

Teaching Requesting to EFL Learners: A Conversation Analysis-Informed Approach

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Requesting can be a difficult speech act for EFL learners. However, current classroom materials do not always provide effective guidance, frequently lacking explicit instruction or failing to embed requests in wider conversations. Conversation analysis (CA), focusing on requesting in authentic talk, has been proposed as a potential resource for the EFL classroom. In the current study, the effectiveness of CA-informed classroom instruction in promoting development in learner requesting was investigated, focusing on a single participant. There were 3 study phases—a preprogramme set of requesting tasks; a short program of instruction, informed by the CA literature; and a further set of requesting tasks. Pre- and postprogramme transcript data and requesting models drawn by the participant were analysed. Postprogramme requesting performances were found to generally be more complex, with lengthier opening, requesting, and closing sequences. Learner requesting models also showed evidence of developing understanding of how requests are co-constructed in conversation.

EFL学習者にとって、依頼行為は、難しい発話行為となりえる。しかしながら、授業で使用する教材は、効果的なガイダンスが提示されていないことがあり、明白な指示もしばしば不足し、また様々な会話での依頼行為を盛り込めていない。会話分析(CA)は、実際の会話での依頼行為にフォーカスし、EFLの授業のリソース候補として提唱されてきた。本論文では、CAに基づく授業指導の有効性を探っている。今回のCAIは一人の実験参加者に着目し、3段階に分けて調査した。指導前の依頼行為、CA研究に基づく短かい指導、指導後の依頼行為である。そして、指導前後の会話データと、実験参加者が描いた依頼の会話チャートを分析した。指導後は、依頼行為が全体的により複雑化し、会話の始まり、依頼、そして結びまでが長くなることが判明した。また、学習者が描いた依頼の会話チャートでも、会話での依頼行為の(参加者による)共同の組み立て方をより理解した形跡が見られた。

Speech acts, such as *requesting*, are important in daily life, but are not always given the attention they deserve in the EFL classroom. This study was aimed at addressing this issue, examining the effectiveness with which the requesting speech act can be taught to Japanese EFL learners using an approach informed by conversation analysis (CA). Data are analysed qualitatively for evidence of learner development in requesting knowledge and performance over time.

Background

Requesting and Classroom Materials

Requesting can be a difficult speech act for EFL learners, due to the role of context in requesting interactions (Fukushima, 2000). Although there is a clear need, therefore, for EFL classroom instruction in requesting, classroom materials often do not meet learners' needs. There can be a lack of explicit instruction (Taguchi & Roever, 2017); when requesting is covered, the speech act may be reduced to lists of common phrases or grammar patterns (McConarchy & Hata, 2013). Furthermore, model interactions may be based on author intuition, with speech acts often presented in isolation from the surrounding conversation (Kasper, 2006; McConarchy & Hata, 2013).

Conversation Analysis and the EFL Classroom

Recently, there have been calls to bridge the divide between classroom practices and speech act research, drawing on the field of CA (Barraja-Rohan, 2011; Kasper, 2006). CA practitioners analyse authentic interactional data for evidence of common features of talk, seeking evidence for the intentions of the interlocutors within the data (Kasper, 2006). Requesting has been the subject of considerable CA research (Sidnell, 2010); this can be used as a resource in the classroom, potentially addressing the need for authentic models (Huth & Taleghani-Nikazm, 2006; McConarchy & Hata, 2013) and for viewing the requesting speech act in the context of the wider conversation as a whole (Kasper, 2006).

Huth and Taleghani-Nikazm (2006) put forward a number of principles for incorporating CA into the EFL classroom including reflecting on the systematic nature of conversations, contrasting L1 and L2 practices, presenting authentic transcript data, and providing opportunities for applying this knowledge in communicative L2 contexts.

Studies have employed CA to examine classroom interactional practices (e.g., Al-Gahtani & Roever, 2011; Mori & Hasegawa, 2009) and investigate the use of CA as a resource for teaching practices and materials (Barraja-Rohan, 2011). Little research to date, however, has been carried out on applying a CA-informed approach to raising learner awareness of speech acts, specifically *requesting*.

Research Questions

- RQ1. Does a program of CA-informed instruction lead to changes in participant performance regarding the requesting speech act?
- RQ2. Does the program lead to development of the participant's understanding of how requests are constructed in conversation?

