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Understanding a Learner's Responses: Uses of Silence in Teacher-Student Dialogues

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While interviews are typically used in EFL/ESL to measure students' oral proficiency, the author believes teacher-student interviews in the form of guided talk offer teachers the opportunity to explore the processes of interaction. Transcript excerpts will be examined through a descriptive account of the organization of talk. A basic concept of conversation analysis, turn taking organization, will be used as an analytical tool to explore possible interactive uses of silence. It will be argued that there are uses of silence that could inform teachers what to do next. It will be suggested that teachers who face students' silence could enhance their ability to help students move forward through the silence by giving appropriate support such as rephrasing questions and requests. Treating silence as an interactive device could be one way to help teachers interpret and address otherwise awkward moments.

EFL/ESLに於いて生徒の能力を知る方法として面接法がよく使われるが、教師―生徒間の誘導面接で教師は相互交流のプロセスを探索することが出来る。抜粋記録の談話構成記述が吟味され、会話分析の基本概念、交替発話を分析手段として用い、沈黙が相互交流に利用可能であることを探る。全ての沈黙を単に無言として扱うのではなく、教師の対処法を示唆するものとして沈黙を利用できると論じる。生徒の沈黙に接したとき、質問や要求の換言等の適切な支援を与えることで、生徒が沈黙を乗り越える手助けをするための教師能力を高めることが出来、沈黙を相互交流装置として捉えることで、手に余る沈黙の瞬間にどう対処していけばよいかを知る助けとなると筆者は提唱する。

A feature of talk

According to Hutchby and Wooffitt (1998),

> Talk is not seen simply as the product of two 'speaker-hearers' who attempt to exchange information or convey messages to each other. Rather, participants in conversation are seen as mutually orienting to, and collaborating in order to achieve, orderly and meaningful communication. (p. 1)

Silence, one type of student response to a teacher's question, is often viewed as a failure of communication. No immediate

response commonly frustrates teachers, especially since we want to help students express themselves in English as much as possible. However, it is inevitable there will be such problems as silence that need to be overcome by both learner and teacher when they interact. The danger is that teachers may prematurely and abruptly bring the interaction to a close because silence has been interpreted to mean that the student has nothing more to say. Is silence really a sign of failure to communicate, or are there some basic underlying purposes for it? This study examined silence in two different settings, a classroom and an interview, in hopes of offering some insight into possible communicative uses of silence. Since the focus of this study was on how participants use silence, a framework that allows us to see in some detail what is going on structurally in such situations would be helpful. Thus, conversation analysis (CA) was used as an analytical tool to describe and interpret the data.

Using conversation analysis (CA)

What is CA? As Psathas (1995) explains it, "Conversation analysis studies the order/organization/orderliness of social action, particularly those social actions that are located in everyday interactions" (p. 2-3). This idea of interaction is described by Hutchby and Woofit (1998) as being "mutually orienting to and collaborating" (p. 1), with the intention of accomplishing *meaningful* communication. While most of the early literature on CA is associated with the studies of ordinary daily conversations between English native speakers, CA is now being applied to an growing variety of contexts, including institutional talk in English between non-native speakers as well as institutional and non-institutional talk between native speakers in Thai, Japanese, Dutch, and other languages. CA is also being used as an analytical tool in studying transcripts of doctor-patient, prosecutor-witness, and male-female discourses. In all cases, CA analysts attempt to describe the interaction as it unfolds (Schegloff & Sacks, 1973).

Sacks, Schegloff, and Jefferson (1974) highlight two basic features of talk that are useful for teacher-researchers interested in analyzing talk-in-interaction through transcripts:

1. Participants in ordinary conversation usually take orderly turns. "Overwhelmingly, one party talks at a time" (p. 706).
2. The first part of an exchange commonly influences to some extent what kind of response will be produced by the other speaker. The question sets "constraints on what should be done in a next turn" (p. 717).

