

## Using Teacher-centred Feedback to Combat Unnatural Turn Taking in English Discussion Classes

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### ABSTRACT

This research was intended to examine how often learners pause unnaturally to invite reason questions, e.g. “Why?” and then to test the effectiveness of teacher-centred feedback as a means to combat this behaviour. During the course of the study it also became apparent that some learners were also interrupting speakers with reason questions before they had a chance to give reasons.

Consequently, two teaching techniques were developed to combat both behaviours: a dialogue involving the teacher and a student in a demonstration of both behaviours, and a description of both behaviours by the teacher.

One possible reason for both behaviours is that the curriculum awards points based on the use of discussion skills and functions. This factor sets this case apart from most of the existing research literature, and calls for further research.

### INTRODUCTION

A review of research literature found that Conversation Analysis led the way in examining turn taking between individuals, especially in the study of casual speech (Sacks, Schegloff, & Jefferson, 1974; McCarthy, 2000; McCarthy, Matthiessen, & Slade, 2002). These turn taking models are now used in Discourse Analysis (DA) within Applied Linguistics, so they have become more amenable to pedagogical applications (McCarthy, 2000; McCarthy et al., 2002).

There are many examples of types of collaborative turn taking (CTT) within the existing research literature (Sacks et al., 1974; Goodwin, 1981; Szczepek, 2000). However, pausing to invite a reason question (without intending to stop the turn or give it to another speaker) was not found in previous research. Therefore it is possible that this form of CTT is not as widespread as some others. There are also many examples of types of interruptive turn taking (ITT) within the existing research literature (Roger, Bull, & Smith, 1988; Tannen, 1990; Okamoto, Rashotte, & Smith-Lovin, 2002; Padilha, 2006; Maroni, Gnisci, & Pontecorvo, 2008). However, learners interrupting speakers with reason questions before they had a chance to give reasons (without intending to stop the turn or take it from the speaker) was not found in previous research. Therefore it is possible that this form of ITT is not as widespread as some others.

Research into turn taking in small class discussions in Japan has been carried out before (Hauser, 2009; Fujimoto, 2010a, 2010b). However, this research did not identify cases where learners paused unnaturally to invite reason questions; nor did it identify cases where learners interrupted speakers with reason questions before they had a chance to give reasons. This may be explained by differences in the teaching contexts between these studies.

DA shows, “that language is used to negotiate and achieve meaning in social contexts and so it cannot be divorced from those contexts” (Burns & Seidlhofer, 2002, p211). More specifically, “by managing turn taking as they do, the student participants construct an intersubjective understanding of the nature of the classroom task that they have been assigned and display an orientation to the institutional context.” (Hauser, 2009, p236).

The main focus of this research was not to discover why the forms of CTT and ITT appeared to be different from those found in other studies. It was to see if the unnatural

behaviour could be reduced. It is important to reduce such behaviour because learners need to develop their knowledge of “why, how and when to communicate, and complex skills for producing and managing interaction, such as asking a question or obtaining a turn.” (Burns & Seidlhofer, 2002, p211). In the Student Handbook for EDC classes one of the five key objectives is improving, “speaking fluency and communication skills” (page 3). Later interacting “appropriately” is also listed as being important (page 13). Unnatural pausing to invite reason questions and unnatural interrupting with reason questions are by definition not fluent speech. It could also be argued that interrupting others is not an appropriate form of interaction. Consequently, reducing these behaviours would not only help to meet the course objectives, but also improve the communicative abilities of the learners.

The research questions are:

- 1) Can the observed forms of CTT and ITT be reduced by teacher-centred feedback?
- 2) Is a dialogue or a description an effective form of teacher-centred feedback for reducing the observed forms of CTT and ITT?

### **METHOD**

As there was little existing research in this specific area it was decided that a flexible action research model should be applied. The first step was to observe the unnatural turn taking behaviour, the second was to create teaching techniques to combat it and the third was to test the effectiveness of the techniques.

There were 13 classes conducting two discussions every week (of 10 and 16 minutes) except during the discussion test weeks, which were excluded from the study. The average class size was 8 learners, however some were absent on different weeks. So a conservative estimate of the number of participants in the study in any week would be 7 learners x13 = 90 participants.

