Subversive questions for classroom turn-taking traffic management

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Abstract

This paper uses conversation analysis to document countering actions taken by a teacher for turn-taking traffic management in the classroom institutional settings. Adopting the notions of ''parallel activity'' and ''subversion,'' I introduce a particular teacher's accounting practice that was used to curtail potentially disruptive activity among students. The data for the study come from 20 h of video recordings collected from a Japanese public junior high school classroom. Analysis of the videotaped classroom interactions revealed the use of a specific interactional practice, viz., the teacher's use of subversive questions to put an end to parallel activity among students without forcefully asking them to desist. Since subversive questions are designed to reflect the sequential environment of the central activity and take different forms depending on it, students who can answer teacher's subversive questions thereby evidence their previous participation in the central activity, and hence the teacher closes the sequence with positive feedback. In contrast, students who are not able to answer the subversive questions evidence their lack of participation in the central activity and receive reprimand. These findings contribute to the literature on classroom interaction from the turn-taking traffic management point of view.
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1. Introduction

Up to the present, much classroom interaction research has adopted conversation analysis (CA) for understanding and explicating various aspects of interactional phenomena in the classroom (e.g., McHoul, 1978; Mehan, 1979; Macbeth, 2000, 2002; Mushin et al., 2013). Especially in the field of second or foreign language classroom research, there have been growing numbers of studies from a CA perspective (e.g., Lee, 2007; Mori, 2004; Seedhouse, 2004; Sert, 2013; Waring, 2008, 2009). From this perspective, talk in interaction in classroom settings is defined as institutional talk, since it is "goal-oriented talk" (Drew and Heritage, 1992). The goal of classroom interaction for the teacher is to provide students with an opportunity to learn. This learning opportunity, in the case of language learners, is the opportunity to be exposed to the target language as much as possible and to use it as much as possible (Ellis, 1994; Krashen, 1985; Swain, 1985). Foreign language teachers are thus required to assume responsibility for controlling classroom interaction in order to distribute such a learning opportunity to each student. To conceptualize such a distributional structure, talk in language classroom interaction has been the focus of many CA studies (Lerner, 1993, 1995; Markee, 2004, 2005, 2008; Waring, 2008, 2009).

The structure conceptualized in the literature has assumed a common feature a single interactional teacher-student activity (e.g., McHoul, 1978; Mehan, 1979). This is what Schegloff (1987) called a two-party speech exchange system. In a classroom setting, such exchange system must have the teacher as a party in an unequal power relationship where turn-taking is concerned. In this unequal power relationship, the teacher has a greater right to initiate turn-taking, to close sequences, and thus to organize entire sequences in the classroom (e.g., Gardner, 2012; Lerner, 1993; Macbeth, 2004). Much of the literature

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has focused on how teachers and students participate in this single interactional activity, as if the classroom setting itself were equipped with the two-party speech exchange system (Lerner, 1993, 1995; Mori, 2004; Waring, 2008, 2009).

Recent studies, however, have viewed the structure of the two-party speech exchange system not as the inevitable interactional structure that will be found in the classroom institutional setting but rather as a contingent structure maintained by seamless interactional effort among participants (Hall and Smotrova, 2013; Waring and Hruska, 2011; Waring et al., 2016). The system is often under threat of breakage by students (Koole, 2007; Markee, 2004). Markee (2005), for example, reported that students are capable of engaging in a co-occurring speech exchange system while engaging in the two-party speech exchange system involving the teacher. Similarly, Koole (2007) reported that students often engage in their own activity and the two-party speech exchange system simultaneously.

Some studies have indicated that such students' departures from the teacher-initiated two-party speech exchange system actually create learning opportunities (e.g., Jacknick, 2011; Waring, 2009, 2011). For example, Jacknick (2011) highlights students' ability to control their turn taking at activity transition points. She found that such student initiation creates a further interactional space for learning opportunities. Waring (2009) analyzed how such student initiation is organized with co-participants and promotes their learning. She found that student initiation was organized by the student's self-selected turn immediately after a teacher-initiated sequence (Waring, 2011). One common feature of the student initiation for learning in these studies is that the student initiative must be accomplished with the involvement of the teachers. For example, both Jacknick (2011) and Waring (2011) observed that such a student initiative turn occurs at a transition point in the teacher-initiated two-party speech exchange system. Therefore, the student initiation must be attentive to the teacher's involvement. With the involvement of their teachers, student initiation comes to be treated as a learning-oriented activity furthering the institutional goals of the classroom (Jacknick, 2011; Waring, 2011).

However, without the involvement of teachers, such students' departures from the teacher-initiated two-party speech exchange system tend not to be treated as learning-oriented activities, and thus these activities can even be defined as disruptive to the institutional classroom goal. For example, if student X starts to chat with student Y, overlapping with their teacher's talk, X and Y's departure from the teacher-initiated two-party speech exchange system observably fails to involve their teacher as a party. In such a case, X and Y miss information provided by the teacher in the simultaneous talk, and hence, they can be disrupting their learning opportunities. Furthermore, in the foreign language classroom, such student–student talk tends to be organized in the students' first language (Broner, 2000; Tarone and Swain, 1995). In such a case, the students momentarily lose their opportunity to be exposed to the target language, given that language learning theory claims that learners must be exposed to the target language as much as possible (Ellis, 1994; Krashen, 1985; Swain, 1985). Therefore, such student departures from the teacher-oriented two-party-speech exchange system have the potential to disrupt their learning opportunity. As teachers are in charge of creating students' learning opportunities (Macbeth, 2000, 2004), they are obliged to put an end to such students' departures from the two-party speech exchange system because of its potential disruptiveness of the institutional goal.

The problem is that teachers cannot always identify whether the students' departure from the two-party speech exchange system is oriented toward disruption or toward the creation of learning opportunities. If the teacher simply puts an end to all uniquely student–student talk, that teacher could possibly disrupt learning opportunities for those students. As many classroom management studies have pointed out (e.g., Doyle, 1986, 1990; Manke, 1997), such asymmetric power use by the teacher fails to establish a positive social relationship between the teacher and the students. In the absence of accountability, unilateral intervention on the part of the teacher would create an undesirable distance between the teacher and the students. This kind of issue needs to be further examined as one of the challenging practices of 'classroom turn-taking traffic' management (Lauzon and Berger, 2015).

Therefore, in this paper, I examine a particular teacher's accounting practice for putting an end to students' potentially disruptive activity. The data for this study come from 20 classroom hours of video recordings collected in a Japanese public junior high school. Adopting the notions of ''parallel activity'' (Koole, 2007) and ''subversion'' (Edwards, 1995; Sacks, 1992), I will introduce recurrent interactional phenomena that can be identified as teacher's accounting practice used to put an end to students' potentially disruptive activities. The study aims to contribute to the literature on classroom interaction and teacher education from the viewpoint of classroom turn-taking traffic management.

2. Parallel activity

In order to define students' potentially disruptive activity in this study, I will further elaborate on Koole's (2007) definition of ''parallel activity'' versus ''central activity'' and contrast it with Markee's (2005) definition of ''off-task talk'' versus ''on-task talk.''

Markee (2005:197) characterizes activities between students in classroom interaction as ''on-task'' and ''off-task'' talk. He defines on-task talk as interaction related to whatever topic(s) teachers designate as the current class agenda. Off-task talk, in contrast, is any interaction that is not on-task, leading naturally to the question of what on-task talk is in the first place.

Koole (2007) also characterizes two types of students' classroom activities as ''central activity'' and ''parallel activity.'' The central activity is, in principle, organized by a teacher with one or more students and is observed by all participants in