

Literary Discussions and Advanced Speaking Functions: Researching the (Dis)Connection

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Abstract: This study investigated the discourse of class discussion in the advanced undergraduate Spanish literature course. Motivating this study was the need for research to determine how discussion in advanced undergraduate literature courses provides discourse opportunities to students to develop advanced language functions, as defined in the ACTFL Guidelines. Despite claims that literature classes play an additional role in developing language proficiency, this issue has not received serious research attention. In this study, classroom transcripts were analyzed for the following features: (1) discourse structure of the literary discussion; (2) the use of teacher questions; (3) verb tense distribution; and (4) student uptake. The analysis attempted to uncover how literary discussion afforded opportunities for students to describe, to narrate in major time frames, to use extended discourse, to share opinions and arguments, to explore alternatives, and to hypothesize—all advanced and superior level speaking functions. The study also included instructor and student interviews to determine their views of foreign language literature classes and to see if what was observed could be explained by the goals the instructor and students had expressed. The findings suggest that simply having a literary discussion does not ensure that students will be pushed to use the language in advanced ways even when faced with tasks requiring critical thinking and advanced language use. One issue that this study reveals is that, for students to experience speaking in the advanced ranges of proficiency, discussions must enable complex thinking in complex language. Other findings suggest that literature instructors should be aware of the discourse opportunities that arise in literary discussions, should make speaking expectations and advanced functions clear to students, and should monitor student language use during discussions.

Introduction

This study investigated the discourse of class discussion in the advanced undergraduate literature course. Motivating this study was the need for research to determine how discussion in advanced undergraduate literature courses provides discourse opportunities to students to develop advanced language functions, as defined in ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines for Speaking (Breiner-Sanders, Lowe, Miles & Swender, 2000). This study addressed an area in our profession that has not received serious research attention. In the past, studies in the context of literature instruction have focused on reading comprehension of cultural texts (e.g., Bernhardt, 1990; Davis, 1992; Fecteau, 1999; Kramsch, 1985). This line of research appears to be the most systematic and is connected to the larger second language reading research agenda. In the profes-

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