Method

The Study

The current study forms part of a larger investigation of requesting among Japanese EFL learners. The extracurricular and voluntary study consisted of three phases—a set of preprogramme requesting tasks carried out by each participant and myself collaboratively; a program of instruction informed by CA, aimed at raising learner awareness of requests in conversation; and finally a set of postprogramme requesting tasks. To recruit participants, I gave presentations in various classes, outlining the study and potential benefits. Six participants were selected on a first-come, first-served basis. The small number of participants allowed me to qualitatively analyse in detail the interactions.

To provide a qualitative perspective on learner development over time through in-depth examination of the transcript data, the focus is on the requesting performance of a single participant, TS, a 19-year old female in the 2nd year of a Japanese university program. TS had an estimated TOEIC level in the 550-650 range; intermediate learners were chosen on the assumption that they would have sufficient ability to engage with the study, but would still be challenged. TS had studied English formally for 6 years but had never lived abroad.

The Program

I met with all participants in a group context six times over a 4-week period; each learning session lasted approximately 90 minutes. The program was informed by CA research, which provided detailed descriptions of common features of requesting in conversation. Following principles set out by Huth & Taleghani-Nikazm (2006), participants were introduced to the systematic nature of request conversations, provided authentic models from transcript data, and encouraged to analyse and reflect on their own performances. Participants were introduced sequentially to the following ideas: (a) speech as action; (b) *adjacency pairs*, in which a first turn is followed by a second-turn response (e.g. a question and answer); (c) *sequential organisation*—the idea that a conversation is structured and that a request can occur over multiple turns; and (d) the *prerequest expansion* sequence (Sidnell, 2010), in which the requestor foreshadows an upcoming request by, for example, checking the *ability* or *availability* of the requestee to perform the request (“Are you busy tomorrow morning?”). Participants’ awareness of the role of context in influencing language choices was raised, and they were introduced to the contextual factors of *social status*, *distance* (how well the interlocutors know each other), and how *troublesome* the request may be for the requestee (Brown & Levinson, 1987).

Instruction was in English, with both verbal and written instructions given to help ensure understanding. In introducing concepts to participants, I aimed to take participants from concrete, practical examples to a more abstract, conceptual understanding. For example, in introducing *adjacency pairs*, I performed a brief requesting skit with one participant, asking the group to identify the speech act (requesting). The roles were then reversed, and the participant was asked to make a request; I deliberately did not respond. Instead I asked the group what was missing from the conversation (the response, or adjacency pair *second part*) to raise awareness that an adjacency pair first part requires a second part in conversation. On a handout (see Appendix D), participants then completed second parts of speech acts and labelled the functions of the second parts (e.g., granting or refusing a request). Participants then drew a basic model of a request adjacency pair and explained it to a partner.

Drawing models is a form of *materialisation* and is employed to capture learner conceptual understanding. Materialisation is based on the work of Gal’Perin (1979), who suggested that presenting concepts in visual form rather than written form can promote learner development. Participants produced five diagrams at regular points throughout the programme to demonstrate their current level of understanding (see Figures 1, 2, and 3).

Participants were frequently presented with audio-video materials and transcripts from Barraja-Rohan and Pritchard (1997) to analyse in light of the concepts they had learned. These examples were unscripted and of realistic situations. They also frequently carried out requesting role-plays in pairs, which were audio recorded, self-transcribed, and analysed by the participants. In analysing interactions, participants were required to identify and label concepts learnt during the course (see Appendix C) and reflected upon the appropriateness of language choices, drawing upon the values of social status, distance, and how troublesome the request might be. In this way, participants' awareness of specific features of their talk (or lack thereof) was raised and self-reflection encouraged.

Task

Pre- and postprogramme, I carried out a set of four *strategic interaction* (SI; Di Pietro, 1987) tasks with each participant, in which I performed one role and the learner performed the other. Each interlocutor was given a card explaining the scenario. Unlike a typical role-play, the learner participants played themselves and were unaware of my own often-competing goals. It was necessary for me to play a number of roles such as “friend” or “teacher” in order to provide the participants with varying contexts. Scenarios were based on requesting situations provided by a sample of the student population ($N = 26$) via a questionnaire. Elicited scenarios were ranked in terms of frequency and formed the basis for the task scenarios used (see Appendix A).

