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Discourse in an EFL setting: An analysis of turn taking by Arabic speakers in English

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Abstract--Turn taking is an important micro-skill in conversation and being governed to some extent by the cultural context, it may need to be explicitly taught while training learners for proficiency, interactional success, and performance in a foreign language. The premise is that these learners are being trained to fulfil a prospective need for interaction with native or second language speakers. Moreover, in the language classroom, smooth functioning and transfer of information can only be ensured when learners' current turn taking patterns and the desirable ones are compared. This study aims to observe the active factors in the process of turn taking using Sacks et al.'s (1978) as the theoretical basis in the first year tutorial EFL class with a total of eight intermediate and upper intermediate learners at Qassim University, KSA. Video recorded data from twelve speaking skills analysed using a speech analysis software (Praat V 6.2.22 version) along with time notations, discourse particles, overlaps, and turn transfer notes taken simultaneously. Data showed that the EFL learners most frequently took self-select (241 times) as the form of turn taking while the role of particles in turn transfer was minimal, indicating the learners' poor paralinguistic skills in English. Moreover, turn taking motivation frequently derived from teacher prompts for explanation from current speaker or others, in learners' questioning to gain clarity on English vocabulary, and while teacher evaluated learners' speaking skills. The study is one of its kind in an EFL classroom of Saudi learners and contributes majorly to the available knowledge while also guiding EFL teachers in classroom pedagogy.

Keywords--EFL learners, turn taking patterns, turn taking forms (CSSN, SS, CSC), turn taking motivation.

Introduction

Language organization is a systematic arrangement at not only the levels of sounds, words and sentences, but also, at the level of conversations (Bialystok, 1991). Another level of definition can be language as a conversation, a structured body of sounds, words, and sentences that has a beginning a middle, and an end (Liddicoat, 2021). Moreover, the content and ordering of information in a conversation follows a certain order even within the confines of the broad platform that conversation offers to its participants (Campbell et al., 2011). The sequence of possible utterances, in other words, operate within syntagmatic constraints. Moreover, language in use has many aspects such as code-mixing and language planning (Pennycook, 2017). In any case, however, the structure of conversation retains its form by being organized around the three sections stated above. Conversational openings or other talk-exchange can have many ways of opening, for instance, they may start without any preliminaries, with the help of a vocative, or with a greeting (Schmid, 2020). Though all speech communities universally follow the act of opening a conversation, the manner or way of doing so may vary from one speech community to another. In an early study (Coates & Cameron, 2014). Godard's (1977) contrastive analysis of the phone call found that the openings are more direct in the former where the caller was not required to check the number, identify him/ herself, or engage in polite conversation with the caller, all of which were absolute essentials in the latter.

Comparing these etiquettes to the present times of Facetime and Mobile phone calls, there is, however, bound to be drastic change. After the opening of the conversation comes the main body or middle of the conversation which can be of varied lengths depending upon many intrinsic and extrinsic factors. It may be dropped in some situations where the opening is immediately followed by the closing, but this is more of an occasional event. It is in the middle that conversation topics are raised, changed, interruptions made, questions asked, answers presented or, questions evaded (Myers Scotton, 1983) . In any case, to ensure a smooth running of this middle part, coordination between the interlocutors is essential. This coordination can be achieved with the help of turn-taking which is like an unsaid regulatory manual that is shared by the parties to the exchange (Goffman, 2009). Its role is central in smooth exchange of speaking turns in the conversation, thus ensuring minimal simultaneous or overlapped talking. Turn-yielding signals from the speaker or interruptions by the listener(s) decide who the next speaker will be (Cutler & Pearson, 2018). Finally, all conversations that are begun must be ended with a 'closing'. Schegloff and Sacks (1973) refer to this as the 'closing section' because it starts with the initiation of the closing and ends with the termination of the talk exchange.

In certain social situations, one or more speakers may not wait for turn-yielding signals and end up interrupting an exchange already in progress. Wiemann (1973) gives two examples: A four year old entering a room and interrupting his/her mother who is already engaged in a conversation with another person. It is typical for young children to tug at their parent's clothes to gain attention and even if the same is not given, they may start speaking. The mother, however, gets irritated due to this behavior of the child and scolds the child for interrupting her conversation. Similarly, in another example to Wiemann et al. (2017) is that a few

university scholars are seated inside a classroom with the intention of discussing some topics. One of the scholars talks for too long causing the other scholars to interrupt him as they are not yielded turns. In each of these instances, a central character broke a socially acceptable rule of communication. And in each instance, a reprimand was given the result.

