CLASSROOM RELATED TALKS: Conversation Analysis of Asian EFL learners

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, the author first records, transcribes, and then analyses a short extract from an English conversation among three graduate students with different cultural backgrounds. It aims to analyse several aspects of conversation analysis; turn-taking, topic change, preference organisation, listing, use of figurative language, face saving, breakdowns and repairs, and dysfluency. The data analysis shows that there is an interesting feature occurs concerning to overlapping during conversation. Moreover, dysfluency is also one of noticeable features which exist regularly during the conversation. However, the figurative language that is expected to emerge during talk among different cultural background cannot be figured out because the participants tend to avoid using such complex and idiomatic language structure.

Keywords: *Conversation analysis; Classroom talks*

INTRODUCTION

Conversation analysis emerged from Sack's study on analysing language use in social interaction. (Wooffitt, 2001) He recorded and analysed how people actually converse. Many researches have been conducted in this area since the 1960's. Despite this, different concepts and assumptions on conversation analysis (CA) have been used. Hutchby and Wooffitt have defined CA as 'the systematic analysis of the talk produced in everyday situations of human interaction: talk-in-interaction' (1998, p. 13) In the same way, Have (1999) points out that CA is generally referred as the analysis of utterances produced in daily communication. CA focuses not only on language produced by people in talk-in-interaction, but also on the understanding

and interpretation of the speakers of each other's utterances during the talk itself. (Hutchby & Wooffitt, 1998) In addition, when analysing data, features such as culture, gender and social background have to be considered.

Regarding data analysis, Atkinson and Heritage note that analysts are not expected to interpret the participants understanding in utterances or to restrict them during the recording of the data interaction. They are, instead, required to present the data based on their own observation of the participants' ordinary behaviour throughout the interaction (Atkinson & Heritage, 1984).

The first section looks at the methodology of collecting data such as participants, context, and the recording itself. The second section looks at several points in transcription procedure and system used in analysing the record data and brief definitions of CA elements discussed in the data analysis. Moreover, a range of symbols that exist in transcription will be introduced as well. The third section is data analysis of a series of actions within utterances. However, this paper tends to limit the discussion to only several aspects in conversation analysis. The aspects consist of turn-taking, topic change, preference organization, listing, use of figurative language, face saving, breakdowns and repairs, and dysfluency.

METHODOLOGY

Participants

The students were all female and aged 25 and 28 who come from Asian countries. The conversation is in a friendly, informal style. They talked about the progress of their assignments in a café near their classroom. The conversation reflects their worry in choosing titles for their assignments. Some problems in composing the assignments such as choosing a topic and collecting data are also discussed during the conversation. One reason for the conversation is to share their ideas dealing with those problems.

Context and Expectations

The type of talk discussed in this paper is a conversation among three graduate students with different cultural backgrounds. Before the recording, a number of

expectations were expected to come out from the recorded data. Since they come from different cultural backgrounds which have their own style in expressing ideas of using language, the use of figurative language by participants, for instance, was expected to develop during conversation. Moreover, cultural and gender backgrounds usually play a crucial role in several elements occurred in a conversation such as topic change, breakdowns and repair, and preference organization. The different ways in reacting each other's turn-taking are also expected to reveal in the data. Dysfluency is also one of the most common things predicted to appear during conversation because they speak English either as second or foreign language.

Recording

A digital camera was used to record the conversation. It was put on the table in front of the participants during the conversation in order to avoid picking up too many outside noises. The quality of the sound recording is not at the highest quality as it was expected. Some parts of the conversation cannot be heard clearly because of the low capacity of the equipment itself. Furthermore, the noisy environment in the recording location also had a negative impact on producing a high-quality recording. In ethical aspect of getting permission, the participants had been told that their conversation would be recorded. They were very kindly to give permission for these data to be arranged on this paper. There were some difficulties, however, to produce a natural conversation when people recognize that their conversations are being recorded.

TRANSCRIPTION PROCEDURE AND SYSTEM

Transcribing a recorded data systematically is assumed as the first basic thing generally done by an analyst before doing a CA. As a foundation in analysing conversation, this transcript becomes a crucial part to analyse the utterances of the interaction. As it happens, the process to write a clear and readable transcription is not that simple. This condition occurs because in a recording many people sometimes are talking at the same time, laughing while the others are talking, laughing together, giving such a long pause, expressing their words improperly, etc. (Ten Have, 1999).

