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Turn Taking in Adult ESOL Classroom Interaction: Practices for Interaction in Another Language

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whether spontaneous conversations also occur in English in classes where students share the same language of origin. Managing pair work so that spontaneous conversations can occur might be a greater challenge in that situation, since students might be tempted to share their real-life concerns in their native language.

If, as teachers, we model communication to promote and maintain community, students will follow and use English in a similar manner. Being aware that spontaneous conversations happen gives us an opportunity to eavesdrop on our learners' linguistic needs, which is helpful in planning subsequent classes. 

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About the Author

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Turn-Taking and Opening Interactions

by John Hellermann

The teacher set up a task in which students practiced using the yes/no question form about possession: "Do you have ____?" She wrote the form on the board, modeled appropriate questions and answers, and demonstrated with several students in front of the entire class. Her students were accustomed to working in pairs, so they had no questions about what to do next when she said "Now, ask your partner. Ask your partner, 'Do you have ____?' 'Do you have a book?' 'Do you have paper?' Practice with your partner."

But I had a question: What does happen next?

Most instructors working with adult English language learners are aware of the advantages of having their students work together on tasks in small groups or pairs. Research has shown that by using English, learners of English for speakers of other languages (ESOL) gain opportunities to co-construct or negotiate meaning (Long, 1983; Pica, 1988). Carrying out tasks with others in English gives learners opportunities to use the language and to test out hypotheses about vocabulary and language structure in a safe environment. Learners have fewer inhibitions about using English correctly when talking to other learners (Price, 1991).

To do this rich language work,

learners must become facile in the practices that make possible the back and forth of talk in interaction. They must also learn to manage the practices that get their interactions underway; in other words, they must learn how to start a conversation in English (Mori, 2002). When humans meet in face to face encounters, one of the parties in the interaction (in most cases) starts talking (Goffman, 1963). In the context of the language classroom, in task-directed interaction with a classmate, these so-called natural practices are used in slightly contrived contexts. Yet, in each case, inside or outside the classroom, an issue for learners of a language as well as first-language speakers is who says what and in what sequence. Boxer (1993) has suggested that language learning through the negotiation of meaning is facilitated when learners are fluent in turn-taking in the language being learned: the back and forth with language in which people routinely and unconsciously engage.

The Research

It is obvious that ESOL instructors cannot easily monitor every pair in their classrooms. Not much teacher wisdom has been gathered about what students do to start pair activities, nor has much empirical research been done in this regard. One surprising outcome of research on small group interaction is that when instructors become involved with their students' small group or dyad interactions, they alter the dynamic of that group to the detriment of learning (Ford, 1999; Garland, 2002).

In this article, I report on

research into practices for turn-taking that adult learners of English used to start their teacher-assigned, task-focused dyadic interaction with their peers in an ESOL classroom. I also discuss the implications of this research for instructors. The study was conducted at the National Lab Site for Adult ESOL, known locally as “The Lab School,” funded by the Institute for Education Sciences, US Department of Education, via the National Center for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy (NCSALL). The Lab School is a partnership between Portland State University (PSU) and Portland Community College (PCC), both of which are in Portland, Oregon. The school and research facilities are housed at PSU, while the registration, curriculum, and teachers are from PCC. The ESOL classrooms have six cameras embedded in the ceilings. During every class period, two students and the teacher wear wireless microphones. Two microphones in the ceiling capture audio from the entire classroom. Specially designed software enables researchers to view the six views of the classroom video and multiple audio tracks simultaneously, providing as complete a picture of the classroom environment as possible (Reder et al., 2003).

The study focused on five adult learners of English who participated in classes at the Lab School for at least four terms, starting in beginning-level classes (Student Performance Level ((SPL)) 1-2) and progressing to upper-level classes (SPL 4-6). They were not all in the same classroom each term. I collected 100 interactions from these students: 50 when they were in beginning-level classes and 50 when they were in upper-level ones. The study compares the turn-taking in openings done by the five students when they were in the beginning-level class with the practices they used in their peer-to-peer interactions when they were in the upper-level classes. Such turn-taking practices include working out

what, exactly, the task is (task clarification); inquiries into health or other light banter (interpersonal exchanges); and deciding who will take the first turn and who will go second (turn allocation).

