Discourse Analysis for Professional Growth
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Abstract
This study was primarily designed for the professional growth of the author, whose goal was to become more aware of the dialogue within the second language classroom. A transcript of part of the author’s English conversation class for beginners was examined. This paper focuses on the discourse, not on the grammatical and lexical structures of the spoken English. After analyzing the speech acts and constraints to communication, three trends found in the transcript are presented. Classroom implications for enabling students to develop turn-taking skills, back-channel signals, and indirect speech acts are discussed.

Utterances do not exist in a vacuum nor is meaning conveyed only by the syntax and semantics used. In addition, beliefs about language and the world affect language use. Consequently, the greater the difference between cultures, the more problematic communication becomes since the meaning is likely to be different (Saville-Troike, 1997). The potential for miscommunication between, for example, an American native speaker (NS) of English and a Japanese non-native speaker (NNS) would probably be greater than between the American and a non-native speaker from Europe.

It is a phenomenon of language learning that NSs and NNSs use language in different ways. This is the result of not only different grammatical structures and lexical choices but also of the less developed sociolinguistic, discourse, and strategic competencies of NNSs. These competencies affect one’s ability to achieve unity in speech and at the same time have effective and appropriate utterances in terms of both meaning and form (Yalden, 1987). Second language (L2) instructors can, however, help learners avoid miscommunication by assessing their L2 use; discourse analysis is one tool for doing this.

Discourse analysis includes the investigation of how language users “understand what speakers mean despite what they say” (Yule, 1996, p. 139). By observing student behavior and transcribing a class, it is possible to discover students’ linguistic deficiencies. It is also possible for L2 instructors to more accurately evaluate their teaching methods and classroom materials when they have knowledge of student discourse. Discourse analysis, therefore, allows the instructor to more effectively teach
strategies and language to help the students with areas in L2 conversations that could potentially be problems.

Method

In order to evaluate my own teaching methods as well as to become aware of communicative skills that should be emphasized in the classroom, portions of a tape recording of a 30-minute English conversation class with three students were transcribed (see Appendix) using the marking system and symbols designed by Jefferson (as cited in Schegloff, n.d.). To aid in the analysis, Searle’s speech acts and some system constraints to communication were identified and included in italics to the right of the utterances.

Discourse analysis is “fundamentally concerned with the relationship between language and the contexts of its use” (McCarthy, 1991, p. 10). As a result, utterances rarely only perform one act at a time (Schiffrin, 1994). Furthermore, there is not a one-to-one correlation between form and function (McCarthy, 1991). Consequently, the speech acts identified on the right side of the transcript were determined not by syntactic structure or by the locutionary force of the utterance (i.e., what the sentence says in words) but by the illocutionary force of the utterance—the intention of the utterance (Hatch, 1992). For example, although directives are often in the form of imperatives, the questions asked of the students were directives because they were genuine requests for information to which I was expecting a response.

The students were beginners, having started their study of English as a foreign language the previous school year. Because the class was at a student’s house, the channel was a non-traditional classroom and there was an informal tone of language. The mode was face-to-face conversation. Because fossilization occurs when students stop learning because of the internalization of a rule system that is different from that in the target language (Ellis, 1994), an awareness of deficits in new learners allows instructors to adjust instruction to prevent fossilization. Furthermore, examining new learners provides insight into tertiary students’ difficulties or errors.

Analysis

Speech Acts

Using Searle’s definitions of various speech acts, there was an abundance of directives and representatives uttered during class. There were, on the other hand, only two declaratives, which is reasonable since there are few chances for people to use
declaratives (Hatch, 1992). As the person with the power to do so, I used one declarative to start class (line 1) and the other to draw the class to a close (line 208). In this particular lesson, there also were not many expressives on the part of the students, presumably because the topics did not invoke strong emotions. The side sequence about chicken soup, however, allowed them to express their surprise (lines 192-193). As the facilitator of the conversation, I did, however, utter expressives.

