
Zones of Interactional Transition in ESL Classes

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This article uses conversation analysis (CA) to describe the structural properties of *zones of interactional transition* (ZITs) or talk that occurs at the boundaries of different classroom (and perhaps other institutionally oriented) speech exchange systems. Two types of ZIT are analyzed in detail. *Counter question* sequences (Markee, 1995) are interactions in which teachers, in order to regain control of the classroom agenda, insert counter question turns between the question and answer turns of question-answer-comment sequences initiated by learners. *Tactical fronting talk* involves ambiguous or misleading claims made by learners to the teacher concerning precisely who is having trouble understanding problematic language. ZITs are loci of potential trouble, whose explication is of interest to both CA and second language acquisition researchers, and also to teachers and teacher trainers.

HISTORICALLY, SECOND LANGUAGE CLASSROOM research (see Chaudron, 1977, 1987, 1988; Day, 1986; Long, Adams, McLean, & Castaños, 1976; Seliger & Long, 1982) has been strongly influenced by studies on the role of negotiated interaction in second language acquisition (SLA; see Doughty & Williams, 1998; Gass, 1997; Long, 1996; Long, Inagaki, & Ortega, 1998; Lyster, 1998; Nicholas, Lightbown, & Spada, 2001, for recent discussions of this issue). Second language classroom research has not only sought to classify the range of participant behaviors that occur in communicative classrooms, but has also attempted to justify the adoption of specific teacher behaviors or methodological practices. Some examples of this more applied research tradition include work on the pedagogical desirability of teachers using referential over display questions (Brock, 1986; Long & Sato, 1983). In addition, a great deal of work has been done on the psycholinguistic properties of information gap tasks (Doughty & Pica, 1986) and small group

work (Long & Porter, 1985; Pica, 1987, 1992; Pica & Doughty, 1985) as catalysts for comprehensible input and output (Long, 1989; Pica, Doughty, & Young, 1986; Pica, Holliday, Lewis, & Morgenthaler, 1989) and the pedagogical implications of a focus on form (Doughty & Varela, 1998). In turn, this research has led to specific recommendations concerning how pedagogical tasks should be designed and structured (Foster, 1998; Foster & Skehan, 1996; Pica, Kanagy, & Falodun, 1993).

In sum, considerable progress has been made on the psycholinguistic front of classroom research. However, much less sociolinguistically oriented classroom research has been done on how participants achieve some of the pedagogical behaviors that are predicated by advocates of task-based instruction. The small body of work that has emerged to date on the social construction of classroom talk has typically used conversation analysis (CA; Koshik, 2002a, 2002b; Markee, 1994, 1995, 2000, 2003, in press-a, in press-b; Mori, 2002; Seedhouse, 1997, 1999) or micro-ethnographic techniques (Lazaraton, 2003, in press; van Lier, 1988, 1996), or both. The use of these methodologies is sometimes also framed by a language socialization/sociocultural theory

perspective on situated SLA studies (see Duff, 2000, 2002; Ohta, 2001a, 2001b; Ohta & Nakaone, n.d.).

This article uses CA to describe the structural properties of *zones of interactional transition* (ZITs). More specifically, ZITs involve talk that occurs at the boundaries of different classroom speech exchange systems. ZITs are loci of potential interactional trouble, whose structural explanation is of interest to both CA and SLA researchers, and also to teachers and teacher trainers.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

The data used for this article come from two university-level English as a Second Language (ESL) classes that were audio- and videotaped in 1990 at a research university in the Midwest of the United States. Both classes were taught by experienced teachers, T1 and T2, respectively. T1 used materials she had written herself for this undergraduate class, and T2 used materials written by another instructor for the graduate suite of courses. The first languages of the participants whose talk is analyzed in this article are summarized in Table 1.

In both classes, which lasted for 50 minutes, the teachers used a task-based, small group work-based methodology. In Class 1, the learners discussed the potential reunification of East and West Germany. The class was divided into two phases. During Phase 1, five small groups each read and discussed different articles on the theme of German reunification. During Phase 2, three newly constituted larger groups exchanged and synthesized information from these articles, in order eventually to write a term paper on the pros and cons of German reunification.

In Class 2, the learners discussed the effects of greenhouse gases on world climates. Again, dur-

ing a first phase of class activity, the learners were given different articles to read in order to set up an information gap. However, instead of reconfiguring the composition of the groups, as T1 did in Class 1, T2 asked all groups during the second phase of Class 2 to report back to the whole class what information they had found in their articles.

