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## **Exploring Accountability Talk as an innovation to engage university students**

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**Abstract:** Accountability Talk (AT) is a purposeful, respectful, and productive conversation among learners which aims to promote collaborative learning as they listen, respond, agree, disagree with each other. While successful AT sessions among young learners and in content area classes (especially Science) have been reported, little to no research has been reported on the use of AT to engage university students. This study explores AT as a learning innovation for university students by conducting six AT sessions in a class of first year students handled by the researcher. Using an Accountability Talk Questionnaire to identify and measure learners' perceptions and classroom peer observation rubric and fieldnotes by the researcher to describe their engagement throughout the sessions, the study reveals that the participants have an appreciation of Accountability Talk as learning strategy which they consider suitable to meet the course objectives. Moreover, the main strength of AT for the participants is its advantage in developing their accountability in building a learning community. The peer observer noted that the instructional method was highly engaging which captured the students' attention, and they seemed to have a clear understanding of what was to be expected. Also, while the learners' participation was consistent, there were topics that appeared to be more interesting to them which is why more quality exchanges were noted while these topics were being discussed. They also did not engage in a generally high level of discourse although they were respectful in expressing their opposing views. Overall, Accountability Talk appears to be an appropriate and stimulating learning activity even among university students despite the misconception that teaching in college is mere transmission of knowledge. As to future research, some worthwhile studies to undertake are those that will look into the role of topics, class size, nature of the course in implementing AT.

**Key Words:** Accountability Talk; collaboration; engagement; learning innovation



## 1. INTRODUCTION

The demands of the 21<sup>st</sup> century educational landscape include that learners develop real world skills in the areas of communication, collaboration, and critical thinking (Teo, 2019). With this, we also see at present the steady decline of direct teacher transmission of content which is being replaced by a pedagogy where the learners are taught to argue and post counterarguments to ideas from their peers, textbooks, and even their teachers called dialogic teaching (Alexander, 2008 in Teo, 2019). This pedagogy has roots in Vygotsky's sociocultural theory where learning is deemed to be a collective endeavor, in which dialogue among participants create and acquire shared meaning-making. (Motlhabane, 2016). Through engagement with one another, learners achieve an understanding of the lesson on a more personal and relatable level. Moreover, the discussion allows the development of rapport, affinity, and appreciation of their diverse notions related to the topic being covered.

One type of dialogic pedagogy is Accountability Talk (AT). It is defined as a classroom talk where learners are taught to be responsible "for getting the facts right for thinking challenges together, and for following rules that encourage participation" (Resnick, et al., 2018, p.17). The teachers and researchers who have tried this intervention in the classroom reported that Accountability Talk addresses the learning needs of linguistically and economically diverse learners by teaching the learners to be responsible for three main things: 1. Accountability to the learning community 2. Accountability to rigorous thinking 3. Accountability to knowledge. (Michaels, et al., 2000) *Accountability to the learning community* happens when learners are able to expand, clarify, or question other learners' ideas. This is prompted by an interesting yet complex idea from the teacher which can likely prompt such reactions. *Accountability to rigorous thinking* involves finding logical connections to make conclusions and may include self-corrections. *Accountability to knowledge* is considered the most

complicated among the three as it is the one that ensures that facts are being used to argue and to counter argue. This facet includes correcting misconceptions and misunderstandings by preparing evidences as support. It should be noted that for some Accountability Talk sessions, a class will not focus on all the three aspects especially in the earlier sessions where it is expected that the learners are likely to focus on building up each other's ideas (Accountability to learning community); however, to promote learning, the three must be present.

Most studies on AT involved learners from the early to the middle grades. Ardasheva, et al. (2016) identified the AT perspectives of 68 Spanish-speaking middle school students. Through focus group and individual interviews, classroom observation, and teacher interview, the researchers reported that the students acknowledged expanded learning opportunity and improved quality of classroom interaction because of the AT sessions given to them. O'Connor, et al. (2015) have similar findings in their study involving elementary school students in a low income, low performing school district in the United States. For a decade, they implemented Accountability Talk, and their data which were presented in two studies reveal that the intervention had significant and positive results on the students standardized test results. Motlhabane (2016) on the other hand focused on how teachers implemented Accountability Talk lessons. He observed that the teachers encountered challenges while implementing the lessons because of the repeated efforts it requires to elicit quality responses from the students. The quality of the questions posed by the teacher has been identified as a crucial factor as well. He concluded by suggesting constant reflection and patience from the teacher as the expected results from the AT sessions take time.

