Perceptions of Volunteer Roles in English Conversation Circles

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This study explores English conversation circles, which bring together native speakers with non-native speakers in informal conversation. Specifically, this study compares the volunteers' (native speakers') perceptions of their roles in the conversation circle with learners' expectations. Analysis revealed that learners expected volunteers to play a more authoritative role than volunteers perceived themselves playing. This study considers the power that learners grant to volunteers, identifying a number of roles played by volunteers.

Cette étude porte sur les cercles de conversation en anglais où des locuteurs natifs et des locuteurs non natifs se réunissent pour discuter informellement. Plus précisément, elle compare les perceptions qu'ont les bénévoles (les locuteurs natifs) de leur rôle dans le cercle de conversation aux attentes des apprenants. L'analyse a révélé que les apprenants s'attendaient à ce que les bénévoles jouent un rôle plus autoritaire que celui qu'ils se voyaient adopter. Cette étude examine le pouvoir que les apprenants accordent aux bénévoles et identifie un nombre de rôles que jouent ceux-ci.

Introduction

Despite being immersed in an English speaking country, adult newcomers' opportunities to participate in meaningful conversations in English can be surprisingly limited. Many of the participants interviewed in this study described how language classes provided only limited speaking time because of class size and focus. Similarly, many of those who were employed encountered few opportunities for extended conversational interaction in English because of their type of work, workplace demographics, or even a resistance to the target language (Goldstein, 1997). As a result of these realities, many newcomers struggle to find opportunities to practice spoken English.

Various community organizations have recognized this gap and provide safe environments for newcomers to practice conversational English in the form of conversation circles. Conversation circles bring together native speakers (NS) or near-native speakers with non-native speakers (NNS) in small groups to converse informally in the target language. By interviewing the participants at a Host Program (a federal settlement service) located in a mid-sized town in Southwestern Ontario, this study identified implications

for practitioners who facilitate conversation circles. Specifically, in this article, I compare the volunteers' (native speakers') perceptions of their roles in the conversation circle with learners' expectations and consider implications for practice.

Theoretical Framework

The volunteers' fluency in the target language and their cultural knowledge place them in a position of power. Fairclough (1989) discussed power in discourse where participants are unequal (i.e., fluency in the target language versus lower-level language skills) and indicated that the powerful participant has the potential for "controlling and constraining the contributions of the non-powerful participants" (p. 46). Similarly, Norton (2000) based her book *Identity and Language Learning* on the premise that "relations of power can serve to enable or constrain the range of identities that language learners can negotiate in their classrooms and communities" (p. 9). Consequently, the question of how volunteers navigate their position of power in the context of a conversation circle comes to the fore.

Heron's (1999) system of facilitation provided a valuable lens through which to conceptualize the various roles that conversation volunteers play, and it made the power relations explicit. He outlined three modes of facilitation:

- *Hierarchical mode*, whereby the facilitator exercises the power to direct the learning process for the group, thinking and acting *on behalf* [original emphasis] of the group, and making all the major decisions …
- Cooperative mode, whereby the facilitator shares the power and responsibilities *with* [italics in original] the group, prompting members to be more self-directing in the various forms of learning …
- *Autonomous mode*, whereby the facilitator respects the autonomy of the group in finding their own way and exercising their *own* [italics in original] judgement. The task of the facilitator in this mode is to create the conditions within which students' self-determination can flourish. (cited in Dörnyei, 2007, p. 725)

Heron argued that none of these modes is superior to the others, but rather that effective facilitation results from the right sequencing, balancing, and even combination of the three modes. The selection of modes is dependent on the context, task, and group members.

Cummins (1996) noted that power relationships may be "additive rather than subtractive. Power is created with others rather than being imposed on or exercised over others" (p. 15). He added that collaborative relations of power can be beneficial in empowering, whereas the coercive power of a dominant group or individual is detrimental to others and perpetuates inequitable division of resources. Cummins's contribution supports Heron's

ANNE VAN GILST

(1999) understanding of effective facilitation, where hierarchical power is not maintained and collaborative relations of power result.

This study takes a Vygotskian (1987) stance, which highlights the sociality of learning, where cognitive processes depend on social interaction with more capable peers. This interaction in the Zone of Proximal Development potentially allows learners to acquire language above their current skill level. Indeed, even the simplest of conversations can become verbal scaffolding, because learning takes place "when the new is embedded in the familiar" and "conversational interaction naturally links the known to the new" (van Lier, 1996, p. 171).