Many researchers have worked on turn-taking in the past (Ford et al., 1996; Sack et al., 1974; Speier, 1972). Turn taking in the academic situation has also engaged scholars from early times. McHoul (1978) investigated the patterns of turn taking in geography classes while Ingram and Eliot (2014) studied both turn taking and silence in mathematics classes. Maroni et al. (2008) examined a wider range of factors by studying silence, interruption, and overlap in the classroom. Turn taking in the foreign language classroom has been examined by Santoso et al. (2017) in the Indonesian classroom. However, the current study is unique as turn taking in the Saudi EFL classroom has not been examined so far, creating a gap in the available literature, a fact that motivated this investigation. Based on the review and following the turn taking process laid out in Sacks et al. (1978), the study is guided to answer the following questions:

Research questions

- How far does the English language conversation in a Saudi university EFL classroom qualify on the tenets laid down by Sacks et al. (1978) vis-à-vis TCU and PCP?
- What are the factors that motivate the foreign language users to self-select a turn in the conversation?

Literature review

One of the most crucial milestones in child language development during early years is learning and understanding how to communicate (AlHammadi, 2017; Alkhudiry & Al-Ahdal, 2020). The most basic elements that this starts with is babbling and single-syllable words till gradually, they start adding more complex aspects of language development like full conversations, voice nodes, exchanging views, and learning when and how to react while communicating with others (Brosseau-Lapr   & Rvachew, 2018). Once young children develop these speaking abilities, they also start learning turn-taking skills: When to speak with what voice node to be used and when and how to stop a conversation. It is a skill learned through conversation (Marshall & Lewis, 2014). In its most basic form, turn-taking happens when one person listens while the other is speaking in a circle of discussion (Padilha & Carletta, 2002). Over a period of time when the conversation progresses, roles are exchanged back and forth between the listener and the speaker.

As per pragmatics research by Yakushkina (2018), gender plays a significant role in how people take turns speaking, with the majority of conversational patterns being dominated by men. Gender and turn-taking haven't been studied in the foreign language classroom, despite the importance of gender in the students' conversational habits in an academic setting (Almakrob & Al-Ahdal, 2020; Mart  nez, 2018; Maria, 2018; Yakushkina, 2021). With an emphasis on floor

management, linguistic methods of conveying conversational styles, and interactive content in regard to gender, Yakushkina explores gender as enacted in turn-taking organizations in the Spanish language classroom. Overall, the qualitative conversation analysis of nine pair interactions of students engaged in a problem-solving activity in the Spanish language supports the notion of gender-related disparities in conversational styles—a pattern that had previously been established in a native-language setting.

Maria (2018) studied the role of gender in turn-taking organization in the Spanish language classroom with the focus on floor management, linguistic means of expressing conversational styles, and content of the interaction in its relation to gender. The case study was focused on qualitative conversation analysis of 9 pair interactions of students conducting a problem-solving task in a foreign language. They found that in conversational styles there is significant gender-related difference. Mainly the focussed differentiation is of interlocutor-oriented collaborative female vs. self-oriented competitive male style found in the content-level patterns. Additionally, the results showed that for the argument of gender being shaped and constructed in society, as well as the reflection of gender stereotypes in the content of the message conveyed by the individuals.

Martínez (2018) analyzed the interplay of cultures the in English-Spanish language pair conversations, and found that across languages there are certain differences discernible in regard to turn-taking practices. Communicative demands or expectations in every unique culture were also noticed. This investigation was more focused on finding possible culturally specific features of the turn-taking practices in two intra-cultural conversations that include both speakers native (English) and Spanish. Fajardo et al. (2014) focussed on a hypotheses to explain why native speakers of the language are more confident in real communicative situations as compared to foreign language (FL) students who were highly successful in learning a FL. He focussed on possible available solutions that could be implemented in classroom settings to enhance students' proficiency and command on the foreign language while interacting with native speakers (NSs). The main aim is to encourage scholars to become autonomous learners continuously looking for quality input—inside or outside of the classroom—that will allow them to learn “real language” as opposed to the kind of language created by teachers and textbooks.

