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'Small Talk': developing fluency, accuracy, and complexity in speaking

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A major issue that continues to challenge language teachers is how to ensure that learners develop accuracy and complexity in their speaking, as well as fluency. Teachers know that too much corrective feedback (CF) can make learners reluctant to speak, while not enough may allow their errors to become entrenched. Furthermore, there is controversy over the effectiveness of recasts (the most common form of CF) in promoting acquisition. This article explores a methodology, 'Small Talk', which aims to resolve some of the tensions between the need to encourage truly communicative language use and the need to develop complexity and to bring focus on forms into the syllabus in ways that can be recognized as valid and relevant by both teachers and learners. It presents some preliminary research on the viability of this CF methodology premised on attention to, and arising from the needs of, the individual learner.

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Introduction

A perennial struggle for teachers is how to develop both accuracy and fluency in students' speaking since one often seems to come at the expense of the other. On top of this, we have the even greater challenge of coaxing our students out of their comfort zones towards greater complexity (Skehan 1998), especially when the language they have appears to be adequate for their communicative purposes. Different theoretical positions have had dramatic and conflicting influences on teaching methodology, so it is not always clear what we should be doing to best serve our students. If they practise pronunciation, vocabulary, and grammar, will they use them spontaneously and correctly when necessary? Should we teach grammar explicitly, and if so, which forms should we teach? Should we correct errors, and if so, how, and which ones? The wise teacher employs an eclectic combination of methods depending on the teaching context and the students in the classroom, but it is hard to escape the feeling that eclectic often simply means unsystematic.

The limitations of contemporary language teaching

Many teachers resist the strong form of communicative language teaching (CLT) because it does not have 'concrete', 'tangible' content and, therefore, does not equate with 'real' teaching. This is hardly surprising since the one area in which language teachers have traditionally had expertise, the structure of the language, is off-limits in the strong form of CLT; all that remains is coaching learners on how to get their message across, which in the final analysis can be done with very limited linguistic resources,

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provided that formal accuracy is not a major concern or a concern at all. Indeed, Gatbonton and Segalowitz (2005: 327) see 'no provisions in current CLT methodologies to promote language use to a high level of mastery through repetitive practice', noting that 'focused practice continues to be seen as inimical to the inherently open and unpredictable nature of communicative activities'. Thus, while we can fairly assume that a teacher-centred classroom in which the main focus is on linguistic form will not lead to fluency, we can also be confident that a focus on authentic communication alone will not lead to accuracy and complexity.

It could be that the pendulum will return towards pedagogy that prioritizes formal accuracy over communicative fluency, but I doubt this for several reasons. First, sociolinguistic research into language varieties has challenged the notion that there is a monolithic, 'correct' form—that of the 'native speaker'—against which the language of learners can be measured. Second, this challenge has increased pressure on researchers, materials writers, and teachers to check their linguistic intuitions against findings from corpus linguistics, which continue to shed light on the importance of context at both the linguistic and sociolinguistic level. Finally, language-teaching methodologies have become increasingly humanistic, stressing the importance of the learner in the language acquisition process. The heterogeneity of linguistic competence, learning styles, strategies, and degree of social investment of language learners is precisely the impetus for greater research efforts into pedagogical methodologies that depart from the prescriptive syllabus and encourage our reflective and intuitive capacity as teachers. The time is right for a responsive pedagogy premised on careful attention to, and arising from the needs of, the individual learner.

