

# Differential Discourse Patterns in Mainstream Versus First Nations Students in an Adult Basic Education Classroom

by *Nancy L. Ross*

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Students of First Nations ancestry are seen to be at a special disadvantage in the classroom setting, with greater cultural discontinuity and greater sociolinguistic interference between home and school. Susan Phillips (as cited in Cazden, 1988) notes that cultural patterns of interaction greatly influence students' engagement with their teacher and with academic tasks, and that Native students' silence and nonparticipation in classroom lessons are due to the lack of social conditions for their participation. Roberts, Davies, and Jupp (1992) note that avoiding this requires a conscious effort of understanding based on an awareness of the real difficulties involved, and that good policies, principles and intentions are not enough.

Cazden (1988) notes that, in the classroom, discourse is "radically asymmetrical. . . almost never used by pupils" (p. 161), where teachers inevitably engage in face-threatening acts. The seriousness of any act depends on the perceptions of social distance, relative power, and ranking of the imposition of the teacher's act at a particular moment. Cazden believes we need to pay attention to the "hidden curriculum" (p. 184), the special forms of language that we as teachers expect and reward, and how we want our students to talk. Discourse styles, rhythm and pace, questioning and other interactional etiquette, and teacher inquiry methods all have an effect on the participation of First Nations students (Cazden 1988, 1992; Darnell, 1979; R. Scollon, 1981; S.W. Scollon, 1981).

The purpose of this study was to record and transcribe a lesson conducted in the Initiation-Response-Evaluation (IRE) style, in order to examine the patterns of interaction between teacher and students, focusing on ways in which the teacher differentiates between First Nations and non-First Nations students, and on ways in which their discourse differs. I chose to use one of my own classes, and to examine my own interactions, in order to discover my role in these student-teacher interactions. What differences can be seen in the quantity and quality of student utterances between First Nations and mainstream students? How do I, as the teacher, treat students, and do I treat First Nations students differently? What am I doing that may cause differences, and how do I react to differences? How does the IRE style of the lesson impact upon student contributions? What is occurring that maintains or reinforces inequalities of knowledge and skills? In sum, I wanted to examine my role in the classroom more closely, in the hope that I could use any findings to improve my practice.

## Method

## **Subjects**

The class being observed was a Grade Eleven equivalent classroom of adults in a Technical English course, in the Career and College Preparation department of Northwest Community College. Twelve students were present on the day of the videorecording. Five of the twelve were of First Nations descent. The students ranged in age from 20 to 49, and most had low incomes and had experienced chronic unemployment. All of these adults had failed to graduate from high school in their teens, and had returned to school to upgrade their education to provide them with greater opportunities for work or further education.

## **Procedure**

I informed the class of the project in general terms, and obtained permission from them, with each student signing a consent form. Written permission from the Centre Director was also obtained. An unmanned videocamera was set up in one corner of the classroom, and although not every interaction was captured by the camera, all of the discourse that was directed to me or to the whole class was clearly heard through the videorecording. Students were informed that no one would view the videotape except the instructor/researcher, and were offered the opportunity to read the report. Although the class was informed that the purpose of the research was to investigate if the instructor differentiated her discourse amongst students, I did not indicate what kinds of differences would be examined.

A lesson focusing on the use of commas in association with run-on and fragment sentence errors was chosen. Students previously had been given the assignment of working on exercises from their textbook. The class lesson used these exercises, a six-paragraph selection that had run-on and fragment errors for the students to correct. The selection was projected onto a screen, with the instructor asking students to make changes to punctuation and wording to correct errors. All of the students were aware of the videocamera, but after the initial period prior to the lesson, they appeared to ignore it.

## **Data Analysis**

### **Participation of students**

The videotape was viewed and a transcription was made of the lesson. The transcript consisted of a series of speaker lines, with names alternating as speakers changed. The instructor/researcher was indicated on the transcript as "N." Students' names were changed to pseudonyms. The total number of utterances made by the instructor and the number of utterances made by students was counted. Responses by students of First Nations descent were highlighted to assist in examining for significant incidents, trends, and a descriptive quantitative analysis of the students' responses. Student responses were placed into two main categories: initiating a communication, and answering a question. These were further divided into more specific subcategories.

