

Towards a Pedagogical Framework for Participatory Learning in EAP

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Participation of students in spoken activities within the classroom is an essential part of the aim of many English medium higher education institutions across Asia to enhance the English language proficiency of their undergraduate populations. However, while many researchers and teachers have discussed the alleged reticence of Asian learners, only limited attention has been given to understanding the process of how second language learners participate in oral activities within the undergraduate classroom. This paper draws on interviews, observational data and recordings of classroom interaction collected as part of a larger ethnographic study of Chinese-background undergraduates in an English medium of instruction university in Asia. The paper begins by exploring some of the assumptions about Chinese learners' participation in spoken activities and then reveals how the epistemological assumptions made within the English for academic purposes (EAP) classroom shaped one group of freshmen business and economics students' participation in spoken activities. A framework for promoting student participation in spoken activities is then outlined and implications for future research are discussed.

Key words: classroom discourse, reticence, epistemology, English for Academic Purposes

INTRODUCTION

Hong Kong, a special administrative region of the People's Republic of China, has two official languages, English and Chinese. Cantonese however is the mother tongue of the majority of the ethnic Chinese who comprise more than 95% of the population. While tertiary institutions in Hong Kong have adopted English as their medium of instruction (EMI), for the majority of students English represents an auxiliary language, used only for specific purposes such as education or business (Li, Leung, & Kember, 2001). It is not surprising then that doubts have been raised about whether some students entering tertiary institutions possess the necessary language skills required for undergraduate study. The University of Hong Kong, for example, has identified a need to "help students with weaker language abilities to reach the threshold level for using English as the medium for learning" (University of Hong Kong, 2004, p. 28).

English for academic purposes (EAP) courses play a central role in providing this assistance, ensuring that graduates of tertiary institutions in Hong Kong are equipped with the linguistic skills necessary for academic and professional success (Evans & Green, 2007; Hyland, 1997).

Enhancing the spoken English proficiency of Hong Kong undergraduate students could however be problematic. The alleged reticence of Asian learners (Cheng, 2000; Flowerdew & Miller, 1995; Jackson, 2002; Kim, 2006; Tsui, 1996) is believed to be "a common source of frustration and bewilderment for lecturers in Hong Kong and other parts of Asia" (Jackson, 2002, pp. 65-66). Although it is thought that in a suitably supportive classroom environment Asian students are capable of and indeed enjoy active participation in classroom activities in English (Littlewood, 2000; Liu & Littlewood, 1997; Tan & Goh, 2006; Zhou, Knoke, & Sakamoto, 2005), there is a need for greater understanding of how these students participate in spoken activities as well as specific classroom conditions that support and encourage this participation. This is because classroom based research concerned with the second language learners' participation in oral activities

has been limited when compared to areas such as writing (Basturkmen, 2003; Flowerdew & Peacock, 2001; Robinson, Strong, Whittle, & Nobe, 2001). This paper addresses the need to further explore how Chinese students participate in spoken activities at EMI tertiary institutions. The paper begins by considering the reasons why use of the spoken language by Asian learners is thought to be limited in EMI classrooms. Drawing on interviews, observational data and audiovisual recordings of classroom events, the paper then presents the results of an ethnographic study of Chinese-background undergraduate students' participation in spoken activities in language classrooms at the University of Hong Kong. The implications of this research for encouraging students' use of spoken English at EMI tertiary institutions are then discussed. Suggestions for future research are also considered.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Anxiety has long been regarded as one possible explanation for the alleged reticence of second language learners (Horwitz, Horwitz, & Cope, 1986). Tsui's (1996) study of 38 secondary school ESL teachers in Hong Kong suggests five factors that are thought to generate anxiety amongst Hong Kong learners and account for their supposed reticence in the classroom: low English language proficiency, a fear of being seen to make mistakes, the teachers' own dislike of silence in the classroom, a tendency to ask questions of brighter students, and the inability of students to comprehend and understand the instructions and questions of their teachers. Jackson (2002) also describes the anxiety experienced by a group of Chinese undergraduate business studies students who were required to take part in case-based classroom discussions at one university in Hong Kong. The most reticent students lacked confidence in both their ideas as well as their command of the English language.

