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

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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.
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
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.

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References


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

Books


Videos


About the Author
John Hellermann is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Applied Linguistics at Portland State University. His research interests include classroom discourse and talk in social interaction in the language classroom. Previously, he taught English as a second language in the United States and in Hungary. ☀