Utah State University

From the SelectedWorks of Joshua J. Thoms

2011

Researching the (dis)connection between literary discussions and speaking functions: A replication with intermediate learners

Joshua J. Thoms, Utah State University

Available at: https://works.bepress.com/joshua_thoms/19/
CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

RESEARCHING THE (DIS)CONNECTION BETWEEN LITERARY DISCUSSIONS AND SPEAKING FUNCTIONS: A REPLICATION WITH INTERMEDIATE LEARNERS

JOSHUA J. THOMS
UTAH STATE UNIVERSITY

1. Introduction

The field of second language acquisition (SLA) is relatively young. As this burgeoning discipline develops, hypotheses and research questions related to a myriad of topics and skills continue to be investigated across a number of languages. The participants typically used in SLA research come from various backgrounds and are acquiring a second language (L2) in different contexts via an array of methodologies employed by instructors with diverse characteristics (experienced vs. inexperienced, native vs. nonnative speakers, having different educational backgrounds or expertise, etc.). Furthermore, as in any other academic field, SLA studies analyze data through a variety of theoretical lenses. Although some findings interpreted within specific theoretical paradigms afford SLA researchers the ability to establish a number of reliable constructs and approaches to better describe, explain, or question the processes involved in language acquisition (Krashen 1982, Lantolf 2000, Long 1996, Swain 2000, Swain & Lapkin 1995, VanPatten 2002, White 2003, among others), many would agree that more questions and hypotheses remain unanswered and under-researched compared to what appears to be confirmed.

Given the current state of SLA, many scholars have argued for studies that seek to corroborate findings or claims. For instance, Polio & Gass
(1997) call for more replication studies. They suggest that “replication is . . . crucial in order to distinguish the spurious from the real” (1997: 500). They go on to explain the possible kinds of replication studies found on a continuum ranging from “virtual” to “conceptual” replications (1997: 501). Finally, they outline a number of important issues related to the reporting of results of these studies and suggest solutions associated with the consistency or inconsistency in the description of findings.

In this vein, the research project reported on here responds to the call set forth by Polio & Gass (1997) and others (Ortega in press, Porte in press) by investigating an under-represented and under-researched area of SLA via replication. In doing so, the results of this project will help validate the findings established in the original research study. This replication study, in turn, will serve to expand SLA theoretical perspectives and extend them into unexplored territories. Before providing details about the original study replicated here, it is important to highlight that this study focuses on the oral discourse that occurs in whole-class discussions between an instructor and her students in a college-level Spanish literature course. It investigates the following research questions:

R1. **How often do students produce turns that consist of more than one sentence while participating in a whole-class discussion?**

R2. **Why and when do students produce turns that consist of more than one sentence? Do interaction patterns observed in the discussions (e.g., IRE, IRF) inhibit or encourage discourse produced by learners that is more than a single sentence?**

R3. **Does an introductory-level literature course for Spanish language learners provide occasions during whole-class discussion for participation in Intermediate-level speaking functions as defined in the ACTFL Speaking Proficiency Guidelines?**

1.1. **The original study**

This study replicates research carried out by Donato & Brooks (2004). Their study, “Literary discussions and advanced speaking functions: Researching the (dis)connection,” seeks a better understanding of the relationship (or lack thereof) between class discussions that normally occur in literature courses and the speaking ability of the advanced undergraduate students (i.e., mostly foreign language majors in their last
semester of language study) who populate those courses. Specifically, the investigators explore how literature courses provide discourse opportunities for students to develop advanced oral ability as outlined in “The ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines-Speaking, revised 1999” (Breiner-Sanders et al. 2000). Before describing details related to the original study, it is important to look at the theoretical grounds by which Donato & Brooks justify their research and how their theoretical approach, in turn, motivates and guides this current replication project.

**Background studies**

2.1. Research in the literature course

Studies focusing on literature instruction in a foreign language classroom have predominantly been used for L2 reading research (Brown 1999, Kern 1994, 2000). Several of these studies have investigated issues such as how learners deconstruct, decode, and understand cultural differences and nuances in an authentic L2 text (Kramsch 1985, 1993). Other studies (Dillon 2009, Everson & Kuriya 1998) have focused on the accompanying metacognitive or metalinguistic processes and strategies typically employed by learners while reading literature in their L2 such as when learners question the meaning of a word or phrase or grapple with a grammatical structure while attempting to decode the meaning of a text. In this sense, research on the L2 literature classroom has primarily focused on the developing modality of reading. Although Donato & Brooks (2004) do not mention the research strand that examines issues related to L2 writing within the context of a literature classroom, L2 writing research and literature classes have also received significant attention (Godev 1997, Greenia 1992, Kauffmann 1996, Maxim 2009). Finally, the investigators note that there is a plethora of pedagogical research dedicated to analyzing the use of literature in foreign language classrooms (Barnes-Karol 2003, Bernhardt 1995, Maxim 2006).

Given that the use of literary texts in the foreign language classroom is often investigated and related to the developing L2 reading and writing competencies of learners, Donato & Brooks (2004) seek to fill a void by examining how the study of literature (i.e., in a L2 literature course) contributes to developing advanced L2 speaking proficiency. The authors discuss the need to research the (dis)connections between the study of language and literature, two entities that are often separated and viewed as being “dichotomous educational goals” (2004: 184). Within many foreign language departments where both literature and basic language classes are
offered, a kind of hierarchy is inherently created and maintained by making a clear distinction between those who teach language courses and those who teach literature courses. Donato & Brooks (2004) point to the origin of this disaccord by citing Davis (2000), who attributes the separatist mentality in language departments to the creation of the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) in the late sixties. Prior to 1967, the Modern Language Association (MLA) was equally dedicated to the teaching of literature as well as language(s). With the creation of ACTFL, language teaching interests were segmented out from the MLA and from then on, the MLA has become an organization that focuses on the teaching of literature. The fallout from the creation of ACTFL and the division between these two separate organizations has contributed to the division of labor that has become commonplace in many post-secondary foreign language departments in the United States.