Concern over learners' language proficiency is also reflected in several surveys of language use and attitudes at different English medium institutions

in Hong Kong. Littlewood and Liu (1996) surveyed 2,156 first year undergraduate students across four universities in Hong Kong and found that 36% experienced “a lot of difficulty” with unplanned speaking (Littlewood & Liu, 1996, p. 31). Hyland (1997) used a self-reporting questionnaire to investigate the perceptions of 1619 undergraduates about the role of English in academic success across five English medium universities in Hong Kong. Many respondents felt that the level of English language proficiency necessary for academic success was almost twice that of their current self-assessed proficiency level. It was the productive skills, writing and speaking, that the students believed caused them the greatest difficulty. More recently, Evans and Green (2007) undertook a questionnaire survey of 4932 undergraduates across all departments at one English medium university in Hong Kong. Sixty percent of students reported difficulty in speaking accurately in English while 40% suggested that communicating ideas fluently is difficult. Evans and Green (2007) conclude that “inadequate basic language competence results in a lack of confidence as students struggle to accomplish macro-linguistic tasks of a complex nature” (p. 15).

As Littlewood and Liu (1996) note, oral participation in the classroom involves not only language ability but also perceptions about the role of learners in the educational process. Flowerdew and Millar (1995) argue that the role of the learner in the Hong Kong classroom may result in part from the influence of the learners’ ethnic culture, that is, the social-psychological features which affect the behaviour of students. The negative attitude towards classroom participation of some Chinese learners could reflect influences such as the importance of showing respect for one’s teacher and the Confucian emphasis on harmony and face saving (Cortazzi & Jin, 1996; Flowerdew & Miller, 1995; Jackson, 2002; Jones, 1999).

Other research however challenges explanations of Asian learner reticence based solely on linguistic or cultural characteristics of individual learners. Such understandings are argued to downplay the role of power differentials between different languages, cultures and knowledge in accounting for second language learners’ participation in classroom discussion (Morita,

2004; Zhou, Knoke, & Sakamoto, 2005). The alleged reticence of Asian learners has also been described as a “myth” (Kennedy, 2002) or as a “misunderstanding” (Kember, 2000). Kember (2000), for instance, reports on the introduction of alternative teaching and learning methods, including problem-based learning, group projects and peer teaching, across eight universities and colleges in Hong Kong. Evaluation of the project, through questionnaires and interviews with participants, indicated strong student support. Kember (2000) concludes that “the impression that Hong Kong students prefer passive learning and resist teaching innovations can have little or no foundation” (p. 110). Kennedy (2002) notes that Chinese learners might be regarded as reflective rather than passive, with much interaction between teacher and student taking place outside the classroom. Given this ongoing debate, calls have been made for more research, in particular ethnographic investigations of learner participation in classroom discussion in different higher education settings throughout Asia (Jackson, 2002). Such research may provide both content and language teachers with a greater understanding of their students and lead to more effective communication in the undergraduate classroom.

METHOD

This study investigates participation in classroom discussion by one group of Chinese second language learners at an EMI tertiary institution in Hong Kong. The experiences of a small number of learners and their teachers are examined within classroom contexts to reveal the participants’ definition of the situation. A feature of this type of research is that the researcher is encouraged to use triangulation. Therefore, to better understand learners’ participation in classroom discussion, as well as the thoughts and feelings of both teachers and students about this participation, data were collected from different sources using various methods over an entire semester.

Context and Participants

The study was conducted at the University of Hong Kong, an English medium tertiary level institution in Hong Kong. Undergraduates at the university are required to complete a one semester credit-bearing English for Academic Purposes (EAP) course designed to prepare them for the language demands of their particular disciplinary specialization. At the time of this study the student participants, all freshmen economics majors, were enrolled in the EAP module entitled 'English for Academic Communication: Economics and Finance' (hereafter EAC). The spoken language plays an important role in EAC, reflected partly in the fact 20 percent of each students' final grade is allocated to their performance in an individual oral presentation, with a further 20 percent of this grade based upon each students' participation in spoken activities within the classroom throughout the semester. Other assessment items in EAC include an essay, a quiz and a vocabulary test. Eight EAC Chinese students, four males and four females, were invited to take part in the study. In addition, two English language teachers responsible for the delivery of EAC classes were asked to participate in the study on the basis of their prior experience in teaching this course. In this paper the names of all participants are pseudonyms.

