Reports from the Field

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Communicative Competence in Small-group Talk:

Contrasting cases

Abstract

When students talk and work in classrooms, they need specific communication skills. This study describes how children in a small peer-led group used language to carry out their assigned tasks, to interact with each other, and to think critically about what they were asked to do.

Résumé

Pour parler et travailler en classe, les étudiants ont besoin de dons particuliers pour la communication. Cette étude expose la façon dont les enfants d'un petit groupe dirigé par un pair ont employé le langage pour faire leurs devoirs, interagir les uns avec les autres et réfléchir de manière critique à ce qu'on leur avait demandé de faire.

It is suggested here that primary children demonstrate three types of communicative competence in small-group talk: operational, relational, and critical. Hymes (1974) applied the term "communicative competence" to the ability to use language appropriately for a range of purposes in different social settings. Communicative competence in schools is defined here as the ability to join in classroom conversations. An interest in what constitutes communicative competence in schools first led to studies of children's language in teacher-led, whole-group talk sessions. In such classroom events

the range of language use is frequently so narrow that students' only role is to respond to teacher questions (Dickinson, 1985; Mehan, 1979). In this setting, competence often consists of responding to teachers' stated and unstated expectations.

But what constitutes communicative competence in small, peer-led groups of children? In following such a group of Grade 2 students engaged in assigned language arts activities, I became involved in their talk as a participant observer, and concluded that previous definitions of communicative competence were not adequate to describe the interactions of these children. According to Wilkinson (1984), an effective communicator in small groups is someone who uses task-oriented operational talk. "Making requests, such as asking for information, or asking someone for a pencil, and receiving adequate responses, such as the correct answer or the pencil being given, is central to the teaching and learning processes in small groups" (p. 166). Relational talk is used to establish social roles (Cooper, Marquis, & Ayers-Lopez, 1982). Wells (1989) considers communicative competence as more related to critical skills, to be manifested when "students are encouraged to turn their thinking back upon itself, reflectively selecting, ordering and evaluating their ideas in order to construct an intelligible, coherent and convincing verbal formulation" (p. 271).

In the group of primary students in this study, there was evidence of a range of communicative competence demonstrated through operational, relational, and critical talk. The children used operational language as described by Wilkinson (1984), as well as relational talk, and talk which communicated a critical attitude towards authority and the assigned tasks. The ability to communicate judgments about task relevance and teacher control also represents a form of competence. One student in particular successfully directed his communicative competence towards changing the work environment. Skepticism towards some activities was observed as students established independence from the group leader. Students solved the problems of responding to inappropriate tasks by negotiating with the leader and with each other, demonstrating a beginning critical communicative competence.

Communicative Competence in Classrooms

Operational language

In order to describe the communicative competence of children working in primary classrooms, Wilkinson and Dollaghan (1979) studied reading groups in a first grade class. They related such language behaviours as question-asking to achievement scores in reading, and connected specific

types of questioning to children's educational success. However, they acknowledged that their focus on one particular aspect of communication might obscure the wide variations between individual children. "Examination of individual children in particular situations shows a wide range of variation in style and skill in actual communicative interactions" (p. 272). Intensive study of small groups must take account of the variety in individuals' communicative strategies.

In follow-up research, Wilkinson and Calculator (1982) proposed a definition of **effective speakers** in classrooms as those children who use questions efficiently: "Effective speakers use their knowledge of language forms, functions, and contexts to achieve their goals in interaction" (p.86). Their study of 30 first grade students in six peer-led reading groups focused on request behaviours; they regarded those children whose requests were most often attended to as successful communicators. Requests most likely to receive appropriate responses were: on-task, direct, sincere, made to a designated listener, and revised if initially unsuccessful. Most requests were for materials or for specific answers to questions on workbook pages. The language recorded was operational; that is, language used to complete concrete tasks.

Relational language

Cooper, Marquis, and Ayers-Lopez (1982) went beyond the study of question-asking behaviour to understanding the characteristics of contexts where such behaviour occurs. They attempted to find out what **roles** children assumed in spontaneous peer-learning episodes in both kindergarten and second grade classrooms. They identified the importance of the children's relational skills as they took on the role of teacher in informal groupings: "As language is used with increasing skill to coordinate self with others, children learn to use attention focusing and behaviour management to negotiate and sustain their partner's involvement in interaction" (p. 80).

