

Exploring Classroom Interaction through Conversation Analysis: from communicative to interactional competences in language teaching

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Abstract

This paper will provide an introduction to the rationale behind the use of Conversation Analysis (CA) (Sacks et al., 1974) to explore language classroom interaction for readers new to the field. CA is the systematic analysis of talk produced in everyday human interaction, that is, talk-in-interaction (Hutchby & Wooffitt, 2008). Since its origins in 1960s, the field has expanded tremendously: from telephone calls to video recordings in Multimodal CA (Mondada, 2018) and has made great impact in the way we explore classroom discourse from an interactional perspective.

This paper will first present an overview of the historical development of language instruction comparing both cognitive and socio-interactionist perspectives. It will then introduce CA to readers and will explain its main analytic concepts before exemplifying the kinds of practices that become visible through this approach, such as the temporality of gestural productions and the practices teachers deploy to promote participation. The paper will end with more current perspectives by introducing two teacher training frameworks which have emerged from the application of CA to classroom discourse.

Keywords: classroom interaction, conversation analysis, English language teaching, multimodality, interactional competence

1. Introduction: the interactional turn in language teaching

Through the last decades, several principles have guided teachers' classroom practices. Language teaching, in particular, has been shaped, first, by cognitive theories that view language acquisition as an internal process of grammatical and linguistic competence development (Lightbown & Spada, 2013), and, second, by a more sociological perspective that highlights the contextualised interactional features of the language learning process. This first section will explore the development of these perspectives and what this has meant for language educators.

In the sixties, researchers that held a sociological perspective proposed the notion of 'communicative competence' (Hymes, 1964) to highlight that apart from grammatical competence, L2 learners should develop discursive, sociolinguistic and strategic competences (Canale & Swain, 1980). Within the communicative competence framework, sociolinguistic competence is concerned with contextual

factors. Strategic competence highlights the strategies used to deal with communicative problems; however, early studies approached these communicative troubles by comparing the productive skills of non-native speakers with the talk of native speakers (Kramsch, 1986) with the assumption that the first was deficient in some way. Within this dichotomy, acquisition was considered to be facilitated with L2 speakers' exposure to communication with a 'more competent interlocutor' native speaker who produces speech modifications to accommodate to the learners' deficiencies (Long, 1980, 1990). This conceptualisation compared the speech of native speakers versus non-native speakers and employed quasi-experimental procedures, in laboratory settings (Ellis & Shintani, 2014; Hall, 2009). From a more socio-interactionist perspective, Firth and Wagner (1997) pointed out that the complexity of talk-in-interaction needs to be recognised as such in language classrooms to acknowledge that learners make use of the second/foreign language as a resource to attend to the developing contingencies and emerging contexts, thus, interlanguage needs to be considered within its own right. Their seminal paper received mixed reviews¹ but a new (though heterogeneous) branch within the SLA field emerged, highlighting the social characteristics of language classroom interaction and instruction.

The emergence of Conversation Analysis (CA), also in 1960s, as an approach to study mundane talk made way for this a socio-interactionist approach in the SLA field as well. It was especially concerned with the use of the foreign language in classrooms, the processes of negotiation of meaning, and the kinds of communication strategies interactants naturally deploy to act in sociality, thus, the earlier Hymesian construct of communicative competence was expanded to interactional competence (IC) (Hellermann, 2008; Young, 2011). IC considers classroom communication as collaboratively-constructed (Cazden, 2001; Hatch, 1992). It resonates with CA in that talk is both 'context-sensitive', as it emerges from the talk that precedes it, and 'context-renewing', as each turn provides limitations and has consequences for the turn that follows (Heritage & Clayman, 2010), thus, it widened not only the methodological, but also the ontological parameters of the SLA field.