Data Collection

Collection and analysis of data was guided by the following research question: How can oral classroom participation by Chinese undergraduate students be promoted in English medium universities in Hong Kong? Multiple methods of data collection were used. I observed four EAC classes, two conducted by each of the language teachers who participated in the study, for 12 weeks throughout Semester 1 of the 2005-2006 academic year. Interviews were also conducted with both the students and their teachers. An initial interview was conducted with students and EAC teachers seeking background biographical information as well as their thoughts and feelings

about participating in classroom discussion. Both the students and EAC teachers were also interviewed every week through the semester in which they reported their immediate reactions to each class. All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. In addition, audiovisual recordings were made of two EAC classes throughout week's five to nine of the semester. Selected segments of the audiovisual material that were deemed relevant to answering the research question outlined above were transcribed. Finally, the data base also included relevant documents such as statements of the university language policy, the undergraduate prospectus, the EAC course handbook as well as classroom handouts.

Data Analysis

Data collection and analysis were closely linked in an iterative and on-going process that occurred throughout the entire semester in which the study was conducted. Initial coding of data involved the search for themes across the set of data that was being collected. These themes were initially represented using the "indigenous concepts" (Patton, 2002, p. 454) employed by the participants themselves, including "an active class" and "freedom". Data was coded according to these categories and tentative propositions were developed with the aim of constructing a coherent understanding of the classroom discourse as it was experienced by the participants in this study. In this sense, the analytical framework was not pre-determined or imposed but was grounded in the data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). As the data were read and re-read I undertook a more "systematic inquiry into the data" (Miles & Huberman, 1984). At this stage of the data analysis more theoretical categories, such as 'classroom roles' and 'pedagogical decisions', emerged. These emerging understandings were then tested against the data by searching for alternative explanations and negative cases. This was assisted by the steps taken to triangulate data sources and methods of collection. This allowed for the data to be compared across different sources and locations – teachers, students and classes - as well as through different methods of

collection - interviews, observations, classroom recordings and documents.

Findings

Speaking in the EAC Classroom

An important finding of this study is that students are able and willing to take part in classroom discussion within the EAP classroom. Before commencing classroom observation and lesson recording, I asked both of the English language teachers, referred to here as Karen and Anne, to reflect upon their experiences of teaching EAC. Both teachers argued that one of the reasons they enjoyed teaching economics students was the enthusiasm they displayed when provided with the opportunity to contribute to classroom discussion. Karen and Anne attributed their learners' interest in oral participation partly to the characteristics of the learners themselves. Karen, for example, described economics students as, in general, "intelligent", "hardworking", "willing", with English language skills that are, "for the most part, pretty good" (Karen, EAC teacher). The apparent willingness of economics students to participate in spoken interaction was confirmed both by my own classroom observations as well as the learners' descriptions of their experiences in EAC:

"it's really a pretty active class (EAC), really a lot of speaking and talking, always like back and forth – teacher and students and then the students to each other...sometimes we just all seem to be talking at once, yeh, it's a noisy class sometimes" (Elizabeth, EAC student).

"We (students) do a lot of talking in that class (EAC), in every lesson so far, its been like a very active time for all the students, we always seem to be talking to her (the teacher) or to the other classmates" (Ivy, EAC student).

"I think so far it's the class (EAC) where we (students) are most (orally) active in the whole (EF) program (Andrew, EAC student).

The remainder of this section discusses the factors that appear to account for the willingness and ability of this group of students to participate in spoken activities within their EAP classroom.

Careers

EAC is viewed positively by students partly because of the opportunities it provides to practice and to improve their oral English, a skill these learners believe will be essential in entering and advancing within their imagined future professional or academic careers:

After study I will probably work in a large bank or international company in Hong Kong, so to get that kind of job your spoken English must be very good (Tony, EAC student).

For my future career, most likely I will work in the finance field, probably for an international company in Hong Kong, I hope, so I need good English to communicate with the foreigners, the clients. If I don't, then I think I can't really get a better position in the company (Robert, EAC student).

I want to do more study overseas, like a master's degree maybe in the States, so I need good English speaking skills to get in those top colleges (Amanda, EAC student).

