



**Joint Efforts for Innovation:
Working Together
to Improve
Foreign Language
Teaching in the
21st Century**

**Dolors Masats, Maria Mont
& Nathaly González-Acevedo (Editors)**

A book for the curious and passionate 21st century language teachers and teacher trainers.

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- calls for teachers to do research in their classrooms.
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Analysing classroom discourse

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Introduction

Language learning is not about learning words, but rather learning to construct, along with other participants in a communicative event, meaningful exchanges to carry out some kind of social activity (reaching a consensus, purchasing goods, sharing information, etc.). If, as Vygotsky (1962) suggests, the construction of meaning is the conjunction of thought and word, learning is a process of gradual transition from not knowing a language to being able to use that language for a purpose. The process starts and develops thanks to social interaction: children come into contact with a language through socialising with adult (and peers) speakers of that language. By taking part in social activities with them, they internalise knowledge of and about the language. That is, through their participation in conversations in the target language, they learn how the language works (knowledge of) and learn how to use that language and what they know of it to communicate (knowledge about). If there is no socialization, knowledge cannot be internalized and, therefore, learning does not occur.

The process of learning a second, third or additional language does not differ much from the process of learning the first language(s), in the sense that participation and social interaction also play a key role in the development of communicative expertise in the target language(s). Socio-interactionist language learning theories sustain that acquisition emerges from interaction, as learning is a situated social practice. Learning is described as situated because learning only takes place through action, and meaning is constructed in the social context in which action takes place. From this viewpoint, cognition is also situated as cognitive actions are responses to the demands of a given social activity (Resnick, 1991). Consequently, analysing classroom conversations is essential to understand how languages are learnt. The study of verbal interaction has been undertaken from different, sometimes complementary theoretical approaches. The aim of this paper is to introduce teacher researchers to *Conversational Analysis for Second Language Acquisition* (CA-for-SLA), a theoretical and methodological tool to analyse natural classroom data.

Conversational Analysis (CA-for-SLA)

Conversational Analysis (CA) has its origins in Sacks' revolutionary studies on ordinary talk in a time in which linguistics was under the influence of the paradigm proposed by Noam Chomsky and, therefore, it was believed ordinary talk was too disordered to become the object of study for linguistics. CA's scope, unlike what its name suggests, is not restricted to the analysis of conversation, instead, talk-in-interaction is CA's object of study:

CA's broader provenance extends to *the study of talk and other forms of conduct* (including the disposition of the body in gesture, posture, facial expression, and ongoing activities in the setting) *in all forms of talk in interaction.* (Schegloff et al., 2002:3)

When CA emerged in the 1960s, it had no connection with learning. CA studies exclusively analysed monolingual data in English. CA has only been associated to the study of second language acquisition (CA-for-SLA) in the past two decades (Seedhouse, 2005), although, since the late 1980s CA has also been used by researchers interested in establishing links between plurilingual practices and language learning (see, among others, Lüdi & Py, 1986; de Pietro, Matthey & Py, 1989; Py, 1997). CA-for-SLA studies make relevant contributions to the teaching of languages. For example, they offer guidelines for the design of materials and textbooks regarding the types of discourses that must be presented, they give teachers suggestions on how to manage interaction in the classroom or, among others, provide hints to understand how conversations between native and non-native speakers (experts and non-experts) are structured or to comprehend code-switching and code-mixing procedures in bilingual or multilingual environments.

Teachers interested in doing research in their classrooms should consider the possibility of engaging in small case studies using CA procedures. Case studies are a very useful methodology ([see chapter 22 in this volume](#)) to analyse particular phenomena (see chapters [24](#), [25](#) & [26](#) in this volume) because it does not require teachers to have control groups, which for ethical issues are better to disregard. Good committed teachers should not apply a given methodology to one of their groups and not to others if they are convinced that the approach they want to test could be beneficial for all their students. Case studies, on the contrary, allow researchers to observe and analyse behaviours and phenomena of interest naturally, without altering what occurs in the classroom.

What is it?

CA is not a field of study related to descriptive linguistics because it is not interested in the study of decontextualized language. Instead it studies language use and the social activities that participants make when they interact. That is, “CA’s primary interest is in the social act whereas a linguist’s primary interest is normally in language. CA, therefore, does not treat language as an autonomous system independent of its use; rather, it treats ‘grammar and lexical choices as sets of resources which participants, deploy, monitor, interpret and manipulate’ (Schegloff et al. 2002:15) in order to perform their social acts” (Seedhouse, 2005:165).