There are several ways that are adopted by analysts in transcribing these data. Have (1999) states that while a number of analysts usually put only the clear utterances spoken by participants during interaction in a transcription in order to avoid confusions to the readers, the others not only put any utterances but also how that language was produced by setting any original sounds from recorded data without changing or correcting them. In other words, several analysts emphasize on the content of the conversation by giving only a little interest on how those languages have been said, but the others give details of original record data in the transcription and discuss the process of producing utterances.

Each of the techniques has plus and minus side actually. In detail transcription, on one hand, the complete and original data in language use for social interaction will be appeared perfectly but it is not always easy to the readers (especially non linguist ones) to understand what the analyst tries to transcribe. The conventional transcription, on the other hand, which is likely to give the clear data by highlighting only the clear utterances and avoiding noticeable mistakes from the conversation (Ten Have, 1999), is quite readable to the readers but it limits the exploration of using the language in talk-in interaction. It can be done in any techniques because no standard of the highest-quality in constructing a transcription. In addition, some symbolic transcript notations used in transcribing recorded data need to be introduced in order to provide such information to the reader how people were actually speaking in social interaction.

In this paper, the record data was transcribed based on dictionary spelling in order to make it readable to the readers. The transcription procedure adopted in this paper is a conventional one. Before explaining some examples of sequences in the conversation, I will clarify the transcript convention I have chosen and adopted in my transcription. A range of these symbols is employed from Ten Have's book which is devised by Gail Jefferson and commonly used by analysts in current CA publications.

Pauses are notated by their length in second that is shown in bracket and the stressed words are underlined. Parts of the transcript that are symbolized by single left square bracket indicate the point of overlap. Equal sign is the symbol for indicat-

ing no gap between two lines. The arrows represent the higher or lower pitches in the utterance parts. Some non-verbal features such as laughter are shown within the square bracket. The colon indicates a long sound in a word. The angle bracket is employed to indicate fast speech. Moreover, small degree sign is used to indicate the part of which is quieter than other parts in utterances (Ten Have, 1999). The use of feedback is also added as the transcript notation, for example 'yeah', 'mm', 'ok', and 'well'. In addition, commas and full stop used in the transcription reflect their normal function in written language only. In order to give a clear view of the elements discussed in this paper, below are a brief explanation of those;

Turn-taking

Conversation is operated naturally by turn-taking. Based on Sacks's work collaborate with two of his colleagues in 1960s on turn-taking system, Beattie categorizes three techniques in indicating turn-taking system in conversation. First, the technique called 'previous speaker select next' which happens if the previous speaker addresses question directly to someone to be answered and being a next speaker. It could be either by straight calling his/her name or turning a nonverbal sign such as gaze or gesture toward the person who is selected to be the next speaker. Second, the 'self-select' technique which means that people gain their own turns by initiating utterance in a talk. Lastly, the utterances are continued by the current person because the next speaker is not selected and no one tries to gain the right to speak. (Beattie, 1983) Have, then, explains that one of these categories comes before another systematically. It means that the select-next speaker is followed by self-selection and self-continuation techniques respectively (Ten Have, 1999).

Preference Organisation

The structure of preference is signed by a first part in utterances that consists of several action sequence pairs such as assessment, invitation, offer, proposal and request. The adjacency pairs discussed in CA is involved within sequences to examine the coherence actions between utterances. In one chapter of the discourse analysis book, Wooffitt (2001) states, for example, that it is understood that a question from the previous speaker should be followed by an answer, an offer could be ac-

cepted or declined, an invitation could be possible followed by an acceptance or a refusal, etc.

Use of Figurative Language

Only few specific studies have been done on the use of figurative language in conversation (Fussel & Kreuz, 1998). The common figurative languages used by people in a conversation are idiom, metaphor and irony.

Topic Change

The conversation is controlled by changing from one topic to another naturally. It often cannot fully be predicted when the topic will be changed. The topic change, however, appears when one of the speakers introduces a new topic which is then agreed by the interlocutors.