Donato & Brooks, along with many other researchers (see Paesani & Barrette 2005) call for more studies that articulate the need to address this division by investigating how literature courses can not only provide opportunities for learners to learn how to read and write about texts in the L2, but also how they can help learners become more proficient L2 speakers. They say that empirical evidence is needed to substantiate claims that merely studying literature affords learners the ability to sustain communication in connected, paragraph-length discourse, to provide a structured argument to support their opinions, or to construct and explore hypotheses (with few errors) related to special fields of expertise or interest (e.g., literature)—all of which represent advanced-level functions as outlined in the ACTFL Speaking Guidelines (Breiner-Sanders et al. 2000). Thus, Donato & Brooks (2004) asked one overarching research question:

1. Does a senior-level literature course for Spanish language majors provide occasions during group discussion for participation in advanced speaking functions as defined in the ACTFL Speaking Proficiency Guidelines? (Donato & Brooks 2004: 186).

Two specific questions emerge from their primary research question:

1a. Does literary discussion in this class reflect functions of advanced-level speaking?

1b. If yes, does the discussion offer opportunities that challenge a learner to perform and develop advanced-level speaking functions? (Donato & Brooks 2004: 186).
2.2. Methodology and results in original study

The researchers audio-recorded 11 class periods of an advanced undergraduate Spanish literature class during the course of a semester. They transcribed five of those classes from the latter part of the term. The transcription was straight-forward; it did not indicate non-verbal interaction or features such as intonation. The transcripts were then studied to analyze the discourse structure of the literary discussions that developed between the instructor and her class. It should be noted here that the original study did not indicate whether the instructor was a native or non-native speaker of Spanish. The researchers then categorized the verb tenses employed by students during the five days of class. They gave the raw number and the percentage of verbs used in a specific tense (e.g., 44 verbs used/conjugated in the preterit = .09 of all verbs used by students). The researchers found that students predominantly used the present tense over all other tenses. They also found that within the discourse of discussing a literary text with the instructor, students often shifted the discussion back to the present tense when passive tenses would have been more accurate in order to maintain consistent use of aspect in the discussion. The researchers conclude that this shifting “indicates lack of tense-aspectual control (Donato & Brooks 2004: 191)” and that this is not indicative of speakers at the advanced proficiency level on the ACTFL Speaking Guidelines.

Finally, the transcripts were then analyzed for student uptake. That is, they examined the transcripts to see if the instructor provided corrective feedback to the students and then analyzed the student discourse to see if the students understood and successfully used the verb form/tense that was modeled for them. Again, it was found that students’ speech did not reflect that which was used by the instructor. The instructor’s modeling of various grammatical structures did not result in uptake by the students or at least was not observed in students’ speech (as operationalized by Donato & Brooks). The last part of the study included a qualitative analysis of how speaking is carried out in a literature course. The researchers interviewed the instructor twice and then interviewed two students based on their high degree of participation in order to identify their goals or motivations regarding the literature course under investigation. The content of the interviews revealed some shared goals by both the instructor and the two students as well as some differences.
2.3. Synthesis of the findings in original study

Following is a list of the more important points found in the discussion section of Donato & Brooks (2004) with regards to the findings and their implications. These findings will serve as a basis for comparison and help to structure the replication study as described in the next section.

1. Discussions that take place in literature courses have the potential to incorporate advanced proficiency goals.

   Although the potential is there, the researchers suggest that more investigation is needed to better understand the relationship between how instructors conduct a literary discussion and what students need to do in order to develop speaking functions at an advanced proficiency level.

2. Literature classes need to include a variety of interaction patterns to provide opportunities for elaborated responses, one feature of advanced-level proficiency.

   Here, the researchers indicate that the large-group discussion format may not be the best way to help students develop the ability to elaborate on their ideas and interpretations within a literature course. Donato and Brooks propose that small-group discussion may afford students more opportunities to interact with each other via extended discourse—again, another function typical of advanced-level proficiency.

3. The potential of literary discussion to move students into advanced speaking tasks needs to be raised in the minds of instructors and students.

   To this end, the researchers found that the goals of a L2 literature course held by the students and teacher oftentimes did not coincide. Furthermore, the researchers point out that students and teacher did not espouse one common goal for this kind of course—improving students’ speaking proficiency as part of their L2 language development.

4. More research into the literary discussion and its relationship to developing functional language abilities at the advanced level is critically needed.

   This last finding, or implication, is one that highlights the need to articulate an area of L2 language development (i.e., speaking) in a context
that many times is overlooked by SLA researchers (i.e., the L2 literature course). Donato and Brooks stress that by carrying out further research in this area, not only will it help to fill a void in an under-researched area of SLA scientific inquiry, but it may also help instructors of literature courses to become cognizant of the kinds of activities, interactions, or discussions needed to improve their students’ L2 oral proficiency.

3. A conceptual replication study

This replication project is motivated by the findings and implications in the original study. It seeks to answer Donato & Brooks’ (2004) call for research focusing on articulating issues not commonly analyzed (e.g., developing learners’ L2 oral proficiency) in a L2 literature course. Given the difficulty of carrying out a virtual replication study within SLA, and the limitations presented by the qualitative elements found in the original study, this project is conceptual in nature. According to Polio & Gass (1997), 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” (1997: 502). Although this project will focus on the investigation of the (dis)connection between literary discussions and oral interaction between instructors and students in a L2 literature course, it also incorporates some changes.

3.1. Theoretical framework

Although not the primary focus of Donato & Brooks (2004) study, the qualitative analysis section of the data relied on the tenets put forth by sociocultural theory (Donato 2000, Lantolf 2000, Lantolf & Thorne 2006, Vygotsky 1978, 1987). Donato & Brooks look to a sociocultural theoretical (SCT) perspective to highlight the discursive nature of competence inherent in human beings. They argue that “the discursive conditions of the literature class created or inhibited opportunities for learners to participate in language interactions that reflect advanced levels of language functioning” (2004: 185). This project will also employ a SCT perspective to analyze how discourse is structured, regulated, or constructed within a L2 literature course by both students and instructor. However, this study focuses on instructor’s role as an effective socializing agent whose interactions with students in the L2 literature course may or may not afford them the opportunity to speak in extended discourse. As such, analysis will focus on the interaction between instructor and students.
by examining the data to see what kinds of interaction patterns emerge and what we can learn from the instructor’s role in these interactions.

