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Enabling audience participation and stimulating discussion after student presentations in English as a foreign language seminars

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ABSTRACT

Although discussions after student presentations play an important role in higher education seminars, relatively little attention has been paid to the ways in which the presenters, teachers and audience members actually interact. Building on a data set consisting of 12 videotaped follow-up discussions collected in an undergraduate English as a foreign language (EFL) seminar, this conversation-analytic study focuses on teacher practices and shows how teachers can build on previous student utterances to improve the clarity or accuracy of the discussion, or how they can create space for audience participation by inviting audience questions. The study also describes how teachers can encourage the presenters to elaborate on their answers. The findings contribute to the body of research on seminar talk by describing teacher practices utilized during discussions after student presentations.

1. Introduction

Student presentations and follow-up discussions occur relatively frequently in higher education seminars. During the discussion the presenters may interact meaningfully with the audience (Kobayashi, 2015), and thus receive invaluable feedback on their performance (van Ginkel, Gulikers, Biemans, & Mulder, 2015). Furthermore, the seminar group can discuss the key issues raised in the presentation (Exley & Dennick, 2004, p. 97). Student presentations followed by discussions are therefore listed among recommended activities in higher education seminars (Biggs & Tang, 2011; Exley & Dennick, 2004; Geven & Attard, 2012; O'Neill & McMahon, 2005).

Whereas presentations can be prepared and rehearsed, discussions are to a large extent unpredictable and thus may be challenging for students, especially when conducted in a foreign language (Morita, 2000, pp. 299–300; Yang, 2010). In addition, since teachers and audience members are supposed to comment on the presentation, ask questions and, possibly, express some criticism or make suggestions, and since the presenters are expected to respond to such comments, the follow-up discussions may be face-threatening to the participants (Duff, 2010, p. 178), which may result in limited involvement on the part of audience members. For example, it has been reported that some discussions after student presentations were dominated by the teachers, who were rather critical of the presentations, while the audience members remained passive (Dvořáčková et al., 2014, pp. 40–42). Similarly, a study of classroom interaction within a master's thesis seminar showed that the discussant predominantly asked questions which the author of the thesis answered, while the rest of the audience were not engaged in the discussion (Svinhufvud, 2015). From these findings it follows that there may be two competing interests on the part of the teachers. On the one hand, they may focus on (critical or corrective) feedback, evaluation or elaboration on some aspects of the presentation, which may result in teacher domination over the discussion. On the other hand, the teacher may want to maximize student participation, while providing the audience members with some space for their comments and questions as well as encouraging the presenters to respond. The present study addresses this tension by focusing on the practices used by a teacher during discussions after student presentations.

It has been observed that after a student presentation is finished, the performance is summarized or evaluated (typically by the teacher), and then questions and suggestions are invited (Bunch, 2009, pp. 99–100; Duff, 2009, p. 178). On the other hand, studies of interaction during discussion sessions at academic conferences have shown that the chairs typically initiate the discussions after presentations by inviting audience questions (Webber, 2002, p. 242), for example by indicating how much time is left for the discussion (Wulff, Swales, & Keller, 2009, pp. 83–84). Audience members then typically comment on the presentation, make suggestions and ask questions, and the presenters respond (Konzett, 2012; Querol-Julián & Fortanet-Gómez, 2012; Webber, 2002, pp. 230–241). Chairs

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can conclude the discussion by simply thanking the presenters or by explaining that the time has run out (Wulff et al., 2009, p. 84).

In classroom settings, there are a number of studies which focus on the ways teachers and students take turns in whole-class work (e.g. Kapellidi, 2013; Markee, 2000; McHoul, 1978; Seedhouse, 2004). It follows from these studies that it is usually the teacher who asks questions, elicits student answers and gives feedback, by which the teacher can maintain control over the topic and student contributions. Recent studies have uncovered the practices that teachers employ during whole-class work, such as how they use wait-time (Ingram & Elliott, 2014; Maroni, 2011), how they invite learner participation (Rusk, Sahlström, & Pörn, 2017; Willemsen, Gosen, van Braak, Koole, & de Glopper, 2018) and how they manage it (Reddington, 2018; Waring, 2013; Waring, Reddington, & Tadic, 2016).

Specifically in higher education settings, research has been conducted on aspects of discussions in seminars that will not be centrally considered here, such expressing disagreement (Argaman, 2015; Waring, 2001) and non-comprehension (Waring, 2002b). More importantly, in foreign language seminars, students may claim or avoid speakership by using eye-gaze, gestures, touch and bodily conduct (Lee, 2017). Relatedly, teachers' practices, such as repeating, extending or paraphrasing what has been said, may invite or further shape student participation (Daşkın, 2015).

