TEACHER-STUDENT TALK IN THE ONE TO ONE WRITING CONFERENCE: WHO TALKS MORE AND WHY?

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Abstract

The one to one writing conference between a teacher and student is often viewed as an ideal space for student autonomy. Yet conferences are also instances of 'institutional talk', which are characterised by asymmetry in the relative power each participant enjoys during the interaction and the discursive devices they are able to employ. Much of the literature on conferences has been based on native speakers, yet with an increasingly internationalised populace within UK higher education, there is a need to evaluate international student autonomy, who may face greater challenges due to unfamiliarity with the genre and their spoken linguistic proficiency. This paper derives from an on-going doctoral study that seeks to examine the power relations that occur within the second language writing conference between a teacher and an international student on an International Foundation programme at UCLan. This study will report on a first step that was taken in measuring conference interaction from a quantitative perspective and relating it to the contextual factors of institutional role and participant beliefs. The findings suggest that teachers dominate the conference interaction in terms of words spoken, turns used and average length of turns. This conversational dominance seems related to the defined roles the institution assigns each participant and the beliefs they carry into the conferences.

Introduction

Emanating from a US liberal arts philosophy, one to one teacher-student writing conferences have long been seen as an ideal arena in which to probe the internal cognitive processes of the student writer and convey the demands of academic convention. A 'conference' here, refers to the one to one dialogue that takes place between a teacher and a student about a written draft in order to transmit feedback and discuss potential revision. They allow for a more immediate and contextualised response to a student's needs and offer opportunities for mutual negotiation of meaning between the teacher and student to occur (Brannon and Knoblauch 1982; Sommers 1982; Zamel 1985). One argument presented by advocates within the first language literature (hereafter L1) has been its potential for more equal communication to occur between a teacher and student. Over thirty years ago Murray (1979, p.15) described himself in a conference as searching for 'the voice of a fellow craftsman having a conversation about a piece of work, writer to writer'.

Such a stance borrows strongly from the field of 'critical pedagogy' that seeks to critique power relations in education with the ultimate aim of redressing the perceived hegemony that is seen by some to exist within the institution. Critical pedagogy draws upon the work of many, in particular Freire (1970) who critiques the traditional 'banking concept' of education and argues for 'dialogical relations' between students and teachers where each party teaches the other. This hope has also been expressed on the part of second language (hereafter L2) writing conferences albeit with a more critical perspective that highlights its challenges too. Ewert (2009) referring to L2 conferences, speaks of the benefits of the writing conference for more collaboration between a teacher and student while noting that teachers may need to be more active in prompting student participation.

Yet the notion of L2 conferences as being sites of greater student voice faces challenges, not least that the writing conference itself is an example of so called 'institutional talk' that is bound up with notions of power relations. Drew and Heritage (1992, p. 48) define institutional talk as involving:

> role structured, institutionalized, and omnirelevant asymmetries between participants in terms of such matters as differential distribution of knowledge, rights to knowledge, access to conversational resources, and to participation in the interaction.

Compared to ordinary conversation where speakers may share a similar status, institutional talk is characterised by one participant who may control and restrict the contributions of the other participant. Fairclough (2001) describes such constraint as an example of 'power in discourse' where there may be constraints on the content of what is stated, the relations between people and the relative subject identities taken up. Such exercise of power is not overt or coercive but rather enacted through convention and implicit consent on the part of the subordinate participant. As a result, the power relations within such discourse

construct hegemonic attitudes, opinions and beliefs in such a way as to make them appear natural and common sense (Gramsci 1971). In the case of the writing conference, the teacher may typically occupy the more powerful role granted by virtue of greater knowledge and institutional status and the student a more subordinate role in line with their own expectations. Indeed, many L2 conference studies highlight how the interactional talk and agenda is often controlled by the teacher with the international student writer playing the more subordinate role (Ewert 2009; Goldstein and Conrad 1990; Haneda 2004; Patthey-Chavez and Ferris 1997).