### **Response subcategories**

Responses were evaluated as interruptions; initiating questions, comments, or topics; answering a directed or class-wide question; following up from a previous answer; or as non-answers. These student utterances were categorized as shown in Table 1. The total number of utterances within these categories and subcategories was counted and analysed for their relative frequencies, comparing the types of responses, counting them within the whole group, as well as within the subcategories of "First Nations Students" and "Mainstream Students." Relative frequencies of categories and totals were recorded in tables and relative percentages were determined. The differences noted were examined for significant trends and differences.

**Table 1.** Response Categories of Student Utterances

Category	Description
Interruption	Student spoke up when question was directed to another individual, or when breaking in to an existing utterance when another person was already speaking.
Initiating Question	An utterance which asks a question.
Initiating Comment	Comment which a student makes which has been unsolicited, and comments on or adds to the topic being discussed.
Initiating Topic	Student raises a new topic without being asked a question, or the topic being implied in previous discourse.
Answer-Wide	Student is answering a question which was asked to the class as a whole.
Answer-Directed	Student is answering a question which was directed to him/her.
Follow-Up/Comment	Student is making an utterances which follows upon others he/she has already made, usually a further comment upon what they had already said. Also includes utterances which are unrelated to initiating or answering responses, e.g. laughing.
Non-Answer	Student did not respond with an intelligible utterance when asked a direct question.

### **Critical incidents**

The comments made by the instructor were examined closely to see if any significant threads emerged from the transcript, especially in how she responded to students generally, and how she responded to First Nations students specifically. As well, the transcript was examined to see what kinds of differences were discernable in the instructor's responses. These differences and trends were noted and compared to information from other sources.

### **Limitations**

Some students later noted that I seemed to be acting in a "heightened" fashion when the videocamera was recording. Also, I was aware that I would be examining the ways I differentiated between mainstream and First Nations students, and knowing this, I probably

consciously or unconsciously adjusted my method of delivery to avoid the differential treatment I would be examining. Here, the limitations inherent in examining one's own practice are clear.

The videorecorder was unable to view all of the class, and another machine to enlarge the perspective, although planned, was unavailable. This meant that many of the details concerning eye contact, facial expression, and other behaviors of the students were not included in the study. The focus of the study, then, concentrated on the oral discourse that was directed to the instructor and the class.

Another difficulty lay in deciding how to categorize because of the overlapping intents of some of the utterances. For example, some comments were coded as "Initiating Comment," but defined another way, could be determined to be a "Follow-Up Comment" because they added to or followed-up a previous question. However, because I was looking for discourse that students initiated (that is, volunteered without explicitly being expected to do so, as opposed to answering a question, whether directed at them or at the entire class, or following up from an utterance they had already made), it was labelled an "Initiating Comment." In reality, it is an initiating kind of comment, but it also follows up from another's question. In addition, students who answered a question that was directed to the entire class, and not to them, could have been categorized as initiating an answer to a question, because they spoke up without being directly asked to do so. Instead, these responses were categorized as "Answer-Wide."

Another area where choosing a category posed a problem was in deciding what kinds of utterances were "Interrupters." Some clearly caused an interruption in the topic being discussed, but others might serve as adding to the topic and assisting the speaker. For example, on page 3, Joe assists the instructor who actually wanted someone to interject/interrupt with a suggestion, when he says, "That's a complete sentence" while the instructor was reading a sentence from the exercise. This overlapping of categories was noted by Tannen (1994), who pointed out the difference between intentions and effects in discourse, and how specific linguistic strategies have widely divergent meanings.

It is also important to note that categorizing students who are or are not First Nations students has many limitations. Many of the students in the class come from economically disadvantaged backgrounds; the differing abilities, cultural backgrounds, educational histories, to name a few significant factors, were unknown or not used in categorizing both the "Mainstream" and the "First Nations" groups. Within both groups there were individuals of higher and lower ability, and of different cultural backgrounds and different previous school experiences. The categories, then, are broad and admittedly imperfect.

## **Results and Discussion**

### **Participation of Instructor**

There was a total of 130 utterance-turns by the instructor during this lesson, compared to a total of 189 utterance-turns by students. However, the number of turns when the instructor spoke does not indicate the total amount of talking; many of the turns taken by the instructor consisted of a much greater quantity of talk, involving explanations, whereas most of the turns taken by

students consisted of shorter statements, from one word to usually no more than twenty, involving answers and questions. Pappas, Kiefer and Levstik (1999) describe this kind of exchange as an initiate-respond-evaluate (IRE) pattern of interaction, which constrains flexibility and reduces opportunities for teachers to interact with individuals. If 12 students spoke 189 times and one teacher spoke 130 times, and usually for much longer within each turn, the restriction on individual students is evident.

