



Conversation Analysis in Language Teacher Education: An Approach for Reflection Through Action Research

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ABSTRACT: This paper outlines a practical approach for professional language teachers in secondary and adult-learning contexts to enhance their reflective teaching practices through conversation analysis-based action research. Conversation analysis (CA) can provide English as a foreign or second language (EFL/ESL) teachers with insights into not only classroom-discourse dynamics but also the language-learning processes of their learners. As exposure to CA becomes increasingly common in language teacher education programs, there is an opportunity to integrate CA with the broader curricular trends in teacher development and reflection. Action research is widely taught in such programs as its goal is to enhance teacher-awareness and lead to improved classroom practices. The paper will provide a framework for teachers to follow that is coherent, achievable, and above all, practical. Practicing ESL/EFL teachers present examples of their own classroom-based, CA action research from Japan, Thailand and the U.S. conducted with the aim of improving their own pedagogical awareness and situated classroom practices.

Keywords: classroom practices, conversation analysis, professional development, action research

1. INTRODUCTION

CA is a natural fit for action research as it can provide teachers with a powerful analytic lens through which to view language use in their classrooms—both their own language use, and that of their students—in order to make pedagogical changes that can enhance learning. However, CA as a methodology for action research can seem intimidating and time-consuming to novice, as well as experienced, teachers. Currently, the literature connecting CA to classroom-practices, while enlightening in terms of helping teachers identify and classify features of talk likely to occur in institutional settings, does not generally offer an accessible framework for how language teachers can connect the illustrative power of CA to their own situated teaching, reflection and professional development.

This paper will review the personal and professional benefits of reflective teaching practices and illustrate how CA can be situated in that discourse. Concerns teachers have about using CA as a means for reflecting on their teaching will be addressed, such as 1) what practice-based research questions EFL/ESL teachers can ask; 2) how teachers collect and transcribe their own classroom-generated data; 3) recognizing “salience” in their own classroom-generated data; and 4) after teachers identify specific issues in their classrooms, how they can reflect upon and ultimately address them.

1.1. Teacher Reflection Through Action Research

A critical part of the teaching profession is to remain curious about what we are doing in our classrooms and open to changing long-held practices once better information is discovered. In my work as a teacher educator in MA TESOL programs, I have always tried to emphasize this

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notion of re-examination and reflection as part of my course content. It is particularly important for teachers to continually reevaluate their beliefs, and ultimately their practices. John Dewey (1933) referred to reflection as the “sole method of escape from the purely impulsive or purely routine action” (p. 15), and that learning does not occur without critical reflection designed to “assess the grounds” (p. 9) of the movement from one’s previous schema to the new. This new knowledge, then, can lead to *reflective action* (Mezirow, 2000), whereby the learner re-examines his or her previous schema, and alters it going forward. Thus, these changes in schema originate mainly through constant reflection, as reflection “is the apperceptive process by which we change our minds, literally and figuratively” (Mezirow, 1991, p. 5). Perhaps a sufficiently succinct definition of reflection for our purposes here comes from Baud, Keogh, and Walker (1985), who say that reflection is “a generic term for those intellectual and affective activities in which individuals engage to explore their experiences in order to lead to new understandings and appreciation” (p. 3).

In the field of second language teaching, reflection, or “reflective practice” has proven a particularly resilient concept in teacher education as it allows teachers to collect their own classroom-based data, analyze it, reflect upon it, and make future decisions about how best to proceed in their teaching. Echoing Dewey’s conceptualization of reflection, Farrell (2015) sees an “evidence-based” approach to teacher-reflection as important in helping language teachers “avoid making instructional decisions based on impulse or routine,” and rather “use the data they have obtained so that they can make more informed decisions about their practice” (p. 8).

Reflective practice has become an umbrella term which often encompasses action research, although this point is not always well understood by practicing teachers. For many practicing (and busy) teachers, the notion of action research is simply another name for research itself, which is something that researchers do. However, teachers often conflate action research and other kinds of empirical research when in fact “action research is carried out by those who are best placed to solve problems, improve practice, and enhance understanding—that is, the participants in the situation under investigation” (Bailey, Curtis & Nunan, 2001, p.135). Therefore, the word “research” tends to intimidate many educators, when the fact is, they are already conducting research on a daily basis: they observe, reflect and make adjustments to their teaching instinctively. What proper action research can do in this process is give educators concrete, localized data to analyze and reflect upon. They may believe that being sufficiently observant in their classes is enough “data collection” to inform their teaching practice. Unfortunately, this is rarely the case as much of what transpires in the language classroom happens without the teacher noticing (such as individual discussions in multiple pair and group-work tasks), or is forgotten or overlooked in the busy process of teaching. For reflective practice to lead to meaningful change (or even confirmation that our teaching is on the right track), there needs to be some formal data collection performed.

Walsh and Mann (2015) make a compelling case for why reflective practice requires the collection of data in order for language teachers to find a specific “focus” and gain a fuller picture of their own teaching. While they suggest any number of potential sources for data (reflective journals, narrative accounts etc.), they place special importance on the richness of audio and video transcripts taken from one’s own classroom as “teachers are more engaged when they use [recorded] data from their own context and experience” (p. 4). Therefore, in order for teachers to *properly* reflect on their teaching, they need some tangible data set from which to start their journey of self-reflection. This, then, is where CA can provide the data necessary for reflective practice to take place.

2. CA AND DATA COLLECTION FOR ACTION RESEARCH

As data is key to unlocking a teacher's reflective process, conversation analysis provides the necessary tools. This section will address each of the following questions in order to help the beginning CA action researcher and reflective practitioner bridge the theoretical and practical, and begin to see their teaching (and their students' learning) in a new and revealing light:

- 1) What practice-based research questions can EFL/ESL teachers ask?
- 2) How can teachers collect and transcribe their own classroom-generated data?
- 3) What is "salience" and how can teachers find examples of it in their CA data?
- 4) After teachers identify specific issues in their classrooms, how can they reflect upon those issues and ultimately take action to address them?