Commissives, Searle’s fifth speech act, were also rare. The utterances on lines 210-214 were commissives because we were, essentially, making a promise to have class the next week. If schedules prohibited having class, a refusal would have been used. Other than this, there were few opportunities for the students to make real promises or refuse action in the course of study.

*System Constraints to Communication*

Simultaneously examining speech acts and Goffman’s universal system constraints to communication provides additional insight into speech. Goffman’s system constraints “give us the components required for all communication systems” (Hatch, 1992, p. 47). Interacting with system constraints, ritual constraints reveal cultural expectations and norms for communication (Hatch, 1992).

Goffman’s first constraint is channel open/close signals, which are indications that communication is about to begin/end (Hatch, 1992). As the teacher, I made a verbal channel-opening signal (line 1). While student C made a verbal opening response signal (line 2), student I responded non-verbally, indicating his intention to begin the communication. This student’s posture marks a ritual constraint. His adjustment was to the Japanese cultural norm rather than universal norms. The transition to the opening dialogue in the class was then provided by the opening moves (line 4). Similarly, preclosing signals (lines 210-213) led to the final, closing signals (lines 214-215).

Goffman’s second constraint, back-channel signals, includes both verbal acts such as noises and sentence completions and non-verbal acts such as nodding, smiling, and eye contact (Brown & Yule, 1983). My inadvertent attention to the heater (line 33), for example, was interpreted as a nonlinguistic back-channel signal of inattentiveness. Student K was, therefore, effective at reducing the non-participant constraint of the heater’s noise by waiting until the noise was finished before beginning his utterance (line 34).
Back-channel signals indicate to the speaker that the listener understands without taking over the communication. Back-channel signals served as reinforcement for the students (e.g., lines 30, 38, 83, 122, 158, 188). The students also provided feedback expressing their uncertainty (e.g., lines 6, 46, 137, 155). Student C’s feedback was, however, often a transfer from her first language (e.g., lines 75, 82, 86, 90, 92, 114, 201). Likewise, the influence of living in Japan occasionally resulted in my production of non-native back-channel signals (e.g., line 76).

Back-channel signals also lead to impressions about the level of involvement. Student C’s use of back-channel signals even when she was not directly spoken to (lines 24, 29, 128, 131, 206) indicates her active participation in the class. Although the transcript suggests that she violated Grice’s maxim of quantity by talking more than the other students, a transcript of the entire class would reveal this was not the case. In contrast, student K provided no back-channel signals while others spoke, thereby violating the quantity maxim and leaving the impression that he was disengaged from the conversation. The maxim was also violated because of the amount of information he provided (i.e., never more than a three-word utterance). Furthermore, student K’s messages were sometimes inadequate (lines 31, 43, 189), another system constraint. Using Holmen’s guidelines (as cited in Hatch, 1992), he was a very passive student during this class.

Turn-over signals, the fourth system constraint, help potential speakers determine when one person is finished so the next person can take a turn (Tannen, n.d.). Turn-taking was controlled by me; there were no instances when a student passed the turn to another student. In addition, students did not use preempt signals, a fifth system constraint, to interrupt the conversation. Interestingly, student C sometimes used the Japanese *um* sound to indicate her intention to complete her turn (lines 86, 176). Although not a turn-over signal, my use of (a.) evaluation, (b.) *ok*, and (c.) a short pause before the next question signaled a topic shift.

There were five side sequences. They were not marked by overt bracket signals such as *by the way* or *incidentally*; these signals are another system constraint. In spite of this, during three of the side sequences (lines 69, 130, 190), structured turn-taking decreased; overlap and latching demonstrate this. While overlap during other parts of the conversation occurred as either back-channel signals between one student and me as the instructor (e.g., lines 24, 48, 81, 87, 122, 140, 164) or collaborative turn completion (e.g., lines 107, 116, 156, 165, 171, 174), during the side sequences the students more often overlapped with each other (lines 70, 131, 192/193,
195/196). Similarly, latching, when two utterances are said with no break between them, occurred primarily during repair during most of the dialogue (lines 67, 102, 121-123, 156, 170-175). The less formal environment of the chicken soup side sequence, however, resulted in relatively more latching (lines 195-202). In addition to less ritualized turn-taking that reflects more natural conversation, other benefits of the side sequences were less hesitation before students spoke (i.e., fewer and shorter pauses, resulting in a faster pace) and less “teacher talk,” including the elimination of my transition signal and fewer breaks in my speech at syntactic boundaries.