The origins of accuracy and fluency

Brumfit (1979) was the first to highlight the distinction between *fluency*, which represents the learner's 'truly internalized grammar', contrasting this with 'overt and conscious *accuracy*' (115, emphasis in original) and suggested that fluency should be 'regarded as natural language use, whether or not it results in native-speaker-like language comprehension or production' (Brumfit 1984: 56). When he introduced these terms as key concepts in second language acquisition (SLA) and syllabus design, Brumfit was also arguing for an approach to form- and meaning-focused teaching, which, it seems, has largely fallen on deaf ears. For instance, he proposed

> allowing people to operate as effectively as they [can], and attempting to mould what they [produce] in the desired direction, rather than explicitly teaching and expecting convergent imitation. (ibid.: 50)

That is, instead of giving learners language items to imitate and expecting their imitations gradually to conform to the model, teachers could discover what learners actually wanted to say and then teach them how to say it in the target language. None the less, it is still rare to leave learners to their own devices to produce 'natural language use', partly owing to the fear of exposing students to each others' errors, but also because in many classrooms students rarely have extended opportunities to produce language for themselves at all. Rarer still is the learner-driven syllabus that Brumfit proposed, one in which teaching is based on language production, and not the other way around.

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The role of corrective feedback in oral fluency activities

Corrective feedback (CF) literature to date has, with very few exceptions, examined feedback provided by teachers during teacher-fronted activities, in which the teacher controls the activity itself as well as the type and quantity of language produced. Research into the effects of such feedback has tentatively suggested a positive role for CF in the form of recasts, but has been weakened by methodological issues such as the interpretation of teacher intent and learner perception of recast moves (Mackey, Al-Khalil, Atanassova, Hama, Logan-Terry, and Nakatsukasa 2007) and the controversy over learner uptake as an indicator of either noticing or actual acquisition. Whether or not recasts are the most effective form of CF (see Ammar and Spada (2006) for a contrasting view) the pedagogical goal remains, to return to Brumfit, 'convergent imitation'.

What would an alternative pedagogy and CF approach look like? Brumfit (1979: 115), talks of the teacher modifying the learners' 'self-developed systems as reflected in the fluent language behaviour' claiming that teachers 'need to look at genuine language use in the classroom, to the extent that it can ever be really genuine' (Brumfit 1984: 52). But this presupposes two conditions: fluent—and genuine—language behaviour and a way to encourage learners to focus on the formal aspects of their production. Skehan (1996) suggests that these are unlikely to occur simultaneously since students engaged in genuine communicative interaction are likely to be too focused on meaning to pay attention to form. The same must be said of teachers; however, it is extremely difficult to participate in, let alone direct, a genuinely communicative interaction while simultaneously paying attention to and remembering the form of the utterances produced. Therefore a third condition is that teachers be free to listen carefully to both form and content of student utterances, which means being free from the responsibility to direct or even to participate in the interaction. This would permit teachers to become the experts on the language their students actually use and to design effective pedagogies to help them progress; and it would bring much-needed content to CLT and highly relevant content at that. The 'real teaching' that teachers feel is currently missing would be the language that the learners are striving for at that moment, rather than the syllabus imposed by textbooks, which is disconnected from the needs of the learner at best, and completely arbitrary at worst. And finally, since language learning occurs over time and learners' 'self-developed systems' are likely to change at different rates, it is essential that the CF methodology be responsive to the needs of the individual learner and that there be some systematic means of collecting, storing, analysing, and recalling the data collected.

The communicative methodology: 'Small Talk'

'Small Talk' began as an experiment in learner-centred, reflective teaching of oral communication over 20 years ago (Harris 1998) and has developed into a comprehensive approach to developing accuracy, fluency, and complexity in oral production. In a 'Small Talk' session, students use their communicative ability in conversation without intervention by the teacher, and then receive feedback. Each session has a pre-appointed student leader, who is responsible for choosing the topic, providing questions and relevant vocabulary to further the discussion, putting classmates into small groups, timing the conversation, and leading a 'check-in' session at the end, in

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which each group reports to the whole class on their conversation. The stages and timing of a 'Small Talk' session are usually similar to that shown below.

