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Getting and keeping Nora on board: A novice elementary ESOL student teacher's practices for lesson engagement

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ABSTRACT

This study describes how a novice ESOL (English to Speakers of Other Languages) student teacher successfully navigates an instructional path in a one-on-one tutoring session with a second grade student. We document the student teacher's strategies to both engage and disengage her student, who alternately resists and cooperates throughout the lesson. In particular, we demonstrate, through conversation analysis, how the student teacher fine-tunes her moment-by-moment decision-making in order to maintain forward momentum through a series of transitions by negotiating with her student, avoiding power struggles, and incorporating student interests while at the same time keeping her teaching objectives in mind. The findings illuminate the complexities involved in implementing a seemingly mundane task such as transitioning in teaching. The various resources for managing resistance can contribute to detailing teacher education in important ways. We conclude by addressing the methodological advantages of combining conversation analysis and ethnographic insights in examining educational interaction.

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While observing novice teachers, especially in K-12 settings, it is not uncommon to witness their bewilderment when it comes to classroom management. Solidly trained in their content area and well-prepared with a lesson plan, they sally forth with the best of intentions only to be brought down by a single 5 year old or a class of 10 year olds before they have a chance to get the lesson off the ground. They quickly learn that how they conduct the class is as important as what they are teaching and that success relies on learners' willingness to cooperate and align with the teacher. Securing that cooperation can be hard won at times and not always a straightforward process.

In this study, we follow a novice student teacher as she works to transition her tutorial student from one lesson task to the next. When encountering student resistance, she adjusts her moment-by-moment decision-making to the child's emerging voice in an attempt to engage the child in the lesson and elicit her cooperation. We begin by considering two bodies of the literature that provide an important backdrop for our investigation: (1) classroom management with a focus on transitions in K-12 contexts and (2) discourse analytic work on managing resistance in interaction.

1. Background

1.1. Classroom management and transition

Effective classroom management contributes to the creation of a teaching environment where learning can occur (Brophy, 1988; LePage et al., 2005). Strong management skills can be the difference between a successful and not-so-successful lesson regardless of the merits of the lesson design on paper. It is of such import in K-12 settings that student teachers and practicing

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teachers are routinely evaluated on their classroom management skills (Acheson & Gall, 2003; Danielson & McGreal, 2000; Nolan & Hoover, 2008). Student teachers and novice teachers often cite classroom management issues as their greatest challenge (Burnard, 1998; Martin, Linfoot, & Stephenson, 1999; Silvestri, 2001; Stallion & Zimpher, 1991), precisely because it involves a synthesis of a wide range of components, many of which are not clearly articulated in teacher training programs (LePage et al., 2005; Merrett & Wheldall, 1993). Even when they do receive explicit training, it can take time for teachers to master this synthesis and orchestrate the desired outcome. Reading about management techniques in a textbook (e.g., Burden, 2006; Cangelosi, 2008; Charney, 2002; Jones & Jones, 2010; Weinstein & Mignano, 2007) is one thing, implementing them with real students, quite another. Effective management involves mastering a variety of skills that together form a cohesive whole, which are assumed to result in a classroom conducive to learning.

While order and "well-behaved" students are observable features of effective management, for learning to actually occur, students need to be engaged in appropriate lesson tasks (Fisher et al., 1980). Therefore, gaining and maintaining engagement is of primary concern for teachers and is frequently evaluated by supervisors and administrators as effective practice (Acheson & Gall, 2003; Danielson & McGreal, 2000; Nolan & Hoover, 2008). Ironically, shortly after engagement, teachers must frequently disengage students to move them on to the next task, lesson, or location. In an observational study examining the structure of the school day, Gump (1982) calculated that 21–27% of the day was devoted to non-instructional activities, with the majority of this time devoted to transitions. He also recorded up to 30 different transitions during a typical elementary school day and identified three sequential transition phases: "(1) an abandonment of a previous activity with its relevant milieu; (2) a movement toward the second activity; (3) 'getting into' the second activity with its milieu" (Gump, 1987, p. 722). This art of shifting student focus is worthy of study as evidenced by its inclusion in a variety of classroom management texts and articles directed at preservice and inservice teachers (Buck, 1999; Burden, 2006; Cangelosi, 2008; Charney, 2002; Hemmeter, Ostrosky, Artman, & Kinder, 2008; Jones & Jones, 2010; McIntosh, Herman, & Sandford, 2004; Nix, 2008; Smythe, 2002; Weinstein, 2007; Wood, 1999).

