

## Turn-taking in EFL Classroom Discourse

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### ABSTRACT

In this essay, there will be a contrast and comparison between the teacher-dominant turn-taking patterns and students-centered turn-taking patterns. This comparison can help us to find out which pattern can help develop an effective turn-taking in classroom discourse. In terms of the turn-taking pattern in EFL classroom, there also will be a study of turn-taking patterns. This study is concentrated on the EFL students who study in foreign language classroom. Different turn-taking patterns will be recorded to analyze students' language performance and language anxiety during the turns change process. Brown (2008) proposes that senior foreign language learners tend to be influenced by the low sense of confidence, the feel of shame and inferiority. However, evidence shows that many students with higher level of language proficiency also are silent in the foreign language classroom. They seldom take turns to make a contribution to the speech in the classroom. This essay shows great interests in the relationship between EFL learners' language anxiety and turn-taking patterns. Particularly, this essay will explore the several turn-taking patterns which can help to foster the flow of classroom talk. These turn-taking patterns will be analyzed in two directions: the teacher-fronted turns exchange and students-centered exchange. This can help EFL teachers to adjust the turn-taking patterns to the classroom teaching to help students get more involvements in the classroom conversation.

### 1. Introduction

One of the values of Conversation Analysis (CA), which serves as a research principle, is its power of engaging researchers on obvious communication characteristics as well as break down the principles out of the expectations (Richards & Seedhouse 2004)<sup>[1]</sup>. The study of Conversation Analysis is of great values for the classroom teaching and learning. Based on ethnomethodology, conversation is described as the discourse which is created and talked by people involved in the conversation, and it has certain principles and is guided in some certain ways (Cook 1989). As for conversation, it has turns-taking, and

this is due to the fact that there are participants in the conversation. Cook (1989) in his book depicts that the mechanisms of turn-taking is how participants make the flow of the conversation, and the mechanisms changes according to cultural and linguistic elements<sup>[2]</sup>.

As for the definition of turn-taking, Sacks ets (1974) explain turns-taking is the order movements during games, for distributing political offices, arranging traffic at crossroads, giving service to customers at the business buildings, and for the speech exchange<sup>[3]</sup>. Sachs' explanation gives the general view of turn-taking in daily life. Actually, in the EFL teaching and learning, turn-taking deserves great attention. Turn-taking is guided by a set

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of principles which refer to the linguistic elements, and many phenomena acts as the cues of turn-taking. According to Cook (1989), effective turn-taking not only includes linguistic elements, and eye-contact, body language, intonation as well as volume together make a difference to turn-taking. Ford and Thompson (1996) depict that turn-taking happens in the coincidence of melodic, syntactic and pragmatic completion<sup>[4]</sup>. However, turn-taking in EFL classroom seems to not so easy. Many factors are involved in the classroom teaching and learning. It is common that there is some failure of turn-taking in the EFL classroom conversation.

During the daily conversation, turn-taking is very common. In the first language conversation, turn-taking occurs in an easy and natural way. One of the most important roles of turn-taking in daily life is that consideration and respect should be taken into consideration since the subjects in the conversation are human beings<sup>[5]</sup>. However, it is accepted that turns-taking is very difficult for EFL learners, and this is due to the fact that it demands the intercultural elements and multi turns-raising signals. Many EFL learners encounter problems about how to continue the speech, and Cutler and Pearson (1986) states that when a conversational communication breaks down, this phenomenon arouses from the unsuccessful efforts of turns-taking<sup>[6]</sup>. It is true that EFL learners always feel anxious and silent when they are cued to speak in the foreign language classroom. Therefore, the study of the patterns of turn-taking is beneficial to the management of EFL classroom conversation.