The Data

The data show distinct differences between beginning-level and upper-level classes. In the beginning level (Box 1), the students used many fewer pre-task moves than when they were in the upper-level classes. These students’ beginning-level interactions were characterized by turning to face one another (achieving mutual postural alignment) after the teacher’s final task instructions and then immediately starting the activity without any intervening talk (what I am calling a direct launch). In the beginning level, 60 percent of the students’ openings for the pair work were characterized as these direct launches. In the upper-level classes, only 24 percent of the peer interactions were direct launches of the teacher-assigned task.

While the beginning-level students tended to launch directly into pair work, when these students got to the upper levels of proficiency they possessed a greater repertoire of verbal moves for opening interactions. These

moves reflect greater linguistic sophistication, subtlety of action, and integration into the community of the ESOL classroom. They include turn allocation, evident in Box 2; starting the interaction with a joke, in Box 3; and starting the interaction with clarification of the task, in Box 4.

Boxes 2, 3, and 4 show a few examples of the task-prefatory talk

Transcription Conventions

((turns))	double parentheses are transcriber’s comments
?	high rising intonation contour
.	final falling intonation contour
,	continuing intonation
:	consonant or vowel sound is stretched
>then he say<	talk inside angle brackets is faster
[indicates overlapping talk
(.)	micro pause
(10.0)	pauses timed in seconds
(words)	words transcribed in single parentheses indicates transcriber uncertainty

Box 1

<http://www.labschool.pdx.edu/Viewer/viewer.php?FOB1jkh>

Pre-Task

Beginning Level

Task: To practice the question form “Do you have?”

Teacher: Now, ask your partner. Ask your partner,
 Jeanette: Okay.
 Teacher: Do you have. Do you have a book. Do you have paper.
 Jeanette and FuQin: ((Turn to face one another as teacher is talking))
 Teacher: Practice with your partner
 Jeanette: Mmm
 FuQin: Mmm Do you do you have a book.
 Jeanette: Yeah I have. ((moves book toward FuQin))

Box 2

<http://www.labschool.pdx.edu/Viewer/viewer.php?FOB2jkh>

Turn Allocation

Upper level

Task: To practice the question form “going to”

Teacher: Ask your partner. Ask your partner those questions. Maybe you are sure you’ll say yes I’m going to do that or, it all depends. I’m not quite sure. Ask your partner for about five minutes. ((Students looking directly at the board))
 Reinaldo: Okay. ((as he turns to Manal)) first=
 Manal: What (are) ((as she turns to Reinaldo))
 Reinaldo: Okay (you)
 Manal: Okay okay
 Reinaldo: >you first you first<
 Manal: Okay go ahead
 Reinaldo: Okay thanks. ((turns to board)) what are you going to do when you finish this course

used by students in the upper-level classes. In Box 2, Reinaldo uses an imperative for turn allocation: "You first." In Box 3, Kathryn tells Reinaldo she is ready to start the task and then makes an ironic remark about the difficulty of the task. In Box 4, Tommy and Abby engage in a rather lengthy clarification of the task assigned by the teacher.

Instructional Implications

One of the primary goals of student dyadic tasks is student engagement in language for face-to-face interaction, and not simply the completion of a teacher-designed task. Instructors should make sure that students understand this goal for

their interactive tasks. Allocating some extra time around pair tasks will give students time to engage in talk that is not explicitly task-oriented, but has been called spontaneous conversations (see the article on page 22 for more on this).

Students should be encouraged to use all their social skills in their everyday classroom interactions. These include prefacing tasks with interpersonal talk such as joking and inquiring into the well being of their partner, and, more directly as part of their tasks, inquiring into readiness and asking for clarification.

One way for instructors to help students become aware of and improve their skills at opening interactions is to video record first-language speakers' opening interactions at the places where students will need to interact using English, such

as the post office or grocery store. The teacher can transcribe the recorded interactions, review the transcripts with students in class, and then play the recordings and analyze the recordings and transcripts with the students. After the students practice these openings, a homework assignment might be to go to these locations and try the openings that were analyzed and practiced in class. Students can then report back to the class on what was successful or not successful about starting their interactions.

Recording student interaction in the classroom raises students' awareness of the details of turn-taking that constitute successful interactions in English. With more advanced students, the focus on successful turn-taking in English can easily move to the discussion of cross-linguistic differences in language routines (pragmatics) such as salutations, leave-taking, and other speech acts such as thanking, apologizing, requesting, and appropriate responses to these actions.

