



EXAMINING NEGOTIATION IN PEER GROUP ORAL ASSESSMENT

WHAT ARE THE IMPLICATIONS?

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This article reports on a case study of negotiation that occurred in peer group oral interactions under assessment conditions. Discourse analysis was used to illustrate how participants negotiated and co-constructed the assessment format itself as well as meaning exchange sequences. Analyses of the data point to the advantage of using peer group discussion task in generating the interaction patterns representative of natural conversational situations. By concentrating on the situated dynamics and process of peer group functioning, this study also demonstrates the importance of peer learning opportunities that resulted from collaborative reasoning under assessment conditions, which have typically been ignored in the conventional testing paradigm. Implications of these findings over validity issues in oral language assessment are discussed.

INTRODUCTION

Inextricably linked to the theory of comprehensible input in the process of second language learning, the role of meaning negotiation as a way to build common ground and solve problems that arise in the process of communication has been researched for the past several decades (see Long 1985, 1996; Foster and Ohta 2005). This kind of negotiation of meaning that triggers interactional modification by the more competent interlocutors in communication situations connects input, attention, and output in productive ways, and also leads to the creation of various types of feedback such as correction, comprehension checks, clarification requests and recasts (e.g., Pica 1994; Long 1996). Negotiation described in studies by these researchers clearly concentrates on locating and dealing with actual or potential trouble sources related to communication breakdowns. The discourse sequence of this type of negotiated interaction has been typically characterised

as a configuration of trigger, signal, modified output and uptake, which are considered as a vehicle for the acquisition of the target language (see Nakahama, Tyler and Van Lier 2001). Mori (2004) comments that negotiation of meaning has been considered by researchers such as Pica and Long as an individual-focused process directed towards the accurate transfer of information, or towards the formation of comprehensible input and output. This means that what gets negotiated is not contextual meaning, but input and output. Namely, in this research paradigm, negotiation of meaning is generally portrayed as a representation of cognitive constructs.

From a sociocultural perspective, however, Mercer and Wegerif (1999) argue that students engaging critically but constructively with each other's ideas may foster the creation and exploitation of learning opportunities. Swain (2001) also suggests that what is learned socially through collaborative dialogue might then be appropriated by the individual for future use. These researchers' views correspond closely with the idea that learning is viewed as an interactional process that requires understanding of language and other semiotic tools as both personal and social resources (Halliday and Hasan 1989), and that learners can be seen as mutual scaffolders who give and receive support as they interact with their peers (Vygotsky 1978). Consequently, "the catalyst for learning is not necessarily noncomprehension, as is the case in the second language 'negotiation of meaning' literature; rather linguistic development is seen to emerge through the social mediation of the group's activity" (Naughton 2006, 170).

We thus agree with Nakahama, Tyler and Van Lier (2001) and Mori (2004) that an expanded definition of negotiation should go beyond an exclusive focus on repair to include multiple levels of interaction (e.g., discourse management and interpersonal dynamics). Negotiation occurs when people juxtapose ideas and arguments, raise and resolve a particular conundrum, reject alternative voices, or reach an agreement concerning a disputable event (Schrimshaw and Perkins 1997). We notice that there is little research on negotiated interaction between non-native speaking candidates in a paired or group oral interaction test (Iwashita 1999). This article reports on a study that examined the meaning negotiation or co-construction sequences between non-native speakers that occurred in peer group oral interactions under assessment conditions. The aim is to investigate what kind of negotiation discourse may arise in non-native peer group oral assessment situations in an English as a second language context; and what implications the investigation of negotiation discourse on such assessment occasions could contribute to illuminating validity issues in second language (L2) oral assessment.

In the remainder of this introduction, I will first present a brief review of some discourse-based empirical studies of test candidate conversational interaction that are of

particular relevance to this study. Second, I will consider research examining negotiation features of natural conversation and oral proficiency interviews (OPIs). I will then move on to a consideration of the learning dimension embedded in peer group oral tasks.