Related to turn-over signals is non-participant constraints, the seventh system constraint. I attempted to use collaborative turn completion to allow students to join in the dialogue or to expand an utterance, thereby improving clarity, another of Grice’s maxims. The constraint to have a student enter/continue was not, however, always successful. For example, student C did not take her collaborative turn, so I then provided the lexicon (line 109) for her to continue her statement. Similarly, although provided with opportunities to respond (lines 25, 146), student K did not respond verbally or non-verbally to the invitations to take a turn. Consequently, repair in the form of explanations (lines 26-27, 146) were provided. These examples also demonstrate the effectiveness of silence as a back-channel signal.

Discussion
Three trends were found in the transcript. The most common rhetorical formation in classrooms is teacher question, student answer, teacher evaluation (Lemke, n.d.), but these questions are those to which instructors already know the answers (McCarthy, 1991). The transcript shows that this does not have to be the case when questions are chosen well and/or the conversations are more natural. This is particularly true in informal teaching situations when a textbook is not being used. Becoming more aware of this, however, allows me, as an instructor, to more thoughtfully consider future material and how to use the questioning technique in an L2 conversation class.

Although the larger discourse represented in the transcript is a lesson, individual units are distinguishable. These units, called transactions or exchanges (McCarthy, 1991), are framed by transition signals or discourse markers, words that divide speech into sections and show the relationships between the segments (Tannen, n.d.). Studying the transcript, the second trend became apparent. My transition signal in these informal English conversation classes consisted of a comment on the student’s answer (evaluation), ok, and then a short pause before proceeding to the next question.
(e.g., lines 11, 78, 132-133, 145-6, 152-3), although only two of these three elements were also used as a transition signal (e.g., lines 19, 23, 44, 57, 124, 175). Sometimes
the shift was related to the previous discussion, as in the case of scaffolding, which allowed the students to provide more details (e.g., student K to eventually say *I played kendo at school. On Sunday I studied at home* in lines 28-43). Without an
analysis of the transcript, I would not have been aware of my transition signal in these types of classes.

Restatement and remodeling, the third trend, are used to enable learners to successfully complete an utterance. The students did not attempt to repair their own utterances without assistance, but when the students expressed a lack of understanding, I provided restatement that was genuine reshaping of the message (e.g., lines 7, 26-27, 47, 102). I also remodeled with correct lexicon (e.g., lines 9, 17, 65, 143, 148). Line 67 provides an example of remodeling that did not contribute to learning because it was ignored. Because of the form of the remodeling, student I sometimes seemed uncertain whether the utterance was a question or remodeling (e.g., lines 18, 144). These cases were the exception, however. Most of the time both forms of assistance provided the students with the help needed to refine or complete their utterances (e.g., lines 10, 66, 149), suggesting the students recognized my perlocutionary act. Restatement also helped the students by allowing them to answer the directives (e.g., lines 8, 28-31, 45-50).

**Classroom Implications**

The benefits of a relaxed environment were demonstrated when students forgot, even if momentarily, that they were studying. During the side sequences, the students were less hesitant to speak, resulting in more natural turn-taking and less instructor-driven conversation. In addition, the conversation resembled more natural dialogue with an increase in both overlap and latching. Creating more of these relaxed environments during every class continues to be a challenge, one which many instructors presumably share.

