

On Language Teachers' Classroom Practices: Bridging Conversation Analysis with Language Teacher Education Research

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Since the late 1980s, second language teacher education (SLTE) research has grown immensely as a field of inquiry within applied linguistics, particularly as teacher knowledge, expertise, and cognition have been found to influence students' language learning processes in classroom contexts (Borg, 2011). Much empirical evidence illustrating this connection has been gathered using a variety of ethnographic data techniques such as individual interviews, focus groups, journal writing, questionnaires, field notes, and stimulated recall sessions. The strengths of these data sources are numerous in that, when triangulated, they provide insight into teachers' thought processes and perceptions of their teaching practices. It has been asserted elsewhere (see Fagan, in press a), though, that while many studies within the SLTE field have attempted to draw implications from such findings for teachers' classroom practices, the methods used do not allow for such assumptions. In fact, as Borg (2011) presents in his summary of SLTE research over the past two decades, there remains a lack of juxtaposition between findings on teachers' perceptions and their actual classroom practices *in situ*. That is not to say that there have been no studies bridging such data sources. Tsui (2003), for example, utilizes varied ethnographic data sources, including the use of classroom discourse data, to get at language teachers' development of expertise. This study, however, is representative of the few in the SLTE field that incorporates glosses of interactions into their analyses. In other words: (a) transcriptions tend to solely consist of the verbal non-suprasegmental components of the discourse rather than include other interactional resources (i.e., prosodic cues, pausing, nonverbal conduct) illustrating the intricate constructions of teachers' communication; (b) the focus of the classroom data does not detail the specific sequential environments in which certain teacher practices appear.

Conversation Analysis provides a systematic understanding of how talk-in-interaction is constructed based on how interlocutors orient to one another's prior turns-at-talk. Furthering this, Waring and Hruska (2011) explain how it offers "a slow-motion detailed analysis of interaction that often occurs in real time in lightening speed" (p. 453), thus allowing for intricate insights into the minutia of teachers' classroom practices not often detected in other forms of data gathering. For SLTE, then, CA would prove to be a valuable addition and complement to the already existent forms of data gathering commonly used in this strand of research as a way to further enhance understanding of teacher's classroom practices as they connect to language learning opportunities in the classroom.

To illustrate the benefits of this methodological bridge, I present here data taken from a larger study examining how one expert teacher manages learner contributions in an adult English as a Second Language (ESL) community program in the United States. The teacher, Ann¹, a 30+-year veteran in language education and teaches the most proficient level in the program as deemed by the program's placement exam. The numbers of students in the class in attendance range from five to 17 depending on the day, and they have varied first languages (L1s) including Japanese, German, Portuguese, and Korean. The study triangulates: (a) interview data to get at Ann's perceptions of her teaching practices, and (b) classroom discourse data transcribed and

¹ All names are pseudonyms.

analyzed using CA methodology. The study culminates with stimulated recall sessions where Ann provides insight into the CA findings.

In alignment with much SLTE research, the initial interview data procured much in terms of Ann's beliefs about her teaching practices. Of particular note here is Ann's perception of how she addresses "correct" answers in whole group activities, which is based on (a) her own experiences as a student of Spanish, her extensive English language teaching in the United States and Europe, and (c) as a doctoral student in an applied linguistics program. She stated that she "avoids giving *explicit positive assessments* (EPAs) (see Waring, 2008) ... [but rather] send[s] [answers] back to the other students to get their perspectives and to promote further dialogues." While the majority of the CA findings are congruent with this statement, a few cases appear not to be. In one such excerpt below, the students had just finished doing a phrasal verb fill-in-the-blank activity, and one student, Bae, is now giving his answers:

- | | | | |
|----|------|---|--|
| 01 | Ann: | | ((to Bae))- keep going. |
| 02 | Bae: | | <i need to (0.4) get away (.) for a few days. |
| 03 | | | (1.0) ((Ann looks from paper with surprised look)) |
| 04 | Ann: | → | ((smiles and nods to Bae))- \$ni(hh)ce.\$ |
| 05 | | | (0.4) ((Ann continues nodding; Bae smiles)) |
| 06 | | | ((to all Ss))- you like that one? |
| 07 | | | (1.2) ((Ann looks around; Ss nod)) |

After Ann selects Bae to continue with the next sentence (line 1), he quickly takes over the turn and, after a brief 0.4-second pause, provides the acceptable answer of "get away". Interestingly, there is a 1.0-second gap in line 3 instead of an immediate response Ann has commonly shown in most other data in which she "sends it back to the other students". Gaps are common indicators that the current turn is a dispreferred response to a prior turn (Levinson, 1983); as such, this would be more indicative of Ann responding to an unacceptable answer as opposed to an acceptable one. However, as the remainder of the excerpt illustrates, this is indeed not the case. It is during this gap that Ann shows her apparent surprise at the answer, followed by the smiley-voiced airy "nice". The combination of the voice quality used with "nice", the nonverbal conduct of smiling and nodding in lines 4 and 5, and Bae's display of content in line 5 all illustrate the word "nice" being used and oriented to as an EPA. The excerpt concludes with Ann bringing in the other Ss' perspectives, to which they agree with her assessment.

The CA data presented here demonstrates Ann's use of an EPA in the environment of addressing a surprisingly correct student response; this is in contrast to what Ann's stated in the initial interview data. She clearly remembered this incident during the stimulated recall session in which she watched the video and read the transcript. Based on her experience with students struggling with this particular phrasal verb in the past and her knowledge that this student was one of the weaker ones in the class, Ann had expected an incorrect answer. As explained, her uncommon use of an EPA at this juncture of the sequence was (a) "a genuinely surprised reaction", and (b) a way to fully show her support of Bae in his correct usage of a "difficult component of English."

As this example illustrates, the bridge of a CA framework with other commonly used language teacher education data gathering techniques provides a more encompassing understanding of teachers' classroom practices. The latter sources allow for insights into the teacher's perceptions of their instruction while simultaneously supplying a focal impetus from

which researchers can start their CA examinations. The CA data, in turn, highlights the specific sequential environments in which certain practices, the varied interactional resources used by the teacher to accomplish certain practices, and the students' orientations to those practices as affecting their subsequent involvement in the interaction. When coupling CA findings with those from stimulated recall procedures, the overarching picture of *what* a teachers does in the classroom and *why* that is so becomes more apparent.

In conclusion, conversation analysis is a framework within which one may address the issues that have brought up in SLTE research. CA not only enables researchers, teachers, and their educators to see the minutia of classroom practices and how they are done *in situ* at all points of instruction, but also, when bridged with other data sources and analyses, provides a clearer understanding of the convergences and divergences between teachers' perceptions of their practices and actuality.

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