Conversation Analytic Approaches to Language and Education

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Abstract

This chapter documents the impact of conversation analysis (CA) as a research method on language education. Beginning with the earlier crossover between CA and applied linguistics on the campus of UCLA, it proceeds to sketch how conversation analytic findings have enriched our understandings of the nature of interactional competence, the complexity of pedagogical practices, and finally, the very conceptualization of learning and how that learning is accomplished. It also paints in broad strokes the current trends of CA work on language education and highlights such challenges as translating CA insights into the classroom, illuminating teacher expertise, and cultivating a broader view of learning. The chapter concludes by delineating some future directions where some of these challenges may be addressed.

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Introduction

The field of language education has witnessed exponential growth in harnessing the methodological power of conversation analysis (CA) to address issues of teaching and learning, forcing us to reconsider some of the fundamental questions such as what needs to be taught, how teaching is done, and how learning proceeds. To date, aside from its presence in numerous edited volumes as well as special journal issues, CA research has left an indelible mark, if not become a staple, at major conferences such as TESOL (International Association for Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages), AAAL (American Association for Applied Linguistics), and IPrA (International Pragmatics Association) as well as in leading journals such as *TESOL Quarterly*, *Applied Linguistics*, *Language Learning*, *Linguistics and Education*, and *The Modern Language Journal*. In this chapter, I charter CA's journey into the field of language education and highlight its major contributions to our understandings of the nature of interactional competence, the nature of language learning, and the nature of language teaching. Throughout the chapter, I emphasize CA's methodological forte that affords these unique contributions that would have otherwise remained inaccessible to intuitions or interviews. Despite this robust growth, conversation analytic work addressed to language education is not without its problems and difficulties, a few of which I shall briefly outline. Finally, I venture to sketch some directions for future research.

Early Developments

Championed by sociologists Harvey Sacks, Emmanuel Schegloff, and Gail Jefferson, CA emerged as a radical approach to sociological inquiry in the 1960s. As a research methodology, it insists on using data collected from naturally occurring interaction as opposed to interviews, field notes, native intuitions, and experimental designs and letting research questions emerge from such data. Analysts work with audio or video recordings along with the transcripts of these recordings, using transcription notations that capture a full range of interactional details such as volume, pitch, pace, intonation, overlap, inbreath, smiley voice, the length of silence as well as nonverbal conduct. It is in such minute details that evidence for the tacit methods of social interaction – those often not subject to easy articulation – is located. This stance toward prioritizing naturally occurring interaction and on-the-scene participant orientations quickly proved attractive to scholars from a variety of disciplines such as anthropology, psychology, and communication studies.

The field of language education was no exception. Early cross-over between CA and applied linguistics/SLA (second language acquisition) took shape on the campus of UCLA during mid 1970s–1980s (Wong 2013), where a series of master theses began to apply CA to the analysis of conversations that involved nonnative speakers and to argue for the relevance of CA for language teaching. In her 1984 thesis (later published as Wong 2002), for example, Wong evaluated telephone conversations in ESL (English as a second language) textbooks based on CA findings on real-life telephone conversations, revealing such surprising facts as the absence of ringing, the irrelevance of voice samples, or the perplexing discrepancy between talk and participant relationships in textbook phone conversations. From the vantage point of CA, Wong sounded the first wake-up call to language teaching professionals regarding the inauthenticity of textbook materials and how such inauthenticity may be assessed and alleviated. This wielding of CA as an assessment tool for textbook dialogs speaks most directly to CA's relevance for and contribution to language education, and it inspired a line of subsequent work addressed to the design of language teaching materials and activities.