### 3.2. Classroom interaction

Classroom interaction between instructor and students can consist of a variety of patterns depending on a number of variables such as teaching style, topic or content of conversation, and students’ proficiency level. Interaction in the L2 language classroom takes on an important role in that not only is it the tool or medium in which learning takes place but it is also the object of what is being learned or acquired (Swain 2000, 2005, Swain & Lapkin 1998). As such, interaction in the L2 classroom between students and instructor takes on a dual role: (a) it provides input to learners; and (b) it socializes students into their classroom roles. Specifically, interactions in the L2 classroom primarily serve to socialize students into understanding what counts as the official curriculum as well as inculcate the way in which students should act (or react) to the subject matter being studied (Hall & Walsh 2002). Therefore, the way in which an instructor interacts with his/her students in the L2 classroom can be very powerful and influential with regards to how much language students are exposed to in addition to the way in which (and how much) they are able to freely practice with and express themselves in the L2.

One of the most commonly studied classroom interaction patterns is that of Initiation, Response, Evaluation (IRE). Although commonly referred to as the recitation script or triadic dialogue (Lemke 1990), this interaction pattern’s three parts function as follows: the instructor initiates the interaction by posing a question; a student is then typically expected to provide a response to the instructor’s question; the exchange ends with the instructor evaluating the student’s response by saying something such as Correct, Very good, or No, that’s not it. Thus, the instructor is the interlocutor in the interaction who is oftentimes responsible for carrying out the first and third components of the exchange (i.e., initiation & evaluation). The student is the one responsible for the second part of the interaction pattern (i.e., response). The predetermined instructor and student roles within the IRE interaction pattern allow the instructor to act as an expert who is able to freely guide or direct the interaction as he/she sees fit. Meanwhile, the student assumes a role that is dependent upon the instructor’s decisions about who participates when and how much interaction should take place between a particular student and the instructor. Therefore, the instructor’s role within the IRE pattern is that of a gatekeeper who controls the amount and type of interaction, input, or
learning that takes place in the classroom (Hall & Walsh 2002). Given these roles within the IRE interaction pattern, the student’s ability to interact and respond meaningfully depends on the opportunities given to him/her by the instructor. The IRE pattern has been thoroughly investigated (Hall 1998, Lin 2000, Nassaji & Wells 2000, Nystrand 1997). In general, it has been found to limit students from being able to speak freely about the topic at hand or have ample practice at using the language in extended discourse, and it does not allow for complex ways of communicating (Barnes 1992).

Thus, some researchers have further examined the classroom to investigate the presence and resulting effects of other kinds of interaction patterns between instructors and their students. Upon taking a closer look at the IRE pattern, Wells (1993) discovered that subtle changes to the third part of the IRE triadic exchange resulted in increased student participation in the discussion. That is, the resulting discourse between instructor and students reflected more of a dialogic interaction versus an inquisitive session as found in the IRE pattern. Wells then proposed a new pattern—Initiation, Response, Feedback (IRF). The first two parts of the IRF exchange functioned as they do in the IRE sequence. Again, the instructor initiates the exchange (usually by asking a question) and the student responds. However, instead of evaluating students’ responses, instructors provide feedback which may include asking students to expand on their response, justify or clarify opinions, or further articulate their views.

One of Wells’ conclusions is that the third part of the exchange in the traditional IRE sequence (i.e., evaluation) severely limits students’ ability to thoroughly respond in a meaningful way. In contrast, if the instructor simply provides some kind of feedback as is done in an IRF sequence, then the student would be afforded more meaningful opportunities to produce extended discourse. Wells also points out that the typical triadic exchange pattern found in classrooms is neither wholly good nor bad. Decisions related to which pattern is used may simply depend on factors such as the activity being carried out, the interlocutors involved, the purpose of the lesson, etc.

This study also analyzes the interactions between instructor and students in the introductory literature course under examination. It attempts to see if the interaction pattern employed by the instructor (i.e., IRE and/or IRF) affects the amount and kind of discourse produced by students while talking about a Spanish novel. Specifically, part of the analysis examines if the IRE or IRF exchanges affect the literary discussions and if they limit or encourage speaking functions that are typical of Intermediate-level speakers.
3.3. Intermediate speaking functions and the literary discussion

One of the main differences between the original study and this replication is the language level of the participants. Learners in the Donato and Brooks (2004) study were primarily seniors and Spanish majors in their last semester of language study before graduating from college. Moreover, some were planning to continue their language study at the graduate-level. Given the demographics of these Advanced-level learners, the original study hypothesized that learners’ oral discourse should have been characteristic of those Advanced-level speaking functions described in the ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines for Speaking (ability to narrate and describe by combining and interweaving information in connected, paragraph-length discourse, talk about topics in abstract terms while putting forth hypotheses related to the topic of conversation, narrate and describe in major time frames with good control of aspect, etc.).

In contrast, the subjects in this study were enrolled in an introductory (i.e., 5th semester) college-level Spanish literature course. Therefore, adjustments were made to analyze the kinds of discourse that are typical of learners at this level. The speaking functions of students in the L2 introductory literature course were analyzed while comparing their discourse to the Intermediate-level functions outlined in the ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines for Speaking (Breiner-Sanders et al. 2000). The following descriptions represent those that are characteristic of oral discourse associated with Intermediate-level speakers: (a) participate in simple, direct conversations on generally predictable topics related to daily activities and personal environment; (b) create with the language and communicate personal meaning to sympathetic interlocutors by combining language elements in discrete sentences and strings of sentences; (c) obtain and give information by asking and answering questions; (d) sustain and bring to a close a number of basic, uncomplicated communicative exchanges, often in a reactive mode; (e) satisfy simply personal needs and social demands to survive in the target language culture; (f) narrate and describe in major time frames using connected discourse of paragraph length with some breakdowns (Breiner-Sanders et al. 2000). The descriptions above come from all three ranges (i.e., Low, Mid, and High) within the main category of Intermediate from the ACTFL Guidelines. Thus, some are indicative of proficiency at the High range, such as the last description of narrating in connected discourse of paragraph length. However, by including Intermediate-High, the replication study is able to account for those speakers who spike into this range of proficiency while at the same time closely mirroring what was done in the original study.
That is, within the Advanced-level descriptors used in the original study, characteristics from the Advanced-High range were also incorporated.