## 2. Literature Review

Burgoon (1976: 62) claimed that “individuals with communicative reticence exhibit the predisposition of unwillingness to communicate”<sup>[8]</sup>. This phenomenon is very common if there is an observation of Chinese students’ performance in the foreign language classroom conversation. Teachers feel frustrated to manage the flow of the classroom conversation. There are several causes related to this situation. It is widely accepted that the feeling of shame and lack of language proficiency and confidence, to some extent, result in the failure of turns change among teachers and students. As a matter of fact, students feel pressed and stressful or even tend to be silent if they are cued to speak a foreign language<sup>[9]</sup>. The need of the students’ language performance in foreign language classroom increasingly becomes salient among many researchers. A self-report measurement<sup>[10]</sup>, the unwillingness to communicate scale (Burgoon 1976), nonverbal and relational communication associated with reticence<sup>[11]</sup>, and nonverbal communication performance

and perceptions associated with reticence ( Burgoon, Pfau & Manusov 1987) together make a difference to the study of students’ silence in classroom turn-taking phenomenon<sup>[12]</sup>. In the traditional foreign language teaching, teacher governs the whole flow of the classroom communication, and dominants the central role in the class. During the discussion between students and teachers, many students fear of making mistakes so that they keep silent in the conversation. Therefore, when teachers create the turn-exchange with the class, it is reasonable that students have no reaction with the cues. This phenomenon is correspondent with Liu and Jackson’s (2008) study, which shows that the anxiousness of foreign language learning is closely related with the level of self-confidence of learners’ own language proficiency. This means the more students feel confident with their own language proficiency, the more they will be willing to make an utterance in the EFL classroom conversation. In addition to this, in the classroom turn-taking conversation, the traditional teacher-governed speech reveals the information to students that teacher is the information provider and tend to be more knowledgeable than themselves. As a consequence, students always have a sense of inferiority in terms of knowledge capacity. This is regarded by many researchers as language anxiety. There are variable turn-taking patterns in foreign language classroom conversation. The relationship between turn-taking patterns in classroom discourse and EFL students’ language anxiety can bring benefits to the management of the turn changes in the class.

Jacobs (1986: 151) claims that classroom communication seems like a game which is a “goal-oriented activity involving moves by one or more players, mutual dependence and constraints on moves, and the need for strategy and tactics”<sup>[13]</sup>. The talk of classroom has some certain patterns and roles. For ESL teachers, it is demanding for them to have a clear understanding of what kind of turn-taking patterns can facilitate their control of classroom communication. Some researchers have explored the relationship between EFL students’ language anxiety during the classroom talk and the patterns of turn-taking. In fact, students’ language anxiety and performance in EFL classroom is influenced by a variety of factors. For example, students’ own confidence in their language competence may make a difference in their contribution in the classroom discussion. This means students with higher level of confidence in their foreign language proficiency tend to join the classroom communication frequently. In addition to this, according to Koul, Roy, Kaewkuekool and Ploisawaschai (2009), the actual language proficiency and language superiority have a negative on students’ language anxiety in class<sup>[14]</sup>. However, in this essay, great

interests are shown in the relationship between turn-taking patterns and EFL students' language anxiety and performance in the classroom communication.

According to ethnomethodologists, one type of turns taking is an adjacency pair (Cook 1989). This often happens when the utterance of one participant in the conversation is very similar with that of another participant. Adjacency pair occurs in everyday life. Cook in his book gives the examples of adjacency pairs, like offer (acceptance/refusal), assessment (agreement/ disagreement), blame (denial/ admission) and question (expected answer/unexpected answer). Adjacency pair occurs in the daily life, and the question and answer utterance happen through a series of turn exchange. In the EFL classroom communication, the turns-taking patterns are traditionally defined as Question-Answer-Comment (Q-A-C) and Question-Counter Question-Answer-Comment (Q-CQ-A-C), and this clarification is on the basis of Nicholls' (1993) statement. In the classroom discourse, these two patterns occur throughout the talk. In the following part of this essay, a detailed illustration of the two patterns will be created to explore how they help get students' more contribution and involvement in the classroom conversation.

As for the Question-Answer-Comment (Q-A-C), it is very similar with Initiation-Response-Evaluation (I-R-E). In daily conversation, turns are governed as adjacency pair or Question-Answer (Q-A), but in the classroom discourse, turns are governed as Q-A-C pattern<sup>[15]</sup>. After a pair of question and answer, there also comes to a comment on the answer. This can be seen in the sentence pair below:

(1) A: Have you finished your assignment?

B: Yes, I have submitted it yet.

A: That's great.

