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# The Nature of Talk in an Advanced Spanish Conversation Class: A Replication Study

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THE NATURE OF TALK IN AN ADVANCED SPANISH CONVERSATION CLASS:  
A REPLICATION STUDY

A Thesis

Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies and Research

in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

Sydney Nii Odotei Odoi

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December 2014

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The purpose of this replication study was to investigate how students' turns at talk and discussion during selected whole-group text-focused speaking activity in an advanced undergraduate Conversation class in Spanish met the stated goal of the course (the development of speaking skills at Advanced-Low oral proficiency standard, as defined by the ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines). Using a discourse analytical framework, the transcripts were analyzed for (1) teacher question types; (2) length of student and instructor talk and (3) the verb tenses used in students responses. The results showed that, for the most part, students' turns at talk were at the Novice and Intermediate levels, or below the Advanced-low level due to the types of questions posed by the teacher, which led the student to produce one-word, phrase, or one to two sentences per utterance, mostly in the simple present tense. Implications for language teaching and recommendations for further investigations are provided.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

In recent years, research in foreign language classroom discourse has received considerable attention. Classroom – based researchers define discourse as the oral interaction between teachers and their students and between students themselves in the classroom (Thoms, 2012). Mantero (2002) argues that the analysis of classroom talk has helped shape current classroom pedagogical practices and theories of second language acquisition (SLA). With regards to foreign languages, the role of a teachers’ oral proficiency in the target language that is necessary for classroom instruction has become a critical issue. Over the past ten years in the United States, an important emphasis in education has been placed on teacher effectiveness in the classroom and the students’ achievement (see Darling-Hammond, 2000; Stronge, Ward, & Grant, 2011). Generally, a teacher’s oral proficiency in the target language is seen as essential for student achievement (Chambless, 2012, p. S142). Because in the foreign language class both the content and the medium of instruction are the language studied, it is not far from wrong to say that a foreign language teacher should have strong oral language proficiency in order to teach. For this reason, the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) Program Standards approved by the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) has set the minimum speaking proficiency level for prospective foreign language teachers of Spanish, French, and German at Advanced-Low (AL) (ACTFL, 2002), as defined by the ACTFL Speaking Guidelines. According to the profession, teachers with a minimum level of Advanced Low will be able “(a) to provide effective oral input in their classrooms that is characterized by a

degree of consistent fluency and spontaneity; (b) to speak in spontaneous, connected discourse; and (c) to narrate and describe in major times frames (present, past, future), among other functions” (Swender & Vicars, 2012, as cited in Glisan, 2013, p. 543). The oral proficiency level is tested through the Oral Proficiency Interview (OPI), which takes the form of a conversation (face-to-face or telephonically) between a certified tester and the test taker. The interview is recorded and a ratable sample is scored by the interviewer and also a second certified rater for reliability by a scale that ranges from Novice to Superior per the ACTFL Speaking Guidelines. This interview compares how well a person speaks a foreign language by judging their performance of a series of language tasks against the criterion-references scale.

Thus, prospective foreign language students from NCATE institutions who seek foreign language teacher certification upon taking the OPI must meet at least the Advanced-Low level prior to beginning a teaching position at a public school for Spanish, French, and German. “Advanced Low speakers demonstrate the ability to narrate and describe in the major time frames of past, present, and future in paragraph-length discourse with some control of aspect” (ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines, 2012, p. 6). The OPI requirement of Advanced Low level is a challenge for foreign language teacher candidates and the institutions in which they study (Pearson et al., 2006, p. 508, Burke, 2013). In an effective foreign language teacher preparation program based on the ACTFL standards, opportunities must be provided for the students to develop language proficiency in their classes (ACTFL, 2002). Many researchers (Donato & Brooks, 2004; Mantero, 2002a, 2002b, 2006; Thoms, 2011, 2012; Polio & Zyzik, 2009; Darhower, 2014) argue that, opportunities for students to engage in unplanned, extended, paragraph-

length discourse are rare and often challenging in classrooms. In traditional second language literature text-based discussions, “the instructor usually lectures about his or her interpretation of the text rather than talking about the meaning the student assigns to the text” (Mantero, 2006, p. 106). The teacher’s interpretation of the text has primary importance during class discussions. Thus, in a formal academic setting, there are constraints and limitations on developing communicative competence in a foreign language (Brooks, 1992).

The ways in which students interact through different and recurrent discourse patterns enhance their knowledge of a foreign language. McLaughlin (1984) argues that students develop interactional competence when they engage in discourse that is spontaneous and has a coherent topic over multiple turns. These, according to him, reflect the features of conversations outside the classroom. Walsh (2011) reports that interaction lies at the heart of effective classroom practice that leads to extended student turns. According to him, moves by the teacher such as error correction, content feedback, extended wait-time, scaffolding, questioning strategies, and so on are aspects of classroom that can either inhibit or promote interaction in that milieu. Students are socialized into particular language practices via distinct patterns of teacher discourse (Hall & Walsh, 2002). That is to say, the pattern a teacher uses in the class will either provide or inhibit opportunities for students to engage in and thus develop their language proficiency.

In content-based instruction, the language serves as a medium for learning content and content plays the role of a resource for learning and improving language skills (Stoller, 2002). The students’ development of conversation skills is important for a

complete foreign language education program since a common goal shared by teachers, program designers and students is to communicate with native speakers of the language they study.

### **Relevance of Discourse Analysis to Second Language Learning and Research**

According to the Longman Dictionary of Applied Linguistics (Richards, Platt, & Weber, 1985), discourse analysis refers to the study of spoken and written discourse (p. 84). It deals with examining how members of a speech community use language both in spoken interaction and written texts (Demo, 2001). Thus, discourse analysis views language as social interaction. “Even with the most communicative approaches, the second language classroom is limited in its ability to develop learners’ communicative competence in the target language” (Demo, 2001, p. 2). Some possible factors for this reason may be: few contact hours in the classroom, minimal or no opportunity to interact with native speakers, and limited exposure to different types of genres, speech events, and discourse types in the real world (outside the classroom). For this reason, foreign language teachers should provide more opportunities for student participation above the word or phrase level into paragraph-length (Mantero, 2002).

Discourse analysis is one way to monitor what goes on in the foreign language classroom. This is done by the process of Record (video or audio) – Transcribe – Analyze. This process allows for the study of the interaction patterns in the classroom to determine whether they promote or hinder the students from engaging in target language use as specified in the goals for the Conversation class. Since in the classroom teachers often ask questions for the students to respond, a discourse analytical research approach may study the structure of the classroom talk, the teachers’ type of questions and their

effectiveness in relation to the effect it has on students' responses (word, phrase, sentence, or paragraph-level) as per the overarching goal of the course. This can be revealing to foreign language teachers to know what goes on in their classroom and make informed changes in their instructional practices. With the overarching goal of improving teaching, discourse analysis that involves classroom-based research can be an asset for teachers who seek professional development (Johnson, 1995).

In sum, second language researches employ discourse analysis as a research method to investigate their instructional practice and also a tool to study the interactions among language learners.

### **Sociocultural Perspective in Second Language Learning**

Historically, formal linguistic theories viewed language learning as the acquisition of linguistic properties without paying attention to the context and distinct ways in which learners acquire this knowledge (Thoms, 2012). These theories paid little attention to the students' interaction with the environment in which they learn. In contrast, in Sociocultural Theory (SCT), language is more than a formal system of linguistic properties. According to Hall and Walsh (2002), SCT views language as social and thus, involves linguistic resources whose meanings develop during frequent communicative practices. As students and teachers or other capable peers engage in interactions among each other, the linguistic aspects of language take form.

Sociocultural Theory has its origins in the writings of the Russian psychologist Lev S. Vygotsky and his colleagues. They advocate that through scaffolding and the zone of proximal development (ZPD) – “the metaphorical ‘place’ in which a learner is capable of a higher level of performance because there is support from interaction with an

interlocutor” (Lightbown & Spada, 2006, p. 206), teachers find out what students want to learn and they guide them accordingly. The theory posits that the students’ language use improves as they engage in active interactions with teachers or other more able colleagues. This theory supports the notion that the way in which teachers interact with their students in foreign language classrooms influences the way in which (and how much) they are able to freely express themselves spontaneously in the foreign language (Thoms, 2011).