ZONES OF INTERACTIONAL TRANSITION

When teachers and learners make the transition from one speech exchange system to another, it is quite common for problems of various kinds to occur as members adjust to the turn-taking and repair practices of the new speech exchange system. Empirically attested examples of trouble that occur in the environment of ZITs (taken from a database of nine task-based, small group-mediated university ESL classes) include:

1. Misunderstandings of the function of teachers' questions, specifically whether these are *display* or *referential* questions (see Markee, 1995);
2. Off-task talk that occurs at the interstices of two activities (Markee, in press-a);
3. Challenges that occur in the environment of *counter question* sequences;
4. Instances of *tactical fronting talk*, which consists of tactically ambiguous or misleading claims made by learners to teachers concerning precisely who is having trouble understanding problematic language.

It is these latter two types of trouble that are discussed here.

Challenges Associated with Counter Question Sequences

Challenges are *done* (that is, achieved) in both ordinary conversation and institutional talk

TABLE 1
Native Language Backgrounds of Participants in Classes 1 and 2

Class 1		Class 2	
Participant	Language	Participant	Language
Teacher 1	American English	Teacher 2	British English
Learner 1	Colombian Spanish	Learner 9	Malay
Learner 6	Colombian Spanish	Learner 10	Mandarin Chinese
Learner 9	Sesotho	Learner 11	Mandarin Chinese
Learner 11	Austrian German		
Learner 12	Japanese		
Learner 14	Khmer		
Learner 15	Malay		

(Koshik, 2003). Furthermore, not all challenges are exclusively done in the sequential contexts of ZITs, in general, or of counter questions, in particular. Last, ZITs are likely not specific to classroom talks; they may well occur in other forms of institutional talk, such as business meetings or therapy sessions. With these caveats in mind, let us now examine what institutional norms, roles, and goals are enacted by the accomplishment of challenges that occur in the environment of counter question sequences.

When learners ask teachers questions during small group-mediated interactions, a ZIT is set up that requires the participants to make a transition from the practices of a relatively locally managed, peer-based speech exchange system (i.e., task-based, problem-solving talk, in which the teacher is not a participant) to the practices of a preallocated, unequal power speech exchange system (i.e., form-focused work, in which the teacher is a participant). More specifically, learners now own the question and (potentially) the comment turns, while teachers are now sequentially obligated to do the answer turns. However, empirical evidence has shown that ESL teachers (though not teachers of Japanese as a Second Language: see Ohta & Nakaone, n.d.) typically respond with a counter question turn that is inserted between the question and answer turns. As shown in Table 2, this behavior sets up the following prototypical trajectory in small group work where a teacher has just joined a group at the invitation of learners.

Counter questions are a device—specifically, an insertion sequence that expands the main question-answer-comment sequence—through which teachers regain sequential control of the interaction in the immediate short term, and, by extension, of the classroom agenda in the longer term (Markee, 2000; A. W. He, personal communication, March 7, 2003). By inserting a counter question turn in between the question and answer turns of a prototypical question-answer adjacency pair sequence, teachers reposition learners as next speakers who must respond with an answer turn as the second pair part of a counter question-answer to counter question sequence.

In addition, the teachers also reposition themselves as the owners of the comment turn, which functions as the second pair part of an answer to counter question—comment on answer to counter question sequence.

Counter questions allow teachers to continue or close down a sequence as appropriate. But the use of counter questions can also have the negative consequence of provoking challenges in the ensuing talk. Such challenges can be made either by learners or by teachers and can occur either within a counter question sequence itself or in follow-up question sequences triggered by a teacher’s comment on answer to counter question turn. Excerpts 1 and 2 constitute a collection of this phenomenon and demonstrate that challenges by learners prototypically occur in the answer slots of counter question ZITs. Alternatively, they occur in the answer slots of follow-up question ZITs initiated by teachers who have just repositioned themselves to control the interaction through a counter question sequence. In contrast, challenges in ZIT environments initiated by teachers occur in the question, counter question, or comment slots.

More specifically, consider Learner (L) 11’s arrowed turn, “I have ↓no idea↑” in line 547 of Excerpt 1. It is a *No Knowledge* claim that also refuses T2’s invitation to L11 (543) to display her knowledge. More specifically, L11’s turn occurs in the environment of T2’s counter question turn in line 543 and in T2’s subsequent prompts in lines 544 and 546. Now, as we can see in lines 522 and 523 at the beginning of this same excerpt, it is actually L11 who had initiated this particular sequence in the first place. This evidence explains why L11 “has no idea” and why she makes an admission that might in other circumstances potentially identify her as a lazy student. By doing this turn in this way, L11 simultaneously draws T2’s attention to the fact that she cannot be expected to know the answer to this question and that T2’s selection of L11 as next speaker is bound to be unsuccessful. In short, we are able to motivate an analysis of this *No Knowledge* claim as a challenge rather than as an attempt to avoid a challenge—which is the typical