1	The day before the session, the leader announces the topic.	
2	At the beginning of the session, the leader writes discussion questions and vocabulary on the board, re-introduces the topic, and clarifies any confusion; the leader also puts the students into groups of three to four and tells the students to begin.	(3–5 minutes)
3	Groups discuss the topic.	(15–20 minutes)
4	The leader asks the groups to bring their conversation to a close and prepare for check in; the groups decide what to report to the class and who will do it.	(5 minutes)
5	The leader invites each group to check in with the class about the highlights of their conversation.	(5–10 minutes)
6	The leader thanks the class and reminds them of the next 'Small Talk' date and leader.	(1 minute)

The students are encouraged, in Stages 4 and 5 above, to reflect and report on the dynamics of their interaction and their own part in it. This makes explicit the quality of conversational interaction as both a cultural construct (i.e. different cultures 'do' conversation in very different ways) and a quantifiable variable (i.e. we can identify the features of appropriate interaction and evaluate our use of them).

The teacher, having no role in or responsibility for the conversations, is able to observe the interactions and afterwards to suggest ways in which they can be improved. In a typical 50-minute class, there are usually ten minutes at the end for 'coaching', when the teacher comments on the interaction and dynamics of the 'Small Talk' session. For instance, I often teach or remind quiet or non-fluent students ways to get their point across; I remind dominating talkers to be patient and to invite others to participate; and we practise how to 'listen actively', to show interlocutors our comprehension (or lack of it) and to interrupt for clarification whenever necessary. 'Small Talk' is thus effective in increasing the students' pragmatic competence since it gives them an opportunity to practise, in a relatively low-stress environment, the kinds of speech acts they would need in higher stress interactions outside the classroom. It also puts students in the position, as leaders, to practise a variety of speech acts and discourse management strategies that are usually restricted to the teacher.

'Small Talk' is very popular with students, as the following comments (from end-of-semester class evaluations) illustrate:

- its helped me in my speaking a lot.
- i think it will improve our skills.
- i really enjoy it because we chose our topic.
- i recommend it for student.

In addition, at least from teachers' untested observations, it is very effective in raising the level of fluency of lower-intermediate to advanced students in

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general and particularly of students from cultural backgrounds in which verbal participation is not encouraged. It is not suitable for true beginners, who do not have sufficient language for what Willis (2003: 22) calls 'improvisation', in which 'learners are obliged to make the most of the language they have at their command'. For them, perhaps more appropriate would be what Willis calls 'consolidation' activities, in which 'learners think through carefully what they want to say', which would more accurately describe most classroom tasks. However, even in improvisation activities (and perhaps *especially* then), students understandably want to know what they are *not* doing successfully, and 'Small Talk' also gives an opportunity for teachers, as observers of their students, to focus on accuracy.

'Small Talk' worksheets

Since the goal is for teachers not to intrude in the conversation with comments, recasts, or other corrective moves, CF is provided in the following way. It would be impossible to listen to four or five conversations (or however many groups there are) simultaneously, but teachers can catch a portion of each conversation, listening to each group in turn and writing down inaccurate language use, whether it interferes with the communicative flow or not. They then enter each error (typically 15 to 50 per 'Small Talk' session) with the name of the speaker into a computerized database,[1] noting the date of the 'Small Talk' session and the topic (Figure 1).