The willingness of learners to participate in classroom discourse reported by Anne and Karen could be due in part to the connections students established between their immediate involvement in oral activities within the EAC classroom and their imagined future professional and educational experiences

Classroom Atmosphere

The premium EAC students appeared to place on enhancing their spoken

English skills may be one reason why they did not report feeling compelled or forced into speaking in the classroom, either by their language teachers or by the need to meet the assessment requirements of the EAC module. For example, when asked to comment on the EAC assessment practice of allocating 20 percent of the students' final mark to oral participation in classroom, six of the eight students indicated support for this approach. As Ivy put it, an oral participation mark "might push any students which is a bit shy to say more" (Ivy, EAC student). However all of the student participants claimed that the mark had little influence on their own classroom behaviour. Rather, the students believed that their participation in classroom discussions improved what Elizabeth termed the "classroom atmosphere", making EAC lessons "fun", "interesting" and "enjoyable". Amanda, for instance, argued that her contribution to spoken activities in EAC is unaffected by this grade because "it's just more fun in that class if we can interact with the others, I think we'd all (students) talk as much (as we now do) even if speaking is not for marks or anything like that, anything to do with our (EAC) grade" (Amanda, EAC student). For Elizabeth, the oral participation mark is "not a big deal, I don't think about it at all, I just want to talk (in class) anyway, if we all talk then the class is more interesting, so I don't think that (participation) mark makes a difference to me" (Elizabeth, EAC student).

Learners' Perceptions of Classroom Roles

Participation in spoken activities can also be considered in terms of the learners' understandings about the purpose of EAC and their own identity within the classroom. For these learners, EAC was closely associated with use and development of their spoken language skills. Amanda, for example, characterized EAC as "basically a speaking class". For Tony, "this class (EAC) is really about students talking to improve their oral (English)". Ivy summarized the students' understandings about the purpose of EAC:

"The main thing about EAC is oral English. We do the individual presentation for marks, but also we do a lot of group work every week,

discussing different topics. As well we have (a) group presentation every week, so I think all that really makes it (oral English) the most important part of the (EAC) course” (Ivy, EAC student).

Students’ perceptions about their own role within this “speaking class” also shaped their participation in oral activities. For example, all the students agreed that an important part of their role within EAC was oral participation:

Students should speak up, respond to the teacher and other students and give opinions (Tony, EAC student).

We (students) need to contribute to the discussions and help the classmates by giving all our ideas and suggestions to them during the class (Teresa, EAC student).

I think in the English class if you are going to really be a part of the class then you should speak up and make some (oral) contributions, otherwise you will definitely feel sort of left out of the group (Amanda, EAC student).

Amanda’s comment suggests that speaking in EAC is closely tied to each student’s identity as a member of EAC and that the failure to participate in spoken activities would mark a student as an outsider.

Teachers’ Perceptions of Classroom Roles

The role of the learner as an active participant in spoken activities within EAC was endorsed and supported by both language teachers. Karen maintained that participating in spoken activities was an essential part of the responsibilities of an EAC student: “I want them (students) to speak, to participate, to negotiate answers and to be asking the good questions”. For Anne, oral participation positions students not only as members of EAC but more broadly as members of the university community:

I emphasize critical thinking skills. I think, after all, that’s one of the

characteristics of a university student, so I encourage students to put forward their ideas and opinions in class and encourage others to critically discuss and debate what they're hearing and to put forward alternative views. It's what a university student is supposed to do" (Anne, EAC teacher).

The language teachers conceptualized their own classroom role as one of guiding learners through this process of discussion, negotiation and debate:

My job is not to just transfer information. I give students choice, I try to lay out options and tell them to take or reject it. I say, here it is, take it if you want, develop it or reject, fine, but come up with something that works better for you and justify it. So I assist or maybe support negotiation; students negotiate with me and with each other about what they're going to do and what they're going to say in this class. Of course at the end of the day I need to give them a grade; they need to do certain things like an OP (oral presentation), we can't change that. But on a day to day basis my role is to help them to negotiate and debate with me and each other what's important for them, what their understandings are, what knowledge they ultimately want to take away from this (EAC class) (Karen, EAC teacher).

A lot of the conclusions students make about things comes from their own discussion. I'm there just to help out if needed, but mostly its up to them to shape the discussion and to reach their own conclusions. So my role in the classroom, in terms of discussion, is to set things going, then it's more or less hands off until, and if, I'm really needed (Anne, EAC teacher).

Within their respective classrooms both Karen and Anne appeared to adopt the role of navigator, guiding students as they used classroom discussion as a means of constructing their own knowledge and understandings.

Teachers' Pedagogical Approach

The emphasis Anne and Karen place on students negotiating and reaching their own conclusions was reflected in the pedagogical decisions taken by the

English language teachers. For example, pair work and small group discussions involving four to five students were used extensively in all EAC classrooms. Karen argued that apart from providing her learners with much needed practice in the use of the spoken language, group work was a forum for students to shape what, how and when they contributed to classroom discussions. Anne commented that EAC students “really seem to like the group work, I think they appreciate the freedom they get from talking to each other and not just (talking) to me or listening to me all the time” (Anne, EAC teacher).

