Intercultural disagreement and knowledge construction in EAP seminar discussions

Adam.Donnelly@Glasgow.ac.uk

English for Academic Study,
University of Glasgow

Outline

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Key points

- Discourse approach to speaking - accurate, detailed descriptions based on authentic samples. Away from idealised functions (e.g. useful phrases to express opinion, dis/agree).

- Recognise importance of disagreement/opposition in provoking complex exchanges and co-construction of knowledge.

- Awareness of *cultural* dimensions to interaction >> inclusive EAP methodologies, materials, assessment.

Rationale

- Seminar discussions - established component of higher education (HE) study, across disciplines; "facilitate socialisation, increase retention, enhance critical thinking, problem-solving and communication skills" (Aguilar, 2016:336).

- "Seminar" = selected readings: oral presentation >> question/discussion. More or less tutor-led, depending on context.

- Common feature of EAP provision: materials, course ILOs, assessment.

- Tendency to focus on idealised, "useful" functions (e.g. expressing opinion, clarification, dis/agreement). Lack accurate descriptions of discourse & behaviours.

- Basturkmen (2002) – *simple* exchanges of pre-formed ideas; *complex* exchanges – meaning negotiated through discussion > **co**-constructed *knowledge emerges*.
  - "Learning to speak vs. speaking to learn" (Basturkmen, 2016:154)

- **Disagreement/opposition** > provokes extensions, pursuit of "common ground" – "site of shared knowledge" (Littlewood, 2001:189) – highly valued as means of learning enhancement.

- Norms around interaction and disagreement management differ widely across *cultures* (Ting-Toomey and Kurogi, 1998; Kádár and Haugh, 2013).

- Crossroads: Knowledge making <> EAP pedagogy <> Intercultural communication.

The study

1. *When and to what extent does disagreement occur in seminar discussions between EAP students?*

2. *What strategies are employed by EAP students to manage disagreement in interaction and how do they compare across and within cultures?*

3. *What role, if any, does disagreement play in the achievement of co-constructed knowledge in EAP seminar discussions?*

Theoretical Background

- Universal **politeness** (Brown and Levinson, 1978).

- Disagreement/opposition = "**face-threatening act** (FTA)"; speakers employ strategies to mitigate impact.

  - "**Bald-on-record**" - unambiguous, direct act. No attempt to mitigate face threat.
  - "**On-record with redress**" – modified act, to lend 'face' to the listener (e.g. hedging, impersonalising mechanisms).

- "Content of face" and "limits of personal territories" vary substantially across *cultures* (Brown and Levinson, 1978:61).

- "Cultural variability" (Ting-Toomey, 1998) - ***individualism-collectivism****: self-interest / in-group needs.*

- Interaction is highly situated, context-dependent – disagreement influenced by "personality traits and relational histories" (Sifanou, 2012:1556).

- Face-saving silence among Japanese students negatively evaluated by peers and lecturers (Nakane, 2006).

- Disagreement is a beneficial, necessary interactional resource e.g. decision making, problem-solving (Angouri and Locher, 2012) – co-constructing meaning in seminar discussions.

Methodology

- Case-study - authentic speech data; "rich descriptions of real world behaviours" (Casanave, 2015).

- 11 participants; "Year-round Pre-sessional" EAP (5 nationalities: China, Saudi, Japan, Kuwait, Indonesia).

- 3 x 30-minute seminar discussions recorded, transcribed, analysed.

- Conversation Analysis (CA).
  - Sequential organisation of spoken turns – focus on management of interaction, disagreement and knowledge co-construction.
  - "Bald on record" / "on record with redress" (Brown and Levinson, 1978)

Sample transcript

91	M:	So you think that the courses that knowledge is not uh for beneficial for living?

Discussion 3

K - Saudi
M - Indonesia
N – China

91 M: So you think that the courses that knowledge is not uh for beneficial for living?

92 N: Yeah.

93 M: Wow! *laugh* Quite surprising. [*laugh*]

94 K: [*Laugh*]

95 N: But [because]

96 M: I don't know.

97 N: If you want to learn PhD in university you can choose one system of course

98   and if you want to work directly uh after graduating from university you can

99   choose another system of education in university.