Long's (1996) revised *Interaction Hypothesis* also provided a framework to understand volunteer roles that arise from interaction. Long (1981) hypothesized that although input (i.e., language heard by the learner) in the target language is necessary, it is modified input (i.e., slower speed, simplified syntax, and vocabulary) and, even more so, modified interaction (i.e., clarification and confirmation questions) that can allow language acquisition to take place. He later argued that negotiation for meaning, which "connects input, internal learner capacities, particular selective attention, and output in productive ways" (1996, p. 452) further facilitates language acquisition. Long identified a number of ways that meaning is negotiated: implicit and explicit negative evidence (i.e., information provided to learners concerning the incorrectness of their utterance), recasts (i.e., repeating utterances with modifications that correct errors), and modified input and output. Swain (1985), as part of her *Output Hypothesis*, added that interactions where there has been a breakdown in communication may result in increased learning because the learners are more likely to recognize a gap in language knowledge and are subsequently pushed to use alternate means to get their messages across. This process moves learners from semantic processing to syntactic processing.

Recent research has generally concluded positive learning results for most forms of feedback such as requests and prompts (Ammar & Spada, 2006; Ellis, 2007; Iwashita, 2001; Leeman, 2003; McDonough, 2007; McDonough & Mackey, 2006). However, as these studies demonstrate, there is growing evidence that diverse contexts and language levels influence the effectiveness of the varying forms of feedback. Lyster and Izquierdo (2009) concluded their study examining prompts versus recasts by calling for "a more fine-grained analyses of the discourse contexts, linguistic targets, and learner characteristics that are more amenable to one type of feedback than to another" (p. 487).

Because a relaxed and informal atmosphere is the trade mark of a conversation circle, the idea of affect is an important consideration. The term *affect* refers to a human's emotional being, including anxiety level. Gardner and Macintyre (1993) defined language anxiety as fear or apprehension occurring

when a learner is expected to perform in the second or foreign language. Many studies have shown a negative correlation between language anxiety and learning (Aida, 1994; Trylong, 1987; Gardner & MacIntyre, 1993; Scarcella & Oxford, 1992, cited in Oxford, 1999).

Oxford (1999) created a taxonomy of correlates of anxiety, including the following: self-esteem; tolerance of ambiguity; risk-taking; competitiveness; social anxiety; tests, presentations, and other activities; culture shock; unrealistic beliefs and goals about language-learning; and instructor-learner interactions, where harsh error correction and other conflicts increase stress.

In more recent studies, Gregersen (2005) explored how learners displayed language anxiety: "Anxious learners manifested limited facial activity …; maintained less eye contact with the teacher, were more rigid and closed with their posture; and … they used fewer illustrative and regulatory gestures" (p. 388). Although Gregersen concluded that teachers should be aware of nonverbal indicators of language anxiety, she warned of the complexity of these signals and the need to ask questions and examine the context of the situation. In a 2009 study, Gregersen further suggested that an understanding of both auditory and visual indicators could lead to enhanced determination of negative language anxiety.

In response to these signals, Gregersen (2005) encouraged teachers to employ strategies to reduce this anxiety by "increasing feelings of self-efficacy (Pappamihiel, 2002); … creating student support systems (Horwitz et al, 1986 in Aida, 1994); giving more positive reinforcement (Price, 1991); and making the classroom as relaxing and friendly as possible through pair and small-group work, [and] games … (Crookall & Oxford, 1991)" (p. 389). Oxford (1999) also offered implications for language instructors, which include encouraging moderate risk-taking, allowing less than perfect language performance, encouraging relaxation through humor, and helping students to assess language performance and goals realistically.

Methodology

This article is a portion of a larger collective case study that followed four conversation volunteers and their conversation groups. The study involved a mixed-method approach of pre- and post-interviews as well as a qualitative analysis of videotaped data gathered during eight one-hour conversation sessions.

Stake (2000) identified a case as being specific with a "bounded system," a system where behavior is patterned with some features in the system and some outside. In case analysis, the researcher seeks "both what is common and what is particular about the case" (Stouffer, 1941, cited in Stake, p. 438). A conversation circle can be viewed as one such system where behavior is mediated by the government prescription and the social interactions of the participants involved.

By studying four conversation circle groups, this study became a collective case study that sought to explore the variety and similarity of interactions in order to gain a better understanding of a larger collection of conversation circles. The cases in this study provided rich enough descriptions and working hypotheses that researchers and practitioners could determine the significance and transferability of the findings to their own situations (Donmoyer, 2001).

In this article, I focus on the pre-interviews, which elicited participants' perceptions of roles and gathered demographic information for the four volunteers and 16 learners. Cresswell (2003) summarized that individuals "develop subjective meanings of their experiences.… These meanings are varied and multiple, leading the researcher to look for the complexity of views rather than narrowing meanings into a few categories or ideas" (p. 8). Thus the goal of my research was to "rely as much as possible on the participants' views of the situation being studied" (p. 8). The interview portion thus became an important portion of the case study.