In addition to providing students with such an environment, there are three skills that must be addressed in L2 classrooms. First, Tannen (1989) discussed the rhythmic nature of conversation, as well as the necessity of sharing rhythm in order to enter a conversation. I have observed that not only the students in the transcript but also students in various other venues lack proficiency in passing the turn to an interlocutor. Consequently, students at all levels of L2 education must first be taught
to recognize turn-over signals. They must also practice follow-up strategies so they can have discussions where the participants take turns naturally. Students must also be encouraged to be self-selected speakers rather than always waiting to be nominated. They may think self-nomination is rude, so an explanation of cultural differences will be necessary. Similarly, students tend to lack the skills to use preempt signals to interrupt conversations, so including these in L2 curriculums would be helpful for the students.

Second, students need instruction in English back-channel signals and an increased awareness of the differences between English and Japanese feedback. Students may not be aware that they are transferring their back-channel signals from their native language, so it may be necessary to do activities to demonstrate their unconscious use of them. In addition, it is necessary for students to be aware of how they are perceived when they do not give back-channel signals. Doing so may encourage those like student K to become more outwardly active in English conversations.

The need for instruction in back-channel signals is not limited to students with low-level English abilities; tertiary students are also interested in obtaining this important element in native-like communication. At the beginning of the new school year, a questionnaire was administered to one class of second-year junior college English majors to determine what they believed were the most important things to study in the Speaking Class. Two of the 15 students specifically mentioned the desire to learn how to express their level of understanding and the ability to interpret how much the interlocutor understood. Several other students mentioned the ability to communicate clearly. Similarly, during the semester, students in a university class indicated they had previously been unaware of several back-channel signals. When the signals were taught in class, the university students enjoyed learning and practicing them. There is, consequently, an indication that tertiary students feel inadequate to fully communicate because they have not been exposed to native-English back-channel signals and that they are receptive to their inclusion in classroom instruction.

Third, the transcript shows that indirect speech acts were rarely, if ever, used, but indirect speech acts, having a syntactic form generally associated with a different function, are common in English. For example, *Can you get the door?* is a request for action rather than a question of ability, thereby making it an indirect speech act. Indirect speech acts add to the cognitive burden on L2 students and increase the
possibility for miscommunication. Thomas (1995) referred to this as the cost of indirectness since indirect speech acts take longer to produce and to process upon hearing. In spite of this, even beginners can be taught set phrases that represent indirect speech acts. Furthermore, as students’ L2 communication becomes increasingly complex, the inability to understand indirect speech acts will be limiting, so it is necessary to continue to use and teach them at all levels of L2 education.

Conclusion
Transcribing a portion of a conversation class increased my awareness of issues important to the students’ continued L2 development. In spite of the time commitment to accurately transcribe even short segments of class conversations, it is a task I would recommend to colleagues who are interested in increasing their understanding of the dialogue in their classrooms. Studying the transcript reinforced the fact that restatement and remodeling are generally effective, but it also gave me insight into how some students misunderstand these teaching tools. It is now clear that more back-channel signals and turn-taking must be incorporated into my instruction. Additionally, the importance of having relaxed environments where natural conversations can occur, like those during the side sequences, was once again reinforced. These environments allow students to more naturally take turns with less hesitation, to rely less on the instructor, and to become accustomed to overlap and latching, all of which are common in native speakers’ conversations. Adjusting classroom instruction to include these elements will allow students to develop skills that will increase their communicative competence beyond mere grammatical competency.

References


### Appendix

The transcript utilizes the marking system and symbols designed by Jefferson (as cited in Schegloff, n.d.). Because some symbols were unavailable on the computer, the following have been substituted:

- ✰text✰ text was spoken more quietly than other dialogue
- ✴text✴ text within these symbols was spoken at a higher pitch
- (?, rise, but not as strong as ?

Other symbols that were not discussed in Hatch (1992) are defined as:

- >text< compressed or rushed
- <text> slower or more drawn out than other dialogue
- (text)/(text) more than one possibility exists because utterances were not clear

To reduce some of the clutter, back-channel signal has been abbreviated *bcs* and turn-over signal has been abbreviated *tos*.

