

‘Getting a word in edgeways in the foreign language classroom’ – how students participate in classroom interaction

1. Introduction

Let me start with the objective of my paper: Today I would like to show some ways of how learners can participate in the teacher-led or teacher-fronted foreign language classroom discourse. We all know that the easiest and by far the most common way is to ask them using various techniques of questioning (open/closed – directed/undirected¹). What I will do here is to talk about spontaneous utterances by students, utterances which were not – at least not directly – elicited by the teacher.

In showing two little samples of my corpus of video-recorded English lessons I also want to show how these utterances are accomplished and how they are integrated into the official classroom interaction. In other words, how students take the floor in the official teacher-student interaction without being asked to do so, i.e. how they get a word in edgeways.

I therefore identified a certain practice of speech (Schegloff), in German *Gesprächspraktik*, which is shaped by what I call student or learner initiative (*Schülerinitiative*) and can be distinguished from other conversational practices that take place in the foreign language classroom.

2. Background of study

The data presented here was taken from a larger corpus collected as part of my doctoral thesis that I finished earlier this year (Schwab forthcoming). Over a period of two years, fourteen English lessons were video-recorded and fully transcribed. The project focused on one particular female teacher and her English class during their final years, classes 8 and 9. This class belongs to a German ‘Hauptschule’, a secondary school which is on the lowest level within the tripartite German school system of ‘Gymnasium’ (grammar school), ‘Realschule’ (secondary school), and ‘Hauptschule’ (lower secondary school). The ‘Hauptschule’ has often been associated with ‘slow learners’ whose basic problems in learning bar them from more advanced and challenging schools (for a general overview on the topic see Ganschow / Sparks 2001).² Ever since its introduction in 1968/1969 in Western Germany (Federal Republic of Germany), it has been argued that the way English is used in the classroom of the

¹ Harrie Mazland (1983): ‘programmed self-selection’ (programmierte Selbstauswahl)

² I would like to thank one participant of the conference who pointed out that the term ‘slow learners’ should be replaced by ‘less privileged learners’ – not just in this case, but in general.

‘Hauptschule’ is more or less a one-way flow of communication, from teacher to student only, which does not encourage any kind of communicative competence (as proposed e.g. by Hymes (1979), Bachman (1990) or the Council of Europe (2000). Unfortunately, how classroom interaction at this kind of school is conducted has hardly been examined. With the exception of the recent large-scale video-study DESI in almost 100 secondary schools (Beck / Klieme 2007) – amongst them a number of ‘Hauptschulen’ – the study presented here was one of the rare attempts to take a thorough look at the foreign language classroom of the Hauptschule over the last 20 years. In contrast to the DESI study, the purpose of my study was not only to see how student-teacher interaction is shaped at one specific point in time – the researchers of DESI only visited each classroom once – but also to see how this kind of communication might develop over a longer period, in this case two years. In order to get as close as possible to this process, no preliminary requirements for what was to be done during the recording sessions were imposed, i.e. naturally occurring second language interaction.

Following Firth / Wagner (1997) or Seedhouse (2004, 2005), I adopted an ethnographical approach to Second Language Acquisition which is also referred to as *CA for SLA*, Conversation Analysis for Second Language Acquisition, a methodology which tries to analyse the process of language learning rather than just its product. It can be assigned to a socio-cultural understanding of language learning (Lantolf 2000b) which emphasises the social dimension of language acquisition in what some authors also discuss under the heading of an ecological perspective (Kramsch 2002).

One of the basic theoretical aspects of the socio-cultural perspective is the notion of the mediated mind, which goes back to Vygotsky (1978). The central idea of a mediated mind (or mediation, as it is also referred to) is one of a shared understanding amongst two or more individuals or *socially distributed mind*. In contrast to the traditional idea of exchanging information (Shannon / Weaver 1964), e.g. when lecturing students, information cannot be just transmitted from one person to the other. Knowledge is rather to be mediated in a process of collaborative work (Lantolf 2000a). With regard to the classroom learning process, it means that how the students participate or are allowed to participate in this process of collaborative work is pivotal (Hall 1998). So if we want to say something about acquisition we have to, at the same time, say something about language use (Firth/Wagner 2007).

It means that – when doing Second Language Acquisition research – we have to change from teacher- or student-orientation to *learning-orientation*, as Cameron (2001) has put it.

3. First example

To make things a little more interesting, I would like to start of with a first example. The following sequence takes place right at the beginning of the lesson. It was, by the way, the very first recording I made in this class. This warming-up ritual could be seen in every lesson and it was more or less similar to what you will see now – with regard to the interactional structure or – as a Conversation Analyst might say – with regard to the speech exchange system.

Transcript 1:

T = teacher, S = student, Sm = male student, Sf = female student,
Sx = several students, Rachel? = student, name not certain

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9 T:          NELLY (-) what about YOU:;
10 Nelly:     =i'm fine thanks. (-)
11 T:          good. (-- ) EMily (.) how are [you ?
12 Sarah:     [i'm fine.
13 T:          GOOD (.) and you rachel?
14 Rachel:    =i'm fine thank you;
15 T:          ((low voice)) okay (-- ) so EVERYbody seems to be
16           FINE (.) that's really great-
→ 17 Tracy:   ((softly)) VErY fine-
18 T:          VErY fine,
19 Tracy:     yes;

          [...]