Terminology was coined to attempt to represent the interactionist perspective within the SLA field, for example, through the term "CA-for-SLA" (Markee & Kasper, 2004). However, research done under this umbrella varies in terms of what is studied, and how classroom talk is explored. This is especially true in relation to the ways in which CA can be used as a methodology that does not analyse learning directly (Evnitskaya, 2012), as the focus is on observable behaviour in interaction (Seedhouse, 1996) and not on the cognitive aspects of language development. What CA can do, however, is to provide a systematic framework and approach to make learners' and teachers' interactional competences visible. Language learning is viewed, thus, as interactional achievement (Hall, 2004).

The context also received increasing attention as it influences the kinds of skills learners put into practice (Young, 2013). This is key when the intention is to analyse

participants' language skills in interaction, especially since in language classrooms, the language being taught is also the means of instruction. Therefore, relevant to this view is that learners develop their interactional competence through solving communicative breakdowns and using the second/foreign language to maintain understanding and intersubjectivity. Thus, it is important for teachers to comprehend that L2 classroom talk is at the interface between pedagogy and interaction (Seedhouse, 2004).

Responsibility to provide learners with interactional space to develop their skills rests with teachers as, in the words of many scholars, teachers *orchestrate* (Breen, 1998; Corder, 1975; Dalton-Puffer, 2007; Streeck et al., 2011b) various elements of classroom interactions, such as the turn-taking system, the topics being made relevant, the kinds of activities being done, and the pedagogical projects etc.. Thus, language skills are developed in parallel with interactional, institutional and sociocultural competences (Mondada & Doehler, 2004). Therefore, this paper introduces and explains Conversation Analytic procedures with the aim to develop educators' awareness of the complexities of language classroom interaction.

2. What is CA?

Conversation Analysis (CA) is the systematic analysis of talk produced in everyday situations of human interaction, that is, talk-in-interaction (Hutchby & Wooffitt, 2008). It originated in the 1960s from the work of Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson (1974). Its analysis focuses on the system of turn-taking and how we accomplish actions in and through language. The approach became multidisciplinary and "Institutional CA" emerged when in varied contexts, such as doctor-patient interactions, buying-selling transactions, courts of law, and the teaching-learning process, among others. In these contexts the asymmetrical roles affect both how interactants take turns, and how they use different practices to accomplish the institutional goals (Antaki, 2011; Heritage & Clayman, 2010).

CA focuses on the ways interactants construct action, meaning and understanding through talk (Heritage and Heritage 2013) and how these actions are ascribed by the recipients on a turn-by-turn basis (Levinson, 1983; Sacks et al., 1974). Its basic analytical tool is 'next turn proof procedure', a practice through which one analyses the following turn in order to understand how that interactant has understood the previous turn (Sidnell, 2010); for example, if one remarks "we need to do the dishes" and the interactant adds: "oh, I forgot, sorry", the analyst can state that the second speaker oriented to the first as a complaint. By exploring the second turn, we can identify speakers' orientations to the prior turn. These turns are called 'adjacency pairs' and are the basis of interaction; they demonstrate how courses of action are implemented through sequences. Therefore, talk is shaped, redefined, and negotiated collaboratively by the participants in each turn (Schegloff, 2007).

Through its methods, CA holds an internal or *emic* perspective towards the data, which means that analysis is carried out from the perspective of the participants themselves, exploring interaction on a turn-by-turn basis just as it is available to them (Sidnell, 2010), and not by imposing pre-determined categories to data (*etic* theorising) (Pike, 1967). As can be seen, CA is a bottom up or data-driven approach. Its concern is not only what is said, but also how (Fox et al., 2013), that is, the linguistic packaging (composition) of the turn, as well as its placement in the interaction (position).

As humans, however, we not only express ourselves through words. We combine different bodily resources, like gestures, gaze movements, body movements and even manipulate artefacts in the surrounding environment. The next section will delve into the relevance of these practices for social interaction in general, **and classroom interaction, in particular.**

1. The multimodality of gestural practices

The field of gesture studies emerged in 1970s with the work of Adam Kendon and David McNeill, in parallel.ⁱⁱ Their early explorations focused on the relationship between speech and gesture and speech and cognition (Kendon, 1981; McNeill, 1985). Through empirical research in laboratory and naturally occurring interactions, they have proposed different dimensions of gestures and different gesture phrases and units, which will be explored below.

