LESLLA Symposium Proceedings

Citation for LESLLA Symposium Proceedings

This article is part of a collection of articles based on presentations from the 2011 Symposium held at University of Minnesota in Minneapolis, Minnesota, USA. Please note that the year of publication is often different than the year the symposium was held. We recommend the following citation when referencing the edited collection.

Vinogradov, P., & Bigelow, M. (Eds.) (2012). Low-educated adult second language and literacy acquisition (LESLLA): Proceedings of the 7th symposium. University of Minnesota Printing Services. https://lesllasp.journals.publicknowledgeproject.org/index.php/lesllasp/issue/view/472

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THE ROLE OF CLASSROOM TALK IN THE CREATION OF "SAFE SPACES" IN ADULT ESL CLASSROOMS[1]

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Perspectives on safe spaces in adult ESL

A common perspective held in adult ESL education is that classrooms need to be "safe spaces" – environments where learners are able to share personal concerns, admit confusion, try out new language, or ask questions, with relatively more ease than they would demonstrate in real-world contexts (e.g., a doctor's office). For many ESL teachers, the concept of a safe space can guide pedagogical decisions about the extent to which learners' personal histories and everyday lives outside the classroom are worthwhile topics of conversation for the language curriculum. Although "safe space" is a frequently heralded metaphor for describing supportive learning environments in adult ESL education, few empirical studies have documented the conditions which presumably support learner participation and willingness to exchange personal information. Scholars have waged a similar critique in other areas of education (Boostrom, 1998; Holley & Steiner, 2005; Stengel & Weems, 2010), such as this commentary from Barrett (2010) in social work education:

> "The notion that the classroom can, indeed must, be a safe space to facilitate student engagement and improve academic outcomes is so pervasive in the pedagogical literature that it is often presented as established truth, despite the fact that there is a dearth of empirical evidence documenting that safe classrooms are more effective at achieving those goals than other types of classroom environments" (p. 1).

Barrett's (2010) observations help to illuminate a similar disconnect in the adult ESL/literacy field: although we have a myriad of reputable pedagogical practices for "bringing the outside in" (Parrish, 2004; Wallerstein, 1983; Wrigley & Guth, 1992; Weinstein, 1999), we lack adequate empirical evidence to reinforce these practices (Baynham, 2006). In the adult ESL/literacy field, research on the creation of safe spaces has the potential to validate what many teachers have long held to be true based on their own professional wisdom, daily observations, and intuition. To contribute to this broad research agenda, we investigated how one highly experienced ESL teacher and her class of beginning-level adult ESL learners manage interaction in an ESL grammar lesson which called upon a learner to share personal information about his immigration history in response to the question, "When did you come to the U.S.?" Applying methods of conversation analysis (CA) (Pomerantz & Fehr, 1997; Schegloff, 2007) and examining the references to learners' personal lives in the classroom talk, we looked for ways that the participants

attend to language learning goals as well as interpersonal sharing goals in the grammar lesson. In this way, we sought to provide evidence in classroom talk for claims about the creation of safe classrooms.

The "interactional work" of LESLLA learners

By focusing on talk and interaction in a beginning-level ESL classroom in particular, we aim to provide evidence for the kinds of teacher talk that create opportunities for novice learners (hereafter referred to as LESLLA learners, or low-educated, limited-literacy second language learners) to share personal information. Perhaps more importantly, we also are interested in generating evidence for the "interactional work" (Harris, 2005; Hellerman, 2006, 2008) that learners contribute to the creation of safe classrooms, even at rudimentary stages of L2 development.[2] Without a doubt, LESLLA learners will require extensive practice with vocabulary and grammatical structures before they will be able to self-express spontaneously or formulate original sentences readily in the L2. Moreover, given the diversity in formal schooling experiences and beliefs about learning and teaching, LESLLA learners will likely vary in their ability to participate in classrooms where the teacher is attempting to create a safe environment. With limited to no experience in formal classroom settings, LESLLA learners cannot be presumed to have the classroom interactional skills (e.g., turn-taking, holding the floor, answering or asking questions about one's self) that are foundational to their ability to participate in meaningful L2 classroom discussions.