Face Saving and listing

Face saving is often defined as an action done by people to save theirs or others' position, idea, or assumption (Yun, 2006). This situation occurs commonly when people express their idea and opinion in a different language and culture. Face-saving in conversation has a strong relationship with politeness which is categorized in two terms by Brown and Levinson; positive and negative faces. Negative face is defined as a personality of someone who protects and prevents his right and freedom to do something on his own willingness. Positive face is an action done by speaker in attempting positive self-image without contrasting with others (1978).

As regard listing, it is a common thing occurs in a conversation. It happens very often when the speaker left the last item of the list in the blank way. The listing, however, is more specific when it is used in formal political speech in order to attract people attention (Heritage & Greatbatch, 1986).

Breakdown and Repair

Breakdown is linked to misunderstanding, obvious mistake in interaction, or just an expression of doubtfulness. Breakdowns are often followed by repairs which are divided into several categories; 'self-initiated self-repair, other-initiated self-repair, self-initiated other-repair and other-initiated other-repair' (Hutchby, 1998, p.

61). Repair is a crucial part in a conversation in avoiding and correcting misunderstanding.

Dysfluency

Dysfluency often takes place in an informal situation in social interaction. More informal the conversation more often it happens. It could be symbolised by providing unfinished sentences, repeating words, or even repeating part of sentences. The dysfluency appears more often in two situations; when someone or a group of people speak in another language and when someone speak to people they close to in their mother tongue language.

DATA ANALYSIS

The opening sequence in the transcription begins by P's utterance, *'Record ↑sou:nds or picture?'*, asking an explanation about an activity arising at that time (the process of conversation record) which is then answered by S with a respond by choosing one option in P's question. P takes the turn once more and provides another question by emphasizing the word 'only' to ensure that no more activity than what has been mentioned in S's answer. Notice that A replies without any gap, high pitch and stressed word, *'=↑Yea:h'* which indicates a strong re-join to ensure C's doubtful and is followed by S's confirmation, *'Ya'*. Again, A takes the floor using self-select technique to give the last comment regarding C's question. The pause in about three second before the next utterance could be positioned as the end of the first topic.

The next utterance by S that appears twice in the whole conversation, *'<Now I don't know what to talk>'*, seems as evidence that shows people feeling (nervous) of being recorded. In fact, it builds a difficult situation to create a natural conversation.

In the following extract, A recognises this condition and starts another turn by introducing a phenomenon which seems to be a problem.

It begins as follows;

```
A  So (1) so we have to do it naturally. But how ↑co:me? (1)
A  How to do it naturally?
S  Because [
```

```
A          [It's ↑difficult [
P                    [So just keep your machine [↑secretly
S                                              [↑Aha
P Yeah
P ˚Another somewhere˚
A But you will have the [
P                  [Ok, you can record it and (1) afterwards af-
ter people (1) ehm…agreement
S <Because last time > [
A                       [Yes, but the low quality of record it-
self
A ↑Right?
S ˚Right˚
A If I hid (2) for example if I hi:de my camera over here ehm…the
(2)
  I think the..(1) the voice
S Yeah, maybe (1) maybe we can't hear the voice clearly, that ↓way
```

A begins her utterance and continues on self-selection turn by reforming the sentence into a direct form. Notice that S's reply overlaps with A's second half of her turn, which is further overlapped with P's suggestion;

```
S Because [
A          [It's ↑difficult [
P                    [So just keep your machine [↑secretly
```

S then interrupts P's utterance by giving short excitement '↑*Aha*', which means that "it clicks my mind!". C continues her turn but this time in a quieter utterance, '˚*Another somewhere*˚ ', showing her uncertainty with her own sentence. At this time, A tries to argue but fail as C interrupts and continues her turn to complete her previous sentence by giving preface feedback, '*ok*', to cut off A's argument. C's utterance, however, seems as a persuasion to convince A.