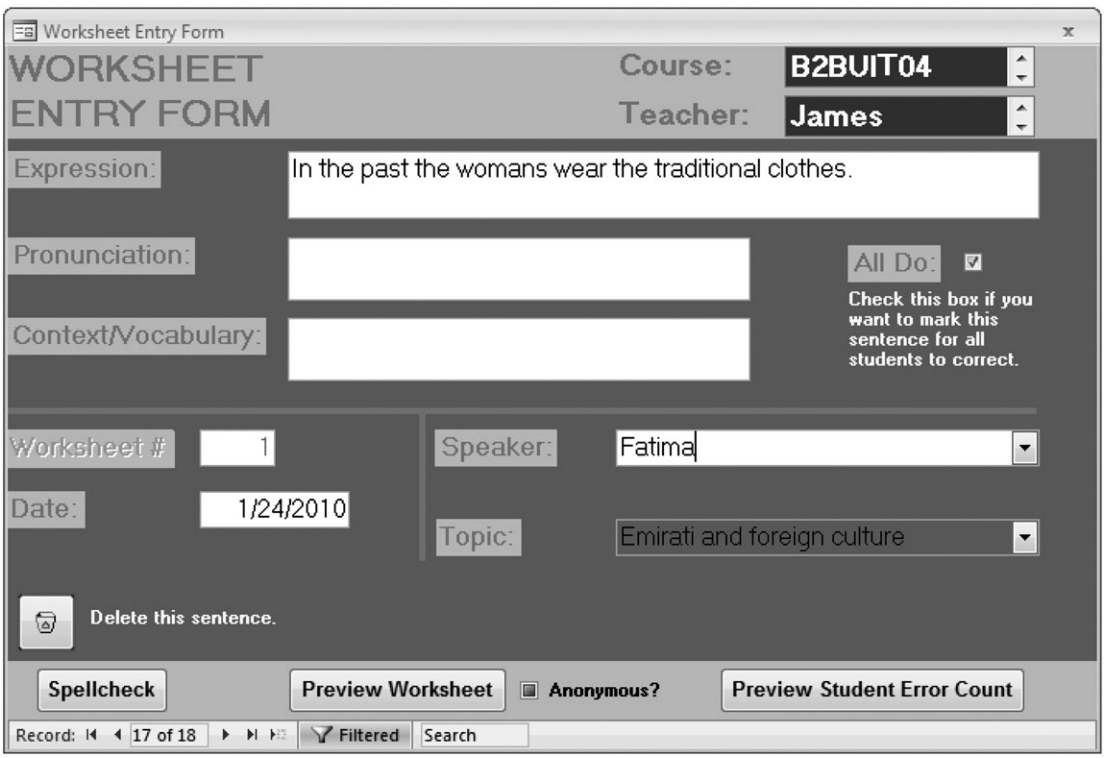

FIGURE 1
Worksheet entry form from the database

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Spring I, 2008	Level 105	WORKSHEET 3	Topic: 'My Favourite Place'	2/5/2008
Sentence	Expression	Speaker	Pronunciation	Context/Vocabulary
1	This is the natural park which called Kanding.	Terry	national/natural?	
2	Kanding is place name?	Taka		

FIGURE 2
Excerpt from a 'Small Talk' worksheet

Teachers also occasionally flag an item for all students to correct, regardless of who said it, which allows them to focus on specific language points. This option is especially useful in cases where several students are making similar kinds of errors. The database produces a worksheet of these errors (Figure 2), which is normally made available to the students within 24 hours of the conversation.

If certain individuals dominate the conversations, of course, this collection of errors would be biased towards those individuals and some students would rarely be heard by the teacher. Consequently, two mechanisms are in place to counteract this effect. First, as mentioned above, the teacher addresses domination during the coaching sessions and explicitly teaches discourse strategies to reduce it. Second, because the database keeps a running tally of the speakers and their errors, it is possible to form groups consisting of individuals who have not been heard as frequently (and who often tend to be quieter and less dominant) and spend more time (even the whole session, if necessary) listening exclusively to them.

CF options

Giving learners a written transcription of their errors enables them to correct any 'slips' they have made, and it might push them towards a more stable interlanguage form in cases where there is variability, and this alone makes the activity worthwhile. However, beyond that, if learners truly do not know how to say something because they lack the appropriate structure or vocabulary, some form of guidance is necessary to facilitate more accurate production in the future. Two choices present themselves. The first is to provide the students with some sort of written metalinguistic feedback to enable them to locate and correct the error (Figure 3). This option has intuitive appeal and widespread support in the literature, especially the literature on feedback in writing (Ellis 2009).

