

On the Implications of Conversation Analysis for College Oral English Teaching

Li Feng

School of Foreign Languages, Shanxi University, Taiyuan, China

Email address:

mapleli@sxu.edu.cn

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Abstract: College English is an important basic course in China's higher education. Its quality is related to the talents' cultivation and their practical working ability in the 21st century. Although most Chinese college students are proficient in English reading and writing, their oral English abilities are relatively weak. As is known to all, conversation plays an irreplaceable role in oral communication, and a host of scholars and educators have advocated including authentic conversations into college oral English teaching. However, their studies are mostly concerned with only a specific interactional practice of conversation, and there lacks a systemic study on the comprehensive application of conversations to oral English teaching. As a sociological research method, Conversation Analysis is aimed to study the social practices of talk and the social norm behind these conversational practices. The findings of Conversation Analysis have shown some potential in oral English teaching. Based on the current situation of Chinese college oral English teaching, the present study first explores the applicability of Conversation Analysis to college oral English teaching, then attempts to construct a practical oral English teaching model for college students in terms of four typical interactional organizations in conversation, viz. turn-taking organization, adjacency pairs, preference organization and repair organization, so as to effectively cultivate their communicative and interactive English skills and enhance their all-round practical capabilities to use English as a whole.

Keywords: Conversation Analysis, College Oral English Teaching, Conversation Organization, Communicative Skills

1. Introduction

As early as in 2007, the China Ministry of Education has printed and issued "College English Curriculum Requirements", explicitly stipulating that "the goal of college English teaching is to develop students' comprehensive English ability, especially listening and speaking skills, to make them communicate effectively in the future study, work and social activities". Therefore, how to improve college students' oral communicative ability occupies an important place in college English teaching. However, compared with reading and writing, oral communicative competence is still most Chinese students' weakness. And under the long-term examination-oriented education system, most Chinese students attach importance to memorizing a sea of vocabulary and sentence patterns, ignoring the practice of authentic spoken language data. The result is that their oral communication is rigid and more textbook-oriented rather than life-oriented.

As is known to all, conversation plays an irreplaceable role in oral communication. Whether it is small talk between friends, acquaintances or strangers, classroom discussion, business negotiations, court debates and other institutional activities, conversation is indispensable. As Clark points out, "face-to-face communication is the cradle of language use" [4]. We first learn conversation and then learn syntactic structure through conversation. In other words, conversation is our medium of language learning.

Over the past 40 years, discourse analysts have advocated the use of authentic conversations as teaching materials in textbooks [3, 7, 12, 22]. Applied linguists are also increasingly aware of the contribution of conversation analysis to language teaching. They combine different teaching methods to describe the lexical, grammatical and textual features of conversation [2, 8, 15, 20]. Some Chinese scholars have also paid attention to the guiding role of conversation analysis in oral English teaching. For instance, the analysis of teachers and students' questioning skills in classroom interaction [24];

the enlightenment of turn taking on oral English teaching [25]; the analysis of the application of conversational correction in oral English class [6], et al. However, these studies are mostly concerned with a specific interactional practice of conversation, and there lacks a systemic study on the comprehensive application of conversation analysis to oral English teaching.

2. The Applicability of Conversation Analysis to College Oral English Teaching

Conversation Analysis (CA), originated from ethnomethodology, is a sociological research method that emerged in the United States in the 1960s. The main goal of CA is to “discover and explicate the practices through which interactants produce and understand conduct in conversation” [5].

What makes CA unique from other social science research methods is its respect for linguistic facts. Conversation analysts believe that “talk or conversation is a basic and constitutive feature of human social life” [21]. We use conversation to greet, to request, to offer, to complain and so on. Without conversation, we would not live the lives we do. From the perspective of human development, when a baby is born in the world, the first language form s/he is exposed to is spoken language. Through oral communication, infants have mastered the communicative ability, social knowledge and reasoning ability, and thus become people with social attributes [9, 26]. Therefore, it is self-evident that oral communication is of much significance for a person's growth and socialization and the importance of conversation cannot be overstated.

