



Does Conversation Analytic Intervention Improve EFL Students' Discussion Performance?

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Face-to-face discussion is often considered as a challenging activity for Japanese students learning English as a foreign language. Although some scholars have suggested that a co-constructive approach between students and teachers can develop effective discussion strategies, such an approach from the learners' perspective (=emic approach) is scarce. In this study, the author applies conversation analysis (CA) as an emic intervention method to help improve students' discussion performance. Participants for this study were first-year university students who attended weekly group discussions in English language classes. They watched video recordings of their discussions as a self-reflection activity and transcribed their performances based on the CA transcription convention. After 12 weeks, their performance did not change regarding their language usage. However, their reflective reports changed from "self-oriented comments" to "other-oriented comments." These findings indicate that CA interventions can help change students' perceptions of participation in discussions, even if immediate performance improvements are not evident.

ディスカッションは、英語を学ぶ日本人学生にとって最も困難な活動の一つである。ディスカッションの効果的な指導法をめぐる研究では、学習者が中心となり、教師と共同することで効果的なディスカッション方略がうまれたという報告がある。しかし、そのような学習者の視点にたったエミクな研究アプローチは未だ報告が少ない。そこで本研究では会話分析のエミクな視点を英語学習者のディスカッション指導に援用することを試みた。国内の大学生に毎週の英語の授業でディスカッションをしてもらい、その後ビデオに録画したディスカッションを書き起こして改善点を報告してもらった。12週間後、学生のパフォーマンスに大きな変化は見られなかったが、多くの報告内容が「自己中心的なコメント」から「他者中心的なコメント」に変化していた。この結果から、介入会話分析は学生のディスカッションという活動に対する認識を変えるのに役立ったといえる。

Previous studies have shown that participating in oral communication, including face-to-face discussions, is challenging for Japanese EFL students (Yanagi & Baker, 2015; Benson et al., 2013). TESOL practitioners and researchers have explored better practices in the context of Japanese language teaching (Benson et al., 2013). Benson et al. (2013) suggested a "co-constructed approach" to improve Japanese EFL students' oral communication skills. In the co-constructed approach, learners construct strategies with the teacher, giving them a sense of ownership and agency in the language learning process. Such a co-construction approach can be reinterpreted as an *emic approach* (Pike, 1966) because it originates not from outside learners, such as textbooks, but from their experiences and orientations regarding their performance in English.

In the study of second language acquisition (SLA), the emic approach is often explored in conversation analysis (CA), particularly in language learning and teaching contexts (Seedhouse, 2005). Such studies are referred to as CA for SLA (Markee & Kasper, 2004) and treated as a study of applied CA (Antaki, 2011). Applied CA studies do not begin with a problem defined in CA terms but in other specific research domain terms in which CA is applied to other discipline-specific issues, such as TESOL student-teacher training (Carpenter, 2021; Heritage & Robinson, 2014). Extending such "applied CA," TESOL scholars have recently termed their research practice to the "CA intervention" study. CA intervention is defined as "Applying CA to a 'practical problem with the intention of changing or solving those problems'" (Antaki, 2011, 1). For example, Carpenter (2021) and Ishino and Takahashi (2023) implemented a CA intervention study to help improve TESOL student-teacher teaching practices. They confirmed the efficiency of the CA intervention in the US (Carpenter, 2021) and Japanese contexts (Ishino & Takahashi, 2023).

However, studies conducting CA interventions to train EFL learners in discussion performance are scarce. Although the effectiveness of CA interventions in practitioners' professional practices has been documented (Carpenter, 2021), how they work in language learners' interactional practices has not been sufficiently examined. To help



fill this gap, I examined how the CA intervention could be applied to language learners as a pedagogical practice. Specifically, by targeting Japanese university EFL students, I examined whether CA interventions enhanced their discussion performance.

Literature Review

CA study on L2 discussion

Regarding the CA in L2 discussions, Hauser (2009) analyzed Japanese EFL students' small group discussions with turn-taking management. He found that students showed an orientation toward avoiding and minimizing gaps and overlaps. Noting that the turn-taking system deviated from the daily conversation system, he concluded that these students manage their turn-taking system locally. Sert (2019) investigated the talk-in-interactions of L2 English learners during discussion tasks in Turkey. He found that learners often co-completed their discussion tasks when one interactant faced difficulty articulating English words. Sert (2019) defined such practice as learners' "active listenership," which requires attentive listening when interactants speak. Such active listenership enables students to achieve collaborative resolution of interactional problems.