3.4. Research questions in conceptual study

The research questions for this study are similar to those posed in the original study. However, it is important to note here that the research questions in the conceptual study are ordered as they are due to the data analysis required to answer them. Specifically, before answering the main overarching research question investigated here (i.e., R3), one involving a more qualitative examination of oral discourse, it is necessary to address the two related research questions that involve more quantitative analyses (i.e., R1 and R2). The following questions were investigated:

R1. How often do students produce turns that consist of more than one sentence while participating in a whole-class discussion?

R2. Why and when do students produce turns that consist of more than one sentence? Do interaction patterns observed in the discussions (e.g., IRE, IRF) inhibit or encourage discourse produced by learners that is more than a single sentence?

The overarching research question investigated here was the following:

R3. Does an introductory-level literature course for Spanish language learners provide occasions during whole-class discussion for participation in Intermediate-level speaking functions as defined in the ACTFL Speaking Proficiency Guidelines?

4. Methodology

Data analyzed in this replication project came from an introductory-level Spanish literature course typically taken in the 5th semester of language study at a major Midwestern research institution. The literature course, entitled “Introduction to Literary Analysis,” met for 50 minutes three days a week. According to its syllabus, the course focused on different genres of Peninsular and Spanish American literature, including drama, the novel, poetry, and the short story.

The instructor for this course recently received her Ph.D. in Communication Studies from the same institution where this study was conducted. She indicated that her interests included peninsular Spanish
literature, cultural studies, visual studies, media studies, and writing. She taught a number of undergraduate courses as a teaching assistant including second-year Spanish, non-fiction writing, and communication studies. Her official title was Lecturer in the department of Spanish and Portuguese. In all, she had taught more than ten semesters of Spanish at the university level. However, she indicated that the course from which data was taken for this study was the first literature course she had taught. She was a very energetic and consistently enthusiastic instructor.

All 19 students (5 males and 14 females) enrolled in the introductory Spanish literature course had previously studied Spanish in high school and at the college level. For some, this was their first Spanish literature course, and for many, their second. Most students in this course were juniors. All of them intended to either minor or major in Spanish. Ten students indicated that they had traveled or studied in a Spanish-speaking country. Length of stay for these students ranged from one week to three and a half months. Finally, a total of 12 students stated that they had contact with Spanish outside of the classroom including having Spanish-speaking friends and co-workers, watching Spanish TV channels, speaking Spanish with family members such as grandparents, etc.

4.1. Data collection procedures

After obtaining permission to gain entry into the course, five class meetings near the end of the semester were audio- and video-recorded. The latter part of the semester was chosen for two reasons. First, it was hoped that by that point, students would have become accustomed to the discussion format(s) and content of a L2 literature course. As such, the recorded observations intended to represent what typically went on in class. Second, it was hoped that the instructor and her students would have settled in to their typical discussion routines by this point in the semester. One additional reason for observing the class at this juncture of the semester. The instructor and students were dedicating these class meetings to reading and discussing the Spanish novel *Luna de Lobos* by Julio Llamazares. Speaking about a novel in the L2 is a straightforward process that often implies that students attempt to address meaning and/or explain basic reading comprehension (e.g., plot summary, relationships of characters). As outlined further below, this kind of discourse is more representative of speaking functions at the Intermediate level of the ACTFL Speaking Guidelines (Breiner-Sanders et al. 2000). In contrast, it was hypothesized that interpreting abstract symbolism and complex
meaning typically associated with literary forms such as poetry or drama is something that these particular students were not yet able to do in the L2.

Two of the five recorded class sessions were chosen to be transcribed. Technical difficulties was among one of the reasons for choosing these two specific sessions. They also represented typical oral discourse observed in the course across all five meetings. The audiotapes were the primary sources used to transcribe the two sessions while the videotapes were consulted when discourse on the audiotapes was inaudible. The resulting transcripts were analyzed for the following features: (a) the discourse structure of the literary discussion at this level (i.e., how interactions between instructor and students were structured); (b) the length of discourse produced by students in their turns at talk; and (c) students’ discourse in comparison to characteristics of an Intermediate-level speaker according to the ACTFL Guidelines. Details related to how these analyses were carried out are provided below. Finally, short follow-up questionnaires were distributed to four students and the instructor in order to determine their goals or reasons for taking (or teaching) a L2 literature course. Their responses will be summarized and discussed later.

5. Data analysis & findings

5.1. Quantitative analyses

The results will be discussed according to the three research questions. In order to answer the main overarching research question investigated in this replication study, it is first necessary to address the two related research questions that involve more quantitative analyses.

R1. How often do students produce turns that consist of more than one sentence while participating in a whole-class discussion?

Before addressing the first research question, it is important to explain what constitutes a turn. A turn was defined as when the floor was transferred from one participant to the other. A speaker’s turn can consist of a single word, phrase, one sentence, more than one sentence, or any combination of the aforementioned. However, once a speaker allows his/her interlocutor to start speaking and have the floor; that is when the speaker’s turn ends and the interlocutor’s begins. The example provided in Table 1 illustrates how turns were defined and counted. As one can see, the first turn consists of single words, phrases and sentences. Speaker T’s turn consists of lines 1 through 11. Speaker T’s interlocutor, S, then takes the floor and begins his turn in line 13. Again, this second turn consists of
phrases as well as multiple sentences. This second turn ends with line 20. Speaker T then responds with another turn in lines 22–23. The exchange ends with a turn consisting of one word in line 25. In all, the example below constitutes four turns.