In another examination of peer learning, Cazden (1979) undertook a study of children's communicative competence where students were trained to become peer teachers in primary classrooms. The research findings emphasized the way in which children took on the role characteristics of teachers as they taught their peers. For example, one student organized his teaching interactions so that there was a desk between him and his tutee (emphasizing the asymmetrical power relationship between "teacher" and "pupil"). Peer teachers also saw themselves as possessors of special knowledge. Here again are two aspects of communicative competence: relational and operational knowledge.

Critical language

There have been few studies where children's communicative competence has been linked to their negotiation of school tasks. Wells (1989) has been involved in a long-term study of classroom talk. He has recorded lengthy examples of intermediate grade students engaged in what he calls collaborative talk, which "arises in the context of activities that are oriented towards goals of understanding, construction and presentation of student-owned topics" (p.271). Wells described the characteristics of talk generated in these conditions as tentativeness, argument, making explanations justifiable and comprehensible, and establishing goals. Young (1992) also explored classroom language from a critical perspective. He believes that it is the teacher's responsibility to enable students to use critical language. Students should participate fully in classroom talk, and be encouraged to solve real problems or to critique current practice. According to McPeck (1990), critical thinking involves the skills used "to engage in an activity or problem with *reflective skepticism*" (italics added) (p.42). Communicative competence in small-group talk should involve operational, relational, and critical skills. The study described here documents the communicative competence of students engaged in small-group activities in one Canadian classroom.

Purpose of the Study

Previous research (Ward, 1990) had confirmed that the whole-group activity labeled as "sharing time" in one kindergarten class followed a discourse pattern which limited children's opportunity to talk much at all, and did not enable them to display their full range of communicative competence. I was therefore interested to find out how primary students would use language when they were not dominated by the teacher. The purpose of the current study was to document how primary-aged children used talk to carry out small-group work in a language arts classroom. In recording the students as they talked and worked I documented how children established their roles in small-group discussions, and how they demonstrated their communicative competence. Question asking and answering behaviour was of particular interest, since Wilkinson and Calculator (1982) had considered this crucial to communicative competence in peer-led work groups. It was assumed that in small groups children would contribute freely to discussions, and that they would use a wide range of language functions.

Method

Since I wished to observe the children's language in a classroom context, it was important to develop a working relationship with their

teacher. Before I began working with a small group of students in language arts, I spent two months helping and observing in Jenny K's Grade 2 classroom. The aim was to introduce the class to more small-group work in language arts. Twice a week for four months I read children's literature aloud to the whole class, and then organized small-group activities based on the stories the students had heard. I read the whole of *Ramona Quimby, Age 8* (Cleary, 1981), as well as a selection of folk tales. The activities were open-ended; for instance, children drew a new version of *I Know an Old Lady Who Swallowed a Fly*, interviewed *Ramona Quimby*, wrote letters to story characters, designed imaginary menus, and illustrated *A Promise is a Promise* (Munsch, 1988).

Jenny (the teacher) selected four children she thought represented the mixture of children in her class; I originally planned to record them in the classroom as the whole class worked in small groups on language arts assignments. In the group I recorded there were two boys and two girls, all of appropriate Grade 2 age (either 7 or 8 years old) and had no major learning or behavioural difficulties. Kim was originally from Vietnam, but she had been in Canada long enough to speak and write fluent English; the other three children were Canadian born. Alice was the most voluble of the four. Tom was also talkative, although he did not always seem delighted to be at school. Rick, the youngest member of the group, was very quiet and most frequently distracted and off-task.

As detailed in other studies (for example, Barnes & Todd, 1977), it was difficult to obtain a clear recording when five other small groups were interacting nearby, so I removed the group from the classroom for the ten sessions that I recorded. Three different locations, depending on available space, were used for the sessions, which lasted about 30 minutes each.

The small-group sessions (10) were recorded on both audio- and video-tape. The clearest recordings came from a microphone placed in the middle of the table where the children were working. The video tapes were used by the research assistant to confirm speaker identity when she was transcribing the tapes, and were also used for checking codes and categories. The audio tapes were the primary data source. Field notes were kept, since I was present and participating in all the sessions.

