

Turn-Taking in A Naturally Occurring Conversation And A Textbook Dialog

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In second language teaching, there are many instances when teachers refer to textbooks for examples to teach students how language is used in normal, everyday dialog. More often than not, the examples found in the textbook are broad examples used to teach learners a range of grammar, vocabulary, and pragmatic points. There needs to be more use of real or authentic material and examples of conversation in the classroom. “Authentic materials...offer a much richer source of input for learners and have the potential to be exploited in different ways and on different levels to develop learners’ communicative competence” (Gilmore, 2007, p. 103). It is important for teachers to find ways to improve texts and materials so that they may be more authentic for the students in the classroom.

Teachers need to be able to help students develop interactional competence: the ability to use various interactional resources, such as turn-taking and how to deal with problems that occur with understanding (Wong & Waring, 2010). Unfortunately, until quite recently, the textbooks available rarely help students in this regard: (Gilmore, 2007):

“Language teaching materials tend to concentrate on monologues or dialogues where turn-taking is structured and predictable, with some kind of transactional goal. More interactional, non goal-oriented language, used to develop relationships, is much less common and it is hardly surprising,

therefore, to find that learners experience more difficulties with this kind of talk.” (p. 102)

Conversation Analysis (CA) can offer an understanding about how interactional practices work, such as repairs, word searches, and topic management. A basic interactional practice, turn taking is an important practice for ESL and EFL students to be familiar with as speakers must be competent in turn-taking in order to partake in conversations (Wong & Waring, 2010, p. 103). CA is thus one approach to inform Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), an approach to second or foreign language teaching that emphasizes communication as the final goal and means of learning a language.

The following analysis compares how turns at talk are organized in two dialogs: an authentic conversation and a textbook dialog. There are some similarities between the two dialogs, but there are also noticeable differences in turn-taking practices.

The two pieces of data that will be examined are a conversation between university colleagues during their lunch break¹ and a conversation found in a textbook used to teach English as a foreign language. The naturally occurring conversation amongst the university colleagues will be discussed first to point out specific turn-taking practices that occur in ordinary conversation.

Lunch in the Office [4:47-5:22]

- 1 N: >but it said< in the paper yesterday
- 2 th=th=that a red pepper is simply a
- 3 green pepper >that has< ↑ripened
- 4 M: *looking at J*



of turns, something that language learners may find difficult, especially if they are beginners (p. 37).

Another aspect of turn-taking that occurs in this data set is the use of turn-entry devices. These types of devices are used to allow speakers who are early starters to begin their turn even if they may not be entirely ready (Wong & Waring, 2010, p. 41). The speakers often start their turns with words such as *but* (lines 1, 14 and 30); these words can help minimize damages that may occur in an overlap, although those words do not occur in an overlap in these examples.

Finally, a turn-taking practice in this piece of data to highlight is the use of different ways to allocate turns. Often, the speakers look at the person they are addressing to “initiate action with gaze,” something Wong

and Waring (2010) describe as a part of turn allocating (p. 34). Examples of this can be found in lines 4, 8, 16, and 19.

Now I would like to turn to a textbook dialog taken from *NorthStar Listening and Speaking* (Preiss, 2004). Although the above conversation is among three speakers and the textbook dialog I present involves only two participants, observations can still be made about the differences in turn-taking practices between the two samples. The following excerpt was taken from the “Warriors without Weapons” section of the book. The conversation takes place between an ICRC volunteer and the prisoner of war (POW) he is visiting in a detention camp. (The following excerpt has been numbered for ease of reference.)

Textbook Dialog

1 VOLUNTEER: Hello. How are you doing?
2 I'm here to collect your
3 messages for your family.
4 POW: Thank you so much. But I have
5 a question. Can I attach
6 photos to my message?
7 VOLUNTEER: Yes, you can. However,
8 let me warn you: Do not
9 attach more than two
10 photos, and you must
11 protect them with
12 something so they don't
13 get damaged.
14 POW: Oh. Then, does that mean I
15 can staple a little plastic
16 bag to the message?
17 VOLUNTEER: Well, this is the first time
18 anyone has ever asked me this
19 question. Let me think. Yes,
20 I guess it's all right with me.
21 I can't imagine the prison
22 center would object.