The findings generated by the CA's emic perspective of student interaction in a discussion task are helpful in teaching L2 discussions. However, few studies have attempted to deploy such CA's emic perspective in interventions to help develop L2 students' discussion performance.

CA intervention with Transcription

Although not in L2 discussion teaching, Carpenter (2021) documented a CA intervention study on a language teacher's development of elicitation techniques with young ESL learners. She conducted a CA-informed analysis of TESOL student-teacher (ST) lessons performed over four months. After one month of observation, Carpenter (2021) provided feedback based on the study of the ST's lessons and examined how ST changed practice four months later. Carpenter confirmed that CA's emic perspective helped improve ST's teaching practices. Following Carpenter (2021), Ishino and Takahashi (2023) conducted a CA intervention with Japanese EFL ST undertaking pre-service training in their microteaching. They also analyzed the STs' initial microteaching and provided feedback. They confirmed improvements during the second round of microteaching.

While these studies deploy CA to analyze learners' improvement, no study has yet allowed learners to use those CA perspectives to observe their performance. This intervention study attempted to encourage learners to use the CA's emic perspective to improve their practices. While the CA's robustness is its sequential analysis (observing participants' turn-taking), another essential aspect is its transcription system. CA's specific transcription convention (Jefferson, 2004) requires the transcriber to focus on the details of the interaction, including the duration of silence, voice inflection, and overlapping conversation. CA transcription requires the transcriber to possess an emic view.

Some TESOL studies have shown that learners transcribe their L2 performance (Mennim, 2012; O'Grady et al., 2008); however, the CA's transcription convention is more demanding regarding its rules. Thus, this study argues that the CA transcription system provides students with emic insights into their performance and generates strategies to participate in discussions. Therefore, this intervention study used the CA transcription system as an intervention device to improve EFL learners' discussion performance.

Method

Participants

The participants were 27 first-year university students enrolled in an English language course at a private university in Japan. Their ages ranged from 19 to 20 years, and their English proficiency was approximately CEFR B1–B2. Among the 27 students, Noriko and Aya were selected as the focal students in this study as they represent the typical changes that observed among the 27 students. No participant had prior experience living in an English-speaking country. The instructor was the researcher of this study. She was trained as a conversational analyst during her PhD program.

All participants provided informed consent, and the university's institutional review board approved the study. All names were anonymized, and any personal information was modified to protect individual privacy.

Data Collection

The data consisted of approximately 18 hours of video recordings of the students' group discussions and their reflective reports on each discussion. Group discussions were recorded over 12 weeks during a 15-week general English language course. The course is designed to help students gain general academic English skills through presentations and group discussions.

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A discussion topic was provided in each class, and the students worked in groups to discuss their thoughts for 15 min.

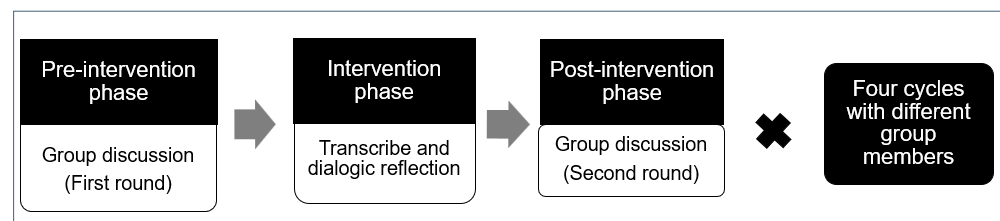
For group discussions, the students were asked to form a group of four; each group had a moderator to facilitate the discussion. However, the roles were flexible, as some students voluntarily played the role of moderator if the initially assigned moderator did not promote the debate. The groups were formed randomly, and the instructor created the group based on where the students were seated in the classroom during the week of initial discussion.

After the discussion, each group was asked to give a short presentation to share their thoughts on the topic with the other class members. Every week after class, students were asked to submit reflective reports to the instructor as homework assignments. The assigned weekly reports were used to examine the efficacy of the CA intervention.