### **Statement of the Problem**

There remains a lack of studies related to the nature of discourse found in higher-level, content-based courses in comparison to language-related studies carried out in foreign language classrooms. A substantial amount of professional literature argues for the potential benefits of content-based instruction; however, there is limited research on how this type of instruction is actually appropriated, understood, and carried out by foreign language instructors in these higher-level classrooms (Pessoa et al., 2007, p. 103). In addition to acquiring new vocabulary, syntactic patterns, and phonology, language learners also have to acquire discourse competence, sociolinguistic competence, strategic competence, and interactional competence. Second language learners need opportunities to explore and discover the systematicity of language at all linguistic levels, especially at the highest levels (Riggenbach, 1999). In his review of studies related to classroom discourse in foreign language classrooms, Thoms (2012) advocates for the need for more research on the development of learners’ linguistic and interactional competence in upper-level, content-based foreign language classes (p. s21).

## **Purpose of the Study**

This replication study is motivated by the reported findings and implications in the original study. In addition, it seeks to corroborate the findings in another context with different participants, hence, conceptual in nature. Conceptual replication studies “alter various features of the original study and serve the purpose of confirming the generalizability or external validity of the [original] research” (Polio & Gass, 1997, p. 502).

The purpose of this study was to replicate the study done by Darhower (2014) about advanced-superior speaking functions in the undergraduate language program. Porte (2012) argues for more studies about under-researched areas of SLA that seek to corroborate findings via replication. Therefore, this study seeks to validate the findings reported in the original study. This study, however, investigates how students’ turns at talk and discussion during selected events in whole-class text-based speaking activity in an advanced undergraduate Conversation class in Spanish met the stated goals of the course (the development of speaking skills at Advanced-Low oral proficiency standard, as defined by the ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines – speaking, developed by ACTFL). The focus of this investigation was on paragraph-length speech, and narration and description in present, past and future time frames with some control of aspect. The grammatical and vocabulary errors made by students in their turns at talk are not addressed in this study since the focus is on the verb tenses and length of their contributions as per the goals. This study will pay attention to interpersonal communication as defined by the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTL)’s communication standard goal (1.1) that argues that ‘students engage in conversations, provide and obtain information,

express feelings and emotions, and exchange opinions' (National Standards in Foreign Language Education Project, 2006). This standard focuses on interpersonal communication, that is, direct oral or written communication between individuals who are in personal contact. However, this study pays attention to oral speech since it is a Conversation class. Thus, to enhance their language ability, students should have opportunities to express their reactions and thoughts on topics treated in the classroom context. This replication study, in turn, will add to scholarship and best practices in the foreign language teaching and learning profession.

### **Research Question**

For the purpose of this replication study, this following research question guided the analysis:

1. To what extent do students' turns at talk during selected whole-group text-focused discourse, in an advanced undergraduate Spanish Conversation class reflect ACTFL Advanced Low-level of oral proficiency, as stated by the overarching goal of the course? Using a discourse analytical framework to answer this broad question, the transcripts were analyzed for (1) the type of teacher questions; (2) length of learner and instructor talk and (3) the verb tenses used in students' responses. The reason for these categories was to determine whether the discussions during selected whole-group discussion engaged the students in narrating, describing in the past, present and future, and engaging in paragraph-length discourse as outlined by ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines-Speaking.

## CHAPTER 2

### REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

#### **The Original Study**

This study replicates investigation carried out by Darhower (2014) about the extent to which whole class discussions in three different third-year undergraduate Spanish literature courses taught by different instructors provided opportunities for students to engage in talk that reflected the Advanced and Superior levels of the ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines – Speaking. As reported by previous studies, the author revealed that the majority of the students’ discourse was below the Advanced level with few opportunities for conversation at the Advanced and Superior levels. In all three classes, instructors spoke more than the students’ contribution and the usual pattern was teacher-student-teacher-student. In addition, the majority of the verbs used in the classes were in the present indicative and the students’ responses were usually brief, with an average of eight to fourteen words per utterance. According to the researcher, the opportunities were prevented for the most part due to the teacher-dominated teaching style and the teacher question types.

#### **Relevant Related Literature**

It is generally accepted that a second language learner should demonstrate at least an Advanced-Low speaking proficiency in order to be able to work comfortably with the language for professional purposes (Darhower, 2014, p.397). Research has shown, however, that many undergraduate second language majors fail to reach the Advanced level in their junior and senior years of college. For example, in her study of five liberal arts colleges in the United States, Swender (2003) reported that out of 220 Spanish and

210 French majors (juniors and seniors), only 43% and 52% tested at the Advanced level respectively on the OPI. More recently, Glisan, Surface, and Swender (2013) conducted a study of OPI test results in 11 different languages from 48 identified university teacher preparation programs. The results revealed that out of 1, 716 Spanish candidates, an average of only 49% achieved the Advanced Low-level or higher. Given that these statistics are similar in other colleges, it appears to be that almost half of Spanish teacher candidates in the United States are not obtaining the Advanced Low-level upon program completion. This lack of Advanced proficiency in a commonly taught language such as Spanish can prove disturbing for employers who seek language majors with advanced speaking proficiency levels for jobs. More seriously, “teachers who are not at least Advanced Low level speakers [will] have difficulty serving effectively as a facilitator [sic] in helping students to negotiate meaning with one another and to function spontaneously in the target language” (ACTFL, 2002b).

For this reason, there is a growing awareness of and interest in the Advanced Level in colleges among second language researchers. According to Thoms (2012), “[f]rom a discourse perspective, classroom talk is considered consequential to language learning and development” (p. S8). However, to this researcher’s knowledge, there is a dearth of data-driven classroom studies about the nature of discourse in higher-level content-based classrooms with relation to the oral proficiency goals being practiced in these classes. Additionally, the classroom studies to date have looked at discourse patterns in only literature classes to determine if the discussions provide ripe opportunities for students to move into advanced and superior speaking functions.

For example, Donato and Brooks (2004) after their investigation with senior-level Spanish literature undergraduate students concluded that the discourse patterns during whole-class discussions about the literature they were reading did not provide ripe opportunities for students to experience Advanced and Superior oral proficiency levels. The instructor used display questions (which trigger short factual answers often already known to the instructor) most of the time. Also the ubiquitous IRE pattern (Cazden, 2001; Mantero, 2002; Thoms, 2012) was a dominant pattern used by the instructor that prevented the students from giving extended paragraph-length responses. In the IRE sequence, the instructor often asks a display question, receives a short response from the learner, and then evaluates the answer by judging whether it is correct or wrong. In the IRE exchange, the teacher acts as an expert who freely guides the interaction and evaluates the accuracy of the student's response while the student, by contrast, assumes a role partially determined by the teacher as to who participates when and how much interaction takes place between student and teacher (Thoms, 2012). Also, although a characteristic of a speaker of the Advanced level is the ability to narrate in present, past, and future time frames, the researchers found that 81% of the conjugated verbs used by the students were only in the present indicative.

Replicating the study of Donato and Brooks (2004), Thoms (2011) investigated whole-class discussion between students and their teacher in an introductory college-level Spanish literature course. He found that the IRE pattern dominated the discussion. The author reported that the pattern did not allow students to orally display critical thinking abilities and respond in extended, paragraph length discourse. Many studies (Hall & Walsh, 2002; Donato & Brooks, 2004; Thoms, 2011, 2012) have reported that when IRE

is over-used during classroom discussions, students have few or no opportunities to express their ideas using complex language about the topics-at-hand.