23 T:          aaah:: i would like (-) to see:: (...)
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4. Student participation

I will now take a closer look at this short sequence in order to focus on some aspects of classroom participation.

The sequence begins with three IRF-exchanges. The first one goes from line 9 to 11, the second from 11-13 and the last one starts in line 13 ending two lines later. Somehow the warming-up phase is now finished and the teacher would like to continue when this step is delayed by Tracy. In line 17 she says something that is not directly elicited by the teacher. It is what I call a student initiation that is immediately taken up by the teacher. Definitely, this is just a little detour from the official structure but serves quiet well for what I would like to show you in more depth.

What we also see is that the framework of classroom interaction is always the teacher-led communication. Sequences derived from learner initiatives always happen *within* this framework.

Before we continue with the next example, let me give you a definition of a learner initiative, according to Sue Garton 2002, 48: (1) “the learner’s turn does not constitute a direct response to a teacher elicitation” (2). The learner’s turn gains the ‘main floor’, and is not just limited to a ‘sub floor’. The first precondition means that it is not (just) a reply to teacher initiation, i.e. not (just) a second turn. It is self-selected. The second precondition refers to the fact that the interaction is held within the official classroom discourse, i.e. – so to speak – performed on stage.

5. Second example

The next sequence took place about two month later. It is still class 8. This time the camera is at the back of the classroom and I will focus on the two boys on the right first row: Chris and Mike who is behind Chris and therefore hard to spot. Mike talks to the teacher first.

On your handout there is also a short introduction to the scene:

Transcript 2:

The teacher, standing in front of the board, is repeating the topic ‘family tree’. Therefore she first refers to her own family members and describes them. After some time she is talking about her son:

1 T: and then (1.5)
2 my SON (---) HE of course lives (.) in [the same HOuse]-
→ 3 Chris: ((does not look at teacher)) [he hate GIRls haha]>
4 Mike: =YES- (1.5)
5 T: of COU:rse- (-)
6 S?: [miss rie’]
7 Mike: [HERE] in this school?
8 T: mhm (.)
9 [this]is not our school it’s [the HOuse](.)I [(.)live in;]
10 Mike: ((Chris with raised arm)) [but]
11 Vivian: [hh] [hah]
12 T: [(-) right] mike?
13 Sx: [()]
14 T: ((emphasis))i don’t LIve [in this]SCHOOL[house(.)my GO:d]
15 Chris?: [achso ((= I see))]
16 Mike: you have said ehm (---)]
17 he live in (.) THIS house (.) too-
18 T: oh in in THIS here;
19 Mike: achso- ((= I see))
20 Vivian: hmh
21 T: that was a [MISunderstanding.] (-) YES.

22 Mike: [mhm]
→ 23 Chris: your SON (.) HATE (.) girls;
24 T: he hates [girls (.) that's] right; (-)
25 Chris: [y e s]
26 T: he is THIRTEEN years old and (.) he (.) thinks (.)
27 all girls (.) are (-) silly;.
28 Ss: [=((laughing))]
→ 29 Mike: [()] des kommt noch; ((= it will come))
30 Sx: ((slight laughing))
31 T: [=yes] (--) wait and see (-) that's right. (-)
32 Ss: [((laughing))]
33 T: does ANYbody remember my son's
34 [NAME? (.) i i think i've told] you;
35 S: [()]
36 Vivian: frederik
37 T: GOOD; (.)
38 Sm: [()]
39 T: [his name is frederik]
40 that's right; and he'[s THIRTEEN (-)] YEars old (2.0)
41 Sm: [()]
42 S1-2: ()
43 T: he's in class EIGHT actually (-)
→ 44 Chris: [oh miss riegel,]
|_____|
|
he raises his arm

45 T: [yeah] (-)
46 the same a:ge (.) as you (.) ye:s,
|_____|
|
she is pointing to Chris

47 Sm: [=hä?]
→ 48 Chris: is yo[u (-) äh::]
49 T: [wait a] WAit a second- (--)
|_____|
|
T is looking at Chris

50 ((T is pointing to pupil in last row))
51 Sm: () hab's vergessen; ((=I've forgotten it))
52 T: mike? (3.0)
→ 53 Chris: ((pointing to the board)) is (.) this son a GAY:? a-
54 S1: was? was was was wa:s? ((=what))
55 S2: what?
56 Chris?: [()]
57 T: [what?]
→ 58 Chris: kann ja SEIN- ((=might be))
59 Vivian: ((smiling)) wie; ((= what))
60 T: I don't KNOW YET (.)
61 wha what a FUNny QUEstion-
62 S2: [()]
63 T: [just a NORMAL]
64 boy (-) at thirteen he thinks most of the girls are
65 silly (.) (4.0)
66 so who else is in MY family?

