

Pedagogical Discourse in the Writing Conference

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Introduction

Cee is a relatively low achieving but highly motivated student enrolled in the class of an excellent teacher of college composition. Cee's teacher routinely uses conferences as part of her plan for writing instruction. Conferences are one-to-one, tutorial meetings between teacher and student. In Cee's class they generally take place during a formally scheduled appointment in the teacher's office, not in-class or during class time. The language of instruction in one of Cee's writing conferences is analyzed for insights into how the conference functions in the teaching and learning process.

The conference is important to study because it is such a widely recommended technique for teaching writing (e.g., Graves 1978, 1983; Murray 1979). Conferences are thought by directors of freshman composition programs across the United States to be the most successful part of their teaching programs (Witte et al. 1982). Exemplary teachers of writing at the elementary and secondary levels find that conferences allow for the most consistently helpful feedback during the writing process (Freedman 1985). Their students at the secondary level agree. Cee herself says to her teacher: "It's good that students are able to talk to their teachers about their essays. That way students have a better idea of what's going wrong in their essay... And also you have a better communication gap with your teacher." Her tongue slips, but her meaning is clear - conferences promote communication.

Teachers describe the conference as a "student-centered" learning situation (Duke 1975; Murray 1979) where students "learn to express themselves" (Knapp 1976), where "a student discovers his own ideas" (Jacobs and Karliner 1977; Freedman 1981), where "more 'real' teacher-student interaction" takes place (Fassler 1978; Reigstad 1980). Teachers are urged to listen to students in order to teach them, to allow students to voice their own concerns about writing, and to focus on the problems students encounter when they write.

Carnicelli (1980) points out that when teachers listen to students analyze their own writing, students are learning to react to their own work. In the learning situation of the writing conference, then, the students' "roles" include analyzing and thinking about their writing as well as putting their thoughts into words. The teachers' "roles" include listening to the student, identifying composing problems, helping the students solve those problems, not just for the moment but for the future as well, and deciding how much higher the student can be encouraged to reach.

A linguistic analysis can begin to show what makes conferences so special

in the ways that they function in the teaching and learning process. With segments from one of Cee's first conferences, we show in some detail how the student and teacher construct the topics on which teaching and learning will focus during much of the rest of the semester and how the construction process is unlike whole class teaching when less mutual topic construction occurs. The intent will be to describe the pattern of the discourse and the control and predictability of the language of that discourse in terms of its participants, and to suggest what the study of the discourse reveals about how the conference functions in the student's process of learning to compose. It must be noted here that a linguistic analysis of a single conference will not uncover how conferences function in teaching and learning; rather it will only uncover some beginning clues and lead to some hypotheses. To see the complete function of the conference, one must analyze not only the conference but also the other aspects of the teaching-learning environment - in particular classroom instruction and peer collaborations. Furthermore, one must look across time, rather than only at a moment in time.

Background

The analysis compares verbal interaction in the conference with the analysis of turn-taking operating in the conversation of adult Americans proposed by Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson (1974), and with Mehan's² (1979) description of teacher-student interaction during classroom lessons².

Sacks, Schegloff, and Jefferson have outlined how discourse evolves moment by moment in an orderly fashion with speakers vying for turns according to a set of rules. Variations in the basic rules of turn allocation show the effect of the context and thus help to pinpoint distinctive characteristics. They find a continuum of contexts with respect to turn allocation, with debates at one pole and everyday conversation at the other. In conversations, the speakers agree together, on the spot, on who speaks when. Turns are allocated locally. In debates, turns are pre-allocated, that is, there are preset rules for who speaks when and for how long a given speaker's turn lasts.

The hypothesis here is that classroom conversations and conferences fall in the middle of the continuum, with turn allocation in classroom conversations closer to debates and in conferences closer to natural conversations. Such differences in turn allocation from conferences to classrooms to conversations could point to how the conference functions pedagogically. With this image of a continuum in mind, the question is: what is the place of the writing conference? (See Jacobs and Karliner (1977) for a complementary linguistic analysis of conferences.)