EMPIRICAL STUDIES OF CONVERSATIONAL INTERACTION IN TESTING SITUATIONS

Discourse and interaction in oral language assessment situations has been a topic of considerable interest in the field of second language (L2), as is evidenced by a growing body of research on this topic (see McNamara, Hill and May 2002). For example, Ross and Berwick (1992) studied the degree to which interviewers used two types of speech modifications, i.e., control (e.g., topic nomination and abandonment, reformulations) and accommodation (e.g., clarification requests, display questions, and simplifications) with learners at different levels of proficiency. Their study revealed that oral proficiency interview discourse reflects the types of accommodation that are part of native-nonnative interaction (i.e., ‘foreigner talk’). In particular, they raised the issue of misplaced accommodation as a threat to both the validity of interviews and the subsequent rating process. They concluded that “the major threat to validity occurs when interviewers are unaware of the propositional complexity of their probes or ignore the effects of their own inclination to accommodate to all nonnative speakers, regardless of their need for it” (p. 170). Filipi (1994) also conducted a study of talk that occurred in a sample of interactions between assessors and students during the 1992 Victorian Certificate of Education Italian Oral Common Assessment task. The interaction patterns she found in her study appeared to display features both different from, and similar to, ordinary conversation. Based on her findings, Filipi suggested a need “to encourage conditions for talk that resemble ordinary conversation as closely as possible so that students are given more opportunities to show their conversational competence as well as their linguistic competence in the oral test” (p. 113).

More recently, discourse analysis has proven to be a useful tool in illustrating the nature of oral test performance and in investigating the construct of language proficiency. Using conversation analytic techniques, Lazaraton (2002) described several studies examining both examiner and candidate behaviour on various Cambridge EFL Speaking Tests for the purpose of informing rating scale development and refinement. Also employing conversation analytic techniques, Brown (2004) examined how interviewer behaviour differences affect the quality of the interviewee’s talk and result in different pictures of interviewee’s speaking proficiency.

A number of studies have focused particularly on validity issues in relation to the group oral test format. To investigate validity of the CET-SET group discussion task where the candidates are asked to have a 4.5-minute discussion between peers on a given topic in relation to the visual prompt, He and Dai (2006) conducted a corpus-based study by comparing candidates' actual performance to a checklist of eight interactional language functions specified in the test syllabus. They found a low degree of interaction occurring among candidates in the CET-SET group discussion. Based on their results, they claimed that the inadequate elicitation of the interactional language functions from candidates may well pose a validity problem for measuring students' interactional competence as specified in the test syllabus.

To build an overall validity argument for the group oral format, Van Moere (2006) investigated test-taker reactions to the group discussion format, inter-rater reliability for these test administrations, and consistency of individuals' scores from one test occasion to another. Van Moere's examination of scores produced on a large-scale group oral performance test showed that they are useful for making general inferences about a candidate's ability to converse in a foreign language, and that reliability increases over multiple test occasions. Given the positive reactions to the group oral test format from the candidates, Van Moere suggested some potential areas for further investigation, one of which is "unpredictable interaction dynamics, textual analysis of different discourse events, their paralinguistic features, and candidates' willingness or ability to contribute to them" (Van Moere 2006, 436).

NEGOTIATION: A COMPARISON OF NATURAL CONVERSATION INTERACTION AND ORAL PROFICIENCY INTERVIEWS

Bannink (2002) argues that conversational interactions cannot be the outcome of planned agendas: they have to emerge and so, by definition, cannot be planned. This resonates with Schlegoff, Jefferson and Sacks (1977), who assert that everyday conversation is produced on a turn-by-turn basis, and that no aspect of such turn-taking is specified in advance. More specifically, Jones and Gerard's (1967) well-known theory of dyadic interaction highlights that conversation involves a mutual responsiveness, in which each person's responses become stimuli for the other. This means that such interactions are characterised by a sequence in which each person's response is contingent on the preceding response of the other. In such situations, topic is negotiated and topical coherence is constructed across turns by collaboration of participants (Levinson 1983, 313; Johnson and Tyler 1998, 32). "This collaboration involves participants picking elements from

other participants' contributions to the preceding discourse and incorporating these elements into their own contributions" (Johnson and Tyler 1998, 32). Johnson and Tyler emphasise that ordinary conversation is based on mutual contingency with equal distributions of rights and duties.