2.1. Deciding on a Question or Problem

In action research, it is customary to start with a question or problem that the teacher wishes to address. This can be simply, "why are my students so reluctant to engage in group work?" or "how can I encourage more student-initiated talk in full-class discussions?" Once a question, problem or "puzzle" has been identified, some form of data is collected that has a direct bearing on the problem. Next, reflective analysis is conducted on the collected data in order to determine if it is sufficient and informative in terms of leading to an answer or resolution. Finally, the problem should be reinterpreted and re-examined based on some intervention, change or "action" taken to address the problem, thus starting the cycle over again. In reflective practice literature, the "reflection" stage is added again at the end of the cycle whereby teachers can evaluate what they have discovered throughout the process about themselves, their teaching, students, context and most critically, what the next steps should be in their development. Farrell (2015) suggests action researchers also conduct a literature review once a problem area has been identified in order to better understand the nature of the problem and how it has been treated by other researcher practitioners. Thus, the typical stages for action researchers are, following Farrell (2015, p. 92), as follows:

- 1) Plan (problem identification)
- 2) Research (literature review)
- 3) Observe (collecting data)
- 4) Reflect (analysis)
- 5) Act (redefining the problem/implementing intervention)

However, traditionally CA requires no specific research question, and in fact discourages any preconceived "hypothesis testing." In CA, the questions and problems should be inductive, that is, they should arise out of the data itself. In CA, there need not be a more specific research question than, "What is happening in this recording of my class?". Seedhouse (2004) refers to this "unmotivated looking" as "being open to discovering new phenomena rather than searching the data with preconceptions" (p. 39). While this may seem to conflict with the reflective practice literature, it in fact fits perfectly. That is because the goal of reflective practice is to grow personally and professionally, and there is no better way to do that than to look at ourselves and our teaching from an objective vantage point. When we think we know what we are doing (or doing wrong) without data to support that belief, we are essentially clouding any positive outcome of the reflection with "preconceptions." And with preconceptions come judgments about ourselves and our students that may or may not be based in reality. With approaching our reflective practice through "unmotivated looking", we in fact open ourselves up to the possibility of discovering something we did not expect. This discovery, then, becomes the

“critical event” (Webster & Mertova, 2007) or “critical incident” (Richards & Farrell, 2011) that forces us to re-evaluate what we are doing and ultimately transform ourselves and our teaching. But in order to achieve this level of reflection, first we must approach our practice with a “non-judgmental” stance (Gebhard, 1999), and be open to whatever we find in the journey of teacher development. That said, unmotivated looking “does not exclude having a general area of interest such as turn-taking at the outset of a project” (Wong & Waring, 2010, p. 6), it simply means that one is withholding judgement and preconceptions about what they may find, or where in the data they may find it. Oftentimes these discoveries come when the teacher recognizes a disconnect between the “pedagogical focus” they think they are maintaining in the classroom, and what they uncover in the data about what their students are actually doing (Seedhouse, 2004, p. 195).

In CA action research, we essentially want to start with the data, and see what it tells us about what we are doing (or not doing) in our practice. Thus, when employing a CA approach to reflective practice, the first two components of the action research model are inverted, that is, the question or “puzzle” emerges from the data collected. Once an area of “salience” is identified, the action researcher can review the CA literature associated with that feature of interaction (such as IRF sequences, repair practices, etc.) to better understand it, and see how other researcher practitioners have treated the phenomenon. This will then better prepare the teacher for the reflection and analysis stage, and finally to redefining the problem and planning the next steps in addressing it. With these caveats in mind, *Table 1* illustrates the re-envisioned and re-ordered cycle:

| | Typical Stages for Action Researchers | Stages for CA Action Researchers |
|---|--|--|
| 1 | Problem identification | Collecting data |
| 2 | Research (literature review) | Problem identification |
| 3 | Collecting data | Research (literature review) |
| 4 | Reflect (analysis) | Reflect (analysis) |
| 5 | Act (redefining the problem/implementing intervention) | Act (redefining the problem/implementing intervention) |

Table 1. Traditional and CA-modified action research cycles

2.2. Working with Classroom Data

2.2.1 Collecting CA data

Once we are confident in the approach of taking a “non-judgmental stance,” we can then set out to collect the data to look at, and collecting data to transcribe in CA is a fairly straightforward process. Teachers can use pocket-sized digital recorders (or even their smartphones with a recording app) to capture talk in their classrooms. Small recorders are especially practical in small group and pair work settings as they are less of a distraction to students than video cameras or other recorders with large microphones. While perhaps more intrusive, video recordings can make the task of transcribing turns in full-class discussions easier as the teacher can see who is making a particular utterance, and recognize who is overlapping with whom, for example, which can sometimes be difficult with audio-only recordings. Recently, tablets with audio and video recording capabilities have provided an unobtrusive way to collect data, and students are increasingly used to seeing them in classroom settings. Using video to collect CA data also makes it easier to recognize and transcribe non-verbal cues, such as “gaze,” which in CA can signal when the next speaker is “other selected,” for example, or indicate confusion as they read a prepared text. What is most important for teachers collecting data is making sure that the sound quality is as clear as possible, which is not always easy in the active, communicative classroom. The task of listening to and transcribing the recordings will be made easier with clear audio.

2.2.2. *Transcribing the data*

One of the reasons that CA methodology has not proven a common data collection tool for EFL/ESL teachers is that the transcription methods are much more detailed than those in other qualitative research methods, such as Discourse Analysis (DA). Also, the research that employs CA tends to be produced for (and consumed by) other researchers, not necessarily practicing EFL/ESL teachers, who can be intimidated by the thought of having to read (and fully comprehend) academic research. However, while CA transcription methodology is indeed quite detailed, it is detailed in a way that actually benefits the second language teacher. This is because features of pronunciation, intonation, speech speed, overlapping and even length of pauses are represented in the CA transcription protocols. These features of language are important to second language teachers, and can add pedagogical insights into student talk that an otherwise straightforward transcript cannot. The detailed nature of the transcription conventions can tell us not only *what* was said (as in straight DA transcriptions), but also the subtle linguistic nuances of *how* something was said (such as through prosody and pitch), which can uncover what was actually meant by an utterance, indicating high (or less developed) communicative competence, “the development of which is the goal of communicative language teaching (CLT)” (Wong & Waring, 2010, p. 8). The following exchange typifies a breakdown and repair sequence among students engaged in a pair-work activity, and exemplifies some of the more common CA transcription symbols used (data from Hale, 2012).