According to Heritage, “the basic outlook of conversation analysis can be briefly summarized in terms of three fundamental assumptions: (1) interaction is structurally organized; (2) contributions to interaction are contextually oriented; and (3) these two properties in here in the details of interaction so that no order of detail can be dismissed, a priori, as disorderly, accidental or irrelevant” [9]. Based on these basic assumptions, conversation analysts draw naturally occurring everyday mundane conversation as their data and object to the use of corpus produced by any artificial control, including those obtained by means of interview, observation, introspection, and experiment, because these corpora cannot reflect the true nature and all details of human verbal interaction. In addition, conversation analysts establish a detailed data transcription system, which includes a minute description of the speaker's inhalation, exhalation, pause, emphasis, pitch, volume, etc. As an integral part of conversation, these phenomena exert different effects on verbal communication, and conversation analysts keep a strict record of what they hear, without making any corrections or changes [13].

CA findings have shown some potential in cultivating English learners' communicative competence, but there is still

room for improvement in teaching materials and teaching skills. Although most foreign language teachers are proficient in the grammar, pronunciation, grammar, or sociolinguistics of the target language, they are not equally proficient in the conversational practices at the same time, which leads to the disconnection between the oral expressions learned by students and the real verbal communication. Moreover, sentences in language textbooks are somewhat misleading and they are not the basic unit of conversation [23]. To understand exactly how a conversation works requires us to study every detail of real conversation communication, which is a distinctive feature of conversation analysis.

3. CA-informed College Oral English Teaching Model

According to CA findings, interactional competence consists of conversational practices. Conversation practices refer to “the systematic verbal and nonverbal methods participants use to engage in social interaction” [23]. Conversational practices include the following four organizations: turn-taking organization, adjacency pairs, preference organization and repair organization.

3.1. Turn-taking Organization

One of the basic questions we face in everyday communication is: when do we start a conversation and when do we stop? Do we need to start and end each conversation by telling the recipient, “now it's my turn”, “now it's your turn”? Why don't we all talk at the same time? Why aren't there long pauses between conversations? There seems to be an invisible rule that guides us when to start and when to end a conversation in daily communication. Conversation analysts call “a time during which a single participant speak, with a typical, orderly arrangement in which participants speak with minimal overlap and gap between them” [11] a turn.

A turn is the basic unit of conversation and is composed of turn-construction units (TCU). Sacks, Schegloff & Jefferson divide TCU into three types: lexical TCU, phrasal/clausal TCU and sentential TCU. According to grammar, intonation and pragmatics, we can infer whether a turn-construction component has been completed or not. In general, a complete TCU is grammatically complete or correct; A complete TCU exists in a complete intonation; A complete TCU performs a complete action. Based on these three criteria, we can determine whether a turn building has been completed or is about to be completed [16].

Turn-allocation techniques are distributed into two groups: (1) next turn is allocated by current speaker's selecting next speaker; and (2) a next turn is allocated by self-selection [16]. The turn-taking conversational mechanism consists of some specific rules:

- 1) “For any turn, at the initial transition-relevance place of an initial turn-constructional unit:
- a) If the turn-so-far is so constructed as to involve the use of a current speaker selects next technique, then

the party so selected has the right and is obliged to take next turn to speak; no others have such rights or obligations, and transfer occurs at that place.