100 M: Mmm

101 N: It depends you.

102 M: Actually I I haven't considered that actually

103 N: Mmm

Extract 7

Sample transcript

Bald-on-record FTA.

91 M: So you think that the courses that knowledge is not uh for beneficial for living?

92 N: Yeah.

93 M: **Wow!** *laugh* Quite surprising. [*laugh*]

94 K: [*Laugh*]

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Extract 7

Sample transcript

Bald-on-record FTA.

Redressive action.

91   M: So you think that the courses that knowledge is not uh for beneficial for living?

92   N: Yeah.

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Extract 7

Sample transcript

Bald-on-record FTA.

Redressive action.

Shared rapport management.

91 M: So you think that the courses that knowledge is not uh for beneficial for living?

92 N: Yeah.

93 M: Wow! *laugh* Quite surprising. [*laugh*]

94 K: [*Laugh*]

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97 N: If you want to learn PhD in university you can choose one system of course

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100 M: Mmm

101 N: It depends you.

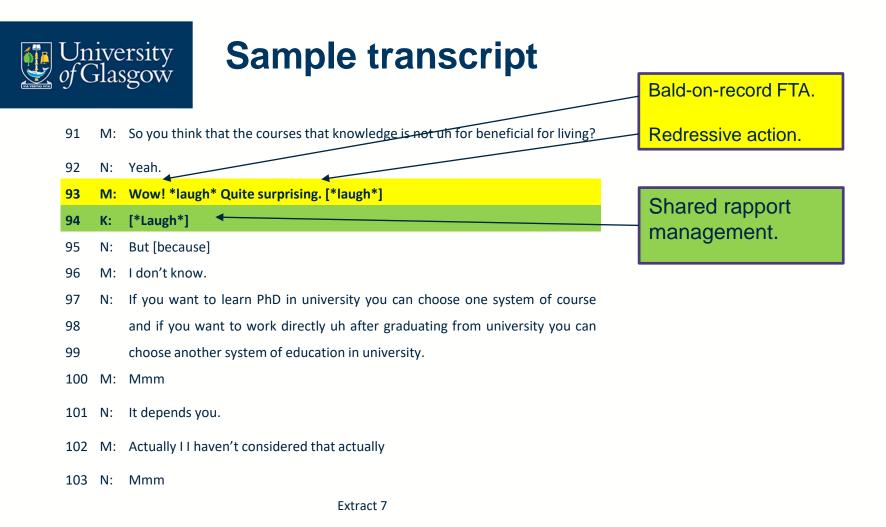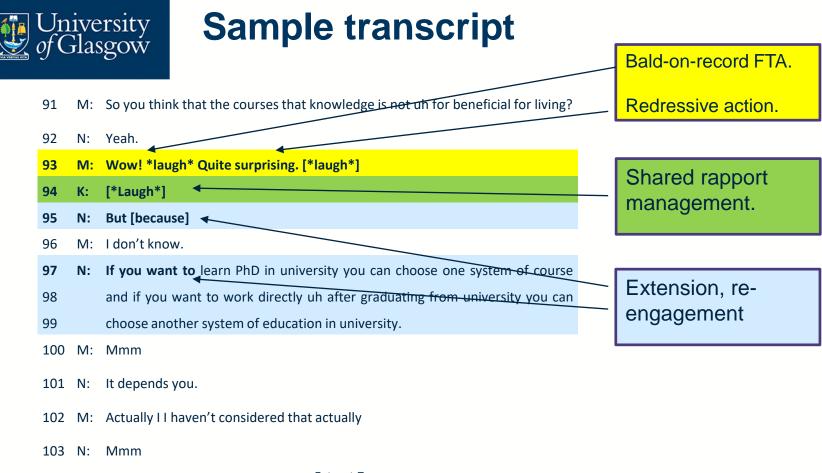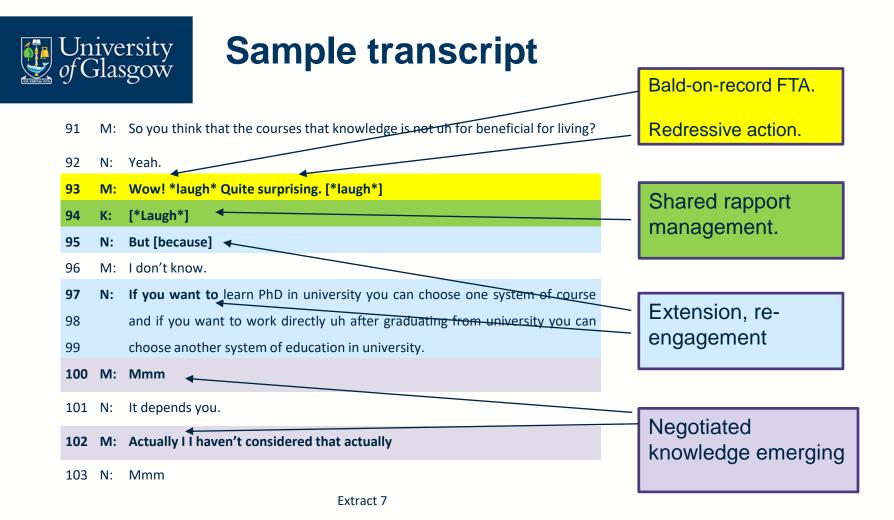102 M: Actually I I haven't considered that actually