While scholars in other fields (e.g., social work, nursing, literature) (Boostrom, 1998; Holley & Steiner, 2005; Fecho, et al., 2010) focus on the classroom processes by which learners can

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2 While most LESLLA studies tend to focus on the development of learners' literacy skills (learning to read and write), we focus on the learners' L2 oral communication skills (see also studies by Strube, 2009; Bigelow, et al., 2006), as well as their emerging interactional competence (i.e., their ability to use their L2 skills to manage interaction with others in the classroom).

exercise their right to self-expression, language socialization theorists emphasize the social outcomes that safe classrooms may be able to engender (Duff, 2007). Presumably, in a safe learning environment, learners gain more than just practice with target language forms used to structure the exchange of personal thoughts and experiences; they also gain opportunities to manage how others view them – as ESL learners, parents, workers, patients, refugees, and so forth. In this way, the "interactional work" (Harris, 2005; Hellerman, 2006, 2008) involved in the creation of safe spaces requires learners to attend to at least two important resources – personal information (what information you wish to share with others) and linguistic information (how to say what you want to share). In other words, learners need to develop linguistic competence (e.g., knowledge about grammatical forms, vocabulary, and fluency) to be able to communicate their thoughts, emotions, and experiences to the teacher and other learners, but they also need "classroom participation competence," referring to the "beneficial ways to engage with the instructor and the curriculum" (Curry, 2007, p. 280). Curry's (2007) view on participation competence reinforces what Kathy Harris (2010) has referred to as a learner's capacity to "do school": "Learners who have attended school as children or adolescents come to ESOL classes knowing how school 'works.' They know how to start activities, how to ask for help, and how to be an expert or novice in a classroom interaction" (Harris, list-serv posting, April 12, 2010; see also Reder et al., 1984). In fact, from a language socialization perspective (Schieffelin & Ochs, 1986), it is more accurate to say that all language learners – no matter how proficient in English or competent at "doing school" they are – must learn the unique norms for speaking freely, asking/answering questions about one's personal life through repeated opportunities to participate in interactions with their teacher and other learners.

From a classroom community of practice perspective (Wenger, 1998), the ESL learners' participation is central to our

understanding of the creation of 'safe spaces'. As members of an ESL classroom community, learners move from peripheral to full participation (Lave & Wenger, 1991) in the sociocultural practice of classroom discussions between teacher and students. As Duff (2007) observes, participation in these classroom interactions is significant "not only IN learning but AS learning" (p. 313). Over time, the learners' increasing participation in personalized exchanges with the teacher and other students contributes to the generation of further 'safe spaces,' thus enriching the community of which they are a part.

If both linguistic and participation competence play a role in learners' ability to benefit from a community of practice which is defined by 'safe spaces,' we posit that classrooms which create opportunities for learners to practice using linguistic structures, through repeated, meaningful routines, will be successful in allowing learners to move from peripheral to fuller participation in the safe space.

Learner immigration stories in the ESL classroom
As will be explained in greater detail below, this study focused on approximately eleven minutes of classroom interaction in which the ESL teacher (Deborah)[3] tells the class she wants to review irregular past tense verb forms, starting with the verb come. To demonstrate use of this verb, the teacher asks one of the learners, Armando, questions about how he came to the United States. We highlight this particular segment of classroom interaction because it demonstrates how teacher questions create the space for learners to share personal information about a potentially sensitive topic (e.g., a learner's personal immigration story) but also that the focal learner, Armando, and other learners play an equally critical role in holding the space open for further clarification, expansion, or commentary on his personal story about illegally crossing the border into the U.S.

It's critically important to recognize the sensitivity and ethical care with which many practitioners view the issue of

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3 All names are pseudonyms.

immigration status as a topic for discussion in our ESL classrooms. Although the Workforce Investment Act stipulates that only learners with legal status may enroll in federally-funded programs, in reality, learners without legal status do enroll, via a variety of pathways (Wrigley, 2007). Amid the controversial, and often ugly, debates around routes to legalization, and in response to fears of deportation and Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) raids, teachers understandably may avoid the topic of immigration histories in the classroom. Indeed, there can be tremendous risk and consequences to learners who feel probed about their immigration status or history. By examining the "interactional work" that takes place when a learner does share his personal immigration story in the classroom, however, we hope to provide insights into the ways that novice ESL learners learn to negotiate classroom interactions around personal, potentially sensitive, matters.

