

# The Role of Conferencing in Improving Proposal Writing of Graduate Students: Three Case Studies of Good, Average and Below-Average Students

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## Abstract

Research studies conducted here and abroad have found that students use memorization strategies and individual feedback given by teachers to improve their writing. This research was a qualitative classroom-centered study. Two classroom teachers, one was the researcher, were assigned to teach a graduate English course offered by the Chulalongkorn University Language Institute.

The project aimed at:

1. studying the patterns of conferencing in improving proposal writing of graduate students with different levels of English ability, and
2. analyzing which aspects of proposal writing were improved most.

The subjects selected for the study were three graduate students having low, average, and above-average English language ability. The research instruments consisted of a pretest of reading, writing, vocabulary, grammar and self-assessment. The criteria for analyzing language interactions during conferencing were pragmatic and meaning-oriented.

The research results revealed that the subjects could improve the content of their research proposal, research procedures and uses of technical terms better than their grammar, especially for

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the below-average subject. The teachers most frequently started interactions through “elicitations” and “inquiries” while the subjects used “information” and “explanation” most often. Silences after turn-takings were very frequent. Other participants who were students in the same class mainly contributed to these lapses of interaction when silences predominated. The proposers ranked second in this respect. Teachers and proposers used more discourse markers than other students and discussed more topics. The topics discussed most during conferencing often included “content of proposal”, “research procedure” followed by “language”. The topic most frequently mentioned in the subjects’ self-assessment was their English language ability. The attitudes expressed most during conferencing were neutral, thus reflecting the academic emphasis and atmosphere of the interactions.

This paper is in three parts as follows:

Part I: Context of the Research

Part II: Research Methodology

Part III: Findings, Conclusions and Recommendations

#### **Part I: Context of the Research**

This study is a learner-centered action research involving two teachers assigned to the group of graduate students and the three of their students selected on the basis of English proficiency. The research analyzed the interactions the three cases had with their peers and teachers during conferencing in an English course offered by the Chulalongkorn University Language Institute to university graduate students. The rationale of the study was based on Altrichter’s (1993:47) model of interactions among the processes of writing preparation, analytical thinking and relationships between analytical thinking and actions for writing improvement. This model stipulates the cycle of theoretical implementation, ideas for actions, actions, and analytical thinking about actions. The students presented their first draft, then underwent first-round conferencing, revised the first draft, presented it, entered into the second-round conferencing, revised the proposal then submitted their proposals for grading.

The project is aimed at:

1. studying the patterns of conferencing in improving proposal writing of graduate students with different levels of English ability, and
2. analyzing which aspects of proposal writing were improved most.

The three research questions and the extended sub-questions are:

**Question 1:** What are the interactions during conferencing? Is it possible to establish patterns of conferencing?

#### Sub-questions

- 1.1: Who starts interactions? The teacher? Classmates? Or the Proposers? What are the frequencies of interactions—between proposers and teachers?—between proposers and classmates?—between classmates and teachers?
- 1.2: Among the three parties concerned, namely the teachers, the subjects, and the students, who direct the interactions?
- 1.3: What is the nature of the interactions: verbal or silent?
- 1.4: Are the interactions neutral-academic, personal-positive, or personal-negative? Etc.?

**Question 2:** Are the subjects able to use feedback from conferencing for improving their research proposals? If yes, which parts of the proposal get improved?

#### Sub-questions

- 2.1: Does the subjects' level of English Language proficiency influence their ability to improve the research proposals? If yes, how much is the improvement?

- 2.2: Does the subjects' ability to express themselves, to give details, to explain, to give reasons, to inquire, and to ask for more information affect their ability to improve the proposals? If yes, how much is the improvement?
- 2.3: What is the meaning of the "silences" that occur during conferencing? Does silence mean confusion, indecision, and lack of understanding or a sign of reflections that help the subjects improve their proposal writing skill?
- 2.4: Which components of the research proposal get improved: content of the proposal, namely the introduction, rationale, research background, significance of the study, research objectives, research design, etc. or language improvements, namely uses of vocabulary, idioms, grammar, organization, relevance, or smoothness?

## Part II: Research Methodology

### The Research Subjects

Internal sampling (Bogdan&Biklen, 1982:63) was used to obtain three students with differing English language ability. A pre-test consisting of free writing, completion, and a reading outline with multiple-choice questions was used for this selection. The three cases were graduate students at Chulalongkorn University: Orn--the below - average graduate student in physical education, Prum--the average graduate student in architecture, and Boon--the above-average--a doctoral student in educational psychology.