This approach to pedagogy was supported by the classroom language teachers used. Anne, for instance, frequently reminded her students of the importance of learning from each other and of making decisions together. Karen often stressed the gains to learning that resulted from group and pair work, pointing out to her students that “we all work better when we’re working together” and by asking learners to “pool your knowledge, see what (ideas) you can come up with that’s different from what you could get working alone” (EAC classroom observation).

In addition, both EAC teachers emphasized that the ability of learners to shape their own contributions to classroom discussion was not limited by linguistic proficiency. Karen encouraged her students to “make all the (language) mistakes you want, nothing you say in here (EAC) is wrong” (EAC classroom observation). Anne agreed, arguing that:

I would never say their (students) language is not good, I say ‘wow’, the fact that they’re out there speaking is a good thing (Anne, EAC teacher).

Both EAC teachers therefore stated a preference for communication over accuracy in terms of student contributions to classroom discussion. This attitude appeared to support the spoken role learners were expected to and wanted to play within EAC. In particular, the attitude to language use expressed by both Karen and Anne encouraged learners to take linguistic risks as they attempted to shape the processes and products of classroom discussion.

Task Design and Implementation

Five students reported that they valued the freedom EAC afforded them to influence both the process as well as the outcome of their participation in spoken activities:

It's really a fun class mainly because the teacher just gives us (students) the bare bones (of a discussion topic) and then we can decide whatever, what we want to say or how we react, positive or negative (Elizabeth, EAC student).

There's lots of chances for us to decide what to talk about. Even we need to do the OP (oral presentation) it's still really up to us what to talk about and what point of view to take, like agree with something or not. So I think it's a lot of freedom (in EAC) (Robert, EAC student).

What I like in EAC is that we are much more freer. I mean, we (students) decide a lot of the things about the discussions and about our own (oral) presentations (Teresa, EAC student).

The freedom students enjoyed to shape the nature of spoken activities meant that knowledge formation within the EAC classroom was not guided solely by the discipline of economics and finance. This is not to imply that the disciplinary context was unimportant, as seen in student initiated discussion topics such as the introduction of a minimum wage in Hong Kong and the economic impact of the opening of Disneyland in Hong Kong. However the scope of classroom discussion extended beyond the language of economics and finance to reflect the current life experiences of learners and included topics such as housing, sports and popular culture.

Classroom Discourse

The discourse of the EAC classroom illustrates how some of the different roles that these teachers and students adopted were put into practice. The

extract below suggests how debate and negotiation between the teacher and the student as well as amongst students themselves were carried out in EAC. In this example, taken from Karen's classroom, one student has completed a two minute individual oral presentation to the class on the role and status of the beauty industry in Hong Kong. Karen begins by asking the class to provide feedback to the presenter:

Karen: Right, now, question for everyone; what would you like to hear in terms of the content, anything she (the presenter) could add, anything that you would be interested in hearing about?

Student 1: How does appearance change the daily life?

Karen: Ok, how does appearance influence...

Student 1: Our daily life.

Karen: Our daily life (turns to the class). Ok, in this topic what would you like to know? What would you like to know?

Student 2: Which part of their daily life?

Karen: Which parts of their daily life? Yes, which part of their daily life, what do you think your audience would like to know? So the first thing you do when you plan to make your presentation interesting is you think about your audience, analyze them what would they like to know. So what parts of daily life do you want to know about?

Student 3: I want to know, how does the appearance influence the career? Do the people who are more pretty or handsome, can they earn more?

Karen: Ok, who else wants to know something about that? Who thinks (she) should include that in her presentation?