The second option is to provide the students with the printed worksheet of errors along with reformulated versions, as a competent speaker might say them, in the form of an audio recording. Students then listen to this in order to work out where the differences lie. As in a dictation, students have to listen very carefully to hear some of the less salient grammatical features (in particular, articles and verb inflections). Furthermore, this option gives teachers the opportunity to introduce alternative, often more complex, language forms that can express the students' intended meanings and has

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Spring I, 2008 Level 105 WORKSHEET 3 Topic: 'My Favourite Place' 2/5/2008

Sentence	Expression	Speaker	Pronunciation	Context/Vocabulary
1	art. ww? This is the natural park which called Kanding.	Terry	national/natural?	
2	art. Kanding is place name?	Taka		

FIGURE 3
Worksheet with metalinguistic feedback

the additional advantage of providing a correct model for phonological errors.

Pedagogically, both these options satisfy teachers' concerns that students actually do something with the CF, and in theoretical terms, the hypothesis is that this level of focus is more likely to lead to acquisition than the 'uptake' of simply repeating a teacher's recast. Since this is delayed CF, there is no immediate communicative need for the information, the moment has passed. However, it might better help students to 'notice the gap' (Schmidt and Frota 1986) because there is no simultaneous pressure to communicate. It also constitutes both explicit positive evidence and implicit negative evidence about the language (Long, Inagaki, and Ortega 1998).

However the feedback is provided, the students keep a running list of their own errors and errors which the teacher has flagged, on which they are tested every three to four weeks. The test requires them to look at these errors and orally correct as many as they can in a given amount of time, usually two or three minutes. As an example, the following sentences were taken from a conversation about 'Traditional and modern culture' from my class of 22 adult intermediate students (L1 Arabic):

* We can learn what their food, their cultures.
* In the past the womans wear the traditional clothes.
* Yeah, actually I'm agree with you.

When I tested the students on these sentences (and many others) six weeks later, all 22 could fluently produce correct forms, typically:

- We can learn what their food and their cultures are.
- In the past women wore traditional clothes.
- Yeah, actually I agree with you.

I do not claim that all the students had *acquired* all or any of the previously incorrect forms, and therefore that they would be able to produce the correct form fluently in novel contexts; but the focus on these forms did have the noticeable effect of promoting self-correction, especially of high-frequency chunks such as *' . . . I'm agree . . .', in subsequent 'Small Talk' sessions without any reduction in their overall willingness to speak. On the contrary,

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the students welcomed the individualized attention to their spoken production and felt more willing to try to express themselves knowing that I would be listening and providing feedback, as the following comment shows:

> I want to liste all of my sentences during small talk. I am not used to speak correct sentenses. So I am often surprised at seeing my mistakes. If I can get more sentenses, I can edit my sentenses more.

Questions

I made a small-scale study of the CF potential of 'Small Talk' with a class of 12 adult intermediate students (mixed L1) in an academic ESL program in the United States. Ten of the weekly 'Small Talk' sessions were videotaped (see the Appendix), and four of these were randomly selected for analysis. The conversations were transcribed and turns with errors were identified. I then asked five experienced teachers to watch the videos independently, without stopping or rewinding, and make worksheets just as I (the class teacher) had done during the sessions. In doing this, I wanted to address the following questions:

1. Do students get more speaking practice during 'Small Talk' than during a traditional, teacher-fronted class? Do they make more errors?
2. What percentage of students' errors receives CF, and what percentage of uptake is there?
3. Do some students receive more CF than others, and if so, why?

Results

In answer to the first question, the results from the four 'Small Talk' transcripts are shown in Table 1.

TABLE 1
Count of words, turns, and turns with errors in four transcripts

Topic	Time	Word count	Turns	Errors	% of turns with errors
Favourite place	31:53	1,756	308	87	28
Traditional food	33:32	2,795	326	111	34
$1 Million	32:35	2,723	344	95	28
Generation gap	26:20	2,696	279	106	38
Total	124	9,970	1,270	399	31

In this study, there were 1,270 student turns in 124 minutes of conversation; by way of comparison, the oft-cited study by Lyster and Ranta (1997: 52 and 62) documented 3,268 student turns in 1,100 minutes. Lyster and Ranta do not include word counts, but in turn count alone the students in 'Small Talk' spoke 3.5 times more than those in Lyster and Ranta's study. The percentage of student turns with errors in both studies is almost the same, 31 per cent in this study and 34 per cent in Lyster and Ranta's (ibid.: 52), meaning that the speakers left to their own devices not only spoke more but also made slightly fewer errors than those in teacher-controlled activities.