Of further interest is the turn structure itself. Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson show that turns in everyday conversation are marked by a sequence of cooccurring pairs of utterances such as question-answer, request-grant. Mehan outlines a three-part classroom sequence of teacher initiation (I), student response (R), and teacher evaluation (E). The I and R together make up one unit that is itself "completed" by the E. This three-part system is a modification of the turn-allocation system in everyday conversation in that one speaker, the teacher, maintains control of the discourse or the lesson. Since the teacher initiates the sequence, she may select the topic and, as current speaker, select the next student speaker. After the student's response, the teacher again regains the floor, for evaluation, topic selection, and speaker selection. Within the lesson, then, there are restricted appropriate times for speaker change

initiated by the student - either when the teacher allows it, when she has not selected a specific responder, or after teacher evaluation but before her selection of another speaker and/or before her change of topic.

Linguistic analysis of the data

1. Turn-order and turn-allocation

Mehan's three-part (IRE) turn-taking system, characterizes the basic structure of turn-order and allocation in the following conference; however, within the IRE, the student manages a certain amount of control:

I- --T19: ...Are there any things that you think I would, I would think that would be particularly good about the essay, ..Or that you think are good.=

R- --S19: =You,
Or me.

T20: Well,
either one.
Things that you think are good,
// /hum/,
..let's start with that.//

S20: The paragraph,
the sentence,
or the..ideas,

T21: ..anything.

S21: Anything,=

T22: =Yeah, on a sentence level,
or a..paragraph level.

S22: Umm,
well there were some sentences,
that I..got..from,
my,
first essay,
the one,
I forgot to turn one in,
and you told me,
to turn in an essay anyway and I wrote about,
the attitudes..of,
..Peanut's attitudes,
of Americans,
something like that.
..And let's see... ..oh Lord,
... ..Oh it might be in this paragraph right here.=
=/Uh hum./
I changed it around to fit my essay.
From the young man,
to the bright women.

T23: Okay this was a sentence that you'd had in your other essay,

S23: Uh //Hum, / and then you changed/
similar to it.//=

T24: =I see.
Okay.
And you included it..in this paper..because,=

- --S24: =It seemed to,
go in ..uh..blend in well,
with³it.

E- --T25: Okay.

The teacher initiation (I) in T19 consists of a broad question or directive that allows, or rather almost forces, the student to participate actively in the discussion of her writing since the student must take responsibility for choosing the direction for development of the topic broached by the teacher. The teacher asks for general information, and "good" things about the essay. These initiation questions give the student control during conference since they are "real", open-ended questions - ones to which the teacher cannot predict answers and ones which allow the student to initiate topics. They are unlike traditional classroom questions which have been called "exam" questions because the teacher knows the answer and poses the question only to test the student's knowledge (Searle 1969).

Interestingly, in T19 the teacher first asks an exam question ("What would I think would be good?") and then a real question ("What do you think is good?"), but in collaboration with the student in S19 shifts to the real question "what do you think" in T20. The student has trouble responding until this shift is accomplished. The teacher initiates real questions to gather information about the students' learning and composing processes, and to help the student learn to self-evaluate. For example, the teacher asks, "In general, how do you feel about the paper?" and "Any other things that offhand you think that made this paper good or bad?" Such real questions encourage the student to respond substantively and give the teacher important information to use in guiding the teaching-learning process.

The response part (R) is the focusing section, the part of the sequence in which the student's response indicates the student's desired direction for the discussion. The teacher's subsequent utterances are adjusted to the student's response in an attempt to track the student's thoughts. Here, the teacher's control of the discourse seems loose; her role may be seen less as that of the teacher giving information, and more as that of the manager or guide prompting the student to clarify her thoughts and ask her questions. Forty turns are analyzed in this segment of the conference data: 26 out of 40 teacher turns for Cee, occur during the response part of the sequence; as in Mehan's model, this section may be extended to include several conversational turns.

In the example, after Cee understands the teacher's initiating question in S22 and after a cue from the teacher, she finally produces an answer and a lengthy one at that. She is concerned about how well her tactic of slipping in sentences from another essay works. She aimed to "blend" an idea from a previous essay into this one. She seems to have had difficulty generating ideas on this topic. After Cee's lengthy answer, the teacher's questions and comments are used to help Cee finish shaping her answer; in T24, the "because" trails off, allowing Cee to complete with her own reasoning.