(2) A: Do you know what the capital of China is?

B: Of course. It is Beijing.

A: Fantastic.

(3) A: Did you enjoy the piano concert?

B: Yes.

A: It was great performance.

From the perspective of McHoul (1978), teachers hold the dominant role to comment on students' responses, despite of the fact of the optional role of this C-part<sup>[16]</sup>. The problem of the pattern is that the answer is not always what the teacher wants to get. The rationale behind this phenomenon is that teacher in this kind of turn-taking pattern is dominant, and this traditional teacher centered classroom implies the "power inequalities" (Nicholls 1993). This is very similar with Long's (1983) "unequal power" discourse<sup>[17]</sup>. The teacher's dominant role in this turn-taking communication may impair students' confi-

dence so that they hesitate to make a contribution to the classroom interaction.

In terms of the Question-Counter Question-Answer-Comment (Q-C Q-A-C) pattern, it results in the turns changes in the group. According to Nicholls (1993), this C-Q part is the significant turns move to teachers, and teachers take the responsibility to guide the discourse. When teachers dominate the conversation and distribute the questions, students raise their questions they encounter. The process can be seen in the following sentence:

T: Do you know how to get to the first crossroad from here?

Q S1: What is crossroads?

CQ T: Does anyone know the meaning of crossroad?

A S2: A road that crosses another road.

T: Could you explain it to S1?

S2: It is the junction where one street crosses another.

Form the example above, the C-Q part is also directed by teacher which is a traditional teacher-fronted classroom. Teacher directs the question raised by student to the class group. Thus, teacher has restructured the turn-taking in the classroom discourse.

Whether the traditional turn-changes in classroom discourse fosters students' involvement in the discussion has elicited heated debate. Actually, turn-taking patterns in classroom have some certain effects on classroom interaction and communication<sup>[18]</sup>. Nevertheless, some researchers, like Rymes (2009), argue that the traditional patterns block the students' involvements in the communicative text and learning process. Based on the former analysis in this essay, it is clear that teacher acts as the head of the discourse. Teacher is the information provider and holds an upper position than students in the classroom communication. Muller (1988) also claims that teacher is the only information provider, and students seem to be of less knowledge, and only teacher takes the responsibility to make comments on students' utterance. In this situation, students obviously feel stressful in the classroom talk and hesitate to take their turns to make an utterance. In Zhang's (2011) study, she states the ideas that the traditional turn-taking patterns should focus on learners instead of teacher-fronted classroom. Teachers should better make learners direct the classroom, and importantly, the students-students communication should be emphasized in the turns taking. It seems that the students-centered turn-taking approach can better facilitate the turns exchange and learning process.

In the following part, there will be an analysis of several turn-taking patterns in classroom discourse. The traditional teacher-fronted turn-taking patterns and students-centered turn-taking approach will be analyzed. Es-

pecially, there will be a specific focus on the students-centered turn-taking pattern. There is an assumption that this kind of learners-centered turn-taking can reduce learners' anxiety and enhance the effective turns change during classroom communication and interaction. The written transcripts about students-centered turn-taking will be created and presented in the essay. Besides, there will be a contrast and comparison of traditional teacher-centered turn-taking pattern and students-centered turn-taking pattern, and this can check the efficiency of whether the approach of students-centered turn-taking can better enhance the flow of the classroom interaction and communication.

### 3. Discussion in Teaching and Learning

If the topic is determined, and the conversation is aroused, the conversational and interactional turn-taking should be taken into consideration. There are variable turn-taking patterns in the classroom discourse. The traditional Q-A-C and Q-C Q-A-C patterns have some certain influence on students' class performance. In the traditional teacher-fronted classroom, these two traditional turn-taking approaches are widely applied in the classroom teaching. In this part, there is a comparison and contrast between teacher-fronted turns change in EFL classroom and students-centered turns change. Based on the related literature to Q-A-C and Q-C Q-A-C turn taking patterns, it reveals the some certain disadvantages behind the traditional teacher-centered approach. Moreover, on the basis of Zhang's (2011) study, she proposed that the teaching of turn-taking should absorb the idea of students need to direct the dominate role in the turns exchange process.