Data Analysis

Research Question 1 concerns whether the instruction programme led to changes in participant requesting performance. To address this, pre- and postprogramme tasks were audio-video recorded, transcribed using conventions adapted from Jefferson (2004; see Appendix B), and imported to NVivo software for qualitative analysis. A *microgenetic analytical* approach is taken to analysis of transcript data, in which the data is closely examined for evidence in the talk of learner development (Siegler & Crowley, 1991), focusing on identifying typical features of request-based talk in the SI tasks, as described in the CA literature (Sidnell, 2010; see Appendix C). Prior to coding the full data set, a reliability check was carried out between myself and a second coder following the procedure set out by Campbell, Quincy, C., Osserman, & Pederson (2013), a procedure specifically aimed for instances in which a full data set will be coded by a single coder. To ensure reliability, 10% of the full data set was initially coded by the primary coder (myself), and a second, “nonexpert” rater. Once a sufficiently high level of agreement

(98%) was reached (Campbell et al. consider 80-90% sufficient), I coded the full data set. Pre- and postprogramme task performances were then compared for evidence of development in learner performance.

Research Question 2 concerns whether there is additional evidence of change in learner understanding of how requests are constructed in conversations. To address this, the materialization models drawn by TS are shown and discussed. Diagram one was drawn in Week 1, diagrams two and three in Week 2, diagram four in Week 3, and the final diagram in Week 4. These materializations provide additional data on changes in TS's understanding of requesting across time and grasp of target concepts. In conjunction with the transcript analysis, insights are gained into TS's development during the study.

Findings and Discussion

SI Requesting Performances

In the following section, TS's performances in the pre- and postprogramme SI tasks are compared for evidence of change, using excerpts from the transcript data.

Opening Sequences

Typically, a conversation opening can include a *greeting* adjacency pair, *personal state inquiries* (“How are you?”), and small talk. In the preprogramme SI tasks, TS's opening sequences are generally simple with no small talk, and she does not initiate any personal state inquiries herself (see Excerpt 1). In this scenario, TS is a student; I (“M”) am the teacher. TS enters M's office to request a deadline extension.

Excerpt 1 (preprogramme)

1. M: hello come i:n.
2. TS: hello:
3. M: ooh hi TS.
4. TS: hello M. (.) u:h (2.3) I (.) I'm talking (.) about my- e:r my project
5. [u:n ((Japanese))
6. M: [u:m
7. TS: and (1) I ask me favour, (0.2) of you [um

In Excerpt 1, line 2, TS initiates a greeting; M provides the second part in line 3. However, TS then immediately initiates a prerequisite expansion sequence in line 4 and explains her situation and reason for seeing M. Although she does initiate a greeting, there is no small talk or personal state inquiry by TS. This is typical of all her preprogramme performances.

Postprogramme, TS continues to initiate greeting adjacency pairs. Additionally, her opening sequences of talk are generally more complex, including personal state inquiries and small talk, such as in Excerpt 2.

Excerpt 2 (postprogramme)

1. TS: ((knocks))
2. M: he:llo come in
3. TS: yes (.) hello: [mm
4. M: [oh hi TS]
5. TS: how are you today
6. M: yeah I'm- I'm good thanks how are you

In Excerpt 2, TS provides the second part of the greeting in line 3 then proactively produces a personal state inquiry in line 5. This begins a sequence of four turns in which the personal state of the interlocutors is discussed. This more complex opening sequence is produced by TS throughout the postprogramme tasks.

Requesting

Following the opening sequence, request-based talk typically proceeds to the central focus of the interaction—the request. From a CA perspective, this consists of the base request adjacency pair first part (e.g., “Can I borrow your eraser?”) and second part (e.g., “Sure”). Additional sequences, called a *prerequisite expansion*, may be inserted before the base pair, in which the requestor signals the upcoming request by checking if the requestee has either the time or availability to carry out the request (Sidnell, 2010). There may also be a *pre-pre*, which also signals an upcoming request in a general manner (“Can I ask a favor?”). A sequence may also be inserted between the base pair first and second parts if the requestee wishes to ask for more information before granting or refusing the request. Finally, there may be a *post-request expansion* after the base pair in which the requestor thanks the requestee for granting the request.

Preprogramme, TS produced a number of prerequisite expansion sequences, but they are limited to one type—explaining her reason for the upcoming request. There are no other types of prerequisite produced (see Excerpt 3).

