

Opening up and closing down

Many teachers are responsive to their students' talk and have a genuine interest in what they are saying; after all many ESOL students lead interesting lives. But when students take control of classroom discourse, a lesson can move away from its planned route. This might seem to be a problem if a teacher wishes to get through her lesson plan, or if the lesson is being observed, or students have to prepare for an exam. However, when carried out in a systematic and principled way, the opening up of classroom discourse can lead to opportunities for learning that would never exist if the teacher was overly attached to a predetermined plan. For example, in this extract from a lesson in London, Melinda, a shy student, has just finished speaking to her teacher, Carol, about her homework. Carol says:

Well done Melinda, very brave, but just remember when you feel a bit worried slow down don't panic, there's no bus no tram, we've finished the rush.

The mention of the tram prompts Melinda (M) to tell the class about a recent incident which surprises Carol (C):

Ss [laughter]

M yesterday I left my children in the tram they didn't

C tram

M the tram closed the door I leave my children inside

C [intake of breath]

At that point, Carol could have diverted the lesson back to its course, perhaps by asking the next student to talk about her homework. Instead she makes the choice to open up the classroom talk to allow contributions from other students. The extract continues:

D=Dalia, M=Melinda, C=Carol, the teacher

D yesterday I saw you get down

C what, Dalia was getting off?

D yeah getting off out

M I am inside, my children both out

C so you were left on the tram and your children

M out

C were on the pavement?

The episode goes on for some time in this vein, with Melinda telling her story of being left on the tram without her children, a story helped along by supportive and collaborative interjections from both Carol and Melinda's fellow students. Both teacher and students seem to be interested in what happened next. Carol also wants to encourage Melinda to speak, because previously in lessons she has been quite reticent.

We can describe this behaviour by teachers and learners using the terms 'agency' and 'contingency'. Agency refers to how an individual takes control