah...gave Raffles...ah...more support ...in fact ... he gave Raffles permission to set up a base ...ah...but...he said that whatever you do do not offend the Dutch...okay...if whatever base you have selected...ah...they have been occupied by the Dutch then you would have to abandon the project...okay...ah...and when Raffles went to Penang...alright...after getting help from William Farquhar ...and all that...he was informed by Bannerman that the Dutch had occupied Rhio islands..."

Example 2

Critical incidens in group talk occurred when students contradicted statements or comments made by the group members and qualified these comments with their own ideas building on historical evidence. This promoted adductive thinking as students formed new hypotheses. When students were engaged in such talk they were using exploratory talk. It was apparent by their uses of such features as fragmented sentences, change of direction, initiating talk with the phrase, "I think," use of pragmatic and discourse markers, and cognitives markers indicating a monitoring of talk.

"Ding: why Farquhar is not being in Singapore is because of Raffles...because...unnecessarily they fired him and sent him back home in England...right...that wrong deed to Farquhar was righted there was ...an announcement made then Farquhar redeemed his prestige...but...in Singapore everybody still doesn’t like him

Kong: but...I think...also that the achievements by Farquhar are
are ...are not like monumental or or they are not like big

Ding: no...but...the things those contributions that he made were vital to the survival of Singapore in its budding stages

Kong: I know...they were they were they were vital ...but...the only people who would truly realise the importance...would be people at that time and they are all dead ...yeah

Ding: but...we have to look back in retrospect and realise...that without Farquhar there would be no Singapore

Kong: obviously without Raffles obviously the lack of ...popularity now with Farquhar shows that there haven’t been people going back to look at Farquhar’s achievements

Ding:

they have ...but...the main point that they have that the... main reason why he is not that great is ...because...he was fired and he was put in such a bad light ..."

Example 3

Critical incidents in student teacher talk

Mr Aziz, is having a class discussion on evolution and revolution. He poses multiple questions which comprise an open followed by a closed question This appears to trigger an active discussion with students showing their ability to comprehend talk of a higher order. The students respond to the teachers both by evaluating and interpreting information and by drawing on evidence from history. This drawing of conclusions and inferences from evidence are indications of higher order thinking in history. Further the students then go on to raise hypotheses and new questions and to challenge and contradict each other. This often happened as the students competed with one another for the floor. The student talk was also exploratory in nature as there was several changes of direction, overlapping of speech, fragmented sentences, restarts and hesitations. These features appear to show adductive thinking.
"TT: it is very close to the countries that we have looked...Germany China Japan...what kind of a revolution did they have...did they have a revolution or evolution...what about Russia

ST: revolution

TT: definitely a/...revolution...what about Japan

ST: little bit like a revolution than an evolution

ST: actually it is more capitalism

TT: how how do you define what happened in Japan Meiji

ST: a speeded up revolution

ST: rapid revolution

TT: rapid revolution

ST: [a peaceful revolution]

ST: [[I am thinking of ...]]

ST: [[[I mean that ...]]]

TT: one at a time one at a time one at a time

ST: roughly what I would say ...it is not violent ...but...it wasn't that slow as it was...

TT: when we talk about Japan talk about Japan

ST: no...reformation

TT: there was/

ST: there was reformation

ST: I think...

ST: revolution... is like...this whole big thing...but...when you reform it is just making changes

ST: the government did not change...but ...it was the policies that were changed
Conclusion

The research is an exploratory one but it indicates the importance of talk and interaction in the history classroom in teasing out historical facts and ideas. When students and teacher are engaged in the historical thinking processes like adductive and empathetic thinking, which require them to perform at a higher level of mental capacity, there are certain language demands made on the teacher and the students. This research provides some insight into these demands made on the ‘propositional’ and ‘exploratory talk’ of teachers and students in the history classroom.

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