

## Curtailing or Sustaining “Off-Task” Interaction: A Conversation Analytic Study

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This study is an analysis of one way that students in a language classroom may go off task, which is to start talking with other students about something not directly related to the current task or activity. The data come from video-recorded discussion tasks in English among Japanese university students. Multimodal conversation analysis is used to illustrate how the students use talk, gaze, and gesture to either curtail or sustain off-task interaction once it has been initiated. Focusing on instances of off-task interaction in which the students use English, the analysis illustrates how even students with fairly limited proficiency in English can show themselves to be interactionally competent while using English. The analysis also shows how off-task interaction may provide students with valuable opportunities for language practice and language learning.

この論文では、外国語の教室の学生達がオフタスクする仕方を分析する。オフタスクとは、授業中に、進行中のタスクやアクティビティーとは関係ない話題について他の学生と話し出すことである。データは、録画された日本人大学生の英語のディスカッションタスクである。マルチモーダル会話分析で、学生達が話したり、視線、ジェスチャーを使用しながら、オフタスクインタラクションを抑えたり、維持したりする方法を検証する。英語が使われているオフタスクインタラクションの分析を通じて、英語能力が割と低い学生でも、自分の英語のインタラクションコンピタンスを見せることができることを説明する。オフタスクインタラクションが外国語の練習や習得する機会を学生に与えることも説明する。

In an analysis of a collection of video-recorded and transcribed L2 English classroom discussion tasks among Japanese university students, it was found that some students would occasionally engage in nonserious interaction in their L2, resulting in a brief side sequence (Jefferson, 1972) in English. These side sequences were recognizable as one sort

of interaction that teachers would consider off task, in that the students were not directly engaged with the topic of the discussion. Examples of such side sequences are analyzed in this paper.

Within the small but growing field of conversation analysis for second language acquisition (Kasper & Wagner, 2011), Markee’s (2005) article appears to be the only attempt to focus specifically on off-task classroom interaction. However, although Markee identified off-task interaction as involving a change of speech exchange system (Sacks, Schegloff, & Jefferson, 1974)—that is, a change from pedagogical interaction characterized by three-part sequences (McHoul, 1978; Mehan, 1979; Sinclair & Coulthard, 1975) to conversational interaction—the side sequences analyzed in this paper do not involve changes in speech exchange system.

### Data and Transcription

The data are drawn from over 4 hours of video-recorded and transcribed L2 English discussion tasks among Japanese university students at two universities in Tokyo. These recordings were collected for the general purpose of investigating interaction during discussion tasks, rather than for the specific purpose of investigating off-task interaction. Off-task interaction was simply something that the students sometimes did. The talk has been transcribed following conversation analytic conventions (Jefferson, 2004). In the transcripts below, participants are labeled with pseudonymous Japanese surnames. Talk is transcribed in Courier font. In order to make nonverbal aspects of the talk available for the analysis, frames from the recordings and descriptions of nonverbal behavior appear beneath the talk, in Times font. The precise timing of a frame with the talk is shown with a sharp symbol (#). The start of a nonverbal action is shown by the placement of a symbol (+, \*, @) in the line with the talk and prior to the description. A different symbol is used for each participant. When the nonverbal action is produced by a participant other than the one currently producing talk, the first initial of that participant’s pseudonym precedes the description.

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**“Off-Task” Side Sequences**

Extract 1 is an example of the sort of side sequence examined in this paper.

