

Teaching Interactional Competence through Conversational Style in English

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Abstract:

This article focuses on the use of conversation analysis (CA) to help teaching interactional competence in English to adult foreign language learners from lower to intermediate levels. To set the context, this article gives a brief overview on the use of CA in foreign language research as well as considering the construct of interactional competence in foreign language teaching. Based on classroom research, the article demonstrates how CA applied in the foreign language classroom was effective initially in raising students' awareness of both the mechanisms and norms of spoken interaction, and also eventually in helping them to become analysts of conversation and more effective conversationalists. To better understand what CA concepts needed to be taught a conversation analysis of the students' undirected conversations was undertaken revealing interactional problems not noticed through traditional methods of investigation. It is therefore suggested that a CA-informed pedagogical approach can help to teach interactional competence or competencies, by using materials designed for that purpose.

Keywords: Conversation analysis, pedagogical approach, implications for teaching, paralinguistic activities, the sequential organization of utterances, sociocultural norms, conversationalists, authentic conversation, intersubjectivity.

Conversation analysis (CA) refers to make ways into second or foreign (L2) language teaching as there is an increasing body of research conducted from a conversation.

If conversation analysis has now become more widely accepted as a research methodology into L2 use and acquisition, its application to teaching L2 adults is still in its infancy although one of the earliest records of its use goes back to the late 1990s. Indeed Barraja-Rohan explained the relevance of conversation analysis to L2 teaching to enhance the learning of L2 conversational skills[1]. She demonstrated that sociocultural norms were reflected in openings, closings and adjacency pairs (e.g.

greetings, leave-taking, invitations, and requests); consequently, focusing on these concepts made L2 sociocultural norms salient to students who could then employ them in L2. She also considered other CA concepts such as turn-taking (including overlaps and listener responses), preference organization, as well as prosody and kinesics. More recently other articles testify that CA has been used successfully in the L2 classroom for various purposes. For instance, Huth and Taleghani-Nikazm examined the acquisition of pragmatic functions such as telephone openings in German[2]. Working from a CA perspective they contrasted the use of telephone openings in German with English to point out the different sociocultural norms between the two languages. Their article illustrates the positive outcome of a CA-informed instruction by comparing a pair of students» L2 telephone openings pre- and post-instruction. Another study by Packett indicated that CA was used in an English for specific purposes (journalism) class to teach the specifics of news interviews and, particularly, insertion sequences for an audience. News interviews have been the object of much study in conversation analysis; thus, such a body of knowledge constitutes a useful and readily available resource to teach the complexities of spoken interactions in various settings.

Conversation analysis has vast implications for L2 teaching and learning because it has been able to reveal the «social organization of natural language-in-use». The conversation analyst's task is to examine how conversationalists achieve order and social organization. To be able to do this CA relies on naturally occurring spoken interactions to explain its orderliness, sequence organization and turn-taking. The principle of using authentic conversations can be equally applied to the L2 class so that learners can be exposed to real life language. Its value is in the social dimension that CA brings to the classroom and the view of L2 learning as socially distributed knowledge.

Language from this perspective is no longer regarded as a set of linguistic items, and learners are no longer considered as deficient L2 speakers but rather as novices as well as a social entity trying to come to grips with a new sociocultural environment. Therefore, they are no longer regarded as a machine, a metaphor used for too long in traditional foreign language acquisition (SLA) where there is input, output, uptake, etc[3].

Using a CA pedagogical approach implies using real life language and thus delving into authentic situations. Social interactions are at the core of human activities, so adult L2 learners have a vested interest in learning the intricacies of talk-in-interaction; however, learners may lack opportunities to engage in social interaction in L2 even while living in the L2 country. Making explicit key L2 interactional resources that interactants employ can facilitate this learning as learners can notice differences and similarities between L1 and L2. This is where CA can enhance students» learning by providing insights in talk-in-interaction, which can be used as a «grammar» of interaction. This point has also been made by Schegloff[4]. He has noted that L2 students at UCLA, in particular from South East Asian countries, take a particular interest in CA. He remarks that:

One element of this attraction, I have come to believe, is the role Conversation Analysis (CA) plays in their progressive mastery of English. Most of our graduate students have gone about as far as they can go in mastering English by the end of their first year of graduate studies, building, of course, on their previous course work and lived experience devoted to learning the language; their efforts to make further progress by the traditional methods of language pedagogy seem to have been frustrated. It has occurred to me that one attraction CA has had for them - aside (of course) from its appeal as a method of research - has been analytically-informed access to how language is actually employed in the course of mundane, daily activities.