Another factor that may make greater student autonomy more difficult in the L2 writing conference are perceived differences in culture regarding teacher-student relationships. In the UK, students are often expected to voice their opinions and teachers required to elicit them within the confines of a more mutually reciprocal relationship, yet the 'the schema of teacher-student relationships [maybe] different in other cultures' (Liu, 2009, p. 112) and perhaps more hierarchical. Additionally, participation in a one to one interaction with a teacher may be a new experience for some L2 students. In discussing international students, Ferris (2003, p. 41) highlights how such interaction may be 'stressful for some students … [and] affect their willingness to participate'. Language proficiency will also be an issue for some international students who may not possess the means necessary to express their point of view.

This portrays L2 writing conferences as challenging sites for greater student expression. Yet L2 conference studies remind us of the potential benefits of greater student engagement in talk that may be linked to more successful post conference revision (Goldstein and Conrad 1990; Haneda 2004; Patthey-Chavez and Ferris 1997). If the status quo is to be challenged, then we need to better understand L2 writing conference interaction. Few studies to date have focussed on the L2 writing conference and even fewer have sought to examine the interaction in higher education settings with low level international students on preparatory English language programmes.

As such, the study aimed to provide some initial answers to the following questions:

> To what extent is conference talk asymmetrical between the teacher and international student writers in terms of words spoken, turns used and length of turns?

> To what extent is such asymmetry of talk shaped by the institution and participant beliefs?

Methodology

The study took place during the second semester of the International Foundation Programme in Academic English at the School of Languages and International Studies at the University of Central Lancashire in 2010. The course caters for international students from around the world who need to raise their level of English to enter undergraduate study in the UK. For their academic writing module, the students are assessed by a long essay of 1500 words and receive conferences on the two drafts they write.

Participants

The participants in the study were two international students and their writing teacher from the IFP course at the university. Student A was a male student from Cyprus with an IELTS overall score of 4.5 and was considered by his teacher to be a weak speaker. Student B was a male student from China who with an IELTS overall score of 5.5 and was considered a stronger speaker. Their writing teacher had been teaching EAP for many years and was well qualified holding a CELTA and MA TESOL. She was the writing class teacher for both student A and B.

Data Collection

In order to explore the belief systems all three participants might bring to their conferences, questionnaires were administered prior to the conferences taking place. These were followed up with a semi-structured interview, which was audio recorded. The four conferences between the international students and their writing teacher for their first and second drafts were then audio recorded. Within two days of each conference, interviews were conducted and recorded with all participants individually to gather their reflections of the event.

Data Analysis

Due to space constraints, this paper will limit itself to the initial quantitative analysis performed on the four conferences. The conference recordings were transcribed and analysed to calculate their overall length (in minutes and words), the distribution of talk (per cent of words contributed by the student and teacher) and the number and length of turns used by each participant (Patthey-Chavez and Ferris 1997). The questionnaire and post conference interviews were analysed for areas that could help answer the research questions.

Discussion of findings

The quantitative data gathered of the four conferences is shown in the tables below.

Table 1: Conference length in minutes

Conference length in minutes			Average conference length per student in minutes
	Conference 1	Conference 2	Mean conference length
Student A	**16.19**	**13.02**	**14.60**
Student B	**15.21**	**16.25**	**15.73**

Table 2: Conference length in total number of words

Conference length in total number of words*			Mean conference length per student in words
	Conference 1	Conference 2	Conference 1 and 2
Student A	**2085**	**2356**	**2221**
Student B	**3238**	**2954**	**3096**

*does not include repetition, fillers, false starts or words read verbatim from draft

Table 3: Conference length in total number of words by participants

Conference length in total number of words* used by participants			Participant contribution to conference by percentage %		Mean participant contribution
Conference 1	Conference 2	Conference 1	Conference 2	Conference 1 and 2	
Student A	**439**	**282**	**21.1%**	**12%**	**16.6%**
Teacher	**1646**	**2074**	**78.9%**	**88%**	**83.4%**
Student B	**657**	**589**	**20.3%**	**20%**	**20.2%**
Teacher	**2581**	**2365**	**79.7%**	**80%**	**79.9%**