While prior work has focused more on whole-class interaction and discussions, these are different from discussions after student presentations in at least two respects: (i) the audience members are usually expected to ask questions that the presenters will address, and (ii) the audience members typically ask questions after being invited to do so. Despite the fact that presentations and follow-up discussions are recommended and commonly used in higher education seminars, literature on classroom interaction has so far paid little attention to the ways in which the teachers, presenters and audience members actually interact. To my knowledge, no studies to date have detailed the practices used by seminar participants in discussions after student presentations through the lens of conversation analysis. The present conversation-analytic study therefore builds on and contributes to the existing body of research by focusing on the practices utilized by a teacher during discussions after student presentations in a foreign language seminar.

2. Data and context

The data on which this study is based come from an undergraduate seminar group within an EFL course for prospective teachers of various subjects (other than English) enrolled in a Czech public university. In 2015, I followed the group for the whole of the fall semester. The group was selected by Eva[1] (the teacher) on the basis of her preference and time possibilities. The students enrolled in the group did not know that they would become research participants until the first session (i.e. before the data collection started), in which I informed them about the purpose of my research and offered alternative solutions in case the participants were not comfortable with the presence of recording equipment. All the participants granted informed consent.

I attended the classes as a non-participant observer. I noticed that the participants quickly became accustomed to my presence as well as the recording equipment. One of the most interesting aspects of the classes were student presentations and follow-up discussions, which I subsequently studied in more detail as they included many interactive and unrehearsed exchanges, as well as some aspects of academic English. I observed that after each presentation, the teacher involved the audience and then, during her own discussion with the presenters, stimulated their answers skillfully, which resulted in relatively elaborate contributions by the presenters.

Earlier in the course, in session 4, the teacher asked the students to prepare a presentation about a person whom they found significant in their fields of study. When discussing a handout with useful presentation language, the teacher encouraged the students to conclude their presentations by inviting the audience to ask questions, which is clearly observable in the actual presentation data. Altogether there were 12 presentations, as some students preferred to work on their own rather than in pairs. From the recordings comprising a total of 11 classes (approximately 90 minutes each), I concentrated on discussions that followed the 12 student presentations in sessions 8–11.

The class met in a relatively small classroom (see Fig. 1). For each presentation, the presenter(s) (P) stood behind a computer desk (top-left corner in Fig. 1), while other students (S) were seated at desks with a horseshoe arrangement. The teacher (Eva, E) would sit at a desk in the upper-right corner of Fig. 1, or, when the class was not full, she would sit behind the desks with the students on the right-hand side of the figure. During the presentations and discussions, she remained seated, except when manipulating the lights or window blinds. To record the class, I used a tripod with a video camera with a wide-angle lens (bottom-left corner in Fig. 1), which captured the screen on the wall behind the presenters, the presenters and the majority of the class. I sat at the back of the class next to the camera (R).

The group comprised 18 students with different teaching specializations ranging from music to biology. The classes were taught by an experienced teacher, Eva, who had been teaching at the Department for nearly 10 years and who had teaching experience of approximately 20 years in total. The class met on a weekly basis and the target level of the English was intermediate (B1 according to the CEFR, 2001).

3. Conversation analysis

The aim of this study is to explore the practices that the teacher (Eva) employed during the discussions. To uncover these practices, I used conversation analysis (CA), which makes it possible to scrutinize how speakers produce language and action on a moment-by-moment basis. Researchers have used ethnomethodological CA to investigate recordings of naturally occurring talk-in-interaction (e.g. Seedhouse, 2004; Sidnell & Stivers, 2013; ten Have, 2007). In CA, speakers are assumed to produce talk-in-interaction methodically (Schegloff & Sacks, 1973, p. 290) and therefore "order at all points" (Sacks, 1995, p. 484) is assumed. The goal of the analysis is to describe the practices that the participants use to produce this order, which a conversation analyst can achieve by examining ongoing talk-in-interaction turn by turn.

Apart from mundane conversation, CA is also used for investigating institutional talk (e.g. Heritage & Clayman, 2010), including educational settings (for reviews of research in classroom interaction, see Gardner, 2013; Mori & Zuengler, 2008; Waring, 2017). Discussions after student presentations in a foreign language course represent a specific type of institutional talk whose general goal can be formulated as to provide the students (both the presenters and the audience) with opportunities to participate in oral communication in academic settings.[2] In classroom interaction there is a reflexive relationship between interaction and pedagogy

[1] All names are pseudonyms.

[2] This can be compared with the goal of discussion sessions after conference paper presentations, which can be formulated as opening the research for discussion within which "the presenter has to defend the validity of his or her research