### **Participation of Students**

The total number of utterances of non-Native students (mainstream) greatly outweighed the utterances of the First Nations students. Out of a total of 159 utterances during the lesson, 129 of these were by mainstream students, compared to 30 by First Nations students. Although there were proportionately more mainstream students (7/12, or 58% of the class), their rate of 81% of utterances clearly indicates that mainstream students were doing most of the student talking.

### **Discourse types**

The relative proportion of the kinds of responses by First Nations students was found to be significantly different from those of mainstream students. Responses categorized as "initiating" (Interruptions, Initiating Questions, Initiating Comments and Initiating Topics) were much less frequent with First Nations students, both in quantity and in relative proportion to the total numbers of responses made by First Nations students. Mainstream students made 81% of all student utterances, and of these, 41% were initiating responses. First Nations students made only 19% of all utterances, and of these, only 28% were initiating responses. The majority of responses (67%) made by First Nations students were answering, or following up from a previous response they had made. Of these answers, most (37%) were answers to questions directed specifically to them. In contrast, only 21% of mainstream students' responses were answers to direct questions.

Interruptions by First Nations students were non-existent, compared to four interruptions by mainstream students. As well, there were two occasions of student initiation of a new topic, both by mainstream students. No new topics were initiated by First Nations students. Follow-up comments by First Nations students were also rarer -- about half as frequent (compared to their total) as by mainstream students (13% compared to 22%). Thus First Nations students appeared to respond mainly when directly asked, they much less often initiated comments and asked questions, they never interrupted or initiated a new topic, and they followed up their responses less often than mainstream students.

In the lesson studied here, pausing was not measured. However, there were very few pauses of more than one second in length (those pauses were noted in the transcription, and were rare). In a group such as this, where First Nations students are less than half of the total class, non-Native students, as well as the teacher, are likely not providing the First Nations the time they need to provide an equal opportunity for commenting and responding. Ron Scollon (1981) notes that often it is "big little differences" (p. 4) that produce very big effects in people's attitudes and discourse with each other. For example, pausing expectations differ, with non-Native people taking their turn after a shorter pause. In any conversation, the person who expects a longer

pause will wait their turn, but the person who expects a shorter pause has already begun to speak again, thinking the other was not going to come in again, so, in effect, those people who expect shorter pauses will end up speaking more and more and the other (Native) students will speak less and less. Suzanne Scollon (1981) notes that non-Native teachers set a rhythm that dictates that those who are first to respond are the ones that get to speak. By consciously waiting before calling on students, more Native students were found to enter into discussion. Native students report that they sometimes do not think of an appropriate response until the class is over.

The effects of the differing expectations of pausing between First Nations students and the rest of the class, as well as the use of the IRE format, which rewards students who interrupt, answer quickly, and answer even when not directly asked, can be seen in this lesson, with devastating effects. Although I felt that the First Nations students were willing participants and engaged in the activity, the greatly reduced quantity of utterances indicates that they were not able to participate verbally as fully as the mainstream students. The larger proportion of their responses being direct answers to questions can be explained, as well, by Darnell's (1979) analysis of the rules of etiquette with some First Nations groups, where it is considered very rude to interrupt, or not to allow sufficient pause before answering a question.

### **Critical Incidents:**

#### **Collaborative style**

The style of interaction between the teacher and students was examined to see if there was evidence of a collaborative style of teaching that allowed for students' perspectives. Pappas et al. (1999) define a collaborative style of teaching as one where teachers share authority and power with their students, and where the culture of the classroom allows students control. In these data, many examples of a collaborative style can be seen. Explicit ownership is indicated when the teacher asks if the lesson is helpful. Everyone nods or murmurs assent, and one (First Nations) student says "A lot!"

Another time, Joe asks why a comma is used. The teacher provides an explanation as an answer, and Joe then concludes by giving an answer with the specific example as a way of checking his understanding, to see if he now can do it correctly:

N: No, that's similar to "since." (*instructor indicates he has changed the sentence incorrectly*)

Joe: That isn't \_\_\_\_\_. (*student echoes the clarifying explanation just given*)

N: Yes. . . (*explanation ensues*). . . and you'll see them more and more, as you do more of these exercises, you'll get more familiarized. . . . You may do them on short sentence. . . you may do this automatically, but when they get long, and they're mixed in with other stuff, that's when it gets really confusing.

Joe: Yeah, that's what I have trouble with.