Table 1. Example of four turns

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Turn</th>
<th>Text</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>¿Algunas palabras de vocabulario? En este capítulo hay mucha acción también, ¿no? ¿Qué palabras tenéis?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Había mucho vocabulario, verdad, en este capítulo. S, ¿tienes una palabra?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>S: Ah sí. En la página 100. En el párrafo que empieza con «Esa música...». Es la palabra enardecido. Y se refiere a la voz de Ramiro.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>T: Muy bien. Y ¿por qué está enardecida su voz?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>S: Porque. . .</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>T: Yes. Very good. Let’s see. Chapter 10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>Any vocabulary words? In this chapter there is also a lot of action, right? What words do you all have?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>There was a lot of vocabulary, right, in this chapter. S, do you have a word?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>Ah, yes. On page 100. In the paragraph that starts with «Esa música...». It’s the word enardecido. In English it’s the word inflamed. And it refers to Ramiro’s voice.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22</td>
<td>Very good. And why is his voice inflamed?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25</td>
<td>Because. . .</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

To answer the first research question, the transcripts from the two class sessions were analyzed. First, the turns produced by the students were examined to investigate the composition of each turn. Specifically, each student’s turn was analyzed to see if its length was composed of a single word, one or more phrases, a solitary sentence, or more than one sentence. This breakdown is shown in Table 2.
Table 2. Number of Student Turns

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Total # of student turns consisting of:</th>
<th>Total # of Turns and Percentages for Class Session A</th>
<th>Total # of Turns and Percentages for Class Session B</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>more than 1 sentence</td>
<td>21 (25%)</td>
<td>23 (25%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 sentence</td>
<td>28 (35%)</td>
<td>40 (44%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 or more phrases</td>
<td>21 (255)</td>
<td>19 (21%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 word</td>
<td>12 (15%)</td>
<td>9 (10%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total turns</td>
<td>82 (100%)</td>
<td>91 (100%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As Table 2 shows, the students’ discourse across both class sessions consisted of turns that varied in their composition. The student turns in both class sessions were similar in that they varied in length—being as brief as a one word response and ranging up to a turn with more than one sentence. In all, the total number of student turns produced in session A was 82. Of those 82 turns, 21 (25%) were more than one sentence in length. Class session B had a slightly higher total number of turns produced by students at 91. Out of the 91 total turns produced by students in this class session, 23 (25%) consisted of more than one sentence.

Further analysis of the data reveals that in both sessions, the most common length of students’ turn was a single sentence. The percentage of the total number of student turns produced in class session A that consisted of an individual sentence was 35%. When taken together with those turns that were more than one sentence in length, 60% of the total student turns in session A consisted of one or more sentences. Similarly, 44% of the student turns produced in class session B was composed of a single sentence. When added to the percentage of student turns in session B that had more than one sentence, 69% of the total turns produced by students in session B consisted of one or more sentences.

In answering question R1, the data show that students in both class sessions produced turns of more than one sentence in length. Across both sessions, students produced turns that were more than one sentence 25% of the time while participating in whole-class discussions. Although students’ turns did range from having only one word or one or more phrases up to having multiple sentences, the data also show that the most common length of students’ turns across both sessions consisted of one sentence.

R2. Why and when do students produce turns that consist of more than one sentence? Do interaction patterns observed in the discussions (e.g., IRE, IRF) inhibit or encourage discourse produced by learners that is more than a single sentence?
To address research question 2, the transcripts for both class sessions A and B were analyzed for the presence of IRE or IRF patterns. When these exchange patterns were observed in the data, they were coded accordingly. Table 3 below illustrates an IRE exchange commonly found in the data. In this particular example, the instructor (T) commences the exchange by initiating a question. T’s initiation (lines 1 through 6) is in the form of three related questions about a mine and its owner. In line 7, the student (S) fulfills the second part of the triadic exchange by responding to T’s initiation. Finally, T closes the IRE exchange in lines 8 and 9 by providing an evaluative comment indicating that S’s response was accurate.

Table 3. Sample IRE pattern

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>I</th>
<th>T:</th>
<th></th>
<th>E</th>
<th>T:</th>
<th></th>
<th>R</th>
<th>S:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>I</td>
<td>T:</td>
<td></td>
<td>E</td>
<td>T:</td>
<td></td>
<td>R</td>
<td>S:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
<td>Entonces, ¿qué pasa con el dueño de la mina? Que es el dueño de la mina? ¿Quién es? Bueno, sí...</td>
<td></td>
<td>E</td>
<td>T:</td>
<td></td>
<td>R</td>
<td>S:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
<td>Don Pedro.</td>
<td></td>
<td>R</td>
<td>S:</td>
<td></td>
<td>E</td>
<td>T:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
<td>¡exactamente!</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The example in Table 4 exemplifies a common IRF exchange observed in both class sessions. Similar to the IRE exchange, the IRF pattern starts with an initiation in the form of a question. The instructor (T) initiates the exchange (lines 1–5) by posing a question related to something important happening in the novel. A student (S) responds to the question in lines 6 and 7. In line 8, we see that instead of providing an evaluative comment as typically found in the IRE triadic exchange, T provides feedback in the form of another question in order to have S provide more details related to his response. S then further clarifies his original response by elaborating his answer in lines 9 through 11. Again, this second response put forth by S would not have been possible had the interaction been an IRE sequence. This IRF sequence comes to a close in line 12 as T ends the elaboration with an evaluative comment.
After coding all of the IRE and IRF sequences in both class session transcripts, it was necessary to measure the frequency with which these specific interaction patterns were used. As in the original study, the percentage of turns that were coded as being part of IRE sequences was calculated. This percentage was arrived at by dividing the total number of turns in each class session by the turns that were coded as initiation, response, or evaluation (i.e., those turns that were part of the IRE triadic exchange). The same calculation was carried out for the turns that made up IRF exchange patterns. Table 5 below indicates the percentages of turns in both class sessions that were coded as being part of IRE or IRF sequences.

**Table 5. IRE and IRF sequences per class**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Class Session</th>
<th>Total # of turns</th>
<th>IRE sequenced turns</th>
<th>IRF sequenced turns</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>165</td>
<td>81 (49%)</td>
<td>38 (23%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>187</td>
<td>107 (57%)</td>
<td>55 (29%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The data in Table 5 indicate that both IRE and IRF patterns were present in both class sessions. Across both sessions, the IRE pattern dominates—representing 49% and 57% of the total turns in class sessions A and B respectively. In addition to the IRE sequence, the data show that 23% and 29% of the turns in the respective class sessions A and B were part of an IRF exchange pattern.