Intervention Procedure

Similar to previous CA intervention approaches (Carpenter, 2021; Ishino & Takahashi, 2023; Robinson & Heritage, 2014), this study applied Robinson and Heritage's (2014) pre-intervention, intervention, and post-intervention frameworks. The intervention process is summarized in Figure 1. Participants underwent four cycles of the intervention phase over a 15-week semester.

Figure 1
Intervention Steps



During the intervention (Robinson & Heritage, 2014), students were asked to watch video recordings of their group discussions and select a particular moment at which they thought they could perform better. They were then asked to transcribe the moment based on CA transcription conventions (Jefferson, 2004) and write possible strategies

to execute their tasks better. Although the students' transcribing was inaccurate in its annotation of the duration of silence, voice inflection, and overlapping conversation, the aim of letting the student transcribe their discussion was to allow them to focus on those micro aspects of the interaction.

After transcribing, the students were asked to share their transcriptions with their peers and discuss their generated strategies with each other to engage in dialogic reflection. The course instructor then checked the students' reports and strategies and gave them feedback on finding ways to improve. There was a second round of discussions with the same group members in the subsequent week.

Analytic Procedure

First, the author analyzed the students' oral communication performances during the first discussion video recording and the discussion phase in the last cycle of the intervention. Specifically, the author examined whether the students' performances changed following their generated strategies in reflective reports between the first and later cycles of the intervention phase.

Second, the author analyzed their reflective reports and the interaction sequence within the extract that each student chose for their reflection from the first rounds of discussion in the first and fourth cycles, respectively. In doing so, the author analyzed the problems that students observed in their discussions from the CA perspective and their reflective comments on the reports.

Findings

By comparing Week 1 with the first and fourth rounds of the intervention cycle, students' discussion performance did not change regarding the strategies they generated in their reflective comments. However, regarding the selection of recorded moments and reflective comments, the author noticed a large shift.

While their comments in Week 1 were more self-oriented, they eventually became other-oriented. The "self-oriented comments" in this study refer to the reflective comments that the student focused on their own oral performance (i.e., grammatical errors, disfluent, etc.) in their comments on the discussion video. In contrast, "other-oriented comments" refers to the comments that the student focused on their performance errors in terms of other group members (i.e., lack of securing reciprocity from the group members before the student spoke) in their comments.

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In what follows, the author presents the cases of two students, Noriko and Aya. Their comments and those of the other participants were translated into English.

Noriko's Transcription and Her Reflective Comments In the First Round

Figure 2 shows a screen capture of Noriko's transcription, which she selected from the recorded video and transcribed during the first intervention phase. The discussion topic was "Should the Japanese government accept refugees?" Noriko transcribed the moment her group's moderator expressed his viewpoint and was nominated as the next speaker.

Figure 2*Noriko's Transcription of the First Round*

32 N: I think um... I think we should accept refugees. um... ah... Of cause, Japan have money problem. But I think... In Japanese, zindoutekini (人道的に) I think we should accept refugees. I think.

Although she transcribed her pauses as "... " in her transcription above, there were many pauses and silences in her recorded video, as she commented in her reflective commentary (Figure 3). As she transcribed, she stated that the Japanese government should accept refugees, and her reason was because of humanitarian aid.

Figure 3 shows a screen capture of Noriko's reflective comment regarding the above interactional moment. In order to maintain the authenticity of the first-hand data, the students' reports in Japanese were translated into English as follows:

Figure 3*Noriko's Reflective Comments on the First Round*

選んだ理由と反省点, 改善点
論題に関する自分の意見が頭の中でまとまっていないのに話し始めたせいで、沈黙してしまった。何か言わなければと焦ってしまったのがそれを助長したので、意見をある程度自分の中でまとめてから落ち着いて話したい。人道的、のような難しい単語はなるべく簡単な単語で表したいです。

English translation

Although I have not yet organized my opinions, I have just started talking. Thus, my turn was disrupted by silence. The next time, I begin my turn when I am ready

to share my ideas with everyone. In addition, I will use an easy word instead of a difficult word like "humanitarian aid."

Noriko's strategies for the next time were primarily: a) she would organize her thoughts before starting to speak so as not to disrupt the discussion with silence, and b) she would not use a difficult Japanese word, such as [JINDOUTEKI] (humanitarian aid), where she needed to use Japanese instead of English and choose easier words to express her thoughts in English.

