

The Effect of an Unequal Power Relationship on Interaction in a Children's EFL Classroom

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ABSTRACT

Although children are often thought to have an advantage when it comes to second language acquisition, in EFL contexts, adults tend to learn more quickly due to experience and socialization (Ortega, 2009). In order to facilitate communication in a children's EFL classroom, it is important for teachers to recognize the strategies that children use to when they want to indicate difficulties in interaction. This paper uses Conversation Analysis to examine the strategy use of three children and the power relations between the children and the adult teacher in a children's conversation class in Tokyo.

INTRODUCTION

In the modern communicative second language classroom, it is believed that learners acquire language by interacting with both native speakers and other learners. Through miscommunication and negotiation of meaning, learners develop competence in their second language (Long, 1996; Brouwer, 2003). Although much research has been done concerning adult learners, there are few studies which examine how children interact in a communicative classroom (Cho, 2008). Whereas children are often thought to have an advantage when it comes to second language acquisition, in EFL contexts, adults tend to learn more quickly due to experience and socialization (Ortega, 2009). Therefore, when it comes to interaction in a children's EFL classroom, teachers may need to take certain factors into consideration.

First of all, it is important that teachers understand what communicative strategies children tend to use when they encounter difficulties. When children encounter a lack in linguistic schema, they often resort to reduction strategies such as repetition and message abandonment (Comeau & Genesee, 2001). In addition, teachers must be aware that second language (L2) learners often find it challenging to appropriately initiate repair when they do not understand an utterance. This sometimes results in a delayed repair initiator (Wong, 2000; Chun, Day, Chenoweth, & Lupescu, 1982). This delayed form of repair can cause difficulties in communication if the teacher is not sensitive to the non-native speaker's lack of comprehension. For a non-native speaker interacting with a native-speaker, the social construct of a novice-expert relationship can make it even more difficult to initiate repair (Vickers, 2010). This unequal interaction is compounded in the classroom, where the teacher, often a native-speaker, is the expert and the learner is the novice (Cazden, 1988; Walsh, 2002). Finally, in a children's EFL classroom, there is an additional layer to the novice-

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expert construct due to the significant age gap between the teacher and the student (Ochs, 1991).

The purpose of this paper is to examine examples of interaction in my classroom in order to reflect on how I can create more learning opportunities with child EFL learners. To do this, I will use a conversation analysis (CA) approach to take a closer look at the conversation strategies and the negotiation that takes place during a learner initiated word search.

LITERATURE REVIEW

A significant amount of research has been done on the conversation strategies that L2 learners use when they encounter difficulties in communication. Dörnyei (1995) and Nakatani (2005) organize these strategies into two main categories: Achievement strategies and Reduction strategies. Achievement strategies include time-gaining strategies, help-seeking strategies, maintenance strategies, and self-solving strategies. Reduction strategies include message abandonment strategies, first-language-based strategies; and interlanguage-based strategies. However, little research has looked into the strategies that child L2 users employ. Comeau and Genesse (2001) studied 3 year-old and 5 year-old French and English bilinguals to see if and how they could repair events of miscommunication. Although the study found that it is indeed possible for children as young as 3 to repair misunderstandings, the subjects' most frequently-used strategies were reduction strategies: repeating the initial utterance (without changing to the target language) and reformulating the initial utterance (also without switching to the target language). Comeau and Genesse (2001) postulate that the children turned to reduction strategies when there was a gap in their knowledge of the second language.

When a learner has a gap in his or her lexical knowledge, a word search occurs. However, a word search does not always develop into an interaction which may lead to acquisition. According to Brouwer's research (2003), a word search only becomes a learning opportunity if two conditions are present: 1) the learner invites others to participate in the word search, and 2) the speakers are oriented in a novice-expert relationship. Hammarberg (2009) suggests that a word search is not only a communication strategy, but also a learning opportunity. A learner can show that he or she has learned a new lexical item in a number of ways, such as by saying "yes" to an expert's guess, by repeating the expert's guess, by asking for confirmation, by asking a question about the word's form or use, by immediately using the word, or by using it later in the conversation. Under the right conditions, a word search has the potential to contribute to lexical acquisition.

