BECOMING NEXT SPEAKER:
LEARNERS' SELF-SELECTION IN GROUP TALK

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Abstract

Through conversation analytic (CA) techniques, this paper explores English learners' interactions in a conversation room within an English as a foreign language (EFL) institution in Japan. Specifically, short video excerpts of small-group conversations conducted between intermediate-level EFL learners are examined. The focus is upon turn-taking practices. In particular, this investigation uncovers how the interactants self-select so as to become the next speaker. This paper demonstrates that, in spite of linguistic difficulties, language learners are able to make proficient use of verbal and nonverbal interactional resources to engage in social interaction.

Key words: conversation analysis, language learning, self-access center, turn taking, self-selection

1. INTRODUCTION

According to the sociocultural perspective of second language acquisition, development of knowledge occurs through real life interaction and activity within a community (Lantolf, 2000). As such, more and more tertiary-level learning institutions dedicate free-access centers to English conversation, places where English learners are provided not only with opportunities for self-directed (typically private) scholarship, but with opportunities for conversation-for-learning through life-like interaction.

Through conversation analytic (CA) techniques, this study explores English learners' interactions in one such conversation room within an English as a foreign language (EFL) institution in Japan. Among the many possible phenomena to focus on, the authors narrowed their focus upon learners' next speaker self-selection practices. Among the sets of turn-allocation practices, self-selection is probably the most challenging for second language learners. Without knowing how to self-select as the next speaker, they cannot break into a

conversation. The authors have already discussed two self-selection practices: 'turn-entry devices' and 'display of listening' (Otsu & Krug, 2010). The study reported here is a preliminary attempt to find out what variety of self-selection techniques learners use in addition to the two practices above. On the basis of examining short video excerpts of small-group conversations conducted between intermediate-level EFL learners, this study describes learners' self-selection practices and how they are interactionally competent, in spite of linguistic difficulties.

2. NEXT-SPEAKER SELF-SELECTION

Before we present the analysis of the data, the important concepts of turn-taking and next-speaker self-selection will be briefly explained. Turn-taking is a basic form of organization for conversation, and it organizes the distribution of opportunities among parties to interaction (Sacks et al., 1974). In order to participate in a conversation, we have to know how turn allocation is managed in conversation: how to bring others into a conversation, how to take a turn at the right moment, and how to keep a conversation going. According to Sacks et al. (1974, p. 703), turn allocation practices are classified into two groups: (a) those in which the next turn is allocated by the current speaker's selection of a next speaker; and (b) those in which a next turn is allocated by self-selection, which is the focus of this paper.

The basic principle for self-selecting to become the next speaker is, as Sacks et al. describe, to start as early as possible, at the earliest transition-relevance place (1974, p. 719). This study will discuss the methods that second-language learners use to take a turn at talk as early as possible, at the first available transition-relevance place.

Turn is the vehicle for the other practices like sequencing and structuring whole conversations (Wong & Waring, 2010, pp. 7-9). Hence, the ability to self-select and obtain conversational turns by employing various verbal and/or nonverbal resources is an essential component of interactional competence. Without turn-taking techniques in their target

language, learners cannot properly start nor remain involved in real-life conversations on their own, hence opportunities for learning may well be reduced.

3. THE PEDAGOGICAL SETTING

The conversation room at the center of this investigation exists within a tertiary-level institution in Japan. On the whole, it serves the dual purposes of (1) providing a self-access space for students to study and borrow resources (including resource books, study guides, graded readers, newspapers, novels and DVDs) and (2) making available a permanent place for interested students to meet and practice their second-language (English) conversation skills in small groups. During operation, one member of the university's teaching staff is present in a teacher-as-facilitator role. All in all, the conversation room provides a relaxed, semi-casual study and conversation environment (Krug et al., 2011).

What exactly should be learned is not specified, but the general pedagogical idea behind such environments is, through target-language exposure and practice, the participating students will improve their second language fluency. Conversation rooms provide much-needed opportunities for second-language learners to experience more conversation-like talk with peers in EFL settings. Institutional talk, such as occurs in classroom-based learning situations, and ordinary conversation offer different opportunities for language learning (Markee, 2000). Conversation rooms typically have no fixed participant roles, unlike conventional classroom environments, so learners are required to organize and structure entire interactions on their own. Thus, within such settings, learners can develop and display their interactional competence as equal participants in ordinary conversations.

4. THE PARTICIPANTS AND DATA

For this study, two small-group interactions were video recorded in the conversation room. Before the recordings, the participants had no other instruction than to talk about

anything they liked for about 15 minutes. It was understood that the conversation should be conducted only in English. The material for this paper was extracted from one of those interactions, which comprises three intermediate-level English learners, as follows: LA (male Japanese student), LB (male Chinese student), and LC (female Japanese student). The above participants met weekly in the conversation room with assorted and varying other members. Hence, the three interactants could be described as acquaintances rather than close friends.

