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Research Article

Dialogue: A Core Element in the Learning Process

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Abstract

This two-year collaborative research project aimed at understanding the role of dialogue in the EFL classroom. Both researchers teach at national universities with similar student populations, courses taught, and institutional expectations. The researchers noted that during and after COVID, engaging in meaningful discourse had become the core element in the teaching and learning process. This paper introduces key elements that helped the researchers and students engage with each other and the learning materials. Initial findings revealed how dialogue influenced teaching practices. It further showed students' preferences towards dialogic learning over independent study, or lecture-style classes. Implications from this study address the need for continued communicative teaching approaches in the L2 classroom and consistent collegial dialogue to deepen and expand current knowledge of dialogic teaching practices.

この2年間の共同研究プロジェクトは、EFL教室における対話の役割を理解することを目的としています。両研究者は、類似した学生人口、教授するコース、そして制度的期待を持つ国立大学で教えています。研究者たちは、COVIDの期間中およびその後において、意味のあるディスコースに参加することが教育と学習プロセスの核心要素となったことに注目しました。本論文では、研究者と学生が互いに、そして学習資料と関わるために役立った重要な要素を紹介します。初期の調査結果は、対話が教育実践にどのように影響を与えたかを明らかにしました。それはさらに、学生が独立学習や講義スタイルのクラスよりも対話的学習を好む傾向を示しました。この研究からの示唆は、L2教室における対話的な教育アプローチの継続と、現在の対話的教育実践の知識を深め拡大するための一貫した同僚間対話の必要性に関連しています。

This study began to take shape during COVID, when the authors frequently met online to discuss how to teach effectively in an emergency remote situation. The students, for the most part, were unfamiliar with technology and each other, which sometimes resulted in a somewhat disjointed and inactive learning space. Through ongoing dialogue, the authors managed to redesign language tasks that enabled students to successfully achieve curricular goals, as well as create an interactive environment in which students could bond with classmates. Reflecting on the challenges and successes during COVID, the authors came to the realization that the core component that helped them overcome the challenging circumstances was the consistent dialogue between themselves and the students. When classes resumed as normal, it was determined that maintaining meaningful dialogue as a core element during classroom activities would help learners to understand the learning materials more deeply, produce work at the expected standard, and retain the information learned longer. It was further observed that consistent collegial dialogue during the design and development of learning materials resulted in faster lesson planning and tasks that led to a more active classroom.

The term "dialogue" has been gathering momentum in classroom teaching in recent years, as research continues to show that meaningful interaction in the L2 classroom contributes to the (co-)construction of knowledge and challenges learners to think more critically about the course content. In the second language classroom, what might come to mind for many instructors is communication-style teaching activities, such as role-play, pair work, or presentations. Typically, this kind of dialogue focuses on teaching linguistic components to meet specific teaching objectives. For other teachers, dialogic teaching focuses on interaction that is purposeful, critical, and reciprocal. Various factors, such as learning context, curricular goals, teaching approach, and/or proficiency level of students, help to determine the most appropriate type of dialogic activities promoted in the classroom. Appendix A identifies various types of dialogue that are employed in the L2 classroom. Over the years, there has been a noticeable shift from 'traditional' discourse, in which the teacher leads the classroom with authority to a somewhat "flipped" (Mohan, 2018) version, in which the students are given more control over their learning and the teacher facilitates the process. For Nystrand (1997), "the quality of student learning is closely related to the quality of classroom talk" (p. 29). Therefore, to engage in dialogic teaching, instructors need to determine the most suitable type of dialogue, as well as practical applications that will promote effective learning in their specific learning context.

This paper will focus on two main points related to meaningful dialogue: (a) dialogue between researchers in two separate universities as the impetus that encouraged teacher and researcher professional development, and (b) dialogue as a core element in students' learning process.

Research Context

The researchers teach at national universities in Japan and have similar educational backgrounds, teaching beliefs, and classroom experiences. In addition, English courses taught, course loads, number of students per class, and proficiency levels of students at both universities are comparable. Over the years, this has led to several collaborative research projects and joint government grants (McCarthy & Armstrong, 2019; Armstrong & McCarthy, 2021).