S then starts another turn but fails to complete as A continues arguing and shows a predisagreement 'yes, but…'. S gives up her turn with no completion. A performs a polite disagreement by giving justification why C's suggestion is quite ineffective to be done. A's sentence seems to offer an account why she disagrees with C. In this case, A tries to minimise the offensiveness of C. Holtgraves (1992) notes that the speaker's positive and negative face will be more encouraged by doing this kind of face-saving than if the speaker uses such an excuse. A's next utterance is aimed to catch interlocutors' attention by giving further explanation of her previous argument but she fails with dysfluency at the end. S then responds in the

following turn and shows an agreement by summarising A's point. Notice that in one of utterance, *'If I hid (2) for example if I <u>hi:de</u> my camera over here ehm…the (2) I think the..(1) the voice'*, A recognises that she has mispronounced the word and performs a self-initiated repair by providing the correct pronunciation.

The following extract offers a number of adjacency pairs in yes-no question form.

```
A  That's the ↑problem…I don't ↓know
  (4)
S  How about the other assignment? Have you done it?=
P  =No
P  Chris (1) Chris Kyriacou
S  No?=
P  =↑No!
P  And we do not have the [
A                          [We have the same with Graham class
P  Research question (2) the topic about [ ehm assignment
S                                         [Ok
P  (unclear) decide the research question our self
A  And (1) have you decided?
  (2)
P  No
S  So (3) he he didn't give any list?=
P  =↑No!
S  So you have to find it by your self?=
P  =↑Yes!
```

The pause indicates an end of the current conversation subject. After a four second silence, S provides a topic change and introduces a new topic by addressing a question to P about her assignment progress. P replies to S's question quickly without any delay as an indicator of her certainty. A question-and-answer adjacency pair then is again embedded in the following turn by the same speakers. It is followed by P's additional information, which is overlapped by A and S, on the subject discussed. Most of this extract set up an adjacency pairs in CA terms, to which the selected next turn speaker is obliged to respond (Wooffitt, 2001).

The interesting part is when the selected speaker responds to the questions very quickly and does it without any gap. This behaviour could be analysed in two contrasting possibilities; first, the speaker does not want to discuss about her assignment any further so she gives a short and quick answer. Second, in reverse, she is really enthusiastic in discussing this topic. The rise pitches in the set of answers not only could be defined as a reflection of emotion, but also as an action of expressing

appreciation and enthusiasm. In this discussion I prefer, however, the second option as a more relevant illustration in expressing P's behaviour because the rise in pitches of her answer are continued by further explanation on the subject that is often related to enthusiasm.

S's reaction in the next turn shows her interest in P's statement, *'Oh..that's ↑fun!'*, which is again indicated by rise pitch. P responds with a question. Notice that A's assessment afterward is preference of agreement,' *I think it's not that fun, because you have no clue (1) what [you have no limit, right? What should you write'.* The assessment is then endorsed by P in her self-selected turn, *'[↓Yeah yeah '.* S then takes the floor and claims that she has a reason about what she has been said by giving a further explanation, *'But you can write from your own experience,[you ↓know'.* It can be seen that S tries to offer a solution which then is overlapped by P's pessimistic comment that she has no idea on doing what S has been suggested, *'[But I don't know how to create idea of the (1) about it'.* Analysing on P's overlap before S completes her turn, it seems that P has already thought about it and she found difficult to solve the problem.

The sequence continues by S's utterance, *'mm..well (2) is it…? What's exactly the course? What exactly the..the course?',* beginning by a feedback in CA term, which contains a self-initiated repair. P employs a second part of adjacency pair in question-answer sequence by providing an informational answer. S again continues another turn in self-selected technique and gives a pre-sequence in CA term, *'And then how (.) how about the topics? Is it ehm..the (1)[',* which is then overlap by A's completion, *' [The module itself=',* after one second delay in S's utterance. As a selected speaker, P responds the question spontaneously without pause by providing a list of topics projected in her assignment subject, *'=Teaching skills? Or ehm..students' differences? Yeah..something like that'.*

Having succeeded in her pre-sequence, specified as pre-figuring in CA, S begins her another turn and provides a suggestion based on listing by P in the previous turn, *'You can write about effective language teacher [',* which is then overlapped by another suggestion by A, *'[Or or one method applied in a classroom='.* This pre-sequence comes as an adjusted action done before the projected action

appeared in the next utterance. (Levinson, 1983) In other word, this pre-sequence is considered as a sign for interlocutors of what actions will come out in the next turn. S then replies A's idea without gap with a feedback, *'=Yeah'*, which seems to be an agreement. The interesting part comes afterward when A continues her sentence in quite speech, *'something like that°'*, which seems as another listing between utterances.