Learning materials consist of a task-based video lesson on "Proposal", the research proposal format, a specimen research proposal, academic reading and writing lessons and materials in the self-access Learning Center. The subjects' research proposals were the main learning material.

Research instruments consist of a pre-test for selecting the subjects in the study and self-assessment questionnaires distributed after each session.

**Materials in the research** are audio and videotapes taken during conferencing, transcribed verbal interactions during conferencing, and the subjects' self-assessment reports. The data for analysis consist of observational data recorded by the researcher and the subjects' self-assessment reports written after each session.

**Data analysis methods** employed were: (1) the qualitative method of field analysis carried out while the data was being collected and (2) post-analysis when data collection had been completed. A coding system was developed using the pragmatic and communicative principles to analyze verbal data, which are interaction units. Conferencing was analyzed through the unit's processes of sequencing, trace back starting points, trace forward starting points and trace through starting points (Lofland & Lofland, 1984:108-109). The criteria and coding were developed using the works of Halliday (1973), Sinclair and Coulthard (1978), and Widdowson (1992). In analyzing silences that take place during conferencing, Basso's explanation (1979) referred to in Tannen (1984:85) was employed. There are 5 coding systems consisting of (1) Turn taking, (2) Discourse marker/Conversation strategies, (3) Functions, (4) Topics, and (5) Affective markers. Classroom language socialization with classroom culture originating from learners' cultures, teachers' cultures and patterns of interactions (Poole in Olsher, 1996) are significant variables in the study.

**Reliability and validity** of the research were determined by qualitative processes. The following factors proved internal reliability:

- (1) an American who knew Thai as the transcriber of the tapes
- (2) a co-researcher who was an educated American teaching English at the Chulalongkorn University Language Institute
- (3) two highly experienced ELT teachers to confirm data interpretation
- (4) systematic coding which was developed by expert linguists and adapted by the present researcher to fit the data of the present project
- (5) the research subjects consisting of the three case studies and their classmates evaluated the self-assessment questionnaires and confirmed their clarity and practicality.

To prove the external validity of the research the researcher did the following:

- (1) informed the students that the learning process was for a research project
- (2) explained clearly in the research who were the three case studies and their research proposals
- (3) presented clearly and explicitly what the study was about by giving research questions in detail
- (4) presented methods of data collection and data analysis clearly and in detail to ensure the internal validity of the research
- (5) completed the study within one semester so there were no changes in the subjects' maturity
- (6) prevented bias in selecting cases for the study by using the results of the pretest to obtain subjects with low, average, and above-average ability in English
- (7) used many different explanations and exercised valid reasoning in mapping the subjects' changes or improvement in research proposal writing as well as their behavioral changes in giving and receiving during conferencing. In addition, the researcher presented the research while it was on-going to colleagues who were university English language teachers to obtain comments about the criteria for analysis and confirmation of the accuracy of interpretation.

### **Part III: Findings, Conclusions and Recommendations**

In presenting the findings, the term "proposer" refers to the case in the study, namely Orn, Prum, and Boon. "Student" and "peer" refer to other students in the same class during conferencing. The findings are presented in the order of the research questions.

**Question I:** What are the interactions during conferencing? Is it possible to establish patterns of conferencing?

**Findings:** The findings for Orn and Boon are similar in that the most frequent interaction that occurred during conferencing was teacher-proposer-text while the least frequent was student-

teacher-text. For Prum proposer-teacher-student-text pattern of interactions was the most frequent while the least frequent was student-proposer-text.

### Sub-questions

1.1: Who starts interactions? The teacher? Classmates? Or the proposers? What are the frequencies of interactions—between proposer and teacher?—between proposer and classmate?—between classmate and teacher?

**Findings:** Among the three subjects, teacher talks occurred most frequently in Orn's case. Similarly for Boon the teacher talked more than the proposer. However, for Prum, proposer talks were the most frequent. Similarly for the three subjects, student talks or peer talks were the least frequent. The most frequent language functions were "giving information" or "explanation". When communication problems occurred, Orn and Prum most frequently employed transfers or used L1 and interlanguage (L3).

1.2: Among the three parties concerned, namely the teacher, the proposer and the student, who directs the interactions?