Wennerberg and McGrath (2022), examining the outcome of participating in collegial dialogue for professional development over individual efforts, found that informal dialogue helped to reduce feelings of isolation, gain confidence, and understand the progression of courses. For the researchers, professional development beyond traditional conferencing, individually publishing papers, and reading up-to-date studies on teacher pedagogy became more relevant and immediate to our respective teaching contexts.

Our dialogic moments consisted of unplanned Zoom meetings to discuss classroom activities and class management, frequent emails and text messages, and Google Doc exchanges of lesson plans and syllabi. It was during one of our Zoom meeting discussions that we observed that the core element that reduced the stress of designing new materials and adapting to the new online learning platforms was our dialogue, in which we questioned, problem-solved, reflected, and co-created new knowledge to suit the new context. We further came to the realization that this was the style of learning we had both experienced during teaching practicum at the start of our teaching professions. Our dialogic practice was thus, in essence, "getting back to basics," which was the theme of the 2024 PanSIG conference.

Designing Dialogic Activities for L2 Learners

Both researchers were expected to use assigned textbooks for their respective writing courses. However, the underlying philosophy of academic freedom in both universities allowed teachers to adapt materials according to their personal style of teaching, as long as they met the curricular requirements. Having a high level of teacher agency and a flexible learning context meant that the researchers could apply the five principles of dialogic teaching when designing learning tasks (Alexander, 2017)—collective, reciprocal, supportive, cumulative, and purposeful—which served as a guide during discussions about suitable learning activities. The examples of dialogic tasks presented below illustrate how the researchers employed these principles to engage in meaningful dialogue about course design and materials development, and create a more active learning experience.

Collective dialogue refers to joint discussions by students and the teacher about a particular activity. A task designed was reviewing paragraph writing by completing a partial essay in which students were given only the introduction and conclusion. They were required to work together to co-construct body paragraphs to write a coherent essay. This task provided a dialogic space to agree, disagree, question, and expand on ideas.

Reciprocal dialogue refers to listening carefully to others, asking critical questions about student written or oral assignments, acknowledging each other's feedback, and offering a different perspective. An effective activity which encouraged reciprocity was giving critical feedback in pairs on recorded academic presentations to help each other to improve presentation skills. This kind of dialogic task encouraged critical thinking and reflective practices, as students were asked to justify their feedback comments and provide ideas that would improve each other's performance.

Supportive dialogue refers to negotiating with students about particular tasks. Giving students the responsibility to decide on a list of topics for essays or presentations, for example, was an effective method of giving students more agency and ownership over their learning, thereby creating an inclusive, supportive environment.

Cumulative dialogue refers to building on contributions to allow for deeper discussion and exploration of a specific theme. An illustrative example which encouraged cumulative discussion was a whole-class brainstorming activity for an argumentative essay in which half the class presented arguments which agreed with the topic while the other half disagreed with each point raised. Following this, students were asked to refute the best argument and then decide which side had the most convincing argument.

Purposeful dialogue refers to students having shared learning goals. This lent itself best to situations in which students have a clear purpose for improving language learning such as giving presentations for real-life academic conferences or learning how to write a CV for a job application. The stronger the purpose, the more students became actively engaged with the learning materials.

Studies in dialogic learning/teaching, from elementary level to tertiary education, typically expound the power of discursive interaction to enhance students' engagement with learning (Alexander, 2017, 2020; Skidmore, 2006); thus, it is imperative for teachers to build a repertoire of dialogic activities in order to engage in successful dialogic teaching.