In the case of a children's EFL classroom, it is important to carefully consider the different ways in which the novice-expert relationship is constructed. First, one must examine the features of adult-child discourse. Ochs (1991) examines how adults react when they cannot understand a child's utterance. Although there is variance across cultures, Ochs describes four possible reactions: 1) ignore the child, 2) express a lack of understanding, 3) guess what the child is trying to say, or 4) provide a culture gloss of what the child *should* say in a given context. The ways that adults deal with children's problematic utterances help the children learn about social relationships in their culture – particularly, what it means to be a child.

In addition to the adult-child construct, there is the teacher-student relationship that exists in every classroom. Cazden (1988) bluntly explains that, "teachers have the right to speak at any time and to any person; they can fill any silence or interrupt any speakers...and no one has any right to object" (p. 54). Nevertheless, Cazden's research (1988) shows that

teachers have the ability to encourage class discussion by allowing the students more autonomy in organizing turn taking and communication. Walsh's (2002) comparison of two teaching styles also supports the idea that teachers have the ability to hinder or facilitate classroom discussion. Walsh (2002) finds that teachers in a communicative classroom can encourage learner involvement by using direct error correction, content feedback, extended wait-time and scaffolding. On the other hand, a teacher can discourage student involvement by completing students' turns, using "teacher echo," and interrupting.

Finally, there is the novice-expert relationship that exists between native and non-native speakers. Vickers (2010) examined the interactions between two engineering students (one a native speaker, one a non-native speaker), who were working collaboratively on a project. Vickers found that, despite the fact that they had comparable knowledge of the technical subject, the native speaker always took on the role of expert, even in areas in which the non-native speaker had more expertise. The non-native speaker felt that he did not have the power to go against his partner, and so he always deferred to the native speaker – even when he was in disagreement. Similarly, Leki (2001) learned that non-native speakers studying abroad in the United States, despite making efforts to participate in group work, were relegated to "apprentice" status by the dominant native speakers. As apprentices, the non-native speakers were not allowed to contribute using their expertise, and were even encouraged to minimize their participation in the projects. Although the subjects of Leki's study did not want to position themselves as apprentices, they were put in that position by the native speakers, and were unable to resist and claim a more active role.

Amid these social relationships that create a novice-expert construct, it can be difficult for the novice to initiate repair when there is a problem with the native speaker's talk. Both Wong (2000) and Chun, Day, Chenoweth, and Luppescu (1982) discovered in their research that repair which is initiated by the non-native speaker is often delayed. Initially, after a problematic utterance, the learner falsely accepts the talk. Only after a few turns does the learner initiate repair. However, Wong (2000) concludes that the expert is often sensitive to the fact that there was a problem, indicated by the fact that he or she allows their subsequent turn to be interrupted. Wong postulates that the expert finds the non-native speaker's initial (false) acceptance as insufficient, and therefore the expert fails to fully embrace his or her subsequent turn.

METHODS

Context and participants

The data for this study was collected during one 50-minute session of a conversation class that meets once a week. The class is part of a small, private English conversation school in western Tokyo. The class consists of two eight-year-old girls, who have been studying together for two years, and one six-year-old girl, who (at the time of the study) had been in the class for 3 months. All of the students had been attending English conversation classes for over two years, and all students share Japanese as their first language (L1). The teacher can understand a bit of Japanese, and occasionally uses Japanese to communicate with the children. Although the class has an assigned textbook, it is only used for about 10 minutes each lesson.

Data Collection

The lesson was recorded on a digital voice recorder that was placed in the center of the table around which all of the students and the teacher sat. Although the students were initially intrigued by the recorder, and picked it up a few times during the lesson, they did not seem to pay it much attention. The resulting data was analyzed to isolate instances of negotiation between the students and the teacher of lexical items. During the lesson, there was one instance of a word search in which one of the students made an appeal for help to find a word. For the purpose of this analysis, the word search was transcribed using conversation analysis transcription standards (Appendix 2). For a full transcription of the word search, see Appendix 1. This study will examine the word search in detail in order to determine what factors encourage students to interact, and which factors discourage students from doing so. Conversation analysis was selected because it allows teachers to examine learning opportunities in detail, and when combined with Second Language Acquisition (SLA) theory, helps illuminate how tasks can lead to language acquisition (Kasper, 2006; Wong & Waring, 2010).