SS raise hands

Karen: Ok, about 90 per cent, I think, of the audience wants to hear about that, appearance and career, so think about it and you decide if it's something you want to include in your presentation for next time. (EAC classroom video recording)

In this extract the teacher, Karen, demonstrates how she puts into practice

her stated classroom role of assisting student negotiation by eliciting students' opinions and suggestions about what they want to be included in this particular oral presentation. Providing students with the freedom to make their own decisions about the type of information and knowledge that was important for them, what they would "like to know", was an essential component of Karen's pedagogical aims:

My goal, in that situation, was not to tell the student what to say or that they must include this or that in the presentation. I've given them freedom to select the issue and conduct whatever type analysis is relevant and interesting to them. I also want them to know that making these decisions is better together, with the input from peers, and that it's not a threatening environment, it's just that the feedback from their peers is going to make for a better, more exciting presentation (Karen, EAC teacher)

In sum, the picture that emerges is one of EAC classrooms in which participants place a premium on student involvement in classroom discussion. EAC is a setting in which oral participation is seen as an essential feature of the role students expect and want to adopt as members of their English language classroom. Student participation in spoken activities is supported by a variety of pedagogical decisions teachers take which privilege the capacity of learners to make decisions about what and how they speak in EAC. The following section discusses the implications of these findings for promoting Chinese students' participation in classroom discussion within English medium of instruction tertiary institutions.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study suggest support for those who challenge TESOL research and practice in which Asian learners are stereotyped as reluctant to take part in classroom discussion (Kumaravadivelu, 2003). The study contributes to the growing body of evidence suggesting that Chinese second

language learners are both capable and willing to participate in classroom discussion using the English language (Littlewood, 2000; Liu & Littlewood, 1997; Tan & Goh, 2006; Zhou et al., 2005). The results of this investigation also support the belief that understandings about Asian students' participation in classroom discussion should not be limited to the individual characteristics of learners, such as language proficiency or cultural heritage. Rather, student participation in spoken activities should also account for the classroom context with which such factors interact (Zhou et al., 2005). In the case of the EAC classroom this context includes the pedagogical decisions taken by teachers, the expectations of both teachers and learners about the roles of participants in the classroom, the attitudes of teachers and learners towards language use, the nature of the assessment tasks, the types and sources of knowledge and skills that are validated within the classroom as well as the skills and knowledge that learners believe to be privileged within their imagined future careers.

The results also indicate that an essential feature of the complex processes that shaped student participation in spoken activities were the epistemological beliefs which operated within the EAC classroom. Epistemological beliefs refer to the beliefs made about knowledge and knowing, including beliefs about the definition of knowledge, how knowledge is constructed and evaluated, where knowledge resides, and how knowing occurs (Hofer & Pintrich, 1997; 2002). Exploring the beliefs that teachers and students have about the type of knowledge that is privileged within the classroom has been argued to be necessary for achieving successful collaborative teaching partnerships between language and content teachers (Arkoudis, 2007; Davison, 2006). The results of this study imply that beliefs about how knowledge is constructed and how knowing occurs could be equally important in understanding second language learners' participation in classroom discussion. In the case of EAC, a crucial ingredient in ensuring students' spoken participation appeared to be the rejection by both Karen and Anne of the so-called "banking model", in which the role of the teacher is to deposit knowledge and skills into the memory banks of learners (Freire, 1970).

Rather, the views of both of these teachers about knowledge and knowing are more closely reflected in the pedagogical approach of John Dewey and the premium it places on student experience and the classroom as a social group where interaction is essential to learning (Simpson, 2006). The pedagogical decisions made by both Karen and Anne reflect a constructivist approach to knowledge and learning which positions knowledge as being co-constructed by all EAC participants (Fosnot, 2005). Importantly, the epistemological assumptions of these language teachers appeared to be welcomed by EAC students as they willingly took on the role of co-constructors of classroom knowledge and understandings. Thus, these teachers' expectations of students and their beliefs about the process of teaching, rather than the content of teaching, may have been important factors in understanding the willingness of students to participate in classroom discussion. The epistemological assumptions underpinning the approach to teaching and learning adopted by Karen and Anne are consistent with recent recommendations for facilitating Asian students' participation in spoken activities based on teachers and students co-constructing "a more open framework for embracing various forms of knowledge in the classroom setting" (Zhou et al., 2005, pp. 304-305). The EAC classroom might provide a successful case study of how this could be brought about, an issue discussed in greater detail below.

Towards a Framework for Participatory Learning

This section proposes a framework that, drawing upon the experiences of teachers and students in EAC, suggests how student participation in classroom discussion might be encouraged within the classrooms of Asian English medium tertiary institutions.

