EFL Students' Turn-Taking Strategies in Face-to-Face and Online PBL Discussions

Anchalee Jansem[1] and Worasiri Boonsue[2]

[1]Srinakharinwirot University, Bangkok, Thailand

[2]Chiang Mai Rajabhat University, Chiang Mai, Thailand

Abstract

This study aimed to explore EFL students' turn-taking strategies in two different contexts of PBL discussions—face-to-face (FTF) and online discussion board. Twelve college students with sufficient English to carry on discussions were recruited on a voluntary basis to participate in the research project. Data derived from the description of video recordings and all entries of online discussion boards revealed two major findings.

First, in the FTF discussions, turn allocation was determined by current speakers, through verbal and non-verbal language, and yielded linear and immediate interactional discourse. In contrast, the message system synchronously managed turns in the online chat discussions. The function of the system drew the participants' attention to be engaged in discussions which appeared to be dispersed into threads of messages.

Second, while overlapping randomly took place during turn allocation in the FTF discussions, taking turns via self-allocated strategies in the online discussion boards seemed to be the underlying form of interaction. In doing this, the participants needed to use a variety of techniques to both extend from previous relevant messages and manage their turns via prints as well as emoticons.

The significance, implication, and discussions of this study provide contributions to foreign and second language instruction.

Keywords: Turn Taking, Face-to-Face Discussion, Online Discussion, Problem-Based Learning

* Corresponding Author
e-mail: anchalej@swu.ac.th

Introduction

The fact that computer-mediated communication (CMC) has become a part of all aspects in life including the area of language teaching is undeniable. It is believed that this intrusion of technology impacts the way people communicate (Fairclough, 2003; Herring, 2003; Wetherell, Taylor, & Yates, 2001).

In conventional language classes, language students communicate via a face-to-face (FTF) channel. They use both verbal and non-verbal language to transmit meaning of a message (Reiser, 2001). Contrarily, in the online chat context, students are limited to text messages only (Beauvois, 1992; Jepson, 2005; Murray, 1989; Xiao, 2007). In order to explain how the nature of communication has been distorted by CMC, it is beneficial to investigate how language students manage their turn-taking in FTF and online chatting contexts since turn-taking is one of the basic communication mechanisms that show how interaction is oriented by speakers of that context (Sacks, Schegloff, & Jefferson, 1974). Throughout this paper, CMC refers to synchronous computer-mediated communication.

Objectives

To explain the turn-taking strategies Thai EFL students employ in face-to-face and online chat discussions, two research questions were established.

a) How is turn-taking managed in face-to-face and online chat discussions?

b) What are the common and distinct turn-taking strategies employed in face-to-face and online chat discussions?

Conceptual Framework

Turn-taking, which, serves as the framework and theory in this study is based on Sacks, Schegloff, and Jefferson's (1974) model. Sacks et al. focused on two components of turn taking: the turn constructional and the turn allocational components. The turn constructional component is based on the speaker's choice of a type of constructional unit ranging from words, phrases, clauses, and sentences. The turn allocational component relates to "how a participant takes the next turn" (p. 12) that includes (1) the current speaker selects the next one (person to speak); (2) a speaker self selects his/her turn, and (3) the current speaker continues talking. Yet, the turn-taking system becomes more complicated when more than two speakers are engaged in the conversation. Sacks et al. (1974) explained that, in conversation, one speaker speaks at a time and it leads to turn-taking or a one-at-a-time-model. However, Edelsky (1981) added that speakers might take part at the same time as

others and that this situation can be considered an alternative all-in-together model. That is, the former is called the single floor and the latter the collaborative floor. As Markee (2000) notes, turn taking practices may differ in different speech exchange systems.

However, due to the widespread adoption of interaction via a simultaneous computer-mediated communication (SCMC), turn-taking in such context, as revealed in recent studies, is somewhat different from patterns found in face-to-face communication (Beisswenger, 2008). One difference is caused by the fact that the floor tends to belong to one participant at a time in face-to-face communication while all participants can pose messages simultaneously in CMC. In addition, in face-to-face communication, the speaker ends each turn with both vocal and non-vocal behaviors. In terms of vocal behaviors, various forms of constructional units and intonation are adopted. In terms of non-vocal behaviors, gestures such as gaze are widely used. In contrast, participants in a CMC context rely on content and textual cues and can monitor each other's flow of utterances (Anderson et al., 2010).