Through the years, it has been observed that teachers and researcher have personalized how they implement Accountability Talk, but the basic steps of having the students lead the discussion and the teacher posing questions that will elicit various reactions from the students have remained. It is



therefore interesting to explore if Accountability Talk will also be successful when used with university students. With this background, the current study raises the following questions:

1. What are the perceptions of the university student participants about Accountability Talk?
2. How engaged are the university student participants during Accountability Talk sessions?

## 2. METHODOLOGY

### *2.1 Research Context and Participants*

The study was conducted by the teacher-researcher who was handling a First Year AB English class in a Manila university. The class is composed of 33 students who were divided into six groups (5-6 members per group) for the six Accountability Talk sessions for the entire term. The students were the ones who grouped themselves and were later randomly assigned by the teacher to the following topics: (1) learner's schema, affect, and learning strategies, (2) mindset and grit, (3) materials in language learning, (4) translanguaging, (5) assessment, and (6) the teacher.

### *2.2 Data collection*

A 15 item Accountability Talk Questionnaire was administered to the students at the end of the term. Twelve of the 15 items came from Talmy et.al (2024) developed and validated questionnaire with three (3) items added by the current researcher. These additional items asked the students' general understanding and perceived appropriateness of the AT in their classes. The classroom evaluation rubric used in the university where the study was conducted was used by a colleague of the teacher-researcher to objectively assess how the teacher conducted the class and how the students performed during an AT session. Lastly, observation notes

(field notes) by the teacher-researcher notes during the AT sessions were used as the third source of data.

### *2.3 Procedure*

Because Accountability Talk is new to the students, the teacher planned activities that will familiarize them with the process before starting the actual A.T. sessions. Five Accountability Talk videos from YouTube were shared with the students via Canvas on Week 4 of the term with the instructions that the class will discuss how AT is done and that any questions or clarifications they might have about Accountability Talk will be answered in the next class meeting. This was followed by a simulation/practice of Accountability Talk with an open class discussion of a short article about the real life use of English language based on the narratives of Filipino bilingual parents. This activity allowed the learners to participate in an in-class discussion by expressing their thoughts about the article, learn together, and evaluate different viewpoints from their classmates which are the important elements for a successful AT. Feedback was given by the teacher during and after the simulation to further prepare the learners for the activity. For instance, they were instructed that there was no need to assign a leader as long as every member comes to the class prepared with ideas to share and questions to ask. However, it was suggested that groups meet once to discuss the general flow of the AT to know how they will start and end the discussion, and to check if they have some general understanding of the article they will discuss. The AT sessions began on the fifth week of the term with the last one held on its tenth week.

### *2.4 Data analysis*

The overall and categorical means were computed to answer the first research question. For the second research question, the verbatim comments from the peer evaluation related to the implementation of the AT were noted and analyzed; likewise, notes from the direct and structured observation by the teacher-



Items	Mean
1. In a group, I listen to other speak.	4.76
2. I hear out the other person without making comments.	4.41
3. I maintain a pleasant tone after I hear an opposing opinion.	4.88
4. I treat a team member with an opposing opinion with respect.	4.82
5. When a team member speaks, I sit in a way that indicates my interest.	4.53
6. In order to strengthen my claim, I use evidence and example from the text.	4.53
7. I choose my best reasoning when presenting.	4.65
8. When I try to strengthen my claim, I use prior knowledge.	4.41
9. During the discussion, I state my opinion, whether it is in favor of others in the group.	4.53
10.If I disagree with someone, I object to what they are saying and explain why.	4.41
11.I listen to what my team members are saying and respond.	4.76
12.Accountability Talk is appropriate for the goals of the course.	4.88
13. I understand Accountability Talk better after experiencing it in class.	4.94
14.Accountability Talk is also appropriate in our other major classes.	4.41
15..Accountability Talk is also appropriate in our other General Education classes.	4.18
Overall mean	4.60

researcher were read several times and then coded and analyzed to come up with patterns which were reflected on. Key examples were reported to justify the patterns identified.

### 2.5 Ethics

A copy of an Informed Consent Form was sent to the students with the questionnaires at the end of the term explaining the goal of the study and their requested participation in it. Of the 33 students, seventeen (17) students returned their answered questioned to the teacher via Canvas. The peer has been informed about the study and a copy of an ICF was likewise sent to her to accomplish.

## 3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 1. Accountability Talk Questionnaire Results

As seen from Table 1 , the participants find Accountability Talk very positive as learning strategy(4.60) with no item getting a score lower than 4. Item 13 was rated the highest (4.94) which may be interpreted to mean the participants appreciated Accountability Talk after going through its process. This was supported by the second highest (4.88) item which considers AT as suitable to meet the course objectives. Getting the same average is the participants' perception that while participating in the AT, they remained agreeable even when a classmate expresses an idea different from theirs. Item 15 received the lowest score (4.18) which imply that the students have some reservations as to whether AT will also be applicable is other General Education (GE) subjects.