T: Teacher (me)

C: female student

I and K: male students

((Before this, C, I, and T discussed Master’s and Doctorate degrees in Japanese. K arrived toward the end of the discussion.))
T: ok?

C: hi. ((yes))

((I rearranges himself to sit in a more attentive, polite style by Japanese standards))

T: so::: (1.8)

T: Tell me about (.2) your (.2) weekend.

I: weekend? (2.8) i (.2) played soccer when weekend.

T: on the weekend?, (1.8)

I: weekend?

T: yeah. what did you do for your weekend?, (2.8) i (.2) played soccer when weekend.

I: (2.8) i (.2) played soccer when weekend.

T: on the weekend?, repair

I: on the weekend.

T: ah::.

T: How many Hours (.2) did you play soccer. directiv e, opening, tos

((sniffle))

I: (.4) ah

((sniffle))

I: (.4) ah

((sniffle))

I: (5.8) eto (.2) about 2 hours in a day.

T: >ah< every day?

I: every day. yes.

T: ah::. two hours every day. ok. repair reinforced/T transition signal

((sniffle))

T: WHere did you play soccer. directive

I: ee in the park OR in the school. representative

T: ok, good. [ok. ]

T transition signal

C: [mmmm ]

T: how about you?, tell me about LAST weekend. (.4) directive +

last weekend means: today’s 17th? (.5) 16th 15th four-mm today’s the 18th. 14th and 15th. last weekend, 14th and 15th. (.8) valentine’s day, ne (hh)

K: ah (.2) [1]4:=

C: [n]

T: =uhuh=

K: =i (.2) i (play)/(played) kendo. representative concluded

T: you played kendo?, (.2) WHere did you play kendo? (scaffolding) directive, tos

[pipo pipopipo ((sound of heater’s temperature being adjusted in background))]

K: [ee ] in my school. representative

T: in your school?, unuhuh.
K: (.8) ee (.2) sunday
representative commenced
T: umhum

K: i (.2) i studiED; (1.4) i studied.
representative concluded
T: you (h) stu(h)died?, where did you study?
scaffolding) directive
K: WHere?
seeks confirmation
T: Where.

K: (e)/(in)/(at)/ my home.
representative
T: ah, ok.
T transition signal
T: do you have a Cold?
directive
K: (.8) Cold?
seeks rephrase
T: cold, yeah. ((make cough sounds to help explain cold)) rephrase
K: 
bc
T: do you have a cold?

K: no.
representative
T: NO::? but your nose sounds very clo:ged!

K: ree nanka hen desuka?
directive
T: <yeah.> you have a.-sounds like (.4)
representative commenced
K: ah! (.4)

T: hananakoene. ((voice from clogged nose))
representative commenced
K: chotto (.4) nettetande
representative
T: you were ☞ SLEEPING?, ☞ ((laughing)) I See. OK. ((laughing)) T transition signal

T: >ok?, how bout you?< (.2)
directive
((sniffle))

C, I, T: ((laughing))
T: no
T, C: ((laughing))
C: tabechatta ((I ate them all.))
T: ((laughing)) it’s ok.
C: ((Japanese un. sound)) sunday,
T: ((Japanese unn. sound))
T: WHAT did you study?
C: what? nani?, (.4) umm (.2) mous
T: math [umhm ]
C: (((Japanese um sound))] (.2) ((Japanese um)) (.2) and: science,
T: umhum, ok.
C: (1.8) ((laughing)) and english.
T: >when are your tests?< (scaffolding) directive
C: unto (.2) monday.
T: NEXT monday?,
C: (.4) ((Japanese disagreement sound uun.))
T: Two days ago?,
C: ((Japanese agreement sound umm.))
T: ahh. your Tests are Finished?,
C: ((Japanese agreement sound umm.))
T: ahh:=
C: =shuushuku (1.8) testo.
T: (1.8) >what is that?<
C: eto nanda. (.2) jibunwa doredakebenkyougadekiruka (.2) tameshitesuto.
T: >umm, like achievement test. ok. side sequence concluded
T: .h when is your FINAL test?
C: final test?=
T: =final test, <end of the term.> your final test. (.4) your Kimatsushiken. when is
your final test?
C: eee may: (.8)
T:  may?
C: sangatsu tsui(h)tachi

T: January February

C: January February

T: (2.4) >March<

C: ah, march da! May wa shigatsuka.