- b) If the turn-so-far is so constructed as not to involve the use of a “current speaker selects next” technique, then self-selection for next speakership may, but need not, be instituted; first starter acquires rights to a turn, and transfer occurs at that place.*
- c) If the turn-so-far is so constructed as not to involve the use of “current speaker selects next” technique, then current speaker may, but need not continue, unless another self-selects.*
- 2) If, at the initial transition-relevance place of an initial turn-constructual unit, neither 1a nor 1b has operated, and, following the provision of 1c, current speaker has continued, then the rule set a-c re-applies at the next transition-relevance place, and recursively at each next transition-relevance place, until transfer is effected.”* [16]

The CA findings thus reveal the mystery of turn taking in social interaction for English teachers, and then help students master the invisible rules. Of course, a skilled native speaker can communicate without knowing the rules of turn-taking, just as a child can speak grammatically correct sentences without knowing the rules of grammar. On the contrary, not knowing the turn-taking system might mean never getting a chance to speak, therefore, to be familiar with the turn taking mechanism is the fundamental “driving force” of conversation and the basis of the whole social interaction [23].

3.2. Adjacency Pairs

Having mastered the turn-taking system, students might get a chance to speak, but it doesn't mean that they know what to do or how to do with that turn. In social interaction, speakers use practices to refer to “participants' ways of connecting two or more turns, for example, in making and responding to a request, telling a story, or managing a topic” [23]. An adjacency pair is the most basic unit of a sequence. An adjacency pair is “(1) A sequence of two utterances, which are (2) Adjacent, (3) Produced by different speakers, (4) Ordered as a first part and second part, and (5) Typed, so that a first part requires a particular second part (or range of second parts)” [19]. Armed with the practice of adjacency pairs, students may learn how to implement actions and activities in their communication.

The sequence organization of daily conversation is not always simply represented as single adjacent pair including First Pair Part (FPP) and Second Pair Part (SPP). On the contrary, the adjacent pair may be expanded by the speaker and it is not the expansion of the turn itself, but the insertion of an independent turn in the front, middle and back of the adjacent pair. The expansion occurring before the FPP of the adjacent pair is called pre-expansion; the expansion occurring between the FPP and SPP of the adjacency pair is called insert expansion, and the expansion occurring after the SPP of the adjacent pair is called post-expansion. These three types of expansions can be developed into many turns or more adjacent

pairs. The extended adjacent pair is called base adjacency pair.

In social interaction, pre-expansion can occur preliminary to a particular pair type, for example, an invitation, an offer, a request, an announcement, etc. Take pre-invitation, its initial turn does two things: “it projects the contingent possibility that an invitation will be produced; and it makes relevant next the production of a second pair part, namely a response to the pre-invitation. And it is on this response that the projected occurrence of the base FPP is made contingent” [18]. Insert-expansion can be divided into two types: post-first insert expansion and pre-second insert expansion. Post-first insert sequences are “repair” sequences that are addressed to problems in hearing or understanding the preceding talk [17]; Different from post-first insert expansion, pre-second insert expansion are type-specific and look forward, ostensibly to establish the resources necessary to implement the second pair part which is pending. Post-expansion also falls into two types: minimal post-expansion and non-minimal post-expansion. Minimal post-expansion involves the addition of a turn after the SPP of base adjacent pair, which is not intended to continue the sequence, but to end it. In non-minimal post-expansion, the turn after base adjacent pair is not designed to end the current sequence [18].

3.3. Preference Organization

When implementing social actions with adjacency pairs and their expansions, speakers identify two types of organizations. For example, a request can be either granted or rejected; an invitation can be either accepted or declined. Heritage defines actions that are “characteristically performed straightforwardly and without delay” as preferred organization, while those actions that are “delayed, qualified and accounted for” as dispreferred organization [9]. As far as the preferred or dispreferred organization is concerned, it is very important to note that these terms have nothing to do with the speaker's personal wishes or psychological tendencies. On the contrary, their usage is required and restricted by social institutions. Some prominent instances of preference format are listed in table 1 [9].

Table 1. Preference Format of Some Selected Action Types.