5. FINDINGS: THE LEARNERS' SELF-SELECTION PRACTICES

As evidenced in the data, the assorted techniques and strategies that were deployed by the participants to start as early as possible, at the earliest transition-relevance place, and become the next speaker will now be outlined below. In addition to (1) turn-entry devices and (2) display of listening, as was discussed in Otsu and Krug (2010), it was also found that the learners were employing (3) progressional overlaps, and (4) restarts and intra-turn pauses. Some of these techniques and strategies have been found in native speaker conversations, while others might be limited to the second language learners in our data (i.e., being situated resources used in the management of the learners' interactions, to compensate for linguistic difficulties). Each of the practices is outlined below.

5.1 TURN-ENTRY DEVICES

To make early starts (also known as pre-starts) in conversation, turn-entry devices can be used; turn-entry devices are turn-initial items such as 'well' or 'so' or 'yeah' and so on (Sacks et al., 1974, p. 719). Example 1 portrays the use of a specific turn-entry device, deployed for the purpose of self-selection of turn. In the talk just prior to this extract, the student participants had focused on the topic of spring holiday plans.

[Example 1]   A turn-entry device

```
01            LC:    I think (I'll) (1.8) study (0.9) to be a teacher?
02                   (1.2)
03            LC:    mmmm
04            LB:    until graduating or [ (    )
05            LC:                        [yeah
06                   ((LC and LB nodding at one another))
07       →    LA:    AHH! (0.6) do [you-
08            LC:                  [yeah=
09            LA:    ahh(.) do you have any (0.8) >how can I say<
10                   the (0.5) jo:b (0.7) <in the>(.) next(.) years.
11            LC:    I've justa got a (0.6) °I've° just got a call?
```

From lines 01 to 03, LC outlines her plan to study during the holiday period. LB addresses LC, inquiring as to the purpose or duration of her planned study by saying "until graduating or" at line 04. LC confirms the purpose or duration directly at line 05, saying "yeah". The two speakers seem to understand one other at line 06, as they make eye contact and nod simultaneously. It is here, suddenly, that LA makes what may seem an almost surprising entry into the talk. LA takes the break in conversation at line 06 to be the earliest transition-relevance place available to him. At line 07, he emphatically says "AHH!" to openly display that he suddenly remembered or discovered something. The loud "AHH!" draws the co-participants' attention, who were looking at each other—and not in his direction—at that point. The "AHH!"-token served to attract the attention of the interlocutors and secure the floor for LA to take his own turn from line 09.

5.2 DISPLAY OF LISTENING

In Example 2, LC's clever use of display of listening enables her to enter the talk to take her own turn.

[Example 2]   Display of listening

```
01            LA:    I need a: (0.8) TOEFL score (.) over (0.7)
02       →    LC:    mmm?
03            LA:    nine(.)ty::: (.) w- >I don't know<(.) because
04                   I've never (0.5) I've never taken the exam?
05       →    LC:    °mmhm°=
06            LA:    taken TOEFL (0.7) but(.) hehe
07                   [.hh do-]
08       →    LC:    [oh are-] are you going to study abroad?
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09              (0.8)
10      LA:     yeah: I want to go: [abroad
11      LC:                         [mmm?
12      LA:     so(.) I need TOEFL scores.
```

During short pauses within LA's turn at the end of lines 01 and 04, LC indicates clearly that she is listening by saying "mmm?" at line 02 and, similarly, "mmhm" at line 05. At line 06, LA reaches a point of contrast in his talk, saying "but(.)" and then appears to have difficulty either continuing or explaining the point of contrast fully. At this point LA laughs loudly, and LC takes the momentary lapse in conversational flow as a permissible point of entry into the talk at line 08. LC's active participation through open display of listening enabled her to enter the talk at the earliest transition-relevance place and secure a turn by and for herself.

5.3 PROGRESSIONAL OVERLAP

To make an early start, an overlap with the prior utterance might occur. However, there are overlaps which are *not* considered intrusive within the turn-taking system. There are three types of non-intrusive overlaps: transitional, recognitional, and progressional overlaps (Jefferson, 1984). In our data, it was found that the learners were using progressional overlaps. Progressional overlap is a type of overlap that orients to the progressivity of an utterance. When an utterance begins to show any of the various types of 'disfluencies', this type of overlap occurs.

Two representative examples of progressional overlap noted in our data will now be briefly outlined. First, please refer to Example 3. Moments prior to this example, the conversation participants had been discussing the topic of raising children.

[Example 3] Progressional overlap 1

```
01      LB:     I don't know (                  ) in Japan.
02      LC:     ah excuse me?
03      LB:     yes(.)[ahm
04  →   LA:           [how much?
05      LB:     yes. [how much i::s (         )
```

```
06              LA:            [how mu::ch ahm um ((LA continues to hold
07                       the turn from this point))
```

In Example 3, at line 04, LA starts speaking at a point where LB is trying to clarify his earlier utterance of line 01; in doing so LB is responding to LC's request at line 02. What LB actually said at line 01 is inaudible, however retrospectively we can guess he was saying that he does not know how much it costs to raise a child in Japan. At line 03, there is a slight delay in LB's clarification; he says "yes" followed by a micropause where LB begins to actually clarify his utterance. That's when LA's progressional overlap occurs. Here, LA shows his understanding of LB's intention, and he assists by helping the conversation to go forward.