T: yeah. aa, nonono. May is

C: (.8) ah! Gogatsuka.

T: yeah.

C: Asoka. ((Japanese un sound))

T: It's ok.

C: March

T: March

T: What day?

C: One day.

T: March 1st?

C: Umm. First day.

T: Did you get chocolate (1.0) for Valentines Day?,

I: No.

C: ((Laughing))

T: No: Oh: I'm sorry.

T: ((Laughing)) My husband too. No chocolate. ((1.6 Laughing)) SORRY*

C, I: ((Laughing))

T: Um. Yeah. It's too bad.

T: Ok?, (1.2) So let's do questions.

((Rustling noise in background))

T: ((Said in melodic way)) Tada-da

T: (3.0) Today is <Sickness>. (2.6) Yeah, sickness. T

C: Nandesuka?

T: Sickness is like (.2) Byouki.

C: Byouki?

T: [mmhum]
T: <WHen was the last time you were sick?>
I: (1.8) eeto: (3.8) six (.4) month ago.=
T: =six months ago? Wow. you are very (.2) healthy.
I: ah?, (.2) yes:.
T: yeah, good. ok.

K: on­on (.2) a year,
T: once a year?
K: a, once a year.
T: once a year?, (.2) only once a year?
K: .h: (daitaisonogurai)desune ((yeah, about))
T: Ahh:, you are very healthy also.

T: (2.0) how Often do you get a cold? (2.6) how often (.2) do you
to beco:me: healthy?>
C: (1.6) hmmm? (.4)
T: so if [you had a =]
C: [?] desuka
T: =uhum.
[[(sniffle)]]
((sniffle))
T: =i don' t take off my jacket.=
C: [i don't take ] off my jacket.=
T: =ahhh ok.
C: ((Japanese umm. sound))

T: And what do you do when you have a cold?

T: I don’t take off my jacket <and:?>

I: (2.0) i sleep.

T: i sleep. ahh, that’s good, yeah. that’s a good idea.

T: what else do you do when you have a cold?

K: ee .h (sorewa) i? (.4) i, (.2) i am tire=tired,=

T: =uhuh, i am tired, so you sleep?, (1.2) uhuh understan= directiv

T: (.2) <do you> take <any> medicine?

K: (1.8) ahh (1.8) yes:::

T: uhuh. do you GO to the doctor?

K: (1.8) ah, yes:.

T: uhuh

T: in America (.4) when we have a cold, (.4) we eat (.4) CHICKEN soup.

C: h[mmm?,]

I: [mmm?]

T: in Japan do you eat chicken soup?

I: [nn no]=

C: [nn no]=

T: =no. ((laughing)) h .h no!=

T: =what do you EAT (.2) when you have a cold?= directive

C: =i eat okayu.

T: okayu!= representative confirmed

C: =((Japanese agreeing sound umm))=

T: =it’s runny rice. ((laughing))

T: how bout you?

I: boku ha no, NEgioyakuyatsu

T: you [<f ]ry> onion? (.2) welsh onion?

C: [(e?) ]

((class continues))

T: >OK, that’s all! Gomen! Sorry!< (1.0) it’s <very> late. declarative/expressive

((tea time with students))

T: is next week ok?
I: [yes ]

K, C: [((Japanese agreement sound umm.))] 

T: ok. see you:: Next week.

I, K, C: see you next week.

T: Good-bye:::. 