The interviews included open-ended questions that allowed the participants to describe their backgrounds and express their views on conversation circles freely. I modified questions, or in some cases omitted them, when a participant was unable to understand. Also, as participants responded to the questions, I encouraged expansion, which added to the richness of the data collected. Each interview lasted roughly 15-30 minutes. The interviews were then transcribed and the transcripts were read and reread as I searched for emergent themes relating to the participants' understandings of the conversation circle as a whole and roles in this context. After developing a sense of emergent themes, I open-coded, translating participants' speech into emergent categories for the purpose of analysis (Kerlinger, 1986). The identification of themes was guided by a theoretical framework of power and language acquisition as summarized above. The analysis documented recurring themes and patterns in each interview and also across the transcripts of all the participants. The transcripts were re-analyzed to identify additional themes that were more salient in other interviews. The themes were then compared and contrasted with each other.

Context

Because of the drop-in nature of the Host Program (for both volunteers and learners), the ratio of learners to volunteers can vary greatly from one-to-one up to even six-to-one. And though people may gravitate to familiar faces, the group formation varies each week. These groups are composed of mixed levels, sexes, and cultures. Although some volunteers may have material prepared, usually informal conversation dominates throughout the designated hour and a half.

Table 1: Participants' Backgrounds

*Volunteer Person	Age	Country	Sex	Accommodation	Occupation	Education
Nancy*	**30s**	**Canada**	**Female**	**Own home**	**Software instructor**	**College**
Nancy's Group Members						
Anya	20s	Slovakia	Female	Relatives	English student	Teaching degree
Hong	40s	China	Female	Family	Researcher	Medical degree
NaYoung	31	South Korea	Female	Relatives	English student	University
Hyunmi	28	South Korea	Female	Canadian host family	English student	Hospitality services degree
Hilka*	**20s**	**Finland**	**Female**	**Apartment**	**Student**	**University**
Hilka's Group Members						
Hwakil	26	South Korea	Male	Shares with 6 other internationals	English student	Media degree
Sangmin	27	South Korea	Male	Canadian host family	Independent student	University
Johanna	30s	Colombia	Female	Family	English student	?
Aadi	27	Sri Lanka	Female	Family	English student	Drafting degree
Gerardo	45	Colombia	Male	Family	English student	Civil Eng. degree
Colleen*	**50s**	**Canada**	**Female**	**Own home**	**Volunteer/ personal care**	**University**
Colleen's Group Members						
Ahmed	23	Libya	Male	Libyan friend	English student	University
Sveta	50s	Ukraine	Female	Family	Unemployed	University
Naomi	39	Japan	Female	Family	English student	Music degree
Marta*	**20s**	**Colombia (4)**	**Female**	**Own home**	**Recent graduate**	**University**
Marta's Group Members						
Chen	42	China	Female	Family	English student	Medical degree
María	50	Colombia	Female	Family	English student	University
Amani	50s	Iran	Female	Family	English student	?
Jing	36	China	Female	Family	Respiratory therapy student	University

ANNE VAN GILST

Participants

The study included four volunteers from the Host Program and the 16 English-language learners who expressed interest in my study (all participants' names are psuedonyms). These volunteers had no classroom TESL training, although they had all participated in some of the Host Program's monthly workshops on various language and settlement issues. The language-learners varied in language level, ethnicity, age, and sex.

Emergent Themes: Volunteer Roles

Low affective filter. Throughout the interviews, the theme of feeling comfortable and relaxed was most frequently referred to by the volunteers both explicitly and implicitly. Indeed, creating an atmosphere of comfort was often the reason cited for performing a number of roles and other actions. The volunteers intuitively believed that language-learning would be enhanced by a low-anxiety environment (i.e., low-affective filter, see Krashen, 1982). Hilka said, "I just want to make sure that at all times they're relaxed, so that they don't view me as one of their teachers." Hilka's view highlighted Norton's (2000) notion that learners may guard interaction with those in whom they have a symbolic investment such as teachers who control evaluation.

A common phrase used throughout the interviews was "relax and have fun." Hilka, Colleen, and Nancy mentioned the intentional use of humor or a willingness to make fools of themselves, to help the learners relax and realize that volunteers are not "going to judge" them (Hilka). In addition, Hilka related how her experiences learning English and being in a new country herself helped learners to relax because they knew she understood and empathized with them. She also focused on reassuring them that it was OK to make mistakes:

> I keep telling them, cause they're so afraid of making mistakes when they talk. I'm like, listen, I've been here for this long and I still make them. So I kind of try and say nobody's perfect. I make them [mistakes] and I've studied for almost 20 years. And I'm like, you know what, nobody's expecting them to be perfect.

Marta added that encouragement, affirmation, and listening carefully to what learners were saying increased comfort levels: "I'm trying to just listen to what they are saying and encourage them to communicate." Hilka also advised other volunteers to listen and "enjoy the people around you. Learn from them, what they've gone through, and why they're here." Nancy, Hilka, and Colleen also noted that building relationships with the learners made subsequent conversation sessions more comfortable.

