The Analysis of Classroom Discourse from a Socio-cultural Perspective

趙 琇 芬

大同大學應用外語學系講師

梁 穎

大同大學外語教育中心講師

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Hsiu-fen Chao, Ying Liang

Abstract

As language is the basic and most common mediation tool for interaction in the classroom, analyzing the discourse between the learners (students) and the people (peers and teachers) or the environment (classroom and culture) may shed light on the learning process in the classroom. In this paper conversational analysis (CA) was used as a grounded qualitative approach to study the discourse that took place in an English conversation classroom at a university in Taiwan. With the analysis, we hoped to study the effects of socio-cultural factors on teaching and learning in an L2 classroom, to understand the interactions among second language learners and their instructor, and to examine how Chinese socio-cultural features or values were reflected in their interactions through the classroom discourse. Analysis results indicated that teachers must consciously resist institutionally defined 'teacher talk', have a clear understanding about the socio-cultural codes students bring to the classroom and place them into learning context. Furthermore, learner-initiated communication such as group discussion in the classroom with equal turn-taking and less reliance on teacher-fronted and lockstep modes of learning should be highly encouraged.

Keywords: classroom discourse, CA (Conversational analysis), turn-taking

從社會文化觀點分析課堂言談

趙琇芬　梁 穎

摘　要

由於語言是促成課堂互動最基本也是最普遍的工具，分析學習者(學生)與他人（同儕及老師)間的言談或環境(教室與文化)可以闡明課堂內的學習過程。本論文以會話分析(CA)做為質化分析根據來研究臺灣某大學英語會話課中所發生之言談。透過分析，我們希望能研究在 L2 課堂內，社會文化因素對教學與學習的影響，了解第二外語學習者與其教師間的互動，並檢視他們在課堂言談的互動中所反映出之華人社會文化的特質或價值觀。分析結果顯示老師必須有意識的抗拒“教師語言”(teacher talk), 並清楚地掌握學生所帶來並置入學習環境中的社會文化規範。此外，應予以鼓勵的是以學生為主的溝通， 例如課堂小組討論應予以鼓勵，而不是以教師為主、因循守舊的學習模式。

關鍵詞：課堂言談、會話分析、話輪轉換

I. Introduction

According to Scollon (2004), more and more educators realize that teaching and learning in the classroom inevitably take place within a matrix of more general socio-cultural practices. The conceptualization of socio-cultural theory of learning draws heavily on the work of Vygotsky (1962-1986). He held that learning is embedded within social events and learning occurs as a child interacts with people, objects and events in the environment, and that mental functioning in the individual can be understood by examining the social and cultural processes from which it is derived. Bedner et al. (1992) also take a socio-cultural perspective to learning which believes that knowledge is constructed through social interaction and is context dependent. From this perspective, learning takes place because the individual interacts with the environment and with the surrounding people. Therefore, to understand the learning process in classrooms, we need to analyze the interactions between the learners (students) and the people (peers and teachers) or the environment (classroom and culture). The basic and most common mediation tool for interaction in the classroom is language, that is, the act of conversation is one of the oldest forms of socio-cultural interaction. Talk is thought made both visible and social and hence through analyzing conversation the thoughts of students and teachers can be ‘seen’.

II. Research Objective and Methods

Members of the same socio-cultural group may often ignore significant aspects of their own cultural displays as seen by others, while at the same time non-members struggle to understand the emic perspective of members, namely, insiders’ perspective, and often only arrive at characterizations that are rejected by members as

stereotypical. The second language (L2) classroom, in particular, is a site of struggle where learners create their own personal meanings at the boundaries between the native speaker's meanings and their own everyday life. Understanding the learner's struggle to create meaning involves an understanding of how socio-cultural meanings are linked in complicated ways to social interaction. To understand and solve this problem, directly analyzing the discourse, examining the cultural stereotypical behaviors and then bringing those to members for critical discussion will be the most effective methods.