García (2014) investigated the competence of students in communicating in foreign language classes. García worked on the nature of conversation as a cooperative activity and pointed out in her study that competence is a key element in learning a foreign language. While analyzing the conflicts between native and non-native conversational turn-taking, she anticipated predicting some important challenges that can emerge while communicating with potential native mother tongue interlocutors. Stivers (2009) explored the universals and cultural variation in turn-taking in conversation and their finding provides substantial support for the universal system hypothesis. As per their investigation universal basis is a strong hypothesis for turn-taking behavior in all languages. For strong universal patterns, they found measurable cultural differences. Wiemann and Knapp (2006) espoused on the role of interaction and explicit grammar in the foreign language classroom. Rodríguez et al. (2005) proposed a three-step

sequence to help Spanish instructors in developing a more effective classroom discourse. Furthermore, Sacks et al. (1978) mentioned that there can be two components to the act of turn taking: i. Turn Construction Unit (TCU) which help the interlocutors identify turn yielding, and can be a part or whole of a sentence; ii. Possible Complete Point (PCP) which indicates turn completion, this enables transition of speaking turns; in addition, Transition Relevance Point (TRP) is the juncture where ii takes place. This model will be applied in this study to analyze the collected data.

Method

Research design

The method was case study and quantitative with the dataset comprising video recorded conversations of the learners (n=12) and the teacher (researcher) over a period of six weeks with a frequency of two classes per week for the academic year (1442).

Participants

This study was conducted in the tutorial classes of the researcher with 12 first year intermediate and upper-intermediate EFL learners at Qassim University in the second semester of 1442 AH. During this semester, all tutorial classes are assigned to the productive skills (speaking and writing) and this made the researcher's task simpler as he could mainly focus on the English interaction patterns of the learners over a period of time. The researcher got approval letter dated (Sep 15, 2022) from the deanship of higher education research at QU. Later on, students were explained at the beginning of the semester the purpose of the research; the consents of the 12 students were obtained clearly stating the voluntary nature of their participation with the researcher's assurance of confidentiality of all data and its use for strictly research purposes. The median age of the participants was 22.3 years, all were Saudi males.

Data building

Data were collected over a period of six weeks, twelve hours of speech data were generated in this study and, post-transcription, this came to 55782 words, a lower word count than in an ordinary conversation which totals between 7000-9000 words in an hour. Typically, the teacher acted as the mediator in these classes and initiated discussion over an interesting or controversial issue of the current times likely to be of interest to the learners. The aim was to engage all learners in the speaking task and elicit them to speak in the given paradigm. The topics that the researcher took up in this study could be all classified into the following categories: Soccer, Education abroad, Russia-Ukraine war, and American fast food. The researcher organized and modulated the opportunity to speak though this control was not overbearing or oppressive in any way but such that everyone got to speak either by the teacher's invitation or on their own initiative. Partially, the speech exchanges were governed by adjacency pairs (which is quite natural in a foreign language speech situation), such as request-acceptance or refusal; question-answer; compliment-thanks; accusation-

admission or denial, with the more frequent occurrence of question-answer and compliment-thanks forms. In this feature, the samples can be labelled 'different' from ordinary, day-to-day conversations, but the reason for this has already been stated above.

Data analysis

Data in this study were analyzed using the PRAAT V 6.2.22 software as speed modulation of the recordings became a necessity in places due to overlaps and also because the pronunciation of the participants was ambiguous, English being a foreign language for them. The class discussions were always initiated by the researcher by introducing a topic that would appeal to the learners, was current, and relevant to their age and education. The target before the researcher was to engage the entire tutorial group in the discussion with the former acting both as a facilitator (helping participants find the right lexis in English when they got stuck), and interjector (to keep undue distraction at bay). Data analysis was strictly on the basis of the Simplest Systematics exchange.

Results and Discussion

RQ1: How far does the English language conversation in a Saudi university EFL classroom qualify on the tenets laid down by Sacks et al. (1978) vis-à-vis TCU and PCP?

Excerpt D6/13

- 1 AN: But all of the saying the same
- 2 AZ: It is the same AR
- 3 AR: Nooo [overlap]
- 4 AN: The same sayings
- 5 AR: Nooo and for that I am trying to say how these lawyers said different things about the same case
- 6 AR: One said Al Hilal will be punished the other said Al Nasser will be punished
- 7 AZ: hmm?
- 8 AZ: Because they just have the papers
- 9 AN: AR please you hear what you want to hear
- 10 AR: Nooo [overlap]
- 11 AN: Be patient please
- 12 AN: Aldweesh the one you said belong to us (AlNasser's club) he himself said the same what Batal lawyer has said

Excerpt D6/13 above shows that though there is variation in turn order in addition to randomness with no pattern visible in the sequence. On the contrary, self-select (SS) is the most frequently turn taking allocation system in this and other similar sequences that occurred during this discussion, coded D6/13. SS reoccurred 241 times, Current speaker select figured next and occurred 39 times while current speaker selected continued occurred 27 times. In another excerpt, D6/19 below a little later in the same discussion, one can identify what Sacks et

al.'s hold is a typical feature of a debate in which the order of speakers is not fixed but is governed by 'rebuttal' and 'counter-rebuttal' with parties being 'characterizable' as 'pro' and 'con'. In other words, the pro and con speaker will take turns in such a situation without waiting for turn yielding cues.