The volunteers were clearly positioning themselves as leaders responsible for creating a low-anxiety environment. They seemed to be intuitively con-

scious of some of the strategies to reduce anxiety such as humor, allowing mistakes, and providing encouragement (Gregersen, 2005; Oxford, 1999). Absent from their discussion, however, was explicit mention of the active process of identifying learners who might be experiencing anxiety. As Gregersen (2005, 2009) suggested, learning to identify indicative auditory and visual cues may facilitate the creation of the desired environment.

Similarly, a number of learners agreed that a volunteer's role included creating a good atmosphere. Gerardo explained, "For me every topic is good. I think the way is more important. The energy, the energy of everybody, the leader keep that energy. This is important." Such energy was echoed by Ahmed, who requested that the volunteer make fun. Many of the learners also related that the use of humor helped them to relax and enjoy the conversation.

Hong related how she felt better because the volunteers understood her despite her mistakes—nobody was evaluating her, and the groups were small. Similarly, Hwakil preferred it when volunteers smiled. When they smiled, he felt that the volunteers were not frustrated by his poor attempts to learn English, whereas a "strict face" with scrunched eyebrows, he explained, caused him to stop trying. Hwakil's comments support Gregersen's (2005) call for teachers to consider what their own nonverbal signals are communicating to their students.

The learners related feeling comfortable if the volunteers really seemed to be listening to them and were interested in what they were saying. Sangmin told of how when a conversation volunteer appeared to be listening and enjoying the conversation, he felt really happy. For example, if a volunteer asked the right questions in the right places, or if the volunteer asked for clarification, rather than just saying uh-uh, he felt he was being listened to. But when there were no responses from a volunteer to his utterances, or a volunteer looked bored, that made him "feel bad." He assured me that this rarely happened. Sveta spoke of her need to be listened to: "When I was in Canada, I found it was difficult to find exactly truly Canadian who would like to speak with you. Because if they have trouble to understand, just sometime ignore."

Interestingly, learners linked volunteer listening to lower anxiety levels. To date, none of the literature seems to consider the role of listening as a correlate to anxiety reduction. On reflection, however, effective listening may do much to value learners' contributions, subsequently enabling identity construction and helping to increase feelings of self-efficacy. And although this positioning might place volunteers in the hierarchical mode, the act of listening and helping students feel comfortable worked to move students toward an autonomous mode where they were willing to take risks to contribute and participate in the decision-making process of the group.

Topicalization. To help learners relax, Hilka recommended discussing light-hearted topics chosen by the participants. All the volunteers agreed that learners should pick their own topics, "rather than … imposing on them" (Colleen). Marta also explained:

> We want them to initiate conversation. If they ask us to help, certainly we're there for that, but I don't know if we're supposed to … I want to make them feel really comfortable, you know what I mean? Let's talk about whatever. Ask me questions.

Marta believed that selecting their own topics would build the learners' comfort level. Hilka also said that she was not there to expound her ideas, but rather she wanted to sit back and let learners discuss what was of interest to them. The volunteers expressed reluctance, especially in the case of Marta, to claim the power of choosing topics.

Although they all agreed that learners should control topicalization, they saw their role, like Marta above, as providing topics mostly when they were asked for them or as back-up when conversation slowed. As such, the volunteers described part of their role as keeping the conversation going. On such occasions, some of the volunteers related choosing topics based on the learners' interests. All the volunteers indicated the need to avoid religious or political topics, so that others would not be offended and the tone of the conversations would be kept fun and light-hearted. Although the volunteers desired to promote autonomous mode interaction, they admitted that at times they needed to act in a more hierarchical mode by initiating topics or in a cooperative mode by using participants' interests to guide the topic.

In responses to questions about who was responsible for topic selection, I received conflicting messages from the learners. Chen related that the topic should "depend on what they [the learners] want," and others echoed this belief. However, later Chen expressed her opinion that volunteers should provide topics, especially for newcomers. She explained how newcomers have many questions and issues, but sometimes "they do not know enough to even know what to ask." She felt that volunteers should "do some research for the newcomer" and present cultural information to them that would help in their daily life. Chen, Johanna, Na Young, and Hyunmi all pointed out that often the same topics were repeated in conversation circles and that they were not very interesting.

Hong expressed her desire for the volunteer to provide topics for expanded discussions so that she could learn vocabulary sets in context, whereas Jing expressed her desire to learn about other countries and explore topics related to Canadian systems. Although Jing also suggested that the volunteers should provide topics, she added that if a topic did not feel good, one could change it. For example, Jing did not want to discuss food, whereas María did not want "another conversation about the weather." Obviously,

learners have varied interests, and it is impossible to find topics that will interest all of them all the time. However, the learners' responses suggested the desire for a balance of responsibility between the volunteer and the learner. The learners clearly did not want sole responsibility for topicalization and were giving the volunteer some power to make these choices. This balance suggests that in the case of topicalization, the cooperative mode may be valuable in that the volunteer can lead the conversation in the beginning but also prompt the learners to direct discussion toward areas of interest.

Like the volunteers, a few of the learners discussed the importance of avoiding religious or political topics. Sangmin told of an unpleasant experience.

