



The multimodal organization of speaker selection in classroom interaction



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ABSTRACT

Drawing on conversation analytic research on classroom interaction, this paper focuses on teachers' selection of a specific student to provide a response (i.e. *speaker nomination*) in French-as-a-second-language classrooms. The analysis first describes the interactional accomplishment of turn-allocation as resulting from both the student's embodied displays of availability to respond and the teacher's recognition of that availability. Second, the analysis shows that availability for speaker selection is consequential for subsequent talk. Indeed, the way turn transition and sequence organization are accomplished after speaker nomination sharply contrasts depending on whether the selected student has previously displayed availability or not. The findings show that turn-allocation in the classroom is more relevantly broached as the result of the participants' collaborative adjustments, rather than as reflecting the teacher's control over the organization of turn-allocation.

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Introduction

Other-selection of the next speaker is a key feature of multi-party institutional interactions (see e.g. [Heritage & Greatbatch, 1991](#); [McHoul, 1978](#)). "Turn-taking traffic" is often managed in such interactions by means of "mediated turn-allocation procedures" ([Heritage & Clayman, 2010](#): 37 sq.): at the end of each speaker's contribution, a chairperson or a mediator allocates the next turn. This role is devoted to the teacher in classroom interactions, to a mediator in contentious meetings, to a journalist in televised debates, etc. The other participants display their willingness to speak by raising hands or producing vocal tokens (such as audible in-breaths) that allow them to be noticed by the chairperson. However, in the absence of a visible or audible "willing next speaker" ([Mortensen, 2008](#)), the chairperson may have to allocate a turn to a participant that is potentially unavailable or unwilling to speak. This situation may have interactional consequences: the participant to whom a turn was allocated may for example display an inability or an unwillingness to take a turn, thereby slowing down the progression of the on-going social activity.

In the classroom, the mediated turn-allocation system and the systematic other-selection of students by the teacher are often viewed as enacting the teacher's control over the students' contributions and thereby as allowing little room for the

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students to take part in the organization of classroom activities. A closer look at the micro details (linguistic, prosodic and non-verbal) of the unfolding talk however reveals a much more nuanced picture of turn-taking organization in the classroom. This paper aims at providing new insights into how other-selection in multi-party classroom interaction is organized, by documenting the participants' interactional adjustments *before* and *after* other-selection is accomplished. Using conversation analysis, it describes embodied conducts that play a central role in turn-allocation and conceives other-selection as resulting from the participants' collaborative adjustments rather than from a procedure controlled by the teacher only. The paper is aimed at feeding current research on the role of non-verbal means such as gaze and gesture in turn-taking organization as well as research on student participation and involvement in classroom interaction. It shows that the process of selection in the classroom is achieved actively and collaboratively by the co-participants' joint adjustments and therefore challenges descriptions of teacher-fronted classroom activities based on initiation–reaction–evaluation sequences (IRE, [Mehan, 1979](#)) as allowing little room for the students to take part in the organization of talk.

Turn-taking in the classroom

The “machinery” of turn-taking in ordinary conversation has been described in [Sacks et al.'s \(1974\)](#) seminal study as a finely coordinated endeavor based on two components: a *turn-constructural component* by which participants project the appropriate moment to take a turn (i.e. after the turn has reached possible completion) and a *turn-allocation component* related to the participants' rights and obligations at turn transition. [Sacks et al. \(1974\)](#) identify a set of procedures that participants in ordinary conversations orient to at *transition-relevance places* (TRP) and show that the ‘current speaker selects next’ procedure predominates over self-selection.

In institutional contexts, turn-transition may operate in a manner that differs from ordinary conversation and that is shaped by the *goal-oriented* nature of the interaction. A central goal in the second/foreign language classroom is to learn a target foreign language, and classroom interaction is organized in order to reach this goal (see e.g. [Seedhouse, 2004](#)). Moreover, classroom interaction involves multiple co-participants and relies on ‘traffic-management’ techniques to avoid collisions of turns-at-talk or schisming. These techniques involve asymmetries in the participants' responsibilities in conversational management, the teacher supposedly ‘controlling’ speakership, contents and activities (see e.g. [Markee, 2000](#); [McHoul, 1978](#); [Mehan, 1979](#); [Seedhouse, 2004](#); [van Lier, 1988](#); [Walsh, 2006](#)). The organization of turn-taking in teacher-fronted classroom activities is usually accomplished as a two-party speech exchange system, with the teacher as one of the party and the cohort of students as the other party ([Schegloff, 1987](#), p. 222; see also [Sahlström, 1999](#)). A range of other parallel conversational activities and participation frameworks (e.g. peer-to-peer side talk) may however emerge during teacher-fronted whole-classroom activities, oriented to by co-participants with various degrees of legitimacy.

Non-verbal turn-allocation procedures have been mentioned in classic studies on classroom interaction (see e.g. [van Lier's \(1988\)](#) distinction between verbally nominating, non-verbally signaling, and using eye gaze for allocating a turn to a student, p. 109). However, it is only recently that studies have provided detailed descriptions of the non-verbal conducts – gaze, head nods, pointing gestures and hand raising – involved in the accomplishment of speaker change in the classroom. For example, [Kääntä \(2012\)](#) shows that teachers use gaze, head nods and pointing gestures to allocate turns to students raising hands (see also [Mondada, 2009](#); [Sahlström, 2002](#)). These embodied turn-allocation procedures are found in pauses dedicated to finding a willing next speaker, or simultaneously to talk oriented to another task (e.g. evaluating a previous answer). The procedures for selecting students who *do not* bid for a turn verbally or by raising hands, however, have not been investigated much. Noteworthy in this respect is the study of [Koole and Berenst \(2008\)](#), who argue that other-selection of students by teachers is not done randomly, but is sensitive to the historicity of classroom interaction: students who frequently bid for a turn by raising hand are also frequently other-selected by the teacher in the absence of a volunteer. Using conversation analysis to investigate the participants' non-verbal conducts prior to other-selection, a study from [Mortensen \(2008\)](#) shows that gazing at the teacher at specific sequential places also plays a role in other-selection: such gazes are regularly oriented to by teachers as displaying *willingness* to take a turn and are followed by the teacher's selection of the ‘gazing student’ as the next speaker.

Following that line of research, the present study focuses on teachers' *verbal nomination* of students, i.e. on episodes where the teacher calls out a student's name, thereby requesting that student to take the next turn. The analysis is twofold: first, it describes the interactional accomplishment of turn-allocation as resulting from the students' embodied displays of availability to speak, and from the teacher's recognition of that availability; second, it shows that selecting a student who has displayed availability to speak has interactional consequences that sharply contrast with those found when the selected student has *not* displayed availability to speak. The findings show that speaker change in the classroom is more relevantly explained as the result of the participants' collaborative adjustments than as reflecting the teachers' control over the organization of turn-allocation. They suggest a revision of the very fundamental notions of *self-* and *other-*selection, insofar as selection is jointly accomplished.

The present study

The present study uses *conversation analysis* to provide a qualitative investigation of how classroom interaction is organized by its co-participants (for recent introductions to CA, see e.g. [Sidnell, 2010](#); [Sidnell and Stivers, 2012](#)). Central to this approach is the description of participants' real time adjustments to co-participants conducts, thereby revealing their highly

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