Excerpt 3 (preprogramme)

1. M: ooh hi TS.
2. TS: hello M. (.) u:h (2.3) I (.) I'm talking (.) about my- e:r my
3. project [u:n ((Japanese affirmative utterance))
4. M: [u:m
5. TS: and (1) I ask me favour, (0.2) of you [um
6. M: [ri::ght] (.) why

In Excerpt 3, line 2, TS produces a greeting second pair part, then immediately produces a prerequisite explanation of her situation. In line 5, she produces what seems like a pre-pre (“I ask me a favor”); however, it is embedded in the prerequisite explanation. Other than in this example, TS does not produce any other pre-pres or other types of prerequisite expansions in the preprogramme stage. Postprogramme, however, TS produces pre-pres in two SI performances (see Excerpt 4).

Excerpt 4 (postprogramme)

1. TS: how are you today
2. M: yeah I'm- I'm good thanks how are you
3. TS: ah yeah thank- uh pretty good thank you
4. M: [oh good
5. TS: [u:m] ma- are you f- are you: free now?
6. M: wh- ((looks at watch)) u:h well I've got class in about ten minutes=
7. TS: [ten minutes
8. M: =[bu:t] hmm. (0.2) [why

In Excerpt 4, line 3, TS produces a second part response to M's personal state inquiry, then in line 5 produces a pre-pre, asking M if he is “free now.” While checking availability is often a prerequisite expansion type, in this situation it can be interpreted as a pre-pre,

as TS is not checking whether M has the time to carry out the request itself (checking availability), but simply whether M has time to hear the request. M's response in line 8 ("why") shows that he interprets TS's turn in line 5 as a pre-pre also, offering her the opportunity to carry out the request.

Postprogramme, TS also produces a greater variety of prerequest types, not only producing explanations of her situation, but also checks of ability and availability (see Excerpt 5).

Excerpt 5 (postprogramme)

1. M: hello (.) hi
2. TS: hi
3. M: ah heya
4. TS: yeah. (.) u:h are you: studying now:?
5. M: yeah I'm just doing this report for (.) um class tomorrow morning
6. yeah
7. TS: a::h ok (.) and- so: (0.2) just- (0.3) just a few minutes (.) uh I
8. want to (.) u:h (0.4) now I'm (.) studying (0.4) I'm studying
9. (.) uh English report,
10. M: mm:
11. TS: a:nd (1.2) bu:t (0.2) it i- (.) the report is a little hard for
12. me, (.) to write

In Excerpt 5, line 4, TS produces a prerequest expansion check of availability, implicitly asking M if he has free time to help. After M responds in line 5, TS produces a prerequest explanation in lines 7, 8, and 9. This demonstrates, therefore, a greater degree of flexibility in her requesting ability and is also seen in her other postprogramme performances.

Closing Sequences

Closing sequences may consist of a *closing implicature environment*, in which the upcoming ending of the conversation is signalled in a number of possible ways, allowing the conversation to close (Sidnell, 2010). There may also be a terminal sequence, in

which a final adjacency pair ends the interaction. For TS, changes can be seen in the ways in which her pre- and postprogramme interactions close. Preprogramme, she does not initiate any terminal sequences, instead relying on M to do so. Closing implicature environments are also limited to expressions of appreciation. This passive approach to closing interactions is shown in Excerpt 6, from a preprogramme SI role-play task. In line 4, M grants TS's request, leading to TS initiating a post-request expansion sequence in line 6, showing appreciation. M then initiates a closing implicature environment in line 7, summarising the arrangement made.

Excerpt 6 (preprogramme)

1. M: ok. (.) and I'll have to lower your grade because it's-
2. it's [gonna] be late after the deadline
3. TS: [yes (.) uhum]
4. M: u:m (.) but yeah if you bring it to my office I'll- (.) I'll
5. take it from you (.) if you (.) get it to me by five o'clock (.) yeah.
6. TS: thank you very much (.) I'm sorry (1) [uhm]
7. M: [ok] alright I'll see you
8. TS: see you

Postprogramme, however, TS is more proactive, producing a variety of closing implicature environment types and also initiating terminal sequences (see Excerpt 7). In line 3, TS initiates a closing implicature environment, summarising the arrangement made earlier in the interaction. In line 5, she produces a further post-request expression of appreciation for M's granting of the request and then produces the first part of the terminal sequence in line 9. During the postprogramme tasks, TS initiates closing implicature environments and terminal sequences in all SI tasks, a marked change.

