

A Fundamental Analysis of the Language Classroom Discourse

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1 Introduction

Discourse analysis is concerned with the description and analysis of spoken and written interactions, mainly in natural settings. However, according to Sinclair and Coulthard (1975), one influential approach of the study of spoken discourse is developed at the University of Birmingham, and that the research was initially concerned about the discourse in school classrooms. They found a rigid pattern in the language of language classrooms taught by native speakers.

The central interest of the present study is to find patterns in the discourse of language classrooms as in Sinclair and Coulthard. This is because observing patterns in the teacher-students interactions can provide us a good hint for effective teaching. Moreover, it might be also quite interesting for non-native teachers including the author, to know patterns in the classroom discourse taught by the teacher of a native speaker of English. The study will discuss classroom discourse features as follows: 1)channel open/close signals, 2)backchannel signals, 3)repetition and paraphrasing, 4)turnover signals, 5)classroom scripts, 6)speech acts.

The classroom data was taken at a two-year college in Nagano, during an English conversation class which is for 2nd year students. The class has been taught by a female New Zealand teacher for two and

a half month. There were 8 students, and they are all female students majoring in English. They all have been in New Zealand to study English at a language school for 5 months by the program of the college. Therefore, their conversation level is about lower-intermediate.

2. Channel Open/Close Signals

In all communication, there must be signals to show that the communication begins and ends. The signal that occurs when the communication begins is called an open signal and the one that occurs when the communication ends is called a close signal.

In this classroom discourse, the open signal is the bell rang. Then, the greeting sequence saying follows.

EXAMPLE 2. 1

- (1) ((bell rang))
- (2) Teacher: OK. Good morning, everybody?
- (3) Students: Good morning.
- (4) Teacher: 2,4,6...I'll wait.
- (5) Now, do you remember what we are going to do on
 Thursday?

After the greeting sequence, the teacher counted the number of students and decided to wait for everybody to show up. There is no how-are-you sequence because the teacher is worried about the food for the party they are going to have soon, and wants to talk about it before she forgets. There is no roll-calling sequence, either. However, the teacher is counting the number of students. In fact, this counting act is enough

for checking the absences because this class consists of only students, and the teacher already knows everybody.

The close signal was also the bell. The teacher had enough time to wind up because she had been thinking about the time since she started the last reading exercise.

EXAMPLE 2. 2

(523)((bell rang))

(524) Teacher: Alright.

(525) Thank you for doing this.

(526) This is- I've never had such a quiet class.

(527) You have never been *so* quiet.

The teacher says "Alright." after the bell works as a preclosing signal, and students started putting their pens and notebooks in the bags. In the conversation outside the classroom, the timing of closing communication is decided reciprocally. In the classroom, however, the closing seems to be announced by the teacher.

3. Backchannel Signals

According to Hatch (1992, p.14), there have to be signals that a message is getting through. Backchannel signals do not take the turn away from the speaker. Though keeping their turns from teachers seems to be very hard for students from Japanese culture, one example was found in the classroom data.

EXAMPLE 3. 1

(230) Student: Umm...drive? if it's high uh- you have to pay.

(231) Teacher: Good. Good. OK.

EXAMPLE 3. 2

(362) Student: Because he went to the snack bar and came back with

(363) food and drink for himself.

(364) He never asked her if she wants anything.

(365) Teacher: Yeah. That's right.

Since the feedback by the teacher does not take the student's turn, it is possible to say these are examples of backchannels. Students were talking very slowly in low voices, but she did not give her turn to the teacher. The teacher's backchannels even encourage the student's talking. Therefore, this feedback by the teacher can be categorized as backchannels.

McCarthy (1991 p.128) states that turn-taking is usually under the control of teachers in the traditional classroom, and it is difficult for the natural patterns of backchannels to occur in the classroom. Moreover, considering Japanese culture, which respects older or people in higher positions, students tend to be very careful about their relationships with teachers. Therefore, it may be very difficult for some students to keep their turns, and in the situation of the foreign language classrooms, it is necessary for both students and teachers to recognize this cultural difference and create their own rules.