The teacher has learned something significant about Cee's composing. In an attempt to please the teacher, Cee takes a sentence from a previous essay that the teacher had indicated that she liked and slipped it into the current essay. The student could not abstract from the teacher's previous praise to apply it to her new piece of writing; rather she interprets the praise literally. If a sentence is good in one essay, then one should try to reuse it in another essay. The resulting text is less than satisfactory.

Teacher evaluation (E), completes the sequence and allows a shift to another topic. In the example, the evaluation is brief, a simple "Okay" (T25). As in any instructional sequence, evaluation provides feedback to the student that she is performing appropriately. Evaluation utterances

also occur within the response (R) section, as markers to help the student continue her analysis of her writing, as reinforcement for her effort. Gumperz (1982) calls these conversational utterances backchannel cues. The crucial distinction between the closing evaluation (E) and the evaluation during the response (R) section is that the former closes the segment by permitting a change in topic, a change controlled by the teacher; the closing evaluation serves to redirect rather than to track the conversation.

Several characteristics of the teacher-student roles in the conference are apparent. Ostensibly, the teacher retains a conventional role within a conventional instructional sequence, directing questions to the student. The teacher, as initiator of the sequence, controls the selection of topic, broad though it may be, and so the overall flow of the conversation as well. Since she closes the sequence, she retrieves the floor and maintains that control into the next topic, the next sequence. The teacher is able to use this turntaking system to provide help for the learner. Yet in several important ways, this verbal interaction is more student-centered than in the usual teaching-learning situation. First, within the response part, the teacher's role as controller is modified to that of manager, as she helps Cee shape her thoughts. Because the topic is broached in such general terms in its initiation, the student is forced into an active role; she must choose a specific direction for development of the topic. Thus, although turn-order seems fairly predictable, specific topic direction in this particular segment is more affected by the student than by the teacher.

Second, the teacher-controlling parts of the sequence (I and E) occupy less time in the overall sequence than that part focuses on the student (R): Most teacher turns occur during R parts of the sequence. Thus, although the student-teacher conference seems to operate with role-specific restrictions within a three-part IRE instructional sequence that affects turn-order and allocation, there seem to be significant modifications that allow student-initiated talk.

2. Topic shift

The second analysis focuses on how teacher and student develop the discourse topic - the content of the conference. The question is: What roles do student and teacher play in shifting topics? The following opening segments of the conference provide some clues.

I---(T1: How did you feel about this essay?)⁴
 R- - S1: Horrible.=
 T2: =You did,=
 S2: =Terrible.
 Well see it was a rush job I did the night before, (laughs) it was // due.
 T3: Oh// you did.=
 S3: =well,
 earlier,
 I was going to start earlier in the week, but I I just..every time I started on it I just couldn't think of anything, but during the first week you gave us the assignment to us, I did write a few things here and there.
 And then I maybe about a week I left it alone, without ever looking at it again.
 Till I finally realized that I better..get going, and I didn't feel too good about this essay.

And I feared there was a lot of little errors here and there. And like I was reading my own copy, about 15 minutes ago, to see how it was.
 ..And there are a few errors I found, that should have been corrected before.

T4: ..Um, you said you sat down and you tried to do some work on it. But you just had a lot of..moments when you couldn't,=
 S4: =uh hum,
 weird thing.
 It was about the same thing I was thinking about,
 E- - T5: ..Okay.
 I--- ...Do you think it was the subject matter, that made it hard for you to write, or do you think,
 // /umm/
 I mean do you // have any idea why this particular paper was hard to write?

R- - S5: ...It's just that,
 ..I wanted to do the subject,
 ..but..getting the ideas out,
 and putting them out..on the paper,
 was hard to do.

T6: Thank you (interruption).
 Sure. (Turns off recorder).
 Okay.
 Uhm.

S6: ..Now what was I saying now?=
 T7: =I was asking you why you felt it was hard to, to get started on this particular piece.

S7: ...Oh yes.
 And I said something about,
 ..that,
 ...I had some ideas,
 but the ideas weren't complete,
 and putting them down on paper was hard.
 I had a lot of ideas running through my mind,
 but when I finally got to the knitty gritty.
 Writing things down,
 was hard.