> *Sangmin:* I'm from Korea and one of my friends, she's Japanese. The Korean and the Japanese used to be a bad situation … Some guy asked me like, Do Korean usually hate Japanese people, right? So I say, "Yes we used to," but I don't know how to stop say.
> *Researcher:* Avoid?
> *Sangmin:* Yes, avoid his questions, and he asked my friend. Does Japanese like Korean people? It is very rude, and I don't like that.

Here Sangmin is sharing his discomfort with such a question. Had he felt more confident, he might have explained his discomfort to the volunteer. However, Sangmin felt that he could not or should not exercise his power of silence, despite his discomfort. The volunteer in this situation seemed to control the participant's contributions, not only by enforcing explicitness, but also by formulating the answer (Fairclough, 1989). This story suggests that volunteers need to be aware of the pressure to answer that learners may feel when asked a direct question, especially a religious or political one. Johanna and Sangmin further illuminated the problem.

> *Johanna:* It's difficult to speak about that in our own language. It's more difficult in other language.… When we speak well English, speak about politics and religion.
> *Sangmin:* And also, remember we cannot speak English very well, so sometimes we talk we wanna say A, but it becomes to mean just like completely different.… It can other people hurt. So that's why I don't want to talk very serious things.

Johanna and Sangmin are aware of their disadvantage when debating issues, particularly with native speakers. They lack the confidence and/or skills, and thus the power, not only to express their view accurately, but also to defend their point of view. Volunteers need to be aware of such power differentials in their circles and should consider ways to mitigate these differentials when discussing sensitive topics.

Facilitating turn-taking. To make that sure all participants have a chance to communicate, all but one of the volunteers mentioned the need to facilitate turn-taking. This facilitation was particularly important, Nancy explained, when there were varied skill levels around the table so that the more advanced learners did not dominate the conversation. Most of the volunteers felt that facilitation was necessary to curb enthusiastic learners who dominated the conversation or vied for the volunteer's attention. They agreed that directed turn-taking helped to draw out shy or self-conscious learners. Hilka related an instance of how when one woman in the group was not talking, she focused on her and by the end of the conversation, the woman was participating with the rest of the group. Marta described how she would alternate and direct questions toward a quiet person. Nancy explained how in such cases she would go around the table often asking each person in sequence the same question.

I was interested to note some of the language used to describe turn-taking. Phrases such as "I let them speak," "before I switch off," "make them," or "I get her to" were sprinkled throughout the discussions on turn-taking. Such verbs imply a sense of volunteer authority and agency over learners. As the language use implies, volunteers at times place themselves in positions of power over learners through directing turn-taking (Fairclough, 1989), resulting in controlling the participants' contributions at least to some degree. In discussing turn-taking, all the volunteers implicitly expressed a need sometimes to facilitate in the hierarchical mode for the purpose of making sure that all learners were able to participate.

In addition, all the volunteers were adamant that they needed to limit their own talking. Nancy described how she thought "the challenge for us native speakers is to be quiet." She related how one easily found oneself controlling the table, and how she tried as much as possible "to shut up." She acknowledged the need to answer learners' questions, but offered a strategy of limiting answers to brief explanations. These snippets allowed learners to ask for more information, thus letting them guide the conversation and giving them an opportunity to practice questioning. Marta also said how she tried to talk "very little": "I've learned to sit down wherever you're needed, and then from there you just learn to listen." However, she admitted that when asked questions, she needed to answer them satisfactorily out of respect. Hilka agreed that "it's more important that they [the learners] talk." However, all the learners indicated that one of the main reasons they came to the conversation circle was to practice listening to native speakers. This pointed to the need for a balance between volunteers' listening and participating in the conversation. This desire for listening may point to the need for volunteers to prompt the learners to ask questions in order to receive the listening practice they need.

Like the volunteers, all the learners interviewed felt that facilitating turn-taking was an important responsibility of the volunteer. However, they did not focus on curbing learners who dominated; rather, they expressed the need for the volunteer to draw out quiet and shy participants. Johanna's story highlighted the importance of this:

> Two or three weeks ago, my daughter, you know my daughter, she went to go here with me. And the conversation circle, she stay in the corner and never participate in the conversation.… Three people here and my daughter in the corner, and the volunteer never say you know, what think about that. My daughter is teenager—shy—and she stay in the corner all the time and not participate. She say no mom, I don't like.

Unfortunately, Johanna's daughter never returned to another conversation circle. Confident, outgoing learners may rarely experience this problem, whereas quiet or self-conscious learners may experience such situations daily. Learners placed the important responsibility of drawing out quiet learners on the volunteer. Indeed, they expected the volunteer to exercise authority in these situations. Most learners indicated that volunteers should ask simple questions to draw out quiet participants. Sveta, Hong, and Chen all described how they would prefer a volunteer to ask everyone in the group the same question to ensure that they all had turns and so that they were also able to learn from each other's responses. These three clearly positioned the volunteer in the hierarchical mode, giving him or her power to control the contributions of the group.