The work done by Sacks with Schegloff and Jefferson (Sacks, Schegloff & Jefferson, 1974; Schegloff, Jefferson & Sacks, 1977) is especially important for the development of conversation analysis as a discipline for the study of oral data (see a review about the origin and development of the discipline in Goodwin and Heritage, 1990). In the beginning, the discipline is interested in ordinary talk, but later it discusses other discursive genres (interviews, political speeches, judicial interrogations, etc.) and, at present, talk-in-interaction is its focus of inquiry.

CA studies must fulfil four premises:

- a) Interaction is a form of discourse that has a clear structure. The analyst has to observe talk-in-interaction episodes to determine its organization and sequencing.
- b) Interaction is linked to the context in which it is produced and, therefore, it is essential to analyse it sequentially, in order to be able to understand it.
- c) Details (silence, changes of intonation or rhythm, whispers, pauses, etc.), even when they are small, are never insignificant. For this reason, classroom interactions must be transcribed carefully and in detail.
- d) The analysis must emerge from the data and must account for how participants interpret and give meaning to what they do. For example, an ungrammatical sentence cannot be described as a problem if speakers do not identify it as such.

To apply these premises, classroom interaction must be (audio or video) recorded and carefully transcribed (see Moore & Llompart, 2017 for tips and suggestions on how to conduct these tasks). The degree of detail in the transcription will depend on the object of study. If we want to understand how children learn to pronounce foreign words, we would need a phonetic transcription of the conversation, but in other cases, signalling how children pronounce certain sounds may be irrelevant for the study and therefore unnecessary. Transcriptions, however,

are partial and selective by nature because they reduce the social reality they wish to study (Bucholtz, 2000; Ochs, 1979). For Haviland (1996:58), a transcription represents speech outside its production context, it is, in the words of the author, “that talk that has been ripped from its physical setting.” Transcribing is also a decision-making process that will have an impact on the analysis, and therefore it must be understood as a first phase of this analysis (Ochs, 1979), as a starting point for reflection (Mondada, 2002). For ethical purposes, participants identities must be anonymised in the transcriptions by either changing their names or by referring to them using other procedures (using their initials, using the word student followed by a number, etc.), as we can see in excerpt 1.

What does it study?

CA-for-SLA can be used to study any topic related to talk-in-interaction. To cite a few, we could refer to the study of how students co-construct a written text ([see chapter 24 in this same volume](#)), of how learners collaborate to solve a reading puzzle ([see chapter 25 in this same volume](#)), or how a teacher transforms the task of asking for volunteers into an excuse for practicing language ([see chapter 26 in this same volume](#)). In CA-for-SLA studies, the description and explanation of the use of language as social action focuses on the study of the four elements on which Sacks (1992) based his analysis of the organization of the interaction: the production of adjacency pairs, the notion of preference, the taking of turns and repair mechanisms (see a detailed description of these elements in Schegloff, Koshik, Jacoby & Olsher; 2002; Seedhouse, 2005, or Masats, 2017, among others). We will exemplify these four phenomena through the analysis of excerpt 1 below:

Excerpt 1. BCN1 School: Pairing picture cards. Participants: 2 young learners of English and Mar, their teacher.

232. BAW: banana and_ the ladder\ | it's colour yellow |

233. PAU: **cómo se llama\ | caer | en inglés?** | ((how do you say 'caer' in English?))

234. BAW: eh_ |

235. PAU: **cómo se dice caer en inglés?** | ((how do you say 'caer' in English?))

((to the teacher)) *caure que com es din caure en inglés?* | ((how do you say 'caure' in English?))

236. MAR: fall |

Analysing the transcription

We can observe that the transcription system used (see the Annex) is very simple, as it only reflects pauses after speech unit boundaries [|], the lengthening of a few sounds [_], and the raising [?] or falling intonation [\] of several phrases. The name of the school and of the participants are anonymised. Turns (participant's interventions) are numbered and presented sequenced, as they were produced. Numbers are high, which indicates that this episode did not occur shortly after the two children started talking. Transcription symbols are normally based on a widely accepted system created by Jefferson (2004), so people familiar with transcription symbols can easily identify that the information inside the double brackets contains comments provided by the transcriber. But discourse analysts can also create their own codes, if necessary. In this case, the transcriber has opted to mark language changes by using italics for fragments in Catalan or translated from Catalan and bold for fragments in Spanish or translated from Spanish.