In classrooms, for the most part, teachers and students interact to meet learning goals (Hall, 2008). Teachers often ask questions to which students are expected to respond during class lessons. Thoms (2012) asserts that Initiation-Response-Evaluation (IRE) and Initiation-Response-Feedback (IRF) interaction patterns are widely used in the foreign language classroom, which makes them the most common ways in which teachers and students interact verbally. The IRE pattern, commonly referred to as the recitation script (Hall & Walsh, 2002), involves the teacher initiating the exchange with question (I); a student usually providing a response (R); and the interaction ending with the teacher saying Very Good, or No, or repeats the students' response with a rise in tone as an evaluation (E) (Thoms, 2012). On the other hand, in IRF, the teacher poses a question (I), then after the students' response in the second turn (R), the teacher follows-up with a non-evaluative feedback (F) (Thoms, 2012). IRF is similar to IRE as they both have teacher initiation and student response but the only difference lies in the follow-up move. In IRF, rather than evaluating students' responses, teachers offer feedback which may include asking students to expand on their response, justify or clarify opinions, or further articulate their views (Thoms, 2011).

In a six-year collaborative action research project involving nine elementary and middle school teachers and three university researchers, Nassaji and Wells (2000) studied various options for the follow-up move in the three-part IRE exchange. The authors focused on teacher contributions in the third part of the three-part sequence. In addition to finding that follow-ups to student responses served various functions, they reported that,

just as they suspected, the kind of follow-up move shaped the direction of subsequent talk. Teachers' contributions that evaluated, as in the traditional IRE pattern, tended to suppress student participation. On the other hand, when teachers used follow-ups, the kind of feedback found in IRF pattern, which asked students to expand upon or qualify their initial responses, there was further discussion that gave rise to more opportunities for language learning.

In a similar study, Cullen (2002) investigated the role of follow-up moves, the third part of the IRF exchange, between a teacher and her students in a secondary school English as a Second or Foreign Language Classroom in Tanzania. The author reported that the use of various forms of discursial follow-up moves (reformulation, elaboration, comment, etc.) by the teacher play a crucial part in clarifying and building upon the ideas expressed by the students in their responses, and in developing a meaningful dialogue between the teacher and the class. By doing so, the teacher supports learning by creating an environment that is rich in language and humor. When compared to the evaluative follow-up, typical of IRE, which simply assesses students' performance, the discursial follow-up in IRF challenges students to expand their responses in order to promote their communicative abilities in the language. According to Cullen (2002), discursial follow-up typically co-occurs with questions that have a referential function (where there is no right or wrong answer predetermined by the teacher). This, it is argued, helps to extend the meaningful dialogue in the classroom.

Mantero (2002a, 2002b) investigated whole class discussion in a third-year Spanish literature class. He revealed that the class was dominated by the instructor's use of IRE therefore inhibiting the students from providing extended responses. He pointed

out three categories of class discussion: only 19% was at the discourse level, 74% was dialogue (exchange of utterances between learners and their teacher), and 7% was teacher monologue. The author, however, reported that when the topic was cultural, the majority of the discussion was at the discourse level since the students felt they were experts on the topic. The findings revealed that the nature of the classroom talk was highly teacher-centered and student-supported dialogue that did not make use of the opportunities to extend the classroom talk into the discourse level.

Brock (1986) investigated students' use of language when responding to display questions and referential questions to determine if higher frequencies of referential questions have an effect on adult English as a Second Language classroom discourse. In the study, each of a group of 4 teachers (2 provided with training in incorporating referential questions into classroom activity and 2 not provided with training) taught a reading and vocabulary lesson to group of 6 non-native speakers. The author found out that students' responses to referential questions were significantly longer, more syntactically complex and contained greater numbers of connectives than their responses to display questions. Brock (1986) concluded that if it is true that referential questions increase the amount of learner output, then such questions may be an important tool in the language classroom.

Chinn and Anderson (1998) and Chin (2001) developed a discourse model called Collaborative Reasoning (CR) for elementary school literature lessons. The goal of this model is to ensure that students are provided with many opportunities to share their opinions and ideas on a central theme in an open environment thereby promoting critical reading and thinking skills. In this model, learners express evidence in favor of or against

an issue that comes up in an assigned reading (2001). Kidder (2008) employed this model in her college French literature class and found that the students participated most of the time and also displayed advanced and superior level language functions of the ACTFL scale.

Being able to converse comfortably in a second language is an essential part of a complete foreign language education program since “[s]peaking is one of the means of communication used most widely in people’s daily lives” (Yang & Chang, 2008, p. 721). For this reason, some foreign language departments have Conversation courses for their senior-level students to provide them ground to engage in the language in higher level functions.

It must be noted that a Conversation class is not just as simple as getting students to talk in the second language. Warren (2006) attempts a definition of conversation while providing nine features of this important human genre with data collected privately from authentic conversation in England. According to Warren (2006), “while this study is of native speakers of English, the nine defining features of naturalness of English conversation are applicable to conversations conducted in other languages” (p. 1). The nine features include: multiple sources, determination of discourse coherence, language as doing, co-operation, unfolding, open-endedness, artefacts, inexplicitness, and shared responsibility. Thus, conversation is a complex human genre that is not neat nor highly organized. However, generally, there is an organization that includes; opening, turn-taking, interrupting, topic-shifting, closings, and pragmatic speech act formulas (for apologizing, thanking, and so on). Conversation is a complex process in which meaning overrides accuracy and spoken grammar is more relevant than written grammar (Barraja-

Rohan, 2000). There exists a number of “conversational strategies” that include speaker strategies such as searching for words, adjusting and avoiding opinion, requesting help, fillers/hesitation devices, repairing message, checking for understanding, repeating for cohesion and so on. In addition, some listener strategies evident in conversation includes; asking for clarification, asking for repetition, giving a summary (Brower, 2003; Cheng & Warren, 2007; Roebuck & Wagner, 2004; Zhou, 2006).

Interestingly, the majority of the studies about how discourse unfolds in higher-level, content-based classrooms have mostly been with literature and culture classes. Thus, further research is relevant in other content-based classroom settings, such as a Conversation class, to determine if the results are similar or different to previous findings. This study responds to the call by Thoms (2012) for more research about the nature of discourse in higher-level, content based courses. The study looks at the overarching goal of instruction and the development of students’ proficiency in a Spanish senior level undergraduate Conversation class and draws pedagogical conclusions based on the results.

## CHAPTER 3

### METHODOLOGY

#### **Setting of the Study**

The study was conducted in a senior-level Spanish Conversation class at a medium-sized public university in a northeastern state in the United States. This class was a 400-level course and the third Conversation course offered in the course sequence in the department. According to the catalog entries for Fall 2013 on the university's website, the goal of this class is "extensive work on the development of speaking skills at the Advanced-Low level of oral proficiency, as defined by the Speaking Guidelines developed by the American Council of the Teaching of Foreign Languages. Focuses on paragraph-length and narration and description in present, past, and future topics and contexts."<sup>1</sup>

#### **Participants**

The participants in this study were five female US students, all of whom were native speakers of English. All five students had recently returned from a semester-long study-abroad program in Spain and were in their final year of college. Four of the five participants were Spanish teacher candidates and were advised to register for this class so that they might have a greater chance of meeting the required Advanced-Low speaking proficiency level on the required ACTFL OPI. One student took this class because she was pursuing a minor in Spanish. Thus, the importance of providing the students with Advanced- and Superior-level discourse opportunities in this class is crucial.

The instructor was a native Spanish speaker who is a PhD candidate in school

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<sup>1</sup> Due to IRB guidelines on protection of subjects, the reference for the university website is not provided.

administration at a nearby university and has been teaching Spanish for about ten years. She is not a certified OPI tester but she expressed her interest to participate in a familiarization workshop later in the future. In an interview, however, she told the researcher this was her first time teaching this course. This class was chosen for this research project because of the stated goal of the class and the researcher's curiosity about how discourse would unfold in this class. In addition, both the instructor and the students were willing to participate in the study.