TABLE 2
The Trajectory of Counter Question Sequences

Ownership of the Turn Sequential Structure	Learner [Q] →	Teacher [CQ] →	Learner [A-to-CQ] →	Teacher [C-on-A-to-CQ]
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Note. Q = Question; CQ = Counter Question; A = Answer; C = Comment. From “Teachers’ Answers to Students’ Questions: Problematizing the Issue of Making Meaning,” by N. Markee, 1995, *Issues in Applied Linguistics*, 6, p. 75. Copyright 1995 by Regents of the University of California. Adapted with permission.

EXCERPT 1

No Idea

522 L11: ok (0.2) excuse me (0.2) uh: what what does it mean hab-
 523 (0.5) habi-
 524 (0.4)
 525 T2: habitats
 526 L11: habitats
 527 T2: yeah (.) you had that word as well (0.2) what do you think
 528 it means
 529 (0.8)
 530 L10: ·hhh [hh]
 531 T2: [yours] talked about habitats didn't it
 532 (0.4)
 533 L10: uh:m
 534 T2: the [m]ost important (1.2) habitat
 535 L10: [I]
 536 (1.0)
 537 L10: I think (.) the habitats is the: /em/ (1.0) e[nvironment uh] and uh
 538 L9: [environment]
 539 L10: (0.8) environment and uh (2.0) uhm ·h
 540 (1.2)
 541 L9: is it [is it] the: nearest [environment]
 542 L10: [for for] [for the fish] you (mea be:) hh
 543 T2: ·h yeah what would be another word for a habitat then (0.7)
 544 it's like
 545 (1.3)
 546 T2: [it's hli-]
 547 L11: → [I ha]ve ↓no idea↑ =
 548 L?: = home

function of such claims in ordinary conversation (see Heritage, 1984; Pomerantz, 1984)—by invoking L11's institutionally relevant concern not to be negatively evaluated by T2.

Before I begin analyzing Excerpt 2 in detail, let me offer some background information about the microlongitudinal context of this interaction that will help situate what courses of action the participants were achieving in and through this talk. The problem phrase *we cannot get by Auschwitz* occurred in a reading that had been assigned to Group 4 (of which L15 had been a member) during Phase 1 of the lesson. During Phase 2 of the lesson, T1 reconfigured the class into new groups, and members were supposed to summarize for the other members of their new group what they had read in their original source reading. However, L15 was unable to make the summary. In Excerpt 2, therefore, L6 explained content for which L15 was nominally responsible by using his knowledge of the world, not information from L15's reading passage.

Excerpt 2 includes examples of both learner- and teacher-initiated challenges. More specifically, in line 346 of this excerpt, T1's evaluating comment turn (which also functions as the question turn of the next sequence) is possibly done too bluntly. There is therefore a local sequential context that may be invoked to explain the trouble that follows in this sequential environment: specifically, the vehement answer turns by L6 in lines 347, 349, 351, and 357. In addition, however, there is also microlongitudinal evidence from the speech event as a whole that demonstrates that L6 knows what Auschwitz was (109–114 in Excerpt 5b) and that he also understands its symbolic importance as an argument against German reunification.

Crucially, the answer that L6 gives in the ZIT in Excerpt 2 is factually correct. L6 therefore has every right to feel aggrieved at the sanction he receives in T1's comment/question turn in line 346. It is for this reason that he does not let the matter drop until he ultimately forces T1 to acknowledge in line 354 that his explanation that

EXCERPT 2

Does It Mean That?

- 331 L6: there is a problem here she [doesn't]
 332 L15: [huh h]
 333 L6: underst(h)and
 334 L7: huh
 335 L6: and we don't understand what ·h
 336 [what means exactly this]
 337 L15: [why we can't get aus /witch/] (0.3) oh
 338 L6: we cannot get by ausch/vits/ ((L6 gazes at the text,
 339 then at T1))
 340 T1: ok (0.3) what d'you think it might mean
 341 L15: uh huh (0.3) uh huh [h]
 342 L6: [it] might /b/ean (0.2)
 343 probably u::h we::: (0.2) cannot have another
 344 ausch/v/itz again if uh germany unites o:r maybe
 345 ·hh
 346 T1: → does it mean that?
 347 L6: → I- I [/ni:/-]
 348 L14: [do]es it-
 349 L6: → I didn't read it
 350 L14: does [it-]
 351 L6: → [I/z/]- [I don't know]
 352 T1: [what do you think]
 353 L14: does it-
 354 T1: oh
 355 L15: [no]
 356 L14: [do]es it mean that u:hm [·hh]
 357 L6: → [I didn't read it]
 358 L14: that if the uni- if (.) the Germany unite again ·h
 359 the Ausch/vit/ might exist, ·hhh
 360 (0.3)
 361 T1: yeah. that's ba- we can't- when you can't get
 362 [by something] that's ·hh you can never forget.
 363 [((T1 flips her hand))]
 364 L14: right.
 365 (0.3) ((T moves away from the group)) . . .