For second language learners, turn-taking could be troublesome due to sociocultural components. For example, as concluded in Kato's (2000) study on face-to-face interaction, there is no exact relationship between tone and turn-taking because language learners pay attention to grammatical forms rather than tone. Nonetheless, opportunities to take part in communication that unavoidably includes turn-taking have been considered essential to second language learners. Through interaction, learners are surrounded by an environment of language use that helps them reconstruct participation, relationships, and communicative application (Boyd &Maloof, 2000). More importantly, by allowing second language learners opportunities to take part in diverse contexts (both face-to-face and online), the characteristics of interaction in these scenarios are studied to better understand issues about second language learning.

In terms of learning contexts, problem-based learning (PBL) has been viewed as an effective environment to enhance learning. In addition, students' verbal interaction during problem-solving practices reflects collaborative learning (Yew & Schmidt, 2007). Utterances also reflect how students verbally engage themselves in the flow of learning phases, for example, providing information, reasoning, evaluating, questioning, and disagreeing. However, no studies have been conducted to uncover how second language learners interact in detail through turn-taking practices in two differing PBL contexts of discussion: face-to-face and CMC.

Research Methodology

1. Samples design

The participants of this study were 12 second-year English major students (six males, six females) in the Faculty of Education, Chiang Mai Rajabhat University. They were recruited on a voluntary basis from 32 students who volunteered to participate in this study. All of the participants had over 15 years of experience in learning English as a foreign language and sufficient English proficiency to carry on discussions.

2. Data collection

The participants were divided into four groups of three members: two FTF groups and two online chat groups. The FTF groups performed their PBL discussions in their classroom and were videotaped simultaneously. The recordings were later manually transcribed by the researchers using word processing software. The transcription system of Jefferson (1979, as cited in Schiffrin, 1994) was adapted to transcribe both verbal and non-verbal language. For the online chat groups, similar tasks were performed through a chat program, Skype, in a computerized language laboratory. Their discussions were saved automatically by the chat program and later retrieved for the analysis. A week after the last discussion was complete a member of each sub-group who had a dominant role in discussions was selected and interviewed

3. Data analysis

To analyze data from the transcripts and the chat logs, the coding process of Strauss and Corbin (1990) was adopted. It consists of (1) transcribing all recordings and interviews so as to make transcripts; (2) open coding which refers to labeling ideas and concepts relevant to turn-taking strategies. Labels with similar qualities were grouped together as a category; (3) axial coding in which relations among different categories were examined; and (4) making conclusions where answers to the research question were revealed and concluded.

Results

a) How was turn-taking managed in FTF and online chat discussions?

The analysis of the transcripts of FTF discussions revealed that turn-taking in this context was mainly manipulated by current speakers. They used verbal and non-verbal language as tools to create a transition between turns. Excerpt 1 is an example.

Excerpt 1 :

(1) Nan: I think it's:: the:: the Impress hotel.
(2) Cake: ((inhale)) Very expensive. ((all laughed))
(3) Nan: I see, I see. Er, and, and you ((turned to Pim))? What do you think?
(4) Pim: (Um..) I: think… I think er should him to er:: the Imperial.

In Excerpt 1, the students were trying to justify the most appropriate hotel for Thomas, a visitor to Chiang Mai. In order to allocate turn-taking, Nan, the current speaker, used verbal language, *and you?* and *What do you think?* (line 3), to allocate the turn to the next speaker. She also used non-verbal language, turning to Pim (line 3), as another turn-taking strategy. That is to say, turns in FTF discussion were managed with smooth transition through verbal and non-verbal language. Additionally, it is found that FTF discussions were conducted simultaneously in a linear manner. That is, a topic was initiated, discussed, and settled before the next topic introduced. This is shown in Excerpt 2.