Moreover, the alignment between the teacher and the students is important in the backchannels, too. Without the alignment, the students will easily yield their turn to the teacher since they may feel

they are interrupting the teacher. Japanese students tend to be especially nervous when they talk in front of others since they think they should be formal in the classrooms. As well as in the case of overlaps, the alignment between the teacher and the students is important in backchannels.

4. Repetition and Paraphrasing

The teacher of this classroom uses paraphrasing many times. Sometimes she just repeats the questions, but mostly she uses different phrases. Chaudron (1988, p.85-6) cites several pieces of research on repetition and concludes that repetition is evidently a strategy to ensure comprehension or retention of the material.

Paraphrasing and repetitions are beneficial to students for many reasons. For example, students can have more time to think about the questions or understand what the teacher has said. Sometime the students need even more time since they have to understand the questions, process the information they have obtained so far and they have to be ready to respond to the questions. Therefore, the time expansion by repetition and paraphrasing are so precious for learners.

Secondly, the paraphrased or repeated expressions can be good inputs for students. Since the forms of those expressions are more simple and easy to understand, they can be closer to their interlanguage. Students can benefit from repetition and paraphrasing even at the stage of producing utterances.

Moreover, when the teacher is paraphrasing or repeating the questions, she is not changing the topic. If the topic or the focus of the conversation shifts while the students are thinking, it will be very hard

for them to follow the conversation. If the class becomes difficult to follow, the students might be discouraged. By paraphrasing, teachers can give students time to think, but it doesn't make the conversation difficult. This is another factor that makes paraphrasing and repetitions beneficial and encouraging to students.

Chaudron (1988, p.128) also refers particularly to teachers' modifying questions during class. By citing some studies, he states that teachers ask many questions frequently, and they tend to cling to their questions. However, most of the teachers' questions receive no response. Therefore, teachers try to modify them to make them comprehensible and answerable.

Then he mentioned two ways of modifying questions, which are 1) narrowing and 2) rephrasing with alternative, or "or-choice" questions. The former "narrowing" is to give the respondents a clue to the expected answer.

EXAMPLE 4. 1

(163) Teacher: Well, do you have to study?

(164) Student: ((laugh))

(165) Teacher: Did you study? S?

(166) Student: Yes.

(167) Students: ((burst into laughter))

(168) Teacher: Did you have to study?

(169) Student: Yes.

The teacher first asks if the students "has to" study in New Zealand, trying to teach the difference between "should" and "have to".

However, she changes the question once by asking about the fact if the student studied while she was in New Zealand, and came back to the original question using "have to". Since these students were not quite sure about the difference between "should" and "have to" at this stage, narrowing the question once from the obligation to the fact was very successful.

Here is another example of narrowing questions.

EXAMPLE 4. 2

(342) Teacher: And tell me what else did she pay for.

(343) She pays for the tickets- and what else.

(344) Students: ((read the script))

(345) Teacher: Did she pay for anything else?

(346) Students: ((pause))

(347) Teacher: Did she go somewhere else?

(348) Students: ((pause))

In the situation, students have just been given the script of what they have heard on the tape, and they haven't really understood the context yet though they have started looking at the script. Therefore, the teacher had to modify the questions. She started from the who-question "what else did she pay for?" and changed to the Yes-No question "Did she pay for anything else?" and even asks about the place they went in order to guide the students to the right answer.

The second type of modification is rephrasing with alternative or "or-choice" questions. Only one example was found though it is said to be very common in the classroom. Here is the example.

EXAMPLE 4. 3

(142) Teacher: Good. You should take a warm jacket.

(143) Now why is that.

(144) Why is it good to take a warm jacket.

(145) Why- why did you say that.

(146) Student: Because uh::: because... No. Cold.

(147) Teacher: Because it's hot? Because?

The teacher first asks the reason for taking a warm jacket to New Zealand simply by using "why". She repeats the question, and clings to it for a while. However, from the student's utterance "Because..." the teacher succeeds making an alternative question. Her question "Because it's hot?" guided the student to the right answer. This guidance is so clear that it can be interpreted as giving an alternative to the students.

5. Turnover Signals

5. 1 Overlaps

According to Hatch (1992, p.16), speakers have a variety of signals to project the end of the turn so that the next speaker can start their turn. Overlaps happen when the speaker misses the timing of the turn-taking, and they do not interfere with the content of the message.