### **Data**

The discourse data were gathered during selected events of whole-class discussion as was done in the original research. This 2-credit class took place during the Fall 2013 semester. The class was held on a Monday - Wednesday schedule from 2:30pm – 3:20pm for a total of 50 minutes each class meeting. Prior to coming to class for discussion, the students were required to select and read articles of their choice on a general topic as stated by the course syllabus. The class activities included; whole-group discussion, paired discussion, individual and paired presentations, and debates. The required text used in this course was *Conversacion sin barreras* (Blanco, 2010)

The researcher sat in the class throughout the majority of the 15-week semester but decided to record only during the second half of the semester so that the students and the instructor would have already settled into some regular patterns of classroom discussion. After acquiring permission from the Institutional Review Board as well as the consent of the students and the instructor, an mp3 audio recorder was used to record the class sessions. The researcher recorded a total of seven class sessions. However, for the purposes of transcription and detailed discourse analysis, five days were selected as a

sample. They were; 10/30, 11/4, 11/6, 11/11, 11/13 (See Appendix A). It is imperative to note that during these recorded classes there were other class activities (for example, pair-work discussion among the students, individual presentations, teacher announcements). The researcher, however, was interested in whole-group class discussions between the instructor and the students that were evident during these days. A total of hundred and three (103) minutes of whole-group discussion was used for analysis. Additionally, the researcher's classroom observations and field notes during the semester as well as interviews with two students and the instructor showed that the recorded class sessions were representative of typical class sessions in the Conversation class.

The selected audiotaped recordings were transcribed verbatim following an adapted version of Green & Walleet (1981), following procedures found in Donato & Brooks (2004). Nonverbal activity such as eye gaze and gestures was not captured in this analysis and was not a focus in this study since no videotaping occurred. Because the researcher was present in the classes during recoding, he was able to identify the voices of all the students and assigned them with pseudonyms. However, not all classroom talk was captured; therefore, the researcher wrote "inaudible" in the transcript for talk that was not comprehensible or that was inaudible.

## CHAPTER 4

### RESULTS

#### **Teacher Question Types**

In the classroom, questions are important in determining the shape and form students' responses take. According to Darhower (2014), "[q]uestions play a fundamental role in classroom dynamics" (p. 400). The researcher analyzed the instructor's questions during whole-group discussion about text<sup>2</sup> to find out whether they asked students to narrate and describe in the major time frames (past, present, and future), and provide an opinion, all of which are functions of the Advanced level speaker. Researchers have investigated questions as tools for either promoting or inhibiting extended verbal responses and critical thinking (Cazden, 2001; McCormick & Donato, 2001).

Additionally, there is a relationship between questions and the levels of the ACTFL Guidelines (Darhower, 2014). In these data, questions refer to instructor utterances to which students were required to respond. Classroom management and questions not related to the topic of discussion were excluded. Repetition requests and questions such as "alguien más, algo más, cuál puede ser otra" were not counted because they referred to the earlier question asked. In addition, instructor questions to which students were not given time to respond were not counted.

Questions that require yes/no answers, a single word, or short phrase are considered Novice level questions. Intermediate level questions anticipate a full sentence in the present tense but lacks critical thinking. Advanced level questions require a paragraph-length response or coherently connected sentences often in the past tense.

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<sup>2</sup> Text refers to the articles and passages from the required text that the students read before class.

Questions that require students to state and support an opinion in oral paragraphs are at the Superior level (Darhower, 2014). There is the potential for further communicative exchange when teachers ask for clarification, probe students' responses, or ask them to explain a particular point in more detail (Miao & Heining-Boynton, 2011).

In these data, however, the researcher reviewed the transcripts for evidence of follow-up questions that might engage students in paragraph-length talk. The instructor's questions were categorized as information questions and follow-up questions.

Information questions require students to provide an opinion about a topic. On the other hand, follow-up questions are those that have the potential to enhance oral proficiency.

Out of a total of fifty-three questions posed by the instructor across the five days of whole group discussion, 15 (28%) were follow-up questions and 38 (72%) were information questions. Example 1 illustrates how the exchange stayed below the Advanced level due to the absence of follow-up questions by the instructor.

Example 1

T: ¿CUÁL FUE EL TEMA O LOS DOS TEMAS PRINCIPALES EN LOS QUE SE ENFOCÓ EL ARTÍCULO?

SE: [inaudible] entre hombres y mujeres

SC: los hombres y mujeres

T: LAS DIFERENCIAS ENTRE LOS HOMBRES Y LAS MUJERES ¿Y LA IDEA?

¿CUÁL ES LA IDEA PRINCIPAL DE ÉL?

SC: que las mujeres tienen que hacer más más control

T: QUE LAS MUJERES TIENEN QUE TENER MÁS CONTROL ES DECIR QUE HAYA MÁS MUJERES PRESIDENTAS ¿NO? QUE HAYA MÁS GOBERNANTES

¿POR QUÉ PIENSA QUE LAS MUJERES SON MEJORES?

SR: porque somos mejores

In this example, the instructor asks “What was the theme or the two major themes the article talked about?” Student SC replies “between men and women” and student SC also responds “men and women.” The instructor then adds “the differences between men and women.” She moves on to another question “and the idea? What is his main idea?” SC responds “that women must have more control.” The instructor could have asked a series of follow-up questions here such as do you agree with the author, why or why not?, why do you think the author is saying this?, to engage the students and then move the discussion beyond phrase and sentence level. However, the instructor repeated the response and adds an idea “that women must have more control, thus, there should be more female presidents, isn’t it? There should be more female presidents.” Immediately, she asked another question “why does he think women are better?”, then, student SR replies “because we are better.”

In contrast, in Example 2 below, the instructor asks a follow-up question after the students produce sentence-level and phrase-level responses. This follow-up question leads to a paragraph-length response by the students.

Example 2

T: ¿POR QUÉ PIENSA QUE LA RANA TIENE MÁS PODER QUE LAS ABEJITAS?

SC: más grande

T: ES MÁS GRANDE

SD: y come todos los insectos pequeños

T: Y ¿EN LA VIDA EN REALIDAD CÓMO SE APLICA ESO? ¿PIENSAN USTEDES

QUE LA TIRA CÓMICA REPRESENTA ¿ALGUNOS TEMAS DE LA VIDA DE LAS PERSONAS?

SC: bueno sí por ejemplo con nosotros si quieres cambiar una fecha que no es de la favor de nosotros todavía tú vas a hacerlo y tenemos que seguir lo que dices entonces siempre hay alguien más que tiene más poder en el caso de los estudiantes pero también sobre todo creo

T: ENTONCES LA RELACIÓN ENTRE LOS ESTUDIANTES Y EL PROFESOR PUEDE SER UN CASO DE QUIÉN TIENE MÁS AUTORIDAD O QUIÉN DECIDE

SR: quizás a veces estamos tan ocupados con las cosas que nos importa más a nosotros y nos olvidamos de que hay personas más mayores con más autoridad por ejemplo las abejas estaban discutiendo sobre algo que se olvidaron que hay alguien más fuerte o con más autoridad que ellos y no importa lo que piensan ellos

T: Y NO IMPORTA LO QUE PIENSAN ELLOS

In this example, the instructor asks “why do you think the frog has more power than the bees?” The first student responds with the phrase “bigger” and the instructor says “it is bigger.” Another student continues with “and eats all the small insects.” The teacher asks a follow-up question “and in real life how is this applied? Do you think the comic strip represents some themes about people’s life?” This leads to student SC giving a paragraph-length response “Well yes for example about we if you want to change a date that is not in our favor you will still do it and we must follow what you say therefore there is always someone with more power concerning students but about everything I believe.” The instructor replies “therefore the relation between students and teacher can be an example of who has more authority or who decides.” Student SR also adds that

“maybe sometimes we are very busy personal issues that matter to us and we forget there are people with more power for example the bees were discussing about something they had forgotten that there is someone more powerful or with more authority than them and what they think is of no importance.” Then the teacher repeats “and what they think is of no importance.” Thus, follow-up questions are more likely to engage students in extended discourse.