**Findings:** For all three cases, teachers most frequently elicited the interactions. For Orn and Prum, students elicited interactions more often than the proposers. For Boon, Boon and other students elicited interactions with equal frequency.

1.3: What is the nature of the interactions: verbal or silent?

**Findings:** At each turn, silences from other students were predominant, followed by proposer silences for Orn and Boon. For Prum, teacher silences occurred more frequently than proposer silences. In general, the number of silences was greater than the number of interactions.

1.4: Are the interactions neutral-academic, personal-positive, or personal-negative?

Etc.?

**Findings:** The interactions were mostly neutral-academic reflecting the learning processes of seeking knowledge and information. The findings from self-assessments revealed positive attitudes toward teachers, learning processes and peers. The three cases felt the usefulness of conferencing for improving their writing.

**Question 2:** Are the subjects able to use feedback from conferencing for improving their research proposals? If yes, which parts of the proposal get improved?

**Findings:** For Orn, the below-average student, conferencing helped improve her uses of technical terms, avoidance of sexist words and improvements on the content of the proposal. For Prum both language use and content were improved. For Boon, the above-average student, improvements of the research procedure and definition of terms were more obvious than his language use.

#### Sub-questions

2.1: Does the subjects' level of English language proficiency influence their ability to improve the research proposals? If yes, how much is the improvement?

**Findings:** For the three cases, improvements on language and content were obvious. Prum could improve his use of language most. In contrast, Orn's language improvement was very little due to fossilization. Boon's language improvement was not obvious due to a ceiling effect, since his English was good from the start.

2.2: Does the subjects' ability to express themselves, to give details, to explain, to give reasons, to inquire, and to ask for more information affect their ability to improve the proposals? If yes, how much is the improvement?

**Findings:** Orn's speaking was improved in giving information about her research proposal. In her second presentation, she did not use Thai at all. Prum could explain about the research method well and had the most frequent turn-takings. For Boon, teacher-talk occurred most



frequently and his proposal was the most complete and very well prepared. This fact explains why few turn-takings occurred during his presentations.

2.3: What is the meaning of the “silences” that occur during conferencing? Does silence mean confusion, indecision, and lack of understanding or a sign of reflections that help the subjects improve their proposal writing skill?

**Findings:** For Orn, proposer silences and student silences were most frequent. The lack of ability to comprehend teacher talks was given as the reason for these silences. For Prum, student silences were more frequent than teacher silences and proposer silences. Students gave the following reasons for their silences: (1) their inadequate background knowledge in the area of the proposal and (2) their lack of confidence in speaking English. One architecture student said that she was silent most of the time because she became very interested in Prum’s presentation as she planned to do her research on a similar topic; therefore, she preferred listening to talking.

2.4: Which components of the research proposal get improved: content of the proposal, namely the introduction, rationale, research background, significance of the study, research objectives, research design, etc. or language improvements, namely uses of vocabulary, idioms, grammar, organization, relevance, or smoothness?

**Findings:** For Orn, improvements made on content and research procedure of the proposal were more prominent than language improvement. For Prum, both contents of the proposal and language were improved. His uses of structure and vocabulary were moderately improved. For Boon, conferencing helped complete his proposal. Regarding English use, his “definition of terms” helped clarify the proposal. His speaking and writing ability was good from the beginning. Therefore, improvements were not obvious. Analysis of self-assessment showed that the three subjects viewed ability to use English as the most important and admitted that they had problems of using English.

## Conclusion

It can be concluded that the classroom culture is IRE (Initiation-response-evaluate) (Olsher, 1996) with teachers mostly eliciting and the frequency of silences being greater than the

number of turn-takings. It can also be concluded that conferencing could help improve the content of research proposals (with moderate to high degrees of improvement), and vocabulary and expression more than structure. Most important are positive attitudes expressed by the subjects toward conferencing as the process by which they gained knowledge and information about their work from various views expressed during this learning process while they could still maintain the values of their projects, not getting lost in a sea of comments and suggestions.

### **Recommendations**

The findings point out the impact of conferencing on improving research proposal writing and language use of the subjects. Positive attitudes toward this learning procedure were expressed in self-assessments by the subjects, who remarked that they could improve their English use as well as their proposals. It is, therefore, appropriate to recommend this learning procedure for a small writing class with not more than 10 students. In addition, a follow-up comparative research study using quantitative methods should be conducted on the following variables: students' English background, their major field of study, the nature of interactions, discourse markers, language functions, topic areas and silences.

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