**Extract 1 (Tanaka, Honda, Suzuki, Izumi)**

01 T: # @plea [se  
#Frame 1  
@RH gesture to H

02 H: [ +oh .h # ehk. +(1.4) <what do you thi:nk,  
#Frame 2  
+orients head, hands, and torso to table  
+starts searching through papers with BH

H S T I



Frame 1



Frame 2

03 (0.5) would be (.) the mostuh (.) fun or  
04 inter interesting things (.) about a  
05 in(.)ternational relation [ship or=  
06 T: [ @↑m: ↓m:  
@nods slightly 3 times

07 H: =marriage. \*(.) why do you think so.>  
S: \*nods once

08 T: ah:  
09 H: +m:=  
+lifts RH from table, nods slightly

10 T: = \*it's +pos # + posi &tive. T1  
#Frame 3

S: \*gaze to T  
H: +starts retracting LH  
+gaze to T  
I: &gaze to T



Frame 3

11 H: [ +m: . T2  
+nods slightly

12 S: [huh huh huh=  
13 I: =ah: &=  
&gaze off T

14 H: = +po [sitive. T2  
+nods deeply

15 T: [ \*positive +question. T3/T4  
S: \*moves back  
H: +nods deeply, gaze off T

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16 H: °+n.°  
+nods twice  
17 \* (1.0) # + (1.7)  
#Frame 4  
S: \*gaze down right  
H: +orients head, hands, and torso to table  
18 H: okay. .h (0.4) †I thought

T4



Frame 4

During and after Honda reads a discussion question the teacher gave her, three of the four students in this group, including Honda herself, claim understanding of the question. Tanaka does this in line 06, while Honda is reading the question, with confirmation tokens and head nods. Suzuki does this by nodding once after Honda has read the first part of the question in line 07. Tanaka does this again by receipting the question with “ah” in line 08. Honda does this with a confirmation token and head nod in line 09.

In addition, though, Tanaka goes beyond a simple claim of understanding and displays understanding by assessing the question in line 10. This assessment becomes the first turn of a four-turn sequence between Tanaka and Honda, consisting of the initial assessment (T1), agreement plus assessment by Honda (lines 11 and 14, T2), an expanded assessment by Tanaka (line 15, T3), and a final agreement by Honda (lines 15 and 16, T4). In addition, the initial assessment is responded to with laughter by Suzuki (12) and by “ah” from Izumi (13). Honda starts moving to close the sequence in line 15, as she shifts her gaze off Tanaka while producing her final agreement. She then reorients towards the table during the silence (line 17) and starts her answer to the question (line 18). Her an-

swer is prefaced with *okay*, a marker of transition. Suzuki also orients to the completion of the sequence by moving back (line 15) and shifting his gaze toward the paper with the discussion question at the start of the silence (line 17).

This four-turn sequence can be described as a side sequence because what is immediately relevant following the reading of a discussion question and claims of understanding is not an assessment of the question, but rather for one of the students to self-select to give his or her opinion. In this particular group, with other discussion questions, the student who has read the question is also the student to first give his or her opinion (Hauser, 2009). This happens here also, as Honda is the first to give her opinion. Before this, though, Honda and Tanaka produce this brief side sequence. The sequence can be described as “off-task” with scare quotes, because even though the initial and following assessments are related to the discussion question, the sequence is not directly related to the discussion task as it does not involve expressing an opinion, giving supporting reasons, asking about another’s opinion, or responding to another’s opinion. There is weak evidence that the students orient to this sequence as not on task, in that Suzuki responds to the initial assessment with laughter and Honda does specific work—through gaze shift, a shift in body posture, and talk—to transition from the side sequence to giving her opinion. I refer to this side sequence, and others like it, as “off-task,” with the scare quotes used to note that it is not completely unrelated to the task interaction and that the evidence that the participants orient to the sequence as not on task is weak.

In looking for examples of “off-task” side sequences in the students’ L2 English, I in fact only found five. Three of the other four are shown as Extracts 2, 3, and 4. (For analysis of the fifth example, see Hauser, 2005.) This is a small collection, but it allows for three interesting points to be made regarding student interaction in a communicative language classroom. First, these side sequences are collaborative achievements and whether they are sustained or curtailed is a contingent outcome of student actions; second, they show how students may break through the constraints of task interaction while maintaining a focus on using their L2 (Markee, 2005); and third, they show some of the variety of resources that students can use to manage the contingencies of interaction. In Extract 1, Honda’s agreement-plus-assessment (lines 11 and 14) transforms Tanaka’s assessment into the first turn of a sequence that will be at least two turns long. Similarly, Tanaka’s expanded assessment (line 15) sustains the sequence for three turns, and Honda’s agreement (lines 15 and 16) sustains it for four turns. While they do this, Tanaka and Honda maintain their use of English, as they also do something—assessing and agreeing—other than what is called for by the task. Finally, the participants use gaze and body posture to move into the side sequence and to close it. Both Suzuki and Honda