Reflections

In the beginning-level interactions, even without pre-task talk, students manage to get into and accomplish their assigned task without incident. Although these practices of opening interactions may evolve naturally, increasing students' awareness of turn-taking practices can only help.

Students have different personalities and interactional styles. However, all adult ESOL learners, who are immigrants and/or refugees to a new culture, face similar difficulties involving the use of English that can be ameliorated through the adoption of interpersonal communication skills. These start, I believe, with the micro-level sequential aspects of turn-taking as practiced in the language classroom. Mastering the sound system or grammar of a second language is a

Box 3

<http://www.labschool.pdx.edu/Viewer/viewer.php?FOB3jkh>

Joke

Upper level

Task: To practice the question form "need to" followed by the infinitive verb form

- Kathryn: Yeah, I'm ready. Yeah. Very easy.
Eh heh [heh heh
Reinaldo: [For you not for me,
Kathryn: No, I just joking. I'm just yeah I'm just joking.
Reinaldo: What did you do: What did [you do
Kathryn: [tchha ok. ok. I I am just looking it's now I am just looking.
Yeah, I'm (recent joking) going to now (in the past).
Kathryn: Yeah.
Reinaldo: Yeah?
Kathryn: Yeah.
Reinaldo: What did you do. (.) What did you do
Kathryn: What did you do?
Reinaldo: What [did you do
Kathryn: [Yesterday.

Box 4

<http://www.labschool.pdx.edu/Viewer/viewer.php?FOB4jkh>

Task Clarification


Upper level

- Teacher: So look at your questions, look at the example, and check. After five minutes, we'll put all of the questions on the board.
((lines missing: clarification with student))
for five minutes together with your partner, check your questions you can look at your old questions but make sure they are in this order. One, two, three, four. Just for five minutes, and then we'll put the questions on the board.
Abby & Tommy: ((start turning towards one another and moving items around on desk))
((11.0))
Tommy: ((looks at Abby))
Abby: From the: *this story,
Tommy: mm (.) one sixty.
Abby: One sixty.
Tommy: From this story. Write [the question five questions.
Abby: [This story.
Abby: Twice,
Tommy: Yeah you can write out five questions ()
Abby: From this story.
Tommy: Yeah.
Abby: From the story.
Tommy: Yeah you write five five questions.
((12.0)) ((students start the task after this pause))

* ((mutual posture alignment occurs on "this"))

long-term process. In the meantime, a practiced repertoire of opening moves for starting their interactions in English can go a long way toward helping learners achieve cooperative exchanges in English with native speakers who may be less than patient when talking with language learners.

The turn-taking practices in task openings might be thought of as student resources that, nurtured in the classroom, are used and facilitate further language development. This and other continuing research at the Lab School (Harris, 2004; Brillanceau, 2005) suggests that students engaging in student-student interaction will activate and use resources that they bring into the classroom if more than enough time is allocated to complete the teacher-assigned tasks. Evidence for this seemingly invisible process for the acquisition of aspects of language such as turn-taking in the context of opening dyadic interactions should

assure instructors that having students work together in pairs offers them potential language learning opportunities beyond the language tasks that teachers design. 

“Students should be encouraged to use all their social skills in their everyday classroom interactions.”

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Resources

Readers interested in the cultural aspects of initiating and sustaining conversations may want to explore these resources.

Books

Look at Me When I Talk to You: ESL Learners in Non-ESL Classrooms, by Catherine Eddy and Sylvia Helmer, is published by Pippin Publishing, Don Mills, Ontario, http://www.pippinpub.com/search.asp?srch_string=Look+at+me+when+I+talk+to+you&Submit=++Search+%21++

Gender and English Language Learners, by Bonny Norton and Aneta Pavlenko, is published by TESOL International, Alexandria, VA. http://www.tesol.org/s_tesol/sec_document.asp?TrackID=&SID=1&DID=1854&CID=283&VID=2&RTID=0&CIDQS=&Taxonomy=False&specialSearch=False

Videos

Understanding Conversation Styles Around the World by Susan Steinbach, is available from Alta Book Center Publishers, Burlingame, CA <http://www.altaesl.com/Detail.cfm?CatalogID=2003&>

Conversation Styles in the USA: Learning to Play by Susan Steinbach, is available from Alta Book Center Publishers, Burlingame, CA <http://www.altaesl.com/Detail.cfm?CatalogID=2004&Basketball>

—Provided by Terrence Kelley

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