- 15 Mi: peopl::e buy some[thing.]
 16 Vivi: [wii.]
 17 Mi: we?
 18 Vivi: wii. wii. W-I-I. the the play machine.
 19 Mi: ah [wii.]
 20 Vivi: [wii,]=yeah.
 21 Mi: where where it is made?
 22 Vivi: ah. japanese.
 23 Mi: nintendo.
 24 Vivi: nintendo.
 25 Mi: [nintendo.]
 26 Vivi: [nintendo.]
 27 Mi: nintendo. game ↑company.
 28 Vivi: >yeah yeah yeah yeah<
 29 Mi: white color::
 30 Vivi: >yeah< white color::
 31 Mi: sell a (2.0) a computer?

As these students were rather engaged, there are multiple overlaps (lines 15-16; 19-20; and 25-26), indicated by brackets surrounding the overlapped words (or portions of words). Vivi speeds up her speech in lines 28 and 30, to show her excitement at being understood, as indicated by “more than” and “less than” symbols (symbols facing the opposite direction indicate slowed down speech). There are also several instances of consonant elongation (lines 15, 29, 30), shown with colons (the more colons indicating longer elongation). At line 27, Mi markedly increases her pitch at the beginning of the word “company,” indicated by a rising arrow. Finally, Mi inserts a two-second pause in the middle of her utterance in line 31, indicating further confusion, and that the repair sequence, while clarifying what “Wii” Vivi is referring to, is not fully resolved (“a computer?”). These 31 lines of transcribed talk took less than 10 seconds to speak, and as practitioners become more proficient with CA, they are able to “hear” the transcribed voices in great detail due to the extensive notation CA employs. There are many more symbols

in the CA transcription protocols than are shown here (see Appendix for full list of transcription symbols).

In general, for teachers new to CA, it takes about one hour to transcribe ten minutes of audio. A one hour class would require more than 6 hours of transcribing, which is something that most busy teachers (understandably) find prohibitively difficult to accomplish. However, there is no “rule” indicating that teachers have to transcribe an entire lesson — in fact I often tell my in-service teachers that classroom discourse data transcribed using CA is so rich that they can randomly choose *any* ten-minute section of their recording to transcribe, and are likely to find something of interest. Some teachers may wish to focus only on the class openings (which involve more “teacher talk,” the reflection upon which is often illuminating), particular activities, or some other easily demarcated section of a full lesson. Doing so can reduce the initial burden on teachers new to CA methodology, while also giving them practice improving their speed and accuracy in the transcription process. Another way to reduce the initial anxiety is to select sample sections of the data to transcribe. This involves focused, repeated listenings of the recordings in their entirety, and identifying a section of the recording where the teacher “notices” something of interest happening. While many CA practitioners prefer to transcribe the data as it is (or a section of it) and read it objectively afterward, pre-scanning the data to find areas of potential salience, then transcribing that section, still qualifies as “unmotivated looking” and can also lead to discoveries and meaningful teacher reflection.

For teachers new to transcribing classroom data in CA, they often have the most difficulty dealing with pause length and overlapping talk. In terms of pauses, it is common to see transcriptions with pause length within turns or between turns. These are indicated with the pauses represented in tenths-of-a-second (such as 1.8 to signify a one and eight-tenths of a second pause). While these short and “micro” pauses may have significance in some contexts, without sophisticated software (or extensive experience with transcription), they are difficult to measure perfectly. I often tell my in-service teachers new to CA that frequent silences between turns are a natural part of second-language discourse, due to students’ need for extended processing of information and response formulation. As such, short pauses are not likely significant. I therefore tell them that for intermediate and lower-level students, only indicate silences of three seconds or more. For upper intermediate to advanced language learners, indicate silences of one or more seconds. Of course, if student-processing and response time or willingness to speak is something a teacher is finding to be salient in the data, then I suggest they can adjust these times to their particular research need. Just this slight alteration to the transcription of pause lengths can put teachers at ease who think they need to transcribe *every* discernible pause in their data.

The transcription of overlapping talk is perhaps the most time-consuming and frustrating for new CA practitioners. This is because it is often difficult to precisely demarcate where the overlaps are occurring (which particular word or words are being overlapped), and in the case of audio recordings, it can be difficult to identify the speakers overlapping each other. In an effort to reduce the stress on my student teachers, I ask them to (whenever possible) use video recorders to collect data with more than three participants in order to make it easier to identify speakers. I also ask that they only demarcate full words (rather than portions of words) that are involved in the overlap. When they become more adept at the transcription procedure, I encourage them to more precisely transcribe the overlapping talk (as where an overlap occurs can be salient in relation uncovering learners’ understanding of transition relevance places (TRPs)). The key point for my student teachers to remember is that they are not conducting this research for publication, but for their own reflective practice. They should be as accurate as they can be, but only because it will make their data richer and more informative to them.

2.2.3. Following best practices in classroom data collection

It is best practice in classroom-based action research to always make sure you talk with your students *before* you begin collecting data. It is important for them to know why you are collecting data, and that it is for you to reflect upon, and ultimately help you improve your teaching. Remind them that they are not being evaluated in any way in this process. Give students the chance to opt out, if they wish, and inform supervisors of your intention to collect audio and/or video recordings of students, as there may be some administrative requirements involved. In addition, anytime data is collected where participant identities can be discerned (such as audio and video recordings), it is always good practice to delete the original recording *immediately* after it has been transcribed (and learners' identities anonymized using conventional markings, such as "S1," "S2," etc.). While there are many more requirements for collecting data with the intention of publishing the results, and although in this case the activity is purely for professional development purposes, every effort should still be made to shield the identities of your learners (and other colleagues, should they also be part of the data).