T8: Did you um,
 did you try to write them down,
 like when we talked about Trimble,
 did you try,
 ..writing down an idea,
 and asking questions of it,
 or //did you.

S8: Uh hum, //
 T9: you tried doing that.=
 S9: =But that also seemed hard too.
 /Humm,/
 Because sometimes my answer would be really long,
 and sometimes it would be short.
 But when I got down to writing it,
 ..it just..wasn't there,

T10: hum.
 S10: ...It's sort of like half of it was blanked out.
 T11: Hmm.

- Ok,
 ...hmmmm.
 ..Let me think.
 You were arguing about an unpopular opinion.
- S11: Yes and I felt that,
 this should have been,
 ..extended more,
 but..I'm not sure how,
 /okay,/=
 =it should be extended.
 And this should been maybe a whole paragraph right here,
 annnd,
 ...there's another area,
 right here,
 and you already made a reference to it.
 .."I think" I said "women can do the job if the work were
 given to them."
 /Right./
 Because,
 women can do the job if they were given to them,
 doesn't make sense at all.
- E- T12: Right.
 Right.
 That's good you picked up on that.
- - Right.

Topic shifts are accomplished interactionally. The teacher encourages the student to talk by using a "real" and "open" question with a broad topic, "How do you feel about this essay?" The teacher controls the broad topic but relinquishes more specific control to the student. This beginning is similar to a rather typical conversational opener about one's health - "How are you?" However, the student responds with a one word summation of her feelings about the paper - "Horrible." Just as one would continue the conversation to get the particulars, prodding a bit with a rejoinder such as, "Oh, really?", the teacher in this conference prods the student to expand on her feelings about the paper by asking, "You did?" and so the student continues without further linguistic prompts. Her lexical choices are forceful, "horrible" and "terrible" rather than "not so good". She continues her explanations (S2), with the marker "Well" signalling the beginning of her discourse (a prestart used repeatedly by this student). In T3, although the surface forms may seem almost identical with T2, the meaning has changed. Here, given the information that the student does not feel good about the paper and that it was "a rush job", the teacher's utterance shifts topic slightly, focusing now no longer on how the student feels about the paper, but on why she has problems. The auxiliary "did" in T3 can be completed by the verb phrase "do the paper" rather than "feel horrible". T2 has the rising intonation of a question and is uttered quickly; T3 has the falling intonation of a statement, the vowel in "oh" is lengthened, and there is a slight pause before "you did". With these prosodic cues, the teacher is probing, asking the student to be more specific, to explain. And the student does, beginning with her marker, "Well".

In S3, the student expresses two concerns about her writing, both in broad, unfocused terms. Her first concern is with developing her ideas, "I just couldn't think of anything". Within this turn, she repeats her earlier statement of concern, the initial response to the teacher's

inquiry about the essay, "I didn't feel to good about this essay", and then goes on to voice her second main concern, about grammar, "a lot of little errors here and there".

In T4, given more than she has probably counted on, the teacher focuses on one point, going back to the student's first stated concern about not being able to think of anything to say, in order to focus the student's attention and elicit more information from her. Although in S4 the student does not respond with anything more specific, the teacher tries again in T5, first prompting with a specific reason - about subject matter - then broadening the question to "any idea", although still offering a hint about topic with "this particular paper". The student, in S5, takes the hint and refers to the topic, but declines that suggestion as a reason for her difficulty, adding a restatement of her difficulty in "getting the ideas out" and "putting them ... on the paper". Her topic initiations occur after the conjunction "but".

Additional evidence for the basic structure of the conference occurs in T6, when the conversation is interrupted. The teacher's responsibility for beginning the interaction is apparent in her self-selection for starting the conversation again, although her prestarts, "Okay, um..." indicate that she hasn't yet collected her thoughts to have anything to say. She is merely responding to her obligation, as the teacher, to begin the discourse, to set the stage.

The student, in S6, however, warms up again as she regains the floor though she needs the teacher's reminder (in T7) to guide her. After a slight pause, the student (in S7) continues about the difficulty of putting down her thoughts, again rejecting the notion that she didn't have any ideas, rather, restating her problem as "getting them out".