The above exchange illustrates the student's use of approximations, where Joe is modifying his concepts in his schema, and verifying whether his approximation shows that his thinking is heading in the right direction. These "creative constructions" (Pappas et al., 1999, p. 38) are said

to reflect the linguistic and cultural diversity that students bring to their learning, and the transcript indicates that this kind of meaning-making was taking place throughout the lesson.

However, when individual exchanges are examined, focusing on First Nations students in particular, less of this collaborative style can be seen. Most exchanges with First Nations students involve them answering a directed question. An exchange with Don indicates an exchange where the answer is considered correct. Here, Don states his answers in the form of a question, and the extending discourse is provided by the teacher, not the student. Don is answering each question without asking any further questions or providing more discussion:

Don: (*long pause*) Is it- would you change that "because?"

N: (*quickly*) What would you do?

Don: Put a comma before it?

N: Sure.

Don: And put a comma after, after "wisdom" and. . .

N: After "wisdom" (*writes it on overhead*). . . that's all right. (*Reads sentence, female student echoes when she says "comma," and nods.*)

The teacher proceeds to explain this choice and the ambiguity with the choice, indicating that in that instance, there is no right or wrong answer, and why. However, interestingly, another student had volunteered the answer at that point, not Don. Don probably would have, but in the class forum, may have needed more time, or may have felt self-conscious about doing so. In effect, then, the teacher provided an extending explanation after another, non-First Nations student, had initiated a comment. Another interesting aspect of the exchange with Don is that he expressed his answers as questions, indicated in the transcript by question marks. Thus, even Don's answers are questions, indicating a reliance on the teacher for confirmation that Don's answer is right or wrong, which is typical of an IRE, not a collaborative, style of teaching.

### Asymmetry of the classroom

Another example of an exchange with a First Nations student involves Ray, where the teacher asks Ray how he is doing, probably because he was nonverbally expressing a lack of understanding:

N: (*turns to Ray*) How are you doing there?

Ray: Oh, it's getting worse.

N: It's getting worse?

Ray: (*nods*)

N: Okay, well, it will get worse, and then it'll get better . . . (*looking at whole class*). . . but I just really want to emphasize to do. . . the work. . . in these books. . . don't just assume it's okay? You can't really breeze by it, . . . the more you look into it, you get this crisis of confidence, it's like suddenly you're seeing commas where you never would have naturally put them. . . that kind of thing? So, do the work, that would be my biggest encouragement.

Here, Ray has taken the risk of acknowledging a lack of understanding, of incompetence. The teacher, however, although appearing to soften this risk-taking and show understanding, also

indicates that Ray may not have done as much work as he should have, that Ray had assumed it was okay until that very moment. This was done without any information being provided by Ray that this was the case. Although she turned to speak to the whole class, and many class members had probably not done much work to improve their competence with the material in the lesson, she chose to discuss this with the group after Ray admitted not feeling competent. She did not do this after any other students' comments.

Cazden (1988), in discussing the differential-treatment perspective, asserts that teachers differentiate among students in ways that may reinforce, even increase, inequalities of knowledge and skills that are already present in students. Although I do not consciously believe Ray to be working less, or to be less able than other students in the group, it is interesting -- and disconcerting -- to discover that it was with Ray, and when he admitted to having difficulty with a lesson, that I chose to discuss the need to do more work. Cazden also notes that teachers can unwittingly contribute to stereotypes and thereby to differential treatment because of limited knowledge and understandings about cultural differences. However, whether this was a factor in the above exchange is unknown. If it was, it was definitely "unwittingly."

Cazden (1988) cites Stubbs, who notes the radical asymmetry of the typical classroom. Within it, teachers inevitably engage in face-threatening acts, which can be softened by various politeness strategies, including expressing intimacy, deference and respect, but the seriousness of any act, by teacher or student, "depends on their perceptions of social distance, relative power, and ranking of the imposition of the teacher's act at a particular moment" (p. 161). It was unfortunate that this face-threatening situation involved a First Nations student, who may have perceived himself as more distant from the rest of the class and the teacher than a mainstream student.

Another revealing example with a First Nations student involves Cleo. In two instances, Cleo was called upon to give an answer. The first time Cleo mumbles unintelligibly, and indicates she is uncertain. In this case, another student attempts to answer the question, and is correct. Cleo was not encouraged to respond further; the focus of attention by the teacher was quickly shifted to the person who initiated the comment.