Excerpt 7 (postprogramme)

1. TS: yeah [thank] you (0.3)
2. M: [yeah]
3. TS: yeah so: (.) one hour later? ye- (.) ok (.) I will (.) come again,

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4. M: u:h ok yeah [yeah] yeah that's cool (.) yeah.
 5. TS: [ahuh] thanks a lot.
 6. M: alright no worries.
 7. TS: thanks (.) M
 8. M: alright
 9. TS: bye
 10. M: [see ya] (.) ok

Materialisation

The transcript data offer evidence of changes in TS's requesting performances over time, and her materialisation diagrams offer further insight into her understanding of requesting conversations in the L2 and the relationships between CA-derived concepts. TS's five diagrams, taken as a whole, show her developing understanding of the requesting speech act from a CA perspective. Three of the five diagrams are presented here (see Figures 1, 2, and 3).

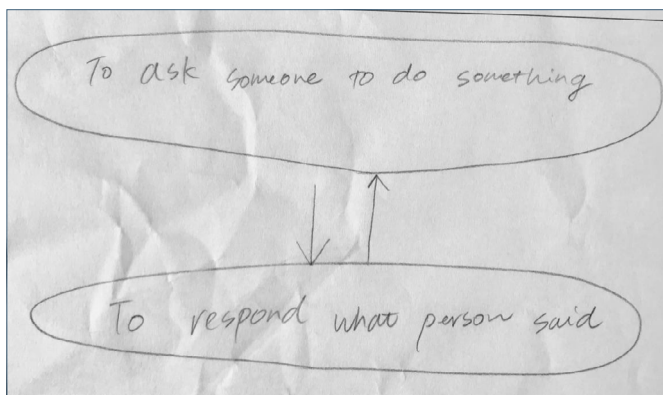


Figure 1. TS's materialization of the requesting speech act in Week 1.

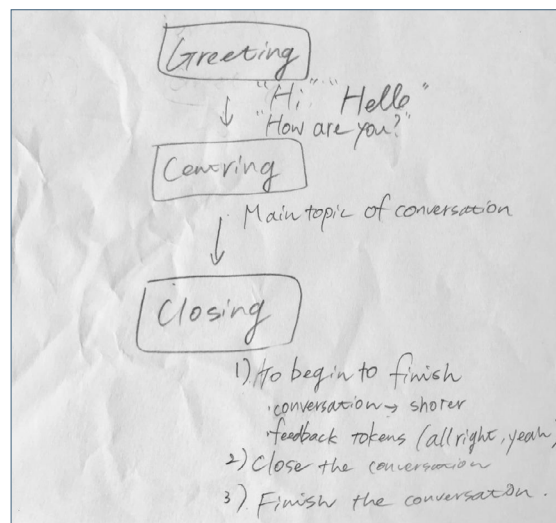


Figure 2. TS's materialization of the requesting speech act in Week 2.

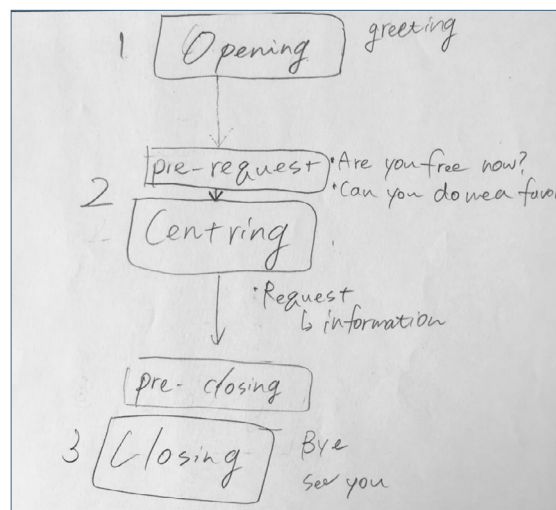


Figure 3. TS's materialization of the requesting speech act in Week 4.

In these three diagrams, clear changes can be seen in the way TS understands requesting in conversation; the models became increasingly sophisticated. In Figure 1, produced at the end of the first learning session, TS visualises a request in terms of the base adjacency pair first and second parts. At this point, there is no explicit awareness demonstrated of requesting being constructed over multiple turns in an interaction. In Figure 2, this awareness is demonstrated, with the model showing three core stages of a request interaction. TS may still be unclear on some concepts, shown by the label of “Greeting” as the initial stage of the interaction. However, there is clearly an awareness at this point of talk being organised and occurring over multiple turns. Figure 3 shows the final model drawn by TS, in which she demonstrates awareness of greater complexity in how request talk can be organised: The prerequisite expansion is included and also the pre-closing sequence, of which closing implicature environments are a part.