To address the second question, the number of erroneous utterances written down by each teacher over four 'Small Talk' sessions was calculated as a percentage of the number of student errors identified in the transcripts (Table 2).

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TABLE 2
Percentage of errors identified by teachers

Teacher						Mean
T1	T2	T3	T4	T5	T6	
34%	46%	36%	57%	42%	24%	40%

T1 was the class teacher.

The level of error identification by the teachers ranged from 24 per cent to 57 per cent, giving an overall average of 40 per cent. The figure of 34 per cent for T1 is the percentage of all errors from these four sessions that I actually provided to these students as CF. Even the low figure here (T6's 24 per cent) would probably be acceptable: if students knew that even a quarter of their errors would be identified by their teacher, they would certainly not feel that they were wasting time, let alone if they could be confident that around 40 per cent of the errors were being targeted. A comparison can again be made with the study by Lyster and Ranta (1997: 53), in which 'of the total number of errors produced by students, only 17 per cent of errors eventually lead to repair'; in 'Small Talk', an average of 40 per cent of student errors would eventually lead to uptake and repair since the students have to correct the worksheets.

In addressing the third question, the number of errors produced by each student (as identified in the transcripts) was compared to the number for each student on the teacher worksheets. In addition, I calculated the number of errors for each student that I (T1) identified over the entire semester, in other words the amount of CF that the students actually received over 16 weeks, giving a point of comparison for bias (Figure 4). (Three students who were not present for the entire semester, S2, S4, and S11, have been excluded from this analysis.)

The correlation between number of errors for each student found in the transcripts and numbers of errors for each student appearing on the worksheets of teachers was high, at .89. It is possible, of course, given the random sampling procedure (the students were grouped by the leader, the video recorded only a five- to seven-minute portion of each group's conversation), that some students would feature more than others and therefore that the teacher identification of errors would be skewed more towards them than others. It turns out, however, that all teachers identified more errors for students who were more inaccurate overall, regardless of how much they spoke. In other words, the CF provided closely reflected the needs of individual students.

Conclusion

We frequently tell our students that it is okay to make mistakes and that they will not make progress unless they talk more. However, we also frequently complain about the number of 'basic' errors that our students make. Willis (2003) reminds us that this is both inevitable and desirable: errors are part of the developmental process, and 'it is the learners' *attempts to mean* that pave the way for learning' (ibid.:110–111, emphasis added) and for noticing what they need to learn. While some might argue that allowing students at an intermediate or lower level to 'improvise' in the classroom could lead to linguistic anarchy, I agree with Willis that opportunities for improvisation in