2.3. Finding What is 'Salient'

There are essentially four interactional practices that combine to comprise the conversation system (Wong & Waring, 2010, p. 8):

- 1) Turn-taking practices: Ways of constructing a turn and allocating a turn.
- 2) Sequencing practices: Ways of initiating and responding to talk while performing actions such as requesting, inviting, story-telling, or topic initiation.
- 3) Overall structuring practices: Ways of organizing a conversation as a whole as in openings and closings.
- 4) Repair practices: Ways of addressing problems in speaking, hearing or understanding of the talk.

In a classroom setting, these practices are mediated by the topic selected (either as lesson content or as off-topic talk), and how it is maintained through interaction. It is within these categories that CA practitioners focus their attention, and while space limitations do not allow for enumerating the various sub-features within each category, the final section of this paper will focus on a few particular areas derived from these larger categories (for superb primers on the conversation system as it relates to second language teaching, see Markee, 2000; Seedhouse, 2004; Wong & Waring, 2010). After becoming familiar with the features of "talk-in-interaction" that CA can uncover, teachers can then set about looking for instances where these features appear in their data and decide if they are salient. Salience here refers to any feature of the data that "sticks out" or is prominent in some meaningful way to the teacher. In CA, it is important to look at the data and ask "why that now?" (Schegloff & Sacks, 2009, p. 299). Why, for example, are my students producing turn allocation moves consistent with formal question and answer interviews in their fluency-based discussion tasks (as in Mori, 2002)? Or, in what ways are my learners' identities reflected through their talk-in-interaction practices (as in Takeda, 2013)? Or, why does the student not self-repair an error after my repeated recasts of the correct form (as in Taomae, 2011)? Or, in what ways do my students' turn-taking moves differ from what is expected in "institutional" discourse settings (as in DiFelice Box, 2011; Hale, 2011)? Essentially, finding what is "salient" will be different for every teacher and depends greatly on their own teaching experience, environment, personal interest, the communicative competence of their learners and, most importantly, the pedagogical aims you are trying to achieve.

In reflective practice, it is critical to identify a feature of the classroom discourse that, for reasons specific to the teacher and their local teaching context, speaks to them in some way. While it can be helpful to find multiple instances of the same phenomenon occurring in the data (showing patterns), Seedhouse (2004, p. 39) reminds us that even a single instance of some occurrence can be significant enough for analysis when it can be compared with other data showing the same phenomenon (thus the importance of the “literature review” in the action research cycle). In reflective practice, as long as the occurrence is of reflective value to the teacher trying to better understand themselves and their learners, it has salience.

2.4. Reflection and Action: Putting the Cycle to Work

Once a salient feature of talk has been identified in the data, it is important to ask *why* it is happening (“why that now?”). What does the discovery reveal about your teaching or your students’ learning? And most critical is to ask how the discovery will affect your teaching going forward. Will you, for example, treat the discovery as a deficiency that needs to be addressed pedagogically? Or does it reveal something about your teaching context (an institutional constraint, for example) or your classroom management style? What you choose to do next, referred to as the “Action” stage of the action research cycle, is important because the action a teacher takes as a result of their observation is derived from reflection on the issue, questioning and challenging one’s previous belief system, and then making a concrete plan going forward. This, then, is how action research can impact and change our practices for the better. In addition to making a change in our practice as a result of our discovery, “action” can also be simply the decision to continue doing what the action research has shown to be effective or choosing to emphasize it elsewhere in one’s teaching. The following example shows how this process can work.

After teaching adult ESL for several years at a university in the New York City area, I was confident that my teaching was sufficiently communicative and that my students were rarely subjected to the IRF (initiation, response, feedback) sequence so prominent in classroom discourse. This is essentially an exchange where the teacher selects a student and asks a question (*initiation*). The teacher then either accepts the answer (*response*) given by the student and closes the exchange (*feedback*), often with some form of *explicit positive assessment* (EPA), such as “good,” or “that’s right,” or the teacher can extend the sequence until they are given the answer they want, at which time the teacher gives the closing turn. Here is an example of how a typical IRF sequence transpires in full class interaction, for example, when going over answers from a textbook (data from Hale, 2011):

- 01 T: ok. let’s look at the second one. what can people do to reduce their
 02 carbon footprints. who can answer.
 03 (3.0)
 04 S1: ahh.
 05 T: → what steps can people take to reduce their carbon footprints.
 06 (3.0)
 07 S2: → use bicycle or use public transportation.
 08 T: bi[cyc-]
 09 S2: [or w]alking
 10 (2.0)
 11 T: → very good. anybody else?

In the above exchange, the IRF sequence is initiated in lines 01-02, yet when there is no student response, the teacher rephrased the initial question, and the sequence resets at line 05. At

line 07, Student 2 provides the “R” part of the sequence, after which the teacher began to repeat the student’s answer, “bicycle.” Interestingly, as the student was not finished with his answer, he interrupted the teacher to provide his expanded response. The teacher waited two full seconds to allow space for the student to further elaborate. Eventually satisfied with the student response, the teacher closed the exchange with an EPA (“Very good”) at line 11, and immediately initiated another IRF sequence (“Anybody else?”).

With no real evidence other than my own impressions of my teaching, I believed that I was successfully promoting more “realistic” interaction in my classes. However, during a course in CA with professor Hansun Waring at Teachers College, I was required to record, transcribe and analyze my own classroom data. Surprisingly, I found numerous IRF sequences in the transcript, like the one above, and other interactional practices (on my part, and some students) that I felt inhibited communication in my classroom. As a result of this discovery, which came as a shock as it went against my own intuitive- and demonstrably false- assumptions of how I actually taught, I looked at the literature describing the IRF sequence in classroom discourse, and the ways that researchers have made efforts to reduce its prominence. As part of my literature review, I found an article by my professor (Waring, 2008) where she analyzed the use of EPA in the third position of the IRF sequence, and how its presence, and the IRF in general, often inhibited student communication. After reflecting on the literature, on my own context and my goals of increasing student communication, I decided to do something “radical”: I decided to intentionally withhold the final part of the IRF sequence (in particular, the EPA) in an effort to see how much more communication could be achieved in each teacher-student interaction.