Conclusion, Limitations, and Implications

The motivation for this study was to explore one possible approach to addressing the issues facing the teaching of speech acts in the EFL classroom. The aim was to examine the effectiveness of the programme in promoting changes in learner requesting performance and understanding by implementing a programme of instruction informed by the CA literature. The focus was on the performances and materialization data from an individual participant to provide a detailed qualitative analysis of how performances changed and how her understanding of requesting developed over time.

A number of clear changes were found in how TS co-constructed requests in conversation. Conversation openings that, preprogramme, were generally simple and brief became more complex and lengthier in the postprogramme tasks. Increased complexity was also found in the requesting sequences of talk, with increased production of prerequisite expansions as well as increased variety of prerequisite types. In terms of closings, TS initiated more varied closing implicature environments postprogramme. In addition to this pattern of increased complexity of interactions, TS also generally showed greater proactivity postprogramme, frequently initiating closing implicature environments and terminal sequences rather than relying on her interlocutor to do so.

It is important to note that the data presented here are from a single participant, so care must be taken in generalising these findings. The participant was majoring in an English-related university programme and was at an intermediate proficiency level. It would be interesting to see if a CA-informed approach would be equally effective with less proficient learners; it would also be of interest to apply these classroom practices to larger groups of learners in order to understand the effects of peer-peer interaction on development.

With these provisos in mind, however, the findings of the current study do suggest a role for CA in the EFL classroom. The authentic data, the systematic descriptions of requesting features in talk, and the situating of requesting in wider conversations as a whole are aspects of the CA literature that offer one way of addressing the challenges of teaching speech acts to EFL learners who may not have ready access to authentic, meaningful L2 interactions outside of the classroom. The findings also suggest that raising learner awareness of CA concepts allows them to understand precisely how interactions can change in different contexts, promoting agency by giving them the tools to adapt their own interactions in a conscious, intentional manner.

Bio Data

Allan Nicholas is an associate professor at the Center for Language Research, University of Aizu in Japan. He has taught at Japanese universities for several years and has research interests in pragmatics, assessment, curriculum design, and peer-to-peer interaction.

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Appendix A

Example SI Task Scenario

Person A

Where: on campus

Situation: You have lost your purse/wallet with your train ticket in it. You see your classmate and walk over to talk with him/her. Ask your classmate to lend you some money to pay for your train ticket back home (about 90 minutes from campus).

Person B

Where: on campus

Situation: It is afternoon, after the last class has finished. Your classmate approaches you to talk with you. Speak with them.

Appendix B

Transcription Conventions (Adapted From Jefferson, 2004)

:	lengthened sound
.	falling intonation
,	slight rise in intonation
-	incomplete/false start
()	Supplemental information deemed relevant by transcriber (e.g., non-linguistic features).
=	turn starts with less than a beat's rest from previous turn.
[]	overlapping speech
(.)	short pause
(0.5)	longer pause

Appendix C

Requesting-in-Interaction Organisation (Adapted From Sidnell, 2010)

Initial sequence of talk, typically including a *greeting* adjacency pair.

Prerequisite expansion sequence

Requestor foreshadows upcoming request. Types may include checking ability, availability, or explaining situation to requestee.

Request base adjacency pair

A request first turn, paired with a granting or refusing second turn. May be separated by an insertion sequence, in which requestee asks for more information, etc.

Postrequest expansion sequence

If there is one, follows the base adjacency pair second turn. May include *thanking* etc.

Pre-closing

Speaker and hearer create opportunity for conversation to come to an end via *closing implicature environment*, e.g., *announcing* end of conversation, *summarizing* conversation, making a *fake arrangement*.

Closing

Talk is ended, typically with a *terminal sequence*, when interlocutors both signal the interaction has finished.

Other

Turn-taking: Orienting to interlocutor's turn and take next turn; signaling end of turn signified verbally, or nonverbally, intonation falling, gaze.

Repair: Ability to repair conversations when communication breaks down

Appendix D

Example Material Used in Programme of Instruction to Raise Awareness of Adjacency Pairs

Pairs in Conversation (1)

Example:

1st part: What's the capital city of the UK?

2nd part: London

1.

1st part: Would you like to come to my party next Saturday?

2nd part: _____

2.

1st part: I'm really sorry for forgetting your birthday . . .

2nd part: _____

3.

1st part: Could you pass the salt, please?

2nd part: _____

Pairs in Conversation (2)

1.

1st part: *offer*

2nd part: accept

or

2.

1st part: invitation

2nd part: _____

or

3.

1st part: apology

2nd part: _____

or

4.

1st part: praise

2nd part: _____

or