*does not include repetition, fillers, false starts or words read verbatim from draft

Table 4: Number of turns by participant

	Number of turns* by participant in each conferences			Mean No. of turns	Mean length of turns by words		Mean turn length in words
	Conference 1	Conference 2	Conference 1 and 2	Conference 1	Conference 2	Conference 1 and 2	
Student A	**27**	**12**	**19.5**	**14.6**	**22.4**	**18.5**	
Teacher	**30**	**15**	**22.5**	**75.3**	**67.2**	**71.3**	
Student B	**36**	**34**	**35**	**15.3**	**14**	**14.7**	
Teacher	**34**	**35**	**34.5**	**75.9**	**67.7**	**71.8**	

*does not include back-channels or overlaps

> To what extent is conference talk asymmetrical between the teacher and international student writers in terms of words spoken, turns used and length of turns?

In response to this question the quantitative data seems to support the characterisation of the writing conference as teacher dominated in terms of talk. In conferences with student A, the teacher contributes up to five times more than the student with respect to words used and with student B four times as much (Table 3). While asymmetry is to be expected in such 'expert' and 'novice' interaction, the relative difference between the participants is, nonetheless, large. The higher level of teacher participation is further cemented by the average length of turns in words utilised when compared with her student. It was generally a minimum of four times longer than each of her students (Table 4). Thus overall, the teacher spoke much more than her students and this seemed to be carried in her frequent longer turns. Yet interestingly, the number of turns between the teacher and the students remained close suggesting that the students did at the very least, have 'opportunities' to contribute to the talk during the interaction. However, the exact nature of these student turns requires further examination in order to conclude to what extent such 'opportunities' were mere backchannels compared to genuine utterances offering new information. This is beyond the scope of the current article.

> To what extent is such asymmetry of talk shaped by the institution and participant beliefs?

To account for such asymmetry, the questionnaire and post conference interviews were examined to help interpret the findings. I shall briefly examine selected responses from student A, student B and the teacher.

Student A

In his questionnaire, student A described his 'ideal' conference as a place where he was able to receive information about the relative strengths and weaknesses of his essay rather than a more collaborative endeavour. As such he seemed to hold a notion of the conference as a transactional form of interaction where a service was being provided to him by the teacher in primarily one direction, serving to relegate him to a more passive role:

> the teacher have shown me my mistake. I was just asking the teacher for my mistake

In his interview, the student offered some reasons to explain why the teacher may have spoken more than he did:

> I go here [the conference] to take information about my essay so I like to listen what the teacher say about my work

The interview with the student offered another potential reason for the asymmetry in his conference, namely his spoken competence. When asked why he had stated that he found speaking clearly during a conference a challenge he replied:

> I can't understand everything ... but I try to take my ideas out ... or I try to ask something and I don't find the true words to do this

International students with a low proficiency in spoken English may struggle to get their point across during the conference act. As a result, it is not illogical to assume that such a challenge favours a situation whereby the teacher is in effect allowed to speak more by such students because quite simply, it is easier for them to let the teacher take charge of the conference talk.

A third potential factor that may contribute to the imbalance of talk is the relative inexperience international students may have of such one to one conferences. Student A highlighted in his questionnaire that in his home country of Cyprus it was not a common practice and as such, being confronted by it in the UK University may have been a challenging prospect for him leading to less participation.

Student B

In his first interview, student B alluded to his 'ideal' conference as being one where a 'conversation' took place between himself and his writing teacher. As such, this student viewed the conference act as a place where mutual construction of knowledge and understanding could take place compared to teacher written comments:

> if you just write something [refers to teacher written comments] because I do not know the real meaning because maybe the teacher have more idea but he or she cannot write more idea in the paper... not enough space to write down all the idea but if you speak to the teacher ... the teacher can give more idea

In his interview, student B emphasised his commitment to being a more active participant by discussing his use of questioning:

> I will always have questions when I'm writing

> it is easy I think [to ask questions] ... the teacher is friendly ... you didn't get nervous

This attitude is reflected in the quantitative data in that, compared to student A, student B's conferences were a little longer in terms of time and words used (Table 1 and 2). More significantly, this student used more words than student A over his two conferences and the number of turns between himself and the teacher was higher than the conferences between student A and the same teacher (Table 3 and 4). A higher level of turns may suggest a more interactional style of conference with perhaps a more confident student actor.