Native speakers implicitly acquire a number of features of interactional competence (IC) such as the use of response tokens, adjacency pairs, preference organization, turn-taking, etc. Interactional competence involves, among other skills, precision timing and a quick analysis of speakers» turns. For instance, when a speaker takes over from a previous speaker, he or she may do so at or near a turn transition relevance place (thereby occasioning a terminal overlap), a move that requires

attention to grammar, pragmatics and/or intonation. Turn-taking is a delicate and complex manoeuvre that necessitates constant monitoring on the part of the participants. If native speakers are asked to describe such complex interactional machinery they are incapable of giving detailed explanations. This is the very reason why CA developed, i.e. to inform on how speakers of any particular community interact. Thus CA offers teachers insights into this interactional machinery, and they can then transfer this knowledge to L2 students by making it explicit. Interactional features need to be taught in context through the use of recorded and transcribed naturally occurring conversations, which will form the basis of the lessons. The features of interactional competence relevant to L2 students will depend upon their level of L2 mastery and include the following[5]:

- The turn-taking system, which involves how and when to take the floor, overlapping, the role of gaze and intonation, etc. The turn-taking system is also linked to the role of participants. Indeed there is a primary speaker (e.g. in story-telling the story teller takes longer turns-at-talk) and a listener (also called secondary speaker who, in the case of story-telling, makes minimal contributions), so these roles have implications on the turn-taking system;
- The sequential organization of utterances, which entails adjacency pairs. Adjacency pairs are connected to the preference organization system, such as preferred response (e.g. granting a request) or dispreferred response (e.g. refusing a request);
- Actions performed by interactants: Interactants use talk to perform actions and orient to them, as for instance in the case of the adjacency pairs of greeting and leave-taking;
- Repairs, i.e. being able to know when and how to initiate and accomplish a repair;
- Intersubjectivity: How intersubjectivity is achieved, in other words how interactants make meaning to each other and display common understanding and knowledge;
- Context: Context is created by the participants, their utterances and actions, which reflect their relationship, e.g. how they address or greet each other. As CA explicates talk-in-interaction, it offers teachers a structure of conversation and an approach to teaching interactional competence.
- Paralinguistic activities, which are produced purposefully and are therefore relevant and meaningful to the participants, such as pauses (e.g. the meaning of silence prefacing a displeased response as opposed to intraturn pause), intonation, gaze, gestures, perturbations (stuttering, hesitation markers, etc.), laughter, and others.

A few researchers have attempted to describe IC (which is examined in more detail in the next section), which can be said to comprise pragmatic competence and conversational syntax, i.e. spoken grammar, as well as embodied actions. Briefly, interactional competence can be described as the ability to[6]:

1. Participate in a range of interactional activities to co-construct conversations with diverse individuals and demonstrate pragmatic knowledge for social and institutional reasons by utilizing conversational syntax, which includes paralinguistics, kinesics, gaze, and proxemics;
2. Manage the turn-taking mechanism cooperatively while assuming the proper interactional roles from fellow participants. This comprises comprehending and demonstrating how turns are constructed, reacting to turns in a logical and orderly fashion, exhibiting a shared understanding and mending any communication breakdowns or threats, demonstrating engagement and empathy when appropriate or necessary, and carrying out social actions appropriate to the interactional context and institutional/social goals.
3. Now, the construct of interactional competence or competencies is explored through a brief historical view that indicates how CA came to be considered. Next, the design of the present

study is outlined, describing the students who participated and how the study was conducted. Then the teaching methodology is examined, which includes a rationale for teaching particular CA concepts. Moreover, an illustration of how some of these concepts were taught. A pattern of the teaching materials designed for the experimental course is reproduced, and a comparison of two L2 students» pre- and post-instruction conversations, Truc and Hakim, is conducted to show the development of their L2 interactional competence resulting from the CA-instructed conversation course. Comments from the evaluation questionnaire given to the students at the end of the course are provided to illustrate students» perceptions of the course in relation to:

- 1) their comprehension and acquisition of the concepts taught;
- 2) the enhancement of their speaking and listening abilities; and
- 3) the applicability of the CA principles in real-world interactions with both native speakers and other students.

The article concludes with a discussion regarding the applicability of a CA-based approach for teaching interactional competencies as advocated by Barraja-Rohan (1997) and later by Kasper (2006), and its benefits to the learners involved.

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