Whose Turn is it? Participation and Passing the Floor
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ABSTRACT

Student participation and cooperation in group discussions are intrinsically related to turn-taking, as a cooperative participant must successfully indicate their desire to speak (take the floor), as well as effectively end their turn (pass the floor). Non-participatory or uncooperative students are consequently less practiced in taking and passing the floor. Likewise, students who lack the necessary linguistic forms to take and pass the floor are less inclined to participate or cooperate in group discussion. This paper examines the behavior of an EDC Level 3 female student who appeared reluctant to take the floor and routinely failed to pass it. The specific floor-passing mechanism of asking a question is discussed within the context of the EDC curriculum.

INTRODUCTION

Furo (2004) notes the difficulty in defining what constitutes a speaking turn. In keeping with EDC curriculum as pertains to scoring a speaking turn on discussion tests, this paper considers a turn as successfully taking the floor (the speaker is recognized by other members of the group) and providing an utterance with semantic content. This definition does not include passing the floor, as a speaker may end their turn without doing so. Successful floor passing is beneficial for group cohesion, though, as it signals the completion of a turn and invites others to speak.

In order to observe a contrast in floor-passing behaviors, I selected an EDC Level 3 class of 7 students for the range of ability and personality I noted among the group during the first four weeks of the second semester. After recording my observations on the first discussion test (lesson 5), I discovered in my notes one specific behavior which seemed to be creating a logjam in each discussion. Furthermore, this behavior was only being displayed by one student in particular, but upon reflection I could recall many of my former and current EDC students who exhibited the same behavior. This student, whom I will refer to by the pseudonym Risa, was an active and engaged listener who nonetheless usually took the last speaking turn in her group and never successfully passed the floor upon completing her speaking turn. Tanaka (2000, p.105) notes that the beginning of a speaking turn in English is important for projecting the shape of the turn, whereas in Japanese turn-endings "are critical for turn projection." When a Japanese speaker of L2 English fails to complete the turn, next speakers (NSs) must first determine that the floor holder has finished his/her turn and then self-select to speak next. Risa's failure to pass the floor routinely disrupted the flow of discussion as her fellow group members had to first determine that Risa had in fact finished speaking before someone self-selected to speak next.

When the current speaker (CS) fails to select the NS, the NS often self-selects from the CS's right in the seating position (Munby, 2005). Tracking the turn order of four Japanese learners of English, Munby found that eight of 16 turns passed directly to the right in a 13 minute discussion, positing that "[g]enuine instances of self-selection are rare in this conversation perhaps because of the predictability of the circular turn-taking practice" (2005, p.175). Fujimoto (2010) argues that such patterned turn-taking among Japanese speakers arises from the need to establish a hierarchy within the group. Itakura & Tsui (2004, p.243) argue that this hierarchy is closely tied to gender, and that the gender dominance of Japanese male speakers is attributed to a "self-oriented conversational style," supported and perpetuated by Japanese female speaker's "other-oriented conversational style." Thus, this dynamic is mutually constructed. We can begin to see that one speaker's inability to pass the floor not only impacts the whole group, but arises from that speaker's relationship to the group as a whole.

DISCUSSION

In an extensive comparison between turn-taking in English and Japanese, Furo (2004) found that English employs a more collaborative floor with more frequent floor changes occurring before complex transitional relevance places (CTRPs)[1] while the Japanese floor has more changes occurring at CTRPs. According to Kern (2009), speaker changes occur at transition relevance places (TRPs)[2] in one of three ways:

1) CS selects NS.
2) If rule one is not employed, NS self-selects.
3) If neither rule one nor rule two is employed, CS extends his/her turn.

Munby (2005) outlines various floor-passing mechanisms that occur at TRPs within the discussion. These include asking a question, nomination of NS, completion of the grammatical clause, termination of hand gestures, use of phrases, falling intonation, and code-switching. More than one mechanism can be employed simultaneously. Of the 16 turns Munby observed, five asked a question to end the turn. Furo further found that Japanese speakers tend to "invite interlocutors' backchannels by using questions and sentence final particles that function to establish a collaborative relationship with interlocutors" (2004, p.193). It would seem that Japanese speakers of English are fully equipped by their L1 to pass the floor by using open or directed questions at the end of their turn, though naturally this strategy is not exclusively employed. It follows that when a CS fails to pass the floor, there are two possible ways in which the group negotiates an NS:

1) The NS self-selects from the speaker's right or some other proscribed, mutually constructed pattern.
2) The NS self-selects when a proscribed pattern is not followed.

With outcome one, the discussion proceeds unnaturally, at least as we would define a natural pattern of discourse in English. With outcome two, the CS's failure to pass the floor places additional communicative burdens on others within the group to self-select and attempt to create a more natural pattern of discourse. In either case, the results for the group are negative.

With specific regard to floor-passing, I stated previously that Risa uniformly failed. Risa did not take a speaking turn in the first group discussion of lesson 6, and in the second, 16-minute, discussion she took only one turn. This turn came with under three minutes remaining. The following week, Risa took and abandoned one turn during the first discussion. Upon abandoning this turn, Risa attempted to pass the floor with an inappropriate question[3], which caused a moment of confusion in her group. In the second, 16 minute, discussion, she took one turn with one minute remaining in discussion time. She again failed to pass the floor with a question. Risa was placed in a group with no men for this longer discussion with the hopes that she would take the floor sooner or more often (Itakura & Tsui 2004, p.243), but the performance was the same as the previous week. It was painfully clear at this point that Risa was reluctant to take the floor and did not appear capable of passing it. The next and final week of regular class during the observation period unfortunately witnessed no improvement, as Risa took one turn in each discussion but never passed the floor with a question. Across eight group discussions during the period of observation (lessons 5 through 9), Risa spoke in final position five times,

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[1] Furo defines CTRPs as "conjunction points among grammatical, intonational, and semantic completion points" (Furo, 2004, p.17)

[2] CTRPs are alternatively referred to as TRPs in the literature, and will be referred to as such here.