103 N: Mmm

Extract 7

Sample transcript

University of Glasgow

91	M:	So you think that the courses that knowledge is not uh for beneficial for living?
92	N:	Yeah.
93	**M:**	**Wow! *laugh* Quite surprising. [*laugh*]**
94	**K:**	**[*Laugh*]**
95	**N:**	**But [because]**
96	M:	I don't know.
97	**N:**	**If you want to** learn PhD in university you can choose one system of course
98		and if you want to work directly uh after graduating from university you can
99		choose another system of education in university.
100	M:	Mmm
101	N:	It depends you.
102	M:	Actually I I haven't considered that actually
103	N:	Mmm

Bald-on-record FTA.

Redressive action.

Shared rapport management.

Extension, re-engagement

Extract 7

Sample transcript

Bald-on-record FTA.

Redressive action.

Shared rapport management.

Extension, re-engagement

Negotiated knowledge emerging

91	M:	So you think that the courses that knowledge is not uh for beneficial for living?
92	N:	Yeah.
93	**M:**	**Wow! *laugh* Quite surprising. [*laugh*]**
94	**K:**	**[*Laugh*]**
95	**N:**	**But [because]**
96	M:	I don't know.
97	**N:**	**If you want to** learn PhD in university you can choose one system of course
98		and if you want to work directly uh after graduating from university you can
99		choose another system of education in university.
100	**M:**	**Mmm**
101	N:	It depends you.
102	**M:**	**Actually I I haven't considered that actually**
103	N:	Mmm

Extract 7

Summary of findings

- Expression of disagreement/opposition is integral to complex exchanges and shared knowledge construction.

- EAP students employ a diverse range of strategies to manage interaction, face threat and group rapport; flaunt politeness imperatives / mitigate face threat.

- Interlocutors who tend towards low-risk, avoidance-based strategies (e.g. silence) appear to be excluded from access to knowledge construction and enhanced learning.

Implications

- Discourse approach to speaking - accurate, detailed descriptions based on authentic speech samples. Away from idealised, pre-formed speech units.
  - Access to authentic samples? Time-consuming process (e.g. ethical approval).
  - Pre-formed "Useful Language" functions = important scaffolding?

- Recognise the importance of disagreement/opposition in provoking complex exchanges and co-construction of knowledge.
  - Encourage students to disagree? Token/arbitrary.

- Awareness of *cultural* dimensions to interaction >> inclusive EAP methodologies, materials, assessment, etc.
  - Silence =/= non-engagement. Parity of opportunity. Assessment constructs?

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