Table 2 presents the means of the different Accountability Talk components. Results reveal that the main strength of AT for the participants is its advantage in developing their accountability in building a learning community. It appears that the central merit of AT is that it allows the learners to communicate with and support each other by sharing ideas with each, engaging in meaningful discussion while still enjoying learning together. The other two components which focus on the cognitive aspects of AT (developing precise thinking and exact understanding) were rated a bit lower than the first component. These results imply that for the participants, AT focused on allowing them to work collectively and collaboratively as a class to reach a common academic goal more than developing their individual mental processes in learning.



Table 2. ATQ by component results

Components of Accountability Talk	Mean
1. Accountability to a learning community	4.68
2. Accountability to rigorous thinking	4.53
3. Accountability to accurate knowledge	4.57

To supplement these data, while each Accountability Talk was going on, the teacher-researcher did a direct and structured observation to document how the learners participated. It was noted that the learners always shared their personal experiences which they think relate with the topic being discussed. Most of these experiences are those that happened in the classroom with their teachers (effective and ineffective teaching practices, memorable lines or gestures that made them like the English subject) and classmates (how they worked together and supported each other to get good grades, how friendship then was different from their relationships with their current classmates). In connection, while their classmates are sharing, it has been observed that the rest of the class either nodded in agreement, blurted “Yes!” or “Same!”, or raised their hand as a signal that they wish to share a similar or different experience. Of the six topics covered, it has been observed as well that the best participation happened when Translanguaging was discussed. Aside from the usual sharing of experiences, the participants posed many questions to their classmates and even to the teacher to clarify if their understanding of the concept is accurate. Other topics that elicited much reaction from the students were the discussion on Attitude, Motivation, and Grit. On the other hand, it was observed that it was when the topics Language Learning Materials

and Assessment were covered that the learners were not very active. Most of the points raised were about the journal article and less about their personal experiences. It can be surmised that they did not have background knowledge and/or interest with these topics which limited their participation during the discussion. With regard to respectful discourse as a quality of a successful AT, it has been observed that arguing between or among the students seldom happened during the sessions although expressing opposing ideas is common. It appears that they were not questioning the answers of their classmates to insist their own ideas, but they would state that “I have a different experience or idea about that” that signal their acceptance of their various beliefs and awareness. The students also did not engage in high level discourse with a recitation usually limited to an expression of a single idea; they also did not elaborate on explanation and thought provoking questions were less than expected. Examples of these questions from the students are *Does this mean motivation happens first before grit? If translanguaging is positive, then why are some educators against it? Should translanguaging be allowed even among adult learners?* They only expound on their answers when they are explicitly asked by the teacher. Lastly, there were 1-3 students who appeared to get the attention of the class by constantly reacting to every response from the class. When this happened, the presenting/leading group reminded the class to give others the chance to share which is seconded by the teacher.

To provide an objective assessment of how AT was employed in the class, the researcher used the peer classroom observation results. Peer Visitation is a regular activity in the university, and this particular class was observed on February 7. Using the university’s classroom evaluation rubric, the peer observer gave an “Outstanding” evaluation to the class and added these notes as her observation: *1. The teacher displays effective techniques to promote self-discipline and maintain appropriate behavior (e.g., mutual respect) among the students. 2. The instructional method was highly engaging, capturing the students’ attention. 3. The learning objectives*





*were well defined and the students seemed to have a clear understanding of what was to be expected.* These comments support the results from the two other data sources which give an overall positive impression on the use of AT. Note that the peer observer was not requested by the teacher-researcher to specifically observe an AT session.

Overall, the results from the three sources of data say reveal that the participants highly appreciate Accountability Talk as a learning method mainly because it challenges them to be responsible in building a learning community in the class. The class was observed to be engaged and disciplined at the same time during AT sessions. While their participation was consistent, there were topics that were more interesting to them which is why more quality exchanges were noted while these topics were being discussed.

#### 4. CONCLUSIONS

With the results, Accountability Talk appears to be an appropriate and stimulating learning activity even among university students. Despite the misconception that teaching in college is mere transmission of knowledge and with courses different in their specific objective and content, activities promoting learning communities, rigorous thinking and accurate knowledge should still be welcomed. For AT to be successful, the teacher should be willing to prepare the class for a successful activity and learners should be open to joining a “free for all” type of classroom learning. As to research, some worthwhile studies to undertake are those that will look into the role of topics, class size, nature of the course in implementing AT.

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