Less directly, CA's bearing on language education became manifest in earlier attempts to examine NS-NNS (native-nonnative) or NNS-NNS conversations. Insofar as much of the enterprise of language education hinges upon our understanding of how language is learned, and much of language learning takes place in interactions both in and outside the classroom as learners interact not only with native speakers but also amongst themselves, understanding the nature of those interactions is pivotal to making informed decisions in both designing and implementing language education practices. Schwartz (1980) (based on her 1977 thesis completed at UCLA), for example, analyzed conversations between ESL learners from a CA perspective, and in particular, the repair work involved in negotiating errors and trouble sources. She found that although the ESL learners' repair practices bear much resemblance to those of native speakers, they do deviate in one respect: in the cases of language errors, the preference for self repair is suspended in favor of other repair, which, according to Schwartz, "might suggest that second language learners can learn more from one another than they think they can" (p. 152). Despite such earlier attempts to apply CA to the study of NNS discourse, it was not until almost 20 years later that the urgency of examining such discourse for applied linguists was explicitly articulated by Firth and Wagner (1997), and a programmatic call made to broaden the scope of SLA (second language acquisition) to accommodate both the social and cognitive dimensions of language use and acquisition. Only in so doing, maintained Firth and Wagner, may a better understanding of "how language is used *as it is being acquired through interaction*" be achieved (p. 296, emphasis in original). Although Firth and Wagner made no explicit reference to conversation analysis in their programmatic call, given its potency in describing and detailing the practices of social interaction, CA became the natural candidate for answering that call. As we shall see in the following section, aside from specifying the nature of interactional competence, CA scholars have made important advance in illuminating the nature of language learning as well as that of language teaching.

Major Contributions

CA and Interactional Competence

Crystallized in the intersection between CA and language education is their common interest in and commitment to the enterprise of interactional competence. For CA, it is the description of such competence, and for language education, its development. Respectively, CA studies on L1 (first language) and L2 (second language) interactional practices offer crucial insights into the nature of L1 and L2 interactional competencies, answering such foundational questions as: what is entailed in the competence to be developed, and what is the nature of such developing competence?

A useful summary of major CA findings on L1 interactional practices can be found in Wong and Waring (2010), who also show how understanding such practices as turn-taking, sequencing, overall structuring, and repair are relevant, and can be applied, to ESL/EFL teaching. CA findings can, as mentioned earlier, serve as a yardstick for measuring the authenticity of various aspects of interactional competence as represented in language teaching materials (Wong 2002). Barraja-Rohan (2011) relates CA specifically to the teaching of interactional competence to lower to intermediate levels adult ESL students, showing how a CA-informed pedagogical approach can effectively raise students' awareness of the norms of spoken interaction and help them become analysts of, and eventually better participants in, conversations. Huth and Taleghani-Nikazm (2006) make the most explicit connection between conversation analysis and the teaching of pragmatics, positing that CA findings "capture pragmatics in its most natural locus: the conversational encounter" (p. 53). The authors demonstrate how CA-based materials can "effectively enable L2 learners to engage in cross-culturally variable language behavior inside and outside of class" (p. 53).

While findings on L1 interactional practices can clearly benefit the design of language teaching materials and instructional activities, understanding the nature of L2 interactional practices is arguably equally integral to assuming an informed pedagogical stance. Importantly, an emic portrayal of learner behavior can help us develop greater clarity in understanding learner "errors" and devise more profitable pedagogical interventions accordingly. In Carroll's (2005) revealing study of vowel-marking (adding vowels to word final consonants) among Japanese learners of English, for example, what is typically attributed to negative transfer is shown to be deployed by the participants as a resource for managing word search and multiunit turns. Indeed, viewing L2 conversations as an exhibit of achievement rather than deficiencies is a prevailing theme in Gardner and Wagner's (2004) edited volume that brings together a series of CA studies showing second language conversations as normal conversations, where errors and mistakes are rarely consequential, and where L2 users exhibit great sophistication and versatility in managing various interactional contingencies. This reconceptualized view of L2 competencies can ultimately alter some of our deep-seated assumptions and routine practices in language education. In discussing the implications for his finding, for example,

Carroll (2005) advises ESL teachers "intent on ridding their Japanese students of vowel-marking" to "forget pronunciation drills and ridicule, and instead concentrate on training students to use interactionally equivalent conversational micro-practices" (p. 233).

In sum, aside from constituting the foundational repertoire of L1 interactional practices, CA findings have also provided crucial insights that have led to a reconceptualization of L2 interactional practices – a reconceptualization that would not have been arrived at without CA's deeply emic research stance that prioritizes participant orientations.