Following this “action” plan, I again recorded my teaching and again transcribed the interaction using CA methods. I maintained an “unmotivated looking” posture, leaving myself open to whatever appeared in the data, though decidedly focusing my attention on instances of teacher talk. What I discovered the second time was that where my previous IRF sequences resulted in (perhaps) 3-6 turns, when I withheld the final “F” part and instead “feigned ignorance” about a student’s answer to my open-ended questions, students became disoriented by the sudden break in the predictable classroom exchange system. In the absence of the powerful closing third-part of the sequence, other students (not part of the IRF sequence, and therefore unselected by the teacher) began to speak up and assist the student, then each other, in what became a whole-class attempt to explain something to me. What resulted was a sequence of over 100 lines in the transcript where more than ten students engaged in lively (and largely self-selected) meaning negotiation. Below is a segment from the exchange, where during a discussion of recycling, a student from Korea indicated that back home they recycle food, to which I began to feign ignorance and surprise (data from Hale, 2011):

- 14 S2: → in my country (0.1) a:h.(1.0) food.
 15 (1.0)
 16 T: → food?
 ...
 28 S3: every food.
 29 T: eh-so i don't know-do you put the food together or you separate the
 30 food?
 31 S2: separate.
 32 S3: fruits.
 33 S4: sepu- not separate food-a:h. already used (1.0) eaten food and just (2.0)
 34 garbage prepare own- ((gestures separating [hands]))
 35 T: [a::h] so for example wasted
 36 food-extra food-you didn't eat the food. you put it (1.0) and then paper

- 37 garbage.
 38 (1.0)
 39 you separate the eggshells?
 40 S2: [some]
 41 S5: [some] some food is separate.
 42 S6: [umm] ((nods head in the affirmative))

After my initial indication of surprise to hear from Student 2 that Koreans recycle food (line 16), other Korean students (S3, S4, S5, S6) came to her aid, and took repeated self-selected turns in their attempt to clarify for me (and the other surprised students in class) what Student 2 meant. This exchange continued for several more turns, each time moved along by my seeming surprise and seeking further clarification and extension of the final part of the sequence. As a seasoned ESL teacher in the US having taught many Korean students, I of course knew what the student meant by saying they recycle food (food scraps collected to feed to farm animals), yet if I were to recast Student 2's initial unclear comment in line 14 (such as by saying "Oh, you mean..."), the opportunity for expansion and meaning negotiation would have been closed down. I wanted to see how far the exchanges could go, and how many students could be involved. I was not prepared for how successful the tactic was. In fact, when the meaning finally became clear, and I again initiated a final IRF sequence with Student 2, the whole class responded, and it was a student, not the teacher, that closed the entire 100+ line exchange with the final EPA (data from Hale, 2011):

- 104 T: → so pigs eat your garbage.
 105 ALL→ yes.
 106 S10: →gre::at.

My "action" had led to a change in my approach to teaching that resulted in more student-directed communication, in particular a marked increase in student-initiated speaker selection and break-down/repair sequences. But the most important part of the cycle for me was the "reflection" I did after looking at the data and reading literature on the salient area I had initially identified. After reflection, I devised an action plan and implemented it, but this final phase could have taken any number of forms, not all of which would have been successful. When I teach action research to my graduate students, most of whom are in-service teachers with years of experience in the classroom, I do not ask them to go beyond the reflection phase of the (revised) action research cycle. My purpose is for the teachers to recognize a salient feature in the data and reflect upon it. What I am most curious about is how the revelation will affect their teaching going forward. I want them to reflect on what they have discovered about themselves and their learners and re-envision that crucial relationship. I ask them what they will change as a result of the discovery in the data (or modify, or in the case of uncovering particularly strong pedagogical evidence in their teaching, how they might expand that feature to other areas of their teaching). Having students reflect on what the "action" can or should be is fruitful enough, and by discussing the possibilities with other teachers and teacher educators, they often uncover a solution that is more promising than one they could have come up with on their own (which is understandable considering their limited experience conducting action research, let alone using CA as a methodological focus).

3. MODELS OF ACTION RESEARCH: TWO TEACHERS' REFLECTIONS ON USING CA FOR THE FIRST TIME

What follows are two example action research projects carried out following the guidelines outlined here. The first, by Alexander Nanni, is from the Thai university EFL context,

and the second, by Daniel Hooper (my former MA student), the adult conversation-school (*eikaiwa*) context in Japan. In both cases, it was their first experience with using CA as a data collection and analysis method in their classroom-based action research. However, as will become clear through their reflections, even in their first attempts, CA was able to uncover important features of their teaching that affected them deeply, and will result in *informed* changes in their practices going forward.

3.1. Turn-taking and Raising Student (and Teacher) Awareness

This brief reflection discusses the application of CA in an intensive English for academic purposes (EAP) program that prepares students to begin an English-medium liberal arts degree at a Thai university. For this initial application of CA, I chose to focus on turn-taking for two reasons: I found some students to struggle with it in the data, and it is a practice that they need to master in order to successfully integrate into their content courses taught in English at the university. The following is an account of my effort to use CA to identify an issue in my teaching, and my reflection on how to address it.

3.1.1. The “discovery,” and diving into the literature

After recording the video data, I reviewed it several times in order to make sense of what was happening, and identify something of “salience” to hone in on. Fairly early into this review, I noticed how well (and not so well) my students were initiating their turns in the small group discussion. Some students seemed to do it effortlessly, while others were struggling, and often interrupting the flow of what should have been a natural discussion of the course material. At this point, I picked up a copy of Wong and Waring’s (2010) *Conversation Analysis and Second Language Pedagogy*, and looked at what was written about turn-taking practices in EFL/ESL settings. As I read, a series of questions early in the text resonated with the “problem” I had identified in my data:

How do we figure out when to begin talking and when to stop? Do we announce each time we are about to start and stop, for example, saying, ‘It’s my turn now,’ or ‘I’m finished, and it’s your turn?’ ... Why don’t we all talk at the same time and crash into each other all the time? How come there isn’t a long gap of silence between one turn and another? (p. 9)

This quote about turn-taking stuck with me, as it briefly summed up many of the problems that my upper-intermediate students have in their interactions. At times, they cannot figure out when to start talking, announce “it’s my turn now” (if not in those exact words), and leave long gaps of silence between turns. While many of the students in the program have studied English throughout their academic lives, much of their exposure to English has been via teacher-centered instruction that included little meaning-focused input or output. For the most part, students entering the program have endured years of training in grammatical accuracy but are unprepared to engage in the meaningful interaction that is an important part of liberal arts education.