In the second instance, Cleo was asked a "why" question, but after a short pause and some mumbling, another student volunteered an answer. A second student continued to attempt the answer by explaining in a collaborative style which invited clarification from the teacher. Cleo was not provided with extra time, encouragement to talk, or assistance to figure out the answer. Instead, the teacher responded to those students who quickly volunteered answers.

These are the only two instances where a student did not give an answer to a direct question, and in both cases, and with the same First Nations individual, the teacher did not provide the scaffolding to help her have a positive experience in this face-threatening situation. Cazden (1992) notes that, when teachers wait for three seconds or more before responding to a student utterance, students speak at greater length and with greater complexity, and teachers become more adept at using student responses in their next turn. She suggests that a slower teacher pace would make it more likely that Maori children would say more, and would thereby give teachers more information on which to construct their next response. However, this does not account for the quicker pace of responding of mainstream students, where they tend to "fill in" any longer

pauses with their own responses. Cazden suggests "affirmative interaction" by changing the contexts of action, the "setting events" in which they occur (p. 228).

Although the activity in this lesson allowed for scaffolding, where the teacher is monitoring students' approximations so that they know how to foster, sustain and extend their efforts and understandings, considerable risk-taking is involved. When students are asked to provide what they think is the best answer in a larger-group forum, where they may be seen in front of the entire class as incorrect, many students are in effect discouraged from participating fully. Cazden (1988) notes that, for all students, the classroom is a strange setting, where getting a turn to talk is restricted and predetermined by someone else, but that for non-mainstream students, there is even greater cultural discontinuity and sociolinguistic interference. Darnell (1979) notes that with Cree children, the teacher almost always misunderstands the rules of etiquette as being silent and unresponsive. However, in Cree society, to tell someone that he or she is wrong is considered impolite, and competition for correct answers is considered inappropriate and disapproved of by peers.

Suzanne Scollon (1981) points out that we non-Native teachers may be doing many things that are offensive to Native students. Whereas many First Nations people value being very careful in speaking, our valuing of rapid answers to questions and the ability to "think on our feet" can be thought of as disrespectful and careless thinking. "When you put this value on being very careful in speaking with the turn-taking in speaking differences, you can end up with a Native person not ever having an opportunity to speak at all because when he or she has arrived at a considered answer, someone else has already begun speaking"(p. 6).

## **Uptake**

There are many examples in this lesson where a First Nations student provided a short answer which was quickly followed up by another, mainstream, student. One involves Geri, who reads a sentence, incorporating the changes she had chosen. The teacher repeats Geri's sentence, and affirms that it is a good one. Geri might have proceeded, or might have discussed this further, but another student, Joy, immediately follows with, "I had that. . ." Immediately the teacher's attention turns to Joy, and conversation ensues. Geri has been shut out of further discourse by a typical exchange in which a mainstream student has taken up the short pause. Had the pause been longer, a First Nations student might have continued.

It is difficult to know what a teacher could do in these situations, where mainstream students are speaking after shorter pauses, and where longer pauses which favour First Nations students are rare. Cazden (1988) agrees that the ways students behave can act to constrain the range of action choices that make sense for teachers to consider and choose. However, it is equally important to understand that it is also the ways we teachers manage a class that constrains the range of actions that are appropriate and reasonable for students.

## **Conclusion**

The study of this lesson demonstrated clearly that the verbal interactions of the First Nations students were markedly different. Even though I believed them to be comfortable in the

classroom and they appeared to enjoy the lesson, there were significant differences in the quantity and the quality of their utterances. First Nations students talked less than one-quarter as much as mainstream students. In addition, their utterances mostly tended to be answers to questions directed specifically to them, they initiated comments and asked questions much less often, and they tended not to follow up their utterances. In contrast, mainstream students mainly initiated comments, and they followed them up more and interrupted to a greater degree. In addition, the discourse of First Nations students showed less evidence of a collaborative style, tending to keep to an IRE style of discourse, whereas many exchanges by mainstream students explored their understandings verbally in a collaborative style. There was also evidence of differential treatment by the teacher, where inequalities of knowledge and skills may have been reinforced.

How does one avoid the effects of an implicit curriculum which puts First Nations students at a disadvantage? Cazden (1988) recommends peer groups as one solution, as they give time for simultaneous exploratory conversations in small groups, which can then culminate in a shorter, less narrative, and more generalized whole-class summary of each group's discussions. She believes we have one of two options: to "think people into new ways of acting, or act people into new ways of thinking (1992, p. 228). The study of this lesson shows clearly that thinking one understands is not enough; one needs to change the setting events in which the behaviors occur.

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