he had not read the original passage is valid.¹ Again, as with L11's No Knowledge claim in Excerpt 1, a resource that is normally used to avoid challenges and conflict in ordinary conversation is deployed by L6 to achieve the quite different, institutionally relevant action of challenging T1's unjust evaluation of L6.

To summarize the argument so far, challenges by learners legitimately occur in the answer slots following counter question and question turns, and teachers' challenges occur in the question, counter question, or comment slots of ZITs. For example, T1's talk in line 346 of Excerpt 2 conflates the comment and question functions of this slot into a single comment/question turn. It

is T1's blunt challenge to L6 in line 346, combined with the microlongitudinal evidence discussed above, that constitutes the trouble source in this excerpt.

But what are we to make of the data in Excerpt 3, which seem to provide a counterexample to the preference organization sketched out so far? More specifically, how can we account for L11's apparent use of a counter question turn in line 204 of this excerpt, which would seem to violate the normative generalization that challenges by learners may licitly occur only in the answer slots following question or counter question turns?

Let us follow the trajectory of this talk in more detail. More specifically, in lines 200–201, L9 re-

EXCERPT 3

Do You Know What the Word Pretend Means?

- 188 L9: [(L9 leans toward L11)]
 189 L9: can [we call jane maybe, ((unintelligible)).
 190 (0.3)
 191 L11: myeah.
 192 [(L9 and L11 both look up toward the front of the class. L9 holds
 193 his chin in his right hand in a thinking posture, and L11 rests his
 194 left hand on his left thigh)]
 195 L9: [nt JANE?] ((T1's name; L9 says this mock formally))
 196 T1: uh huh?
 197 L9: your input plea[(h huh [huh] huh)]
 198 T1: [huh]
 199 L11: [h huh [huh] huh] huh ·huh
 200 L9: there is this e:h (0.8) some sort of an idiom you pretend to
 201 pay us and we pretend to work
 202 T1: ok. what do you think that could be: (0.3) do you have any
 203 idea? ((T1 addresses L11))
 204 L11:→ [do you do you know what the word pretend means]
 205 [(L11's hand gesture emphasizes "know" and "pretend")]
 206 (1.0)
 207 T1:→ do I know what the word pretend means ((T quickly
 208 inclines her head before speaking; she then touches her
 209 chest with her right hand as she says the word "I"))
 210 L11: → yeah (.) [I-I /dawt/ (.) I don't know that see]
 211 [(L11 motions to self, then shakes head sideways)]
 212 T1: oh ok who- do- does anybody know what the word pretend
 213 means. . . .

quests T1's assistance by saying, "there is this e:h (0.8) some sort of an idiom you pretend to pay us and we pretend to work." In lines 202–203, T1 responds by asking L11, "ok. what do you think that could be: (0.3) do you have any idea?" This turn by T1 is a standard example of a teacher's counter question, which in this case obligates L11 to provide an answer turn in the following slot. But L11 does not do a preferentially expected answer turn in line 204. Instead, he responds to T1 by saying in line 204, "do you do you know what the word pretend means."

T1 immediately marks L11's turn as problematic. First, there is a trouble-relevant pause of 1.0 second in line 206. T1 then does a turn in line 207 ("do I know what the word pretend means") whose production confirms that some kind of trouble is indeed unfolding. This trouble is observably signaled through T1's use of heavy contrastive stress on the word *I* and her choreographed use of body language and gesture in lines 207–209. But what is the precise nature of this trouble?

It seems that T1 treats L11's inquiry in line 204

as a challenge to her competence as a teacher and native speaker of English. This analysis is based on the observable fact that L11's turn in line 204 is sequentially hearable as a counter question to T1's prior counter question in lines 202–203. Now, it is most unlikely that L11 intends to challenge T1's competence as a teacher and native speaker of English—L11 may actually be trying to indicate to T1 that the phrase that L9 identified as being problematic is actually his problem, not L9's (see further discussion to follow)—but CA methodology does not give us access to participants' psychological intentions and motivations. However, what CA can demonstrate from a behavioral standpoint is that T1 observably treats L11's turn in line 204 as a highly dispreferred—indeed, illicit—type of turn in the institutional context of teacher-fronted classroom talk. Consequently, this is how analysts should interpret this behavior also.