Excerpt D6/19

- 1 AR: Leave the others they say if Al Hilal did so this would happen and if Al Hilal did that Al Hilal will be so
- 2 AN: Who said that Al Hilal has documented that
- 3 AR: O man. [overlap]
- 4 AV: Who?
- 5 AR: Alfarraj he and Al Hilal resources
- 6 AZ: hhhhhh. [overlap]
- 7 AN: hhhhhh. [overlap]
- 8 AR: Wait wait
- 9 AZ: Alfarraj!
- 10 AZ: Alfarraj o dear has doubted achievements he witnessed
- 11 AZ: He doubted a goal

In D6/19 above, as enunciated by Stacks et al., turn allocation techniques which they call Current Speaker Selects Next (CSSN) need certain conditions to be fulfilled, certain set of utterance types that allow for its operation. Moreover, they hold that in conversations that have four or more than four participants, more than one conversation becomes a possibility, this they have named as 'schism of one conversation' into more as a conversation basically needs two parties to it, and with four or more participants, many such conversational pairs are possible. In the above excerpt D6/19, the new participant is AV (4), and as the data showed, overlap is evident even more frequently. This excerpt also reveals the bane of foreign language exchange as clarifications are sought several times for the same piece of information.

One feature that stood out in the data was that all closings were initiated by the researcher himself and the reason for this appears to be that the participants fail to get the cue of nothing more being there to say. In fact, the researcher has to explicitly ask the group if they had anything more to say and when none of the participants came forward to add to the discussion, he closed the discussion by summing up all the dominant thoughts for the day. Thus, the closing usually dropped the first two stages of Schegloff and Sacks (1978) i.e., pre-closing and leave taking stages and straightaway arrived at the contact-termination stage. Data analysis in the study clearly show that on the count of both TCU and PCP, the turn taking skills of the Saudi university EFL learners is poor. The question, then, is what enables them to successfully communicate in English. The answer lies in the affordances of adjacency pairs in facilitating conversation, for instance in D6/13,

- 7 AZ: hmm?
- 8 AZ: Because they just have the papers

Similarly, in D6/19

- 2 AN: Who said that Al Hilal has documented that
- 3 AR: O man. [overlap]
- 4 AV: Who?
- 5 AR: Alfarraj he and Al Hilal resources

The analysis shows that in the absence of paralinguistic skills in English in both speakers and listeners as in the current EFL context, language users resort to adjacency pairs to make up for the skill deficit. Table 1 below summarizes the occurrences of turn taking allocations in the EFL class.

Table 1
Turn taking allocation occurrences

Turn taking allocation	Total occurrences
Current speaker select next	39
Self-select	241
Current speaker continue	27

The variation in turn order of Saudi speakers in this study can be explained according to several reasons. Martínez (2018) found that across languages there are certain differences discernible in regard to turn-taking practices. Findings possible showed that culturally specific features of the turn-taking practices in two intra-cultural conversations that include both speakers native (English) and Spanish. Furthermore, Fajardo et al. (2014) explained why native speakers of the language are more confident in real communicative situations as compared to foreign language (FL) students who were highly successful in learning a FL. Therefore, they encourage scholars to become autonomous learners continuously looking for quality input—inside or outside of the classroom—that will allow them to learn “real language” as opposed to the kind of language created by teachers and textbooks. García (2014) interpreted the conflicts between native and non-native conversational turn-taking to some important challenges that can emerge while communicating with potential native mother tongue interlocutors.

RQ2: What are the factors that motivate the foreign language users to self-select a turn in the conversation?