To prepare students for active participation in class discussions at the university, the curriculum of the intensive EAP program includes an explicit focus on discussion skills. Interaction is a major focus of the discussions, and students practice responding, clarifying, supporting, progressing, questioning, and redirecting. Over the course of the term, students engage in several researched discussions in groups of 5 or 6. The discussions are held at the end of a sequence of lectures, readings, and essays about a theme, such as business ethics, city sustainability, or urbanization. Each student is expected to supplement the in-class lectures and

readings with additional research. Here is an excerpt from a student discussion of the effects of globalization on Thailand:

- 01 S1: >well< in my opinion I think that um the globalization would affect
 02 the economy by like >the< tourism tha:t gonna be more popular in the
 03 country and maybe like exports good in the countries like rice and
 04 maybe herbs >couldnit<.
 05 S2: yeah and also the globalization like u:m the >a↑y< a:.[sien] ((ASEAN))
 07 S1: [Mm: hm]
 08 S2: which they are sai: °uh:° ss they are sign the agreement >uh< after even
 09 af >uh< even work
 10 S1: yuhhuh
 11 S2: and this allowed the: Thailand to trade with other nine coun[tries]
 12 S1: [mm] hm
 13 S3: without vi↑sa::
 14 S1: >and< BUT that is for trans↑port but this one is °a° for uh it's decrease the
 15 [taxes]
 16 S2: [mm]
 17 S1: like tariff fees,
 18 S2: yeah and we have a better price °for them°

In this excerpt, the students make use of turn-taking strategies that are features of “normal” (i.e., not textbook) conversation, including turn entry devices, transitional overlap, backchanneling, and signals of the continuation of multi-turn units. Turn entry devices are used by Student 1 in line 01 (“well”) and by Student 2 in line 05 and line 18 (“yeah”). Transitional overlap appears several times, including in line 07, where Student 1 begins her backchanneling (“mm hm”) before the completion of Student 2’s turn. The signaling of the continuation of a multi-unit turn occurs in line 08, where Student 2 uses “Which” to indicate that she will continue speaking at a transition relevant place, and in line 11, where again Student 2 uses “And” for the same purpose. All of these strategies demonstrate significant communicative competence and was a welcome discovery on my part. Interestingly, using CA notation, I was surprised at how realistically I can capture the nuances of spoken language, including tone and stress. This notation is useful with Thai learners of English as the Thai language has very different patterns of intonation than English. An example of this is seen above in the transcription of “visa” (line 13) where the notation captures the rising tone and stretched vowel of the second syllable.

3.1.2. Reflecting on the process

In our program, there is a clear need for students to develop their turn-taking practices. During discussions, students who have well-developed turn-taking practices, often students who have attended a bilingual or English-medium high school, tend to dominate. Other students fail to participate because they wait patiently for their turn — which never comes. The underdevelopment of some students’ turn-taking skills may be linked to the approach to language learning that is evident in many Thai schools, where students focus on memorization of words or phrases over communication. In many cases, students learn conversational English by memorizing common phrases and their responses. This leads to highly scripted interactions that exhibit unnatural turn-taking as well as sometimes unnatural language. Students whose turn-taking skills are underdeveloped then cannot hold their own in conversation with more communicatively competent speakers. For example, students who await the grammatical completion of other speakers’ sentences will miss opportunities to speak.

This application of CA has also called attention to my less effective teaching practices. In the past, I tended to teach students phrases to use in discussions, such as “sorry to interrupt” or “I’d like to add a point here.” Upon reflection, these phrases may reinforce students’ tendency to over-script their interactions. Analysis of actual interaction between students shows that these stock phrases are seldom used by students with well-developed interactional competence and that the phrases are often ineffective in achieving the students’ desired result. If students wish to take a turn, for example, they will most likely be more successful in doing so by signaling their intent to speak by using backchanneling such as “yeah” during other speakers’ turns than by waiting patiently for a chance to interject using a memorized phrase. Perhaps even worse, a student who misunderstands the turn-taking system and interrupts another speaker using a phrase such as “sorry to interrupt” at the wrong time may appear rude. In the future, I will focus on helping students to understand turn-taking practices and their importance.

This initial application of CA has demonstrated its potential for further use in my upper-intermediate intensive English course. Much of our students’ prior experience speaking English has been in courses that taught grammatical accuracy and pronunciation through scripted or semiscripted dialogues. Often the scripts themselves are poor representations of natural language. I have learned that many students understand that spoken English does not necessarily involve the exchange of well-formed, ready-made grammatical sentences. This is illustrated in the excerpt above, which exhibits characteristics of natural speech — hesitation, self-repair, overlap among speakers’ turns — that would be omitted from many textbook dialogue models. However, there are still a great many students at the low levels of proficiency that are still clinging on to these unnatural (though grammatically perfect) expressions for indicating turn taking. I’m impressed that many of my students realize that real communication is much more complicated and interdependent than textbooks have led them to believe. As I develop a plan for “action,” I would like to somehow make this fact explicit to my other learners who are still struggling in group discussions. Perhaps exposing students to CA concepts such as turn-taking will help them to identify and improve underdeveloped skills. It could also encourage the students with higher communicative competence to continue working on those skills. Wong and Waring (2010) suggest that using CA transcriptions in language classes may be appropriate, provided that students are at a sufficiently advanced level to read and comprehend them. In the context of our English for academic purposes program, doing so seems to have great potential.

