

Developing Casual Conversation Skills of Pre-school Children Learning English as a Foreign Language in the Home Context

in two volumes

Volume 1

Chapters 1-5

by

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A thesis submitted in fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

Faculty of Education
University of Technology, Sydney

March 2008

Certificate of Authorship

I certify that the work in this thesis has not previously been submitted for a degree nor has it been submitted as part of requirements for a degree except as fully acknowledged within the text.

I also certify that the thesis has been written by me. Any help that I have received in my research work and the preparation of the thesis itself has been acknowledged. In addition, I certify that all information sources and literature used are indicated in the thesis.

Signature of Student

Acknowledgement

I would like to thank several people who have made contributions to this thesis.

I would like to thank my supervisors, Diana Slade and Pauline Gibbons. First, to Diana Slade, I am indebted. Her influence was the main reason why I embarked on this thesis. From the first time I met her as a student in the Master's program at the University of Sydney, through to the time when I met up with her again some years later in Japan, and up until the present time, I have been impressed with her work and dedication to the cause of casual conversation, an area I have always believed to be of major importance. Her input and advice has not only been invaluable to my thesis, but has informed my teaching and research practices over many years. Moreover, her friendliness and support have been major reasons in motivating me to complete the study.

Second, I would like to thank Pauline Gibbons for the advice and assistance she has given me throughout the thesis. Her feedback has challenged and extended my thinking as a researcher and a teacher. This has been invaluable.

I would like to thank my colleague, Eric Hauser, for providing me with opportunities to discuss my research, as well as giving up his time to read and comment on the thesis. His feedback was insightful and helpful.

Also, I would like to thank my colleagues in Japan, in particular Mike Critchely (Josai International University), Chris Gallagher (International Christian University) and Jie Shi (University of Electro-Communications), who have provided me with much needed support and encouragement. I would also like to thank Maree Jouliau for her help with the layout of some of the thesis.

Most importantly, I would like to thank Ikuko Tanaka. The care, support and understanding she has shown to me and the members of our family during the many stressful times of the thesis have been important. The greatest debt I owe in completing this research is to her.

Finally, I would like to thank the two wonderful little girls, Keiko and Rie, without whom this thesis would not have been possible. Their views of themselves and their approach to the world around them were not only a source of inspiration to me during the thesis, but continue to motivate me even now the project has ended. Knowing them and working with them has made me a better person.

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Abstract

The broad aim of this thesis is to investigate the development of the English conversation of two, pre-school children, who are learning English as a foreign language in the home context, by focusing on their language skills and their learning processes.

In order to do this, there are two major aims: first, to describe the development of the children's English conversational language skills over a four year period, by focusing on their construction of five genres of casual conversation. And second, to describe the key learning processes involved in the development of the children's English conversational skills, in particular focusing on the role of the scaffolding process.

The procedure involves the analysis of spoken data collected from the two children. The data is arranged according to genre. Data from the modeling and joint negotiation stages of the pedagogical cycle focuses on the role of the scaffolding process in the children's learning. Data from these two phases has been analyzed within the theoretical framework of sociocultural learning theory, arguing that this framework provides a description of the scaffolding process, which is fundamental to learning. Data from this phase is analyzed for mediation, contingency, the scaffolding steps, and the father's role as the teacher in the ZPD. However, data from the independent construction phase focuses on the language skills the children have independently produced, when the scaffolding has been removed. Language in this phase has been described and analyzed within the theoretical framework of systemic functional linguistics, arguing that this framework provides a systematic description of the children's conversational language. Data from this phase is analyzed for generic structure, mood and appraisal.

The data set has been collected at random over a four year period. This focuses on the father's explicit teaching of five genres of casual conversation to his two daughters. The data set has been taken from the periods of explicit teaching, which occurs at set times of the day, mainly during 'dinner time talk', 'bed time talk', and 'before school study time'.

In order to investigate the two aims of the thesis, the research questions focus on two main areas – questions related to the development of language skills, and questions related to the learning process. The four research questions related to the development of language skills are:

- What is the extent to which the children can independently construct texts with appropriate generic structure?
- What is the extent to which the children can structure their texts to reflect their speaking purposes?
- What is the extent to which the children can give and exchange information appropriately within the five genres, using the interpersonal resources of mood?
- What is the extent to which the children can express attitudes and take a stance by using the interpersonal resources of appraisal?

The four research questions related to the learning process are:

- What is the role of scaffolding in the children's learning?
- What is the role of mediation in the children's learning?
- What is the role of contingency in the children's learning?
- What is the role of the teacher in the children's learning?

The results of the study are based on the data findings in chapters 4, 5, and 6. Each text is analyzed and the findings are interpreted. Conclusions are then presented for each genre, and discussed in relation to the children's language skills and learning processes. The main conclusions of the thesis, incorporating all five genres, are presented in the final chapter.

The significance of the thesis is discussed in terms of its implications for the fields of linguistics, second and foreign language education, and bilingualism. In terms of linguistics, it is argued that the thesis contributes to the descriptions and theorizing of casual conversation; for second and foreign language education, it illustrates the need for pedagogy to be based on functional and explicit theories of language and learning; and for bilingualism, it focuses on the importance of models in the development of identity.

It is argued that the thesis makes a multidisciplinary contribution to each of these three academic fields. Also, by adopting an integrated theoretical stance to the data analysis, the thesis highlights the importance of providing different but complementary insights into the discourses of foreign language learning. These contributions reflect the significance of the thesis, which aims to merge language theory with learning pedagogy, relevant to children learning conversational English in a foreign language context.