Study context
The data analyzed here are drawn from a large corpus of video-tape classroom data, known as The Multimedia Adult English Learner Corpus (MAELC), based at the National Labsite for Adult ESL at Portland State University.[4] The segment of data we analyze in this paper occurred during the fourth week of a high-beginning level ESL class in winter 2003. According to the program's curricular guidelines, the learners at this level are expected to be able to "give information about themselves. They can use common greetings but usually cannot engage in fluent conversation."

The class met twice a week for three hours over the course of the ten-week term. The teacher (Deborah) was an experi-

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4 The Multimedia Adult English Learner Corpus (MAELC), based at Portland State University, was established as part of a grant from the US Dept. of Education, Institute of Education, to the National Center for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy. The full corpus comprises over 4,000 hours of classroom video recordings, from which our classroom segment was derived. For more information about the database, see Reder, et al. (2003).

enced practitioner who had been teaching at the school for about a year and half prior to the focal term. The class was an integrated skills class, with instructional time typically devoted to speaking activities, and reading/writing activities reserved for homework. In the session analyzed here, Deborah's lesson included review of wh-questions and the use of the irregular verb come.

The class consisted of fourteen learners: nine from Latin American countries, four from China, and one from Thailand. The learners' experience with formal education in their native countries varied, with ten of the learners having completed nine or more years. The remaining four learners had completed six years of formal education. Our focal learner, Armando, was one of these learners who typify the LESLLA profile. Notably, Armando had been enrolled at the school for 3 prior sessions (for a total of 50 weeks), longer than most of the learners, which suggests that he had had more opportunity to get accustomed to this particular school setting compared to other learners. For this study, because we were analyzing previously collected classroom data, we did not have access to additional demographic information on the classroom participants (age, years of residence, L1 use). Nor were we able to consult with the ESL teacher to do a member-check of our interpretations.

Through the transcription and examination of recorded, naturally-occurring conversations, conversation analysts aim to discover how participants use their turns at talk to understand each other and accomplish social actions. The major focus of such investigation is the sequential organization of talk as displayed through such elements as turn-taking and gesture. Utilizing a next-turn proof procedure as a means to understand speakers' interpretations, conversation analysts ensure that their analyses are based solely on the accomplishments of the participants in talk-in-interaction, rather than on their own assumptions (Hutchby & Wooffitt, 1988). The primary aim of such research is not to uncover the causes

of the participants' behavior, but rather to explain how that behavior is produced (Pomerantz & Fehr, 1997).

The utility of CA for research on classroom interaction becomes clear when one considers Erickson's (1982) definition of teacher-learner talk as the "collective improvisation of meaning and social organization from moment to moment" (p. 153). He describes improvisation as "strategically adaptive action" in classroom talk, which falls in the center of a continuum between highly formulaic and highly spontaneous speech events. With respect to our present study, by examining turns of talk as they unfold during the process of improvisation, one can see the ways in which both learners and teachers are active participants in shaping safe spaces.

Analysis of linguistic competence and interactional competence at work

In this analysis, we see how a beginning-level learner, Armando, demonstrates both linguistic competence as well as "classroom participation" competence (Curry, 2007), in order to share a personal story about his immigration experience with his classmates. Other learners in the class were then able to share in this story by attending to both its content and form. These L2 oral skills and interactional skills, which we argue are a vital component to learners' language and literacy acquisition, are developed in classrooms such as Deborah's, which devote a significant amount of time to oral communication. This type of classroom literacy practice enables novice learners with little or considerable formal education, like Armando, to gain valuable practice in L2 interactions, and, from a socialization framework, learn the norms associated with the creation of safe classroom discussions.

Excerpt 1 (see Appendix A for transcript conventions) provides an example of what Baynham (2006) refers to as the 'dynamic push and pull' in classroom discourse, in this case, the push and pull of form and meaning, which seems

to enable the teacher Deborah and the learner Armando to maintain different but complementary orientations to the significance of the classroom dialogue. Excerpt 1 begins as Deborah explains she will ask the class questions using the verb *come* to review irregular past tense verbs (also see Figures 1 and 2 for focal speakers).