A common EFL example of taking orderly turns and the first part of a pair influencing the second part is the typical dialogue:

- A: How are you?
- B: I'm fine. And you?
- A: I'm fine, too.
- B: That's good.

While these observations may seem rather unremarkable, they grow in importance when we notice that talk-in-interaction is constantly being co-constructed and co-managed.

Ten Have (1999) proposes a useful strategy for preparing a preliminary analysis. Ten Have identifies three areas to study in any type of transcript analysis. Looking at the following

three types of organizations "in the exploratory analysis of data segments" (p. 110) is suggested: turn taking, sequence, and repair. For this paper, discussion is limited to the first type of organization. Turn-taking organization is the most basic and easiest concept to notice, especially in teacher-student talk, where talk is generally orderly, as speakers tend to take turns speaking. The essential role of turn taking in CA is explained by Psathas (1995). "The discovery of a turn-by-turn sequential organization of interaction was one of the first important discoveries and foci of attention in the development of conversation analysis" (p.13).

An applied CA study of talk between native-speaking English teachers and EFL students holds much promise because CA brings our attention first and foremost to making sense of what is happening turn by turn as the conversation unfolds for the participants. It is hoped that this study will contribute towards teachers' understandings of how students' responses influence what teachers do by investigating how teachers and students are "mutually orienting to and collaborating" (Hutchby & Woofit, 1998, p. 1) within the basic question-answer structure when there is silence. This study will begin with a detailed account of a classroom interaction and then consider how silence is used in two different contexts.

Classroom interaction

The following excerpt comes from a high school *model* lesson (open for observation by teachers from other schools). The 40 students are divided and seated at tables in 6 groups of 6 to 8 students. The teacher is checking their answers (from group 1 to 6) to questions at the end of a textbook chapter. The excerpt begins with a student (S6) being asked about his own experience in learning culture. Of interest in this series of turns is how silence could be used by participants to keep the interaction going. The teacher keeps talking to one particular student despite the initial and ensuing moments of silence (lines 66, 68, 72, 74, 76, and 82).

Transcription conventions

The set of transcript conventions come from Ten Have (1999), which is a simplified form of the conventions commonly used in CA, with one exception. Instead of timing the intervals precisely to tenths of seconds, the seconds have been rounded to whole numbers. According to Jefferson (1989), this is sufficient in most cases.

- A number in parentheses indicates elapsed time in seconds.
- A dot in parentheses is a very brief pause or gap within an utterance.
- Double parentheses contain supplementary descriptions and explanations that did not occur in the original conversations.

Classroom excerpt: Group 6

64	T:	You have a good sense of humor. Okay? Number six group, please. Number six
65		group. Have your parents ever told you to learn something Japanese?
66	S6:	((stands up)) ((speakers of groups in the back stand.) (3) ((looking down))
67	T:	Yes or no?
68	S6:	(2) ((sometimes looking at T, sometimes looking at other students.))

69	T:	Yes or no? In your case.
70	S6:	Yes.
71	T:	Yes. Okay. What did they (.) tell you?
72	S6:	(6) ((looking at friends and talking to them))
73	T:	If you don't know the vocabulary, Japanese is okay. I will help you.
74	S6:	(4) ((looks up at T))
75	T:	What did your parents tell you to learn?
76	S6:	(1) ((looking down and away))
77	T:	Something Japanese. Not Balinese dance Something Japanese.
78	S6:	*Ryoshin ga jibun ni* ((He is repeating in Japanese what his classmate is saying.)) ((translation: Your parents (told) you))
79	T:	You have to learn
80	S6:	*Nihon no bunka de mananda hoga ii?* ((translation: It is better to learn some part of Japanese culture?)) ((still looking at classmate))
81	T:	Something Japanese
82	S6:	(10) ((talks to friends then looks up at T)) No.
83	T:	No. Okay. Your answer is "no." S7. S7-san, how about you? ((next student in same group))

Account

Why does the above interaction between the teacher and S6 continue for 19 turns? When S6 is faced with questions, in the first series of turns (65-70), he waits silently through two of his turns (66, 68) before he gives a minimal response, "yes", in turn 70. He does a similar thing in turns 72, 74, 76, and 78. He waits before saying something. The teacher, based on her generous wait time (ten seconds in line 82), could be using these moments of silence to wait and see what the student will contribute to the interaction. We can see that the teacher continues her efforts to engage the student through questions (lines 71, 75) and tries to help (lines 73, 77, 79, 81).