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shift their gaze to Tanaka (line 10) and then shift their gaze away as the side sequence is brought to a close (lines 15 and 17). Izumi also shifts his gaze to Tanaka (line 10), but shifts it away earlier (line 13). In addition, Honda moves her hands away from the table and the paper that the discussion question is printed on (lines 09 and 10), moving out of the activity of reading aloud. As the side sequence is being closed, Suzuki moves back and Honda reorients bodily toward the table and the question in preparation for expressing her opinion. Before she starts the opinion, she marks the transition verbally with “okay” and an inbreath (line 18). The participants thus use gaze, changes in bodily posture, a material object, and talk to manage the contingencies of the interaction.

Extract 2 shows what would seem to be the minimal possibility for “off-task” interaction, in which a comment from one participant is responded to only with smiling and laughter.

Extract 2 (Suzuki, Tanaka, Honda)

01 S: I- I want to be:: ↓I (what) ↑I want to  
 02 live in: Japan.  
 03 T: uh huh [hh  
 04 H: [mm: [hmhm  
 05 S: [uh:n (0.9) mmhkm ((clears  
 06 throat)) (0.4) why uh: °(why/what)° (6.0)  
 07 uh: I can't live (0.4) uh:: (2.0)  
 08 +°(nan da)kke° # (0.5) +with  
 #Frame 1  
 +grimaces +moves head left, continues grimace  
 H S T



Frame 1

09 (0.2) +(1.4) +(2.2) +(1.0)  
 +moves RH right, starts circle gesture  
 +stops circle gesture after 2.5 cycles, moves head right  
 and down +RH to nose  
 10 +↑I↓:: (0.3) uh: + °nan dakke°  
 +lowers RH, moves head left +raises RH moves head right and down  
 11 +(1.2) +(0.2) +(0.4) # +(2.0)  
 #Frame 2  
 +starts down-up-down gesture with RH +RH on table +lowers head to LH  
 +stops gesture, lowers head



Frame 2

12 +(1.3) °uh: nan dakke° (1.0) +(1.0)  
 +raises head +starts body wiggle  
 13 T: what  
 14 S: °dete kona(h)i° hh (4.5) uh:: + (0.3)  
 +looks down  
 15 T: @Japanese @+please.  
 @raises RH @points to S and retracts  
 S: +looks at T  
 16 +(0.3)  
 S: +smiles  
 17 H: @heh heh [hih hih hih  
 T: @moves LH back



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18 T: [ @heh heh heh heh # + .h heh heh .h  
#Frame 3

@LH to pocket

S: +moves RH left



Frame 3

19 S: @I can't live (.) with [(0.2) uh:n # + ...  
#Frame 4

+moves RH  
toward dictionary

T: @removes dictionary from pocket and places it in front of S

20 H: [.h



Frame 4

In this extract, Suzuki gives his opinion (lines 01 and 02) and then starts formulating a reason to support his opinion. However, he has trouble completing what he starts as “I can’t live with ...” This trouble is shown in his talk through multiple “uh”s, elongation of “uh” and of several words, and the use of the Japanese expressions “*nan dakke*” (What was

it) and “*dete konai*” (literally, it won’t come out). It is also shown in his bodily behavior, as he grimaces, closes his eyes, tilts his head, drops his head, does numerous gestures, and wiggles his body. Tanaka responds to this trouble with a suggestion to use Japanese (line 15), accompanied by a quick pointing gesture. This suggestion is treated as nonserious. Suzuki shifts his gaze to Tanaka and smiles (lines 15 and 16) and Honda (17) and Tanaka (18) laugh. Tanaka also responds to the trouble by retrieving his dictionary from his pocket and moving it toward Suzuki (lines 17-19). Suzuki once more says, “I can’t live with ...” and moves his right hand toward the dictionary (line 19). By continuing in English, rather than following Tanaka’s suggestion, Suzuki again treats the suggestion as nonserious.