Across all measurements, class session B had more turns and interaction patterns than class session A. However, it is important to note that this apparent discrepancy is most likely due to a vocabulary quiz taken by students at the beginning of class session A. That is, the first nine minutes of class time in session A were dedicated to taking a short quiz. Thus, when comparing the two class sessions, it is necessary to keep in mind that these two sessions do not represent the same amount of class time. Although this detail does not directly affect the research questions in this study, it is one of the limitations of the study.

The second research question also asks if the interaction patterns of IRE and IRF affect the discourse produced by students. Specifically, it explores whether the IRE and IRF patterns inhibit or encourage students to produce discourse that is more than a single sentence in length. It also investigates other explanations for why and when students produce discourse that is more than one sentence in length. The total number of turns produced by students across both class sessions that contained more than one sentence was 44. Further analysis revealed the IRE and IRF interaction patterns did not appear to significantly inhibit or encourage students to produce discourse that was more than one sentence in length. As seen in Table 6 below, more than half of students’ turns that consisted of more than one sentence were produced while either reading an excerpt from the novel aloud or when asked to offer up a new vocabulary word they had encountered while reading at home. Many of the turns connected to reading aloud and defining new vocabulary words for the rest of the class fell outside of the IRE and IRF interaction patterns. However, what is surprising is the difference between the IRE and IRF sequences. That is, eight of those student turns that were more than one sentence in length were associated in some way to the IRE exchange pattern.

In contrast, only three student turns of the same length were linked to the IRF pattern. Because the IRF pattern is one where an instructor’s feedback intends to elicit discourse by having students clarify, elaborate, or justify their opinions, it was expected that these instructor challenges would result in turns that were longer than one sentence. It is not clear why students produced longer turns related to the IRE sequence when compared to the IRF sequence. What the data clearly do suggest is that
outside of the IRE and IRF interaction patterns, in addition to being asked to read aloud from the text, students produced turns that were more than one sentence most often when asked to share with the rest of the class the definition of a new vocabulary word. This finding will be discussed more in the discussion/conclusion section below.

**Table 6.**

*Distribution of students’ turns across ‘activities’ in both class sessions*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Class Session</th>
<th>Total # of turns</th>
<th>IRE sequenced turns</th>
<th>IRF sequenced turns</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>165</td>
<td>81 (49%)</td>
<td>38 (23%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>187</td>
<td>107 (57%)</td>
<td>55 (29%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

R3. Does an introductory-level literature course for Spanish language learners provide occasions during whole-class discussion for participation in Intermediate-level speaking functions as defined in the ACTFL Speaking Proficiency Guidelines?

To answer our overarching research question, it is necessary to revisit some of the characteristics that describe an Intermediate speaker as put forth by the ACTFL Guidelines (Breiner-Sanders et al. 2000). What follows are the more salient features that characterize the speaking ability of an Intermediate-level learner. Where appropriate, examples taken from the transcripts will be used to illustrate the speaking ability of students that reflect the descriptors.

- **Participate in simple, direct conversations on generally predictable topics related to daily activities and personal environment**

Although not clearly apparent in the student discourse observed in the two class sessions, it is speculated that students would be capable of having simple and direct conversations based on predictable topics related to their personal daily activities. That is, the topics observed in students’ discourse related more to the events that were unfolding in the Spanish novel rather than personal information associated to students’ own environment or daily endeavors. However, considering the complex nature of articulating their understanding of an authentic text in the L2 classroom, coupled with the fact that students were able to respond appropriately in their L2 while discussing the novel in class, this first characteristic appears to adequately describe all students’ speaking ability in the class under...
investigation. Nonetheless, more observations would be needed in different contexts in order to make this claim.

Create with the language and communicate personal meaning to sympathetic interlocutors by combining language elements in discrete sentences and strings of sentences

Many students in this class were able to create and communicate personal meaning to the instructor and classmates by using discrete as well as strings of sentences when speaking. As observed earlier (see Table 2 above), the majority of student discourse produced across both class sessions consisted of one or more sentences. Although many of the students’ turns consisted of words and phrases, a greater portion of their discourse contained short sentences in addition to strings of sentences—reflecting this particular characteristic of the Intermediate-level speaker. The sample below illustrates how students were able to communicate using single and multiple sentences during their turns at talk.

Sample student discourse containing individual sentences and strings of sentences

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>T:</th>
<th>S1:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>T: Muy bien. Para cada palabra, vamos a ganar tres. Muy bien.</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Capítulo 16, ¿una palabra nueva?</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>La palabra es pezuña.</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>En la página 146, en la parte donde dice Me han despertado el ruido de la puerta y un remolino de pezuñas encima del tablero. En Inglés es ‘hoof.’ Es de las cabras.</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Eso es. Y clase, ¿dónde está Angel en este momento? Es un momento importante.</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>¿Dónde está? Está con</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Obtain and give information by asking and answering questions

For the most part, students were able to obtain and give information by asking and answering questions. They most often answered questions when prompted by the instructor. Again, considering that the IRF and IRE interaction patterns were used extensively in both class sessions, the students were often times answering the instructor’s questions. However, when the floor was given to the students, they were capable of posing questions related to vocabulary words, the plot of the story, characters in the novel, etc. The sample below shows how S5 was able to obtain information by formulating a question (lines 8 and 9). Although the instructor ends up posing S5’s question to the rest of the class (lines 10–18), the question does get answered by a fellow student (S8 in lines 19 and 20) and reaffirmed by the instructor in lines 21 through 24. Thus, this specific Intermediate-level characteristic was observed in students’ discourse across both class sessions.