Discussion

One point of this classroom interaction is that while silence is commonly perceived to be the absence of speech (Jaworski, 1993), there could be moments when silence might serve as a positive interactive device. Silence in some instances could provide feedback in getting both parties involved in "the continual display of mutual understanding" (Silverman, 1998, p. 24), or make up for the lack of mutual understanding. On the other hand, we cannot be sure what silence means, as Jaworski (1993) calls silence "probably the most ambiguous of all linguistic forms" (p. 24). The main point here is for teachers to move beyond treating silence as being one-dimensional. (see Tannen & Saville-Troike, 1985; Jaworski, 1993, for interesting uses of silence in such areas of religion and literature). Instead of viewing silence as a one-sided phenomenon (typically taken to mean, "I don't know"), the possibility should remain open that participants make use of silence as a communicative resource. During silence, for example, the student could possibly be weighing the consequences of saying "yes" versus "no" (lines 65-70), while the teacher could be preparing to rephrase her question (line 69, 71, 75) or emphasize certain instructions (lines 73, 77).

When co-participants in talk are *stuck*, it could mean from students' points of view that they want to take their expected turn but do not know the best way in the target language to do so. From teachers' points of view, it could mean that we want to encourage them to say more, but we do not know the best way of doing so. For both participants, getting stuck could mean the topic of the conversation cannot move forward until some kind of repair is made. Silence could serve as one of various possible devices to help both parties make adjustments and accommodate the other person, as in rephrasing questions and trying to answer them as expected. While it is beyond the scope of this paper to consider other factors, brief mention is made here to recognize the influence of student's nonverbal cues on the teacher's actions. Goodwin (1984) looks at how participants orient themselves in sequences of turns through forms of gaze as well as talk. Gazes and even non-gazes could be doing some kind of communicative work. The nonverbal cues of S6 during silence included: gaze down, gaze down and away, gaze at teacher, gaze at classmates, and listen to classmates.

Interview interaction

An excerpt from an *interview* between a high school student and a teacher will be discussed in order to explore possible uses of silence in a different context. Hopefully, this case will add some clarity to how silence is being used. The term interview is used here to loosely mean a guided talk in which the teacher asks questions to help the student express personal ideas and experiences.

Interview 1: STEP test

In this opening sequence of the interview, "M" initiates the topic of being busy with final exams. Since she was supposed to be taking the STEP proficiency test (commonly referred to as *Eiken*) around the same time as finals, the teacher was trying to find out whether her exams came before or after *Eiken*. Moments of silence are found in turns 11, 23, and 25 and seem important places to look for uses of silence.

1	M:	I was busy to study test test ((end of term tests)).
2	T:	Oh. Which test?
3	M:	World history and math and English.
4	T:	So you finished the test?
5	M:	Yeah.
6	T:	That was OK?
7	M:	No.
8	T:	No. But English all right?
9	M:	So so.
10	T:	Oh. And then after that was *Eiken*?
11	M:	(3) ((looking puzzled))
12	T:	You had the test before *Eiken*?
13	M:	I think before.
14	T:	So when you had *Eiken* ah you already finished all the tests?
15	M:	Pardon?
16	T:	So, when you took *Eiken* you had already finished the school tests?
17	M:	No.
18	T:	Not yet?