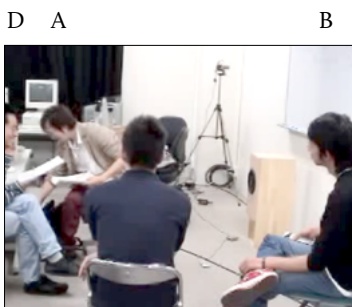
Tanaka’s suggestion and the smiling and laughter it elicits can be seen as an “off-task” side sequence in that the suggestion is not directly related to giving an opinion, is not treated as serious, is not followed, and is overridden by a different sort of assistance—the offering of the dictionary—which is accepted. However, the sequence is quickly curtailed as it is only responded to with smiling and laughter, rather than turns at talk, and Suzuki immediately returns to the talk that he has been having trouble completing. The quick curtailment of the side sequence is thus the contingent outcome of how the participants respond to it. Though Tanaka’s suggestion is to use Japanese, he makes the suggestion itself in his L2 English, creating an opportunity to use his L2 to show attentiveness to another’s trouble. Finally, Suzuki responds to the suggestion with a shift of gaze and smiling, but then immediately shows his return to what he was doing before by repeating the English that he has been trying to find a way to complete, using gaze, facial expression, and talk to manage the contingencies of the interaction.

Extract 3 shows how an “off-task” side sequence can be extended.

**Extract 3 (Abe, Doi, Baba)**

01	A:	+eh	+heh heh
		+gaze on D	+gaze, RH to bag
02	D:	heh	
03	A:	+.hh (0.2) #	+can I look at the dictionary?=hh
		#Frame 1	
		+adjusts body	+leans toward bag, moves RH into bag

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Frame 1

04 + (0.8)  
+LH to bag  
05 B: no.  
06 A: +no:?? #  
#Frame 2  
+removes LH from bag



Frame 2

07 B: @cunning.  
D: @silent laugh  
08 + (0.2)  
+raises head  
09 A: +cunning? #  
#Frame 3  
+turns head left, toward B



Frame 3

10 (0.2)  
11 B: [uh cheating. T5  
12 D: [ +c (h) unn (h) ing.  
A: +sits up, withdraws dictionary from bag with RH, gaze forward  
13 A: +ch (h) eat (h) ing # (.) +reall (h) y=hh T6  
#Frame 4  
+LH to dictionary, gaze to dictionary +opens dictionary



Frame 4

T3 14 (0.2)  
15 A: uh:: (0.4) .t I forgot the (0.8) word uh::

T4  
Prior to this excerpt, Abe has been expressing his opinion. He then (lines 01-03) starts reaching for his bag, on the floor to his right. As he leans toward the bag and reaches inside, he indicates that he is looking for his dictionary by asking permission to use it. This is a pro forma request for permission, given that he has started the course of action of retrieving his dictionary prior to asking for permission. Nevertheless, Baba responds to

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the pro forma request by rejecting it (line 05). While continuing to search in his bag, Abe responds to this with a questioning repeat (Jefferson, 1972) in line 06. Baba then gives a reason for rejection (line 07), to which Abe again responds with a questioning repeat, this time turning his head toward Baba, but still continuing the course of action started in line 01. Baba responds to the questioning repeat by reformulating his reason for rejection (line 11), in overlap with which Doi repeats the first reason while laughing. Abe repeats the reformulated reason (line 13), this time without rising intonation, and then says, “really” while laughing, again without rising intonation. As he does this, he brings his dictionary to the space in front of himself, gazes at it, and opens it. Finally, Abe gives an account (line 15) of why he is using his dictionary. (See Hauser, 2014, for an analysis of Abe’s dictionary use.)