In T8, the teacher initiates a suggestion about how to get the ideas out based on a previous class assignment. In S9, the student acknowledges the strategy but claims that it, too, failed her - "it just wasn't there". By T10, the teacher begins to run out. She holds her place until the student rejoins, in S10, with yet another attempt to describe her problem in producing text. By T11, the teacher has begun to regroup. She stalls with, "Let me think", and returns to the topic as a possible starting point for discussing the student's problem. S11 acknowledges the return, repeats the problem about "extending" and then, perhaps tired of searching for an explanation of her problem, shifts the topic back to something more specific, a problem with the sense of a sentence. T12 finishes off the sequence, with four separate positive evaluations, perhaps as anxious for a change as the student.

Within this sequence, then, the teacher has retained a measure of control, initiating questions to the student as a way of guiding the student's discussion of her writing. But the student provides the direction for the discussion, a direction that may be shaped by the teacher's list of broad questions, but which is shaped by the student as to form (length of her turn, for example) and content (problem discussed).

Conclusion: What does an analysis of the language of the conference mean in terms of student writing processes?

The data in this analysis constitute a small sample of the verbal interaction in a single student-teacher writing conference, and present a case in which certain linguistic characteristics place the conference somewhere between Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson's conversational turn-taking system and Mehan's classroom interaction. It is this mid-ground that seems to

make the conference theoretically an optimal setting or structure for learning to write. However, it is up to each teacher-student dyad to maximize the effectiveness of the substance that occurs within the structure.

Many features in a student-teacher conference resemble those discussed in Mehan's analysis of classroom interaction. However, it would be too simplistic to characterize the writing conference as merely a mini-lesson between a teacher and one student at a time. The pattern of IRE found in the conference predicts the points at which, generally, each participant exercises control over the flow of the discourse. Since the IRE pattern involves question-answer sequences in which, usually, the teacher asks the question and the student answers, the teacher seems to carry the control of the discourse. The end of each question signals the transition point at which the teacher relinquishes her turn and her control. Yet when the student, in responding to the initial question, determines the topical course of the sequence of that talk, be it to discuss ideas for writing or the use of apostrophes, she too seems to exercise control, at least until the teacher reclaims it for evaluation and a shift to another broad question. And perhaps that is more like the "given" of the situation: the teacher retains and releases control in order to encourage student talk and so gather information necessary for her to be able to encourage learning. She is the manager of the learning. She focuses the direction taken by the topics the student initiates. Importantly, in the conference, because of its regular conversational properties, the student has the opportunity to interact and express personal pedagogical needs. Such an opportunity is often absent for many students when group instruction is the primary focus, as is the case in many U.S. instructional settings.

In the conference that we examined here, which occurs early on in the term, the teacher probes for information about the student's problems. There is little evidence of how the teacher helps the student solve her problems. Such solutions, in fact, are not apparent in this conference; rather the solutions come only in later conferences between the same teacher and this student.

It is crucial to note that the linguistic analysis put forth here examines mostly the structure of the talk. What is perhaps more important is the substance of the problem-solving that occurs within that structure. In another paper (Freedman and Greenleaf 1985), we suggest an additional analysis system that examines the language structure and that accounts for the problem-solving that occurs within the structure. Rather than looking at I-R-E sequences, we identify how teacher and student establish an Orientation to the Problem, work on a Joint Solution of the Problem, and the Packaging of the Solution. In this project, we offer an analysis of the problem solving related to the teaching of writing that occurs in the secondary school.

Notes

1. A longer version of this paper co-authored with Anne Marie Katz, appears as a chapter in: Writing in Real Time: Modelling Production Processes. A. Matsuhashi (Ed.), Norwood (N.J.), Ablex.
2. Mehan's analysis of classroom conversations builds on a tradition begun by Bellack et al. (1966) and Sinclair and Coulthard (1975).
3. The following transcription conventions are followed:
 - = stands for latching, that is cases when there is no pause and no overlap between turns;

// // stands for overlap;
 / / is used when one speaker interrupts the turn of another
 speaker without taking a turn, generally back channel cues.

One idea unit (Chafe, 1980) is transcribed per line. Commas stand for rising intonation; periods stand for falling intonation.

4. The parentheses indicate that the talk enclosed was missing from the tape but has been reconstructed from the context.

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