CA and Language Teaching

CA contributes to our understanding of language teaching by portraying in great detail the "amazingly complex and demanding interactional and pedagogical work in the classroom" (Seedhouse 2004, p. 265) as teachers manage "the reflexive relationship between pedagogy and interaction" (p. 263) from one moment to the next. Such complex demands of teaching are usefully captured in the construct of classroom interactional competence (CIC) (Walsh 2006) – the ability to use interaction as a tool to mediate and assist learning. As Walsh writes, "[a]lthough CIC is not the sole domain of teachers, it is still very much determined by them" (p. 130). CA studies in the language classroom have yielded useful descriptions of how participation is promoted (Richards 2006), instructions are given (Seedhouse 2008), and explanations are offered (Mortensen 2011).

A noticeable focus of CA research on language teaching falls under what may be called the contingent management of learner contributions. Yes-no questions in the third position after learner responses to teacher initiations, for example, can be used to "pull into view interpretative resources that are already in the room for students to recognize" (Lee 2008, p. 237). In addition, managing learner contributions frequently involves dealing with problematic learner talk. In the native-nonnative speaker conversation groups, covert third position repair is deployed in response to sequentially inapposite responses as a useful resource for keeping the conversation going (Kasper and Kim 2007). In second language writing conferences, teachers use questions that convey information (Koshik 2010) to promote self-correction.

In sum, what such findings have offered overall is a richer and more nuanced depiction of what the professional work of language teaching entails. Such work, as can be seen, is not limited to asking display vs. referential questions or choosing one corrective feedback technique over another. This richness and nuance is a byproduct of how CA research is approached in the first place. By beginning with a line-by-line analysis of the data without any a priori focus, the investigator is able to remain maximally open to what the participants themselves bring to the scene of the interaction, and as a result, produce reports that privilege interaction as experienced and oriented to by the participants, as opposed to ones that favor the analysts' interpretive stance driven by their particular sets of theoretical or empirical interests.

CA and Language Learning

While the issue of whether CA can usefully contribute to answering questions of language learning has been hotly debated (see 1997–1998, 2004, and 2007 special issues of The Modern Language Journal), those debates will not be rehashed here. Instead, the reader is invited to consider two bodies of CA work that either (1) describes the local interactional process by which learning as a process is negotiated (i.e., learning opportunities) or (2) documents learning as a product in the short term (Markee 2008) or over a longer period of time (Hellermann 2008). Importantly, for these scholars, the fundamental assumption is that both learning and learning opportunities are embedded and embodied in various interactional practices observed both within and outside the classroom. This particular focus necessarily precludes discussions of work addressed to, for example, patterns of classroom discourse without any explicit reference to learning.

Learning opportunities. In mining for learning opportunities in the interactional data, CA scholars have repeatedly drawn our attention to learner practices of repair and various types of searches in contexts ranging from the casual to the institutional (Brouwer 2003; Reichert and Liebscher 2012). In examining casual conversations between L1 and L2 English speakers, for example, Kim (2012) shows how practices for establishing initial recognitional reference when names are not available provide design features that can facilitate learning because, as she argues, such practices exhibit a sensitivity to the learner's ZPD (Zone of Proximal Development) (Vygotsky 1978), and "the juxtaposition of the learner's lengthy and often non-target-like utterance to the single lexical item provided by the L1 speaker increases the saliency for noticing" (p. 726).

The discussion of learning opportunity is often bound up with identity negotiations in learning encounters. Hosoda (2006), for example, shows how different levels of language expertise are made relevant by the participants in second language conversations. In Firth's (2009) study on lingua franca in the workplace, on the other hand, participants go to great lengths to disavow their learner status, which entails, as Firth argues, various types of local learning such as quick assessment of recipient competency and adjustment to that competency.

Aside from identity, task seems to be another locus for investigating learning opportunities. Examining a peer interactive task in a Japanese as a foreign language classroom, Mori (2004) shows how the students shift back and forth between working on an assigned task and managing certain lexical problems, thus transforming "in a moment-by-moment fashion their converging or diverging orientations towards varying types of learning and learning opportunities" (p. 536). On the other hand, Markee (2005) draws our attention to off-task talk and its learning potential by virtue of its attention to learners' real interactional needs. Finally, learning opportunities have also been explored in learner behavior such as learner initiatives. Garton (2012), for example, urges teachers to encourage learner initiatives in teacher-fronted classrooms as they constitute significant opportunities for learning.