Excerpt 1[5]

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1→   D:   So. Remember, um. (0.2) Remember (.) um past
2          that is regular and past that's irregular? Yes? You
3          remember? Yes? Okay. So these (.) this is irregular
4          ((points to word on board)). Right? Okay (.)
5          This is a question (.) with, I'm going to take the
6          example o:f (.) come. Okay, come is the verb that
7→         I'm going to play with. Okay? Um:m I would like
8          to know did- it's a yes or no answer. Did you come
9          to the U.S. i:n u:m: (0.2) two th- in the year two
           thousand? U:m (.) Armando.
10   Ar:  (No I didn't.)
11→  D:   No I- No what? ((puts hand to ear))
12→  Ar:  No I don't.
13→  D:   I- I didn't.
14   Ar:  No I didn't.
15→  D:   Yeah that's the first thing that you said okay?
16          ((turns to board and writes question on board))
17          So did you come to the U.S. in 2000. Okay? Okay.
18          I- I- okay. What is this? ((circles "U.S." on board))
           Is this place? (0.2) Or time?
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Deborah's question *did you come to the U.S. in 2000?* (Lines 7-9) represents the first turn in what appears to be an initiation/response/evaluation sequence. As part of this sequence,

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5 Video clip is available for viewing at: http://www.labschool.pdx.edu/Viewer/viewer.php?pl=Safespaces&cl=Excerpt%201.

Entire 11-minute class segment is available at: http://www.labschool.pdx.edu/Viewer/viewer.php?pl=Safespaces&cl=Entire%20Transcript

Figure 1: Armando in back left corner of classroom

Figure 2: Deborah in front left corner of classroom

Deborah provides Armando with corrective feedback on his use of the past tense: Deborah repeats the first part of Armando's sentence (Line 11, "No I – no what?"), pauses, and uses a hand movement (places hand near ear) to prompt him to speak louder. In Line 13, the teacher explicitly corrects the past tense mistake in Armando's second attempt to answer the question in Line 12, and then in Line 15, she affirms he already had given the right response earlier (the evaluation move).

As the following excerpt begins, Deborah appears to model her thinking about how she will use the verb *come* in a question.

Excerpt 2[6]

24 D: Time. Okay and he said no:: I didn't. ((writes
25   sentence on board)) So first, this is my verb. And first
26   I ask a yes or no question. And I thought hm:: I'm not
27→   going to ask him about his weekend. I'm not going
28→   to say di:d you come to school this weekend. I'm not
29   going to do that. I'm going to ask him about the United
30   States. Did you come to the USA in 2000? And he said
31→   no I didn't. No. Hm. Okay. Tell me more. So so what
32   do I ask then? (.) It has to be a "wh" question. ((writes
33   "wh" on board)) He said no. So I would like to know-
34   this is wrong right? ((points to question on board))
35   He said no. So what do I wanna know? I want to-
36 S: when
37 D: when uh-huh. When?
38 S: (did you come)
39 D: Uh huh - when ((writes on board)) did you come
40 S: to USA
41 D: to the USA? Okay? ((turns around and gestures to
42   Armando)) What's the answer?
43 D: What time would be precise? Would be very precise?
        Yes?
44 Ar: I- I come.
45 D: Well what did he say? Ask him. Ask him.
46→ I: ((turns to face Armando)) when did you come to
47   United States?
48 Ar: (I come to United States in 1999.)
49 Fa: It's I came?
50→ D: Very good. I came. Okay. It's going to be that one
51   over there. ((points to other board)) ((writes sentence
52   on board)) I came to the U.S. in 1999? Okay. Okay. U:
53   m. Okay so I have one yes or no question and then I
54   have one we call these "wh" questions and I want one
55   more. Hm:: What else did I want to know?

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6 Video clip is available for viewing at: http://www.labschool.pdx.edu/Viewer/
viewer.php?pl=Safespaces&cl=Excerpt%202

56 S: (   )
57 D: Or maybe how. I'm talking to Armando. I want to
        know more.
58→ Fa: How do you, how do you come to United States?
59 D: How did you come to the United States ((writes
60   question on board)) And what do you say Mister
        Armando?
61 Ar: I come for the (.) border.
62 D: Oh you came through the [border?]
63 Ar: [Uh hm.]
64 D: Okay.