In light of the traditional turn-taking patterns, Q-A-C or IRE frequently happens in the daily life conversation as well as the classroom discourse. Example of the teaching of this turn-taking pattern has been given in the previous part. There will be a deep look into this pattern. During this transcript, teacher dominant the class talk. This process can be shown by the following sentences.

Q T: How long have you surfed internet each day?  
(5')

A S1: Several hours.  
(4')

A S2: Always.

C T: Yep. Quite a long time.

In the conversation, teacher elicited the question. However, instead of answering the questions immediately, students replied several seconds later. There another type which is Initiation-Response-Feedback (IRF), and this can be seen from the following example:

I T: What kind of website have you searched for such long time?

(9')

R S2: Hmm, I often search for sports news.  
(5')

R S3: I, you know, listen to the BBC news every day.

F T: That's sounds great. Have you found that listening BBC news brings you any benefits?

In the first teaching of Q-A-C turn-taking, several turns later, teacher is likely to find variable responses. However, in the I-R-F turn-taking, similarly, students do response the questions within several seconds thinking. Then, teacher gives his or her feedback and continues with another question. At the beginning, turns exchange smoothly. However, after several pairs of turn exchange, students got tiered to continue the turns. This is due to the fact that the difficulty level of the questions grows, and students fear of making mistakes and getting negative feedback. Therefore, students became reluctant to make responses. This shows than the teacher-centered teaching of the Q-A-C and I-R-F turn-taking patterns, to some extent, impeding the flow of the classroom talk instead of facilitating it.

The teaching of EFL learners often encounters the turn-taking pattern of Q-C Q-A-C. This kind of turn-taking is also traditionally teacher-centered control of conversation talk. This means teacher still takes the responsibility to arrange the talk. Here is a Q-C Q-A-C turn-taking.

Line 1 S3: Listening BBC news helps me broaden my horizons.  
(2')

Line 2 C S4: Teacher, what is the meaning of horizon?  
(2')

Line 3 Q T: Well, Linda, do you know the meaning of this word?  
(3')

Line 4 S5: Hum.  
(2')

Line 5 Q T: Does anyone have any idea about the meaning of horizon?  
(4')

Line 6 A S1: Broadening horizons means opening our eyes.

Line 7 C T: Yap, that's it. Good job.

From the general view of this process, students still do not take the turns to make responses until they think for a while. Specifically, during students' discussion, they encountered problem. In line1, they ask questions for teacher to help solve the problem. Instead of answering the question the teacher himself, he directed the question to the student named Linda. At this point, teacher dominated the



talk and allocated the talk to another student. However, Linda did not take the turn to answer the questions. Again, teacher held the dominant role to allocate the question to the whole class. Several seconds later, students came up with their ideas eventually. In line 7, teacher made his comments, and the conversation continued. It is similar with the Q-A-C and I-R-F patterns, and Q-C Q-A-C turn-taking pattern in this conversation also is the traditional teacher-fronted. The class talk is managed by teacher. It is evident that teacher restructured the talk through employing a CQ part in the turn-taking process. It is practical to foster the flow of the talk. However, when this process continues, there tend to be a silence during the conversation, even though teacher dominant the talk. This is due to the fact that students feel stressful during the turns exchange process. They encountered language anxiety at this stage. In actual fact, teacher still took the control of making comments, and students tended to feel anxious to make mistakes and get negative feedback. They are pushed by teachers' power to answer the questions. Similarly, they are afraid of making errors and getting negative comments. Students silence and hesitation to take turns at this process mainly results from language anxiety.

From the analysis of the teaching of turn-taking patterns, it can be concluded that these traditional turns exchange in classroom interaction and conversation, to some extent, blocks the flow of the EFL classroom talk. This can be seen from many studies which reveal that the unequal power in the classroom talking can elicit students' language anxiety. McHoul (1978) suggests that the allocation of the different speakership in classroom shapes the organization of classroom interaction and communication [19]. In the traditional teacher-fronted classroom, teacher is centered and has the power to manage the flow of the conversation. Students tend to be in an inferior position. In this process, teacher acts as the classroom manager and information provider, and he or she tends to know more than students do. According to Long, this phenomenon is kind of 'unequal power discourse' (1983:11). This unequal power in class is the main reason why students encounter language anxiety during the turns-taking process, and this plays a significant part in the failure of EFL turns change. Importantly, students can be the director of the classroom conversation, and take the responsibility to manage the flow the talk. Students should have the right to choose the next speakership, like any students or even the teacher, to continue the turn (McHoul 1978). This students-centered turn-taking in classroom discourse help reduce students' nervousness, get their more involvement and engage more attention. There is another written transcript which we can find something new about the teaching of turn-taking.

