

# A Conversation Analysis of the Acquisition and Use of Turn-taking Practices in an English Discussion Class

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## ABSTRACT

Turn-taking is an essential part of interactional competence. In order to successfully take turns and manage the floor, English language learners must learn to negotiate transitional relevance places (TRPs) in the L2. As part of a communicative English language course for first year students at a university in Japan, students receive instruction on how to use prefabricated lexical chunks to take and pass the floor. This paper uses conversation analysis (CA) to observe how students integrate these explicitly taught adjacency pairs into preexisting strategies for managing TRPs. Three sixteen-minute discussions in a testing environment were recorded over a period of eight weeks and transcribed. The results of the CA indicate that students orient to a mutually constructed set of turn-taking practices in the L2 that include a wide variety of mechanisms and strategies for negotiating TRPs, yet maintain an L1 orientation to TRPs themselves.

## INTRODUCTION

Interactional competence (IC) as a pedagogical pursuit is generally credited (Barraja-Rohan, 2011; R. Young, 2011) to Kramsch's (1986) assertion that "language is primarily a *functional* tool, one for communication [...] bound to its situational context" (p. 366) and her subsequent proposal to redirect "the enthusiasm generated by the proficiency movement toward a push for interactional competence" (p. 370). In the nearly three decades since this initial call to action, IC has been further developed and applied to both studies of second language acquisition (SLA) and foreign language teaching practices (Barraja-Rohan, 2011; Wong & Waring, 2010).

R. Young (2011) advances Kramsch's initial definition of IC by expanding the pragmatic and context-sensitive aspect to include the criterion that linguistic and interactional resources employed between interlocutors are done so "mutually and reciprocally by all participants in a particular discursive practice. This means that IC is not the knowledge or the possession of an individual person, but is co-constructed by all participants in a discursive practice, and IC varies with the practice and with the participants" (p.428).

IC figures prominently in Celce-Murcia's (2007) model for communicative competence, where she advocates for its explicit instruction in foreign language education by noting that "the typical performance of speech acts and speech act sets can differ in important ways from language to language" (p. 49). An essential component to interactional competence is turn-taking (Barraja-Rohan, 2011; Celce-Murcia, 2007) as Wong & Waring (2010) simply state, "[w]ithout turns, there is no interaction" (p. 15). Undoubtedly, English language learners encounter difficulty in learning how to take turns effectively in English (Cook, 1989; Dörnyei and Thurrel, 1994), and Japanese learners are no exception (Munby, 2005; D. Young, 2013).

The reasons for this become apparent when one considers the differences in the formation of turn-construction units (TCUs) and turn projection between English and Japanese. In Japanese, turn endings are critical for turn projection, whereas turn beginnings are far more important in English (Tanaka, 1999; Thompson and Couper-Kuhlen, 2005). Perhaps the most significant cause of this difference in turn projection is the two languages' dissimilar grammar systems, as Thompson & Couper-Kuhlen (2005) demonstrate that the grammatical clause is critical to turn projection. However, this is only part of the picture at least where English turn projection is

concerned. Ford et al. (1996) illustrate that prosody must also be considered alongside a syntactic/semantic analysis of turn-projection. Furthermore, Goodwin (2000) makes a robust case for the role that action and gaze play in talk-in-interaction. Therefore a conversational analysis (CA) approach which can account for not only syntax and prosody, but gesture and gaze as well is ideal for observing how English language learners take turns in their L2.

Historically, CA grew out of the field of sociology in the 1960s but has since been applied to various other fields (Hutchby & Wooffitt, 2008; Markee, 2000; ten Have, 1999; Wong & Waring, 2010). CA as a research methodology into L2 acquisition and use has become more and more common in the field of foreign language teaching in recent years (Barraja-Rohan, 2011; Hosoda et al., 2004; Markee, 2000; Wong & Waring, 2010), and is the natural method of choice when investigating turn-taking. Harvey Sacks, Emanuel Schegloff, and Gail Jefferson (1974) made perhaps the most significant early contribution to the field of CA with their detailed examination of how turns are allocated and organized in discourse.