6. Learner initiative

Let me start with some general considerations before I go through the transcript step by step. If we want to understand how learners participate in initiating we can look at it with regard to two aspects: *interactional architecture* and *participation structure*, i.e. how these sequences are accomplished and what they are about:

A) *interactional architecture*: (1) direct / indirect initiative, (2) along a given topic/deviating from topic (3), on their own/or together

B) *participation structure*: (1) negotiation of power (when?), (2) negotiation of identity (who?) a) discourse identity - e.g. current speaker, listener, questioner

b) situated identity - e.g. teacher, student, head master/teacher ...

c) transportable identity - e.g. mother, English, male, ...

Now, let's take the transcript and see what we can find in our sample:

In this sequence we have seen two students Mike and Chris being active. Both initiate a side sequences (Mike 4-22 / Chris 23 -65). Though they seem to be independent of each other, they are connected and I dare say they even permit each other and both participants are involved in the other's interaction. Still, my focus today will be on the learner initiated sequence by Chris, i.e. mainly lines 23-65. Nevertheless we have to look at the first part first and therefore we have to start with line 3: This is Chris' first attempt to say something, but he fails. His utterance is obviously at the wrong place (transition-relevance place) since there is no slot. We cannot even be sure whether he wanted to be 'on stage' because he does not really look at the teacher at this moment. His second and more successful try takes place in line 23. Now he is 'on stage' as his utterance is taken-up, reformulated and enhanced by the teacher (until line 27/28). In line 29 you can see that Mike, the boy who was active before, participates again. Both initiatives are direct contributions, though slowly departing from the given topic. This really starts to happen in line 44 when the participation structure – as I call it – is challenged by Chris. This time it is an indirect claim using a pre-sequence (raising hand and calling teacher's name). Given the permission by the teacher in line 46 (gesture by the teacher, pointing at him), the student starts but has to hold on since the teacher focuses on someone in the back row. Negotiation of power, as I said before, here means that the learner cannot do things as he likes, but has to follow the rules set up by the teacher. He must find other ways than the teacher, in this case he has to wait. What we see therefore is an indirect attempt and Chris finally launches his 'new' topic in line 53 – it is the possible homosexuality of the teacher's son. And now it is obvious why he has been so careful and hesitating. It is a

delicate issue, a taboo topic, so delicate that he has even reformulated his utterance using ‘this’ instead of ‘your’ son, obviously a face-saving strategy that might help to dissociate himself from it more easily. And as soon as other students and the teacher (just afterwards) react, he tries to conciliate: In line 58 we see a turn by Chris that can be indicated as a downtoner: And it is not just what he says, but also how. Especially the use of German underlines his dissociation from the official interaction (since the official code is English only).

Interestingly here we can recognize a further aspect of the participation structure which refers to the notion of identity. Though Chris is the current speaker, he changes roles. Suddenly he is not the learner anymore, which would be the situated identity. Learners speak English! Here, he speaks as an adolescent – referring to his transportable identity – a youngster who came up with a rather personal question. But he is not the only one who has changed roles. In actually fact the teacher had begun to act like this. She talked about her private life and in doing this she alludes to her transportable identity, too.

Now I think that she is somehow aware of it, because the way she reacts in lines 56 and 60-65 is not really negative. She takes Chris seriously although she finishes off the topic and continues with a fresh initiative in line 65. This is something she can do since she is the only one in the classroom who has got the interactional power to do so. Turn allocation can only be challenged by students. In the end it is always the teacher who admits or refuses students’ participation. If it is done systematically she can still encourage students to come up with their own contributions. Here in this class she seemed to be rather successful, because Chris did dare to say things like that afterwards, too – even in English.

7. Summary / Conclusion

Though not easy to identify and always embedded in teacher-allocated speech, learner initiative can be considered a constituent part of a certain practice of speech which is to be differentiated from sequences that are based on teacher initiatives. Such a practice of speech is based upon certain features:

(1) strategies to get the turn (direct/indirect – pre-sequences), (2) face-saving strategies (for oneself / others), (3) enhancement of topics (‘delicate topics’), (4) collaborative work (multilogue), (5) linguistic challenge (spontaneous utterances), (6) sensitive communicative.

The teacher’s task is to give students the opportunity or space to come up with an initiative.

Leo van Lier has coined the term affordance to describe such a space. He says that affordance

is a ‘semiotic budget’ provided within a certain setting or environment. To claim this budget learners need the interactional space to participate in the ongoing discourse, even if it is on a very low level – with regard to their linguistic means and with regard to the quantity of speech.

Thank you very much for listening.

Transcript notations:

pauses:	(-) (--) (---) (1.0) (1.5) etc.
overlaps:	[will you .. [i mean ...
emphasis:	EVERYbody
additional explanations:	((<i>in italics</i>))
translation:	((= <i>in English</i>))
unclear utterance:	()
equal sign:	= Indicates break + subsequent continuation of utterance
lengthening:	no:::
abrupt cut-off:	shoppi/
speech delivery:	? or ; = <i>rising tone, sharp or medium inflection</i> . or , = <i>falling tone, sharp or medium fall</i> okay- = <i>‘continuing’ intonation</i>

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