The Oral Proficiency Interview (OPI) was initially developed in the USA by the Foreign Service Institute and later was used by the Educational Testing Service and other academic institutions from around the United States. The overall structural organisation of the OPI interviews is clearly identifiable (Johnson and Tyler 1998). The interview generally proceeds through distinct predefined phases: *warm-up*, which aims at putting the interviewee at ease; *level-check*, which allows the interviewee to display ability to manipulate tasks and contexts at a particular level; *probing*, which aims at stressing the interviewee; and *wind-down*, which brings the interview down to a level comfortable for the interviewee so as to end the interview. Stansfield and Kenyon (1992) point out that the theoretical model of language proficiency on which OPI is grounded focuses on the surface features of languages, but does not include the pragmatic, contextual and strategic aspects of language proficiency as elaborated by Canale and Swain (1980) in their communicative competence theory. Stansfield and Kenyon's view is echoed by Moder and Halleck (1998) who argue that aspects of communicative competence that are highlighted in informal conversations but not highlighted in the interview frame, such as that of OPI, include nomination and control of topic by the interviewees and aspects of turn-taking relevant to and common in real-life context conversations. In fact, during the key phases of an oral proficiency interview, the candidate's power to negotiate is almost nonexistent (Johnson and Tyler 1998). From a discourse analytic perspective, Van Lier (1989) summarises the most salient discourse and interactional features that occur in OPIs as: 1) asymmetrical contingency and lack of co-construction of meaning; 2) unfairness; 3) predictable pattern as to the tester's and the candidate's behaviour in terms of turn unit, and no competition for holding the floor.

PEER COLLABORATION AND LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES

A great deal has been said about the significance of peer collaborative group work at various school levels. Peer group tasks normally involve learners intentionally working together with shared responsibility for the task, and thus requires them to achieve joint management of the task and to make reciprocal contributions towards the completion of the task (Ogden 2000). Ogden further argues that it is the coordination of perspectives, sharing ideas about what is relevant, and extending their joint conception of the task,

that shapes students' thinking and learning through peer collaborative reasoning. Black (2001) also recognises an interplay between interaction, language discourse and learning:

Interaction takes place through language discourse, which is learned and understood in particular social contexts...It would follow that the nature of our learning depends on the particular 'communities of discourse' and its effectiveness on the extent to which its terms and conventions are shared. (15–16)

Similarly, Mercer (1996) highlights that talk between peer group members is more than just a means of sharing thoughts: it is a social mode of thinking and a tool for the joint construction of knowledge. It has been noted that the symmetrical nature of peer relationships presents an ideal context for promoting the development of thinking and learning. In other words, peer interactions offer a context for the transformation of ideas leading to understanding (Tudge 2000). Based on her observation of second language classroom assessment activities, Rea-Dickins (2006) suggests that when learners participate in a dialogue, extend a concept, and help to move the dialogue forward, these can be taken as clues that their language awareness and language development are being pushed forward, and that learning is thus taking or has taken place.

THIS STUDY

THE SETTING

In line with a sociocultural perspective both in learning and in assessment, the Hong Kong Examinations and Assessment Authority (HKEAA) has recently introduced a school-based oral assessment component into the compulsory English language subject in the Hong Kong Certificate of Education Examination (HKCEE) as part of its reform of the high-stakes formal examination system. In-class performance assessment of students' oral language skills by the class teachers, using a range of tasks and guiding questions and a standardised set of assessment criteria (see Appendix 1), are innovative aspects of this new school-based assessment scheme. The specific in-class performance assessment is composed of an individual presentation and group oral discussion, which are based on a reading/viewing program integrated into the regular classroom teaching. It is thus expected that school-based assessment can exert a greater positive impact on classroom teaching, and be inherently more valid and reliable than external assessment, as it aims to assess authentic oral language use in low-stress conditions with multiple assessment tasks in real time situations (School-Based Assessment Consultancy Team 2005). The

present study focused on students' discourse and interaction that occurred in group, which is designed to assess oral skills, particularly in how to initiate, maintain and control an oral interaction through suggestions, questions and expansion of ideas (Davison 2007).

DATA AND METHODOLOGY OF THE DISCOURSE ANALYSIS

For this article, one video-recording was chosen for analysis from among a data bank of actual oral assessment interactions collected as part of a much larger two year collaborative action research study involving over 15 different schools and 24 Form 4 English language teachers in the lead up to the introduction of English language school-based assessment in school. Consent for use of the video-recording for this purpose was obtained from the students' parents. The video-recording chosen for analysis here shows a group of four secondary Form Four students aged 14-17, designated by the labels K, H, J, and W, engaged in a discussion task in which they were asked to choose a gift for a character in the film *Forrest Gump* they had watched previously. These students received instructions about the topic of their discussion and about the length of time they were supposed to talk about their topic – only about ten minutes – before assessment took place. The video-recording was later used as a sample group interaction task for the official school-based assessment assessor training workshops. For the purpose of this study, the video-recording was transcribed in light of conversational analytic conventions (Atkinson and Heritage 1984 – see Appendix 2).