Data Collection & Analysis

Students in this study were purposively selected from mandatory freshman academic writing courses and an elective presentation course offered to students from sophomore to doctoral students. Data were collected from peer-feedback dialogue. Although there were slight differences in the aims and objectives of both courses, as well

as students' proficiency levels and motivation, the researchers found commonalities in learner dialogue that were relevant to this study. Written dialogue from freshman students' peer review activities was downloaded from Google Docs, and recordings of graduate student peer feedback in presentation courses were transcribed. Feedback data were grouped into six dialogical categories, as shown in Table 1—*Building relationships, Peer Advising, Reciprocity, Collaboration, Reviewing, Discovery*. Categories were decided through discussion of the data over several meetings. The researchers then organized the peer feedback into larger conversational chunks rather than sentence-level sections to focus on the purpose of the interactions rather than specific linguistic elements. The categories were ranked in order by number of utterances coded, from highest (number 1) to lowest (number 6), to identify benefits of engaging in dialogue (see Appendix B for a numerical breakdown of utterances per category). Following the analysis of feedback utterances, the researchers then collected survey responses to understand student preferences for dialogic teaching.

Table 1

Six Benefits of Dialogic Activities

Category	Descriptor	Academic Writing course: Data ranked (1-6) by number of utterances ($n = 251$)	Scientific Presentation course: Data ranked (1-6) by number of utterances ($n = 75$)
Building relation-ships	Personal or informal dialogue helps to build friendship and balances the critical discourse and encourages further discourse	2	3
Peer Advising	Dialogue largely unilateral where one student uses teaching guidelines (rubric, checklists) to give feedback on writing or speaking	1	1
Reciprocity	Dialogue showing acknowledgment of the advice and a shared understanding between peers	3	2
Collaboration	Dialogue involving problem-solving, questioning, and framing solutions.	6	4
Reviewing	Dialogue in which interlocuters review important course points and (re)build knowledge together	5	6
Discovery	Dialogue in which interlocuters identify new skills learned or deepen learning	4	5

It should be noted here that qualitative analysis software, such as NVivo (Jackson & Bazeley, 2014) or inter-rater reliability tests, such as Cohen's Kappa (Cohen, 1960) or Gwet's AC1 (Gwet, 2014), were not employed during data analysis. Although rigorous methods of evaluating agreement among raters, the researchers felt that in-depth discussion of categories would achieve sufficient agreement for the purposes of this study. Further, we also considered this discussion as a professional development opportunity to enhance and expand our knowledge of qualitative data analysis procedures, as well as compare student responses in our respective universities. The top three categories that saw the majority of utterances were Peer Advising, Reciprocity, and Building Relationships.

Appendix C provides excerpts of students giving feedback on final essay assignments and presentations. (Please note that excerpts provided in this paper are written verbatim from recordings and feedback comments and include non-standard linguistic variations.)

Peer Advising

Peer advising is built into every course as part of both universities' educational goals of encouraging learner independence through critical thinking. Therefore, as expected, there was a significant number of utterances related to peer work in both academic writing and presentation courses. Through peer advising, learners were expected to have rich, meaning-creating exchanges that led to action and the opportunity for change and/or deeper understanding. This kind of discourse required a strong relationship with the dialogic partner, and a deep understanding of the course content to effectively give feedback. Graduate and doctoral students were more effective in giving critical feedback, as their proficiency level was higher and they approached each task with greater maturity. However, freshman students were also capable, even at the surface level, of checking the basic structure of an essay.

Excerpt 1 in Appendix C is an illustrative example of how student talk can help to improve various components of essay writing. There are debates about how beneficial peer advising is in the L2 classroom due to low L2 proficiency (Hu, 2005) or friendship bias (Cheng & Warren, 2005); however, there is considerable agreement that the more critical students are during peer review, the better their own writing becomes (Byl & Topping, 2023; Yalch et al., 2019).

Reciprocity

This category involves the concept of reciprocity, which is an essential element in discourse-driven learning activities. Reciprocal dialogue (Gillies, 2016) aims to improve the quality of participation and increase student motivation. Through dialogic feedback, students not only receive advice, but they are encouraged to acknowledge the reviewer's words so that it does not feel like a one-directional, passive, monologic discourse. Having students acknowledge each other built rapport, developed empathy, and improved communication skills. Excerpt 2 is an example of a pair of students working on improving each other's posters for a midterm examination, and excerpt 3 illustrates acknowledgment of advice from freshman students in the academic writing course:

Similar to Byl & Topping's (2023) study, reciprocal feedback sometimes benefitted the reviewer more than the writer due to careful construction of feedback comments. However, by encouraging students to respond to every comment and acknowledge the efforts of the reviewer, students were able to think more critically about the advice rather than ignoring it or making random revisions.