The current conversation analysis (CA) methodology is originated from the interest in the function of language as a means for social interaction; CA assumes that the act of conversation, not simply developed spontaneously, follows a set of rules, which is different in different cultures and contexts (Garfinkel, 1967; Sacks et al., 1974). Walsh (2006) claims that the underlying philosophy of CA is that social contexts are constantly being formed by the participants through their use of language and the ways in which turn-taking, openings and closures, sequencing of acts, and so on are locally managed. The CA approach also takes into consideration the contextual information of the learning environment, which could be crucial in understanding learning from a socio-cultural perspective (Riffe et al., 1998). In this paper, we attempt to use conversation analysis (CA) as a grounded qualitative approach to understand the interactions among learners and their instructor in the classroom settings and to examine how Chinese socio-cultural features or values are reflected in their interactions through the classroom discourse.

III. Data set and analysis framework

To conduct discourse analysis or any kind of cultural analysis, the behavior examined must be considered in relation to the context in which the behavior occurs. In this study, the data set was collected from the real-life face-to-face classroom interaction in an English conversation classroom at a junior college in Taiwan, where English (L2) is taught as a foreign language. The class consists of about 20 4th-year English majors with high intermediate level English proficiency. Students were grouped into this class based on a criterion-referenced pre-course ability grouping placement test. English is the only language the teacher, a Taiwanese, used to interact with these students.

According to Acton and Felix (1986) and Brown (1992), second or foreign language learning is often second or foreign culture learning. Advanced language learners normally have greater potential to overcome the complexity of acculturation, the process of becoming adapted to a new culture, and internalize the new culture while using the target language. Therefore, in order to understand the features of the socio-cultural elements the participants demonstrate in the classroom discourse, the class of students with advanced English proficiency is not an appropriate subject for this study. This high-intermediate level L2 class is chosen mainly because students' language proficiency enables them to interact with the teacher in English appropriately so that turn takings are not stopped owing to the language proficiency problem. The lesson was both video- and audio-recorded with the instructor's as well as the students' permission.

Freebody (2003) suggested six analytic passes of talk to examine the transcripts for interaction pattern. They are, namely, turn -taking to talk; building exchanges;

parties, alliances and talk; interactional trouble and repair; preferences and accountability; and institutional categories and the question of identity. Each of the six analytic passes can function as useful instrument in studying the relationship between classroom discourse and interactions. Among these six passes, turn-taking is the basic form of organization for a conversation. It is not a random phenomenon; rather, it has structure and is representative of a system (ten Have, 1999). In a conversation, the parties involved in the talk know when their 'turn' to talk is. In a classroom, this 'turn' to talk may need a little coordination in order to ensure the smoothness of the turn-taking system. Examining turn-taking structures will cast light on the social norms and acceptable interactions that take place in the classroom environment. In this paper, therefore, we attempt to focus on examining the turn-taking structures of the interactions that take place in an L2 classroom to look into the ways how participants, both the teacher and her students, link socio-cultural meanings to their classroom discourse.

IV. Data Analysis

In ordinary talks, talk's topic, speaker order and turn allocation are unpredictable. However, in all traditional didactic classrooms, the turn-taking structure in the face-to-face interaction and speaker order are explicit, systematic and usually predictable (Benwell, 1996). Students and teachers know when they have their speaking rights, leading to a smooth interaction, with each speaker knowing when to talk and when not to talk. Scollon & Scollon (1991) point out that in Asian-English intercultural communication there are different expectations on how conversations should be opened, who should have the right to introduce the main topic and when. In addition, in the context of an L2 classroom in Taiwan, it is not surprising to note that turn taking is often

discontinuous by different factors such as silence either on the teacher's side or on his/her counterparts. Clipped from the video recording, the excerpt below is an example of a rather 'ordinary' classroom discourse that most of the Chinese teachers and students have experienced:

Excerpt 1

1 **S1:** Stand up. Bow.
2 **SS:** Good morning, teacher.
3 **T:** (0.5)
4 **S1:** Sit down.
5 **T:** All right...ok…now, class leader, is everybody here today?
6 **S1:** Yes.
7 **T:** Good. Come and help me pass the handouts.
8 **S1:** Yes. ((walking to the teacher))