Managing these transitions can be particularly challenging as it is possible to lose students' attention as they are being extracted from one task, but not yet involved in the next. Arlin (1979) found that student misbehavior doubled during transition times based on multiple observations of 50 elementary and middle school student teachers indicating the challenging nature of managing this shift. Once disengagement and change of focus are established, re-engaging students in the new task can also be problematic. In an applied behavioral literature review of student compliance during and between academic task studies, Lee (2006) reported that teachers who employed a high probability (high-p) task sequence as a transitional strategy were able to achieve greater student compliance in engaging students in the new task. High probability task sequences are teacher requests for students to perform tasks that are likely to result in student compliance prior to issuing a request that is likely to result in resistance. They found that when students are first asked to complete a non-threatening task, they are more likely to also complete a subsequent more challenging task. Lee notes that the effectiveness of the strategy is related to maintaining student engagement rather than insisting on compliance and potentially dealing with outright student refusal. An analysis of these studies illustrates that the compliant behavior frequently carries over to the previously resisted task and the probability of forward momentum is increased. Lee notes that the high-p sequence does require time and negotiation, but is an investment in securing the student's cooperation in the long run, increasing lesson engagement.

In sum, the exiting literature illustrates the challenges inherent in transition and provides suggestions for facilitating them. However, to our knowledge, no microanalysis of how transitions are negotiated by teachers and students during lesson implementation currently exists. What kinds of choices do teachers make to manage transitions? In what ways do students demonstrate their cooperation with or resistance to transitions? We now turn to a review of discourse analytic work on managing resistance and maximizing cooperation.

1.2. Managing resistance and maximizing cooperation in interaction

Discourse analytic research has tackled at least two contexts in which resistance figures prominently: (1) advising (e.g., Heritage and Sefi, 1992; Silverman, 1997; Velvilanen, 2009) and (2) interaction with children (e.g., Hutchby, 2002; Goodwin, 2007; Sirota, 2006). In advising contexts, such resistance is found not only in situations where advice is uninvited (Jefferson & Lee, 1992) but also in settings where advice is actively sought (Waring, 2005). To facilitate advising processes, advice givers strive to deliver their advice in ways that minimize resistance. One practice is to fit the advice to the recipient instead of delivering a general piece of advice to an unprepared recipient. A second practice is to create ambiguities. One can package the advice as something else or blur the distinction between advice giving and some other "innocuous" activity such as information giving (Kinnell & Maynard, 1996; Perakyla & Silverman, 1991). One can also render the target of advice vague or indeterminant (e.g., Linell, Adelsward, Sachs, Bredmar, & Lindstedt, 2002; Peyrot, 1987; Wajnryb, 1998). Stivers (2005) also found that during parent-pediatrician interaction, a recommendation *for* a treatment is more likely to obtain acceptance than one *against* a treatment, and that a specific positive recommendation followed by a negative recommendation is more likely to secure parents' alignment, which resonates with Lee's (2006) finding that students are more likely to complete a challenging task if it is preceded by a non-threatening task.

Another routine context for witnessing resistance, perhaps not surprisingly, is interactions with children. Hutchby (2002) examined the audio recording of a child counseling session where the 6-year old resists the therapist's incitement to talk with the repeated use of "I don't know." The therapist engages in a range of practices to work with the child's resistance by first treating it as a game, then attempting to get the child to be serious, and finally, reframing the child's "I don't know"