Learning over time. Some scholars have focused on how learning a particular vocabulary item or grammatical structure is achieved within local interactional contexts in the short term. Using evidence from a training course in an American university for 15 science professors from China, Markee (2008) documents how the word "pre-requisite" is first delivered and glossed by the teacher as part of a powerpoint presentation on developing course syllabi and, 2 days later, oriented to as a learning object by the teacher throughout a repair sequence that results in the learner repeating the word along with an independent gloss.

Others document the development of interactional competence over a longer period of time. Nguyen (2012) demonstrate an ESL learner's increasing participation in grasping the structural organization of a communicative event during office hour interactions over a period of 5–6 weeks. In a series of studies, Hellermann (e.g., 2008) documents ESL learners' changing participation in managing task opening and closing, storytelling, repair practices, and literacy events over various periods of up to 27 months.

Notably, because of its methodological focus on members' management of moment-to-moment interaction, CA has recalibrated our investigative gaze into language learning in at least two ways. It has forced us to recognize and appreciate how participants themselves do learning through managing repairs, navigating tasks, and negotiating identities. It has also, importantly, reminded us that language learning is, to a great extent, learning to become competent in mobilizing a wide range of interactional practices.

Work in Progress

Efforts of documenting learning over time continue to characterize some of the current CA work in the language classroom, which explores, for example, how learners develop negation over a seven-month period (Hauser 2013) or how they develop the ability to manage routine inquiries over the span of 9 weeks (Waring 2013a). Similarly, repair and various types of searches remain a magnet for scholarly attention. The practice of epistemic search sequence (ESS) is the focus of Jakonen and Morton's (2015) study on content-based language classrooms, where students in peer interaction collectively resolve emerging knowledge gaps while working on pedagogic tasks, which, as the authors argue, showcases the affordances of peer interaction for learning. In the meantime, learning opportunities have also been explored in CA studies on a wider range of learner behavior such as multiple responses to teachers' questions (Ko 2014) and humorous and playful sequences (Reddington and Waring 2015). Multiple responses to teacher questions, for example, are shown to provide an opportunity for learners to share participation and collaboratively achieve a local learning objective (Ko 2014).

In studies on language teaching, a major object of inquiry remains to be the contingent management of learner contribution, as researchers investigate the use of epistemic status checks (ESCs) in response to student visual cue in the interest of

moving the lesson forward (Sert 2013) and the variable functions of third turn repeats in form-and-accuracy versus meaning and fluency contexts (Park 2014). Also placed under the CA microscope is a broader spectrum of pedagogical work such as maintaining the instructional space via self-talk during moments of trouble (Hall and Smotrova 2013), managing the "chaos" of competing voices (Waring 2013b), and creating space for learning through practices such as increased wait-time, extended learner turns and increased planning time, and managing learner contributions in a positive and open way (Walsh and Li 2013). A useful construct that encapsulates such endeavors to document a broader repertoire of teacher conduct is the *interactional competence for teaching* (ICT) (cf. CIC-classroom interactional competence in Walsh 2006) proposed by Joan Kelly Hall at a 2014 AAAL colloquium.

Problems and Difficulties

The meticulous attention to details celebrated as the hallmark of the CA method also presents, unfortunately, a major obstacle to translating its insights into actual classroom teaching. It is difficult, for example, to explicate and make usable the wealth of CA findings without relying on its transcripts that are highly technical and not necessarily visually inviting – at least not at a first glance. CA scholars are typically not at the same time practicing material developers and classroom instructors, and language teaching professionals are mostly not well versed in conversation analysis as a methodology or familiar with its body of findings on interactional competence. Although Wong and Waring (2010) have taken a first systematic attempt at making those findings available and relevant, and heroic efforts have been made or are underway (Jean Wong, personal communication) to develop CA-informed pedagogical materials and instructional activities, these efforts remain limited in amount and reach as the work demands a special kind of expertise, a great deal of creativity, and a high level of labor-intensive energy. The challenge, for example, of presenting CA discoveries on interaction with appeal and efficiency and yet without losing their richness and depths is a serious one. As such, for some, the impact of conversation analysis on the field of language education remains unimpressive at the moment.