Analysing the production of adjacency pairs

The analysis of adjacency pairs is based on the ethnomethodological principle of reflexivity, which postulates that the procedures activated for the production of an action or statement are the same ones that are activated to interpret them. For example, a question is generated in order to obtain an answer and thus the interlocutor to whom the question is addressed also interprets that and answers the question. The adjacent pairs, then, serve to describe the sequential order in which the interaction is organized. Typically adjacency pairs are distributed in two sequential turns (question/answer), but occasionally other adjacency pairs may be embedded in a pair. For example the question PAU addresses MAR in the second part of turn 235 (*caure que com es diu caure en inglés?*) is responded in the next turn (turn 236: fall). Turns 235 and 236 are a clear example of a question-answer adjacency pair. On the contrary, the first time PAU asked this question (turn 233) did not obtain the expected answer (turn 234), which explains why he had to say it again (turn 236), first addressing his partner and then their teacher.

Analysing preference

Preferences refer to participants' choices. Responding to a greeting with another greeting is a preferred action, it is the most common, but the partners can choose not to perform the preferred action. For example, the learners in excerpt one are making proposals to pair picture cards they would later use to play the memory game. In turn 232 BAW makes a proposal. PAU could have answered that

proposal with 'ok' before making his own proposal or before asking for help, but he opted not to comment BAW's proposal in his turn. The fact that he immediately tries to make a new proposal indicates that he accepts BAW's statement. Then, we can claim that this pair preferred structure for this task is to organise their conversation in single alternatively produced turns.

Preference may also be linked to a participant's choice of language. We can observe that the two learners are conducting their task in English. When PAU encounters a challenge (he wants to use the word 'fall' but does not know it), he asks for help. First, he addresses his request for help to BAW and then to their teacher. In the first case, he formulates his question in Spanish, then in Catalan. Catalan is the language of communication between teachers and students in Catalan schools. By addressing their teacher in Catalan, PAU is simply respecting the conversation norms set at the school. By addressing BAW in Spanish, he indicates this is his preferred language to communicate with his peers.

Analysing turn taking mechanisms

Turns, which can be verbal or non-verbal, are the minimum units of participation in which interactions are structured. The study of turns and the presence of pauses, interruptions, silences, gestures, and even overlapping turns is necessary to understand how participants build and organize interaction and how learning takes place during those interactions. "Why does this happen in this way at this precise moment?" is the basic question that guides CA studies.

The behaviour of the interlocutors when sequencing and organizing the speech should not be analysed from a normative point of view. That is, analysts are not interested in explaining what speakers have to say, but in describing the preferences speakers adopt when they interact. As we pointed out when we were analysing adjacency pairs, BAW and PAU seem to choose to organise their conversation by producing single alternative turns, instead of adjacency pairs. Yet, that is valid because they still can perform the task set by the teacher (pairing cards).

Analysing repair mechanisms

When learners communicate using a language they don't yet master, occasionally they need to interrupt the flow of their conversation to solve some sort of language challenge. This is the case of PAU in turn 233. Instead of making a suggestion about how to form another pair of cards, he makes a request for help. At this point, the task is being interrupted and will not start again until the problem is solved, until it is repaired. Repairs, sometimes, take the form of self-corrections or other corrections.

Analysing the episode

The goal of our study will determine how we analyse students' conversations. For example, if we are interested in observing how students make suggestions and justify them, only turn 232 in this excerpt is interesting for that purpose. In this case, we can say that BAW produces two statements. First, she names the two cards/objects she suggests to pair. Then she produces a sentence indicating what the two objects have in common (it is the colour yellow). We can conclude that BAW cannot produce complex questions in English yet (she cannot say something like 'the banana and the ladder form a pair because both objects are yellow). Instead, if we are interested in observing how students solve communicative problems, turn 232 is irrelevant for our analysis and we should focus on turns 233, 234, 235 and 236. Finally, if we study language preference, we need to observe what occurs in the whole excerpt. In this case, we could conclude that when the students are 'on task' (turn 232), they use the target language, English in this case. However, when they are 'off task', as when they try to solve a communicative breakdown, their language preferences change and they use Spanish or Catalan depending on to whom they address.

Concluding remarks

Research into foreign language learning should begin where all human activities originate: interaction. Adopting a solid theoretical and analytical apparatus is fundamental in any sort of research. CA-for-SLA, a theoretical and methodological tool traditionally used to analyse ordinary talk, seems to be the right instrument that allows researchers to study participation in communicative events in foreign language classrooms. Teachers who also subscribe to the idea that all human activity is organized through participation in social interaction would find CA-for-SLA offers them a simple path to approach the study of oral data. The studies presented in the next three chapters, all written by pre-service teachers, proves this statement right.

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Annex: Transcription conventions

Pseudonym of participants	ABC (three capital letters)
Rising intonation	/
Speech unit boundary	
Analysts comments	((comment))
Interruption	text_
Languages	<i>Catalan</i> & transcription from <i>Catalan</i> Spanish & transcription from Spanish English