Excerpt 1 shows eight turns of talk where the class leader initiated a typical Chinese ritual, asking all students to stand up, bow to greet the teacher (line 1) and say greetings in chorus (line 2) when she stepped into the classroom. There is a mass of evidence (Biggs, 1996; Biggs & Watkins, 1996; Hu & Grove, 1991; Lee, 1996) that Confucianism has prevailed and underlain the Chinese education philosophy for thousands of years. It is deeply rooted in the value of Chinese society that all people should 'revere the aged and honor the wise'. That is, whenever an elderly, a reputable, or a senior approaches or presents him/herself, the younger and the junior have to stand up and bow to show their respects to him/her. In a Chinese classroom, though an L2 class in this case, the teacher is supposed to be the absolute 'wise' and 'senior' so that students will almost automatically stand up at the sight of him/her, even without the class leader's command. Bowing is the body movement that is immediately noticed when one travels between Asia and western countries. It is another most common non-verbal form of greetings in Chinese culture practiced in classrooms, seminar and

conference rooms from primary school all the way through to higher education in most academic settings. Standing up and bowing to the teachers are regarded as the non-verbal cultural prerequisite which elicits and precedes the verbal discourse in the classrooms.

Normal verbal greetings such as “how are you” and “good morning” are categorized as adjacency pairs. They are paired utterances where the second part of the pair (e.g. answer) becomes conditionally relevant on the production of the first pair (question). However, if the second part is not immediately produced, it may still remain relevant and accountable and appear later, or its absence may be accounted for. According to Seedhouse (2005), the adjacency pair concept does not claim that second parts are always provided for first parts, but it is a normative framework for understanding actions and providing socio-cultural accountability. In line 3 of the above excerpt, the teacher was supposed to respond to “Good morning, teacher,” with its adjacency pair, “Good morning, students.” But instead, she kept silence. In line 4, the class leader also seemed to have taken the teacher’s silence for granted and gave the command right away asking his classmates to sit down. Clear status and power relations between the teacher and her students are demonstrated in these four turns from line 1 to line 4. By the teacher’s not returning greetings on one hand, and by the class leader’s immediate taking the turn to give command to his fellow classmates on the other, both interactants are orienting to the same schemata (Bartlett, 1932), that is, as remarked by Scollon & Scollon (2001), they have the shared knowledge that teacher-student relationship in classroom settings is rather hierarchical.

Cortazzi and Jin (1996) note that teachers and textbooks are seen as authoritative sources of knowledge. Teachers in Chinese culture, therefore, are highly respected as

the sole dominant authority in building students' knowledge, disciplining their behavior, and cultivating their personality. According to Chen (1990), the role of the teacher is to serve as a role model, to assist in the development of talent, to answer questions, and to cultivate his own learning while encouraging students to do the same. Teachers are traditionally regarded as the skill holders, knowledge givers and students' life mentors. Therefore, the teacher's seeming ignorance to the students' collective greeting to her in the classroom is common practice socio-culturally acceptable.

In line 5, the teacher took the turn by using the transition markers "all right", "ok", and "now" to signal the end of the classroom greeting ritual and alert the students that the class has started at that very moment. She initiated a question to the class leader about his classmates' attendance (i.e. roll calling is the class leaders' duty in the classroom) without calling his name but his title "class leader". The student responded to the teacher's question with a direct answer, "Yes," in the next turn of talk (line 6). If looking back at line 2, we could find that the students said greetings to the teacher, likewise, by addressing her title "teacher". In a collectivist society such as Taiwan, many relationships are established from one's birth into a particular family in a particular segment of society in a particular place. Scollon & Scollon (2001) claim that, in Chinese culture, memberships in particular groups tend to take on a permanent, ingroup character along with special forms of discourse which preserve the boundaries between those insiders, who are inside members of the group, and all those outsiders. Unlike the system of symmetrical solidarity expressed in the use of given or first name between teachers and students in western college campuses, the ways Chinese address people are culturally conditioned and they reflect a system of symmetrical deference. In an institutional setting such as schools, Chinese teachers have to use 'titles' (e.g. Dean, Chair, Professor, Director, Teacher, etc.) to show their respect when addressing each

other. Students will be regarded as rude and uncultivated if they address their teachers by their given names. Teachers, on the other hand, can choose to call their students by their full Chinese name or 'title' (e.g. class leader, class representative). Since Chinese have a rather complex structure of names which depends upon situations and relationships, it is only natural that all these teachers and students are addressed by other different names or titles when associating with different groups of people in different places outside the school setting.