In Lines 27-28, Deborah gives an example of a question she won't ask (Did you come to school this weekend?), perhaps because the answer is obvious and thus the question is not worth asking (learners don't come to school on the weekend). Her instruction "Tell me more" (Line 31) seems to signal to the learners that the 'right' way to complete the question-answer task is to ask one another substantive questions of each other. In this way, Deborah's instructions help to establish guidelines – the norms – for asking/answering questions about one another's personal history in class. In response to Deborah's instructions, a female learner Inez asks the question when did you come to United States? (Line 46), and a male learner Farruco later asks another question how do you, how do you come to the United States? (Line 58). In response to both learner questions, the teacher provides corrective feedback on their use of the target grammatical form, reflecting her orientation to the pedagogical purpose of the conversation. She also praises the learner Farruco for providing a corrected version of Armando's response to the when-question (Line 50), additional evidence that she is focused on the grammatical accuracy of Armando's response.

In Excerpt 3, we see Deborah and Armando co-construct an expansion of his immigration story.

Excerpt 3[7]

66→   D: Horse?= ((pantomimes riding a horse))

67   Ar: =I running. I running

68→   D: No? You ran? Okay. So you walked. You didn't

69   walk you just ran.

70   Ar: I walked too.

71→   D: You walked? And then you ran.

72→   Ar: I walked for eighteen hours.

Here, Deborah uses more elemental question structures – words with rising intonation (Horse? Line 66) and canonical word order with rising intonation (You ran?, Line 68; You walked?, Line 71) – rather than the wh-questions she instructed the learners to use earlier. Nor does she draw attention to the fact that *walk* is a regular verb, and *run* is an irregular verb like *come*. In this way, Deborah seems to temporarily suspend the focus on form and function of wh-questions and shifts her focus to learning more facts about Armando's immigration story.

With regards to the potentially sensitive content of Armando's story, Excerpt 3 seems to represent critical moves in this interactional sequence. Line 72 seems to mark a pivotal moment in the interaction when Armando volunteers additional information about his immigration story: that he walked for 18 hours to cross the border, displaying his own agency in directing the telling of his personal immigration history in the classroom. In addition, the lines before Line 72 highlight the ways that the teacher's interactional moves are contingent on the learners' contributions. Note also that Armando's utterance – *I walked for eighteen hours* (Line 72) – is one of the few grammatically intact utterances he makes in this entire exchange.

Unlike other utterances in this interaction, the sequence

in Excerpt 3 does not rely on the traditional Initiation-Response-Evaluation exchange, but rather reflects a relatively more complex interaction and meaning exchange between Deborah and Armando.

Excerpt 4 begins with Deborah's compelling response to Armando's declaration in which she asks permission to write his response on the board as a sample sentence (Can I write that on the board?) (Line 74), a move she did not display in response to his earlier utterances.

Excerpt 4[8]

74→   D: Okay. O:oh. Can I write that on the board?

75   Ar: uh hm.

76   D: Okay. ((writes on board)) I walked for (0.2)

77   I: he

78   D: no ((writes on board)) he walked for eighteen
               hours

79→   I: Wow

80   D: on the border. Across the border or <u>to</u> the

81   border? ((runs in place)) or across.

82   S: across

83   ((writes on board)) across the border

84→   I: Wow - this is a marathon?

Deborah's request for permission seems to provide evidence of Armando's agency in this interaction, as well as the teacher's willingness to build classroom talk around learners' verbal contributions. Her request for permission also seems to reflect her own responsiveness as a listener to his story, signaling her awareness that Armando has just shared information that may not be permissible to share in other public contexts. One female learner, Inez, seems to

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7 Video clip is available for viewing at: http://www.labschool.pdx.edu/Viewer/viewer.php?pl=Safespaces&cl=Excerpt%203

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8 Video clip is available for viewing at: http://www.labschool.pdx.edu/Viewer/viewer.php?pl=Safespaces&cl=Excerpt%204

be the most vocal in her amazement at Armando's journey, emitting a "wow" twice in lines 79 and 84.

Further evidence of the agency ascribed to Armando in this exchange is found at the beginning of the following excerpt (Lines 90-92) when a female learner in the back of the room (off camera) asks Deborah whether Armando's story is true.