[3] "Where did you hear that?" (Asking Others to Report Information)

middle position twice, and initial position never. The instances of passing the floor with a question were far fewer than her classmates (see Appendix – Table 1).

At this point it is useful to consider Risa's successes in contrast to her shortcomings. She actively reacts to other speakers, agrees or disagrees readily, and regularly asks follow-up questions. She also excels in negotiation of meaning as a listener: she paraphrases others in almost every discussion and gamely assists her classmates when they struggle. I feel it is important not to undercut Risa's ability to communicate in total, but rather draw attention to a specific deficiency amid an otherwise capable set of communicative tools. In the second discussion test of the semester—which coincided with the final day of my formal observations of Risa's behavior—Risa received full points for content and communication, and notched four points out of five for questions. Risa almost always takes the floor by using a Joining a Discussion function phrase taught in the first semester. Two of the five phrases taught in this lesson were for Asking Others to Join, which were reintroduced this semester in lesson 3 as functions for Checking If Everyone Is Finished. We can reasonably conclude that Risa's inability to pass the floor is not owing to the fault of EDC curriculum of instruction alone, but likely some combination of student personality and classroom dynamic. Risa appears reticent—not unable—to express herself in English.

By comparing the number and length of her turns to those of her classmates, Risa could be described as non-participatory. However, it is important not to unnecessarily pressure non-participatory students to take turns if they are unprepared or unwilling to speak. Seiko Harumi has written extensively on Japanese uses of silence while communicating, including silence as truthfulness, social discretion, embarrassment, defiance, or wordless communication (1999). Harumi further states that "individual responsibility and choice should be respected in student communication" (1999, p.7). While such respect is certainly responsible teaching, it creates the concern that overly silent students continue to use silence in a Japanese mode at the expense of improving verbal communication skills in English. After all, the final aim of learning English discussion skills is to equip students to engage in a more natural pattern of English discourse outside of the classroom environment. Harumi (2001) also notes that silence may arise from a problem with turn-taking, as silent students may not be properly allocated a turn or have difficulty claiming a turn. As noted above, Risa is a clearly engaged listener, though not a frequent or a prolific speaker. She is participating in her own fashion, even when silent.

In light of this, it may be more productive to consider Risa as *uncooperative* rather than *non-participatory*, as she participates as an active listener but does not cooperate by passing the floor. A silent student is not necessarily a non-participatory one. Additionally, a student may be participatory (take a fair share of speaking time) but not be cooperative (fail to take or pass the floor smoothly). As the Appendix shows, the male speakers in this group were generally less cooperative than the female speakers (excluding Risa) insofar as they used questions to take and pass the floor. Our challenge, then, is to help all of our students find a balance between using silence effectively and participating productively *as a speaker* in group discussions while successfully taking and passing the floor. Asking directed questions at TRPs may combat this issue, as participatory students can allocate turns to non-participatory ones, and the latter can in turn cooperate by repeating this behavior.

The question of what constitutes "natural discourse" remains. We teach EDC students to use questions as turn-taking mechanisms, but how often do native speakers, however defined, use these mechanisms? It's safe to say that we hear our students ask "Can I make a comment?" far more often in one lesson than we ask that same question in a month. This high frequency is far from natural, but it is effective in clearly negotiating turn-taking for our students within EDC. As Seedhouse (1996, p.23) argues, an "institutional variety of discourse produced by a speech

community […] convened for the institutional purpose of learning English" is far more realistic for English language learners and teachers alike. Some clever students have referred to our EDC variety of English as *Rikkyo-ben* [Rikkyo dialect], and while we may all agree that the prevalence of our curricular function phrases can lead to unnatural patterns of discourse, it enables students to communicate successfully at least within our institutional framework. Failure to use these phrases in EDC does not necessarily mean a student is not participating; rather it indicates a failure to cooperate by communicating within the "institutional variety of discourse."

CONCLUSION

Poor individual participation burdens the whole group and so requires a solution that involves the whole group. As a starting point, equipping and encouraging students to pass the floor by using directed questions at TRPs will allow participatory students to involve non-participatory students, as well as encourage uncooperative students to cooperate by passing the floor. While I am quick to remind students in verbal feedback after class discussions to indicate the end of their turn by asking a question, activities need to be developed in order to target this specific communicative skill and help students such as Risa succeed in EDC.

Finally, further research needs to be conducted to address the nature and uses of silence by students within EDC, as well as how well so-called *Rikkyo-ben* transfers to other environments and contexts outside of the university. An institutional pattern of discourse is preferable so long as it is compatible with more natural patterns outside of a closed classroom.

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APPENDIX

Table 1

Student Participation in Lessons 6-8

Student by gender	Risa	F2	F3	F4	M1	M2	M3
Questions used to take the floor, lessons 6-8	7	10	14	17	5	1	5
Questions used to pass the floor, lessons 6-8	0	7	13	8	4	3	2
No. of absences, lessons 6-8	0	1	0	0	1	2	0