In turn 7, the teacher said, "Good," to show her satisfaction to the class leader's answer about students' attendance in the previous turn and then went on asking the class leader to help her pass the handouts to the other students. The teacher in this turn made a request but without expressing even a word of appreciation. The class leader responded with a simple 'yes' in the next turn (line 8) and walked toward the teacher under her command. The teacher-student interaction in these two turns again displays to us the apparent hierarchical relationship in the classroom.

Excerpt 2

1 **T:** OK, so, what are the advantages and disadvantages of watching TV news report?
2 **SS:** ……. (4.0).
3 **T:** Who watched TV news report yesterday?
4 **SS:** ……..(3.0)
5 **T:** Raise your hand if you watched TV news report yesterday.
((some students raising their hands))
6 **T:** OK, Jacky, what impressed you most in yesterday's TV news report?
7 **Jacky:** ((smiling)) Um, ….well,…it's about President Ma and Legislative Speaker Wang Jin-Pying.
8 **T:** Yes?
9 **Jacky:** ...They fighted with each other.
10 **T:** Huh? Who fought with whom? What does fight mean? Be careful when you use the word 'fight'. You use 'fight' to express that you have an argument with

somebody about something. You can also use it to indicate that you struggle physically with somebody. You see the difference? And the verb tense of it….

Excerpt 2 shows ten turns of talk where the teacher initiated a question (line 1) to elicit responses from or interaction with the students, but unfortunately, it received no answer from the student cohort (line 2). To this, the teacher responded with another question, "Who watched TV news report yesterday?" The teacher's question in the third turn (line 3) was not a simple repetition of the initial question. Rather, it shows her reaction to the students' collective silence in the previous turn (line 2). The students' silence became a constitutive feature of her reformulated question. This second question, however, received another collective silence (line 4).

One of the most familiar organizations of classroom discourse is referred to as Initiation-Response-Evaluation (IRE) (Mehan, 1979a). It is mostly found in the classroom interaction that the sequence starts with the teacher's question followed by the student's response (answers) and then almost routinely goes back to the teacher who gives evaluation to the student's answer(s). This type of sequential relation of the utterances is prevalent in teacher-fronted class discussions (Nassaji and Wells, 2000). But from turns 1 to 4 above, the IRE sequence is not applicable to explain the turn-taking system in this study; it is stopped by the obvious silence, lack of any response from the students. For students with high-intermediate level English proficiency, it is undoubted that they could easily answer the questions as in line 1 and 3, but they chose not to respond to their teacher. It seems to turn over the long-lasting Chinese traditional value in which students are educated to pay their every respect to their teachers. However, if the students' behavior is put to be scrutinized from the socio-cultural perspective, their keeping silence in the process of the turn-taking system becomes understandable.

Silence of Asian students has been discussed extensively in the literature (Sato, 1982; Thomas, 1983; Brown & Levinson, 1987; Cheung, 1993; Goldstein, 2003; Nakane, 2006). Characteristically, Asian students' responding to questions and group discussion in an L2 classroom setting with silence and reticence may arise from one or more of several reasons: being too shy or embarrassed, by the fear of making errors in front of the teacher and their peers, and by the fear of losing face (Hsu, 2001; LoCastro, 1996; Tsui, 1996); to 'respect for authority', to avoid argument or excessive deference to a teacher, and not to challenge the teacher's authority (Littlewood, 2000; Bae & Pashby, 2002); not to express themselves as individuals but to immerse themselves in the group (Chandler, 1983); conformity being more emphasized and valued than freedom of expression (Lebra, 1987). Most of the research above shows that the most influential factors which inhibit effective turn-taking or verbal interactions in classroom are related to students' cultural background. As claimed by Adamson (1990), one crucial cause of Asian students' reluctance and restraint in participation is the culture they bring to the L2 classroom. Sato (1982) also reveals in her study that her Asian subjects tend to have fewer turns and bid for turns less often owing to their socio-cultural perceptions. Many attributes of informal conversation are normally expected to be displayed in teacher-student and student-student interactions in an L2 conversation class. However, the teacher in Excerpt 2 remained in control no matter on opening, closing and determining the topic. This style of 'teacher talk', as Fairclough (1989) describes it, demonstrates overt social distance and power which conflict with the concept of conversation advanced in an L2 classroom. The students, therefore, might feel constrained on their access to discourse so that they remain respectfully silent and speak only when spoken to by the teacher.