Noriko's Transcription and Her Reflective Comments In the Fourth Round

Figure 4 shows Noriko's transcription performance in Week 1 of the fourth cycle. The discussion question was, "Is Starbucks offering paper straws a good move in terms of SDGs?" The moderator of her group, M, in the transcript, nominated Noriko as the first speaker to share her thoughts to the group.

Figure 4*Noriko's Transcription of the Fourth Round*

38 M: Ok.so... What do you think about topic?
39 N: I think... it is... not to use paper straws instead of ...
40 M: Stop!
41 N: I think it is not... not really good to use paper straws instead of Plastic straws because... because I... I think... I think it is not... I think it is not... not meaningful only straw change. If Starbucks change straws, plastic to paper, 容器もプラスチックじゃなくて違うやつに変えたら change したらいいのになと I think.

English translation of the Japanese in the last line

If Starbucks changes straws from plastic to paper, I think it is better to change the cup material from plastic to non-plastic material.

Based on the recorded video, the moderator's saying "stop" at line 40 seems to be oriented to other participants. As some participants were writing while Noriko was speaking line 39, the teacher, while walking around to monitor them, also was talking to another group member. Thus, they did not listen to Noriko actively. The moderator perhaps observed their non-readiness in listening to Noriko and, therefore, told Noriko to "Stop" and wait until they were ready.



Figure 4 shows that there was no significant change in her discussion practices regarding the strategies Noriko generated. For example, even though Noriko generated a strategy of organizing her thoughts before her next turn to avoid causing silence, Noriko's turn had many pauses and silences. In addition, while Noriko's second strategy in Week 1 was to choose a more accessible word to express her thoughts in English, she depended more on her L1 during the discussion (Figure 4). However, regarding her selection of moments and comments, the author noticed a large shift, as shown in Figure 5.

Figure 5
Noriko's Reflective Comments on the Fourth Round

選んだ理由と反省点、改善点
モデレーターに聞かれたからとはいえ、聞く準備できていない人がいたにも関わらず自分の意見を言い始めたのは、周りが見えていなかったかなと思います。それに加えて、意見を言う際にすぐ日本語を使ってしまうので、日本語はどうしても英語が出てこず沈黙が続いてしまうという場合にしか使わないよう努めます。みんなの意見をまとめる時などはほぼ日本語なので、そこでもなるべく英語を使っていきたいです。もう少し自分に厳しくしたいです。

English translation

Even though the moderator asked me to stop, I started to express my opinion. Even though there were people who were not ready to listen, I think I did not see what was going on around me. In addition, I use Japanese immediately when expressing my opinions, so I will limit myself to using Japanese only when I cannot convey my intended meanings in English and awkward silences are produced. When I have to summarize everyone's opinions, I mostly use Japanese, so I would like to use English as much as possible. I want to work harder for myself.

Her previous comments (Figure 3) were more self-oriented, as she focused on her language usage and disfluency in speaking. However, her remarks here became rather other-oriented since she wrote, "I was too careless not to make sure that others were ready to listen." This means that Noriko noticed that the timing of her speech was not right since other members were not ready to listen; therefore, the moderator said, "stop" to her (line 40 of her transcription) in the video. A similar change was observed in Aya's transcription and reflective comments.

Aya's Transcription and Her Reflective Comments in the First Round

Figure 6 shows a screen capture of Aya's transcription during the first intervention phase. The discussion topic was "Should the Japanese government accept refugees?" Aya transcribed the middle portion of her turn, expressing her opinions to the group members.

Figure 6
Aya's Transcription of the First Round

1N: Of course, as you said, in advance, Japan has to make the limit ation,
but, the number of refugees will increase more and more, in the future, so
that, other country will recommend to Japan to make the frame,, a a n: a
M: limitation?
N: Limitation. of of: refugees more and more, so maybe, it is difficult to
Stay.

N represents Aya in the transcript. As can be seen from her transition towards the first turn, she had trouble with her speech production. Then, M proffers the possible word for her to produce, "limitation." Figure 7 shows a screen capture of a comment by Aya, which reflected on this moment.