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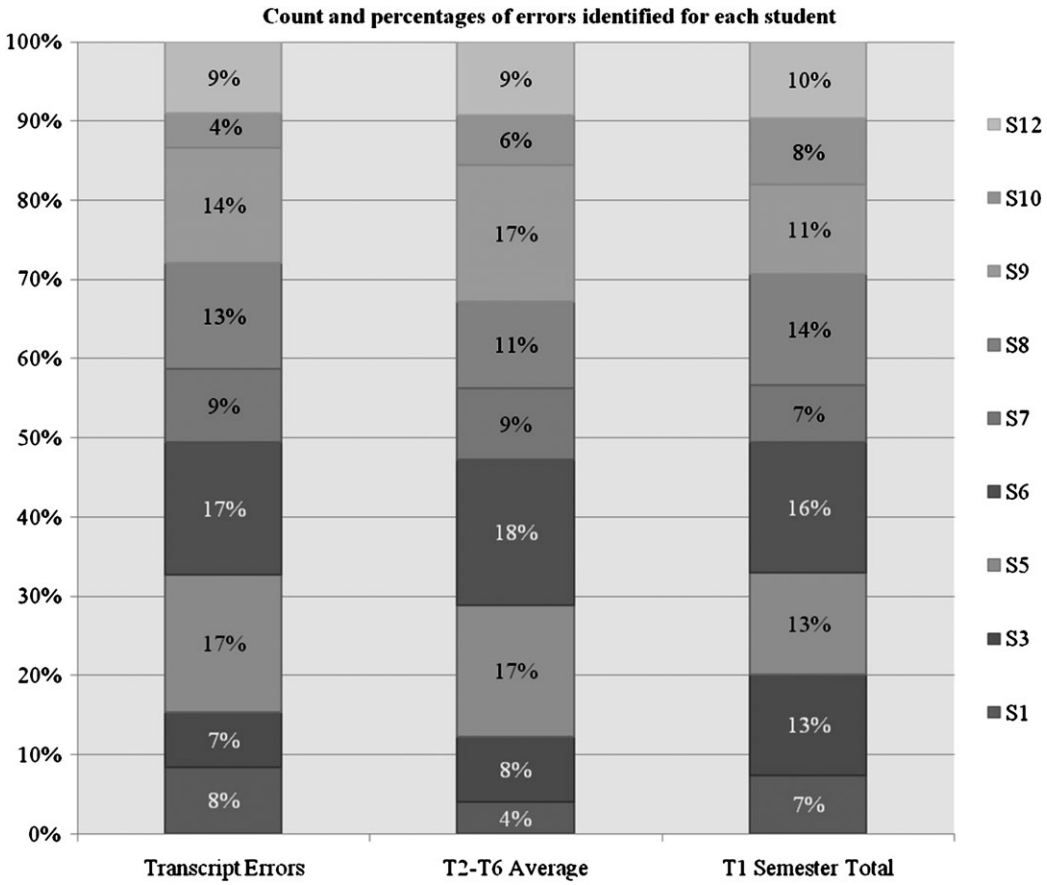

FIGURE 4
Identification of errors for each student in transcripts and by teachers

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the classroom are essential. Although space does not permit an analysis of the discourse structure of the conversations, the transcripts show, as Willis (1992) notes, that 'in the absence of the teacher, [students'] interaction becomes far richer' (ibid.:180).

However, without some consistent way of observing and recording these 'attempts to mean', interpreting them, teaching to them, and assessing subsequent learning, the teaching syllabus remains largely arbitrary and disconnected from the needs of the learner. 'Small Talk' is a consistent methodology for analysing and responding to learner language, and it appears to target learners differentially in response to their self-developed systems. It compares very favourably with the study of Lyster and Ranta (1997) of CF in terms of the quantity of student interaction and CF provided. Finally, my research indicates a connection between this methodology and the development of accuracy, complexity, and fluency, and I am currently looking at ways to evaluate the nature and strength of this connection.

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Note

1 A self-contained version of the database is available for download at http://www.gonzaga.edu/tesolresearch

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Appendix

Small Talk sessions, Level 105/6, Spring 2008

Level	Date	Worksheet no.	Topic
105	23 January 2008	1	Sports
105	28 January 2008	2	Childhood
105	4 February 2008	**3**	**Favourite place (31:53)**
105	12 February 2008	**4**	**Celebrations**
105	18 February 2008	**5**	**Dancing and parties**
105	21 February 2008	**6**	**Traditional food (33:32)**
105	26 February 2008	7	How to look after your body
106	25 March 2008	**1**	**Cohabitation**
106	27 March 2008	**2**	**Crime and punishment**
106	1 April 2008	3	Your dream
106	8 April 2008	**4**	**If you had $1 million (32:35)**
106	15 April 2008	**5**	**Conflict**
106	17 April 2008	6	Discussion of novel *Whirligig*
106	22 April 2008	**7**	**Teamwork**
106	24 April 2008	**8**	**Generation gap (26:20)**
106	29 April 2008	9	One day left on Earth

Bold items represent videotaped sessions

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