Excerpt 2 :

(1) Poto: So so:::… I have found many, I found… many many activity… to::… relieve er.. stress.
(2) Hern: Stress, her stress?
(3) Poto: Yes, I think some activity is er:: can make her lower her stress…er:::because er when I when
(4) I… when I am stress, I usually... watchi- watch er watch comedy movie.
(21 lines)
(5) Poto: I think if if if ah: if she do as me do as me do as I do, she will relieve ah: her stress…. Yes,
(6) what what what about you ((turned to H))…you ((turned to Tai))?
(7) Tai: Ah, I think your way is good. Um: I: after I find er: information, I see many kind of food can
(8) em::… can help…can help and relieve… the stress, such as: em::: I think, Sara, she have to
(9) get enough nutrition { from } yes, from fruit, or::: { vegetables. }
(10) Poto: { Nutrition? } { Vegetable. }
(27 lines)
(12) Tai: And you ((turned to Hern))?
(13) Hern: So after after finding information about about er:… about what she:.. she she should she
(14) should to do and the suggestion about er her lifestyle that I will give=
(15) Poto: Yeah, { you will give her. }
(16) Hern: { =I will give, } give her, you know.

Excerpt 2 shows that the discussion started with an activity topic. Once details of the activity topic were sufficiently discussed and agreed, the students moved on to the next topic, food and lifestyle, respectively. Also, lines 5, 6, and 12 emphasize that turn-taking in FTF discussions was managed through both verbal and non-verbal language by current speakers. Anderson, Beard, and Walther (2010) and Herring (2003) state that interactants in FTF communication are able to time their turn-taking precisely because FTF interactants can use both verbal and non-verbal language in their conversation. While a speaker is speaking, his or her floor is indicated by the use of verbal language as a primary tool and non-verbal language as a secondary tool. Meanwhile, the other interactants acknowledge that speaker's turn and show their listenership with the least amount of interruptions (Sacks et al., 1974).

On the contrary, the analysis of the chat logs revealed that turn-taking in the online chat discussion were controlled by the properties of the online chat program. All messages were arranged chronologically according to the time each message was sent. As a result, turn-taking in online chat discussions were jumbled. Excerpt 3 is an example.

Excerpt 3 :

[18:22:01] Wee: ok.ways to help her from my think

[18:22:41] Wee: I think she should start from have breakfast

[18:22:47] Tin: Quiet her mind Time is always on her side

[18:22:54] Tin: so relax

[18:22:59] Wee:don't drink coffe

[18:23:07] Tin: first

[18:23:14] Tin: Make a list

[18:23:24] Tin: what she has to do

[18:23:36] Pit: about the activities

[18:23:50] Tin: order the important things

[18:24:03] Tin: yap

[18:24:08] Pit: there are many many activities to release stressfull

[18:24:37] Tin: get out the useless thing

[18:25:05] Tin: from the morning till night

[18:25:09] Wee: yeah

[18:25:21] Pit: do the exercise is the good ways to release tress

In Excerpt 3, the students were discussing ways to solve Sarah's problems about her stress. It shows that individual students typed and sent messages independently with little concern for previous messages or who initiated it. This is a result of the lack of non-verbal language, a significant tool that provides interactants with simultaneous feedback and controls turn-taking. (Anderson et al., 2010; Herring, 2003). The lack of non-verbal language also contributed to multi-threading of topics or containing many topics in a conversation. Excerpt 3 shows that while Wee discussed food and drink, Tin focused on time management, and Pit talked about activities. Following Cherny (1999, as cited in Schwienhorst, 2008), this act of multi-threading topics in a conversation leads to a complexity of turn-taking in the online chat discussions.

b) What are common and distinct turn-taking strategies employed in FTF and online chat discussions?

The analysis shows that in the FTF and online chat contexts, students employed turn-taking strategies that were both common to and distinct for each learning situation. For the common turn-taking strategies, the FTF and online chat students similarly used both verbal and non-verbal language in their turn allocation. This strategy was common in FTF discussions. An example is shown in Excerpt 1 (line 3) and Excerpt 2 (line 6). This finding supports earlier studies of Mehrabian (2009) and Sharifabad and Vali (2011). They state that, in order to transmit the complete meaning of a message in all dimensions, FTF interactants generally use verbal language to convey their ideas and non-verbal language such as facial expressions, gestures, pitch, and intonation to add meaning to a conversation.