Findings and Interpretation

As indicated above, I was at first interested in question asking and answering patterns, so these were identified from the database. Questions were coded according to function, using categories developed by Dore (1979). The children's questions and responses demonstrated their use of **operational language.** Since I also wished to understand how students used

relational language to establish and maintain their roles in the group, I further categorized utterances as **support and cooperation, put-downs, taking the teacher role**, **task-orientation**, and **relationship with teacher/researcher**. Categories not discussed in this article described students' self-monitoring talk. As the analysis progressed, I realized that a definition of communicative competence in small groups, identified only as operational and relational language, was inadequate to describe the range of strategies used by the children being studied, since one student in particular negotiated task assignments with me by using emerging **critical language**.

In the initial analysis, Alice's skills were focused on because she neatly fitted the original definition of a competent communicator, as one who skillfully used operational and relational language. She was a perfect small-group leader, or so it seemed. She helped other students, asked questions, talked comfortably with me, and always completed the assigned tasks. In fact, she was very easy to work with because she behaved **as I expected**. But what about Tom, who let me know that he found some of the assigned tasks to be boring or irrelevant? What about the language used by students to negotiate ways **around** the activities? In order to describe Tom's abilities, which diverged from my expectations, I needed an expanded definition of communicative competence in small groups. Tom demonstrated an emerging **critical** sense; a refusal to engage in group talk according to the conventional rules of school dialogue. For this study Alice and Tom were chosen as exemplars of contrasting communicative competence, illustrating the range of competencies these children brought to their small-group work.

Alice's competence

How did Alice construct and maintain her competence as a group member? According to Wilkinson and Calculator's (1982) definition of communicative competence as being able to ask and answer many questions, Alice was extremely effective. She spoke more often than anyone in the group (including me), and asked on average 15 questions during each session, many of them directed to me. By comparison, Tom asked only an average of 5 questions, and he asked more than either Kim or Rick. Not only did Alice ask questions, but she received responses to both information or action requests. She was also very supportive of others in the group; in fact, she was a "perfect" student if one were to consider operational and relational definitions of communicative competence. Only rarely did she use talk in unexpected ways. The details which follow build a picture of a person who understood how to communicate comfortably both with peers and with adults.

Operational language. Alice asked almost as many questions as I did during the study (162 compared with my 164), and used them to obtain

information and practical help. She employed several strategies to ensure that she obtained the information she needed. One particularly effective technique was to address questions mainly to the people she knew would answer them. Consequently, 62% of her questions were addressed to me, because I felt compelled to respond. Frequently I was the only person who could supply the information she wanted:

> *Do we get to hear the tape?*
> *Do we write the date and everything?*
> *Are me and Kim partners?*
> *Will the nurse be coming back in?*

These are questions used as they would be in normal conversation, questions to obtain unknown information. They were almost always answered. She also asked information-getting questions of other students, but since she did not know the skills and personalities of the group before starting this project, it took several sessions before she learned whom to consult about specific aspects of drawing, writing, or spelling. The process through which she learned this is demonstrated in the following excerpt. This is the third recorded session, and Alice had not yet realized that Tom had as much trouble with spelling as she did:

> **Alice** (to Tom) : *How do you spell cheese?*
> **Tom :** *Cheese please.*
> **Alice** (to Tom) : *How do you spell cheese?*
> **Tom :** *I don't know.*
> **Alice** (to Rick) : *C H, does it start with C H?*
> **Rick :** *Ya.*
> **Tom :** *Ya.*

Alice demonstrates three different, and differentially effective, information-gathering strategies here. First, she asks an unambiguous question, and when Tom's word-play answer indicates either disdain or lack of knowledge, she checks through repetition that he has heard her and knows that she is serious. When Tom admits that he doesn't know, she narrows down the question so that it requires only a yes/no response, and directs it to Rick. To show how much Alice had learned during this one discussion, later on the same day she asked Tom to spell something as part of a sequence where she was writing names:

> **Kim :** *I'll write my name.*
> **Alice :** *No, I will. And you will tell me how to write it. I know the first , it's K.*
> **Kim :** *I M.*
> **Alice** (to Tom) : *Okay, how do you spell Tom?*

Tom :	*T.*
Alice :	*Ya.*
Tom :	*H.*
Alice :	*Ya.*
Tom :	*O.*
Alice :	*Come on.*
Tom :	*Okay. M.*
Alice :	*Will you say it faster!*

Here we see negotiation between two competent communicators! Alice has managed to retain control of writing the children's names, and she **has** asked Tom something to which she knows he can reply. However, Tom keeps control for himself by complying but handing out the required information extremely slowly. In most situations Alice received the information she wanted because she recognized appropriate sources of information, and also varied her question-asking techniques.

One of these techniques, as illustrated above, was to make questions more specific, and therefore easier to answer.

Alice :	*How do you spell "do"?*
Tom :	*(Shrugs)*
Alice :	*Does it start with D?*
Tom :	*Ya.*
Alice :	*How do you start a D?*

She also added personal names if her original questions were ignored. Alice found that this strategy worked particularly well with me.

Alice :	*Can our bunny be the leader? Angela, can our bunny be the leader?*
Angela :	*Oh, I think that's a good idea, sure.*

In the following example, Alice is in full spate, using all her communicative strategies to get the job done. The group had been writing a version of *Goldilocks and the Three Bears* .

Alice :	*How do you spell "Goldilocks", Angela?*
Angela :	*Just do it, it doesn't matter.*
Kim :	*There's .... two L's.*
Rick :	*This is how you spell it.*
Tom :	*G O L E L O C K I S*
Alice :	*Stupid. You got it wrong. I don't care if it is wrong.*
Tom :	*Stupid.*
Alice :	*Angela, I need help.*

When she realized that I was not going to supply information readily, Alice looked around at the group. Kim offered Alice specific spelling clues, and Rick pointed to his paper. Tom offered his confident version at breakneck speed, frustrating Alice, who wasn't able to write quickly. She turned back to me only when desperate, understanding that I was more likely to offer help after she had made some other attempts to solve the problem.

Relational language. Her skill at using relational language shows in the way Alice used questions for getting help. This is a common mitigating strategy in adult-adult conversations, where *"Do you feel a draft?"* may suggest *"Please close the window"*. This strategy is frequent in teacher directives to students. For example, *"Will you please sit down?"* does not allow choice. Examples used by Alice include:

> *How do you shut my glue?*   (Please shut my glue for me.)
> *Does anybody have an eraser?*   (Please give me an eraser.)
> *Can you do that for me, too?*   (Please help me.)

More than any other child in the group, Alice used language with the politeness characteristics of teachers. In the frequent situations where I refused to take control in typical teacher ways, Alice did. She organized other students and materials so that the assigned task was accomplished, and gave explicit and inexplicit support to others in the group. At one point when I had left the room with the tape-recorder still running, Alice took it upon herself to make sure that everyone had a speaking turn.

> *Don't you want to say anything?*

She also uttered mild threats on different occasions, usually when I was present but silent:

> *What if Angela gets mad at you?* (This was a highly unlikely event.)
> *You guys, what are you doing?*

Her commitment to completing the task as originally set out sometimes led her to keep me in order:

> *Oh, you said you weren't going to say anything.*

This came after I had intervened in an activity despite my original stated intention to let the students talk without my joining in.

Students in the group received frequent explicit support statements from Alice. This was teacher-like behaviour. Over the ten speech events,

she made 46 support statements. (I made 90, and the most made by anyone else was 14, by Tom.) Most of her comments were related to specific achievements within the ongoing activity:

> *Rick can draw cars good.*
> *Whoo, you draw good.*
> *Hey that was right, you spelled Goldilocks!*

When she attempted more personal support, she ended up in difficulty:

Alice :	*Tom, you're getting better at smiling, you know.*
Tom :	*Shut up.*
Alice :	*And your brothers, too.*
Tom :	*My brothers hate you and so do I.*

Needless to say, Alice limited her comments to immediate events after this exchange. She also offered support through a strategy I labelled **self-deprecation**. This was a strategy common to all the children, used most frequently by Alice and Tom. For Alice it had two purposes; the first to offer indirect support to her peers, and the second to enlist support for herself.