Applying and reflecting on CA has helped me to better understand the goals of our intensive English program, both in terms of what interactional competence entails and how to cultivate this competence. Now that I have a clearer understanding of turn-taking as a result of this action research, I am better able to help my students to answer the question: “How do we figure out when to begin talking and when to stop?” (Wong & Waring, 2010, p. 9). I also feel more accountable as a teacher, as I now have a better means of collecting classroom data, and thus assessing the effectiveness of my teaching practices.

3.2. When a Teacher Gets in the Way of His Students’ Communication

My introduction to conversational analysis came through a practicum course I took with Professor Hale as part of my MA TESOL degree. CA was, admittedly, rather intimidating at first with the extremely technical-looking list of transcription symbols that appeared as alien to me as the first Japanese *kanji* characters I was exposed to when I made the journey to Japan 10 years ago. What gave me the “push” to get my head down and jump into the unknown were the many potential applications that CA had, especially in the practice of analyzing my own lessons and teacher talk. At the time of my first foray into CA, I was an instructor in a private conversation school or “*eikaiwa*,” mainly teaching English to adults after they got off work.

In the planning stage of the study, although I knew I was interested in the area of teacher talk, I didn't really know what features would "jump out at me" when I transcribed the data, so I kept an open mind about what I might find. As this CA study was going to be not only the final module project in my MA TESOL, but also a source of insight into the realities of my *eikaiwa* classroom, I wanted to ensure it was going to produce rich data as well as something that would be strongly tied to the real-life workings of my classroom. For these reasons, I chose to record a communicative activity that 1) I often used in my adult *eikaiwa* classes and 2) I was sure would produce "pushed output" to transcribe. After making a few different recordings, and listening to them several times, I chose to transcribe and analyze two recordings of a picture dictation task, one between two Japanese students and the other between a Japanese student and myself.

3.2.1. Making a "discovery," in the data, and the literature

As I compared the two transcriptions, two key differences jumped out at me. The first was the number of repair sequences that were used during the task. A repair sequence is basically an attempt to solve any communication breakdown in an interaction and can be initiated by anyone in the conversation. In my experience in the adult *eikaiwa* classroom, they are either successful (e.g. they manage to "repair" the trouble spot and move on with their conversation) or unsuccessful (e.g. topic abandonment- they can't understand each other and one person inevitably says "Never mind.") The second difference I noticed was the length of time it took for a repair sequence to be started by the partner in the picture dictation task. As this "discovery" dealt with repair sequences, I went to the literature to learn more about this area of "interactional architecture" (Seedhouse, 2004). I (re)familiarized myself with the different types of repair practices outlined in Markee (2000), paying particular attention to clarification requests, confirmation checks and comprehension checks. This search then led me to something that I wasn't aware of before, yet seemed to be relevant to my data: that repair practices can be affected by a "power speech exchange system" (p. 99). This concept accounts for why repair practices are prevalent in dyads between non-native speakers (NNS-NNS) (e.g. the speakers are linguistic "equals" in the interaction). However, in terms of non-native speaker and native speaker (NNS-NS) dyads, according to Varonis and Gass (as cited in Markee, 2000) the relationship is more complex: "...the inequality in status of the participants (with regard to the language medium) discourages negotiation, because it amplifies rather than masks the differences between them. As a result, there is a greater tendency for conversation to proceed without negotiation" (p. 104). This was a revelation as it seemed to explain what was happening in my data. However, it still came as a surprise as I was never aware of any sort of "power" dynamic in my conversation classroom, and it was a shock to think that there was one (and that I might be responsible for it merely by the fact of my being a NS of English). Looking at the data again, it seemed that there was indeed a power relationship at play, a more equal one in the NNS-NNS group, and an unequal one in the NNS-NS group. I wanted to uncover why this happened, and how I could take steps to reduce the reluctance of students engaging in repair practices in their interactions with me.

This is an example of a successful repair sequence taken from the student-student transcription I made (data from Hooper, 2016):

- 049 Y: kind of ship. (3.0) hm. anduh *ehto*:(2.0) right s: righto-right side of
 050 the house there is a mou-uh ↑hill-hill.
 051 K: °hill?°
 052 Y: ((draws in breath)) (1.0) °mm° small mountain.

The student (Y) describing the picture uses a word (“hill”) that the listening/drawing student (K) does not understand (line 50). She starts the repair sequence by repeating the word but with rising intonation, like a question (line 51). This then signals to student Y that he needs to make a repair, which he does by rephrasing the word using more simple vocabulary that K may already know – “small mountain” (line 52).

Whereas in the student-student transcription, the partner (K) would generally start a repair sequence as soon as she noticed something she didn’t understand (as in the example above), the same tactic was not used by the student in the teacher-student group. To me, this was interesting as it suggested that my presence in the activity may actually have been inhibiting opportunities for interaction and conversational repair (data from Hooper, 2016):

- 032 T: =i-it's not a Japanese style castle [it']s a kind of English style castle
 033 S: [mm] ((stops drawing))
 034 T: [stone]castle
 035 S: [mmm]
 036 T: there are four very small windows like-like dots. [very] small
 037 S: [dots like]
 038 T: a:nd
 039 S: u::h
 040 T: so two on the second floor two on the first floor
 → 041 S: (1.0) u::h one more please. u::h

We can see that the “trouble source” may have occurred in line 032 with my description of the castle as the student stops drawing (line 033). What is notable is that it is not until line 041 that the student attempts to repair the breakdown. Although he is perhaps indicating that he is in the midst of a breakdown with the markers of disfluency he uses in lines 033, 035, and 039, I, the teacher, do not pick up on these signals and instead add yet *more* detailed explanation for him to process (lines 036 and 040). When the student eventually realizes that I am not getting his hints, he initiates the repair sequence with an explicit repetition request (line 041). We can see throughout the teacher-student transcription a level of hesitation and one-sidedness that was certainly not present in the student-student version of the task. This can be observed through the frequent use of next-turn repair initiators by the students as they attended to a breakdown immediately after it occurred such as in lines 050 and 051. I also found that the student-student group used varied and creative strategies to make repairs, like approximation (hill = small mountain), lots of repetition, or circumlocution through well-known cultural references (chimney = Santa Claus’s entering) to get around their lack of linguistic knowledge. On the other hand, in the teacher-student group the student largely parroted me (“dots like” - line 37) and completed the activity in a more passive way as I gave long-winded and wordy explanations. This highlighted two areas that I was interested in as a teacher: the potentially negative effect that my authoritative position as both a teacher and a native speaker of English may have been having on the interaction with students and also how my explanations to students might have been overly-detailed and confusing