As for the online chat, although the students were restricted to the use of text only, it was found that they invented and implemented a number of devices compensating for the lack of non-verbal language in their discussions. Those devices included a string of words for emphasizing a certain word and capitalization for indicating volume of speech. Excerpt 4 illustrates this point.

Excerpt 4 :

(1) [18:36:16] Pit: He can have his breakfast at lad na

(2) [18:36:24] Pit: nam chai

(3) [18:36:46] Pit: it locate at Fah ham

(4) [18:37:01] Tin: by mortor bike?

(5) [18:37:04] Pit: what do you think?

(6) [18:37:18] Tin: 

(7) [18:37:28] Wee: I think so far

(8) [18:37:57] Tin: yeah

In Excerpt 4, the students were discussing a place for Thomas to have breakfast. While Pit and Tin used verbal language to express their ideas, Tin used  , an emoticon which is one form of non-verbal language, to show his disapproval of Pit's idea.

This finding concurs with earlier studies including those of Jibril and Abdullaah (2013), Okuyama (2005), and Sauro (2011). They proposed that the online chat students generally use emoticons when compensating for non-verbal language to express their feelings. Nonetheless, the finding of this study showed that emoticons express not only the students' feeling but also their thoughts. This is consistent with the study of Jibril and Abdullah (2013). They stated that, in addition to substituting paralanguage in FTF communication, emoticons can convey meanings and functions contributing to the construction of meaning in a conversation. Huls (2005) additionally stated that emoticons have a literal or original meaning as defined in a dictionary, and a referential meaning which refers to meaning which is varied by a context. Therefore, one emoticon can contain different meanings in different contexts. Interestingly, this finding reveals that an emoticon can function as a complete turn with complete meaning in a conversation.

In regards to distinct turn-taking strategies between FTF and online chat discussions, the analysis indicated that turn-taking in each context could emerge from different sources. In the FTF context, the current speakers were sometimes interrupted by other speakers, known as overlaps in speech. This practice, often times, functioned as turn allocation. Excerpt 5 shows that, while Cake was discussing causes of stress, Nan interrupted her speech. As a consequence, the next turn was allocated to Nan.

Excerpt 5 :

Cake: She drink coffee, she stay at night. She::

Nan: She she don't talks a lot of fames (friends), yeah.

In contrast to the FTF discussions, turn allocation in the online chat context did not take place because of overlaps in speech due to the properties of the chat program. Without being controlled by the verbal and non-verbal language of a current speaker, turns in the online chat conversation could be established by any students at anytime.

Conclusion and Discussion

Based on the data analysis, this study indicated that the students of different language learning contexts, FTF and online chat, managed their turn-taking in different manners. While the FTF students oriented their turn-taking nicely and orderly with smooth transitions, turn allocation of the online chat discussions were found to be disorderly, disorganized and multi-threading. The main cause was the properties of each learning context—while the availability of verbal and non-verbal language assists FTF students in managing their turn-taking, the lack of non-verbal language led to disorientated turn-taking in online chat discussions.

Suggestions

This study highlighted turn-taking practices in the form of turn allocation. Still, further studies on turn-taking with an emphasis on the functions of utterances can be conducted to reveal how learners use language in different real-life situations. This can contribute to the field of language education and sociolinguistics. Also, in order to understand the development of language learning, a micro-ethnography would be an alternative research method to investigate change over a period of time of language exposure. In addition, this study provides naturalistic data that can be a steppingstone to an analysis of turn management bounded by phases of PBL scenarios restricted to the two contexts.

References

Anderson, J. F., Beard, F. K., and Walther, J. B. (2010). Turn-taking and the local management of conversation in a highly simultaneous computer-mediated communication system. *Language@Internet, 7.* Retrieved from http://www.languageatinternet.de/articles/2010/2804

Beauvois, M. H. (1992). Computer-assisted classroom discussion in the classroom: Conversation in slow motion. *Foreign Language Annals, 25,* 455-464.