3.1 Gesture dimensions

Expanding the work of Kendon (1988), McNeill (1992) proposed Kendon's Continuum as a framework to organise gestural practices: from gestures produced with speech (gesticulations), to those which are produced independently of speech (sign language). McNeill's work has focused mostly on gesticulations as his interest lied on the relationship between speech and gesture. Within gesticulations, he identified dimensions of gestures by means of an experiment in which participants were required to retell narrations, such as a Tweety cartoon film.

Within the dimensions of gesticulations, McNeill (1992) made a broader distinction between non-imagistic and imagistic gestures. The first category corresponds to pointing gestures (deictics) and rhythmic gestures (beats) (Kendon, 2004). Imagistic gestures include iconic and metaphoric gestures: the first "display in the form and manner of their execution aspects of the same concrete scene that is represented in speech" (Kendon, 2004, p.100). Thus, gestures such as pointing up to refer to upward movements or rounding the hands to represent a ball correspond to iconic gesticulations. The latter, metaphoric gestures also correspond to representations of images, however, "the image depicted is presented as an image that represents or stands for some abstract concept" (Kendon, 2004, p.100). An example of this second category is placing the two hands in front, ball-shaped, to

represent an idea being discussed. It must be noted that the classification between these dimensions of gestures is directly dependent on the ways these are being used to accompany speech. A typological approach is not entirely straight-forward and, as a result, it has been argued that categories are not mutually-exclusive (Kendon, 2004). In other words, a gesture could be recognised as iconic with pantomimic-like characteristics.

As CA analysts, however, rather than only focusing on the kinds of gestures produced, gestures are explored in relation to their communicative relevance, temporality, how they are used to guide interactants' orientations, and how certain gestures might project certain actions. In other words, rather than (only) categorising the gestures into their dimensions, the aim is to identify their sequential implications for interaction and, in the case of classroom settings, the progressivity of the pedagogical work.

That is the reason why data will also be explored in relation to the gestural phrases proposed by Kendon (2004) and further extended by Kita (1990, 1993), as will be exemplified in the next sub-section.

3.2 Gesture phases

The gestural phrase (Kendon, 1972) is composed of different phases which are recognisable, such as: the preparation, stroke, hold, and retraction. The stroke is the only compulsory phase as it represents the apex of the gesture (Kendon, 2004). Let's look at this gestural phrase:



Figure 1. Gesture Phases

Figure 1 shows the different phases of a gesture unit or gestural phrase. Frames (a) and (e) depict the home position: “a spate of movement — whether a single move or a series of moves — being completed by returning the moving body part to the position from which it departed at the outset” (Sacks & Schegloff, 2002, p. 133). Frame (b) demonstrates the preparation stage, *i.e.* teacher leans on the table; frame (c) the

stroke, *i.e.* the actual pointing; while frame (d) depicts the retraction of the arm. The deictic gesture is 'materialised' in the stroke. In short, a gesture does not only constitute its stroke, but its preparation and retraction, too.

Complementing the phases outlined by McNeill (2006) and Kendon (2004), Kita (1990, 1993) outlined two other phases in which the movement is stopped and the position is sustained: the pre-and post- stroke holding phases. In these (optional) phases there are "temporary cessations of motion either before or after the stroke motion" (McNeill, 2006, p.64). The relevance of exploring gestural practices from an interactional lies on the fact that embodied practices allow for interactants' forthcoming actions to be projected (Goodwin & Heritage, 1990), and also provide students with semantic information about the talk being produced. The next section will explain the development of CA in EFL field and its state of the art in order to highlight this connection between the verbal and the embodied within this pedagogical context..