Further support for this sequentially based analysis is provided by the fact that L11 himself then visibly orients to T1's understanding of his turn as a problematic action. That is, in lines 210

and 211, L11 verbally and physically clarifies that the problem does not lie with the teacher. Rather it is that he does not understand the meaning of the word *pretend*: (“yeah (.) I- I /dawt/ (.) I don’t know that see”). This clarification has the effect of repairing L11’s social relationship with T1, who accepts L11’s explanation in line 212 when she says, “oh ok.” T1 then opens up the issue to the rest of the class and the interaction proceeds without further disruption.

This deviant case analysis of Excerpt 3 shows that although we can find very rare cases of learners responding with counter questions to teachers’ counter question turns (this is in fact the only example of this behavior in my entire database), such a move draws immediate censure by the teacher. This censure occurs because this turn type violates the preference organization of teacher-fronted talk, even when such talk occurs in the interactionally ambiguous environment of a ZIT. Thus, the original analysis that challenges by learners may only licitly occur in the answer slots following question or counter question turns is preserved.

Troubles Associated with Tactical Fronting Talk

I suggested that when L11 seemingly does a counter question turn in Excerpt 3, he may really be trying to tell T1 that it is he, not L9, who does not understand the phrase *you pretend to pay us and we pretend to work*. This interpretation is consistent with the fact that, although it is L9, not L11, who calls on T1 for help in lines 188–201 of Excerpt 3, L9 demonstrates in prior dyadic talk between L9 and L11 that he understands this phrase. But unfortunately, no other converging interactional evidence is available that would conclusively settle this matter in this particular instance.

However, it is worth noting that the learners provide T1 on several occasions with ambiguous,

not to say actually misleading, information about who is really having trouble with a particular word or phrase. Consider for example, the opening lines of Excerpt 2, which are reproduced here as Excerpt 4. In line 331, L6 first identifies the person who is having a problem understanding the phrase *we cannot get by Auschwitz* as L15. But in line 335, L6 reformulates this analysis as a group problem by saying, “we don’t understand.”

Now, whereas ambiguous talk certainly occurs outside the sequential context of ZITs (see, e.g., the classic study by Hawkins, 1985), it is nonetheless quite noticeable that several learners in T1’s class use tactical fronting talk to enlist T1’s help. And tactical fronting talk always occurs in the environment of ZITs.

More specifically, what happens in T1’s class is that, after an initial period of learner-learner interaction in small groups fails to resolve a problematic item, a (usually) knowledgeable learner takes on the responsibility of asking T1 for help. Consequently, often with this learner’s explicit connivance, T1 then treats the learner who solicits the help as the owner of the problem. However, the real owner of the problem is another learner, who is perhaps never to be publicly identified as the person who is experiencing trouble.

As we saw in Excerpt 4, L6 first identifies L15 as the person who does not understand what *we cannot get by Auschwitz* meant and then—arguably to save L15’s face—reformulates this lack of understanding as a group problem. This tactical fronting talk muddies the waters as to who is actually experiencing trouble with this phrase. But convincing empirical evidence is also available in Excerpts 5a, 5b, 5c, 5d, and 6, which show that this tactical fronting talk is no mere accident (see also Mori, this issue, who independently found evidence of the same behavior in her Japanese language classroom data). More specifically, L12 also uses a similar tactical fronting talk

EXCERPT 4

There Is a Problem Here

- 331 L6: → there is a problem here she ((indicates L15)) [doesn’t]
 332 L15: [huh h]
 333 L6: underst(h)and
 334 L7: huh
 335 L6: → and we don’t understand what ·h
 336 [what means exactly this]
 337 L15: [why we can’t get aus /witch/] (0.3) oh
 338 L6: we cannot get by ausch/vits/ ((L6 gazes at the text,
 339 then at T))
-

EXCERPT 5A

What Is Auschwitz?

- 81 L15: yeah (0.5) huh. this qu[estion] (0.6) so (.) what d'you think.
 82 L12: [ok]
 83 L12: uh:: (1.9) could you tell me what is ausch (0.3)
 84 [ausch/v/it]
 84 L15: [that's (/w/eal)] hard to do- hhh
 87 L12: ·hhh hhh ·hh (0.5) ausch/v/it
 88 (0.2)
 89 L15: °can't get by ausch/v/itz (1.0) they don't want to know (1.6)
 90 uh huh? (4.2) maybe that's german way (2.3) they didn't
 91 ° ((unintelligible whisper))°
 92 (1.0)
 93 L12: ·hh h JANE ((T's name))

EXCERPT 5B

What Is Auschwitz?