Perhaps not surprisingly, none of the learners viewed drawing out shy learners as their role. From this absence arose three questions: Why did learners not perceive this role as an equally shared responsibility, when many of them were also capable of asking questions? Did something prevent them from assuming such a role? How could volunteers have guided learners to play that role?

Monitoring understanding and modifying speech. Throughout the interview process, volunteers related how they monitored understanding. Nancy, Hilka, and Mary told of asking questions to monitor if learners had understood, although they each described different methods. Nancy did not rely on learners to tell her that they had not understood, but instead watched for body language to tell her whether someone understood. She also monitored understanding based on the responses to specific questions. In response, she would then repeat or try and make her sentences simpler. Hilka also told how she would try and "read" learners to monitor understanding. She coupled this with asking, "Do you understand?" or drawing conclusions based on answers that were not congruent with the questions. Colleen told how she would sometimes ask learners explicitly to explain their understanding, so as to make sure they had "the right information." Colleen's

words suggested a transmission model, where she taught the correct information. Also, by asking learners to share their understandings, she was exerting more power and was controlling not only their contributions, but also their understanding.

Indeed, any direct question limits the choice of the learners to respond or not. Thus volunteers exert power by enforcing explicitness (Fairclough, 1989), operating in the hierarchical mode. However, by monitoring understanding, volunteers include everyone in the conversation. The resulting comprehension empowers learners, enabling them to contribute or voice their opinion. In such situations, the connection between the hierarchical mode and autonomy becomes more apparent. The hierarchical mode may help guide the learners toward autonomously participating in the conversation.

The volunteers talked about how they modified their speech to help learners understand. Hilka recommended that volunteers match their English to the learners' levels. Marta also admitted that she modified quite a bit. Laughing, she related how sometimes she found herself starting to speak like her learners. She acknowledged that such modification might not be the ideal because "you're obviously not challenging them." Colleen added that she spoke a lot slower and tried to enunciate her words better. Nancy expressed how she "pared down her language" and tried to eliminate slang and idioms. All the volunteers saw the practical need to modify their speech in order to provide comprehensible input. Still, although some modification is necessary to ensure that learners can participate, by modifying too much, one might eliminate the gaps or the i+1 (Krashen, 1982) that challenge and provide learning opportunities for the learner. Perhaps more interactional modifications, as when Nancy related modifying her speech after realizing that the participants did not understand, may play an even larger role in learning (Long, 1981).

Similar to the volunteers' perceptions, most learners thought the volunteers should monitor the groups' understanding and ensure that everyone understood the gist of the conversation. The volunteers should, they agreed, adjust their language level so that all the participants understand. Gerardo explained,

> I think the volunteer have … has to be a person, who try that everyone understand in the conversation.… When you come to conversation circle you don't know English, so the volunteer have to repeat something, speak slowly. Some volunteer are very good, but another speak fast, speak for the people who know, but the people who don't know stay out.

Similarly, many of the learners felt that a conversation volunteer needed to speak more slowly to help them understand. Such modifications act to equal-

ize the power relations, because increased comprehension increases meaningful participation and lessens exclusion.

On the other hand, Johanna admitted that it was important for the volunteer to speak fast sometimes because on the street people spoke fast and she was not used to that. She concluded, "Sometimes fast, sometimes slow." A more advanced learner, Na Young, said she "preferred [volunteers] to speak a little bit faster," so that she could "catch up with other Canadians' fast speech." Chen also expressed her need for volunteers to speak with less modification, so that she could learn to listen better and learn new words. She recognized, however, the need for volunteers to ensure that all understood. These differences of opinion highlighted the difficulties facing groups with both advanced and beginner learners.

Providing feedback. Of the four volunteers, only Colleen indicated that her role included correcting grammar and pronunciation, saying, "That is something they really need." The rest indicated that they did not correct very often as "it interrupts the conversation too much" (Nancy). All of them, including Colleen, wanted to avoid stopping the flow of conversation and making learners feel self-conscious. They all, however, related instances when someone asked them to correct, and how when they had built a relationship with a person, they corrected more. When asked how they provided feedback, Hilka and Marta both said that they gently told the person, "I would say it like this," or "it's clearer if you say it this way." Colleen was explicit in her corrections, tried to provide the correct form immediately, and would occasionally give mini-lessons if she observed learners making the same mistake frequently. Nancy related that the only time she would correct learners was if she "really couldn't understand them." In those instances, she would ask the learner to repeat the statement and help them with the words if necessary. According to Long (1996) and Lyster (2001), instances of such negotiation produce linguistic uptake. Three of the volunteers pushed aside the authority to correct. They viewed their role as only occasionally encompassing this facet of the hierarchical mode.

Almost all the learners expressed a desire for volunteers to correct more of their pronunciation and grammar. A few even expressed disappointment that they had not been corrected more. Sveta, who had recently lost a job because of her English, expressed her desperation to be corrected.