The analysis of meaning negotiation discourse in peer group under assessment conditions seems to be a neglected topic. In the search for an analytical framework, the present author sought to integrate conversation analysis (CA) theory (Psathas 1995; Pomerantz and Fehr 1997) with the approach to discourse analysis developed within systemic functional linguistics (Halliday 1994). CA originated as an approach to the study of communication that takes place in 'natural' conversational interactions, illustrating the interactional dynamics and contingency (Atkinson and Heritage 1984). It is also widely used in the analysis of institutional interaction, providing useful perspectives on the ways in which participants understand and carry out their roles within specific contexts (Drew and Heritage 1992). Brouwer and Wagner (2004) suggest that CA is particularly useful for investigations of peer group discussion discourse, as it focuses on details of temporal organisation and the unfolding development of action in interaction, enabling researchers to identify which communicative devices and utterance structures individual speakers adopt to communicate effectively in a peer group context. In addition to CA theory, my analysis also relates to Nassaji and Wells' (2000) system of analysis of classroom discourse

grounded within systemic functional linguistics. In this system, the sequence is treated as the focal unit; based on the notion of analysing dialogue as exchange, each sequence contains constituent exchanges which include constituent moves. Nassaji and Wells' system of analysis is useful as technically "it provides a principled basis on which to segment the stream of speech into units of analysis" (Nassaji and Wells 2000, 383).

THE ANALYSIS

Four types of negotiation exchange sequence were visible from the data: The expansion sequence, the disagreeing sequence, the helping sequence, and the clarifying sequence.

THE EXPANSION SEQUENCE

A basic negotiation sequence occurring throughout the discussion is the expansion sequence. It consists of an initiation in which one student expresses their views, a response in which another student not only agrees but further expands the preceding speaker's views, and follow-up moves in which further expansion of the views occurs. Such an expansion sequence can be seen in Excerpt 1:

Excerpt 1

- 1 H: ... So:: (.1) first we (.)if we (.) have to decide (.) to give a gift for a person,
2 I think we better (.2) consider what's his background or::er what (.) impression
3 does he give you. Um: like Forrest Gump I think he is a very optimistic guy
4 ((laughter)). Well and
5 K: [He do.
6 H: [he never gives up ((looks at K)) =
7 K: =Yeah. He do things very straightforward. What he thinks what he'll do (.)
8 straight away.
9 J: Mm ((nods head)), er I think if he's not optimistic, if he is (.) he was (.)
10 pessimistic he won't have this bright future.
11 H: Yeah. And er I'm especially impressed by one of his motto. Er, he says,
12 always said that er life is like a box of chocolate. You will never know you
13 what you get. So:: (.1) I decide, I think I have thought of giving him a box of
14 chocolate ((every one smiles)) as a gift (.) since it's so meaningful to him. And
15 even it's like (.1) er it's a symbol of his life ((smiles)).

In Excerpt 1, in order to establish contextual features relevant to the discussion, H begins the exchange by talking briefly about the character's background and their overall impression about the character. Meanwhile H takes this opportunity to verbalise what he

thinks of the character. H's description of the character as "a very optimistic guy" is apparently appreciated and expanded by K, who appears to be impressed by the character's "straightforward" way of doing things. J also sounds positive about the character in Line 9, talking about a linkage between the character's optimism and his "bright future". In Line 11, H cleverly combines his further positive comments about the character with his suggestion of giving the character a box of chocolates, saying that a box of chocolates is a symbol of life.

In characterising responding acts in classroom conversational discourse, Tsui (1994) mentions two types of responding acts: positive responding acts and negative responding acts. The expansion sequence in Excerpt 1 above clearly contains what Tsui labels as positive responding acts. Examples of negative responding acts will be illustrated below.