Initially the researcher was only aware of CTT. Classes which exhibited this behaviour during either the discussions in the regular class weeks were then identified and recorded. From week 3 of the study the researcher identified which participants exhibited the two behaviours: CTT, and ITT. Following this period of observation the researcher devised two teaching strategies to combat the CTT & ITT:

- 1) A dialogue read between the teacher and a learner, with the unnatural behaviour acted out by the teacher; that would demonstrate and highlight both unnatural turn taking behaviours. The learners would then discuss this in pairs.
- 2) Descriptive feedback from the teacher to the learners; that would describe and highlight both unnatural turn taking behaviours. The learners would then discuss this in pairs.

In study week 5 the main curriculum focussed on asking follow up questions, for example asking for reasons. Nine classes had exhibited CTT or ITT over the observation weeks, so the first five were given feedback using the dialogue; and the second four were given the descriptive feedback. This was done after the first discussion and before the second discussion, when classes were used to receiving either positive or corrective feedback.

### **EFFECTS**

In the entire study 2704 minutes of discussions were observed by one researcher, during this time 52 collaborative pauses and 14 interruptions were observed and recorded. In the final 6 weeks of the study 33 collaborative pauses were made by 23 participants and 14 interruptions were made by 14 participants. 7 participants made both collaborative pauses and interruptions.

## SECTION FOUR: Action Research Part 3- Feedback

Study (Week) →	1 (3)	2 (4)	3 (6)	4 (7)	5 (8)	6 (10)	7 (11)	8 (12)	Total
↓ Class Code									
1	2C	0	0	0	4C 3I	0	0	1C	7C 3I
2	N/A	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
3	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
4	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
5	2C	0	0	0	2C	0	0	0	4C
6	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Exception Class 6	This class had never been taught the function of Giving Reasons, as they followed a curriculum that was designed to be more advanced.								
7	0	2C	1C	1C 1I	1C 2I	0	0	0	5C 3I
8	1C	0	0	0	0	0	1C	0	2C
9	2C	2C	2C	2C 1I	1C	0	0	0	9C 1I
10	3C	1C	1C 1I	0	1C 1I	1C	0	0	7C 2I
11	0	0	1C	1C	0	0	0	0	2C
12	0	3C	3C	2C	2C 3I	5C	1C	1C	17C 3I
13	1C	0	2I	0	4C	0	0	0	5C 2I

Table 1 Data For All Classes

Total Number of Collaborative Pauses in the Study	52
Total Number of Interruptions in the Study	14
Total Number of Collaborative Pauses Between Weeks 3 & 8	33
Total Number of Learners Making Collaborative Pauses Between Weeks 3 & 8	23
Total Number of Interruptions Between Weeks 3 & 8	14
Total Number of Learners Making Interruptions Between Weeks 3 & 8	14
Total Number of Learners who Collaboratively Paused and Interrupted Between Weeks 3 & 8 (N.B These are also counted in the figures above)	7
Total number of Collaborative Pauses Made by Learners that Exhibited both Behaviours	11
Total number of Interruptions Made by Learners that Exhibited both Behaviours	7

Table 2 Summary of Findings

It should be noted that for CTT a total of 114 minutes of discussions were observed before, and 94 minutes after the feedback. For ITT a total of 62 minutes of discussions were observed before and 94 minutes after the feedback.

In every class CTT decreased following the feedback. There was a 61% reduction in collaborative pausing across all the classes. For the dialogue intervention there was a 78% reduction, and for the descriptive feedback a 48% reduction. In two classes ITT increased, and in four classes ITT decreased, following the feedback. There was a 64% reduction in the number of interruptions across all the classes. For the dialogue feedback there was a 50% reduction, and for the descriptive feedback a 63% reduction.

SECTION FOUR: Action Research Part 3- Feedback

Study Week	5 Disc 1	Method Used	5 Disc 2	6	7	8	Total Before Method	After Method	Total
1	3C 1I	Dialogue	1C 2I	0	0	1C	5C 1I	2C 2I	7C 3I
5	2C	Dialogue	0	0	0	0	4C	0	4C
7	1C 1I	Dialogue	1I	0	0	0	5C 2I	1I	5C 3I
8	0	Dialogue	0	0	1C	0	1C	1C	2C
9	0	Dialogue	1C	0	0	0	8C 1I	1C	9C 1I
10	1I	Descriptive	1C	1C	0	0	5C 2I	2C	7C 2I
11	0	Descriptive	0	0	0	0	2C	0	2C
12	2C 1I	Descriptive	2I	5C	1C	1C	10C 1I	7C 2I	17C 3I
13	3C	Descriptive	1C	0	0	0	4C 2I	1C	5C 2I