Overlaps show the alignment between the speakers. According to Hatch (1992, p.17), well-aligned speakers may even complete turns in a collaborative fashion. She calls this "good" overlap. Here is an example of the "good" overlap in the classroom data.

EXAMPLE 5. 1. 1

(487) Teacher: What do you think S?

(488) Student: Do it- do it- secre- [secretly- huhuhuh

(489) Teacher: [Do it secretly

In this example, the teacher overlaps the student's utterance. The student had trouble either in pronouncing "secretly" or making an adverb form of "secret", and stammered. The teacher recognized the stammering as a sign of seeking an aid, and gave her the word. Though Hatch (1992, p.16) mentions only "slowing of tempo", "vowel elongation", and "falling intonation" as signs of exchanging turns, it is very natural for teachers to offer an aid if students stammers.

Moreover, there are three examples of the students' overlapping the teacher. As already mentioned, considering Japanese culture, overlapping teachers is not very common. However, in this class, in addition to the alignments with the teacher, the students are accustomed to the Western lesson style which requires students' participation. It is because all the students have been in New Zealand studying English for 5 months, and this might be the main reason that we could observe three overlaps from students to the teacher in this data.

EXAMPLE 5. 1. 2

(121) Teacher: OK. So get the money?

(122) You said- you should- get- your money. OK.

(123) What did you say as advice?

(124) Something about- the money- cash?

(125) So what is the sentence?

- (126) You [should?
 (127) Student: [should have some cash.
 (128) Teacher: OK. Good.

5. 2 Collaborative Turn Completion

In these two examples, the teacher urges students to overtake her turn intentionally. Hatch (1992) says, "Teachers and tutors often invite collaborative turn completions as a way of checking students' comprehension. This is projected with rising question intonation followed by a pause, with the hope that the listener can chime in."
 (p.17)

EXAMPLE 5. 2. 1

- (191) Teacher: No. SO, WHAT do you have to do every morning.
 (192) Or what do you have to do EACH day at CCEL.
 (193) At nine o'clock, you have to?
 (194) Student: go to the class
 (195) Teacher: Yes.

EXAMPLE 5. 2. 2

- (373) Teacher: What was the advice?
 (374) What did he say.
 (375) You should?
 (376) Student: start looking for a new boyfriend.

In both examples, the teacher signals students to continue her turn with rising question intonation and a pause. The students can clearly see

that the teacher is trying to check their comprehension and they have to say something. These collaborative turn completions are possible probably because of the students' background. They are accustomed to Western class style, and they regard being cooperative as one of the important things in the class.

6 . Classroom Scripts

Sinclair and Coulthard (1975) made a great step in analyzing language classrooms by introducing a hierarchically structured system called "ranks". In their system, there are four ranks. Rank I is lesson, which is made up of transactions (Rank II). Transactions include exchanges (Rank III), and exchanges are made up of moves (Rank IV), which include acts.

6. 1 Transactions

If we apply this system by Sinclair and Coulthard (1975) to this classroom discourse, the lesson can be divided into three transactions, 1) preliminary, 2) medial and 3) terminal. According to McCarthy (1991, p.15), the two framing moves, together with the question and answer sequence that falls between them, can be called a transaction. Therefore, transactions in this class are as follows.

Between transactions, there are boundaries which include framing and focusing moves. For example, between the preliminary and the medial transactions, the teacher says "Now", and the terminal transaction starts with another framing move "Alright".

The medial transaction also consists of some parts, which are

CHART 6. 1. 1 Transactions and framing moves in the script

(1)-(3) Preliminary transaction

***** ((bell rang))*****

(4)-(409) Medial transaction

(5) Teacher: NOW, do you remember what we are going to do on Thursday?

I. (5)-(86) Introducing the key expression, "should"

(87) Teacher: Well; there are two good ways- there are-

II. (86)-(97) Explaining how to use "should" in advice

(98) Teacher: So can you tell me some of the things you have told ...

III. (98)-(155) Deducing the use of "should" from students

(156) Teacher: OK. Did you- umm- is there something that you have to

(157) do at CCEL?

IV. (156)-(266) Introducing and explaining the use of "have to"

(267) Teacher: OK. NOW I'm going to give you this page.

V. (267)-(318) Pre-listening activity

(318) Teacher: Yes. OK.