In addition, Example 3 below shows how follow-up questions are more likely to engage students to produce paragraph-length responses.

Example 3

T: OKAY MUY BIEN. VAMOS A VER ENTONCES ¿QUÉ FUE LO QUE PASÓ? UN POQUITO DEPRIMENTE ¿EH?

SK: no estoy exactamente segura pero pensaba que el hombre en el suelo era su el padre  
o o o

SC: sí el padre

SK: o alguna persona importante al niño y el niño que era él lo que estaba lo que fue mata matado hmm quería no sé tener venganza o

T: VENGARSE

SK: sí de de la persona que que mató a su padre (with rising tone)

T: SÍ PORQUE ÉL ÉL QUANDO ERA PEQUEÑO ÉL VIO COMO

SC: sí la violencia

T: COMO ELLOS Y ÉL VIO ÉL PIENSA QUE FUE ESTE SEÑOR EL GENERAL  
DÍAS QUE MATÓ A A SU PADRE ¿QUÉ PASÓ EN EL CORTO EN LA PARTE QUE  
VIMOS? ADEMÁS DE LA TORTURA

SR: no sé pero fue verdaderamente aquel hombre que mató a su padre (with rising tone)

T: ÉL ESTÁ SEGURO QUE FUE ÉL PORQUE LO VIO HM HM QUE TENÍA

BIGOTE Y TODO ESO POR ESO ÉL REGRESÓ A URUGUAY

SK: el el otro hombre era eran primos ¿no?

T: SÍ DIEGO

SC: bueno a principio del corto pues no vimos pero él estaba haciendo piss y apareció la novia no sé la novia y me parecía que él estaba pensando mucho sobre lo que quería hacer y él decidió ir a México supongo para escapar todo y llegó quién era Diego (rising tone)

T: DIEGO SÍ

SC: para que pudieran ir a no sé

T: A LA CORTE

SC: a la corta sí

In this example, the instructor asks a past narration question “okay very good let’s see. What happened? A little depressing huh?” To which student SK replies “I am not really sure but I was thinking that the man on the ground was the father.” SC says “yes the father”, then SK adds “or someone important to the boy and the boy was the one who was killed hm he wanted I don’t know to take vengeance.” The instructor replies with the correct form of the verb in Spanish “to take revenge”, and then SK continues “yes on the person who killed the father.” Then the instructor says “yes because he saw it when he was a little boy.” SK adds “yes the violence.” The instructor responds “because they and he saw he thinks that this man General Diaz killed his father.” She further goes on to ask a follow-up question “what happened in the short clip we watched? In addition to the

torture.” One student was not sure about what to say “I don’t know but it was a certain man who killed his father.” The instructor then says “he was sure it was him because he saw him with beard and all that and for that reason he returned to Uruguay.” Another student asks “was that guy a cousin?” and the instructor responds “yes, Diego.” Finally, one student responds to the question with a narration “well at the beginning of the clip well we did not see that but he was peeing and the girlfriend came over I don’t know the girlfriend and I think he was thinking a lot about what he wanted to do and he decided to go to Mexico I suppose to run away from everything and who arrived, Diego?” The instructor says “Diego, yes” and the same student continues “so that they can go to I don’t know.” Then the instructor says “to the court” and the student repeats “to the court, yes.” It appears, therefore, that when students are asked follow-up questions, they are more likely to produce extended paragraph-length talk, which characterizes Advanced-Low level speakers.

### **Length of Student and Instructor Talk**

A second analysis performed by the researcher was the length of students’ responses during their turns at talk and compare it to that of the instructor. “One criterion of the ACTFL Guidelines is the length of speech maintained by the speaker, measured in words or phrases (Novice), complete sentences (Intermediate), oral paragraphs (Advanced), and extended discourse (Superior) (Darhower, 2014, p. 402). In this data set, the length of talk was measured by the number of words elicited by a speaker. Repeated words and expressions close to each other in an utterance were counted once. For example, the verb “era” is counted three times and not five times as it appears in this utterance; *eso no era la ley del duelo solo era era un crimen era era la guerra sucia*. In

addition, when a speaker chooses a word over another while speaking, the first word is excluded in the counting, for example, *pueden depender bueno pueden depender en raza y en sexo en en*. Here, *pueden* and *depender* are only counted once. Finally, filler words such as “hm,oh” were not counted.

Table I below shows the average length of turns at talk by the students and the instructor across the five days of whole group discussion. To get the average length of talk produced by the students, the sum of the length of talk produced by the students during whole group discussion was divided by the total number of turns. The same mathematical equation was performed for the instructor’s talk for comparison.

Table 1

*Average Length of Talk by Students and Instructor Across Five Days of Discussion*

Days	Students average length of talk (total number of turns)	Instructor’s average length of talk (total number of turns)
Day 1	11 (100)	29 (42)
Day 2	19 (81)	35 (40)
Day 3	18 (117)	49 (38)
Day 4	19 (28)	48 (17)
Day 5	12 (87)	29 (32)

*Note.* Total number of turns for instructor across 5 days was 159.  
Total number of turns for instructor across 5 days was 413.

As seen in Table I, the average length of students’ utterances during whole group discussion across five days was eleven to nineteen words. In addition, the students had multiple turns at discussion (413) compared to the instructor (159); however, many of the utterances were at the word, phrase, and single to two sentences level. It appears, therefore, that giving students multiple turns is no guarantee that they will produce extended responses using advanced level language functions. The absence of any clarification questions by the instructor in this class may be a possible reason for the

average low number of words per utterance by the students across the five days. As stated by Donato and Brooks (2004), clarification questions are defined as those questions that ask students to say more or explain their opinions a little bit further. Example 4 below illustrates how the students' multiple turns comprised of mostly brief incomplete responses and the absence of clarification question from the instructor after their responses.

Example 4

T: ¿POR QUÉ PIENSA ÉL QUE LAS MUJERES SON MEJORES ENTONCES? ¿POR QUÉ PIENSA QUE LOS HOMBRES NO DEBEN DE SEGUIR GOBERNANDO?

SC: bueno dice que la preservación del medio ambiente es una vocación genética como y con eso pienso sobre como

SK: que las mujeres son más

SC: no sé exactamente

SK: que las mujeres

SC: somos madres

SK: ponen más importancia en

SC: sí sí como madres

SD: la necesidad general en vez de sus propios intereses

T: LOS HOMBRES SON MÁS EGO CENTRISTAS ¿NO? PIENSAN SOLAMENTE EN LO QUE ELLOS QUIEREN. BUENO VAMOS A LA PÁGINA CIENTO SESENTA Y CUATRO PIENSO QUE ES EL NÚMERO DOS Y QUIERO QUE DEN EJEMPLOS A UNAS DE LAS PREGUNTAS QUE ÉL HACE AQUÍ Y ESTÁ RELACIONADO CON EL ARTÍCULO TAMBIÉN QUE YO LES DI.

In the discussion above, the instructor asks why the author thinks women are better and rephrases the question to why he thinks men should not continue ruling. SC responds with an incomplete sentence that “well he says preserving the environment is a genetic profession and that”, so SK continues “that women are more”, then SC takes the floor back and says “I don’t know exactly.” SK says “that women” and SC adds “we are mothers,” which is followed by SK “they put more importance in” then SC says “yes yes like mothers.” Finally, another student takes the floor and says “the general necessity instead of their interests.” The instructor then concludes the discussion “men are more egocentric, right? They think only about what they want” and moves to the next class item “Well let’s go to page 164 I think it is number two and I want you to give examples to some of the questions he asks here and it is also related to the article I gave you.” As observed in the example, the instructor did not ask students to say more or ask whether they support the author’s reason and why but rather concludes the discussion with her answer and moves on to a new item.

In addition, a closer look at the data showed that most responses that approximated narration and paragraph length talk were in the present tense time frame due to a higher preference of questions in the present tense posed by the instructor as illustrated in Example 5 below.