In their seminal paper, Sacks et al. put forth a widely accepted set of basic rules for how turn changes occur:

- 1) At a transition relevance place (TRP)<sup>14</sup>
  - a. If the current speaker (CS) selects a specific next speaker (NS), that NS should take a turn.
  - b. If CS does not select a NS, any NS may self-select.
  - c. If neither rule (a) nor rule (b) is employed, CS may extend his/her turn.
- 2) Rules 1(a)—(c) operate again for the next TRP.

These rules can be viewed operationally, so that the success or failure of a particular rule operation will result in either the beginning of a new turn or else the execution of a subsequent operation.

However, the problem remains of defining a turn, which unfortunately proves problematic as turn boundaries are often difficult to pin down (Furo, 2001; Kern, 2009; D. Young, 2013). Crookes (1990) defines this discourse unit as “one or more streams of speech bounded by speech of another, usually an interlocutor” (p. 185). For the current study, a turn will be defined as a speaker’s control of the floor as recognized by the other participants, bounded by the speech of another excluding back-channeling (reacting), requests for clarity (negotiating meaning as a listener), or follow-up questions, as such conditional entry “may not so much interrupt the turn or the action(s) being accomplished in it, as forward the projected turn or its action project in some manner” (Lerner, 1996, p. 239).

## METHOD

In order to observe the development of turn-taking behaviors among Japanese learners of English, a compulsory English discussion class composed of eight first year university students was selected for conversation analysis. The class was chosen for its relatively low level and affect, as well as for its relative gender balance, on the assumption that these factors would better yield perceptible changes in turn-taking strategies over the period of observation.

Students in the course are explicitly taught prefabricated lexical chunks to bolster

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<sup>14</sup> Transition relevance places are commonly defined as “conjunction points among grammatical, intonational, and semantic completion points” (Furo, 2001).

formulaic competence as framed in Celce-Murcia’s (2007) model of communicative competence. In week seven of the first fourteen-week semester, students learn function phrases that directly target the interactional competency of taking, holding, and relinquishing the floor (Hurling, 2012). These phrases are presented as what Lerner (2003) dubs “two part-pairs” consisting of a “sequence initiating action” and a response, requiring participants to manage floor changes cooperatively.

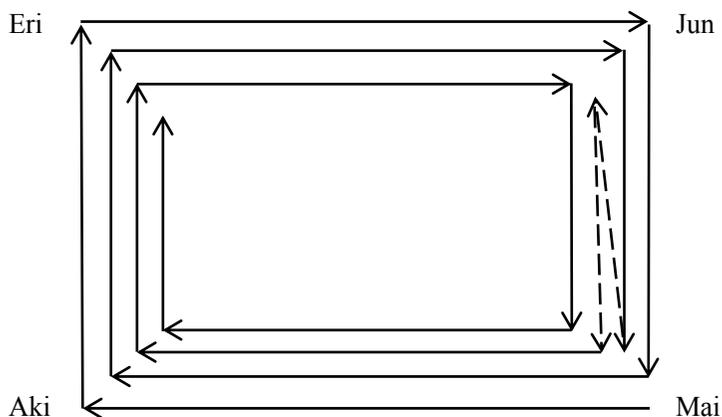
Participants in the current study were video recorded in a testing environment in weeks five, nine, and thirteen of this fourteen-lesson (one 90-minute lesson per week) communicative English discussion course before subsequent CA was conducted to determine what turn-taking strategies were used before and after the introduction of the two part-pair lexical chunks for taking turns. Video recording allowed paralinguistic mechanisms such as gesture and gaze to be considered along with lexical, syntactic, and prosodic strategies for negotiating TRPs.

The primary concern during CA was *not* with how TRPs were projected in the L2, but how the participants mutually negotiated them over the eight-week span of observation with particular regard to how the prefabricated lexical chunks were integrated into preexisting turn-taking practices. Therefore, students who missed the explicit instruction of the turn-taking phrases in lesson seven were eliminated from the study. There was only one such student in the selected class, and so his test groups were recorded but not analyzed.

The transcription key (see Appendix) was borrowed from Wong & Waring (2010) and adapted to include gaze coding borrowed from Lerner (2003).

## RESULTS & DISCUSSION

The turn order in the first sixteen-minute discussion test, which occurred before the introduction of the two part-pair turn-taking phrases, proceeded in a proscribed, circular fashion as reflected in the turn map below.