4. CA in ELT: Development of the field and state of the art.

The wider use of CA in the exploration of classroom interaction can be traced back to the work of Kasper (1985), who explored the practices of repair (correction), and Firth and Wagner (1997) who, as was explained before, called for a 'reconceptualization' in the SLA field to highlight learners' interlanguage, as well as the social and contextual orientations over cognitive and mentalistic ones. From this perspective, interaction is co-constructed by both teachers and learners, it thus challenges classical views of the profession with regards to competence. In fact, despite the type of activity being carried out, interaction will be at the core of every classroom as even traditional grammar teaching is done through interaction (Mondada & Doehler, 2004).

Early Conversation Analytic studies in classrooms focused on the types of questions in the initiation turn within the IRF interaction pattern; for example, whether they were display or referential in that they elicited new or known information (Lee, 2006). Attention then shifted to the practices for turn-transition deployed by teachers, like gaze movements to establish open participation frameworks (Goodwin, 2000), students' gaze orientations at turn transitions (Mortensen, 2009), or the feedback or evaluation actions accomplished through the third turn (Hall, 2007; Hellermann, 2003; Waring, 2009). Research that incorporates embodied means has also gained presence in the classroom context in general in the last decade more particularly (Hall & Looney, 2019).

Hand gestures were studied first in classrooms from a cognitive perspective as tools to overcome communicative deficiencies (Gullberg, 1998), or in the explanations of mathematical problems (Alibali et al., 2013). From a CA perspective, they were first approached as aids in vocanbulry explanations: Lazaraton (2004) was one of the first to observe that in form-focused activities, gestures provided comprehensible input in the L2. Building on this, Van Compernelle and Smotrova (2017) analysed teachers'

contingent practices when performing impromptu vocabulary explanations. They highlighted that teachers' speech was carefully co-ordinated with gestures and that multimodal explanations were recipient designed. These findings demonstrate that gestures not only provide students with access to semantic content, and thus are key in solving troubles, but they also aid teachers in moving their pedagogical project forward because of their role in the co-construction of meaning.

Later on, embodied practices were approached from a more holistic perspective and focused not only on gestures, but also on gaze shifts, body positions, and materiality, among others. Kääntä (2010), for example, was one of the firsts to explore the variety of resources interactants orient to for turn-allocation practices in classroom contexts, showing how embodied and material means intertwine in pedagogical sequences. When mobilising responses, gaze was found to play a pivotal role in relation to the turn-taking system because of its role in setting up open or closed participation frameworks where a student is nominated as next speaker (Lerner, 2003). In cases in which students summon the teacher, gaze is a key feature in securing the attention of the teacher in crowded classrooms (Gardner, 2015).

When pursuing answers, that is, when the appropriate response or relevant next action is not produced in the next sequential slot, repair trajectories ensue to assure the progressivity of the lesson. From a traditional perspective, teachers perform corrections or provide student with corrective feedback (Lyster et al., 2013; Lyster & Ranta, 1997) when, for example, solving grammatical errors. From a CA approach, the perspective is wider as it can also include problems of hearing or understanding. One study that stands out in relation to repair trajectories is that of Kasper (1985) who identified the practice of delegated repair, that is, when teachers initiate a repair sequence but choose another student to provide the repair completion. Teachers can even withhold the repair completion or the evaluation turn so as to leave the participation framework open (or "the floor") to project further student-talk (Zemel & Koschmann, 2011). Embodied means have also been identified as repair initiations, for example leaning forward to display interactional trouble (Rasmussen, 2014), cupping the hand and bringing it to one's ear to display trouble (Mortensen, 2016), leaning towards the book in grammatical explanations (Belhiah, 2009), or producing a DIUs with gestures to trigger student self-correction (Koshik, 2002). As can easily be noted, the participation framework in classroom settings is constructed through the interconnectedness of talk and gesture, through mutual orientation (Goodwin, 2000) and through the manipulation of the materials in the surrounding (Hazel & Mortensen, 2019).