#### Example 5

T: ¿CÓMO SE COMPARAN ENTONCES LOS ARTÍCULOS QUE TRAJERON USTEDES LOS TEMAS SOBRE LA INJUSTICIA EN CHILE PORQUE TIENES LA INJUSTICIA SOBRE EL SALARIO MÍNIMO LA INJUSTICIA SOBRE LAS PERSONAS QUE COMETEN UN CRIMEN VAN A UNA CÁRCEL DIFERENTE?

SK: la única cosa que yo sé sobre las cárceles en Los Estados Unidos es que hay diferentes niveles de seguridad para personas que hacen crímenes diferentes por ejemplo si la una persona mata a otra persona o que que que hay si hay una persona que es muy violento

T: VIOLENTA

SK: violenta hmm van van a van a hacer en una cárcel más segura

T: DE MÁXIMA UNA CÁRCEL DE MÁXIMA SEGURIDAD Y

¿USTEDES SABEN ALGO RELACIONADO CON EL TEMA QUE TRAJÓ FUE SD Y TAMBIÉN SK SOBRE LAS CÁRCELES? SOBRE ESTE TIPO DE DIFERENCIAS 'SK' DICE QUE LA ÚNICA DIFERENCIA ES EL TIPO DE CRIMEN QUE UNA COMETE

SD: pero también yo pensaba que las personas que cometen cometen

T: COMETEN

SD: sí cometen crímenes más peligrosos todos van a la misma cárcel entonces no hay buena seguridad adentro de la de la cárcel

In this discussion, the instructor asked the students how they compare the articles about injustice in Chile, the minimum wage, and the different types of prison according to the crime one commits. SK responds that she only knows that the prisons in the United States have different levels of security and for example a person who commits murder or a violent person goes to a more secure prison. The instructor asks if anyone else has any idea in addition to what SK said about the type of crime one commits. SD adds that she thought people who commit serious crimes go to the same prison therefore there is no good level of security inside the prison. Obviously, in this example, the student's

response are not connected in extended oral paragraph and it is in the simple present tense, reflecting Intermediate level talk according to ACTFL.

Conversely, however, the average length of instructor utterance during whole group discussion across five days was twenty-nine to forty-eight, which reflects that many utterances by the instructor were of extended discourse and oral paragraph length. Example 6 below shows the instructor's use of extended discourse utterance during a discussion about Picasso.

Example 6

T: POR EJEMPLO CUANDO USTEDES USTEDES FUERON AL MUSEO DEL PRADO ¿NO? EN ESPAÑA CUANDO USTEDES SE FUERON A ESPAÑA Y VIERON EL CUADRO DE

SC: bueno de Picasso está en el Reina Sofía no está en el Prado

T: EN EL REINA SOFÍA NO ESTÁ EN EL PRADO

SC: yo lo vi

T: TÚ VISTE LO DE PICASSO Y TÚ ¿QUÉ PIENSAS? PORQUE HAY ESTUDIANTES QUE HAN IDO A ESPAÑA Y ME HAN DICHO QUE CUANDO TÚ LO VES DE CERCA PUEDES

SC: es muy grande sí como la pared

T: GRANDOTE SÍ Y ALGUIEN QUE ME DIJO ESO PERO HA RECIBIDO NO MUCHA GENTE PERO MUCHA GENTE HA CRITICADO O CRITICÓ A PICASSO PORQUE PIENSAN QUE NO ES UN ARTE ES ÉL HIZO CUBISMO ¿NO? Y PARA MUCHAS PERSONAS NO ES EL TIPO DE ARTE TAN ESTÉTICO COMO LAS OBRAS QUE HIZO POR EJEMPLO DA VINCI O OTRA PERSONA EN EL

In the Example 6 above, the instructor asked one student what she thinks of the painting after she said saw the painting in Spain and the student said it is big like the wall. Instead of asking the student to say more or describe the painting and, thus, engage in advanced level talk, the instructor took the floor and gave an extended commentary that the painting is very big and has been criticized by many people as Cubism and not art. She went on to add that the painting is not considered esthetic as those of Da Vinci or other people. By taking the responsibility for describing the painting, the instructor prevented the students from giving their own opinions and ideas about the painting.

### **Verb Tenses Used in Students Responses**

As stated by the overarching goal of this class, the focus of students' utterances is on "paragraph-length and narration and description in present, past, and future topics and contexts." (catalogue entries, fall 2013). If students are performing in the advanced and superior level range then whole-group discussions will show a range of verb tenses especially beyond the present indicative. "A characteristic of an advanced speaker is the ability to narrate and describe events in all major time frames (past, present, and future) in paragraph-length discourse" (Donato & Brooks, 2004, p. 190). The transcripts for whole-group discussion across the five days were examined turn by turn and all inflected verbs expressed by students were counted. As in the original study, repeated verbs in the same utterance were counted once and the repetition was ignored. For example, if a student said *violenta hmm van van a van a hacer en una cárcel más segura*, "van a" in this case was counted once. In addition, the accuracy of the verb form produced by students was ignored when it was clear what mood or tense was implied. In the example, *hmm no problemas específicos pero dijeron que los problemas...* the verb

“dicieron\*” was counted as preterite although inaccurate. The imperative, past perfect, and the passive voice were grouped into a category labeled “other” because they were each used one time across the five days. Table II shows the categories of the inflected verbs used across the five days.

Table 2

*Verb Forms Used by Students Across Five Days of Discussion*

Verb form	Number	Percentage (%)
Present	686	70
Imperfect	103	10
Preterite	97	9.82
Periphrastic future	18	1.82
Present Progressive	14	1.42
Imperfect Progressive	14	1.42
Past subjunctive	14	1.42
Conditional	12	1.22
Present subjunctive	12	1.22
Present Perfect	7	0.71
Pluperfect subjunctive	3	0.30
Other	3	0.30
Future	2	0.20
Conditional perfect	2	0.20

*Note.* Total number of inflected verbs used across five days by students was 987.

As shown in Table II, the total number of inflected verbs produced by students across five days during whole-group discussion was 987. The majority of the verb forms, or 686 (70%) were in the simple present tense. The imperfect was used a total of 103 times (10%), followed by the preterite, which students used only 97 times, some 9.82%. The periphrastic future (ir + a + infinitive) was used 18 times (1.82%). The present progressive, past progressive and past subjunctive were each used 14 times, some 1.42%

each of the total, followed by the conditional and present subjunctive, which students produced 12 times each, representing 1.22%. Students used the present perfect 7 times (0.71%), the pluperfect subjunctive and the other category (passive, imperative, past perfect) 3 times each (0.30% each), and the future and conditional perfect was each produced 2 times only (0.20% each).

It is clear from the percentages of the verb tenses produced that the simple present tense was the dominant tense used across the five days. Whole group discussion in a senior-level Spanish undergraduate Conversation class where the overarching goal is development of speaking at the Advanced-Low level according to ACTFL should engage in discourse in major time frames and especially in complex tenses above the simple present tense. A possible explanation for the predominance of the present tense in the responses produced by the students is the dominance of the instructors' questions in the simple present tense. Out of the total of fifty-three questions asked by the instructor, forty-one (77%) were in the present tense, thus leading the students to mostly produce responses in the present tense. Example 7 below illustrates this point.

#### Example 7

*Verb forms used in discussion in the example are italicized.*

T: ¿QUÉ OPINIÓN *TIENEN* USTEDES DE LOS POLÍTICOS?

SD: bueno *creo* que *debo* saber más de los políticos pero no *tengo* ningún interés en y *creo* que *es* un tema

SK: yo tampoco

T: PERO ¿POR QUÉ LA GENTE JÓVEN NO *SE INTERESA* EN LA POLÍTICA?

SD: porque ahora *es* un tema tan con

T: CONTROVERSIAL

SD: controversial que nadie *quiere* hablar

SC: siempre

SK: no sé si que *es* porque necesariamente que *sea* controversial pero por muchos jóvenes no *es debe* ser importante pero no no es yo *tengo* tantas otras cosas para preocuparme

SD: pero y *es* como *pensamos* todos nosotros *es* un poco egoísta porque

SK: sí *es* muy egoísta

SC: ¿*votaron*?