Figure 7
Aya's Reflective Comments on the First Round

・英語でどういふのかをど忘れして、数秒間固まった。
(何故か)自分の中で探そうとして、沈黙が続いていることに焦って余計に思い出せなくなった。
(どうする)自分の中で探すまえに "In Japanese," と前置きして、早々に日本語でしゃべってしまったほうがよい。時間ももったいない。

English translation

- I froze for a second because I forgot how to say it in English.
(Why) because I was searching for an English word, and there was an awkward silence, which made it more difficult to remember the word.
(how to improve) I could say "In Japanese" "and speak it in Japanese. I can save time during discussions.

As shown above, Aya focused on her disfluency in speaking as she wrote that she froze for a second. Aya's strategy for the next time is to switch from English to Japanese if she produces an awkward silence.



Aya's Transcription and Her Reflective Comments in the Fourth Round

Figure 8 shows Aya's transcription performance in Week 1 of the fourth cycle. The discussion question was, "Is Starbucks offering paper straws a good move regarding SDGs?" The moderator of her group nominated Aya and again transcribed the moment in the middle portion of her talk.

Figure 8

Aya's Transcription of the Fourth Round

1 N: And, first reason is that, we can say the same thing about using plastic straw and paper straw, because plastic straw, of course, plastic straw lead to environmental problem, for example, fish eats microplastic products, and we can, people eat that fish, this is, as you know, this is serious problem.
M: mm.

Although Aya did not transcribe the details of the pauses and gaps in the recorded video, she produced many pauses, silences, and self-repairs. However, she did not use the strategy (switching into Japanese from English) generated during the first intervention phase (see Figure. 7).

For this selective moment, Aya generated her other-oriented reflective comments, as shown in Figure.9.

Figure 9

Aya's Reflective Comments on the Fourth Round

【選んだ理由】
ただ、終始質問してくれた人が顔を見て話していたのと同様に自分はずっと俯いてしゃべっていたので、一方的に話しているだけになって、聞いてくれている人がその時に自分の話している内容を理解してもらえていたかが分からなかった。
(どうする)出来るだけ顔を上げてしゃべる。目線を合わせるとおそらく焦るので、目線を合わせるまではいなくても、聞いてくれている人の反応が把握できるくらい、目線を上げたい。

English translation

Although a person who asked me my opinion looked at me all the time, I looked down all the time I spoke. Thus, I went on and on about my opinions, and I did not check whether the people followed me.

(Strategy) Face up when I talk and look at the listeners' eyes as much as I can, although I might get nervous making eye contact with people while talking to them.

As can be seen, Aya focused on her recipients' faces in the video and her attitude to the recipients in her comments. That is a big shift from the previous reflective comments. Previously, Aya's previous comments and strategies in the first round were self-oriented, as she focused on the language use and silences she produced during her talk. However, in her comments this time, she changed to being other-oriented, as she was inattentive to others, not checking if they were following what she was talking about. Although the author is not able to illustrate other students' changes here due to space limitations, those two students represent many other students' changes after the CA intervention in this study. Many of them also showed their changes in their reflective comments after the intervention, as Aya and Noriko did.

Discussion and Conclusion

This study examined whether CA interventions could improve EFL students' discussion performances in English language learning courses at Japanese universities. After 12 weeks of intervention, this study found that the focal students' discussion performance did not change regarding their oral performance strategies during the fourth group discussion. However, their reflections on discussion performance had changed from self-oriented to other-oriented. For example, in the first cycle's reflective report, Noriko mentioned that she should have used easier English words rather than complex words so she did not have to switch to Japanese from English. However, in her reflective report in the fourth cycle, she reflected that she should have ensured that the other group members were ready to listen to her before starting to talk.

Therefore, the CA intervention helped change students' reflective perspectives regarding how their interactants (group members in the discussion) listened to or did not listen to them. In other words, students focus more on how others perceive their talk instead of how they feel during the discussion. Thus, this study concludes that the CA Intervention with transcription helped students develop perceptions of how to participate in face-to-face discussions.

As a pedagogical implication of the intervention, this study suggests that teacher feedback on linguistic instruction after the reflection phase would help improve students' performance, as many of them were first concerned about their speaking fluencies in their reflective comments. The intervention period was also slightly shorter than that of an existing CA intervention study (Carpenter, 2021). If a year-long intervention

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was conducted, it is possible that the students' improvement based on their generated strategies may also be observed. Thus, as a future implication, this type of intervention would benefit from a longitudinal study design.

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Bio Data

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