- 93 L12: ·hh h JANE ((T's name))
 94 T1: yeah
 95 L12: what's the meaning of (.) ausch/w/itz?
 96 (0.9)
 97 T1: D- UHM DOES ANYBODY HERE KNOW WHAT
 98 AUSCH/W/ITZ WAS? ((T1 is addressing the whole class))
 99 (0.5)
 100 L6: YEAH
 101 T1: [YOU WANT TO EXPLAIN IT]
 102 L6: [CONCENTRATION CAMP]
 103 (0.7)
 104 T1: [EXPLAIN IT TO HER]
 105 L6: [AUSCH/V/TZ]
 106 T1: EXPLAIN IT TO HARUMI ((L12's name))
 107 (0.6)
 108 L12: °[but]° ((whispered tone))
 109 L6: [UH] ITS A CONCENTRATION CAMP, AND (0.3)
 110 UH THEY WOULD SEND SOME UH (.) JEWS
 111 THERE, TO (1.2) TO GAS THEM TO KILL
 112 THEM (1.1) UH DURING THE WORLD WAR TWO
 113 (0.6) IN GERMANY (1.2)
 114 [I DON:'T KNO:W I'M] NOT (0.2) QUITE SURE
 115 L12: [for (.) jews,]
 116 L6: IF UH AUSCHWITZ AUSCH/V/ITZ (.) WAS IN
 117 GERMANY OR IN IN UH
 118 L11: [NO (.) IT'S IN POLAND]
 119 L1: [NO IT WAS POLAND]
 120 L6: POLAND OK
 121 (0.8)
 122 L11: IN GERMANY IT'S DACHAU FOR EXAMPLE IT'S: (.)
 123 NEAR MUNICH
 124 (1.0)
 125 ((L12 and L15 resume their small group talk))

EXCERPT 5C

What Is Auschwitz?

- 125 (L12 and L15 resume their small group talk)
 126 L12: °hh hh (1.6) you understand, (0.3) ausch/v/itz,°
 127 (2.2)
 128 L15: °hm[m.]°
 129 L12: → °[au]sch/v/itz it's (2.8) probably during world war two:
 130 → ·hhh that hh (0.8) (heil) hitler (1.2) stru- (2.2) gathered
 131 → the jewish (0.2) in (0.3) one place?°
 132 L15: ≈ °yeah,° ≈
 133 T1: {≈WRITE≈ YOUR ANSWERS ON THE
 134 L12: → ≈that's a building? and that means ausch/v/itz? ((louder)) ≈
 135 T1: ≈PAPER BECAUSE YOU'LL BE SEPARATING . . . ≈
 136 L15: oh the building?
 137 L12: yeah
 138 L15: oh

strategy earlier in the same class that leads T1 to assume that it is L12, not L15, who is the real owner of this problem phrase.

Excerpts 5a, 5b, 5c, and 6 reproduce talk that temporally occurs before Excerpt 4 in an earlier phase of this lesson, during which L15 is working with L12. In Excerpt 5a, we observe that neither L12 nor L15 is sure what *Auschwitz* (81 and 83) or the phrase *we cannot get by Auschwitz* (89) means.

In Excerpt 5b (which is the immediate continuation of Excerpt 5a), L12 calls T1 over in lines 93 and 95 to ask what *Auschwitz* means. This question turn triggers an extended counter question sequence in lines 97–123. During this sequence, L6, L1, and L11 collaboratively explain to the whole class what Auschwitz was.

In lines 125–126 of Excerpt 5c, (which is the continuation of Excerpt 5b), L12 and L15 make the transition back to their dyadic small group talk. In line 126, L12 starts to check whether L15

understands L6's explanation to the whole class. L12 provides additional information of her own in lines 129–134. For example, she specifies in line 129 that Auschwitz was “probably during world war two.” In line 130, she first uses the formulaic phrase *heil hitler?* to see if this will jog L15's memory about the Holocaust, but when this fails to draw a response indicating understanding from L15, L12 says that Hitler “gathered the jewish (0.2) in (0.3) one place.” And in line 134, she adds that Auschwitz was a building.

From this point on, L12 increasingly behaves like someone who claims to understand the significance of Auschwitz in the context of a discussion about German reunification. More specifically, in line 139 of Excerpt 5d (which is the continuation of Excerpt 5c), L12 prods L15 to say whether she too now understands what *Auschwitz* means. But L15 is forced to admit in lines 140 and 142 that she still does not understand.

EXCERPT 5D

What Is Auschwitz?