> I always ask people who talk with me to correct me. Nobody do that. Nobody. I ask always because I need it…. Even pronunciation, no. Nobody want to correct, and I need this lessons for correction…. Because if I speak, I don't know my mistakes. Nobody correct me.

Learners like Sveta, who are outside of the school environment, often lack opportunities where clear, constructive feedback is provided, and they look to contexts like the conversation circle to provide this. Indeed, those in the

study who had been in Canada longer or had pressing needs to pass gate-keeping proficiency tests were more likely to cite providing feedback as the most desired role of a volunteer.

Although the learners wanted feedback, opinions varied on how it was best provided. Everyone agreed that it was impossible and not productive to correct every mistake, especially for beginners who might become afraid to speak. Chen suggested that a volunteer should focus on one kind of mistake, like tenses one time and stress the next. Many suggested that quick, immediate feedback in the form of recasts was the form most conducive to conversational fluency. Hong wanted to be able to finish her sentences and have volunteers correct her mistakes when she did so. If stopped in mid-sentence, she feared she would be unable to continue her thought. Some, like Sangmin, felt that understanding and correcting a problem even at the cost of conversation was more important. The variety of opinions was not surprising because researchers are exploring the same issue. And because the effectiveness of feedback depends on a number of variables such as context and language level (Lyster, 2001), instruction in the area of feedback may be a valuable addition to volunteer training programs.

Despite these variables, learners relayed the strong message that they wanted feedback. The provision of feedback was in contrast to all but one of the volunteers' perspectives on correction. This suggested that the learners were situating the volunteers in positions of power that most of the volunteers seemed reluctant to assume.

Providing new vocabulary. Only Nancy and Colleen explicitly presented the volunteer role as providing and explaining new vocabulary. Nancy related how she would write down new words as they came up in conversation, to make sure that everyone knew what they meant, and would provide brief explanations. She also discussed how as the relationships built, she encouraged learners to bring her words. Subsequently, some learners, she related, would ask her about words heard during the past week, even before sitting down at the table. Hilka also referred to occasionally providing words in translation for Spanish-speakers during a conversation. In contrast, Colleen emphasized the importance of introducing slang and idioms to the group, providing lists of idioms rather than those used in the context of a conversation. Hilka, Nancy, and Marta differed from Colleen in their approaches. For the first three, vocabulary help would arise from the context, or it would be based on learners' questions. This method would lend itself to a cooperative mode of facilitation that was learner-centered. However, because Colleen would choose the slang or idiom to teach, she was facilitating more in a hierarchical mode.

Echoing Colleen's notion, explicit teaching of slang was also desired by some of the learners. A number of the learners felt that volunteers should introduce slang, idioms, and new vocabulary to them. Chen expressed her

frustration with street language and wanted volunteers to teach her these idioms and slang words. She also wanted the volunteers to "talk … just like … Canadian people." And Junko and Ahmed clarified that they wanted volunteers to explain new vocabulary that was used in the context of a conversation. These perceptions correspond with the volunteers' understanding of their role to help with vocabulary in context, although Chen's comment suggests that less modification would help more advanced learners.

Providing knowledge. A few learners like Gerardo and Chen believed that a volunteer should be knowledgeable, although they did not explain what they meant by that term. Sangmin stated that he preferred native speakers to lead because he was worried about learning incorrect language forms. He felt that for beginners it was not as important, but for more advanced learners, native-speakers could provide more correct forms and native ways of saying things. These perceptions imply that at least some learners desired volunteers to be authorities from whom they could attain knowledge, and these perceptions suggest that learners might be reluctant to learn from each other.

The theme of *volunteer as knowledge-provider* did not arise in interviews with volunteers. However, Marta emphasized how she tried to avoid the role of advice-provider. She felt that because advice was so subjective, a learner could be let down when following advice that did not prove helpful. The others also stated that they would never give advice on settlement or immigration issues because incorrect information could prove detrimental for a newcomer. Such hesitation seemed wise given learners' perceptions of the volunteer's position as a knowledgeable authority. The learner might rely on the volunteer's advice without confirming the correctness of the information.

Emergent Themes: Learners' Roles

When asked to comment on the learner's role, most of the volunteers answered that the learner's only role was to participate and have a positive attitude toward learning. Also, earlier in their discussion of topicalization, the volunteers hoped that learners would guide the selection of topics, implying a shared role. I was surprised that the volunteers did not specify other roles. Such a view seemed not to encourage an autonomous mode of facilitation, especially when three of the volunteers expressed that they were not like teachers. However, I recognize that volunteers might have been hesitant to assign roles to other people, and I realize that this lack of role identification did not necessarily reflect the practice of roles.

In keeping with the volunteers' comments, the most common learner role cited by the learners was the need to participate. Some, like Aadi, only indicated the responsibility of speaking with the volunteer, although María clarified the need to talk with the other learners too. Furthermore, most learners stated that learners should respect others and allow them to speak.