Second, an additional example of progressional overlap is shown in Example 4.

[Example 4] Progressional overlap 2

```
01              LB:    so(.) you must(.) explain your- your: own
02                     mind (0.9) [what you think. and-
03      →       LA:              [in (1.7)       with my writi:ng?
04              LB:    yes. [ah-
05              LA:        [oh. really. ((cough)) in TOEFL(.) there
06                     are(.) four parts °of the(.) test°(.) listeni:ng,
07                     writi::ng, speaki:ng?
08              LC:    huh.
09              LA:    then(.) >how can I say< reading. ahh ((LA
10                     continues to hold the turn from this point))
```

At line 03 in Example 4, LA starts speaking at a point where LB had difficulty in continuing his utterance; see "explain your- your: own mind (0.9)" at lines 01-02. Thus, LA took this turn at talk here to move the conversation on through use of progressional overlap.

Language learners need more processing time while they talk in their second language; therefore there are many opportunities for progressional overlap in second-language conversations. On the other hand, transitional overlap and recognitional overlap require the learners to monitor the emerging utterance more closely and to swiftly respond; the former requires them to forecast the syntactic completeness of the prior utterance (and it can occur as early as the beginning of the prior speaker's final word), and the latter requires them to recognize the upshot of the prior utterance before the turn completion. It is quite difficult for

learners to do these kinds of overlaps in limited time, in comparison to progressional overlap.

5.4 RESTART AND INTRA-TURN PAUSES

By examining several phenomena which may appear to be 'false starts' in novice second-language interaction, Carroll (2004) demonstrated that what may initially appear to be 'disfluencies' in the talk of novice learners are actually skilled interactional achievement. Restart of a turn construction unit (TCU) beginning is utilized to solicit the gaze of a non-gazing recipient (Carroll, 2004: 212-217).

The learners in our data were also employing restart as an attention-getting device. Please refer to Example 5.

[Example 5]   Restart

```
01      →       LC:    is it (0.4) if you study abroad?
02                     (.)   ((↑LB looked at LC))
03              LB:    yes
04              LC     is it (1.5) makes you easier to get a job
```

At line 01 in Example 5, LC addresses a question to LB, but LB is not gazing at LC. However, as the 0.4-second pause emerges, LB turns his head towards LC. Thus, LC successfully solicited her interlocutor's gaze through pausing, and she restarted her question immediately after it.

Pauses had been thought of as errors in statistical research on fluency in the past. However, they are a secondary product of starting speaking as early as possible for next-speaker self-selection. A representative example noted in our data is shown in Example 6.

[Example 6]   An intra-turn pause

```
01              LB:    I just want to prepare for my TOEFL English test.
02              LC:    hmm
03              LA:    ahh
04              LC:    hh[h
05:     →       LA:      [when (0.8) will you do(.) tests.
```

In Example 6, at line 05, LA starts speaking even though he has not planned the whole

sentence yet, a technique deployed to become the next speaker. As a result, there is a 0.8-second pause after he says 'when'; having obtained the turn, LA's pause here provides time for him to continue to formulate his utterance and hold the turn.

6. CONCLUSION AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

This investigation revealed that, despite linguistic difficulties and moments of miscommunication, the second-language learners achieved highly skilled interactions. Even with limited linguistic resources the learners exhibited proficient use of and array of self-selection techniques, becoming active participants in conversations through securing and then contributing their own turns at talk. However, each of these practices needs to be further scrutinized through examining additional data sourced from a larger corpus of multi-party second-language interaction. Also, additional aspects of turn allocation within second-language conversation deserve attention in future studies, including such phenomena as the ways in which learners avoid becoming the next speaker, or the passive means by which learners may be selected by others as a next speaker.

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APPENDIX 1: TRANSCRIPTION CONVENTIONS AND ABBREVIATIONS

[	Point of overlap onset
]	Point of overlap termination
=	latched utterances
(1.2)	Interval between utterances (in second)
(.)	Very short untimed pause
e:r the:::	Lengthening of the preceding sound
-	Abrupt cutoff
?	Rising intonation, not necessarily a question
<u>that one</u>	Words that are stressed or emphasized in comparison to neighboring speech
!	Animated or emphatic tone
,	Low-rising intonation, suggesting continuation
.	Falling (final) intonation
CAPITALS	Especially loud sounds relative to surrounding talk
° °	Utterances between degree signs are noticeably quieter than surrounding talk
↑ ↓	Marked shifts into higher or lower pitch in the utterance following the arrow
< >	Talk surrounded by angle brackets is produced more slowly than neighboring talk
> <	Talk surrounded by reversed angle brackets is produced more quickly than neighboring talk
( )	A stretch of unintelligible speech
(it is this)	Transcriber's interpretation or guess at what is uttered during stretches of unclear or unintelligible speech
→	Mark features of special interest
((nodding))	Nonverbal actions or transcriber's comments
LA:	Identified learner (participant or interactant)