Excerpt 5[9]

90→	S:	(laugh) xxx is this true?
91→	D:	Yes it is true. (0.4) Yeah people are wondering.
92		People don't know.
93	Ss:	xxx [untranscribed learner voices]
94	S:	(walk)
95	D:	Yes. Yes. He walked=
96	S:	=He walked.
97	D:	Through the border
98	S:	(walking?)
99→	D:	Yes. No not through the border. This is the border
100		((walks to map in the back of the room)) Where
101		did you cross? Did you cross here here here here
102		or here? ((points to various points on map)) Into
103		California or into Arizona? Do you remember?
104	Ar:	Arizona. ((points at map))

Deborah responds that the story is indeed true (Line 91), and then turns to Armando to comment that some learners in the room may be confused because "people don't know," meaning perhaps that some learners in the room have never directly experienced fleeing across the border or don't know someone who has. Deborah's comment also serves to position Armando as someone who can teach others about this important topic. Deborah then directs the class's attention to the

9 Video clip is available for viewing at: http://www.labschool.pdx.edu/Viewer/viewer.php?pl=Safespaces&cl=Excerpt%205

map on the back wall of the classroom (see Figure 3); in lines 99-103, she prompts Armando to point out exactly where he crossed into the U.S. Armando replies that he crossed into Arizona (Line 104). Deborah's move (using the map) serves to further legitimate the truth (and value) of Armando's story and ratify his agency in the telling of his immigration story.

Following the exchange in the above excerpts, Deborah explains to the class that Armando was asked many questions because "people were interested in his story" (Lines 207-208 below).

Excerpt 6[10]

205→	D:	Okay. Thank you Armando. Thank you for
206		sharing. Okay. Uh. Okay so I asked him more
207→		than two "wh" questions. We ended up asking
208		him many because people were interested in
209		his story. Okay? But this is a little bit of what I
		wanted- I wanted to see.

Deborah's expression of appreciation to Armando and her use of metalanguage (i.e., the talk about the value of his story and its role in the grammar lesson) signals the end of the class discussion about Armando's story and the transition to the next lesson activity. This expression of appreciation suggests her responsiveness to Armando's willingness to communicate and take risks, potentially reaffirming her classroom as a safe space.

Deborah's appreciation move may be interpreted within Valenzuela's (1999) caring framework, which makes a distinction between aesthetic care and authentic care. Based on her ethnographic study of Mexican-American high school learners, Valenzuela observed the prevalence of aesthetic caring, characterized by the dispassionate articulation of rules, learning objectives, and curricular frameworks which

10 Video clip is available for viewing at: http://www.labschool.pdx.edu/Viewer/viewer.php?pl=Safespaces&cl=Excerpt%206

Figure 3: Deborah and Armando at wall map

aim to pass on knowledge to the learner. Valenzuela further observed that "schools are structured around aesthetic caring whose essence lies in an attention to things and ideas rather than a moral ethic of [authentic caring] that nurtures and values relationships" (p. 22). Deborah's appreciation toward Armando for sharing his personal story arguably represents a display of authentic care, one which may promote future openness to "bringing the outside in" not only from Armando, but from the other learners as well.

As noted earlier, given the exploratory nature of this analysis, and given that we did not have an opportunity to consult with the teacher about our interpretations, we refrain from drawing firm conclusions about Deborah's intentions. However, Deborah's talk – her efforts to validate the truth of Armando's story, her request for his permission to document his story on the board, and her expressions of gratitude to Armando for sharing his story – provides evidence of her beliefs about the appropriateness of personal content in ESL classrooms. Her talk-in-interaction, which is both contingent and responsive, seems to enable her to achieve her objective of learner practice with question-formation, while simulta- neously promoting an atmosphere of safety. We suggest that in a class of learners coming from various backgrounds and with various past immigration experiences, this atmosphere contributes to the building of a community of practice in

which they can share these experiences without the hesitancy they may confront in real-world contexts.

Discussion

Our analysis here reflects insights of Freirean practitioner Pia Moriarty (1996) who critically examined the significance of personal questions in ESL classrooms, particularly those with a survival English focus. According to Moriarty (1998), personal questions such as What is your name? Where do you live? are often regarded as "mere practice at expressing existing realities. They are supposed to be publicly neutral, and at the very least, not harmful to students" (p. 25-26). However, in a critical analysis of interaction in an ESL citizenship class Moriarty taught in the early 1980s shortly after the passage of the Immigration and Reform Control Act (1986), she found that political realities outside the class- room "left the most straightforward questions and answers with a resonance and a politically charged electricity that skewed my simple requests for grammar practice and human connection" (p. 33).