Moreover, turn taking motivation frequently derived from researcher’s prompts for explanation from current speaker or others, in learners’ questioning to gain clarity on English vocabulary, and while teacher evaluated learners’ speaking skills. Thus, all motivations originated in the researcher’s initiatives. Further, it was remarkable to note that the participants were easily able to catch the turn yielding cues introduced by the researcher even though he limited himself to the use of suitable tone and hand gestures. According to Grice (1975), all the speakers are expected to make their conversational contribution such as is required by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which one is engaged. Taken together with Sacks et al. (1978), the foreign language classroom holds out much hope for the learners. Amongst the social skills that we learn as language users, turn taking is an important skill to effectively participate in

social communications. While interacting with other people if a language user is unable to take turns timely and accurately or is not an active listener, then it may impact a healthy conversation. Ignorance of turn taking skills may cause users to interrupt the other person who was speaking, may create overlaps, or may lead to poor listening of what the speaker wants to say. It may indirectly impact social situations too. As adults, and in workplaces, foreign language speakers who struggle with turn-taking in social situations may also experience a lack of social connectivity as this may impact their communication skills, sometimes severely.

There is a minute difference between turn and turn-taking. When a speaker speaks at a time it is considered as a turn but turn-taking is a skill set of the speaker to understand that he should be aware of when to start and finish a turn while in a conversation. In this study, this difference is obliterated amongst the participants as they tend to speak simultaneously without the previous speaker yielding a turn. Since university level EFL courses in KSA specifically aim to prepare learners to fit in the global job markets, understanding the technique of turn taking is one of the important tools in their organizational readiness in spoken discourse. The fact that it is natural for us to form opinions about people based on how they engage suggests that the conversation's structure, or how it "comes off," is at least as significant as its subject matter. Our data shows that the participants are not trained in the English language particles or paralinguistic communication cues: At the end of the conversation, if the speaker wants to finish the turn, he should drop the pitch or volume of their voice. On the contrary, frequently, they assumed a turn, forcing the earlier speaker to terminate their speech act or adopt a higher pitch or volume to assert themselves. As a result, if the researcher did not intervene and yield a turn to a new speaker, smooth transference of speaking turns from one scholar to another one could not be assured. This result replicates (Weimann, 1973). Speaker change was unsystematic and disorganized with frequent overlaps that led to loss of information at time, which in turn, prompted other participants to seek repetition of content or clarification. Finally, this study concluded that adjacency pairs are easier for the Saudi EFL learners to handle in turn taking as these do not require much knowledge of English language implicature or particles. In other words, turn taking was the smoothest in situations where the speaker and the listener(s) could easily discern the conclusion of a speech act or the Possible Complete Point (PCP) as defined by Sacks et al. (1978).

Conclusion

Any conversation is a structured activity comprising of structuring and ordering of a few elements like adjacency pairs, turn-taking, conversational topic, etc. It is imperative that for meaningful communication conversational organization is required as it lays down rules and strategies for exchange. Turn taking is an essential element of language proficiency, more so because it is intertwined with the cultural component, and for this reason, learners may need explicit training in this aspect of language use. To raise awareness of scholars in higher education listening activities can be applied alongside real time activities in turn taking practice. EFL teachers can integrate the explanation of the suitability of utterances in context, explain how speakers cope with a variety of social situations, and explain the different roles of utterances in English as foreign

language classrooms. Simulation exercises can be used for practicing this. Later, they can be incorporated into activities where their use is authentic. To enhance the oral performance skills of EFL learners they should be empowered to participate in all kinds of speech events. The following, accordingly are recommended for all levels of EFL learners.

- To prep learners for real-world language use, it is imperative to teach turn-taking strategies to college students as well as secondary school students. They should be motivated to practice language use outside the classroom to gain first-hand experience in turn taking.
- Turn taking skills can be strengthened in EFL learners by reinforcing their vocabulary, grammar, and understanding of English conversation which, in turn, will boost their confidence to use the language outside the classroom.
- Real life discourse situations should be simulated in academic setting as much as possible to help learners master conversational skills, engage in authentic language exchange, learn new language structures, and adopt strategies for foreign language use.
- Short courses in paralinguistics with greater emphasis on learning-by-doing should be incorporated as mandatory project work to create opportunities for language use by learners.
- Extra-curricular opportunities for language application that makes enhanced use of paralinguistic skills such as in play enactments should be taken up on a front footing.

Limitations

This study is a unique foray into the field of foreign language conversation and turn taking skills of Saudi university EFL learners. It attempted to fill a perceptible gap in the available literature and arrived at some unique results. However, it sadly has certain limitations, though they were imposed by the scope of the study itself. Lack of qualitative data could not add a valuable dimension to the study. It is hoped that future studies will include such data to add another perspective to the findings. Also, inclusion of female participants, too, can change the results even if to a limited extent.

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