SR: no

SK: ¿tú?

SC: sí yo pero *estoy preguntando* a

SD: yo *voté*

SE: *creo* que esta para solver todo de los políticos *es* casi como un trabajo porque *hay* muchísimas cosas en la televisión que *debe* que ver *es* como a tomar un clase el tiempo que *debe* que poner para entender y hm para tener un opinión sobre ese y cuando *estábamos* en universidad sí los políticos *son* importantes porque *creo* que todas las otras cosas que *hicimos* eso es la última cosa en que *estamos pensando* porque vale muchísima tiempo para ver cada persona y qué *piensa* y *debe* que escuchar todo los hm

SR: y formar su propia opinión

In the example 7 above, the instructor asks the students using the present tense “What is your opinion about politics?” to which one student responds using the present tense “I think I should know more about politics but I don’t have any interest and I think

it's a topic." Then another student adds "Neither am I." The teacher then asks another question, which requires response in the present tense verb form "Why are young people not interested in politics?" This question leads to a discussion among the students characterized by mostly short responses. One student says it is a very controversial topic while another student says it is not because it is controversial but she has many other things to worry about, although politics must be important. This prompts student SC to ask her colleagues if they voted and one student said "no" and another student, SK asked SC if she voted and she said "yes." Student SD also responds that she voted. Finally, a longer response comes from student SE when she says "I think that in order to understand politics it is almost like a job because there are so many things on television that you must watch. It is like the time you devote to paying attention when you take a class in order to understand and have an opinion about that and when we were in college, yes, politicians are important because I believe that the many other things we do are the last thing we think about because it is worth a lot of time to watch and listen to everybody and what he thinks." Student SR then adds "and form your own opinion."

It is seen how the present tense verb form dominates in this discussion due to the instructors' question framed in the present tense. The dominant use of the present tense is similar to the 81% reported by Donato and Brooks (2004) when they investigated the senior-level undergraduate literature class. If 70% of the verb forms in the students' responses were in the present tense across the five days, then, it is clear that little discussion occurred in the other time frames (past and future) in this senior-level undergraduate Conversation class during whole-group discussion.

## **Analysis of Instructor and Student Interviews**

In order to triangulate the findings in this study, the researcher interviewed the instructor and two of the students, who voluntarily accepted to be interviewed for the study. The reason for the interview was to find out if what was observed was a result of the goals shared, or otherwise, by both the instructor and the students about the Conversation class and the overarching goal, speaking at the Advanced-low level as described by ACTFL. All the interviews were conducted at the end of the semester and recorded. Both the instructor and the students were asked similar questions (see Appendix B). Their responses related to this study are summarized here. Off-topic responses are not included in this summary.

The instructor and the students agreed that conversation in the class and conversation outside the class should be similar. They mentioned that features of conversation included hesitations, fillers, variety of topics, initiating, and ending a conversation.

With regard to the characteristics of an Advanced Low level speaker, the first functions mentioned by the students were past narration, indirect discourse, connector words, and description in paragraph-length discourse. The instructor, however, highlighted stating and supporting of opinion, comparing and contrasting, and engaging in formal and informal topics in paragraphs. This is a possible explanation for the dominant questions posed by the instructor that asked the students to compare or requested their opinion as compared to questions that call for past narration, evident in the transcripts.

The two students who were interviewed thought they met the goals of the class.

Given that students had to engage in other events aside from whole-group discussion, this claim may be true during those events. The instructor, however, believed some people met the goals and some people did not. She cited that the students who did not meet the goal were either not prepared or did not even have the background knowledge in English during the discussions. Thus, it had nothing to do with their proficiency but rather their knowledge.

The instructor and one student stated the Monday-Wednesday 50-minute schedule as a challenge. They both wanted 3 or more days per week. Both the instructor and one student cited time as a constraint for the development of more ideas on topics, which is unlikely in natural conversation. For example, as stated by the instructor “sometimes we didn’t have enough time to cover everything although everyone wanted to say something.” However, the instructor mentioned that there is also a difference when it comes to classroom conversation. She said because one had to evaluate the students and had certain goals to fulfill, certain aspects of the conversations are controlled, for example, time control for student participation and providing the students with topics.

Symmetry and equality are vital for negotiation of meaning and co-construction of talk between teacher and the students in the language classroom (Van Lier, 1998). However, in most classrooms, the instructor decides who speaks when and for how long; therefore, it seems almost impossible for natural conversation to occur in the classroom, given the asymmetrical relationship between the instructor and the students (Brooks, 1992).

## CHAPTER 5

### DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

#### **Discussion**

This replication study has critically analyzed how discourse unfolded in an advanced undergraduate Spanish Conversation class during selected whole-group discussion across five days of instruction during the latter half of the semester. The motivation for this study was to replicate the study done by Darhower (2014) about literary discussions and advanced-superior speaking functions in the undergraduate language program and validate the findings reported in the original study. This study, however, investigated how students' turns at talk and discussion during selected events in whole-class text-based speaking activity in an advanced undergraduate Conversation class in Spanish met the stated goals of the course (the development of speaking skills at Advanced-Low oral proficiency standard, as defined by the ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines – speaking, developed by ACTFL). The focus of this investigation was on paragraph-length speech, and narration and description in present, past and future time frames with some control of aspect.

The analysis of the transcripts revealed that the instructor posed fewer follow-up questions that engaged the students in talk at the Advanced-Low level. Out of fifty-three questions posed by the instructor across the five days, 38 (72%) were information questions and only 15 (28%) were follow-up questions. For that reason, the average length of the students' response across the five days was eleven to nineteen words per turn. Contrary to Darhower's (2014) finding, the students had several learner turns at talk more than the instructor across the five days. However, as found in Darhower (2014), the

responses produced by the students were mostly very brief, typically made up of one word, phrase, or one to two sentences. Conversely, the average length of the instructor's turn at talk was twenty-nine to forty-eight words per turn, which shows that some of the instructor's turns were of extended and paragraph-length discourse. Additionally, the majority of the verbs produced by the students, or 686 (70%) out of 987 used during the discussion were in the simple present tense. With regards to the other major time frames, the imperfect was used 103 times (10%) while the preterite was used only 97 times (9%). The future was used only 2 times (0.20%) and the periphrastic future 18 times (1.82%). Finally, out of fifty –three questions, forty-one (77%) were in the simple present tense and because of that the students used mostly the present tense verb forms in their responses.

In the interview, the instructor and one student cited time as a constraint for discussion on certain days. In addition, the instructor told the researcher that in her opinion, some students met the goal while some did not. The reason, she cited, some students did not meet the goal was due to lack of preparation or insufficient background knowledge on topic. However, the two students who were interviewed thought they met the goal. Because there were other classroom events and assignments in this class, this claim might be true in other class events.

The research question that guided this study was - To what extent do students' turns at talk during selected events, in whole group text-focused discourse, in an advanced undergraduate Spanish Conversation class reflect ACTFL Advanced Low-level of oral proficiency, as stated by the overarching goal of the course? – As shown by the results, it was found that, for the most part, the students did not meet the overarching goal

of the course. Although the students had several turns at talk compared to the instructor, their turns at talk were at the Novice and Intermediate levels, or below the Advanced-low level due to the abundance of information questions as compared to follow-up and clarification questions by the teacher. For this reason, for the most part, the students produced one-word, phrase, or one to two sentences per utterance, mostly in the simple present tense.