Another key element in the multimodality of situated talk in general, and classroom interaction in particular, is that of the manipulation of and orientation to the material artefacts. In recent years there has been an increase in social interaction researchers' attention directed towards the use of the environment's contextual configuration (Richardson & Stokoe, 2014), the manipulation of tools or objects (Kennison, 2014), documents (Mikkola & Lehtinen, 2014), and technology (Balaman,

2015; Hindmarsh & Heath, 2000). The ways in which teachers and students manipulate the teaching materials not only provide evidence of their orientation to the task (Lerner, 1998), but also to each other. For example, teachers' orientation towards or away from materials is also an interactional practice which displays when a sequence is kept open or when it is closed. As shown by Chazal (2015), when obtaining the correct response, teachers shifted their gaze back to the computer and hit the enter key to display the correct answer on the screen, thus, closing the sequence. By contrast, after incorrect candidate answers, teachers held motionless body postures (Kääntä, 2010; Schegloff, 1998) to maintain the floor open, as in a 'waiting position'. Teachers' gestural practices may also result in joint attention when directing student attention to learnables through pointing gestures to relevant objects, which usually results in recipients shifting their gaze to follow the direction of the speaker's gaze and the direction of their deictic gestures (Streeck, 2009). In this regard, Majlesi (2018) identified teachers' use of deictic gestures towards the materials to guide students' attention towards noticing particular linguistic features in grammar teaching. As shown, the verbal and the embodied take on a leading role in relation to the development of the ongoing activities in teaching and learning.

The following section will present an analytical example of CA analysis in the exploration of one secondary teacher's embodied practices to promote participation, both through a turn designed as a question, and through a designedly incomplete utterance (Koshik, 2002) or elicitation (Walper et al., 2021).

5. An example: Doing multimodal CA in ELT

In the English language teaching (ELT) classroom, the ways in which teachers design their turns is a relevant locus of attention since different types of turn-design have an effect on the opportunities for participation they enable for students (Lerner, 1995; Szczepek-Reed, 2017; Walsh, 2011). This example will portray a particular practice identified in a study on teachers' elicitations (Walper, 2018) in order to highlight the 'lamination' (Goodwin, 2000) of embodied practices deployed to promote participation.

Example 1 below was recorded in an English lesson in a subsidised school in the South of Chile and will demonstrate how one teacher elicits a response and relies on the verbal means, the materials and on her embodied practices to mobilise the response from her students. The way in which she designs her initiation turn is key as it is a verbally incomplete turn-constructive-unit (TCU) which is projected through an embodied demonstration. This teacher poses a question and then produces a designedly-incomplete utterance (DIU) (Koshik, 2002): the syntax of the ongoing turn projects the turn completion and the embodied demonstration is integrated into a 'syntactic-bodily unit' (Keevallik, 2013, p. 5).

In example 1, the teacher is providing a group of students with feedback on their written sentences and prompts them to add the action 'jumping' to their text. The DIU is marked in line 38 with an arrow:

35 Tea: what did he do:? why he was really fast?
36 (0.9)
37 what is this action?
38 → he wa::s?
39 (0.5)

Transcripts are a relevant analytical tool in CA and are formatted in the way shown. Punctuation symbols depict aspects of speech delivery: the colon is used to represent prolongation or stretching of the sound, and the question mark represents rising intonation (Schegloff, 2007). Pauses are timed and written within parentheses. For verbal means, the Jeffersonian transcription system is used (Sacks et al., 1974); for multimodal means, an adaptation of the Mondada (2014) system will be used and exemplified below.

In this excerpt, the teacher asks “what did he do?” “why [was he] really fast?” (l. 35). She adds “what is this action”, gazing to, pointing and circling the flashcard with the character jumping. She then produces the incomplete turn “he was__?” and, as portrayed in the multimodal transcript below, she does a jumping demonstration to project the completion of the ongoing turn and to target that vocabulary item so students produce it themselves.

In multimodal transcripts, as the one shown below, the lines below the verbal means describe the temporality of multimodal practices: the % symbol is used here for the teacher’s gaze; the \$ symbol is used here for gestures; and the # is used to represent the point in which the frame grab was taken. Symbols are aligned with the verbal production in order to represent the temporality of each practice such as the onset of gaze movements, or the phases of the gestural phrase (‘prep’ for preparation; ‘retr’ for retraction; ‘str’ for stroke). LH is left hand; RH is right hand.