Finding a next speaker can be done in a variety of ways and since calling for self-selection often resulted in a collective silence (as in line 2 and 4), the teacher delivered a request asking those who watched TV news report to raise their hands (line 5). The teacher could therefore assert her exclusive right to allocate the turn. Among those who raised hands, Jacky was nominated to answer the question (line 6). He didn't give a verbal response immediately. Instead, his smile preceded the answer. However, there didn't seem to be any correlation between his smile and the question. According to Scollon & Scollon (2001), Asians are observed to smile or laugh more easily than westerners when they encounter difficulty or feel embarrassment in the discourse, and this is misinterpreted by westerners as normal pleasure or agreement. Unlike in an open floor for anyone to participate voluntarily, in this context, the pressure was on Jacky alone to respond. According to the turn-taking rule by Sacks et al. (1974), he is required to respond somehow and anybody else responding here will be violating the turn-taking rule. Jacky's smile, non-verbal behavior, in this excerpt (line 7) suggested he was not confident in what he was about to answer. Teachers' questions in classrooms usually tend to do the action of testing rather than information seeking. Jacky may assume that if he can't answer the question well, imperfect or even wrong answers may result in bad impression or poor marking for this course. Jucker (1993) and Fox Tree (2002) claim that the discourse marker W*ell* and *Um* can both function as 'delay devices' for the speaker to think how to respond or continue the turn in a conversation. By examining the discourse markers, *Um* and *Well* (line 7), which followed the smile, we know Jacky wasn't confident in his answer to the teacher's question.

The feedback, 'yes' with a rising intonation, from the teacher in line 8 serves both to confirm that the student has responded correctly and to elicit (or cue) a further response to clarify the previous utterance from the same student. The same student gave

the second response (line 9) and this was followed by the teacher's turn of talk (line 10) in which, using the expression 'Huh?', she indicated that she did not understand the student's response in line 9 and meanwhile attempted to correct the word 'fighted' misused by the student in the previous turn of talk. Her confusion with the student's answer was shown by the next two questions she asked in line 10. Through her questions, "Who fought with whom? What does fight mean?", she demonstrated where the student was lacking in his answers. The two questions appeared to be rhetorical questions as there was no wait time allowed for the student to respond. The teacher went on to explain the difference of the way using the word 'fight'. She spoke as the authority in this case. Hence the turn-taking structure is largely linear, that is, at any one time, only one person can be speaking and the rest of the class is listening.

V. Pedagogical Implications

The professional training of language teachers is mainly focused on structural facets of language. Therefore, the teaching of culture often represents an aspect of language teaching that is unfamiliar to language teachers. Although applied linguists and practitioners may have been aware that socio-cultural variation is closely tied to language use, training in pedagogy rarely addresses the many influences of key socio-cultural features on language learning and teaching. Standing up, bowing and smiles, for example, do not seem to be relevant to teaching and learning, and certainly not a major aspect of discourse. But as a part of the contextual background within which teaching, learning and our discourses take place, it is essential to remember that we cannot ignore the interpretation and misinterpretations we are making in reading other participants' non-verbal signals and the socio-cultural meanings they carry in the discourse and interactions. Morain (1986: 75) claims that "those who have 'learned' a

language without including the non-verbal component are seriously handicapped if they intend to interact with living members of the culture instead of with paper and print." Therefore, in addition to teaching the linguistic and structural facets of language, teachers should make students aware of the body language of non-verbal communication of the target language.

Chinese education philosophy, as mentioned above, is mainly based on Confucianism and knowledge transmission is indeed the most valued educational goal. Teachers, therefore, are highly respected and regarded as "parental figures" (Braddock et al., 1995). Students receive instructions, accept knowledge transmission, and obey commands from them. Students' predisposition towards reticence and silence, therefore, is determined to a large extent by their socio-cultural background. Without the knowledge or understanding of students' socio-cultural background, teachers may misinterpret their silence as cognitive deficit (Jones, 1999). This fact about Chinese students' prior educational experience is surely one that is relevant to L2 teachers, particularly those engaged in preparing learners for English-speaking academic settings because it allows teachers to interpret students' classroom performance and reaction as social constructions rather than as cognitive deficits. In other words, our teaching will be informed by an approach that focuses on discovering text purposes, which implies differences, and not on developing thinking skills, which implies deficits.

