

Managing Stacy: A case study of turn-taking in the language classroom

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Abstract

A persistent and yet unresolved question raised by language teachers is how to ensure even participation during whole-class interaction. Neither published teacher training materials nor scholarly research on classroom turn-taking, however, have been addressed to this particular aspect of pedagogical concerns. Based on two-hour videotaped data from an adult ESL (English as a Second Language) classroom, this case study details how one teacher systematically manages the participation of a student who appears to be negotiating for more than her “fair share” of the floor. Findings of this study extend our current understanding of (classroom) turn-taking and constitute a potentially important resource for broadening and specifying language teacher education. © 2013 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

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1. Introduction

The challenge of maintaining an inclusive classroom that ensures even participation remains relevant for teachers at all levels in all types of classrooms. As [Allwright \(1980\)](#) writes, “[f]or many years teachers have been urged to secure the active participation of all learners at all times, ... Given a teacher with the declared aim to secure an even distribution of participation, some learners will negotiate for more than their ‘fair’ share, others for ‘less,’ some consciously, some unconsciously” (p. 166). Persistent but unresolved questions raised in teaching practicum courses, from my own experience at least, include what to do with students who remain silent or rarely speak up, or on the opposite end of the spectrum, what to do with students who speak all the time (i.e., hog the floor) to the extent that compromises others’ opportunities to talk. Common solutions such as pair or group work to maximize learner participation are useful but not applicable to whole class interaction. No empirical endeavor to my knowledge has been addressed specifically to depicting the methods deployed to ensure even participation during whole class interaction. In this paper, I take a small step towards such a description by producing an analytical account of the

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systematic ways in which one ESL teacher manages the participation of Stacy who appears to be negotiating for more than her “fair share” of the floor. For the purpose of this paper, I use “even participation” loosely to characterize a state of interaction free of any noticeable hogging of the floor by one or a few individuals.

2. Background

Classroom turn-taking in general has received a substantial amount of scholarly attention. Some have produced meticulous descriptions of the relatively constrained nature of classroom turn-taking compared to that in ordinary conversation (McHoul, 1978; Mehan, 1979; van Lier, 1988). Mehan (1979) describes three ways in which the teacher can select a student respondent: invitation to reply, invitation to bid, and individual nomination. Xie (2011) shows that these turn-allocation practices can affect opportunities of learning in various ways. Others have further specified how current-selects-next or self-selection is accomplished in classroom talk (e.g., Lerner, 1993; Mortensen, 2008; Sahlstrom, 2002). Still others have delved into the cross-cultural difference in turn-taking as a way of illuminating uneven participation in the classroom (e.g., Philips, 1972; Schultz et al., 1982; McCollum, 1989; Poole, 2005).

Of particular methodological relevance to the current study is Allwright's (1980) case study, where he outlines a set of turn-getting and turn-giving practices. Applying the framework to a university level ESL class, he shows how an individual student Igor engages in robust participation, which, upon closer analysis, turns out to involve lengthy repair sequences. In other words, as Allwright argues, Igor's participation is a result of incompetence rather than competence. By demonstrating the potential fruitfulness of isolating “‘interesting’ subjects for a detailed case study,” Allwright's (1980) paper published over a quarter of a century ago holds strong resonance for my current project (p. 165). Both Allwright's Igor and my Stacy engage in “robust” participation. While Allwright focused on the nature of that robustness, I turn to how that robustness is managed by the teacher.

In sum, prior work on classroom turn-taking has greatly enhanced our understanding of what turn-allocation procedures are deployed, why participation may be uneven at times, and how a case-study approach can reveal the complexities of floor management. In the current inquiry, I hope to extend this important body of work by pulling into view a set of previously un-described practices used by the teacher to manage the participation of someone who negotiates for more than her “fair share” of the floor.

3. Data and method

Data from this study come from a 2-h videotaped adult ESL (English as a Second Language) class at a Community English Program in the United States. This is a small-sized advanced-level class that comprises six female students coming from a variety of first language backgrounds including Japanese (Mia and Naomi), Portuguese (Daisy), Spanish (Mindy), French (Angie), and Danish (Stacy) (All these are pseudonyms). The teacher is a male native speaker of English with 11 years of English language teaching experience. The class meets regularly three days per week with a 2-h class on each day, and as part of a larger project that includes a series of other classes, the videotaping for this particular class was done on one of the sessions towards the end of the fall semester.

On this particular day, the class was sitting around a rectangular table. As the camera person in the room, I quickly became aware of Stacy's somewhat overpowering presence. She appeared to produce the most talk, take the most turns, and behave in a way that seems most competitive. I remember feeling the potential challenge for the teacher with a student like Stacy in the room and marveling at his ability to somehow effortlessly maintain a sense of order and equilibrium. This project is in part an attempt to discover the mechanisms underpinning the teacher's craft.

The two-hour video was transcribed in its entirety using a modified version of the system developed by Gail Jefferson (see Appendix). Modifications pertain to the timing between verbal and nonverbal conduct. A dash, for example, is used to signal the simultaneous occurrence between the verbal and nonverbal conduct it connects. For this particular project, I focused on portions of the transcript that involved Stacy, and the analysis was conducted within a conversation analytic (henceforth CA) framework (see ten Have, 2007 for a thorough introduction). A brief explanation of several CA terms with regard to turn-taking is in order: the basic building block of a turn is a turn-constructional unit (TCU), which may be lexical, phrasal, clausal or sentential; the possible completion of a TCU may be projected on a grammatical, prosodic, pragmatic, or even nonverbal basis; turn transition becomes relevant at this possible completion point, where a set of turn allocation procedures apply in quick succession: current-selects-next, next speaker self-selection, and current-speaker-continues (Sacks et al., 1974).

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