*Figure 1.* Turn map for the first discussion. Solid lines represent turns in which floor changes also occur. Dashed lines represent conditional entry phrasal turns into the turn space of another speaker. Underlined names indicate the first speaker.

Munby (2005) observed a similar, circular pattern in a CA study of four students in a similar

environment (an EFL class at a Japanese university). Such patterned turn-taking may arise from the need for Japanese speakers to establish a hierarchy within the group (Fujimoto, 2010), and may be further influenced by the participants' gender roles (Itakura & Tsui, 2004).

Looking closely at how each turn transition is managed, CA yields that thirteen of fourteen turn allocations operate by Sacks et al.'s first rule of negotiating TRPs: CS selects NS. All of these allocations occur by the CS selecting the NS with an explicitly taught lexical chunk that accomplishes the interactional discourse function of eliciting an opinion, for example "What do you think?" (Hurling, 2012). Participants directed these otherwise undirected questions by including some form explicit address: CS directs his/her gaze to the NS, CS utilizes NS's name, or both in conjunction (Lerner, 2003). Only one of the fourteen turn allocations in the current study began with an undirected question. In this instance the CS employed the lexical chunk but did not direct his gaze or use a name to determine the NS, thereby forcing an NS to self-select. Perhaps more intriguingly, ten of fourteen turn endings included a discourse marker post-positional to the TRP to signal that the turn had finished. These post-positional markers always occurred before the CS's directed question to select NS.

206 Mai: It's mainly because eto (1.0) people (1.5) people who who want to study at university  
 207 (2.2) for example philosophy (5.3) other things (2.6) they (0.8) they need to go to  
 208 university school (3.6) they need not (1.0) to go to cram schools, I think. (1.7) What's  
 209 your opinion, Aki?  
 210 Ma-----  
 211 Aki: I disagree with you.

This excerpt exhibits a typical floor change in the first discussion. Mai elaborates on a previous point by providing a reason for her opinion that the university entrance exam system is not the best way for all students to apply to university in Japan. The TRP at the end of her turn is adequately projected both syntactically and prosodically at the end of the clause "they need not (1.0) to go to cram school,". Furthermore, the passage of the TRP is flagged by the post-positional discourse marker "I think." After a brief pause, Mai selects the NS, Aki, with an opinion elicitation question accompanied by two forms of explicit address: name usage and gaze direction held for 1.3 seconds.

In the second discussion, a completely different pattern of both turn order and speaker selection appears. For one thing turn order is less proscribed (see turn map below).

## New Directions in Teaching and Learning English Discussion

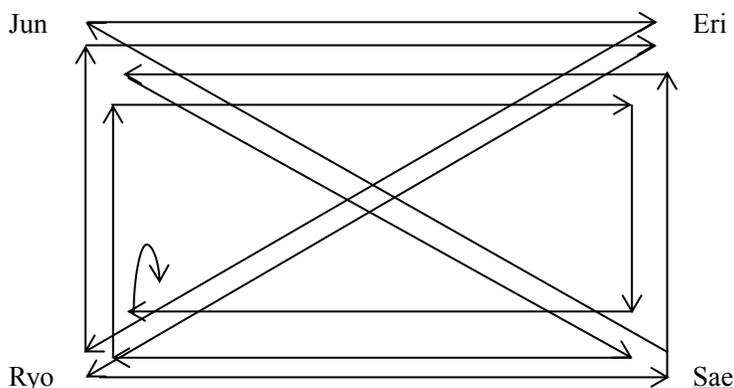


Figure 2. Turn map for second discussion. Solid lines represent turns in which floor changes also occur. Underlined names indicate the first speaker.

More notably, not one of the sixteen turn allocations was realized via Sacks et al.'s first rule. Indeed, all sixteen speaker changes at TRPs followed the second rule, meaning every turn was claimed by NS self-selection. Compared to the first discussion, this is a radical departure but has its explanation in the curriculum. Two weeks after the first recorded discussion and two weeks before the current one, participants were taught function phrases for turn taking. More specifically, participants learned to use a sequence-initiating (first pair-part) lexical chunk as CS to open the floor (i.e. "Does anyone want to comment?") upon completion of their speaking turn, as well as to use a responding (second pair-part) lexical chunk to close the floor and claim a turn as NS (i.e. "Can I make a comment?"), (Lesley et al, 2014). Of the sixteen turn allocations observed in this second discussion, eight were initiated with a first pair-part, while all sixteen were terminated with a second pair-part.