> *I don't know how to make ice, I don't know how to do anything.*

These comments tended to come in pairs, as the students echoed each other:

| Alice : | *I can't draw Quallupiluit (sea monsters).* |
| Tom : | *Neither can I, all I'm going to draw is a hand coming out of the ice.* |

She was particularly skilled at using self-deprecation to gather my support:

Alice :	*I don't know how to make people.*
Angela :	*I'm not very good at that either, just do the best you can, Alice.*
Alice :	*I can't make people.*
Angela :	*Why don't you just turn over and write the story, you don't have to draw.*
Alice :	*I can make people, just not very well.*
Angela :	*Well, don't worry.*
Alice :	*I'll try my best.*
Angela :	*Sounds like a good plan.*

Alice's communicative competence is demonstrated in her ability to interact in a mutually supportive way with both peers and adults in order to accomplish assigned tasks.

Critical language. Anna rarely used language to change task demands; she was more likely to elicit help in task completion. She acted as liaison between me and the other children:

> *Angela's making us the cheese.*

If she uttered "put-downs" they were directed to other students (especially Tom) rather than to me.

> *Way to go Tom!*   (in a sarcastic tone)

She never appeared to balk at the activities and never complained, in my hearing, that they were inappropriate. Alice knew how to enlist teacher help; as a result I considered her to be an effective communicator. She accepted every task given her without question, and organized its completion through cooperation with other children in the group.

Tom's competence

During interpretive analysis, I became aware that Alice was an unnaturally close fit for the definition of communicative competence I was using. Her teacher-like behaviour alerted me to look more carefully for evidence of **other** types of competence. So I began to consider Tom's language behaviour. Here was a boy who communicated clearly, but did not match in all respects the Wilkinson and Calculator (1982) model of communicative competence, particularly in the low frequency of his questioning behaviour.

Operational language. Tom asked far fewer questions than Alice, and only rarely were they directed to me. His utterances appear terse compared with Alice's polite questions:

> *What story?*
> *What's that?*
> *Now who on earth did that?*
> *What are you doing?*

The questions are also context-bound, in that they are difficult to interpret without knowledge of the activity; Tom did not use words to elaborate on shared experience. He was a frequent responder to Alice's

questions, although he sometimes provided information reluctantly or in an unexpected form, by using humor:

> **Alice :**   *Oh, Tom, what is that?*
> **Tom :**   *It's a squished Oh Henry.*

He was the only student who engaged frequently in word-play, as illustrated in the next excerpt:

> **Alice :**   *O.K. Tom, I'll show you what a fish looks like.*
> **Tom :**   *I know mine are better.*
> **Alice :**   *No they aren't.*
> **Angela :**   *I think they are very good.*
> **Alice :**   *Yours aren't better.*
> **Tom :**   *Bet they are. Bet your buns. Of course, you bet*
> *your buns that my fish are better.*
> **Alice :**   *I bet your fish, that your bun, I bet your fish's*
> *buns aren't better!*
> **Tom :**   *Oh ya?*

His quickness with words confounded the opposition most effectively, but certainly not politely. Is this communicative competence? It illustrates an ability with repartée which is not normally rewarded in the classroom situation, but which Tom's peers in this small-group setting respected. He negotiated to the limits of what was acceptable to me in my teacher role:

> *Do we have to draw a real person, or can we just draw?*
> *We're not going to write down the whole idea.*
> *We already made enough, we might not have enough*
> *dough left.*

He never pretended involvement if it meant work that he could not complete; often his suggestions for task modification were realistic and adopted by the group. Tom's terseness also showed in the language he used to relate to others in the group.

Relational language. Tom dealt with everyone without the veneer of politeness, as the quoted interactions with Alice show. He did not bother to couch his conversations with me in conventional ways:

> **Angela :**   *What do you think of all the people in the story*
> *so far?*
> **Tom :**   *What story?*

In all his dealings, Tom strove for realistic appraisal:

Angela :   *Can you help her, Tom?*
Tom :   *I can't, I wouldn't even be able to spell "Quimby".*

It may have been Tom's intent to establish a democratic rather than subservient role relationship for himself here. He was able to give me honest information about his capabilities, which is different from the typical student-to-teacher response. Very often teacher questions are **test** questions, to which the expected reply is acquiescence. Tom clearly states that he cannot spell *Quimby*, and will not pretend to be able to, even to please me.