- 139 L12: → do you think so? did you remember that?
 140 L15: → no I don't kno(h)w
 141 L12: oh h
 142 L15: → I don't remem[ber]
 143 L12: [I] think so
 144 L15: → can you give me
 145 L12: → (I don't know) (0.5) ·hh
 146 L15: °[((L15 reads in an unintelligible mutter))°
 147 L12: °[ausch/v/it :: (8.0) ((L12 begins reading))
 148 and europe can't understand it's never going shame
 149 (k- ending?)°

Now, it is true that, in line 145, L12 responds, “(I don’t know)” to L15’s incompletely formulated request for help in line 144, where L5 says, “can you give me.” If L15 is trying to say something like, “can you give me an example” in line 144, the interpretation that L15 is now constructed as the sole owner of this problem remains viable. More specifically, L12’s “(I don’t know)” response may be interpreted as L12 saying that she cannot explain what the phrase *we cannot get by Auschwitz* means any more clearly to L15 than she already had.

Further support for this analysis is provided by the data in Excerpt 6. In lines 278 and 280 of this excerpt,² L12 again calls on T1 for help with the word *Auschwitz*. In lines 282–298, T1 uses a delegation strategy, which involves her asking another learner (L2) to answer L12’s question turn in lines 292 and 297–298. Crucially, for present purposes, in line 280, L12 identifies the problem as her own by saying, “I still,” and by asking the

vague question, “yeah *ausch- ausch/v/itz* is a building?”³ in line 300. These two turns misleadingly represent to T1 that it is L12 who is having trouble understanding this word. This reading of the talk is confirmed by T1’s turns in lines 297 (“‘cause they’re having trouble with the article”) and 305 (“ok could you ex[plain] it to harumi”), in which T1 first ascribes the problem to both L12 and L15 and then narrows the problem ownership down to L12.

We can now claim with some confidence that tactical fronting talk occurs in the sequential context of ZITs. Furthermore, tactical fronting talk has a definable structure that is purposefully designed by participants to get a particular job done. But what is that job, and why do learners mislead, or, at the very least, allow, teachers to misunderstand who is really having a problem?

In all the instances of tactical fronting talk analyzed in this article, the learners exhausted the linguistic resources available to them in their

EXCERPT 6

I Still Don’t Understand

- 272 L12: °so hh° ((whisper)) (1.0) do you know (0.6)
 273 [that means]
 274 L15: [I can’t understand] why? (.) he (0.6) ·h (0.3) why he
 275 doesn’t want (.) united germany (.) I mean (2.0) we
 276 can’t get (1.0) hhh
 277 (1.0)
 278 L12: → we can’t get hh (24) ·hh hh (.) JANE ((T’s name))
 279 T1: yeah?
 280 L12: → I still
 281 (0.4)
 282 T1: I have uhm (0.3) maria’s ((L2’s name)) reading your article.
 283 L12: uh huh,
 289 T1: maria have you finished?
 290 (1.0)
 291 L2: yeah just (1) I’m in the last sentence
 292 T1: o[k.] (.) could you move here with,
 293 L12: [ok]
 294 (0.5)
 295 L12: yeah
 296 (0.3)
 297 T1: → ‘cause they’re having trouble with the article and I think
 298 → you may be able to clear something up h
 299 L2: ok
 300 L12: → yeah *ausch- ausch/v/itz* is a building?
 301 L2: °h *auschwitz*° ((whisper))
 302 T1: no its a- uhm maria, (0.5) you know what’s
 303 *auschwitz* is don’t you.
 304 L2: yeah
 305 T1: → ok could you ex[plain] it to harumi
 306 L12: [yeah]
-

dyadic talk as they tried to figure out the meaning of a word or phrase. It seems that the knowledgeable learner, who had so far failed to explain the problematic item to his or her partner during dyadic talk, therefore decided to take the responsibility of involving the teacher as a means of breaking the impasse they currently found themselves in. Although breaking a current impasse is the job that needed to be achieved, it also seems that locally important, tactical issues of maintaining learner-learner solidarity and attending to the need to save a partner's face are involved. These issues are clearly illustrated in Excerpt 2/4, in which L6 reformulated his attribution of problem ownership as a group problem, not just L15's problem. Thus, the purpose of tactical fronting talk is not, *a priori*, to mislead teachers. But misunderstanding by teachers is an unavoidable consequence of such talk, because it tactically disguises the identity of the person who is really having trouble understanding problematic language.

CONCLUSION

This article has specified in CA terms the structural organization of counter questions and tactical fronting talk that underpins members' social achievement of ZITs in two ESL classrooms. This empirical study of these practices not only contributes to our understanding of the institutional character of second language classroom talks but also suggests interesting avenues of further research that intersect with current issues in SLA studies. The most contentious of these questions is the role of social context—that is to say, local, interactional context—in SLA.