(319) Listen to the tape and umm- tell me who they are

(320) when you hear it OK?

(321) SO listen to it first.

(323) Teacher: OK, so who is the boy.

~~VI. (323)-(396) Post-listening activity~~

(397) Teacher: OK. Well-done. S?

~~VII. (397)-(435) Reading activity I~~

(436) Teacher: So? S

(437) Can you read yours out?

(438) What does yours say.

VII. (436)-(504) Reading activity II

(504) Teacher: RIGHT, I don't think we've got time for yours.

(507) Teacher: OK. That was only a piece of paper, this piece of paper.

IX. (507)-(523) Summary of the key expressions

*****((bell rang))*****

(524) Teacher: Alright.

(525) Thank you for doing this.

(524)-(527) Terminal transaction

constructed around the function "giving an advice" and the key expressions "should" and "have to".

One of the remarkable points of this class plan is that all the activities are constructed around the function "giving advice". The teacher started with eliciting the situations of giving advice from students very naturally, and they listened to the tape about a brother giving advice to a sister. Then, they read the advice columns in the

CHART 6. 1. 2 Lesson Structure

- I. Introducing the key expression, "should"
- II. Explaining how to use "should" in giving advice
- III. Deducing the use of "should" from students
- IV. Introducing and explaining the use of "have to"
- V. Pre-listening activity
- VI. Post-listening activity
- VII. Reading activity I
- VIII. Reading activity II
- IX. Summary of the key expressions

newspaper. In other words, three skills, speaking, listening and reading are all integrated in this class plan. Since we do not use these skills separately in the natural setting, this integration is a very effective way for students to acquire the function.

Another notable point of this lesson is that it is very much student-centered. For example, the teacher always tries to elicit the expressions from students' experience. Since we tend to be more concerned or motivated if the topic is drawn from our personal experience, it was very successful. Moreover, the teacher changes her plan very easily depending on students' understanding. For example, she was trying to explain the two expressions "should" and "have to" at the same time, but she decided to focus on "should" first after she checked the students' comprehension. If the teacher had been focusing on the two expressions at the same time, students would have been less interested in the class because it would have been too difficult. Since the teacher changes her plan, the class was comprehensible and interesting for the students. The student-centeredness is a very important factor in the language classroom even in Japan.

6. 2 Exchanges

Sinclair and Coulthard (1975) found a rigid pattern in the traditional language classroom of native speakers. It is the T-S-T (teacher-student-teacher) sequences, and each of them is called an exchange. An exchange consists of three moves that are called initiation, response, and feedback as elements of structure.

This typical initiation-response-feedback routine was found several times in this data.

EXAMPLE 6. 2. 1

- (492) Teacher: And Chiharu? What did you think. T initiation
 (493) Student 1: U::::m- say- ignore your parents- hahaha. S response
 (494) Teacher: OK. T feedback
 (494) And you Yoshiko, what do you think? T initiation
 (495) Student 2: Same idea with H.
 (496) Because um- I di- I did it but I didn't tell my parents.
 S response
 (497) Teacher: OK T feedback

This data includes two exchange sequences. In both exchanges, we can observe the fixed patterns of T-S-T, in other words, the teacher initiates, the students respond, and the teacher gave them feedback.

However, sometimes students can initiate an exchange. Here is the example.

EXAPLE 6. 2. 2

- (65) Teacher: SO *what* do you think I *should* do. T initiation
 (66) Student 1: [Are S initiation(1)
 (67) Student 2: [Are neighbors Japanese? S initiation(1)
 (68) Teacher: Sorry? T response
 (69) Student 2: Are neighbors Japanese? S initiation(2)
 (70) Teacher: Yes. Yes, they are=T response
 (70)'Student 2: ((nods)) S feedback
 (71) Teacher: And are very close like all Japanese houses. T feedback
 (72) Students: ((laugh)) S response

(73) Student 2: So:::,maybe I think I [should see] the neighbors=

S response

(74) Teacher: [should see]

(75) Student 2: =and say we are having a party-very noisy- I'm sorry.

(76) ((laugh))

(77) Teacher: OK. Good idea.

T feedback

(78) I could change it to the school,

(79) or I could go to the neighbors to say sorry,

(80) we will be a bit noisy.