Epistemological Foundations

The results of this study suggest that the assumptions teachers and students make about knowledge and knowing can shape learners' willingness and

ability to contribute to classroom discussion. Teachers and their students in other EMI institutions could therefore begin promoting student participation in classroom discourse by negotiating over the type of epistemological assumptions that are made in their classrooms and explore how different assumptions about knowledge and knowing shape student involvement in spoken activities. In the case of EAC, the epistemological conditions that appeared to promote student oral participation included acknowledging the validity and importance of different types and sources of knowledge. Particularly important was the status given to students' life experiences beyond the classroom as legitimate forms of knowledge in EAC.

Designing and Implementing Spoken tasks

Providing learners with a high degree of control over the processes and products of spoken activities could also positively contribute to their participation in spoken activities. This step echoes Graham (2006), who argues that handing greater control over lessons to learners "may foster feelings of ownership and agency, which may lead to greater participation" (p. 27). For EAC teachers Karen and Ann this meant providing students with choice over the nature and form of their oral contributions. One aspect of this freedom was reflected in the choice students were able to make in relation to what they spoke about. Importantly, what was discussed was shaped not only by disciplinary concerns. Rather, discussion topics ranged well beyond the field of economics and finance and included current affairs, politics, the media, as well as the learners own life experiences beyond the classroom.

Another essential aspect of spoken task design and implementation in EAC was reflected in teacher attitudes towards how students participated in classroom discourse. Both Karen and Anne emphasized oral fluency over accuracy, encouraging students to take linguistic risks in their interactions with others and to view language as a tool for constructing knowledge and understandings within the EAC classroom.

Learner and Teacher Roles

The roles adopted by teachers and learners in EAC also played an important part in promoting student participation in spoken activities. Student participation in classroom discussion might be enhanced if students are able to take on the role not only of producers of classroom discourse but also directors, shaping the particular topics, materials and outcomes achieved. The role of the teacher could then be tailored to complement this student-centered oral production and direction. For example, in the case of the economics classroom instructors might assist students in establishing connections between the unique and varied experience learners bring to the design of spoken activities and established frameworks of economic theory and policy. This would ensure that students gain an adequate grounding in economic theory and practice and that the suggestions for teaching and learning made here do not result in content being compromised or diluted (Teemant et al, 1997). To achieve this, economics instructors have available a long established body of research linking economic theory and policy to broader social issues such as 'immigration', 'school', 'families', 'sport', 'discrimination', and 'crime' (Coyle, 2002). Working within such traditions, teachers would function as a bridge, both cognitively and linguistically, to assist learners as they journey between the knowledge, skills, and experiences they bring with them to the classroom and the specialized techniques and language of their content classroom.

Teachers' Professional Development

The suggestions for the design and implementation of spoken tasks could involve an alteration in the role and practices currently adopted by students and their teachers in some classrooms. However, teachers may themselves be unaccustomed to these changing patterns of classroom responsibilities and interaction. It may therefore be necessary to provide instructors with resources and training, in the form of workshops and seminars, to assist them in preparing for their role within the very different classroom environment

advocated in this study. Collaborative and co-teaching arrangements between content and language teachers could also be explored as a form of professional development (Crandall & Kaufman, 2002). Establishing these links between language and content staff could be helpful in addressing the concern that EAP has traditionally functioned for, as opposed to with, subject specialists (Hyland & Hamp-Lyons, 2002, p. 3).

CONCLUSION

This study has attempted to fill a gap in the existing research by examining participation in spoken discourse amongst one group of foreign language learners and their teachers within the language classrooms of an English medium tertiary institution in Hong Kong. An important finding was that this group of Hong Kong learners was both willing and able to participate in classroom discourse. This conclusion contrasted with some earlier research which argued that second and foreign language learners from Asian educational backgrounds are reluctant to take part in classroom discussion in both content and language classrooms. Another important finding has been to show how participants in the EAP classroom were able to successfully promote learner involvement in oral activities. The lessons provided by this study may therefore prove valuable as English medium tertiary institutions seek to integrate English enhancement throughout the curriculum. This study also raises questions and issues for teachers and researchers to consider as part of the effort to promote participation by language learners in classroom discussion. Most important is the need to investigate how different beliefs about knowledge and knowing in both language and content classrooms in English medium higher education institutions shape the willingness and ability of learners to participate in classroom discussion. While the focus of this research has been on oral fluency there is also a need to study how a focus by teachers on oral accuracy might also shape the willingness and ability of learners to participate in classroom discussion. The study does,

however, give reason for optimism that these institutions can meet the challenge of promoting the use of spoken English in all courses.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I would like to thank Professor Bill Littlewood for helpful comments on an earlier draft of this paper.

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