



Designedly Incomplete Utterances and student participation



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ABSTRACT

This paper analyzes Designedly Incomplete Utterances (DIUs), which are an instructional practice commonly used by teachers when eliciting information from students. When producing a DIU, the teacher halts his/her turn before it has reached its grammatical completion, and by doing so invites the students to complete the turn. The study is based on a qualitative analysis of a fully transcribed corpus of whole-class instruction sequences, in grades 5–8, in Virginia, USA. The main focus is the relation between DIUs and student participation. It is demonstrated that frequent use of DIUs might indeed increase student participation, but this participation seems to be by coercion, rather than by students' substantive engagement in the learning process.

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Introduction

This paper analyzes Designedly Incomplete Utterances (DIUs), which are an instructional practice commonly used by teachers when eliciting information from students. DIUs have been mentioned first briefly, for example by Mehan (1979a:292), who called this practice “a sentence completion form of questioning”. Lerner (1995) studied DIUs in more detail, referring to this structure as “incomplete turn-constructive units”. The term Designedly Incomplete Utterances was termed by Koshik (2002). This term stresses the idea that the teacher's incomplete turns are not halted due to any communicative difficulty, but are rather “designed to be incomplete” (Koshik, 2002:279), since it is the students' task to complete them.

Teachers have been found to employ DIUs in different instructional settings and for different instructional purposes. Koshik (2002) for example, investigated the use of DIUs in one-on-one writing conferences, whereas Margutti (2010) studied the use of DIUs in whole-class instruction sequences. Like Margutti (2010), I also analyze the use of DIUs in whole-class instruction sequences. As for the function of DIUs, Margutti (2010:317–318) points out that like other elicitation devices, DIUs in whole-class instruction sequences fulfill many different functions (besides eliciting information), including, for example, checking students' knowledge, highlighting key notions, as well as “achieving, maintaining, and sustaining students' participation in the activity underway”. Her study, however, focuses on a specific subset of DIUs, which she refers to as *main-clause* DIUs, whose primary function, she argues, is to highlight key notions in the instructional sequence. The current study is not limited to a specific subset of DIUs. Instead, I analyze all DIUs, focusing on the question of how teachers' use of DIUs, or more precisely, how their extensive use of DIUs, may affect student participation; and by extension I explore the question whether extensive use of DIUs works to create or perhaps limit learning opportunities.¹

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¹ Although the focus of the current paper is on the effect of DIUs on student participation, this certainly does not imply that DIUs are used only to achieve student participation and that other functions of DIUs are not simultaneously at work here. For example, in Excerpt (1) presented below the DIU functions

The present study draws on several theoretical frameworks. It is influenced by conversation analysis (CA) in its attentiveness to structure, sequencing, and minute details of conversation. It is further inspired by [Vygotsky's \(1978\)](#) sociocultural theory (SCT) in its focus on student participation as it is related to learning opportunities. Thus, in the current study, learning is conceived as participation, rather than as acquisition (on the participation vs. the acquisition metaphor of learning, see [Sfard, 1998](#)). The theoretical perspective of this study thus puts into dialogue CA and SCT. This theoretical move might not seem straightforward; after all, as noted in [Vine \(2008\)](#), in CA the focus is on language (in terms of sequential organization), whereas in SCT it is learning opportunities that come to the fore. However, as further argued and demonstrated by [Vine \(2008\)](#), the combination of the two approaches can be fruitful. A similar theoretical approach, combining CA and SCT, is taken for example by [Waring \(2008\)](#) in her analysis of explicit positive assessments in ESL classes, investigating how these assessments create or inhibit learning opportunities.

The study is based on a corpus of interactions in classes of gifted students. Admittedly, the students' identity as gifted could be consequential, affecting both the teacher's strategic use of DIUs and the way students respond to this instructional act. For example, teachers' expectations of students might be different in gifted classes, and these expectations might influence teaching strategies, student participation, and learning opportunities. Furthermore, interactions in gifted classes have been found to be highly dialogic, especially in comparison to interactions in mainstream classes ([Netz, 2014](#)). However, this does not mean that the results of the current study are inapplicable to other classes as well. On the contrary, it appears that the results might be particularly relevant for low-achieving classes, since, as revealed in [Murphy et al.'s \(Murphy, Wilkinson, Soter, Hennessey, & Alexander, 2009\)](#) meta-analysis, classroom discussions appear to be particularly potent for students characterized by authors as below-average in academic ability.

I begin with a short review of the literature on DIUs. This review discusses DIUs mainly in relation to student participation, since this is the focus of my study. In "Data and Method" section, I present the corpus and the methodology of the current study. In "Findings and Discussion" section, I present the findings of this study, including frequencies, examples, and micro-analysis of DIUs. Finally, in "Conclusions" section, I present the conclusions of the study.

Literature review

DIUs are part of an instructional sequence that begins with a first pair part in the form of a grammatically incomplete turn constructional unit (TCU), produced by the teacher. The teacher's TCU involves typical prosodic features, including vowel lengthening toward the end of the utterance, as well as rising intonation at the intonation contour ([Koshik, 2002:288](#); [Lerner, 1995:117](#); [Margutti, 2010:317](#)). The grammatically missing item may be at any syntactic level, from small units, such as a single syllable or a word, to larger units, such as a phrase or even a full sentence. These prosodic and grammatical features are perceived by the students as an invitation to complete the teacher's utterance. In many cases, rather than a response provided by a single student, we find a group of students providing the missing item in unison. Finally, following the students' response, the teacher usually provides feedback.

The following is an example of a DIU from my corpus (for a detailed description of the corpus, see "Findings and Discussion" section). The example is taken from the first of Mr. Johnson's² three consecutive 7th grade Language Arts classes (henceforth Language Arts1/2/3). In the example, Mr. Johnson is demonstrating to the class the difference between past and present tense.

(1) 'Mattie said i-s?' (Mr.Johnson.LanguageArts1)
 570 Mr Johnson: Do you see?
 571 Abby walks,
 572 is what?
 573 S: ..it's the present.]
 574 Mr Johnson: [present tense,
 575 → and Mattie said i--s,
 576 Ss: ..past.]
 577 Mr Johnson: [past.
 578 ...that's all,
 579 that's all you have to remember.

In line 575 we see the DIU, displaying the two prosodic features just mentioned: the teacher stretches the sound of the auxiliary "i-s" and ends his utterance with continuing intonation, signaling 'more to come'.³ The students indeed pick up

to highlight a key notion (for further discussion of this function of DIUs, see [Margutti, 2010](#)). However, due to the limited scope of this paper, I have chosen to limit my discussion to the relation between DIUs and student participation, overlooking additional functions that might also be at play.

² All names presented in the article are pseudonyms.

³ For transcription conventions see [Appendix](#).

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