167 Eri: [So::] parents put a lot of pressure to them children. For example, (1.3) parents cost a  
 168 lot of money (1.9) them children to go to (0.9) cram schools (1.1) and so on. Students-  
 169 so students must feel a lot of (0.7) pressures.  
 170 EJ----- Er-----  
 171 Ryo: M.: [I see.]  
 172 Jun: [I see.]  
 173 Sae: [I thin]k so.  
 174 Eri: Does anyone want to comment?  
 175 Er-----Ej-----  
 176 (0.9)  
 177 Jun: Can I make a comment?  
 178 Je----

This excerpt is the 'cleanest' example of a two pair-part turn allocation. Eri finishes her speaking turn, projecting the TRP at the end of the grammatical clause "so students must feel a lot of (0.7) pressure." The content also summarizes Eri's initial opinion, which helps the listeners anticipate the TRP. The simultaneous back-channeling by all listeners shows that they have successfully recognized the TRP. Eri then initiates the turn-taking sequence with the first pair-part by opening

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the floor with the lexical chunk “Does anyone want to comment?” Jun then completes the sequence with the second part-pair “Can I make a comment?” to self-select as NS. This completion is the quickest of this discussion (the pause between sequence pairs is less than one second), which may exhibit Jun’s orientation to the new floor management technique, though it is also worth noting that Eri’s gaze is directed at Jun when she finishes the sequence initiating first pair-part, which may have in part operated to select Jun as the NS. So here we can see how “[a]ction sequence initiation can contribute both to current speaker’s techniques for selecting next speaker AND to self-selection of next speaker” (Lerner, 2003). Even when an NS self-selects, turn order is co-constructed.

In the other eight instances of turn allocation (those in which the sequence was not initiated by a first pair-part) NSs were left to identify the passing of the TRP by other means before self-selecting. In some instances, a protracted pause length between turns seemed to indicate students’ difficulty allocating or claiming a turn (Harumi, 2001). One clear example can be seen in the following excerpt:

80 Ryo: Because (1.6) m:: (2.1) I depend (3.0) no e: sorry ((Holds hand up)) (1.9) my parents  
 81 (2.1) wash my clothes (1.0) an::d cook my dinner (0.8) an::d (1.6) <pay my university  
 82 money> (5.3) so: I’m not (2.3) independent.  
 83 Sae: I understand.  
 84 Jun: I understand.  
 85 Eri: I understand.  
 86 (7.5)  
 87 Jun: E: ((Ryo and Jun exchange glances.)) Can I make a comment, thi- follow up question?  
 88 Jr-----

From this excerpt it is clear that at least Sae has recognized the TRP at the end of Ryo’s turn. Jun and Eri may simply be echoing Sae, and the long pause that follows these back-channel responses indicates some confusion as to whether the floor is open or closed or if Ryo would initiate a floor change sequence with a first pair-part. Eventually, Jun determines that the floor is open, likely through the exchange of glances with Ryo, at which point Jun claims a turn by deploying the prefabricated chunk “Can I make a comment?” At other times, NSs self-selected at the TRP without a significant pause between turns:

108 Eri: It’s mainly because (1.6) we:: we will become (1.2) we will become working members  
 109 of (2.9) s:: social. hh <Then we:: can’t rely on our> (1.1) parents. (2.0) For example  
 110 <to pay rent for houses> and so on. So (2.3) university students should try to be (.)  
 111 independent. This experience <will be useful> in future.  
 112 Er---Ej---Er-----  
 113 Jun: I see.  
 114 Ryo: I see. Can I make a comment?  
 115 Rj-----

Such clean operation of Sacks et al.’s rule 1(b) indicates a clear orientation to the TRP on the part of the NS. A close look at lines 110 and 111 reveal clear TRP projection.