37 Tea: what is this ac\$#tion?
 Tgze >> at TM >>
 Thnd >>LH circles TM \$ retr >>
 #2



Figure 2. Tea points and circles TM.

38 h% e w\$ a:\$s#
 Tgze >>% down >>
 Thnd >> \$prep \$ LHRH fists>>
 #3ab



Figure 3. Jumping action: (a) Preparation (b) post-stroke hold/gaze to student.

As shown, the teacher *grounds* the elicitation on the teaching materials: she directs her gaze towards the materials and performs a pointing gesture with circling motion (fig.2). Through these practices she orients to the materials and displays their relevance for the elicitation. She then produces the *incomplete* turn and projects its completion by performing the action being elicited, that is, by jumping (fig.3a) and at the point in which the movement is held post-stroke, the teacher directs her gaze back to the students orienting to them as relevant next speakers (fig.3b). As can be noted, through detailed transcription of embodied practices, it is possible to depict and analyse the characteristics of verbal production and the temporality of embodied practices. This allows us to tap into the microdetails and the complexity of situated talk-in-interaction and teaching as an intrinsically embodied activity (Hall & Looney, 2019) as sequences of action are not only built through talk (Goodwin, 2000; Streeck et al., 2011). Material artefacts and embodied practices, thus, become key in the development of the pedagogical tasks and in the management of student participation.

6. Conclusions: Applications of CA to teacher training

Following from the exploration of classroom interaction to identify its intricacies, several models emerged which include specific stages of teaching and post-observation analysis which is done through a CA approach. CA has clearly become a tool which can be used for training teachers and teacher trainees.

Awareness of the discourse practises developed throughout this paper is at the core of the classroom interactional competence (CIC) construct (Walsh, 2006). CIC refers to the knowledge of these practices and the ability to attend to the contingencies that emerge in the teaching-learning process. To develop one's CIC, it is key to understand how interactions unveils and the relevance of analysing talk through a more systematic perspective. The next section will introduce CA as an approach that can be used to explore talk-in-interaction.

The framework which has received greater attention is the Self-Evaluation of Teacher Talk (SETT) (Walsh, 2013), which explores different moments within the language lesson and the way language varies depending on the goals to be pursued: if instructions are being given, then teachers will produce longer stretches of talk; if materials are used, these are mobilised in interaction; if fluency is being given more importance, then attention will be paid to the content of the message, rather than the form and, lastly, if grammar contents are being practiced, then feedback will target these aspects. These 'classroom modes' all have different characteristics in terms of the way teachers and students use language and, through recordings of one's own classes and post-observation analysis sessions, interactional awareness can be enhanced (for more information on this framework, refer to Walsh, 2013).

A second framework that was developed is the IMDAT model (Sert, 2019) which works in a deductive way in that trainees are first presented with the CIC construct, and recorded in micro-teaching contexts next. The stages of this framework are: Introducing CIC, Micro-teaching, Dialogic Reflection, Another round of teaching and Teacher collaboration and second written critical self-reflection. Through this framework, in post-observation sessions, trainees and researcher talk classroom practices into being (Sert, 2020). For more information on this framework, refer to Sert (2019).

The emergence of these frameworks, among many others, demonstrates how results yielded from previous classroom interaction research can be fruitfully devoted to the training and improvement of teachers.

Through this introductory paper, an overview was provided of the historical development of the socio-interactionist perspective upon language teaching and learning, together with a thorough explanation of Conversation Analytic methods and their application into language teaching contexts.

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Endnotes

ⁱ For a discussion of the proposed ideas from both cognitive and social branches of the SLA field, check the special issues of *The Modern Language Journal* 2004 and 2007.

ⁱⁱ Some of the researchers of gestures that preceded Kendon and McNeill were David Efron, Paul Ekman and Wallace Friesen, among others. For a complete overview of the development of gesture studies, see Kendon (2004).