3.2.2 Reflection and rethinking my place in the classroom

The process of recording, transcribing, and analyzing what had been going on in the picture-dictation task provided me with valuable information, previously obscured from view, that would go on to shape various facets of my teaching practice and beliefs about my desired classroom role. Although I previously had, through various books and teaching courses, been

told about good and bad teacher talk, peer feedback, and the almost suffocating effect that an overly-controlling teacher may have, I believe I had only really internalized these ideas at a very superficial level. It wasn't until I looked deeply at the transcription, then the literature for confirmation that I was able to see the detrimental effect that my presence and approach was having on the amount and richness of interaction. I could finally see in black and white that my well-meaning attempts to "do my job" were potentially counterproductive and that there was actually a great deal that I could learn from the way the student-student group carried out the task. The student-student transcription highlighted for me the importance of providing repeated opportunities to hear new vocabulary items rather than bogging learners down with yet more words via lengthy explanations. In this way, the strategies that my students used were of great use in foregrounding issues in my own teacher talk that needed addressing. These realizations have most certainly entered into my current state of consciousness when I teach and I have grown to view my active participation in my students' language tasks as a last resort if no other options for peer collaboration are viable. I am now keenly aware of the previously unnoticed "power exchange system," and that my mere presence in a pair-work activity can actually result in *less* communication by my students.

Doing the CA study encouraged me to question further assumptions about the role and value of the teacher, and even more so, the NS teacher in English conversation schools. Throughout my eight years in the *eikaiwa* industry, I found that the position of the native speaker was largely unassailable, both as a fount of knowledge or indeed a lucrative selling point for many schools. My privileged position as a young native speaker of English allowed me a great deal of power in terms of deciding on what was best for my students and what knowledge I should pass onto them. Being the keeper of this knowledge meant that I was valued and my worth in the schools where I worked was partly defined by being in the center of the classroom, either as a resource or as an entertainer. Even as I started to challenge these beliefs and began to realize the profound importance of NNS teachers of English, I still held onto the notion that my participation in learning activities would have an enriching effect as some of my knowledge could rub off on my students. When I finally examined the transcriptions I made, I discovered that my privileged position could in fact be a double-edged sword when it came to fostering opportunities for my students to interact freely in English. In the teacher-student transcription, I found that the dual authority I wielded, both as a teacher and a native speaker of English, may actually have been creating conditions where learners were feeling uncomfortable or merely passively shadowing me during our interactions. On the other hand, the student-student group, being on a level-playing field in terms of authority, were freely interacting, quickly signaling to their partner when they didn't understand, and experimenting with different techniques to get their meaning across. This realization led to a change in approach in both my *eikaiwa* and university classrooms where I, at least in part, began to reject the native speaker-centered model and tried to encourage my students to learn more from each other rather than me. In this way, I am re-evaluating and re-configuring the unequal power exchange system that materializes through my presence in an interaction.

Through CA I was able, with relatively limited resources and training, to gain new insights into my teaching and valuable information about the learners I was working with. These discoveries have, in turn, had a far-reaching effect on my personal beliefs about my responsibilities as a teacher, what I can learn from my students, and how I can best serve them in the future.

4. CONCLUSION

The intention of this brief paper has been to provide a rationale for how conversation analysis can serve as a powerful tool for teacher reflective practice. By serving as a solid methodology for “unmotivated looking” at one’s own teaching context, CA provides the tools for teachers to capture and transcribe discourse data, and a framework for analyzing it. As the authentic examples in this paper demonstrate, CA has illustrative power to uncover important features of the talk occurring in one’s classroom, the recognition of which can actually change how teachers approach their practice. As a teacher educator, there is nothing more satisfying than witnessing teachers “assess the grounds” (Dewey, 1933, p. 9) upon which their practice is formed and transform themselves as a result of their own classroom-generated action research.

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6. APPENDIX

Transcription Symbols

| | |
|------------------|--|
| . | (period) Falling intonation. |
| ? | (question mark) Rising intonation. |
| , | (comma) Continuing intonation. |
| - | (hyphen) Marks an abrupt cut-off. |
| :: | (colon(s)) Prolonging of sound. |
| w <u>o</u> :rd | (colon after underlined letter) Falling intonation on word. |
| w <u>o</u> :rd | (underlined colon) Rising intonation on word. |
| <u>word</u> | (underlining) |
| <u>word</u> | The more underlying, the greater the stress. |
| WORD | (all caps) Loud speech. |
| °word° | (degree symbols) Quiet speech. |
| #word | (upward arrow) Raised pitch. |
| \$word | (downward arrow) Lowered pitch |
| >>word<< | (more than and less than) Quicker speech. |
| <<word>> | (less than & more than) Slowed speech. |
| < | (less than) Talk is jump-started—starting with a rush. |
| hh | (series of h's) Aspiration or laughter. |
| .hh | (h's preceded by dot) Inhalation. |
| [] | (brackets) Simultaneous or overlapping speech. |
| [] | |
| = | (equal sign) Latch or contiguous utterances of the same speaker. |
| (2.4) | (number in parentheses) Length of a silence in 10ths of a second |
| (.) | (period in parentheses) Micro-pause, 0.2 second or less. |
| () | (empty parentheses) Non-transcribable segment of talk. |
| ((Reading Text)) | (double parentheses) Description of non-speech activity. |
| (try 1)/(try 2) | (two parentheses separated by a slash) Alternative hearings. |
| \$word\$ | (dollar signs) Smiley voice. |
| #word# | (number signs) Squeaky voice. |