DISCUSSION AND RESULTS

The sole word search occurred during the last three minutes of the lesson, while the teacher was assigning homework. The assignment was to take a song that the students had practiced that day, and to change a few of the words in order to make their own version of the story. The students were asked to write down the song in their English notebooks. After hearing a few examples of possible word changes, one of the students came up with an idea, and wanted to know how to say it in English.

Data Segment 1: Word Search Marker

- 46) T: %Give me a cake? Please please give me a cake.%
47) %A cake for my birthday:- Please please give me a cake.%
48) That's ok. [Or (.) a cake—]
→ 49) S2: [Uh::] Abbie. Un:: oritatami ()
50) T: °Hm:? °

In line 49, the student used mumbling as a time-gaining strategy (Dörnyei, 1995) to indicate that she needed more time to think of how to ask her question. Although the incomplete message was in the student's L1, and it is doubtful that she would have difficulty completing the message in her L1, that fact that she began to mumble may indicate an awareness of the fact that she should have been using the L2 in class. The mumbling also functioned as an indicator that she was struggling to find a word or phrase in English. The teacher acknowledged the student's struggle in line 50 by asking "hm" in a rising intonation. However, although the student used a word search marker, it was not a request for help. Brouwer (2003) suggests that, when a student suddenly starts speaking more quietly after a word search marker, it indicates that he or she needs time to think, rather than help. It is possible that S2, by mumbling her incomplete phrase, was requesting time to think.

However, after the teacher asked for clarification, the student repeated what initially functioned as a time-gaining strategy.

Data Segment 2: Request for Help

- 49) S2: [Uh::] Abbie. Un:: oritatami ()
 50) T: °Hm:? °
 51) (1.0)
 → 52) S2: Oriatami gasa ()
 53) T: <<°Oritatami. °>>
 → 54) S1: <<°Umbrella.°>>

It appears that, by repeating in line 52 the word search marker initially used in line 49, the student was asking for help. This is further evidenced by the fact that, in line 54, S1 jumped in to help after the second appeal for help, in which the student elaborated on her initial L1 utterance adding the noun “gasa” or “umbrella”. Therefore, it seems that the same phrase used to express a need to think could also be used to invite others to participate in the word search. When the same phrase was repeated, its function in the conversation changed.

After S1 contributed a candidate answer, the teacher embraced the suggestion and attempted to continue the earlier talk (line 56).

Data Segment 3: First Language-Based Strategy

- 54) S1: <<°Umbrella.°>>
 55) (.)
 56) T: Umbrella? (.) >>You can say<< %↓g:ive me>>an umbrella?<< (.)
 57) Plea::se plea::se ↑give me >>an umbrella.<< (.)
 58) An um%brella [for my: -]
 → 59) S2: [Oritatami wo] tte tsukete oritatamigasa tte kakitain dakedo.
 60) (1.0)

However, S2 rejected the candidate answer in line 59, by explaining in her L1 that she wanted to specifically to use the term for “folding umbrella” (oritatami gasa) rather than S1’s candidate answer of “umbrella,” and to which the teacher oriented and used to make an example song (lines 56-57). Thus, when S2 first invited the other class members to participate in the word search, the teacher and S1 both contributed candidate answers which were “try marked” (Brouwer, 2003).

Data Segment 4: Candidate Answers

- 54) S1: <<°Umbrella.°>>
 55) (.)
 → 56) T: Umbrella? (.) >>You can say<<%↓g:ive me>>an umbrella?<<

In line 54, S1 suggested the word “umbrella” in a quiet voice. According to Brouwer (2003), a questioning intonation indicates that the speaker is not sure if that answer is correct. In the data above, it appears that S1 used a quiet voice, rather than a rising intonation, to show a lack of confidence in her answer. On the other hand, the teacher’s candidate answer in line 56 was clearly marked with a rising intonation. However, the short pause that occurred after the teacher’s candidate answer did not give the students enough time to accept or reject it.