Although he was a master of put-downs, the other children seemed not to be offended, and certainly continued to communicate with him. When he tried to calm the behaviour of others in the group, he did not use teacher strategies as Alice did, but humor:

> *Smarten up, she's not picking us to be on "America's Funniest Videos".*

So Tom's role was not teacher deputy, but gadfly, commenting on and standing back from people and activities.

Critical language. Not only did Tom set limits for the amount of work that he would do, as illustrated above, but he also changed assigned tasks significantly if they did not match his interests. Again, humor was his weapon. One of the clearest examples of this was a puppet-making activity. I had told the whole class a cumulative story involving a series of animal puppets who followed each other in a parade. Tom found the story too juvenile for his taste (which ran more to Ninja Turtles and horror movies), and he showed this very clearly when I asked him to retell the story to Kim, who had come late on this particular day:

> *We had a story about a bunny that wanted to have a summer parade, but then it was too windy so they had a wittle parade, everyone followed and now we're going to make the story ourselves.*

He indicated his displeasure through his choice of the nursery word "bunny" which was not used in the original story, through his sing-song intonation, and through the lisping "wittle". However, Tom went beyond negative comment and changed the task to make it relevant to his interests. He transformed the major player from a rabbit to a praying mantis, which

was followed by a parade of other insect characters. At the end of Tom's story the praying mantis turned around and ate all its followers! Part of his intention was to shock me, the authority figure, but it was also a way for him to bring in his own knowledge. From watching television Tom had gathered substantial information about insects, which showed in the artistic details of the puppets he made to accompany his story. He became voluble when topics interested him, and was off-hand when activities were not involving. This is an example of Tom's drive to demonstrate his own competence and knowledge; in this case his knowledge of the insect world. He was indeed modifying the task so that it was of greater value to him. Tom certainly did not lack communicative competence, he simply made different choices about how to display it. Tom's communicative competence was evident in his **responses** to questions, where he provided help and information to other students, rather than in his question-asking. He also used language to redefine tasks and his relationship to authority.

Implications for Classroom Talk in Small-group Settings

I agree with Wells and Chang-Wells (1992) that increasing the amount of classroom talk will not by itself lead to enriched language development for students. The range of communicative competence that could be used by the children in this study was limited by the context in which they worked. Concrete tasks led the students to use operational language; although the children were not completing workbook exercises, they were asked to draw, use plasticene, and write stories. Many of the activities were focused on a final product, so that operational language was needed to get the job done. As the students worked with each other, they used relational language to share tasks and tools. Both types of language are necessary in classrooms, but do not encourage cognitive development beyond that needed to coop-erate on a low-level task. Alice used operational and relational language efficiently to carry out the tasks I had assigned. She became almost a teacher deputy in my study, because, although I did not direct the activities most of the time, the tasks were teacher-owned, not developed from student choice. Tom, although he showed himself capable of using operational and rela-tional language to get things done, often chose to work around these tasks with a critical awareness of their lack of relationship to what he needed to practice. Young (1992) perceives classroom discourse as creating a climate such that "[e]ither the pupil will be a pedagogical object or a developing citizen of our one world" (p.88).

This study describes a classroom world in transition. Both Tom and Alice were able to democratize the group experience through enlisting my support as an older peer, rather than consistently deferring to me as a teacher. However, the mundane nature of the tasks performed by the chil-dren, and the lack of student choice, made it difficult for three out of the four

students to use critical language. Tom's individual competence enabled him to communicate skepticism to me in such a way that I allowed the tasks to be modified to fit his need to explore his own knowledge more closely, but other students lacked the confidence to challenge me. Wells and Chang-Wells (1992) suggest that in order for small-group work to stimulate cognitive development the learner must play an active role in selecting and defining the activities. Not only do we as teachers need to increase opportunities for student talk in classrooms, but we must allow children to move beyond operational and relational talk towards critical competence as they select and define their own small- group activities.

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