It is noticeable that quite difficult to analyse the meaning of S's laughter (nonverbal feature) between two pauses. It might be an action to warm up the situation after such a long pause in order to keep the conversation goes on. It also might be functioned as a preparation part by S before starting the next turn. After a long pause, S keeps the conversation going on by starting the next turn still in the same topic. She again tries to offer another alternative *'Or something like (1) or maybe you can take ehm (.)↑reading, the* <u>effective</u> *reading in teaching or °something like that°='*. The dysfluency are conspicuously in S's turn. A replies quickly without delay after the completion of S's assessment *'=But I think it should be an* <u>empirical</u> <u>study</u>=', which seems to give another view on the point discussed.

A's utterance again is replied with S's comment *'=Yeah because (2) how about he (1) he want to do like* <u>what</u>?', in an elliptical question. P as a selected speaker gives no response at all. It frequently happens in a conversation when a question as the first part of adjacency pair is not always followed by an expected answer or even no answer at all. (Seedhouse, 2004) A repeats the previous utterance to attract P's attention which is then continued by S doing the same behavior. It is successful as P takes the next turn and gives a comment which overlaps with S's reply and further overlaps by A's ,' [↑<u>Freedom'</u>.

The next several utterances are repetitions and nonverbal languages (laughter), which is end by P's statement, *'To* <u>be</u> *or* <u>not</u> *to be'*. S's next turn in fast and quiet speech, *'Well…°<now I don't know what to talk>°, oh my God'* seems as a pre-closing sequence. This type of pre-sequence is an indication for other speakers of closing sequence. The other participants take one second pause before responding the pre-sequence given by S. There are two possibilities, however, comes after the pre-closing either speakers continue the conversation in a new topic (related to the

previous topic or a totally new one) or close the conversation (M. Frohlich & Luff, 1989).

```
P  Problem's everywhere=
A  =And problems of everyone
S  You are waiting for your friend?
P  Ya, I'm waiting for my friend
S  Okay
```

In this case, S's utterance sounds that she are getting bored and have no interest to continue the conversation. In her response to S's turn, P tries to sum up their conversation which is then added by A's additional comment. S once more takes her self-selected turn and changes the atmosphere of conversation by addressing P a question on what she is really doing at that moment. She questions in a little mistake in English grammar which is replied by P in a correct pattern. The closing utterance is indicated by S's closing word, '*Okay*', which is indicated as her strong word to close the conversation.

CONCLUSION

CA is a method for studying and understanding human interaction in a social context. Two major points done by analysts in a systematic and analytic way in conversation analysis; language produced in talk-in-interaction and the process of turn by turn utterances. Regarding collection and data analysis, CA does not limit each analyst to have a critical view on it. It is not constrained by high-quality standard of analysis. The recording is a friendly and informal conversation among three female students sharing ideas about their assignment. I had difficulty in recording natural conversation because the participants are aware of being recorded. They tend to avoid speaking freely in order to minimize the grammatical mistakes.

The result of analysing data can be concluded by the following points;

1. An interesting feature occurs concerning to overlapping during conversation. It is noticeable that interruption commonly happens during each other turns. In reality, mostly Asian people are taught not to interrupt other people talk in their culture. They will feel guilty and impolite when they try to intervene someone else talk especially elderly people. As Larry has stated, 'Asians tend not to interrupt another or push to make their point'. (Davis, 1984, p. 30)

This concept seems to happen only in the formal situation. In this case, however, since they are talking in a friendly informal conversation among the same sex background, the interruptions take place very frequently.

2. The figurative language that is supposed to develop in Asian culture talk does not visible during conversation. It is supposed to happen because they are talking in English as their foreign language. The result might be different if they speak in their mother tongue.

3. The dominance of one speaker in changing the topic is non-natural feature of Asian talk. Asian talk is commonly not controlled by one speaker only in topic change.

4. Dysfluency is one of noticeable features which exist regularly during the conversation. One possibility reason for this condition is their lack of confidence in speaking English. More they attempt to speak in correct grammar more often they hesitate in producing utterances. Moreover, it is difficult to have a fluent and natural conversation when they are aware of being recorded.