THE DISAGREEING SEQUENCE

Somewhat in contrast to the expansion sequence is the disagreeing sequence. After an initiation, there is a response which shows that the speaker disagrees with a point or points included in the initiating moves. Such a disagreeing response can trigger further disagreement in the follow-up moves on the part of the very first speaker in defence of his or her argument. This type of disagreeing sequence can thus be regarded as containing what Tsui (1994) labels as negative responding acts. In Excerpt 2 below, in Lines 1 to 7, K is trying to "promote" his idea of giving the character a box of chocolates as a gift. But W reacts to K's idea with disagreement. Instead of agreeing to K's idea of giving chocolate, W suggests giving the character a photo album as a gift in Line 8. In the follow-up move (Line 11), K takes the opportunity to demonstrate his disagreement and appears to be negating the suggestion of a photo album as a gift, thus implicitly defending his idea of giving the character a box of chocolates as a gift:

Excerpt 2

- 1 K: =It could see that in the film that Forrest Gump really likes chocolate (.)
- 2 because once he wanted to give a choc a box of chocolate to his girl friend in
- 3 the university under the er [heavy rain.
- 4 J: [Jenny.
- 5 K: =He ate a few one and told Jenny, 'I'm (.) I have (.) I have a present to give to
- 6 you and but I ate a: few candies inside.' And er I think chocolate is a quite
- 7 good idea.

- 8 W: But can't you see he er always hold er chocolate and er when he showed up=
 9 So:: why don't we consider other presents to give him. How about photo
 10 album? So let him take some photos and put in the photo album ...
 11 K: But when he was telling the neighbourhood that his life and ...in the bus stop, it
 12 seems that he have already got a quite ...

THE HELPING SEQUENCE

Previous studies report some “helping behaviour” on the part of the assessor in oral interview situations. For example, Katona (1998) noted that the interviewer corrected the interviewee's use of inappropriate vocabulary. In the analysis of the discourse of interviewer and candidate in the Hungarian oral proficiency examination, Katona (1998) describes a helping sequence as consisting of an (optional) initiation, a response, a follow-up move containing the discourse act of help, a (optional) second response move in which the candidate usually acknowledges the help, and a second follow-up move in which the interviewer acknowledges the candidate's response. Such a way of describing a helping sequence seems appropriate, particularly for a predominantly question-answer type of interviewing discourse. In our data, in which a group of four secondary students completed a group discussion task under classroom-based assessment settings, the structure of the helping sequence appears to be somewhat different from that in Katona's study. As illustrated in Excerpt 3 below, the helping sequence in our data can be represented as: Initiation → Response → Follow-up moves: Help → Response:

Excerpt 3

- 1 W: But can't you see he er always hold er chocolate and er when he showed up=
 2 So:: why don't we consider other presents to give him. How about photo
 3 album? So let him take some photos and put in the photo album, yea.
 4 K: But when he was telling the neighbourhood that his life and ...in the bus stop,
 it seems that he have already got a quite ... [
 5 J: [impressive memory
 6 W: [clear
 7 H: clear picture in his mind.
 8 K: He remembered very much of his ...

As already indicated, in the beginning lines in Excerpt 3, in response to W's proposal of giving the character a photo album as a gift, K is suggesting in Line 4 that there might not be a good reason for choosing a photo album as a gift. In the follow-up moves (Lines

5, 6 and 7), realising that K is having difficulty with vocabulary while expressing what he wants to say, both J and W almost simultaneously step in to help by supplying the expression “impressive memory” and the word “clear” respectively. Interestingly, following J and W and building up on their utterances, H also demonstrates his willingness to help by supplying a somewhat longer and more complex noun phrase “clear picture in his mind”. At the end of all these “helping” utterances, in Line 9, K is now able to express his view more clearly and make it more convincing as well.

THE CLARIFYING SEQUENCE

In this type of negotiation sequence, one student makes a clarification request based on the information in the initiation move. This is followed with one or two other students’ clarifying utterances in response to the preceding clarification request. A clarifying utterance is then acknowledged (not necessarily by the previous clarification requestor). Further following up the acknowledgement, another clarification request may emerge, thus creating a need for another clarification turn. The whole clarifying sequence is illustrated in Excerpt 4:

Excerpt 4

- 1 K: =But actually I have a: better present to give to Forrest Gump. And I think that
2 giving him a piece of feather would be a good idea (.) because in the film er:
3 since er he and Jenny prayed to God that hoping that er they could be birds
4 and fly away from this er this place to heaven or where, so er Jenny in the
5 film is (.1) became a bird in (.) in the heart of Forrest Gump=So I think that
6 giving (.) a feather to him would be a good idea so that he could er live, with
7 Jenny forever (.) because the feather wouldn’t disappear itself=
8 J: =So why don’t you give give him a bird ((smiles)).
9 K: Yes, I think of this because the reason is that if you keep a bird, then you must
10 have to keep it in a cage and kind of trap trap the bird and it’s=
11 H: =Uh uh, and the bird won’t last forever ((laughs)).
12 K: [Yes.
13 H: [A feather will last forever but the bird [may die one day.
14 J: [But the feather has no life (.2) And
15 Jenny has life ((laughs)).
16 K: Er::, but in er, I think in in the in the heart of Forrest Gump Jenny is living
17 forever and looking at the feather:: I think he will remember:: all the things
18 about Jenny: (.) Yes

In Excerpt 4 above, K first explains why he prefers to give the character in the film a piece of feather as a gift. K's preference, however, prompts J to ask him to clarify why he does not want to give the character a bird. In Line 9, K provides a neat clarification, which is further expanded in Line 11 by H. K expresses appreciation and acknowledgment of H's supportive expansion speech by saying "yes" in Line 12. At the end of K's appreciative acknowledgement which apparently helped to trigger a relaxed and easy-going atmosphere, H, in Line 13, provides further clarification to K's original suggestion. Interestingly such further clarification triggers another clarification request from J (Lines 14 and 15). Although J's challenge overlaps H's utterance, what occurs next is that it is K who steps in to respond to J's challenge. Here K can be interpreted as either intending to help H out, or intending to compete with H for a turn.

DISCUSSION

Van Lier (1989, 42) suggests that "we need detailed discourse studies of language-inter-language-use in action, and this involves taking stock of current work in sociology, particularly conversation analysis, as well as microethnographic studies of our language learners at work using language in different situations – classrooms, OPIs and other settings". Here van Lier emphasises a need to use discourse to characterise how representative the speech behaviours are of those in which second language learners typically engage in real life. In contrast to the asymmetrical contingency inherent in interactional discourse in interviews (Möller and Halleck 1998), what occurred in the present peer group discussion in our study is collaborative co-construction of meaning between peer candidates with the aim of moving the discussion forward and solving emergent problems collaboratively, which provides collaborative discourse patterns that build on and respond to each other's turn. This suggests that peer group discussion tasks seem to have the advantage and/or potential of generating interactional and discourse features representative of natural spontaneous communicative situations.

There is now a general consensus in the language testing community that discourse analysis is a viable approach to understanding candidate language within the context of an oral examination (Lazaraton 2002). Brown (2004) argues that when oral language performance is viewed as discourse which is constructed through interaction throughout the assessment activity, empirical analysis of such assessment discourse provides insights into the construct of oral proficiency, as operationalised in various types of speaking tests: tape-based tests, interviews, face-to-face dialogues or group tests. As the above analysis of the interaction data shows, the students in this study did employ the speech

functions that are hypothesised in the explicit task achievement rating criteria for group interaction (see School-Based Assessment Consultancy Team 2005). Typically, a sequence of the speech exchange managed by the participants in the process of negotiation in this study consists of an initiating move followed by a series of responding moves between different participants. These responding moves displayed a variety of verbal functions, such as expansion, agreement or disagreement, clarification or challenging. Leung and Mohan (2004) looked at the decision-making discourse in teacher-directed assessment activity in the classroom, and found little evidence of whole group active participation in the decision-making. In contrast, our data showed very active participation in the group discussion activity. A possible explanation of the difference in findings between the present study and Leung and Mohan's research is that in Leung and Mohan's study, the assessment activity was more like a normal teaching and learning activity, where the teacher led students to search for answers to some reading comprehension questions, whereas the assessment activity our participants engaged with accounts for 15% of the total Hong Kong Certificate of Education Examination (HKCEE) English mark, and prior to the assessment our participants were supposed to have a good understanding of the relevant assessment criteria, and in particular they were supposed to realise what makes effective interaction during the group oral assessment.

It has been noted that little has been said about usefulness for learning as a feature of validity in the L2 testing literature (Tomlinson 2005). According to Tomlinson, what Alderson says below implies why this new form of validity has not been given greater prominence in the literature:

The primary purpose of a teaching/learning task is to collect learning, while the primary purpose of an assessment task is to collect relevant information for purposes of making inferences or decisions about individuals—which is not to say that assessment tasks have no potential for promoting learning, but simply that that is not their primary purpose. (Alderson 2001, 203).