19	M:	Yes.
20	T:	So you already started or you started after *Eiken*?
21	M:	After *Eiken.*
22	T:	Ah, OK. So let's go back to *Eiken.* You were telling me about the (test) card about students at school.
23	M:	(4) ((sometimes looking at me and sometimes looking away))
24	T:	So there were two pictures on the card. Right?
25	M:	Yeah. (3) ((looking at me))
26	T:	So just imagine the picture. Tell me ah what was in the first picture.

Account

When we look at turns 10-11 as a pair, we notice the first part of the pair is a question. The second part of the pair is silence. Silence seems to function as a form of feedback as the teacher immediately reworks the question by switching the order of words and making the subject pronoun explicit. If we compare the questions in turns 10 and 12, the latter question appears to be easier for "M" to understand as she replies, "I think before." So the turn after silence is a reworded question that is then followed by the student's answer.

A similar reworking of the question around silence can also be seen before the silence in turn 22 and after the silence in turn 24. A relatively lengthy utterance with a rather indirect cue of a shift of topic has been revised into a shorter one with a tag question. The outcome of this work in turn 25 is a verbal response. In both sequences (turns 10-13 and 22-25) the reworked question gets a target language response. A third case of silence is found in turn 25. This turn is a continuation of the sequence that started in turn 22. This silence seems different from the other two examples in that the student answers the question and is then silent. Here it is unclear whose silence it is. "M" seems to be waiting for the teacher to say something since she had already answered, and the teacher is waiting to see if "M" will say anything else. In turn 26, the teacher ends the silence and renews the request which first appeared in turn 22 for "M" to talk about the pictures. If the initial attempt of a request back in turn 22 is compared with the one in turn 26, it is clear that the second attempt is more explicit about what is being asked. Turns 23-26 represent a brief detour to get back on track, and then the next few turns (not shown) are spent talking about the pictures.

Discussion

One question that emerges when looking back at turns 11, 23, and 25 is: Does "M" take her turn through silence and thus signal the teacher to take a turn, or does she plan on saying something? When we look at the teacher's utterances immediately before and after "M"'s turns in 11, 23, and 25, it is noticeable that the teacher rephrased the question or request. (Compare turns 10 and 12, 22 and 24, 24 and 26.) How are these three examples different? A brief description of possible non-verbal cues for these turns has been included here to acknowledge their presence and potential importance for future study. It appears that the cues vary during the three moments of silence. In turn 11, "M" looks puzzled, while in

turn 23 she changes the direction of her gaze. Then in turn 25, her gaze is on the teacher. In addition, some teachers may be inclined to ask the student what she was thinking. The teacher did ask "M" later what she was thinking at certain points of the talk, and her reply the majority of the time was, "I wasn't thinking of anything in particular." While both non-verbal cues and perceptions are undeniably important factors that deserve investigation, the intention of this study is to demonstrate that a great deal can be learned by looking at the transcript alone.

Building a descriptive account turn by turn of what happens before and after silence is one way to consider its potential communicative uses. In the interview interaction, "M"'s silence not only alerts the teacher to the need to rephrase the question or request, but also allows time and space to do so. Silence may not cause particular actions, but only particular actions are noticed in the turn following it, and these actions can be viewed as being influenced by silence.

Conclusion

This study is an attempt to show how silence is used to keep conversations going. If silence is viewed as an interactive device, then the role of the teacher to deal with students' silence comes to the foreground. Two accounts of what teachers do to help the student overcome the silence have been discussed. Out of this study come two suggestions to teachers who encounter similar situations of silence in the classroom:

1. Consider silence as potentially communicative and not simply the absence of speech. Also, if viewed as interactive, silence should not be treated as the sole responsibility of the learner to overcome.
2. Any actions taken to address silence should be based on classroom practices already being used. In this way, teachers can make use of techniques they are already using to prompt students and elicit feedback.

Such practices could include the types of actions taken by the teachers in this study to achieve orderly and meaningful communication.

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