Action	Preferred Format Response	Dispreferred Format Response
Request	Acceptance	Refusal
Offer/invitation	Acceptance	Refusal
Assessment	Agreement	Disagreement
Self-deprecation	Disagreement	Agreement
Accusation/blaming	Denial	Admission

Similarly, Atkinson and Heritage argue that the institutionalized ranking of preferred and dispreferred organization is mainly reflected in the following three aspects: first, in terms of the distribution of these two organizations, there is evidence that when the speaker makes choice between these two organizations, some specific actions are avoided or delayed. Secondly, the manner in which the preferred and dispreferred action is implemented is very different: the preferred organization is usually direct with no delay; the

dispreferred organization is often indirect and weakened accompanied by inter-turn delay. Finally, individual desires or psychological tendencies may or may not coincide with the preferred organization [1].

In social interaction, preferred organization is affiliated and helps to establish and maintain harmony and friendship between speakers, while dispreferred organization brings about the opposite effect [9, 14]. Therefore, a variety of strategies are employed by speakers to implement dispreferred actions, such as inter-turn gap, turn-initial delay, appreciation, token agreement, mitigation, elaboration, pre-emptive reformulation, and explanation, etc. Of course, in the specific communication environment, speakers may choose one or more strategies at the same time to maintain the smooth communication and establish or maintain good social relations.

3.4. Repair Organization

In our daily life, communication doesn't always go smoothly. A speaker may interrupt the ongoing course of action to attend to possible trouble in speaking, hearing or understanding the talk [17]. Repair is closely related to the following factors: trouble source, repair initiation and repair execution. Jefferson divided trouble sources into two categories: production error and interactional error. The former refers to the mistakes made by the speaker in the process of producing a coherent speech, while the latter refers to the mistakes made by the speaker in making inappropriate remarks [10]. The conversational repair organization can help speakers clarify what they have said, confirm whether they have correctly understood others' words and correct what they have said. By initiating repair organization, speakers can avoid misunderstanding with each other and achieve intersubjectivity so as to promote the smooth progress of communication.

The one who performs a repair and the one who initiates the repair operation can fall into two types: self and other, and engender four kinds of conversation repair trajectories, viz. self-initiation/self-repair, self-initiation/other-repair, other-initiation/self-repair, other-initiation/other-repair. Self- and other-initiations have regular and distinctive positions relative to the trouble source whose repair they initiate. "Self-initiated repairs have their initiations placed in three main types of positions. First, they may be placed within the same turn as their trouble source; Second, they may be placed in that turn's transition space; Third, they may be placed in third turn to the trouble-source turn. Other repair initiations occupy one main position: the turn just subsequent to the trouble-source turn" [17].

Besides the different placements, self- and other-initiations are done with clearly different initiating technique [17]. Self-initiations within the same turn use a variety of non-lexical speech perturbations, e.g. cut-offs, sound stretches, "uh"s etc., to signal the possibility of immediately following repair-initiation. Other-initiations use a group of turn-constructual devices to initiate repair, such as, one type is by using "Huh", "what?"; Another type consists of the

question word "who, where, when"; partial repeat of the trouble-source turn, plus a question word; partial repeat of the trouble-source turn; and "You mean" plus a possible understanding of prior turn, etc.

4. Concluding Remarks

Language is an important tool for human communication, and conversation is the basic means for people to exchange information and express ideas in their daily life. The purpose of oral English teaching is to cultivate and improve students' oral communicational competence, and to help them use language naturally and accurately. Based on CA findings, this paper explores a practical model of college oral English teaching in terms of four aspects, namely, turn-taking organization, adjacency pair, preference organization and repair organization, aiming to shed a new light on oral English teaching in colleges and broaden the research horizon of English language teaching. However, oral English teaching is a complex system involving a variety of factors, thus it is equally important to teach students cross-cultural knowledge, guide and recommend them to read more audio-visual materials about English language and culture. If we have a certain degree of familiarity with the cultural customs and social backgrounds of English-speaking countries that are different from those of China, in the communication with English-speaking people, we can receive the messages sent by them more accurately, so as to effectively cope with the problems caused by the differences in language and culture.

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