By 'learning validity', Tomlinson emphasises that students can learn from:

... the work they do with the teacher, and by themselves in preparation for the tests; the opportunities which arise during the tests for developing what they know and what they can do; the feedback which they receive after the test, both from their own reflection and from profes-

sionals who have monitored their performance on the tests. (Tomlinson 2005, 39)

In the new school-based component of the HKCEE English Language in Hong Kong, the teacher-mediated assessments of the students' oral language skills are meant to be used formatively to give constructive student feedback and improve learning (School-Based Assessment Consultancy Team 2005). This new assessment initiative requires taking into account student individual needs and interests as well as the developing of activities and procedures that are explicitly linked to teaching and learning. Consequently, teachers are not only confident and skilled at making trustworthy assessment decisions, but are also effective at giving feedback and thus using summative assessments for formative purposes (Davison 2007). In line with Tomlinson's notion of test validity, classroom-based assessment as the approach being implemented in Hong Kong appears to be more educationally valuable than the traditional external examination.

Yet there is much merit in Tomlinson's idea of learning opportunities that arise during the assessment, as this is what unfolded through language discourse among the students documented in this study. The negotiation sequences described in this study show that while participants engaged in expansion, disagreeing or clarifying, they had opportunities "not only for language display but also to explore their understandings and use of language" (Rea-Dickins 2006, 184); they also had opportunities to signal their difficulties (linguistic or interactional), to their interlocutors, as well as opportunities "to receive feedback which 'speaks' to their current problem" (Skehan 2002, 291). These could be interpreted as instances of learning in the assessment process. However, the learning potential embedded in this type of group activity is more than the pushing of language awareness and development. Leung and Mohan (2004) highlight the learning values of reasoned peer group discussion, one of which is that students who often engage in productive oral discussion are likely to be better prepared for written academic discussion, and the other value is that "reasoned group discussion can play a role in enriching learning in any subject area at any level" (Leung and Mohan 2004, 356).

CONCLUSIONS

The above analyses identified four types of negotiation exchange sequence that occurred between four non-native peer ESL students engaged in a group oral discussion task. While these findings must be viewed with caution as the analyses in this study were based on only one case study, the findings should be able to provide insights into the highly

localised and socially constructed nature of the teacher-mediated classroom-based group oral assessment format, although more descriptive studies are needed to verify the present findings. This kind of microanalysis of the interaction data should be particularly helpful to teachers involved in classroom-based assessment, and in particular to those teachers who are participating in the classroom-based assessment assessor training workshops.

The existing oral interview practices, which focus on eliciting a sample of speech for the purpose of obtaining information about a student's linguistic competence particularly in terms of the traditional subcomponents of pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary, and fluency, usually follow a pre-determined assessment agenda that leaves practically no space for such factors as collaborative reasoning and learning to take place. While I do not mean to suggest which assessment format is the more appropriate vehicle for assessing oral language proficiency, I would like to argue in light of our data analyses that what is unique with school-based group oral assessment is that on the one hand, the assessment task has a *potential* to provide opportunities for students to demonstrate their natural conversational competence; and on the other hand, the assessment task itself *is* an opportunity not only for participants' language development but also for their development of metacognitive/cognitive skills and socialisation competence, and all this development occurs in a social context through negotiation and co-construction. It is this process of peer meaning negotiation, mutual understanding, and co-construction of knowledge that the traditional second language acquisition/testing research has ignored. For example, Chalhoub-Deville (2003) and McNamara (1997) point out that Bachman and Palmer's model of interaction (1996) is mainly a psychological one in the sense that it focuses on interaction between various knowledges internal to the speaking individual, but neglects the fact that shared assessment activities have a social context which involves relationships between participants and the goal of the activity, and which has the potential to create learning opportunities. Clearly, this learning element embedded in the assessment process warrants further empirical research.

APPENDIX 1

The assessment criteria which are divided into six levels of oral English performance in group interaction or individual presentation concern four major dimensions of English spoken proficiency: Pronunciation & Delivery; Communication Strategies; Vocabulary & Language Patterns; Ideas & Organization. For example, the criteria for use of communicative strategies in group interaction:

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