



Responding artfully to student-initiated departures in the adult ESL classroom



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ABSTRACT

Teachers constantly endeavor to strike a balance between the arguably competing tasks of maintaining control on the one hand and encouraging student participation on the other (Paoletti & Fele, 2004). How precisely such a balance is accomplished, however, remains largely a mystery. Based on videotaped data from the adult English as a Second Language (ESL) classroom, we describe two teacher practices for responding to student-initiated departures, where teacher control is maintained in the service of participation and learning. Findings of this conversation analytic study contribute to a growing understanding of how certain learner contributions in the language classroom may be tactfully and efficiently handled while offering increasing specificity for strengthening the foundations of language teacher education.

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Introduction

Much has been written about the structure of classroom talk that embodies teacher control over topic initiation, topic development, and speaking rights (e.g., Cazden, 1988; Edwards & Mercer, 1987; Lemke, 1990; McHoul, 1978; Mehan, 1979; Nystrand, 1997). Although few have explicitly articulated the necessity of such control, as Mehan (1979) reminds us, the teacher's concern for social order "is more of a means to an end"—"a utilitarian stance adopted for the practical purposes of achieving educational objectives" (p. 81), such as following a given day's lesson plan and pursuing the larger goals of the curriculum. In many educational contexts today, encouraging active student participation is also seen as integral to achieving these objectives. As Paoletti and Fele (2004) have convincingly argued, teachers constantly endeavor to strike a difficult balance between the potentially competing tasks of maintaining control on the one hand and soliciting student participation on the other (p. 78) (also see Emanuelsson & Sahlstrom, 2008, on the "price of participation"). How precisely such a balance is achieved, however, remains a largely unanswered question. In this paper, we examine this question in the context of the adult English as a Second Language (ESL) classroom, an instructional setting in which managing participation arguably calls for a degree of artfulness on the part of the teacher, given the diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds and life experiences that students bring to class (Center for Applied Linguistics, 2010). Using the microanalytic tools of Conversation Analysis (CA), we make an attempt at detailing (1) the methods with which the teacher responds to student contributions that initiate a departure from the pedagogical trajectory that he or she is pursuing, and (2) how such methods enable the teacher to maintain control over that trajectory while still validating student participation and advancing learning.

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In contemporary theories of second language acquisition (SLA) from both the interactionist and sociocultural perspectives, communication in the target language is viewed as essential to language learning (Lantolf & Pavlenko, 1995; Long, 1996). Therefore, a key consideration for language teachers in particular is whether the ways in which they seek to maintain order in classroom talk contribute to creating a classroom culture where student participation is promoted. Our study, then, makes a specific contribution to the growing enterprise of “CA for SLA” (Firth & Wagner, 1997; Markee & Kasper, 2004) oriented classroom discourse research, with its interests in describing the nature of classroom talk and the relationship between talk and language learning (e.g., Hellermann, 2008; Lee, 2008; Markee, 2008; Richards, 2006; Seedhouse, 2008; Walsh, 2006; Waring, 2013a), and to the analysis of classroom interaction more generally.

Background

Classroom talk has been widely discussed as a form of institutional talk, and it is often described and understood in terms of the asymmetries that distinguish it from ordinary conversation (Markee & Kasper, 2004). As teachers and students orient to institutional goals, tasks, and identities in the classroom, their talk is responsive to particular constraints on what may appropriately be said, by whom, and how (Drew & Heritage, 1992). Despite the prevalence of teacher control over classroom talk as manifested in a range of implicit ‘ground rules’ (e.g., teachers ask display questions to which they already know the answers and are entitled to the ‘final word’ on student contributions in feedback/evaluation turns), educational researchers studying classroom discourse have observed that students also violate these rules for various purposes, such as building and maintaining their social roles and relationships, saving face, and developing their understandings (Edwards & Mercer, 1987; Lemke, 1990; Mehan, 1979).

Work in content classes in elementary and high school settings has addressed how teachers respond to departures from the interactional rules governing classroom talk. Mehan (1979), for instance, identifies several improvisational strategies used by an elementary school teacher to address violations of individual nomination procedures, including “getting through,” or accepting the response of an unselected student in order to move through a trouble spot in the lesson, and opening the floor to other respondents when a nominated student fails to reply. Lemke (1990) examines how a high school science teacher responded to violations of unwritten classroom rules, such as engaging in side talk, by interrupting students and using humor to soften admonitions. Oylar (1996) goes a step further by showing how moving away from typical procedure- and content-based classroom discourse rules can be conducive to learning. She argues that, by following rather than resisting certain spontaneous learner initiations during read-aloud activities, a first-grade teacher gained greater insight into her students’ understandings and managed to position them not merely as passive consumers but as producers of knowledge (p. 152).

Recent conversation analytic work in applied linguistics has also begun to address how teachers handle certain unexpected or ‘disorderly’ learner contributions. Li (2013), for example, shows how in a Chinese as a foreign language classroom, the teacher responds to a student’s challenging deviation by unilaterally abandoning the ongoing task to maintain her epistemic authority, and as a result, misses certain pedagogical opportunities. Fagan (2012) reports on a novice ESL teacher’s practices of responding to unexpected learner contributions by glossing over them or assuming the role of information provider. In contrast, as detailed in a later study (Fagan, 2013), the expert teacher manages learner questions that are not easily answerable or learner assertions that manifest some misalignment with the teacher agenda by modeling exploration or offering accounts. Lehtimaja (2011) shows how teachers in a Finnish as a second language class play along when reproached by students while still accomplishing pedagogical work. Finally, Waring (2013b) considers how teachers in a community ESL program manage the “chaos” of multiple “competing voices” in response to teacher elicitation (p. 317) by maintaining and/or restoring turn-taking order while encouraging student participation.

The present study extends this research in the adult ESL classroom, focusing specifically on moments in teacher-fronted interaction in which one or more students enact a ‘veering off’ from the pedagogical trajectory being pursued by the teacher. Compared to classrooms with younger students, in which knowledge and status asymmetries are taken for granted, adult ESL learners bring to the classroom a broad spectrum of life experiences and professional expertise, which potentially render them more or less ‘equals’ of the instructor in many respects, with the exception of the domain of the second language. There may, accordingly, be a greater demand for ‘artful’ responses sensitive to the largely symmetrical relationship between adults than in other instructional contexts. In particular, then, our interest is in describing the teachers’ delicate maneuvers to maintain control while still promoting participation and learning.

Data and method

The data include 66 hours of video-taped adult ESL classroom interaction from 17 different classes taught by 20 different teachers (with some co-teaching) at a community English program. As a lab school for the Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) program in a graduate school of education in the United States, the program offers ESL classes at the beginning, intermediate, and advanced levels to members of the local community with a mix of international students, stay-at-home moms, and immigrants who hold full-time jobs, representing a great variety of first language backgrounds and life experiences. The teachers included master teachers as well as student teachers who were taking a TESOL practicum course as part of their MA studies. The master teachers, who had more than 10 years of teaching experience, served as models for the MA student teachers and fulfilled the staffing needs of the program. The student teachers typically have two to five years

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