We would posit that a "resonance" and a kind of "charged electricity" is similarly evident in the interac- tion in Excerpt 2, after Armando replies "I come for the border" in response to the teacher's/Farruco's question "how did you come to the U.S.?" An additional charge seems to accompany Armando's declaration in Excerpt 3 "I walked for eighteen hours", as evidenced by Deborah's novel request for permission, and the teacher's affirmation of the truth-value of Armando's story. "Skewed" seems to convey a negative connotation, which reflects Moriarty's (1996) concern that teachers narrowly view the pragmatic function of their personal questions in the ESL classroom. Because our analysis of classroom talk remains exploratory at this point, we would prefer a more neutral sounding word as our intention here is to demonstrate how questions and answers around personal information in the ESL class-

room may be reflective of different orientations towards the same utterance, in this case the question "How did you come to the U.S.?" Rather than "skew", we opt for the word "intersect"[11] to represent the ways different lines of meaning run through the same utterance but at different angles (e.g, teacher focus on form, learner, and meaning).

Perhaps then, what is socially normative in the ESL classroom is the way grammar practice creates opportunities for indirect sharing of real-life stories, stories that often may be too powerful to tell on their own. While teachers may be intent on integrating personal content into grammar exercises, these tasks may serve as rehearsals for real-life conversations that learners may have outside the classroom. However, this is not the trend we would argue is evident in this particular classroom interaction: learner's legal status is often purposefully side-stepped as a topic for ESL classroom, which prompts us to wonder, what is the likelihood that Armando will use his L2 linguistic knowledge (e.g., formation of wh-questions, use of irregular verb come) to share the details of this journey to other audiences outside the ESL classroom? Perhaps this is unlikely. However, we might imagine Armando one day recounting his immigration story to a child or grandchild who does not speak his native Spanish.

With respect to the discussion of classroom talk in the creation of safe spaces, the value of Armando's agency as a story teller seems to lie in his contribution to a classroom community of practice where:

• the teacher provides opportunities to develop grammatical forms that can be used to convey personal information; she also models ways that speakers in L2 classrooms can shift orientation from form to meaning, and back to form.
• learners are explicitly encouraged to ask personal

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11 We would like to thank our anonymous reviewer for suggesting this alternative wording.

questions of one another, motivated by the teacher's urging to "tell me more", that is, to ask and give details about one another's histories and backgrounds. More expert story-tellers help to apprentice less expert story-tellers gain competence in managing "push-and-pull" interactions which shift readily back and forth between questions that privilege form and questions that privilege personal content.

Implications for classroom practice

This paper highlights classroom interaction which took place on the seventh day of a new term (the fourth week of class), when the teacher knew some of the learners already (e.g., Armando) but not all. This observation is notable given that we have attempted to identify patterns of talk associated with the integration of personal content. With respect to implications for classroom practice, our study has underscored for us the importance of viewing learner contributions to classroom talk as important resources for language acquisition. Based on this initial exploration, we invite adult ESL practitioners and researchers to move away from two default conceptualizations of the pedagogy around the creation of safe spaces:

• the "toolkit" approach, which would lead us to believe that there are specific strategies and techniques that, when employed, create safe spaces, and
• the "magic" approach, which tends to romanticize the ESL classroom, embracing the idea that the mere act of bringing ESL learners of diverse backgrounds together in a classroom will give way to the open exchange of personal stories.

This does not mean that established pedagogical strategies that encourage learner participation and personal sharing – for example, the use of teacher questions and the provision of the sufficient wait time so learners have time

to formulate sentences – have no place. Rather, we must encourage teachers to view the creation of safe spaces as a domain not strictly under teacher control. Both learner agency and teacher contingency promote the creation of safe spaces. Armando's willingness to contribute his immigration story with the class marks his learner agency, while Deborah's contingency is evident in her willingness to make space for personal content to enter the grammar lesson.

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Appendix A

Transcript Conventions (adapted from Schegloff, 2007)

[ ]	Overlapping talk
=	'Latched' utterances
(0.5)	Numbers in parentheses indicate silence, in tenths of a second
(.)	A 'micropause,' hearable but not readily measurable
.	Falling intonation contour
?	Rising intonation
,	'Continuing' intonation
::	Prolongation or stretching of the preceding sound, with more colons representing longer stretching
-	Cut-off or self-interruption
<u>wor</u>d	Underlining indicates some form of stress or emphasis
(( ))	Transcriber's description of events
( )	Transcriber's uncertainty about utterance
xxx	Inaudible talk