Sveta advised other learners: "Don't interrupt each other. Respect each other. Give everybody the same opportunity to talk." Jing especially emphasized the need for fluent speakers to give lower-level speakers more opportunity to speak. However, many of the learners agreed that it was difficult for a volunteer to control some learners when "they talk louder than the volunteer" (Sangmin). Johanna and Sangmin agreed that they avoided sitting with learners who tended to dominate the conversation. Sangmin joked, "I usually try and run away from them." Sangmin and Johanna's avoidance supports Dörnyei and Malderez's (1999) notion that groups can and do "sanction— directly or indirectly—those who fail to conform to what is considered acceptable" (p. 161).

These perceptions reveal that the learners were claiming more responsibility than the volunteers perceived them as having. Indeed, the need to control dominating learners was not always viewed as the volunteer's role, but as the learner's responsibility to self-regulate. For this reason, explicit discussion of group norms as discussed by Dörnyei and Malderez (1999) might help alleviate this problem. Perhaps explicit discussion of these norms could prevent uncomfortable feelings created by such indirect sanctions, and those who dominate might become aware that such behavior is not operating within the subject positions established by the group.

Conclusion

In sum, most of the learners interviewed perceived the volunteers as having positions of power in the conversation circle context. Indeed, they expressed expectations for the volunteer to operate often in the hierarchical mode, facilitating turn-taking, offering corrections, and assuming some control over topicalization. Learners, however, did want a degree of autonomy in selecting topics for conversations and in choosing their own contributions. These perspectives implied that learners were trusting volunteers with this power in the expectation that volunteers in return would help them to gain access to the language, that they would be made comfortable, and that they would be empowered to voice their stories and opinions and assisted in understanding the conversation. The learners' perceptions supported Cummins' (1996) notion that "power is created with others rather than being imposed" (p. 15). In this context, learners at least partly created the power of the volunteer.

It follows, then, that learners may feel comfortable (as they all expressed feeling) in conversation circles because they are operating in participant roles, or subject positions, of a discourse that they have helped create. In a conversation circle, learners do not have to follow the gatekeeping conventions of a foreign discourse they had no part in creating (i.e., the academic presentation, job interview). Instead, like Johnson (2004), I would argue that especially in this context, learners have created their own discourse through

interaction. Although the gathering was organized by an institution, the learners have helped create the newcomer role in the conversation circle. This context has created its own conventions, but these conventions arose out of the needs and experiences of the learners and interactions with the volunteers.

In contrast, most of the volunteers interviewed displayed a clear reluctance to use the power attributed to them by the learners. Most of them felt that they were not there in authoritarian roles, but rather were intended to facilitate the conversation based on learner-directed needs. For the most part, they verbalized a desire to facilitate through autonomous and cooperative modes of facilitation. According to Cummins (1996), this is a healthy desire that avoids coercive power relations and should be the goal of facilitation; however, these contrasting views point toward the need for a balancing act between autonomy and authority. Thus Heron's (1999) modes of facilitation become a valuable lens through which to view the role of the volunteer: Heron argued that leaders should balance hierarchical, cooperative, and autonomous modes of facilitation in order to foster group autonomy. He contended that in the formation of a new group, the hierarchical mode provided a safe environment for the early development of cooperation and autonomy, because participants—lacking the necessary knowledge and skills, and I will add confidence—would rely on the leader for guidance. There should be, Heron added, cooperative and autonomous exchanges even in this state. Later, the participants' acquired confidence will allow them to increase their role in group decision-making and cooperation in the learning process. When the group reaches maturity, power is passed to the group members in order to self-direct their learning. These modes can be adapted to the modes of conversation that volunteers navigate as they seek to create a vibrant conversation where all are participating, interacting, and initiating conversation, making language-learning a reality.

I came to view this mature autonomous state as a community of practice (Wenger, 1998, 2005), which is formed by participants who in this context desire for themselves and others development of communicative competence in Canadian society. However, it seemed that most learners were reluctant to view the conversation circle as such a community and instead relied on the volunteer as being central to their learning, not always considering the scaffolding that they could provide to each other in the learning process. Thus through my analysis, I came to view the role of the volunteer as a facilitator who operates in all three modes of facilitation in order to provide scaffolding to strengthen and be part of building a community of practice.

These findings have implications for training volunteers. The intention is not to give a set of roles or best practices for volunteers to play. Indeed, that would be impossible because each mode and role depends on the group

members' experiences, language levels, and personalities. However, by learning more about the roles they may already be playing, perceptions of roles, and possible learning opportunities that may result, volunteers can become more intentional about the choices they make.

This study also points to the potential benefits of teaching volunteers to identify anxiety cues and effective forms of feedback. In addition, the practice of explicit discussion of feedback, turn-taking, and group norms could work toward narrowing the gap between volunteers' and learners' expectations of conversation circle roles.

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