In order to understand why the teacher failed to give time for an acceptance or rejection, one must examine the relationship between the teacher and the students. In the classroom, the teacher is the expert who must control the contents and pacing of the class

(Cazden, 1988). Since the class was almost finished, it is possible that the teacher wanted to quickly end the word search so that class could be dismissed. In addition, the fact that the students in this class were children only reinforced the teacher's superior role (Ochs, 1991). These social constructs help to explain why the teacher felt comfortable abruptly ending the word search and proceeding with her talk. Interestingly, however, despite the fact that the teacher had the power to end the word search, S2 refused to accept the teacher's candidate answer ("umbrella").

Segment 5: Delayed Other Initiated Repair Sequence

- 56) T: Umbrella? (.) >>You can say<<%↓g:ive me>>an umbrella?<< (.)
 57) Plea::se plea::se ↑give me >>an umbrella.<< (.)
 58) An um%brella [for my: -]
 → 59) S2: [Oritatami wo] tte tsukete oritatamigasa tte kakitain dakedo.
 60) (1.0)
 61) T: <<°oritatami°>> (.) <<#Do you know?#>> ((eye contact with S1 and S3))

S2 was not able to initiate repair immediately after the problem in line 56, perhaps because the teacher did not leave sufficient time for a response. By allowing the song to continue in lines 56 and 57, it appeared that the student accepted the talk. However, when the teacher stopped singing in line 58 and switched to normal speech, S2 interrupted the teacher and initiated repair. By using her L1 to initiate repair, the student showed a strong desire to continue the word search, and the teacher was obliged to help her find the English word. Although it initially appeared as though the teacher felt comfortable abruptly ending the word search, Wong's (2000) research suggests otherwise. According to Wong, the fact that the teacher yielded to S2's interruption suggests that the teacher never fully embraced the turn following her candidate answer, and was willing to negotiate further.

Once it became clear that the word search remained unsolved, the students resorted to a variety of communication strategies to try and make themselves understood.

Segment 6: Communication Strategies

- 61) T: <<°oritatami°>> (.) <<#Do you know?#>> ((eye contact with S1 and S3))
 62) S1: Um:: ()
 63) (1.0)
 64) T: <<Umbre::lla?>>
 65) S1: <<Um:: small umbre:lla.>>
 → 66) T: A ↑small umbrella.
 → 67) (1.0)
 → 68) S1: °Oritatami-°
 69) T: °Oritatami? °
 70) S2: hm::
 71) T: <<I don't know:w.>>
 72) (1.5)
 → 73) S3: Oru. ((folds a piece of paper))
 74) (0.5)
 → 75) S1: Oritatami-
 76) T: A ↑fo:lding umbre:ll? (.) OH. OH.

In lines 66, 68, 73 and 75, the students used a number of strategies described by Dörnyei (1995) and Nakatani (2005). In line 66, S1 used circumlocution to try and describe a folding umbrella. S1 also uses the compensatory strategy of repetition multiple times, in lines 68 and 75. S3 used restructuring to try and help the teacher understand. From the adjective "oritatami", she extracted the root verb "oru", which means to fold. In addition, S3 used a folding gesture to help explain the meaning of "oru". It was S3's circumlocution and gesture that finally led the teacher to understand the meaning of "oritatami".

Segment 7: Second candidate answer

- 76) T: A ↑fɔ:lding umbre:ll? (.) OH. OH.
77) >>We just say UMBRELLA. (.) Umbrella's ok.<< (.)
78) >>A folding um- oh:.....: I see yeah.
79) Umbrella's ok. (.)
80) We say umbrella umbrella umbrella.

Once again, in line 76, the teacher try marked the candidate answer and then proceeded to continue the talk without giving the students any chance to accept or reject her answer. The teacher conducted the subsequent talk in a loud voice, and the students did not attempt to interrupt or correct her.