In this exchange, there is an exchange embedded in another exchange. The teacher initiates the exchange first (T initiation), then the student asks more details about the teacher's question by initiating another exchange by herself, S initiation (1)(2). The teacher responds to it (T response), and the student accepted the response by nodding (S feedback). Then, after the teacher's feedback, the student started responding to the first question (S response), and the teacher provided feedback on the second response (T feedback), too.

Students' initiation is very important in the language classrooms. It is because students are more motivated and more active when they take initiative, so that they will learn more. Moreover, taking initiations is indispensable in conversations and communications. We surely have to take initiations during natural conversations outside the classroom. Therefore, more student's' initiation should be observed in the language classroom though it might be very difficult to find students' initiation in the discourse of Japanese students and teachers of native speakers of English.

In this data, there are a lot of exchanges which include repeated initiations without responses. Especially when students cannot answer the questions for some reason this looping with "zero-response" can be observed.

EXAPLE 6. 2. 3

- (295) Teacher: And the man- how old do you think he is. *T initiation
(296) Student 1: ((pause))
(297) Teacher: About the same age? *T initiation
(298) Or older?
(299) Older like?
(300) Student 1: ((pause))
(301) Teacher: Older do you think?...S2? T initiation
(302) Student 2: Yep S response
(300)'Teacher: Right T feedback
(303) Do you think they are friends? T initiation
(304) Student 2: Hmmm S response
(305) Teacher: OK. T feedback
(306) Do you look as they are friends? *T initiation
(307) Students: ((pause))
(308) Teacher: Look at whereabouts they are. T initiation
(309) Where do you think they are talking.
(310) What is the room?
(311) Student 3: There is a sink, and this is a kitchen. S response
(312) Teacher: Yeah, it looks like a house, isn't it. T feedback
(313) So, they could be friends,
(314) OR they could be a couple.

- | | | |
|--------|---|--------------|
| (315) | They could be a young, pretty young couple. | |
| (316) | Who else they could be? | T initiation |
| (317) | Student 1: Brother and sister. | S response |
| (318) | Teacher: Yes | T feedback |
| (318)' | OK. | T frame |
| (319) | Listen to the tape, | T initiation |
| (319)' | and umm...tell me who they are. | |

In the conversation above, there are three "zero-response" looped teacher's initiations (marked with *) without even any nonverbal reactions. These loops can be a particular characteristic of Japanese students. McCarthy (1991) states that there are some cultures where silence has a more acceptable role than in others. (p.129) In Japanese culture, the students tend to be more formal and hate making mistakes in front of others. Therefore, if the question is difficult or unless they are nominated, the students tend to keep quiet.

7. Speech Acts

Hatch (1992) cited the Seale's (1969, 1976) system of classifying utterances into a small set of functions. They are 1) directives, 2) commissives, 3) representatives, 4) declaratives and 5) expressives. I would like to give example of each speech act from the script, and discuss them.

7. 1 Directives

Directives are used when we make requests. Moreover, it is found that the teachers make a large number of requests using directives in classrooms. Mainly, there were three kinds of directives found in the

script, 1) imperatives, 2) imbedded imperatives and 3) wh-questions making requests.

First of all, there were many directives using imperatives. These sentences are clearly expecting somebody to do something. Therefore, they are directives.

EXAMPLE 7. 1. 1

(26) Teacher: Tell me.

(31) Teacher: Give me an idea.

(33) Teacher: Change the situation.

(57) Teacher: Tell me what I can do with my neighbors.

(269) Teacher: Don't let it out, all right?

(442) Teacher: She said...read it again.

Secondly, one example of imbedded imperative is found in the script.

EXAPLE 7. 1. 2.

(436) Teacher: So, S1?

(437) Can you read yours out?

(438) What does yours say.

This utterance by the teacher takes the imbedded imperative form, which is used for someone not so familiar, physically distant. However, this is soon followed by hinting with wh-question, saying, "What does yours say?" This hinting is, according to Hatch (1992, p.122) used among persons with shared rules.

There are more examples of hinting directives using wh-questions

elsewhere.

EXAMPLE 7. 1. 3

(38) Teacher: What do you think.

(118) Teacher: What was you were talking

(373) Teacher: What was your advice. Yoshiko?