Some of the similarities to be noted are about the TCUs (Turn Construction Units) themselves: the use of a turn-entry device from the Volunteer. In his (the picture in the textbook showed both the POW and the Volunteer to be male) final turn beginning in line 17, the volunteer begins by saying “well” before finishing his utterance.

An example of the dialog that seems to be inconsistent with natural conversations, however, is the places in the text where there are possible TRPs. In line 1, the Volunteer greets the POW, asks the POW how he is doing, and then states the purpose of his visit, without giving the POW an opportunity to take a turn to speak.

While the textbook dialog shows the use of a pre-pre, or a preliminary to a preliminary, by the POW (lines 4-5), a term defined by Wong and Waring (2010) as “a device by which one announces an upcoming action without producing that action immediately afterwards (p. 27), in a real-life conversation, there is usually a response to the pre-pre, e.g., “A: But I have a question. B: Go ahead.” That response is missing in the textbook dialog. This phenomena is seen again in line 7, when the Volunteer gives the POW permission to attach pictures with his letter, the POW does not take a turn to respond. A similar shortcoming occurs in line 20. Normally, after permission is granted, the recipient will express thanks. In the textbook dialog, after the Volunteer gives his permission, the POW’s thanking is missing. Having turn transitions at these TRPs would make the conversation more natural.

Another difference between the textbook dialog and a real-life conversation is the lack of pauses. While it may not be necessary to show pauses in turns, the fact that in line 19, the Volunteer states, “let me think” and then immediately answers the question might imply that all speakers should be able to complete a turn without the use of pauses at all. Normally when a speaker needs time to think he or she can hold the floor by some fillers such as “um” or “hmmm” or “well.”

Note

¹ I thank professor Hanh thi Nguyen for providing me with this data set.

References

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- Preiss, S. (2004). *NorthStar listening and speaking: Advanced* (2nd ed.). F. Boyd & C. Numrich, (Eds.). White Plains, NY: Pearson Longman.
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The conversation as a whole appears to be too bare. There are no pauses, no overlap, and too few turn transitions. It is evident that this is textbook speech and if it were read aloud, it would indeed sound scripted. This type of textbook entry, which is comparable to dialog that appears in almost all textbooks that teach students English (or other languages as a foreign language), does not show students how speech really occurs in an actual conversation.

When determining ways to create texts for teaching learners of English, it is imperative to consider all the ways in which students will be assessed on the skills they will have had to learn. Hughes (2003) stated that “the objective of teaching spoken language is the development of the ability to interact successfully in that language” which “involves comprehension as well as production” (p. 113). If students are going to be tested on the ability to successfully manage turns within talk, then it is important that teachers are able to teach this aspect of conversation to students. It is important for any conversationalist to be able to listen to and adapt to the different courses that a conversation may take since turn-taking is a vital component of conversation and must be more clearly presented within textbooks so that students have a better chance of gaining exposure to natural spoken English.

Transcription Conventions

- [A single left bracket indicates the point of overlap onset.
- = Equal signs, one at the end of one line and one at the beginning of a next, indicate no 'gap' between the two lines. This is often called latching.
- (0.0) Numbers in parenthesis indicate elapsed time in silence by tenth of seconds, so (7.1) is a pause of 7 seconds and one-tenth of a second.
- (.) A dot in parenthesis indicates a tiny 'gap' within or between utterances.
- Word Underscoring indicates some form of stress, via pitch and/or amplitude; an alternative method is to print the stressed part in italics.
- A dash indicates a cut-off.
- . A period indicates a stopping fall in tone.
- , A comma indicates a continuing intonation, like when you are reading items from a list.
- ? A question mark indicates a rising intonation.
- The absence of an utterance-final marker indicates some sort of 'indeterminate' contour.
- ↑ ↓ Arrows indicate marked shifts into higher or lower pitch in the utterance-part immediately following the arrow.
- WORD Upper case indicates especially loud sounds relative to the surrounding talk.
- ° Utterances or utterance-parts bracketed by degree signs are relatively quieter than the surrounding talk.
- >< Right/left carets bracketing an utterance or utterance-part indicate speeding up.
- w(h)ord A parenthesized h, or a row of hs within a word, indicates breathiness, as in laughter, crying, etc.