In a sequence of six turns, there is criticism of one student’s course of action and challenges of this criticism by the student who is being criticized. Baba’s rejection of permission (05, T1) can be heard not only as rejection but also criticism of Abe’s course of action, as Abe began the course of action prior to making a pro forma request. Abe’s repeat with rising intonation (line 06, T2) challenges the criticism and calls, through its intonation, for some sort of response. Baba’s reason (line 07, T3) responds to the challenge, and Abe’s second repeat with rising intonation (line 09, T4) challenges Baba’s reason and again calls for a response. Baba’s reformulated reason (line 11, T5) responds to the second challenge. Finally, Abe’s repeat of the reformulated reason and questioning of its seriousness (line 13, T6) is produced without rising intonation and not responded to. This sequence can be heard as an “off-task” side sequence as it is not directly related to giving an opinion, but is instead related to criticism of a course of action begun in order to give an opinion. It is clearly treated as nonserious. Doi does this by laughing, including his laughing repetition of “cunning” (line 12). Abe does this by laughing (line 13) and by continuing with the course of action that is being criticized, only shifting his gaze briefly to Baba (line 09). Finally, Baba does this by abandoning his criticism once Abe actually begins using his dictionary.

Baba’s rejection of permission (line 05) could have been completely ignored. In fact, through his continued searching of his bag, Abe is partially ignoring the rejection, or at least not granting to Baba the right to reject his request. However, by challenging the rejection, Abe transforms Baba’s rejection into the first turn of what is now a two-turn sequence and also makes a response from Baba relevant. As Baba responds with a reason, and Abe again challenges this, the sequence grows to three and then four turns. As Baba once more responds to the challenge and Abe repeats this, the sequence grows to five and then finally six turns. The students thus collaborate to sustain the side sequence. They also collaborate to curtail the sequence at six turns, as Abe drops his use of rising intona-

tion and Baba does not respond to what Abe says. As the students collaborate to sustain the side sequence, they also maintain their use of their L2. (The use of *cunning* to mean cheating can be considered *wasei eigo*, or Japanese-made English, which may account for why Baba reformulates the reason as *cheating*, but it is generally perceived in Japan as an English loan word.) They thus create opportunities to use their L2 to criticize, to challenge criticism, and to appreciate the nonseriousness of the criticism. Finally, Abe uses his continued course of action to treat the criticism as nonserious and uses his opening of and orientation to the dictionary to end the side sequence and move on to the next step in this continuing course of action, which Baba collaborates with by discontinuing his criticism. This shows how material objects can become resources for managing the contingencies of interaction.

Extract 4 shows a series of progressively longer “off-task” sequences. However, for these, the term side sequence is not particularly apt.

**Extract 4 (Abe, Baba, Doi)**

01	A:	my <u>heart</u> is + <u>beating fast</u> hh heh	+heh	
		((searching bag)) +gaze to D	+glances at B, then gaze down	
02		(1.0)		
03	A:	.hh ((sniff))		
04		(5.0)		
	B:	((leans back and stretches legs out during silence))		
05	B:	my @+brain is sleeping no	[w.	T1
		@starts turning head right		
	A:	+gaze to B		
06	A:		[sleepy:]	T2
07		+ @ (2.2)		
	A:	+gaze to bag		
	B:	@gaze forward		
08	A:	+↑what’s up. +↑what +about your: (0.7)		T1
		+gaze to B +LH gesture to B		
		+gaze to bag		
09		+last night.@(.) hhh		T1
		+gaze to B		
	B:	@yawns---->		

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10 # (1.0)  
#Frames 1a, b  
B: ----->



Frame 1a



Frame 1b

11 B: hhn drink @ing. T2  
---> @gaze right  
12 A: [dri(h)nki(h)ng(h)? T3  
13 D: [huh huh ha ha ha ha  
14 (1.2)  
A: ((gaze back to bag, pushes bag away/closed, removes hand))  
B: ((turns head left, starts raising both arms in stretch))  
15 D: .hh [h  
16 B: [+drinking # + alone. T4  
#Frame 2  
A: +gaze forward +gaze left-down