Moreover, in their efforts to explicate the interactional competence for teaching (ICT), CA studies have not been particularly discriminatory in choosing the types of teachers to be studied. While we are not in shortage of CA studies of classroom discourse, few focus specifically on experienced teachers and the development of novice teachers. Studies would typically report data from, for example, *a* classroom or a particular set of classrooms, without particular attention to the level of expertise brought in by the teachers. It is true that even without such a focus, we gain valuable insights into how various aspects of teaching are accomplished and accomplished with great ingenuity at times. Calibrating our lens to specifically capture the interactional development and enactment of teacher expertise, however, could yield greater dividend for strengthening the professional practices of language teaching.

In order to garner truly useful feedback for language teacher education purposes, we are yet to build a strong and comprehensive knowledge base of how novice teacher develop over time and what expert teachers do and do well.

Last but not least, a longstanding challenge also concerns the uneasy partnership between CA and language learning, as most poignantly featured in the CA-for-SLA movement. As Pekarek Doehler (2010) maintains, finding ways to look at language-in-action across time, which involves "tracking language resources used within the same type of practice at (at least) two different moments in time" poses particular challenges given "CA's uncompromising insistence on naturally-occurring data" (pp. 120–121). Lee (2010) raises a more serious issue regarding the very conceptualization of learning in CA-based studies, observing that the initiative to consider learning issues appears to "take the narrower view of learning than what natural interactional details in CA studies allow us to see" (p. 403). He writes:

> [t]he contingency of interaction has to be treated as central if we want to recover learning as the participants experience it. . . .if the contingency of interactional details is treated as being analytically central, CA research can still tell us very useful things about the phenomena of learning because it can recover the participants' contingent sense-making practices through which the task of learning is discovered, acted on, and realized (p. 403).

Future Directions

Clearly, continuing advancement of the CA and language learning program will entail producing stronger evidence and argument for the in situ nature of learning as it is experienced by the participants. It will also hinge upon our abilities to meet the challenge of documenting language-in-action across time. On a more practical front, to further the impact of conversation analysis on language education, great benefits may be gained from richer dialogs and more fruitful collaborations between CA scholars and language teaching professionals. Given various practical constraints, this is (only) possible if we embark on changes at the level of infrastructure – by fronting the relevance of conversation analysis and making it an integral component of language teacher education. Also crucial is serious collaboration between conversation analysts and language teacher education scholars, which will allow for a richer program of language teacher education that prioritizes the development of not only teachers' interactional practices but also their pedagogical reasoning (Johnson and Golombek 2011).

Finally, serious theory building around the interactional competence for teaching (ICT) will require disciplined empirical work on a wider range of teacher practices with greater specificity. After all, teachers manage numerous challenges in the classroom, and handling such challenges competently is integral to their ICT. Classroom discourse researchers working within a conversation analytic framework may be compelled to address such practical concerns as:

(1) How do we encourage "conversation," which is the essence of interactional competence, in an environment that is not a natural habitat to such conversation?
(2) How do we encourage play and exploration without undermining necessary control? Or conversely, how do we maintain control without undermining participation?
(3) How do we assess performance in ways that assist performance?
(4) How do we resolve the paradox of authenticity, where authentic interaction is often off-task, and where greater participation entails less authentic interaction/pragmatic norms?
(5) How do we ensure robust and inclusive participation in whole-class settings?

In closing, much may be gained from cultivating an appreciation for descriptive work on pedagogical practices, and by extension, an appreciation for the contingency of interaction that such descriptive work illuminates. Adequate descriptions of such practices, as Lee (2013) reminds us, provide educators with "insightful observational resources for their pedagogical gazes" (p. 864), and in particular, allow analysts to "determine what changes are possible in L2 use and what actually occasions those changes" (p. 864).

Cross-References

▶ Interactional Approaches to the Study of Classroom Discourse and Student Learning
▶ Researching Body Movements and Interaction in Education

Related Articles in the Encyclopedia of Language and Education

Judith Green and Janet Joo: Classroom Interaction, Situated Learning. In Volume: Discourse and Education
Marije Michel and Bryan Smith: Computer-Mediated Communication and Conversation Analysis. In Volume: Language, Education, and Technology
Numa Markee and Silvia Kunitz: Understanding the Fuzzy Borders of Context in Conversation Analysis and Ethnography. In Volume: Discourse and Education
Silvia Valencia Giraldo: Talk, Texts and Meaning-making in Classroom Contexts. In Volume: Discourse and Education

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