5. Figurative language that is expected to emerge during talk among different cultural background cannot be figured out as speakers tend to use the simple and formal sentence in their conversation and avoid using such complex and idiomatic language structure.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX 1

TRANSCRIPTION SYMBOLS

(.)	Short pause
(second)	Longer pause
<u>Sounds</u>	Stressed words
<u>[</u>	Overlap (point when the next utterance inter-rupts)
=	No gap between two utterances
↑↓	Higher or lower pitch
[laugh]	Nonverbal feature
n:	Long sound
<speech>	Fast speech
˚speech˚	Quiet speech

APPENDIX 2

P Record ↑<u>sou:nds</u> or picture?

S Sounds

P ↑<u>Only</u> sounds=

A =↑<u>Yea:h</u>=

S Ya

A So just limit the <u>sound</u> (1) <u>that</u>'s all

(3)

S <Now I don't know what to talk>

P Yeah [laugh]

S Yeah (.) yeah [laugh]

A That's the ↑<u>problem</u> [laugh]

Together [laugh]

(2)

A So (1) so we have to <u>do</u> it naturally. But how ↑<u>co:me</u>? (1)

A <u>How</u> to do it <u>n</u>aturally?

S Because [

A   [It's ↑<u>difficult</u> [

P   [So just <u>keep</u> your machine [↑<u>secretly</u>

S   [↑<u>Aha</u>

P Yeah

P ˚Another somewhere˚

A But you will <u>have</u> the [

P   [Ok, you can <u>record</u> it and (1) <u>afterwards</u>
after people (1) ehm…agreement

S <Because last time > [

A   [Yes, but the <u>low</u> quality of record
itself

A ↑<u>Right</u>?

S ˚Right˚

A If I hid (2) for example if I hi:de my camera over here ehm…the (2)

   I think the..(1) the voice

S Yeah, maybe (1) maybe we can't hear the voice clearly, that's ↓way

A That's the ↑problem…I don't ↓know

   (4)

S How about the other assignment? Have you done it?=

P =No

P Chris (1) Chris Kyriacou

S No?=

P =↑No!

P And we do not have the [

A   [We have the same with Graham class

P Research question (2) the topic about [ehm assignment

S   [Ok

P (unclear) decide the research question our self

A And (1) have you decided?

(2)

P No

S So (3) he he didn't give any list?=

P =↑No!

S So you have to find it by your self?=

P =↑Yes!

S Oh..that's ↑fun!

P Is it fu:n?

A I think it's not that fun, because you have no clue (1) what [you have no limit, right? What should you write

P   [↓Yeah yeah

P I know

S But you can write from your own experience,[you ↓know

```
P                                      [But I don't know how to
create idea of the (1) about it

S mm..well (2) is it…? What's exactly the course? What ex-
actly the..the course?

P  Effective teaching in schoo:lls

S  And then how (.) how about the topics? Is it ehm..the (1)[

A                                          [The module it-
self=

P =Teaching    skills?    Or    ehm..students'    differences?
Yeah..something like that

S  You can write about effective language teacher [

A                                    [Or  or  one  method
applied in a classroom=

S  =Yeah

A  ˚something like that˚

(3)

S  [laugh]

(2)

S Or  something  like  (1)  or  maybe  you  can  take  ehm
(1)↑reading,  the effective reading in teaching or ˚something
like that˚=

A  =But I think it should be an empirical study=

S  =Yeah because (2) how about  he (1) he want to do like
what?

A  Should be an empirical research or or

S  ˚Research based˚ or (1) or just ehm

P  <He told us nothing> about (2) nothing [ about ˚the as-
signment˚

S                                  [So its (2) you don't think
the [ the assignment

A
[↑Freedom

P  Freedom [laugh]

S  [laugh] ↑interesting

P  Yeah [end of laugh] freedom
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```
A  ↑Freedom

P  To be or not to be

Together [laugh]

S  Well…˚<now I don't know what to talk>˚, oh my God

(1)

P  Problem's everywhere=

A  =And problems of everyone

S  You are waiting for your friend?

P  Ya, I'm waiting for my friend

S  Okay
```