Students obtaining and giving information by asking and answering questions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>T:</th>
<th></th>
<th>T:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Entonces, ¿qué preguntas tenéis para la clase acerca del capítulo—de acción, de interpretación, etc.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>So, what questions to you have for the class about the chapter—about action, interpretation, etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>S5:</td>
<td></td>
<td>S5:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>No entiendo por qué esperan ellos a don Manuel. ¿Por qué esperan seis años?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>I don’t understand why they wait for don Manuel. Why do they wait six years?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>T:</td>
<td></td>
<td>T:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Uh-huh. ¿Se explica esto? No se explica esto, ¿verdad? Pero es una muy buena pregunta. Pero podemos especular—</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Uh-huh. Is this explained? This isn’t explained, right? But it is a very good question. But we can speculate—why do</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Sustain and bring to a close a number of basic, uncomplicated communicative exchanges, often in a reactive mode & Narrate and describe in major time frames using connected discourse of paragraph length (with some breakdowns)

Analysis of students’ discourse suggests that students were able to sustain uncomplicated communicative exchanges with the instructor in a reactive mode. Given that this aspect is more characteristic of an Intermediate-Low speaker, it is one that adequately describes the way in which all students participated in whole-class discussions. Thus, students’ discourse reflected this particular descriptor.

The second characteristic highlighted above is one that describes speech at the Intermediate-High level. When broken down, students’ discourse reflected only part of this descriptor—the ability to narrate in major time frames (with some breakdowns). The data indicate that students primarily used the present tense when talking about the novel in both class sessions. Furthermore, many students did narrate and describe in major time frames while using compound tenses such as the present progressive, future, as well as the preterit and imperfect tenses. However, the data revealed many breakdowns and lack of control related to aspect. The following example illustrates what was typically observed when students attempted to use these complex structures.

Linguistic breakdowns in students’ discourse

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>T:</th>
<th>Para vosotros, ¿cuál es una cosa importante?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td>Para vosotros, ¿cuál es una cosa importante?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
<td>Sí...</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>S2:</td>
<td>Yo pienso que el final, porque ellos regresan y no sabes si ellos están sobrevivir o no.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
<td>I think the end, because they return and you don’t know if they are survive or not. And at</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
8  Y en este momento
9  pensaba que él *va a
10  estar sólo.
[*grammatical error in
tense/aspect]

Taken as a whole, the data did not contain student turns that consisted of connected discourse of paragraph length. Again, the structure of the literary discussions in both class sessions tended to limit students’ turns to single sentences, phrases, and individual words. Although students at times did respond by putting strings of two or three sentences together (as discussed above), it is not justified to say that their discourse was of paragraph length. Thus, this last Intermediate-High characteristic only partly describes the discourse observed in the two class sessions. Again, further observations would be needed in order to assert that students in this course were able to speak in connected discourse of paragraph length.

5.2. Qualitative analyses

Keeping in line with data collection procedures in the original study, a follow-up questionnaire was given to the instructor and four students. Based on information provided in the initial demographic questionnaire, in addition to observations made both in the classroom and via the transcripts, the four students were chosen due to their diverse experiences (or lack thereof) in taking a literature course in Spanish. These students were also chosen due to their participation in class discussions. The primary aim of the follow-up questionnaires was to ascertain what students and instructor believed to be the primary goals of taking or teaching an introductory L2 literature course. The goals of the students were compared with those of the instructor as was done in the original study.

Although the instructor and student responses from the follow-up questionnaire used in this replication study are listed in the Appendix, their responses are summarized here. First, the instructor and students shared a number of goals related to an introductory literature course in Spanish. Both indicated that this kind of course should focus on developing and improving student reading and writing skills. The instructor and students also expressed that one of the main goals of this kind of course should be to introduce and/or further improve students’ ability to interpret literature in Spanish. Finally, both parties suggested that one of the objectives was to develop the ability to orally express critical thinking abilities and discuss literature in Spanish.
There was only one goal expressed by students that was not one shared by the instructor. The four students (in various ways) indicated that they somehow expected to learn more about the way in which the Spanish language “worked.” They expressed that they expected to have more practice with the language in order to better understand how it is used in particular contexts within the different texts that they were reading and working with in the course. The only goal expressed by the instructor that was not indicated by the students was the idea of introducing students to different literary genres such as poetry, short stories, and novels. This goal of the instructor is apparent in the syllabus for the course. Students did not express this as an explicit goal of the course.

6. Conclusion and implications for L2 literature classes

The results of this replication study have raised a number of issues that merit further discussion. First and foremost, literary discussions in the introductory literature course investigated here have tended to be highly structured. We have seen that the instructor has primarily made use of two common interaction patterns—IRE and IRF. Within both of these triadic exchange patterns, the instructor consistently carried out the first and third parts of the patterns. Oftentimes the students would only be responsible for the second component (i.e., Response) within each of the patterns.

Given the frequent use of these highly structured exchanges, both instructor and student assumed defined participatory roles while discussing the novel. When using either of the interaction patterns, the instructor turned into a kind of socializing agent who was able to get her students to conform to their roles of carrying out the second part of the IRE and IRF sequences. We have seen that this did not have an entirely negative effect on students’ ability to interact and actively participate in class discussion. IRE interaction patterns did appear to allow for more student turns that were longer when compared to turns that were part of the IRF pattern. However, the IRE pattern did not allow students to respond in extended, paragraph length discourse—a characteristic of a speaker at the Intermediate-High range according to the Guidelines. Further, the IRE pattern did not afford students the opportunity to orally express/display critical thinking abilities—one of the goals shared by both instructor and the four students who filled out the follow-up questionnaires.

It is not known why the instructor frequently employed the two interaction patterns while discussing the novel. However, one of the instructor’s comments on the follow-up questionnaire may help to provide an explanation. When asked to point out any challenges and/or problems
encountered in teaching the introductory literature course, the instructor indicated that the disparity of knowledge (i.e., the varying Spanish language skills) among students in the class made it more difficult to teach this kind of course. In other words, although the majority of students in this course were juniors and had taken comparatively the same amount of coursework upon entering this introductory literature course, their overall language abilities, according to the instructor, varied greatly. Related to this notion is the instructor’s second comment. She indicated that another difficulty in teaching this course was that it was challenging to develop a classroom atmosphere that encouraged student participation.