A possible cause for the teacher's dominance of conference talk with student B may have been cultural. In his interview student B provides an insight into how one to one meetings with teachers were often viewed in his country,

> in China if face to face with teacher that [has] one meaning ...
> you have trouble or you have problem

This highlights how the very setting of being alone with the teacher may correlate to a more negative association for some cultures and may impact student participation in the conference.

Teacher

Her questionnaire revealed someone who views conferences as a useful method of conducting feedback on academic writing. In her interview she provides an explanation for this by saying,

> sometimes ... you write something [refers to teacher written feedback] and however
> simply you write it they don't really understand ... it's not sometimes immediate enough because
> if you've got the feedback and you got their essay there [refers to conference] you can go
> through it and make the links

This comment on the limitation of written feedback echoes the thoughts expressed by student B. Yet allied to this positive view of collaboration is a sense that the conference also needs to allow for a clear exchange

of information about areas requiring improvement. When asked to choose from a list of possible approaches for providing effective feedback on academic writing to international students, she chose the following two options on the questionnaire as the ideal blend,

> Working more collaboratively with students during feedback

> Directly indicating areas of strength and weakness and asking students to improve them

She reasons that international students demand a 'degree of teacher input' during feedback and it would be difficult to implement an interaction where students took control of the feedback with the teacher relegated to the role of a facilitator. She wrote:

> in my experience, many students particularly Asians, don't like or feel
> cheated by little teacher input

Thus, collaboration seems to be held as an 'ideal objective' to aim for but in reality, not seen as something easily obtained. Discussing possible reasons for this, she cites something that resembles the experiences of both student A and B, namely, a lack of familiarity with the one to one format of the writing conference. She said:

> it's based on their past experiences ... it's very difficult in a couple of months to change
> everything ... looking at the one to one situation ... some students find that kind of threatening
> ... maybe they think it's like this interview

Another area often repeated in both her questionnaire and interview was the difference among her students with regard to their participation in conferences:

> Very much dependent on student. Some - shy, weak, disinterested would hardly talk

> some of them [students] see you as somebody who can help and some of them see you as this
> authoritative figure ... and I feel in the class no matter how I'd behave or whoever I am ... they
> are going to have the same ... view

This difference was reflected by student A and B and their relative approach to conferencing.

Conclusion

Despite the small scale nature of the study, it does seem to support the literature in viewing the L2 writing conference as controlled by the teacher in terms of talk and turns used during the interaction. In addition, the participants' prior belief systems about conferences and one another did seem to impact upon the interaction in terms of the roles played. Such beliefs served to perpetuate the existing asymmetry that is embedded within such institutional talk. At no time did participants voice any strong concerns over their participation; in fact they seemed to view them as naturalised entities that served to fulfil institutional roles and expectations.

Feedback has long been viewed as a powerful player in prompting learning and student revision. Sadler (1998, p. 78) sees it as a prominent part of pedagogic theory, stating that, 'Incorporating feedback is surely as fundamental a characteristic of responsible and responsive learning systems as having a teacher at all. [It is] a fundamental tenet in our understanding of what it means to teach.' A central tenet behind this study is that good feedback, in whatever form it may take, requires more active contribution by students about their written work. However, this study has served to highlight the potential challenges faced in order to increase student autonomy during the writing conference and for teachers to adapt and promote such exchange.

Participant beliefs will need to be challenged as a first step towards such goals so that both actors may begin to see their roles less as 'fixed truths' but more as 'constructs' capable of change and adaptation. It is hoped that this study might in some small way help illuminate the journey towards greater feedback collaboration between teachers and international student writers at university.

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