Interestingly, the teacher's second candidate answer was the same as the first candidate answer. However, in order to give more weight to her second answer, the teacher provided a cultural gloss, that "we" (native speakers of English) do not have a special word for "oritatami". Ochs' (1991) research shows that providing a cultural gloss is a common way for adults to deal with misunderstanding children. Unfortunately, the teacher's explanation was factually inaccurate, due to the fact that she mistook "oritatami" for a noun, when in fact it is an adjective which describes a type of umbrella, a folding umbrella. However, the teacher did not give the students the opportunity to teach her this distinction.

According to Brouwer (2003), a word search must include an invitation for others to participate, as well as a novice-expert relationship, in order to qualify as a learning opportunity. However, since no new lexical item was explicitly introduced to the students, it seems doubtful that the students left feeling that they had learned anything new from this negotiation, beyond reinforcing the notion that the teacher's word is final on matters of vocabulary (this despite the fact that the teacher misunderstood the word the student was searching for and in fact taught them an inaccurate translation of it). Furthermore, none of Hammarberg's (2009) indicators of learning appeared in the interaction. Therefore, it can be concluded that this word search was not a successful learning opportunity and may have actually resulted in confusion and the teaching of misinformation.

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this analysis was to better understand how I, as a teacher, could encourage more student talk in the classroom. Through conversation analysis, I hoped to see practices that I had not been aware of. The word search that I examined was unique in the 50-minute lesson. Since this type of negotiation does not occur frequently, it is important to facilitate and encourage it whenever possible. Nevertheless, in this particular lesson, I did not (easily) allow the word search to continue beyond my first guesses.

At first glance, it seemed that my lack of competence in Japanese was the reason that this word search was not a success. However, upon closer examination, it seems that the

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negotiation stopped because I did not facilitate its continuation. It is not easy for children to disagree with an adult, for a non-native speaker to object to a native speaker, or for a student to interrupt a teacher, and perhaps most importantly, for a teacher to accept, in front of their students, that they may not actually know something. Therefore, it is particularly important that teachers be aware of how they can promote student conversation, despite these powerful social constructs. Walsh (2002) describes how effective teachers promote student discussion by checking for confirmation and extending wait-time. If I had given the students more time to respond to my candidate answers, in addition to confirming their intended messages and being open to their attempts to "teach the teacher," the negotiation could have been more successful. In this way, conversational analysis is an effective means for promoting reflection on teaching practices, and can help teachers realize what they can do to increase effective interaction in the classroom.

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Appendix 1
Data Segment 1

- 1) T: #↑Please take this story # ((pointing to the text page))
 2) (2.0)
 3) #I want you to take this story and change.#
 4) S2: Hhhhhhh ichi ni san
 5) T: Change the story.
 6) S?: ()
 7) T: #Haruka? Haruka? Can I- can I borrow this?# ((points to a pencil))
 8) #Can I see your pencil?#
 9) S2: °Ok. °
 10) T: Ok. [↑Plea:se]
 11) S2: [Haruka:.]
 12) T: Take box.
 13) S2: Haruka haruka haruka yellow uuuhh ((Students stand up and wander))
 14) T: %Haruka:: sue::no::% Haruka Usami please sit dow:::n <almost finished.
 15) (4.0) ((students sit down))
 16) T: Ok. I want you to ↑cha::nge (.) this one.
 17) For example, <<↑gi:ve me: an apple. ↑Plea:se. >>
 ((Pointing to song lyrics in the textbook))
 18) <Or- <<Gi:ve me: a:n a:pple ((Pointing to song lyrics in the textbook))
 19) Plea:se plea:se give me an apple.
 20) ()
 21) T: An ↑apple for my::: mother. (.) Please. Please. Give me an apple.>> Or::-
 22) Give me a:::? ↑pencil. ↑Please. ↑Please. give me a ↑pencil.
 23) A ↑pencil for my ↑pencil case.(.) ↑Plea:se. ↑Plea:se. Give me a pencil.
 24) I want you to wri:::te? (.) one more.
 25) S?: ()
 26) (2.5)
 27) S?: ()
 28) T: Make a ne:::w song. (1.0) Ok?
 29) S?: ()
 30) T: And write it in your notebook. One time.
 31) S?: ()
 32) ()
 33) S2: One?
 34) T: So. Atarashi uta wo- jibun no uta wo tsukutte kudasai.
 35) S?: [Uh::-]
 36) T: [So-] no-to ni-
 37) S2: Nan [kai]?
 38) T: [i kai]. i kai. i kai
 39) S1: One.
 40) T: One time. (0.5) O:::ne time.
 41) Ok?
 42) S?: i kai ()
 43) T: So- give me a-
 44) Change bo:::x-
 45) S2: Ahhh ke-ki ni shio ja:: ke-ki.