Frame 2

17 A: h heh heh  
18 (1.9)  
A: ((looks at papers in hands, then searches bag))  
19 B: ah: hh  
((arms fully extended above head, brings them down after 19))

This group has not actually started the discussion task at the time of this extract. In line 01, Abe does a noticing about himself and laughs. This is not responded to, but in line 05, Baba also does a noticing about himself. In addition to being a second noticing, there is a sentence-level structural similarity between the second noticing and the first, which can be schematized as: my (organ) is (V)ing (ADV). This noticing is responded to by Abe, who gazes toward Baba as he does the noticing and then does what appears to be a questioning repeat, but with *sleeping* changed to *sleepy*. Immediately after doing this, though, Abe shifts his attention back to his bag and Baba does not respond. In lines 08 and 09, Abe splits his attention between his bag and Baba and asks a question that can be heard as touched off by Baba’s earlier noticing. Baba yawns before responding (line 11), answering the question with what can be heard as a reason that his “brain is sleeping.” This elicits a laughing repeat from Abe and laughter from Doi, followed by a silence during which both Abe and Baba shift attention away from the interaction, with Baba starting a lengthy bodily stretch. However, Baba then expands his answer (line 16), which again elicits laughter from Abe. Through the extended answer, the following laughter, and the silence (line 18), Baba continues his stretch, which culminates in a yawn (line 19). After the laughter, Abe shifts his attention to papers in his hand and then back to his bag.

As Abe’s noticing (line 01) is not responded to, it does not become the first turn of a multiturn sequence. However, the structural similarity between it and Baba’s noticing (line 05) raises the possibility that it was not completely ignored. Baba’s noticing (T1) becomes the first turn of a two-turn sequence, but as Baba does not respond to Abe’s questioning repeat (line 06, T2), the sequence is curtailed after two turns. However, Abe’s question (lines 08-09, T1) pursues a response from Baba. Baba answers the question (line 11, T2), so that Abe’s question becomes the first turn of a sequence that is at least two turns long. The laughter from Abe and Doi show appreciation of the humor of Baba’s answer, with Abe’s repetition of “drinking” (line 12, T3) extending the sequence to three turns. The laughter and the students’ shift of orientation away from the interaction indicate that the sequence could be possibly complete, but Baba goes on to add a fourth turn by giving an expanded answer (line 16, T4), the humor of which is also appreciated. There is thus a series of progressively longer “off-task” sequences, starting with a single



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turn, followed by a two-turn sequence, followed by a four-turn sequence (not counting Abe’s laughter in line 17 as a turn). In addition, the second and third sequences each build on what came immediately before. Before they have even started the task, the students choose to use their L2 for the interaction in this extract. What they are talking about is unrelated to the content of the upcoming discussion task, but is related to being recorded (so that Abe’s “heart is beating fast”) and ability to do the task. Through the interaction, the students gain opportunities to do noticings in their L2 and to respond to these noticings. As they have not yet begun the task, the students do not shift their attention back to doing the task. Rather, they allow the “off-task” talk to lapse in lines 02-04, 07, and 18-19. Aside from not producing talk, some resources that are used to accomplish these lapses are Baba’s stretching and yawning, Abe’s searching in his bag, and Abe’s orientation to the papers he is holding.

### Concluding Remarks

To conclude, then, the sustaining of an “off-task” side sequence is clearly a collaborative achievement of the students. When a turn of “off-task” talk is produced, other students can choose to respond, so that it becomes the first turn of a multiturn sequence, or not to respond, so that a potential sequence is immediately curtailed. When an “off-task” sequence is sustained through an additional turn-at-talk, the other students again face the same choice to sustain the sequence through additional turns-at-talk or to curtail it. By using their L2, the students create for themselves valuable opportunities to use English to do things that are perhaps not provided for within the task design. Finally, the students are able to use a variety of resources to manage the contingencies of “off-task” interaction and thus show themselves to be interactionally competent.

### Bio Data

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