On the other hand, significant pauses were sometimes observed during turn allocations initiated by a first part-pair, suggesting that participants much prefer allowing a period of silence

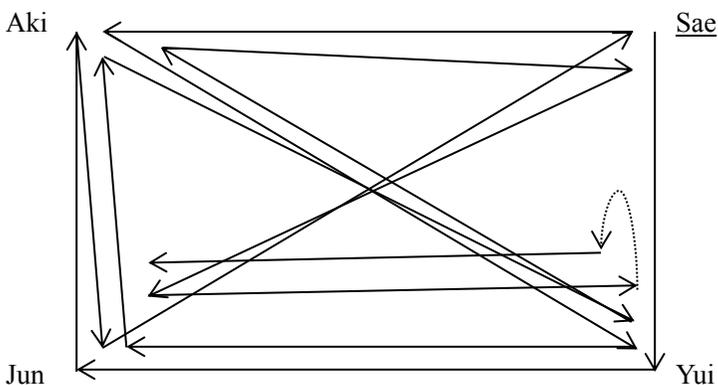
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between turns rather than overlapping them and creating simultaneous speech, even or perhaps especially when the floor is completely open.

- 70 Eri: Does anyone want to comment?  
 71 Er---Ej-----Er-----  
 72 (9.7) ((Eri holds her gaze on Ryo. Jun glances at Ryo, who glances back.))  
 73 Ryo: Can I make a comment?

In a CA of native Japanese speakers using their L1, Kitamura (2001) found that speakers often allow a pause between turns rather than overlapping speaking turns. This would appear to be a transference of the L1 turn-taking system, as Furo (2004) found in an exhaustive comparison of turn-taking systems in English and Japanese that the former exhibits a more collaborative floor with NS allocations occurring before TRPs (resulting in simultaneous, overlapping speech), while the latter makes more frequent use of NS allocations after TRPs (resulting in pauses between speakers).

It is worth noting, however, that in this last excerpt Ryo was the only participant yet to contribute a turn to the discussion at this point. Interestingly, Eri directed her gaze at Ryo even though she opened the floor for any speaker to claim, a contradiction in gesture and speech action. It seems likely that the other three participants held the silence in order to diplomatically allocate Ryo a turn. As no overt NS speaker selection by CS was observed at all in this second discussion, participants seemed to be consciously trying to use the two part-pair prefabricated phrases that were explicitly taught between the first and second recorded discussions. Taken together, these observations reveal not only the participants' continuing exploration of turn-taking mechanisms, but also their sensitivity to the testing environment and adaption to perceived performative expectations. The turn map from the third and final discussion in week thirteen indicates significant progress in establishing normative practice for at least turn order, if not also allocation.



*Figure 3.* Turn map for third discussion. Solid lines represent turns in which floor changes also occur. Dotted lines represent turn changes across topics in which a speaker takes a consecutive but separate turn. Underlined names indicate the first speaker.

Turning to the CA, Sacks et al.'s rules 1(a) and 1(b) for turn allocation were manifested far more

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evenly when compared to the previous two discussions. Participants in the final discussion opted for Rule 1(a) (CS selects NS) eight times out of seventeen.

- 200 Sae: Because e:to: (1.1) being- being kind to other people makes people happy and I- (1.2)  
 201 I also can be happy.  
 202 Sj----Sa----  
 203 (1.7)  
 204 Yui: [I see.]  
 205 Aki: [I see.]  
 206 Jun: I see.  
 207 (1.2)  
 208 Sae: What do you think, Jun?  
 209 (1.9)  
 210 Jun: I think (.) so too, everyone.

When this failed, Rule 1(b) (NS self-selects) was executed the remaining nine turn allocations out of seventeen. Crucially, only three of these nine occurred as a two pair-part. In other words, six of these nine self-selections were unaided by the previous speaker initiating a floor change sequence with a phrase like “Does anyone want to comment?” This ratio is in keeping with a previous study on the deployment of these same two part-pair lexical chunks at the same stage in the same curriculum. In this study, only 39.8% of turns ended with a sequence initiating function phrase among 26 participants and 98 total turns (D. Young, 2014). A typical instance of self-selection in this third discussion is as follows:

- 222 Jun: Have trouble, If I (.) have (.) trouble (3.5) When I have trouble (3.5) if (3.5) others  
 223 people, (1.0) don't help, (1.8) fee- I feel (2.4) very sad. (2.1) So (0.9) I- (2.0) I: (.)  
 224 helped (1.1) other people. I help (1.6) other people (2.0) >chigau< helping other  
 225 people is (1.0) most (0.5) important.  
 226 Js-----  
 227 Aki: I s[ee].  
 228 Sae: [I s]ee.  
 229 Yui: I see. (1.2) Can I make a comment?  
 230 Yj-----

Such a distribution of both turns themselves and the actions by which they are allocated supports Hutchby and Wooffitt's (2008) assertion that Sacks et al.'s rule-set “operates as an oriented-to set of normative practices which members use to accomplish orderly turn-taking” (p. 51).

## CONCLUSION

It has long been understood that negotiating TRPs is collaborative, interactional, and context sensitive (Lerner, 2003; Sacks et al., 1974). Over thirteen weeks of overt instruction on performing various communicative discourse functions using prefabricated phrases, including those that aid in the negotiation of TRPs, the participants in this study appear to have cooperatively created and oriented to their own set of turn-taking practices, blending L1 transference and paralinguistic devices with explicitly taught L2 lexical chunks. However, students maintained an L2 orientation to the TRPs themselves, as no simultaneous or

overlapping speech was ever observed despite the acquisition and integration of the new turn-taking mechanisms into the group's preexisting set of practices.

The development of turn-taking strategies in L2 English for L1 Japanese learners, as well as their ability to successfully manage TRPs, is clearly *not* determined by the instruction of two-part adjacency pairs. Rather, students merely integrate these into a framework that they co-create continually. This framework includes a number of other mechanisms, including directed questions and gaze, as is shown through the current study and corroborated by others (Hosoda et al., 2004; Munby, 2005; Young, 2014). The current study notably demonstrates the participants' preference for using those lexical chunks presented within the curriculum as "Asking for Others' Opinions" (Lesley et al., 2014) to select NS. In these instances, the function phrase should not be viewed as it was initially presented by the instructor, but by how it is deployed by the student.

The implications for not only how turn-taking is taught to students, but also how it is perceived by the teacher, cannot be understated. The current study provides further evidence that teachers concerned with interactional competence should be fostering a broader range of turn-taking mechanisms beyond narrow adjacency pairs, as has been previously argued (Barraja-Rohan, 2011; Fujimoto, 2010; Kellas, 2012; Kern, 2009; D. Young, 2013). Perhaps more critically, teachers should stop assessing students on their ability to manage TRPs and take turns solely by the use of explicitly taught target language. Students develop robust systems for actualizing this component of interactional competency quite well on their own, and they should be recognized for such gains.

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## APPENDIX

The transcription key used in this study was adapted from Wong & Waring (2010) and Lerner (2003).

.	(period) falling intonation
?	(question mark) rising intonation
,	(comma) continuing intonation
-	(hyphen) abrupt cut-off
::	(colon(s)) prolonging of sound
<u>word</u>	(underlining) stress
<u>word</u>	the more underlining, the greater the stress
WORD	(all caps) loud speech
°word°	(degree symbols) quiet speech
↑ word	(upward arrow) raised pitch
↓ word	(downward arrow) lowered pitch
>word<	(more than and less than) quicker speech
<word>	(less than and more than) slowed speech
<	(less than) jump start or rushed speech
hh	(series of h's) aspiration or laughter
.hh	(h's preceded by dot) inhalation
(hh)	(h's in parentheses) aspiration or laughter inside word boundaries
[word]	(set of lined up brackets) beginning and ending of
[word]	simultaneous or overlapping speech
=	(equal sign) latch or continuing speech with no break in between
(0.5)	(number in parentheses) length of silence in tenths of a second
(.)	(period in parentheses) micro-pause: 0.4 second or less
( )	(empty parenthesis) inaudible talk
(word)	(word or phrase in parentheses) transcriptionist doubts
((nods))	(double parentheses) non-speech activity or transcriptionist comment
\$word\$	(dollar signs) smiley voice
Sr-----	(capital letter, lower case letter, and hyphens) speaker's gaze at recipient, measured by hyphens in tenths of a second