Again, according to Hatch (1992, p.122), hinting is used among persons with shared rules. Without considering the context, or a sense of belonging to the class as a group, these sentences seem simply asking questions. However, in the series of questioning in the classroom, for example, (38) surely means, "Tell me your opinion.", and (118) means, "Repeat what you were saying?". Moreover, (373) means, "Tell me your advice to her.", and all of them are considered to be directives.

There are so many directives in the classroom transcript, and the teacher uttered all of them. However, this is very natural if we think about the teachers' role to facilitate the class along the plan.

7. 2 Commissives

According to Hatch (1992, p.125), commissives are statements that function as promises or refusals for actions. There were three commissives found in this classroom script.

EXAMPLE 7. 2. 1

(10) Teacher: That's why- once more- I will go through the food,

(115) Teacher: I'll write that for you.

(505) Teacher: So don't worry.

(506)

We won't go back.

In (10) and (506), the teacher is making promises. Since they were going to have a potluck party at the teacher's house next day, and the teacher wants to know if the students all know what they should bring, (10) means that they are going to talk about the food after the class. On the other hand, in (507) the teacher says that she will not go through the rest of the exercises because they are running out of time. Both of them are promises, therefore, commissives.

Furthermore, (115) seems to be a commissive, too. Since the student spoke in a low voice, the teacher offered to write it down so that other students can understand it. According to Coulthard (1977, p.24), commissives are to commit the speaker himself to acting and it necessarily involves intention. In this case, the teacher, in fact, tries to commit herself in writing on the blackboard though it does not sound like a promise. Therefore, the sentence (115) can be a commissive, too.

7. 3 Representatives

Representative speech acts are those that can be judged for truth value. There are several representatives in the script. Here are the examples.

EXAMPLE 7. 3. 1

(84) Teacher: It's a good idea.

(396) Teacher: So, that's compliment, but good.

(423) Teacher: That's a very good advice.

According to Coulthard (1977, p.25), using representatives is to commit the speaker to "something being the case". In (84) and (423), the teacher believes that the idea or the advice is good. In (396), the teacher is talking about making compliments while cheering up somebody, and she expressed her belief, "It is a compliment, but it is good still". Therefore, this is also a representative.

8 . Summary ans Implications

As is said before, this is a preliminary study to overlook the characteristics of the classroom discourse data. However, there were several findings. For opening and closing signals, it was found that those signals clearly exist in classroom discourse, and the bell and the teacher often give the signals. For backchannel signals, we could observe the teacher was encouraging the student to talk. Because of the alignment between the teacher and the student, the student didn't take it as interruption, and continued to talk.

For repetitions and paraphrasing, three benefits for paraphrasing were mentioned. They are useful in a sense of 1) time expansion, 2) giving more input to students, and 3) keeping questions at the same difficulty level. Then two ways of modifying questions were presented. Both 1) narrowing and 2) rephrasing with alternative or "or-choice" questions were observed in the data and thought to be common and effective in the language classrooms.

As for turn taking signals, the data showed surprising evidences which contradict the students' cultural background. There were several

points where students overlapping the teacher, and students spontaneously complete the teacher's turn together. Moreover, there are three examples of the students' overlapping the teacher. In addition to the alignments with the teacher, the students are thought to be accustomed to the Western culture and lesson style from their experiences in New Zealand.

According to Sinclair and Coulthard' system (1975), the lesson was classified into four ranks, lesson, transactions, exchanges, moves, and acts. Through this analysis, we could find the three facts that this lesson was clearly divided into parts by the teacher's framing moves, and that it was structured around one function, giving advice and it was very much student-centered.

As for exchanges, there were many examples of zero-responded initiations although the study sought for T-S-T interactions. Though silence might be more acceptable in Japanese cultures, since the present study had assumed that T-S interactions might be a clue to a "good English conversation lesson", this result is very disappointing. This section will be reexamined for the future research.

For speech acts, it was found that the teachers make a large number of requests using directives in classrooms, and this must be an important feature of the classroom data. However, commissives and representatives were not so common in this data. Since this is a preliminary study, more specific research, such as comparing the number of commissives and representatives between the classrooms taught by a native teacher and a non-native teacher, might be left for a future issue.

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