Beisswenger, M. (2008). Situated chat analysis as window to the user's perspective: Aspects of temporal and sequential organization. *Language@Internet, 5*, 1-19.

Boyd, M. and Maloof, V.M. (2000). How teachers can build on student-proposed intertextual links to facilitate student talk in the ESL classroom [case study of Japanese, Korean and Thai students in the United States who were studying English as a second language]. In J.K. Hall and L.S. Verplaetse (Ed.), *Second and foreign language through classroom interaction* (pp. 163-182). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

Edelsky, C. (1981). Who's got the floor? *Language in Society, 10,* 383-421.

Fairclough, N. (2003). *Analysing discourse: Textual analysis for social research.* New York: NY, Routledge.

Herring. S. C. (2003). Computer-mediated discourse. In D. Schiffrin, D. Tannen, & H. E. Hamilton (Eds.), *The handbook of discourse analysis* (pp. 612-634). Malden, MA: Blackwell.

Huls, E. (2005). *Emoticons: A corpus-based analysis of their forms and functions*. Retrieved from www.ericahuls.nl

Jepson, K. (2005). Converstions-and negotiated interaction-in text and voice chat rooms. *Language Learning & Technology, 9*(3), 79-98.

Jibril, T. A., and Abdullah, M. H. (2013). Relevance of emoticons in computer-mediated communication contexts: An overview. *Asian Social Science, 9*(4), 201-207.

Kato, F. (2000). *Discourse approach to turn-taking from the perspective of tone choice between speakers*. Master's thesis. University of Birmingham, UK. Retrieved from http://www.birmingham.ac.uk/documents/college-artslaw/cels/essays/matefltesldissertations/fkdis.pdf

Markee, N. (2000). *Conversation Analysis.* Mahwah, N.J., Lawrence Erlbaum.

Mehrabian, A. (2009). *Nonverbal communication.* Piscataway, NJ: Transaction.

Murrey, D. E. (1989). When the medium determines turns: Turn-taking in computer conversation. In H. Coleman (Ed.), *Working with language: A multidisciplinary consideration of language use in work contexts* (pp. 319-337). Berlin, Germany: Mouton de Gruyter.

Okuyama, Y. (2005). Distance language learning via synchronous computer-mediated communication. *JALT CALL Journal,1*(2), 3-20.

Reiser, R. (2001). A History of instructional design and technology: Part 1A history of instructional media. *Educational Technology Research and Development, 49*(1), 1042-1629.

Sacks, H., Schegloff, E. A., and Jefferson, G. (1974). A simplest systematics for the organization of turn-taking for conversation. *Language, 50*, 696–735.

Sauro, S. (2011). SCMC for SLA: A research synthesis. *CALICO Journal, 28*(2), 369-391.

Schiffrin, D. (1994). *Approaches to discourse.* Oxford, UK: Blackwell.

Schwienhorst, K. (2008). *Learner autonomy in CALL environments.* New York, NY: Routledge.

Sharifabad, M. R., and Vali, S. (2011). A comparative study of native and non-native body language: The case of Americans' kinetics vs. Persian English speakers. *Journal of Intercultural Communication, 26.* Retrieved from http://www.immi.se/intercultural/nr26/sharifabad.htm

Strauss, A., and Corbin, J. (1990). *Basics of qualitative research: Grounded theory procedures and techniques*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

Wetherell, M., Taylor, S., and Yates, S. J. (Eds.). (2001). *Discourse as data.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Xiao, J. (2007). Language learning strategies in distance English learning: A study of learners at Shantou radio and television university, China. *The Journal of Asia TEFL, 4*(2), 141-164.

Yew, A., and Schmidt, H. (2007). *Process study of verbal interactions in problem based learning*. Retrieved from http://www.ascilite.org.au/conferences/singapore07/procs/yew.pdf

Authors

Assist. Prof. Dr. Anchalee Jansem

Department of Western Languages

Faculty of Humanities

Srinakharinwirot University

Bangkok 10110 Thailand

e-mail: anchalej@swu.ac.th

Dr. Worasiri Boonsue

The School of Western Languages

Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences

Chiang Mai Rajabhat University

Chiang Mai 50300 Thailand

e-mail: worasirib@yahoo.com