Building Relationships

Throughout each semester, the researchers worked on building rapport and a sense of community through dialogue. This was done informally through warm-up discussion questions and formally through critical evaluation of student work. Notably, creating closer social networks was more beneficial for freshman students (especially during the pandemic, when classes were held online) as they were experiencing their first year of university and trying to build a community of friends. Although less important to graduate students, they also benefited from rapport-building activities, as participants in the course belonged to different labs and had few opportunities to interact with students in other faculties. For both sets of students, informal dialogue led to a social space where students could more comfortably ask critical questions and show support for each other during peer-review sessions. In essence, encouraging informal social interaction in the classroom balanced rapport-building with critical discourse, which, in turn, encouraged further discourse. Excerpt 4 shows relationship-building dialogue in the scientific course between two students from different labs.

This kind of friendly discourse often led to casual meetings after lessons, where students helped each other with assignments. Although research has been conducted on the benefit of informal dialogue among educational professionals and in the business workplace (Thompson & Trigwell, 2016), more research is needed on how informal dialogue between students (on topics unrelated to immediate teaching tasks) contributes to improved learning.

Perception of Dialogic Learning

In the final class of the semester in the academic writing course in the researchers' respective universities, students were asked to reflect on the dialogic activities they experienced. Question 1 asked students which dialogic activities they considered most and least useful during the course and why. Question 2 asked students which style of teaching they preferred in the second language classroom. As can be seen in Figure 1, responses indicated that the activity that benefited students the most was reviewing the learning materials through group tasks and discussions (35%). They explained that peer discussion, rather than teacher talk, helped them to recall the course materials and understand them more deeply. It was also more interesting to review with peers than work alone. One-to-one dialogue with the teacher in the classroom and on Google Docs (31%) helped students to receive personalized feedback and ask specific questions about problem areas. Peer feedback (25%) had both positive and negative comments. Students understood the purpose of peer feedback, but ultimately, many preferred talking with the teacher directly, since the teacher gave the final grade on the course. Other students recognized that the teacher did not have time to teach individual students, and it was also a skill they needed to practice for their future. Although students enjoyed speaking with each other about the latest events happening in their lives, casual conversation as a lesson activity was less beneficial, as they could speak with each other outside of class via text messaging or in the cafeteria during lunch.

Figure 1

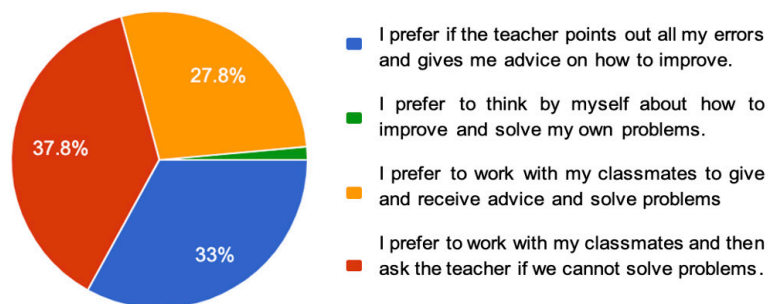*Dialogic Activities which Benefitted Students in Academic Writing*
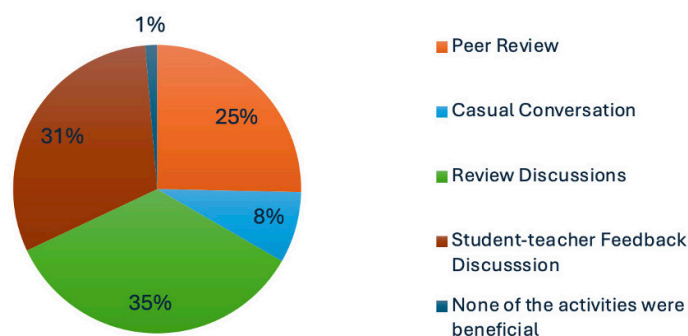
In the Scientific Presentation course, dialogue was built into all lessons since students were more proficient. There were two main activities that encouraged graduate students to actively participate in class: (a) video recording presentations and discussing improvements with a peer, and (b) critically assessing each other's performances. The main reasons for the effectiveness of these activities, as reported by the students were as follows:

- Improve specific aspects of my presentation (e.g., voice, structure, body language, visual aids)

- Increase my confidence in public-speaking and lower anxiety

- Improve my communication skills

- Become more critical when giving and listening to presentations

- Feel like a professional

- Understand how the audience views me

- Convey my presentation message clearly

Regarding Question 2, students in the academic writing course were asked about their preferences for teaching style. Graduate students were not asked this question, as the Scientific Presentation course did not lend itself to lecture-style teaching. Figure 2 shows freshman students' strong preference for a more active, communicative classroom. For teachers interested in adapting a more dialogic teaching style in their L2 classrooms, this result is encouraging.

Figure 2

Preferred Teaching Style

I prefer if the teacher points out all my errors and gives me advice on how to improve.

I prefer to think by myself about how to improve and solve my own problems.

I prefer to work with my classmates to give and receive advice and solve problems

I prefer to work with my classmates and then ask the teacher if we cannot solve problems.

Noticeably, many students showed that they did not have the confidence or experience to work by themselves solely and preferred the teacher to assist them with their writing assignments. Only a few students showed preference for problem-solving their own essays and working independently. Overall, it is evident from the results that the students have a positive attitude towards working interactively.

Conclusion

There has been significant research around dialogic learning and teaching over the years, which has had a positive impact on the learning process and academic performance (Skidmore, 2006; Alexander, 2020). Respectful and collegial dialogue between teachers when designing courses also benefits teaching practices by focusing on shared views and trying to understand new perspectives in a constructive manner (Thompson & Trigwell, 2016). This study identified various types of dialogue used in the second language learning classroom focusing specifically on meaningful dialogue that helped learners increase engagement and perform at the academic level expected at both universities. To create a dialogic classroom, the basic requirements for instructors are having knowledge and skills of the pedagogical approach, a suitable curriculum to apply the underlying principles, and a university culture that enables teachers a certain level of agency in how they conduct classes. A limitation of this study is that it did not explore the outcome of the researchers' dialogic interactions on student performance or material design.

What was evident in this collaborative study, upon reflection, were three changes in the researchers' teaching approach. First, after focusing on a more dialogic style of teaching, we shifted away from teacher-directed activities and overuse of the textbook to a more relaxed approach, in which time was allotted weekly to more discussions, such as reviewing important points as a group, or one-to-one teacher/student discussions. This meant managing classroom time differently and choosing textbook activities more carefully to ensure that students had time to grasp the learning point sufficiently. The second area was that the researchers were able to bridge the gap between more and less proficient learners. This was true for courses in both universities, as there was a wide range of proficiency levels in classrooms from lower intermediate learners to almost fluent speakers. Through pair and group work, students were able to critically review course materials and assess each other's assignments. Both researchers encouraged students to have discussions in English; however, they were free to speak in their L1 if it allowed for deeper discussion and supported their L2 learning. Finally, focusing on dialogue created a more active and communicative classroom. For students who

preferred learning independently, they had the option to work by themselves.

In the research literature on dialogic pedagogy, the term "dialogue" is sometimes used interchangeably with other terms such as "discourse," "talk," "communication," "conversation," or "interaction." However, for all terms, the idea is that interaction is two-way and reciprocal, rather than monologic, or preconstructed discourse. For instructors who would like to move away from the typical Initiation-Response-Feedback pedagogy and incorporate more meaningful dialogic practices in their classrooms, it is perhaps best to consider "dialogue" as a "disciplined, consensus-building process of collective communication based on shared values and beliefs" (Banathy, 2003, p.11, as cited in Watson et al., 2004, p. 54). In essence, this means that to benefit from dialogue, students must have a shared purpose and teachers should encourage a reciprocal, supportive relationship. For instructors, it is imperative that they build a repertoire of dialogue-driven activities that matches the specific needs and abilities of students and classroom context. This is possible through engaging in regular discussions with other educational professionals and attending teaching conferences.