- 46) T: %Give me a cake? Please please give me a cake.%
 47) %A cake for my birthday:- Please please give me a cake.%
 48) That's ok. [Or (.) a cake—]
 49) S2: [Uh::] Abbie. Un:: oritatami ()
 50) T: °Hm:? °
 51) (1.0)
 52) S2: Oriatami gasa ()
 53) T: <<°Oritatami. °>>
 54) S1: <<°Umbrella. °>>
 55) (.)
 56) T: Umbrella? (.) >>You can say<<°↓g:ive me>>an umbrella?<< (.)
 57) Plea::se plea::se ↑give me >>an umbrella.<< (.)
 58) An um%brella [for my: -]
 59) S2: [Oritatami wo] tte tsukete oritatamigasa tte kakitain dakedo.
 60) (1.0)
 61) T: <<°oritatami°>> (.) <<#Do you know?#>> ((eye contact with S1 and S3))
 62) S1: Um:: ()
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 65) S1: <<Um:: small umbre:lla.>>
 66) T: A ↑small umbrella.
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 71) T: <<I don't know.>>
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 77) >>We just say UMBRELLA. (.) Umbrella's ok.<< (.)
 78) >>A folding um- oh:..... I see yeah.
 79) Umbrella's ok. (.)
 80) We say umbrella umbrella umbrella.
 81) S?: Umbr:.....
 82) T: <So- >>%Please give me an umbrella.%<<
 83) >>%Please please give me an umbrella%<< An umbrella for my:.....-
 84) (1.0)
 85) T: For my:: Ba::g.
 86) S?: hhh[hhh]
 87) T: [>>Or] something like that. [Ok?]<<
 88) S2: [Yappari] bakku ni shio:()
 89) T: <<Thank you:..... See you next [time:.....]>>
 90) S?: [o uchi] de naraiba ii no ni-)
 91) S3: o uchi de narattarishite.

Appendix 2

CA transcription symbols

.	(period) Falling intonation.
?	(question mark) Rising intonation.
,	(comma) Continuing intonation.
-	(hyphen) Marks an abrupt cut-off.
::	(colon(s)) Prolonging of sound.
w <u>o</u> :rd	(colon after underlined letter) Falling intonation on word.
w <u>o</u> :rd	(underlined colon) Rising intonation on word.
<u>word</u>	(underlining)
<u>word</u>	The more underlying, 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 & more than) Slowed speech.
<	(less than) Talk is jump-started—starting with a rush.
hh	(series of h's) Aspiration or laughter.
.hh	(h's preceded by dot) Inhalation.
[]	(brackets) simultaneous or overlapping speech.
[]	
=	(equal sign) Latch or contiguous utterances of the same speaker.
(2.4)	(number in parentheses) Length of a silence in 10ths of a second
(.)	(period in parentheses) Micro-pause, 0.2 second or less.
()	(empty parentheses) Non-transcribable segment of talk.
((gazing toward the ceiling))	(double parentheses) Description of non-speech activity.
(try 1)/(try 2)	(two parentheses separated by a slash) Alternative hearings.
\$word\$	(dollar signs) Smiley voice.
#word#	(number signs) Squeaky voice.
%word%	(percent signs) Singing