Broadly speaking, the field of SLA studies seems to be dividing into two camps on this issue. On the one hand, researchers who conceive of SLA as a psycholinguistic enterprise seek to explain second language learning as a cognitive phenomenon that occurs in the mind/brain of individuals (see, e.g., Doughty & Long, 2003). From this perspective, a fairly rigid distinction is maintained between language use and language acquisition. Thus, although the social organization of learning talk may be of interest in its own right as an instance of language use, it is only incidentally interesting to cognitive SLA, and then only insofar as it sheds light on fundamentally psycholinguistic processes of language learning (see, e.g., Gass, 1998; Kasper, 1997;⁴ Long, 1998).

On the other hand, researchers who conceptualize SLA in sociolinguistic terms treat language

learning as an emergent, socially constructed phenomenon (see, e.g., Duff, 2002; Firth & Wagner, 1997; Hall & Verplaetse, 2000; Markee, 2000; Ohta, 2001a). This alternative view of SLA does not necessarily deny that language learning and cognition occur in the mind/brain of individuals. But, to the extent that acquisitional processes can be observed in talk (and there are obviously many occasions when such processes are not manifested in talk-in-interaction), SLA is now seen as a set of socially distributed practices that are situated in the interactional space between conversational partners. Consequently, little (if any) effort is made to distinguish between language acquisition and use.

The analyses sketched out in this article (and indeed in the other articles in this issue) lend empirical support to the theoretically important position that there can be no clear-cut boundary between language acquisition and use in SLA studies that are motivated by the Interaction Hypothesis (Long, 1996).⁵ More specifically, this article has demonstrated how and why second language classrooms are not just learning places; they are, just as importantly, also social places (see also Markee, *in press-a*). Thus, there are inevitably many micromoments when the avowed purpose of such classes, which is language learning, is observably postponed or is otherwise modified in unpredictable ways by participants who deal with locally contingent issues such as hierarchy (as in Excerpt 3), the need to save face (as in Excerpts 2/4), or the need to break an impasse (as in Excerpts 2/4, 5a–5d, and 6). These are matters that have received comparatively little attention in the SLA literature to date, and much more research in this area is needed to understand better how individual and socially distributed accounts of cognition differ from or intermesh with each other.

Let me also say a word concerning the lessons that teachers and teacher trainers may draw from the kind of research exemplified in this article. This article has shown that, just because learners ask what a word or phrase means does not, therefore, mean that they do not know the meaning of that problem item. Learners may be doing tactical fronting talk—that is, displaying a misleading lack of understanding—in order to resolve another learner's problems that they have been unable to solve in small group work. Thus, however experienced we may be as teachers or teacher trainers, we should always be on the lookout to understand the myriad ambiguities of classroom talks and be careful not to take all of our learners' actions at face value.

Finally, this article has complexified the pedagogical practice of teachers doing counter questions. These turns are routinely loci of potential trouble. Counter questions are so familiar to ESL teachers that these practices may not even register as being potentially problematic ways of answering learners' questions. Whereas we should not underestimate the practical difficulties that we must overcome if we conclude that we should change our teaching practices⁶ (e.g., 8 years after first discovering how counter questions play out, I still find myself doing counter questions in my applied linguistics and other classes), we language teaching and learning specialists should be aware that what we say and how we say it, no matter how seemingly unimportant, may turn out to have profound consequences in terms of the access our students have to good opportunities for language learning. This is a weighty responsibility and we need to be able to rise to this challenge. Thus, second language teaching practitioners need to know and understand the empirical consequences of implementing teaching practices such as counter question sequences. I submit that CA is one of several approaches that potentially offer teachers and teacher trainers the tools to analyze such data in a principled fashion.

NOTES

¹ See Markee, 2000, chapter 8, for a more complete analysis of the Auschwitz data.

² Excerpt 6 chronologically follows the talk reproduced in Excerpts 5a–5d, but still precedes the talk reproduced in Excerpt 2/4.

³ As we saw, this explanation derives from L12 and L15's prior talk in Excerpt 5c.

⁴ However, note the quite different position adopted by Kasper (2002, this issue).

⁵ Notice, however, that there is a considerable range of opinion among the contributors to this issue on precisely what kinds of insights CA can or cannot provide into SLA. See, in particular, He (this issue), Mondada and Pekarek Doehler (this issue), and Young and Miller (this issue).

⁶ Note that this conclusion is by no means the only one that can be drawn from this analysis of counter questions (see Markee, 1995).

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