In the end, although there are drawbacks to dialogic teaching in EFL settings, the act of engaging in meaningful dialogue can act as a valuable catalyst for students to become more critical thinkers and ultimately more active participants in the learning process.

Acknowledgments

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Appendix A

Defining and Unpacking "Dialogue"

Dialogue Type	Definition	Example
Monologic Dialogue	Dialogue largely concerned with the transmission of knowledge from teacher to student (Lyle, 2008); Dialogue by students which incorporates a three-stage model of speech production: Conceptualization, Formulation, and Articulation (Levelt, 1989).	e.g., Initiation-response-feedback (IRF) teaching: The teacher controls the learning process mainly through recapitulations, elicitation, repetition, reformulation, and exhortation (see Mercer, 2000); student presentations.
Structured Dialogue	Dialogue focused on the competence for speaking production rather than interaction; distinguished largely by what an individual knows rather than how an individual interacts with others (Hall & Pekarek, 2011); Dialogue which has been modified to facilitate interaction more efficiently (Long, 1981).	e.g., role-play activities; and discussion circles in which students are assigned specific roles and guided questions; and given prepared responses for specific social situations.
Collaborative Dialogue	Dialogue in which speakers engage jointly in problem solving and knowledge building (Gillies, 2019).	e.g., project-based style of learning: Building ideas through discussion about a text; co-writing or co-presenting a project; Pair or group reading of an academic text to understand the content and generate multiple perspectives.
Constructive Dialogue	Dialogue in which new meanings or knowledge are (co)constructed based on specific communication principles, or ground rules for discussion (Michaels & O'Conner, 2015); and/or one that fulfils some specific (constructive) function (see Baker, 1999).	e.g., theme-based academic discussion classes in which students actively listen to each other, share and build knowledge on a particular theme, co-construct new knowledge together, synthesize information, and draw conclusions.
Meaningful Dialogue	Dialogue which capitalizes on the power of talk to further students' or instructors' thinking, learning, and problem solving (Kim & Wilkinson, 2019); dialogue which nurtures engagement, confidence, independence and responsibility (Alexander, 2006).	e.g., peer-analysis of academic writing or presentations in which students clarify, exemplify, explore, expand, explain or justify ideas; collegial dialogue about lesson planning and materials development.

Appendix B

Data Analysis of Peer Feedback in Academic Writing and Presentation Courses

Example of Academic Writing Feedback Data Downloaded from Google Doc
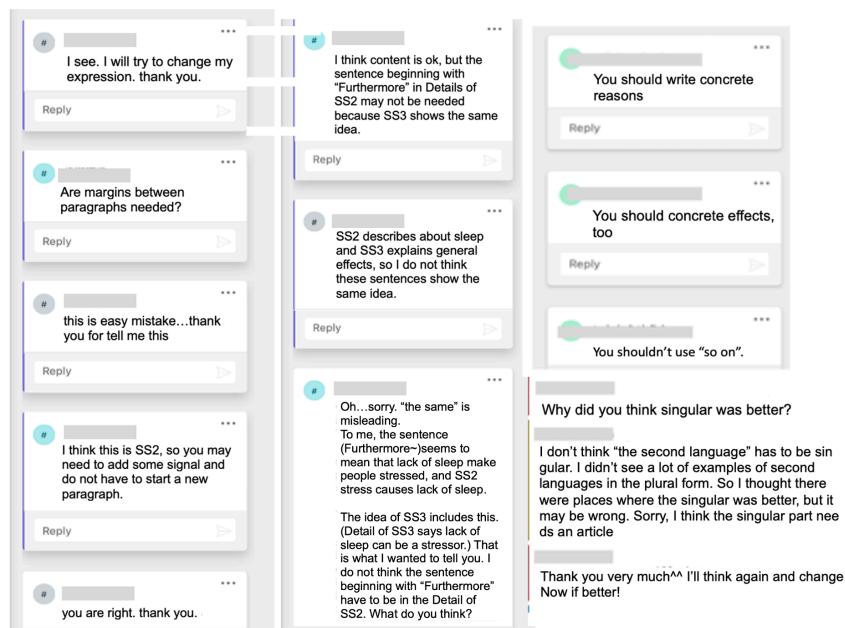
Example of Transcribed Excerpts from Presentation Courses