The participants in this study, both the teacher and her students, obviously understood each other since they have the shared knowledge of Chinese socio-cultural background. However, the course where the discourse data were collected is English conversation and English is the target language that students were learning. Both the teacher and her students demonstrated a lack of competence in the rules and norms of English conversation. Standing up, bowing, smiling and silence are not socio-cultural

features frequently found in the target language classroom interaction. Language teachers should first receive training on cross-cultural awareness to help recognize the challenges that students may face. Teachers then should have the responsibility for teaching the rule of turn-taking, social interaction patterns, cultural values, and other aspects of the English-speaking culture while at the same time having to take into consideration the negotiation of a tension between students' cultural patterns and the target culture. Moreover, teachers should try to improve students' participatory or interactional skills and encourage their participation in class discussion. Otherwise, teachers can utilize the power in a face-to-face environment to steer the learning direction for students in a productive way and yet relinquish this power to the students in group discussion so that the students learn to assume the role of epistemic agents in knowledge construction.

VI. Concluding remarks

As claimed by Heritage (1997: 162), "CA embodies a theory which argues that sequences of actions are a major part of what we mean by context, that the meaning of an action is heavily shaped by the sequence of previous actions from which it emerges, and that social context is a dynamically created thing that is expressed in and through the sequential organization of interaction." This paper, taking a socio-cultural perspective of learning, presents CA as a tool to examine texts resulting from interactions in a classroom environment. Classroom discourse is characterized by peculiar patterns of both non-verbal and verbal interaction which tend to be short exchanges directed by the teacher. While the words may be understood, we have to keep in mind that the meanings are interpreted within a socio-cultural envelope created by the discourse system from which a person speaks. Using CA, the actions and knowledge of

the participants can illuminate how the socio-cultural norms of learning are constructed and understood by the participants in the classroom learning situation. Unlike the teacher in this study, any language teacher who wishes his/her students to learn languages by participating in extended meaningful conversation, then, must consciously resist institutionally defined 'teacher talk', namely teacher-dominant lectures, have a clear understanding about the socio-cultural codes students bring to the classroom, and place them into the learning context. Learner-initiated communication such as group discussion in the classroom with equal turn-taking and less reliance on teacher-fronted and lockstep modes of learning, should be highly encouraged.

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Appendix

Transcript notations

(2.0) Timed silence between utterances
(( )) Scenic description and accounts

1 **S1:** Stand up. Bow.
2 **SS:** Good morning, teacher.
3 **T:** (0.5)
4 **S1:** Sit down.
5 **T:** All right...ok…now, class leader, is everybody here today?
6 **S1:** Yes.
7 **T:** Good. Come and help me pass the handouts.
8 **S1:** Yes. ((walking to the teacher))
9 **T:** When you get the handout. Have a….have a look at the news report on the second page. Um…you'll have 10 minutes to read it then.
(20.0)
10 **T:** Everybody gets one copy of the handouts? OK, now you can start to read it.
(10 minutes)
11 **T:** All right… so… what are the advantages and disadvantages of watching TV news report?
12 **SS:** ……. (4.0).
13 **T:** Who watched TV news report yesterday?
14 **SS:** ……..(3.0)
15 **T:** Raise your hand if you watched TV news report yesterday.
((some students raising their hands))
16 **T:** OK, Jacky, what impressed you most in yesterday's TV news report?
17 **Jacky:** ((smiling)) Um, ….well,…it's about President Ma and Legislative Speaker Wang Jin-pying.
18 **T:** Yes?
19 **Jacky:** ...They fighted with each other.
20 **T:** Huh? Who fought with whom? What does fight mean?... Be careful when you use the word 'fight'. You use 'fight' to express that you have an argument with somebody about something. You can also use it to indicate that you struggle physically with somebody. You see the difference? And the verb tense of it should be 'fought'. Fight, fought, fought. OK?