Shifting Patterns of Classroom Discourse and Their Consequences for Student Participation

Given the importance of student participation for learning, the equitable distribution of turns at talk is a matter of social justice (Au & Mason 1983, Emanuelsson & Sahlström 2008). This paper examines the relative prevalence and pedagogical consequences of the two main discursive strategies teachers use in allocating turns to individual students: "invitations to bid"—soliciting students who are willing to respond to raise hands, then nominating one of the volunteers—and "individual nominations"—selecting a student to respond without his/her having volunteered (Mehan 1979). I begin by determining the relative prevalence of these two strategies in detailed transcripts of 4.5 hours of third-grade lessons (students ages 8-9), video-recorded in three classrooms in 2008. I then compare with equivalent data from the 1970s (Mehan et al. 1976, Griffin & Humphrey 1978). This reveals a dramatic shift: In the 1970s, individual nominations (calling on students without their having volunteered) accounted for over 70% of teacher-initiated interactions (Mehan et al. 1976, Griffin & Humphrey 1978), whereas in today's classrooms, individual nominations account for less than 10%, and invitations to bid make up over 70% (see Lemke 1990 for early hints of this).

Analysis of the discursive structure and functions of each strategy suggests a motivation for this shift. Individual nominations consist of a single adjacency pair (Levinson 1983): a combined cue/nomination first pair part followed by a student response. Functionally, these allow teachers to select any student to respond, which can help ensure equitable participation (Griffin & Humphrey 1978), though nominating students without their having volunteered risks eliciting dispreferred (incorrect/inappropriate) responses (McHoul 1978). The now-predominant invitation to bid functions to reduce this risk of dispreferred responses with a volunteer-solicitation presequence, which, like other presequences (e.g., pre-invitations), helps avoid dispreferred responses (Liddicoat 2011). However, a regression analysis suggests that using primarily invitations to bid has a detrimental effect on equity, insofar as it makes how often a student volunteers (which, in the classes analyzed, ranges from *never* for some students to an average of 16.5 times per lesson for others) the overwhelming determiner of how many opportunities that student gets to contribute verbally, β=.84, $t(28)$=8.16, p<.001. In other words, invitations to bid disadvantage those who (due to culture, personality, etc.) volunteer less often.

The perceived benefit of invitations to bid is that students get a choice, and those who volunteer are more likely to give the response that the teacher has in mind (McHoul 1978). However, this is really only a benefit when questions are used to display/review facts (a widespread practice that has long been criticized; e.g., Barnes et al. 1969, Wood 1992). Researchers now recognize the superiority of process-oriented questioning, since learning *how* to solve problems is far more important than the solutions themselves, and errors provide for discussion and learning (Gayle et al. 2006). Ultimately, a shift to more process-oriented questions could also reduce the desirability of volunteer-based turn allocation, thus freeing teachers to promote a more equitable distribution of turns by nominating students at random rather than seeking volunteers.

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