### **Conclusion**

Teacher talk is very crucial in classroom discourse. As stated by McCormick and Donato (2000), teacher questions are “semiotic tools for achieving goal-directed instructional actions within the context of teacher-student classroom interaction” (p. 198). The types of questions as well as follow-up moves used by a teacher determine the length and complexity of a students’ response (Hellerman, 2003, Waring, 2009). Instead of just requesting for known-answers, instructor questions must elicit complex thinking in complex language (Donato & Brooks, 2004, p. 140). In order to ensure continued oral proficiency development, lesson planning should not only pay attention to the content to be covered, but also how to engage students to talk during discussion. In this way, the instructor can elicit the type of talk students need to enhance practice based on their proficiency level. In content-based instruction, “teachers must consider how their language might influence various aspects of students’ language proficiency beyond spoken interpersonal communication” (Donato et al., 2007, p. 117). If all instructors are enlightened about the ACTFL guidelines, opportunities will be provided in classrooms to ensure that learners build upon their proficiency level and not otherwise (Darhower, 2014, p. 408).

The qualitative nature of this replication study puts limitations on the generalizability of findings from this class. “Findings from a qualitative study are typically emergent and revelatory rather than anticipated and predictive” (Donato & Brooks, 2004, p. 186). For this reason, the researcher did not conduct an experiment or manipulate variables, but rather, recorded, transcribed, and analyzed naturally occurring data in an Advanced Conversation class. The results were then interpreted and a conclusion was drawn. Thus, because of the lack of generalization, the readers of this study may or may not find similar discursive practices in other higher-level content classes.

The study will raise the awareness of the professionals in the field of language teaching and learning and pave the path for more research in this area. As stated by Thoms (2012), more empirical research is needed about the nature of discourse in higher-level, content-based classes. Two possible research questions are: how can teachers be trained to become conscious of their discourse patterns in their classes? What, if any, are types of development opportunities available for transformation of teacher talk? (Thoms, 2012). A suggestion will be for instructors to partake in an OPI familiarization seminar. Finally, research is needed in classes where proficiency levels are the goals to reveal the nature of discourse that takes place. This study looked at whole-group discussion; therefore, another study can look at small-group discussions and students’ proficiency. In addition, another way to look at the data from this study will be to analyze the teachers’ questions in terms of task and the functions required of the students. Another study can adopt a pre- and post-study design about the student’s proficiency before, during, and after the intervention, in this case, the class, to assess if there is a difference.

## CHAPTER 6

### IMPLICATIONS FOR SECOND AND FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNING

The purpose of this replication study was to reveal the nature of students' talk in this class relative to the course goals about language development at the Advanced Low level as defined by ACTFL and not to criticize and condemn the instructor and the students of this course. In fact, small group work, debates, and individual presentations were recorded as events in this class but were not the focus of analysis. In addition, the students had to interview native speakers and narrate the experience at the end of the semester. Therefore, it is possible that students engaged in Advanced and Superior level discourse during these events. Moreover, as included in the course syllabus, the students were advised to seek opportunities outside of the classroom to practice in Advanced and Superior language functions. One student told the researcher in the interview that she visited one faculty member, who is a trained OPI tester, twice a week and engaged in Advanced level talk for about thirty minutes daily. However, since the Conversation class in this study had development of speaking at the Advanced Low level as the main goal, it was expected that the students engaged in discourse at this level during discussions in the classroom for the most time, if not all the time in order to "climb the proficiency ladder" (Darhower, 2014, p. 406).

There are several implications for second and foreign language classrooms that can be drawn from this study about goals of instruction and students' proficiency. First, for students to produce extended responses in complex language, for example, narrating in the past and hypothesizing, instructor questions must elicit Advanced and Superior language functions. Rather than just making comments to expand students' responses,

language instructors should ask students to explain their point or say more. Swender (1999) suggests “spiral up” discussion questions, which is used in the ACTFL OPI to discuss the same topic at different levels of linguistic demands. According to Darhower (2014), “[t]o spiral a question from the intermediate to the advanced level, for example, one would ask the question in the past time frame and attempt to elicit details that go beyond the single sentence. Questions can be spiraled to superior by eliciting hypothetical language, often involving conditional tenses and the subjunctive mood” (p. 407).

However, he adds that students may require linguistic scaffolding to respond to these types of questions. This means that instructors who teach classes where proficiency levels are the goals may need ACTFL professional training to be able to engage in this kind of talk.

Second, language instructors have to pay attention to their oral practices in and across their classes. One way by which this can be done is by video-taping or audio-taping classes to listen for some of the following. Is the class highly structured? Who gets to talk more in class, instructor or students? What is the nature of instructor questions and students responses and whether they reflect the course goals? This informs the instructor about the nature of talk in the classroom to help make adjustments as necessary.

Third, although difficult, there is the need to determine what content should be “sacrificed” for the sake of engaging in extensive discussion of other topics. In the interview with the instructor, time was mentioned as a factor that restricted discussion on certain days when students had more ideas to express. It is of great advantage to ignore coverage of more content and allow time for substantive collaborative discourse on few

topics in the classroom (Walsh, 2005).

Fourth, to encourage participation from the students, instructors should involve students in topics selection for discussion. According to Brooks (1992), “[i]mposing topics of some assumed pedagogical importance may fully hinder communication processes during face-to-face talk among language learners in classrooms” (p. 240). As revealed in the interview, the instructor noted that students did not engage in extended talk sometimes because they did not have the background knowledge about the topic. She said “they didn’t have the information in English let alone Spanish.” One student said “I did not say anything because I was not interested in the topic and did not want to talk about politics.” In her study of a high school Spanish class, Todhunter (2007) reported that when students engaged in instructional conversations, they initiated and developed topics by themselves, as well as responding to the teacher’s questions with answers and comments.

Finally, this study responds to the dearth of sufficient studies about the nature of discourse in higher-level, content-based classrooms as per the oral proficiency goals of the class. The results are revealing and show that explicitly stating oral proficiency goals does not mean that students are performing in those levels. There is also an obvious need for more research in this area.

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## Appendix A

### STRUCTURE OF CLASSES ANALYZED

Table III

*Structure of Classes Analyzed*

Days recorded	Minutes on whole-group discussion (%)	Topic	Other class activities
10/30/13	17 (34)	El estereotipo ; artículo de Gabriel Marquez; pregunta número dos de página ciento sesenta y tres	Individual video presentation on stereotypes; pair work about questions on page 164 of text book
11/4/13	24 (48)	4 minutes video on “ojo de la nuca”; comparación de las injusticias de Chile y los Estados Unidos, pregunta número dos de página noventa y tres	Instructor talks about on “guerra sucia”; pair work on students’ articles about injustices in Chile;
11/6/13	33 (66)	pregunta número dos de página noventa y tres, los políticos, la seguridad y libertad de expresión	Pair work on students’ articles about Honduras; announcements on topics for individual presentation
11/11/13	10 (20)	Tira cómica; tres leyes de la moraleja de la tira cómica	announcements on activities for the lesson; pair work on moral lesson of tira “tira cómica” on page 114; pair work on globalization
11/13/13	19 (38)	El arte, artículo en página 129 sobre drácula y los niños	Groups of three about question 2 on page 128

*Note.* Total minutes for whole group discussion across five days were 103 minutes.

## Appendix B

### Interview questions

#### Students

1. In your view, what are some features of natural, everyday conversation?
2. Do you think classroom conversation and real-world conversation should be similar in some way, shape or form? Why?
3. What in your opinion are the advanced-level speech functions according to ACTFL?
4. What knowledge and abilities did you hope to develop from this course?
5. What knowledge and abilities did you get from this course?
6. Do you think this course has been successful? How so?
7. Did you face any challenges in this course? If so, what are they?
8. What would you like to change if you took this course again?
9. What is your general opinion of this course and its goals?

#### Instructor

1. What in your opinion is conversation?
2. In your view, what are some features of natural, everyday conversation?
3. Do you think classroom conversation and real-world conversation should be similar in some way, shape or form? Why?
4. What in your view are the major goals of the advanced-level conversation forum class?
5. What in your opinion are the advanced-level speech functions according to ACTFL?

6. What knowledge and abilities do you think your students are acquiring from this course?
7. How do you think this class met the goals of the class?
8. What challenges did you face as the instructor of this course?
9. What would you like to change if you taught this course again?
10. What is your general opinion of this course and its goal?