When taken together, one can hypothesize that the instructor may have felt inclined to structure class discussions by utilizing some kind of interaction pattern (e.g., IRE or IRF). One of the students who filled out the follow-up questionnaire stated that one of her difficulties in taking this kind of course is that she does not feel confident speaking in Spanish. Specifically, she indicated that “I get nervous and sometimes discourage myself from being part of the discussions.” Given the fact that students’ L2 abilities appeared to be unequal, the instructor may have felt that she had no other choice to get through the novel’s content in efficiently than to structure class discussions in such a way that would include all students no matter their L2 proficiency level. However, more information would be needed to find out if the instructor consciously employed this kind of teaching strategy/discussion pattern for the above reasons.

Outside of the interaction patterns observed in the class discussions, we see a very different story. The opportunity to share a new vocabulary word that students had discovered and defined on their own before coming to class, resulted in an increased length of student discourse. In the context of discussing vocabulary words found throughout the text, student turns were generally longer in comparison to student discourse within the IRE or IRF patterns. Although students were initially prompted by the instructor to see if they had any vocabulary words to share with the rest of the class, once given the opportunity, they were able to speak using strings of multiple sentences. From a cognitive viewpoint, it can be argued that since students had already carried out research related to their new vocabulary item on their own outside of class, they were then able to produce more discourse with longer turns because they had freed up cognitive space. In other words, by processing for meaning a priori, they were able to say more when prompted by the instructor during in-class discussion. Although this argument is a fair one, it remains outside the theoretical scope of this project. What we can say is that when students in this particular literature course were not tied to the IRE and IRF
interaction patterns, their turns became longer and they appeared to participate more meaningfully.

For the most part, this introductory-level literature Spanish course did provide occasions during whole-class discussion for participation in Intermediate-level speaking functions as defined in the ACTFL Guidelines. Although the length of students’ turns ranged from one word to more than one sentence, their discourse mirrored many of the Intermediate-level functions. They were able to obtain and give information by asking and answering a variety of questions, communicate in discrete as well as strings of sentences, and sustain and bring to a close a number of basic, uncomplicated communicative exchanges (albeit in a reactive mode). They were also able to narrate using major time frames. However, when they attempted to use more complex structures, there were linguistic breakdowns. Furthermore, student discourse analyzed in this study did not indicate that students were able to speak using connected discourse of paragraph length.

Thus, student discourse in this introductory-level literature course appears to be at the Intermediate-level as defined by the Guidelines. As a whole, students’ talk in this class is more characteristic of the Intermediate Low and Intermediate Mid proficiency levels. However, it would be unfair to make any claims based on the kind of data analyzed in this replication study. That is, given the structured nature of the class discussions in addition to only having analyzed two class sessions, it would be inaccurate to attempt to distinguish students’ oral proficiency levels in this particular course by merely observing two whole-class discussions.

With that said, many of the students in the literature course observed in this study intend to minor or major in Spanish. For many, they have one or two semesters left of coursework before attaining their Spanish major. It is hard to imagine students making significant gains in oral proficiency by the time they graduate. Echoing the recommendation put forth by Donato & Brooks (2004) in the original study, developing students’ oral proficiency is an issue that needs to be raised in the minds of instructors at all levels of study. This is especially true of those instructors who teach literature courses at the advanced language instruction levels. There should not be a disconnect between literature courses and language courses nor a disregard for students’ developing speaking proficiency while taking an L2 literature course. Besides developing reading and writing fluency in L2 literature courses, the primary goals should also include developing students’ speaking proficiency so that instructors do not feel the need to over-structure class discussions. As James (2000: 259) states, “we need to
create properly coordinated language, culture, and literature upper-level college programs now” (as cited in Donato & Brooks 2004: 196).

Clearly, this is an area that needs further analysis before any kind of systemic change can come about. Further research into the oral proficiency levels of students after completing four semesters of language study (i.e., before they enter literature courses in the 5th or 6th semester) should also be addressed. Doing so would help to analyze the way in which students in these lower-level courses are developing their L2 speaking abilities. It would also help to articulate gaps in L2 instruction at this level in the hopes of better preparing students to be active participants in upper-level literature courses instead of feeling nervous about or discouraged from contributing to discussions. Additionally, instructors who teach literature courses, starting at the 5th semester and beyond, need to be made aware of the different structures of literary discussions and their resulting effects on students’ oral proficiency. Although the proposed changes outlined above might be easier said than done, research like that presented here should act as a catalyst for dialogue between relevant parties in order to improve students’ L2 oral proficiency regardless of the content focus of the course.

In summary, this project responded to the call put forth by Polio and Gass (1997) and by Donato and Brooks (2004) in that it replicated previous research investigating an area of SLA that is not often analyzed. Examining the way in which learners’ L2 oral proficiency develops while studying literature in their L2 merits further analysis as mentioned throughout this paper. Hopefully the results presented here have contributed something to this under-researched area of SLA.

7. Directions for future research

As with any study utilizing human subjects, this research had some limitations: (1) its qualitative nature, to some degree, limits the generalizability of its findings; (2) the obvious need to analyze data from more classes/contexts. Similarly, this study only observed discussions related to one literary genre—the novel. Different findings may have possibly resulted from observing students talking about poetry, drama, short stories, etc. Future studies might investigate whether literary genre affects the nature of whole-class discussions in upper-level L2 literature courses. Additionally, the incorporation of technology in the teaching of L2 literature may also be worth looking at with respect to whole-class discussions. That is, analyzing interactions carried out on class blogs or via other online activities done outside of the classroom to determine any possible effects on whole-class discussions may also yield insights into
how students and instructor discuss literature inside the classroom. Finally, another fruitful area of research should focus on how heritage language learners and non-heritage language learners perceive and interact with each other in whole-class discussions in L2 literature courses. Given the complex nature of talk in these contexts, much more work is needed.
Appendix–
Goals of instructor and students in conceptual study

Goals expressed by both the instructor and students:

- Develop and improve reading and writing skills
- Interpret Spanish language literature
- Develop ability to orally express critical thinking abilities

Goals expressed by the instructor but not by students:

- Introduce/address different literary genres

Goals not expressed by the instructor nor the students:

- Asking questions and obtaining information
- Having the opportunity to speak in extended discourse

Goals expressed by the students but not by the instructor:

- Seeing how the Spanish language is used in specific contexts (i.e., language practice)

References