This turn exchange is more students centered.

- (1) L9: Mary? ((formally))
  - (2) T: uh huh?
  - (3) L9: your input plea// (h huh //huh//huh)//
  - (4) T: //huh//
  - (5) L11: // (h huh //huh//huh// huh) <huh>
  - (6) Q L9: there is this e::h (+) some sort of an idiom you pretend to
  - (7) pay us and we pretend to work
  - (8) CQ T: ok. What do you think that could bet (+) do you have any
  - (9) idea?
  - (10) L11: do you know what the word pretend means
  - (11) (++)
  - (12) T: do /know what the word pretend means
  - (13) L11: yeah (+) I- I doubt (+) I don't know that see
  - (14) CQ T: oh ok who - do - does anybody know what the word pretend
  - (15) means.
  - (16) L5: //pretend?//
  - (17) L6 ://pretend7//
  - (18) LB: pret(h)e:nd? ((LB sounds disbelieving))
  - (19) L7: //pretend7//
  - (20) A L6: //pretend// to be (+) like you're trying to show something
  - (21) from
  - (22) you that u:h
  - (23) A L9: is not?
  - (24) A L6:is actually not you
  - (25) (+)
  - (26) L11: a::h
  - (27) L5:pretend
  - (28) L11: ok
- (Nicholls 1993)

From the above mentioned, a general view of the transcript is that the turn-taking process continues smoothly. Specifically, in line 6 and line 7, students aroused the question creatively, instead of the teacher's dominant role in the class. This disturbs the power imbalance in the traditional EFL classroom talk. In line 1, student directed the turn to teacher. Then, in line 6, students continued dominant talk and raised a new topic. This Q-part breaks down the traditional principles of turn-taking in EFL class where teacher is centered. Then, in line 8, teacher inserted a C-Q part. However, in line 10, interestingly, students self shifted the topic to teacher. Instead of answering the question instantly, teacher repeated the question and wanted to get response from this student. Without getting the right answer, teacher took the responsibility to insert another C-Q part and allocated the question raised by the former student to the whole class. In the following part,

students provided their own understanding with sounds delivering. From line 15 to line 28, turns exchange happens among students automatically and freely. There was less reluctance to take the turns. Obviously, there is less teacher's involvement in the following part. It seems that during the student-student communication, turn-taking in class continues smoothly.

#### 4. Conclusions

From the analysis above, the traditional teaching approach of teacher-centered turn-taking pattern tends to impede students' learning and the flow of the classroom talk. Long regards dominant teacher role as the "pre-determined ability to control topic and speaker" (1983: 11). The unequal power allocation in classroom discourse can arouse students' language anxiety. For ESL students, it is very common that they hesitate to take the turns to express them in class. Many ESL students believe making mistakes in front of the whole class and teacher is kind of shame. Many studies have explored this phenomenon. Worde (1998) reveals that almost one half EFL students encounter language anxiety in variable degrees<sup>[20]</sup>. That is why the failure of turn-taking always happens. From the analysis of the patterns of the turn-taking, the traditional ones are teacher-fronted classroom talk, and this kind of interaction and communication does not go smoothly. During the classroom process, students are more likely to feel stressful. In contrast, when students are put in the central role of the classroom talking, especially when there is the student-student communication, the conversation continues naturally and smoothly. In the last written transcript, even though teacher plays the C-Q part, the teacher's role in this process is not so strong and explicit. This, to some extent, helps decrease students' language anxiety. In conclusion, the key factor of solving the problems embedded in the turn-taking process in EFL classroom is to reduce the students' language anxiety and let students, instead of teacher, be the power to manage the flow of the talking.

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