- **Example of Peer Advising**

    A: Hi! OOO!!There are three points I think you need to edit (Just I think haha). 1: The color of the theme box—Except of conclusion part, all theme box is black blue. However, the only conclusion part is gray. So, you should change black blue conclusion box into gray. 2: Too many characters—Without Result/Discussion section, there is no figure and picture. I think it's ok, but in my opinion, too many characters make people get reluctant to read. For example, Introduction section is easy to introduce my idea. 3: Figure bottom center—I could not understand what it means. 52% of those who believe in major technological improvements pay 42,000 yen? Maybe it is not true, so I want you to make improved figure. Except these points, your poster is so brilliant that my poster is based on yours [laughs]. I hope you will adopt my idea to your presentation!

    B: You can't see it, but even so, I had made reduce very much. In fact, at first, there were 62 words in Methodology section, 87 words in Future prospects section. So I was making effort to decrease, yes I knew it was still lengthy and wordy...But next time, I improved it more!

- **Example of Reciprocity**

    A: OOO said to me I should use more transition words and emphasize the current problem. It helped me a lot, and the presentation became better. In addition, I saw him doing presentation before final, and that made me aware of the importance of enthusiasm.

    B: Me too. mostly, I watched his presentations and learned a lot from him, such as how to speak slowly and confidently. He showed me a great example. My peer gave me a helpful advice about my images in my presentation. This kind of advices was not given even by my teacher but it was persuasive to me. What do you think about my poster?

    A: OK. A couple of comments then. As a general comment, there's too many words. It's better to use less or add something different (that's not words). Having this many words makes it look more like an essay than a poster. I also think you can remove the shadow for the boxes, it might be distracting instead. I think it could also use a lot more colour than just black and white, a different colour for the title and the subheadings.

    B: Thank you.

- **Example of Discovery**

    A: Why did you decide to give the questionnaire to only 14 students?

    B: I thought 14 students was enough to research.

    A: Maybe 14 students is too few. But maybe your topic is ok because you are trying to analyze the sounds of music. It is quantitative? Or…

    [silence…checks dictionary]

    B: Qualitative!

    A: Qualitative? OK.

Numerical Breakdown of Utterances and Example of Color-Coding Utterances into 6 Categories

Appendix C

Excerpts of Student Voices from Data

Excerpt 1

You many need to write "effect" clearly. You should write concrete reasons. You should write concrete effects too. You shouldn't use "so on". I'm not sure but you should refrain from using the word "we".

Excerpt 2

A: Your poster's heading says, "Research Question." This is not a question; it is a statement. Sometimes in a poster session, the presenter is not there but the poster is up. They come to read the poster, so you cannot explain.

B: Ok I will change it. Your poster has a good layout. I can understand the structure clearly from the heading.

A: Thank you. I followed the teacher's style.

Excerpt 3

A: First paragraph content says developed countries produce a lot of garbage but second paragraph content says how help developing countries reduce garbage. I think the way to reduce garbage in developed countries is more important.

B: Yes you are right. Thank you. I will change it.

A: Maybe you can talk about Japan because of a lot of plastic waste.

Excerpt 4

A: Is there anything that you are doing in your research now?

B: Actually, I have a big problem [laughs]. I will have, have the international conference in April and its abstract deadline is soon.

A: [laughs loudly] when?

B: the deadline is this month, on the 15th, but…

A: [laughs again] have you started? It's next week!

B: Now I am doing pilot, pre-pilot study, so, so…help me! [laughs]