Table 3 The Effectiveness of Using Dialogue and Descriptive Feedback to combat CTT & ITT

Total Number of Collaborative Pauses Observed Before the Feedback	44
Total Number of Collaborative Pauses Observed After the Feedback	14
Percentage Drop in Collaborative Pauses After the Feedback Given Uneven Numbers of Discussions	61.36%
Total Number of Interruptions Observed Before the Feedback	9
Total Number of Interruptions Observed After the Feedback	5
Percentage Drop in Interruptions After the Feedback Given Uneven Numbers of Discussions	64.29%

Table 4 Summary of Findings for Both Methods of Feedback

Total Number of Collaborative Pauses Observed Before the Feedback	23
Total Number of Collaborative Pauses Observed After the Feedback	4
Percentage Drop in Collaborative Pauses After the Feedback Given Uneven Numbers of Discussions	78.26%
Total Number of Interruptions Observed Before the Feedback	4
Total Number of Interruptions Observed After the Feedback	3
Percentage Drop in Interruptions After the Feedback Given Uneven Numbers of Discussions	50%

Table 5 Summary of Findings for Dialogue Method of Feedback

Total Number of Collaborative Pauses Observed Before the Feedback	21
Total Number of Collaborative Pauses Observed After the Feedback	10
Percentage Drop in Collaborative Pauses After the Feedback Given Uneven Numbers of Discussions	47.83%
Total Number of Interruptions Observed Before the Feedback	5
Total Number of Interruptions Observed After the Feedback	2
Percentage Drop in Interruptions After the Feedback Given Uneven Numbers of Discussions	62.5%

Table 6 Summary of Findings for Descriptive Method of Feedback

## DISCUSSION

The evidence indicates that teacher-centred feedback can be effective at reducing CTT & ITT. The evidence may indicate that feedback using a dialogue is more effective at reducing CTT. The evidence may indicate that feedback using descriptive feedback is more effective at reducing ITT. However, the study may have been affected by other uncontrolled variables and only 9 classes for CTT, and 6 for ITT, were involved in the second half of the study. So, generalisations about the effectiveness of using dialogue or descriptions feedback to combat CTT and ITT should be made with caution.

It is possible that the learners responded better to descriptive feedback in the case of reducing interruptions as it is a teacher-centred form of feedback and the case involves behaviour which is not only unnatural, but also rude. Learners may be accustomed to following teacher-centred feedback on polite behaviour. Furthermore, a stereotypical belief that teachers do not behave rudely may have made the dialogue ineffective at showing rudeness.

The researcher was surprised by the high number of individuals exhibiting both behaviours. One reason why the number of interruptions increased in two classes is shown by the fact that one learner from Class 1 and one learner from Class 12 collaboratively paused before the feedback and interrupted after the feedback. It may be that they overcorrected their previous behaviour.

It is suggested that similar research should be conducted in the future with the following improvements:

- 1) Individuals exhibiting CTT & ITT should be identified from the start.
- 2) Individuals responding to unnatural pausing, and those being unnaturally interrupted, should be identified from the start, to establish if the same people are involved in pairings.
- 3) The study should incorporate more participants and include data from more than one researcher, to reduce the effects of individual biases.
- 4) The study should run during the first semester, when the function of giving (and asking for) reasons is taught. And so that the feedback can be effective from an earlier stage, when CTT & ITT are less entrenched in behaviour patterns.
- 5) A new study could be conducted to establish whether teacher-centred feedback is more effective than student-centred feedback at combatting the two behaviours.
- 6) A new study could be conducted to examine if differences in curricula can affect the type of CTT and ITT that occurs within small group discussions in Japanese university classes.

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## APPENDIX A: The dialogues

### 1) Collaborative (with long pause, inviting a reason question)

Learner: In my opinion we should think about where we get our information.....

Teacher: Why?

Learner: Because sometimes what we see on TV is not true. For example, the natto diet in the homework.

### 2) Interruptive (with no time for the learner to give a reason)

Learner: In my opinion we should think about where we get our information, be...

Teacher: WHY?

Learner: Because sometimes what we see on TV is not true. For example, the natto diet in the homework.