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“What is the date today?”: A dialogist perspective on expert EFL teachers’ classroom interaction

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Abstract

This article presents a micro-analysis of an EFL classroom episode in which the teacher and the pupils worked on the concepts “date” and “day” (and relatedly saying the date in English), which the learners had not fully internalized yet. Conversation analysis (CA) and concepts from sociocultural theory (SCT) are used in the analysis to reveal how the mutual understanding proceeded. It is argued that the presented dialogist perspective can cast light on the intricacies of the teaching and learning processes.

Keywords

classroom interaction, dialogism, conversation analysis, English as a foreign language, learning, teaching

Introduction

The shared activity and mutual influencing among learners and teachers constitutes a fundamental part of the teaching and learning processes. In this paper I offer a dialogist perspective on one episode from a corpus of video-recordings of expert EFL teachers’ classes. The selected episode exemplifies, among other things, the process of reaching mutual understanding between the teacher and the pupils, and within this process, the role of display questions, pauses and non-verbal signals is discussed. This paper is structured as follows. First, I will briefly characterize dialogism as an epistemological and theoretical framework and conversation analysis (henceforth CA) as one of the possible approaches to researching classroom interaction in a dialogist manner. Then I outline the research on teacher questions in classroom interaction. In the following part I present a microanalysis of an episode from an expert English language teaching.

Dialogism and interaction

I use the term dialogism to refer to a theoretical and epistemological framework for researching interaction. A detailed examination of the dialogist presuppositions, and relatedly the contrasting monologist views, is beyond the scope of this paper and can be found elsewhere (e.g. Linell, 1998, 2009; Marková, 1982; for a summary, see Tůma, 2014a, pp. 878–883). However, it is necessary to point out that it is the situated interaction (i.e. what emerges among the participants) rather than the activity of individual participants (i.e. the cognitive functioning of a speaker or listener) that is of particular interest if one is to approach interaction in a dialogist way. It follows that each utterance presupposes a “partner” to whom it is addressed and that interaction is a collective process in which the participants mutually influence each other.

The nature of learning in dialogism can be discussed in the light of Sociocultural Theory (henceforth SCT). Building on the works of Vygotsky, SCT can be seen as one of the theoretical accounts of learning within dialogism. According to the general genetic law of cultural development, every function appears on two planes: first on the social plane, and then it is reconstructed onto the intrapsychological plane

(Vygotsky, 1978, pp. 56–57, 1981). This reconstruction can be called internalization and is possible only if the function lies within one's zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1978, pp. 55–57, 84–91, 1981; Wertsch, 1991, pp. 19–28). In second language acquisition research, this view represents a social view of second/foreign language learning/acquisition, conceptualizing language learning in relation to interaction (Firth & Wagner, 2007; Lantolf & Thorne, 2006). In this respect there exists a body of research connecting CA and social SLA, often building on SCT (for a review, see Gardner, 2013, pp. 606–610; for more details, see Markee, 2000). In the context of foreign language teaching and learning, it is important to recognize the unity between (verbal) interaction and educational aims. Relatedly, Seedhouse (2004) refers to the reflexive relationship between interaction and pedagogy (see also Tůma, 2014a, pp. 896–897). CA, and the dialogist framework in general, makes it possible to capture this relationship.

Researching classroom interaction: Conversation analysis

In general, the phenomenon of classroom interaction has been studied from a number of perspectives (not only dialogist ones), including quantitative observation methods, (micro)ethnographic research, linguistic approaches and conversation analysis (Mercer, 2010; Mitchell, 2009; Rampton, Roberts, Leung, & Harris, 2002; for reviews of Czech educational research on classroom interaction, see Mareš, 2009; Tůma, 2014a, 2014b).

In the present study I employ ethnomethodological conversation analysis in the context of language classroom (for the differences between "pure" and "applied" CA, see ten Have, 2007; for the specifics of interaction in institutional settings, see Drew & Heritage, 1992). I will use the form of a single case analysis, which focuses on how phenomena are manifested in local contexts. The purpose of such studies is not to discover a new practice, but in this case to develop a richer understanding of an existing phenomenon and to "showcase CA's analytical potency in illuminating the intricacies of a single utterance, speech act, or episode" (Waring, 2009, p. 801; see also Hutchby & Wooffitt, 1998, pp. 120–130). Therefore I do not address here comprehensive data treatment procedures and generalization issues (see, for example, Seedhouse, 2004; Schegloff, 1987; ten Have, 2007).

The microanalytic procedure starts by identifying relevant phenomena and related passages, which is referred to as "unmotivated looking" (ten Have 2007, pp. 120–121; Seedhouse 2004, p. 38). Then the analyst carries out a micro-analysis of the passage in which the phenomenon of interest occurred, using the "toolbox" that CA offers (see ten Have, 2007, for an introduction to CA). If the analysis is driven by research questions aimed at learning and language acquisition, related insights from the learning theories come into play. In this paper, in line with the proponents of "CA for SLA" (e.g. Firth & Wagner, 1997, 2007; Markee, 2000), I will refer to SCT.

Questions in classroom interaction

It is not easy to define what exactly a question is. For example, a corpus analysis by Biber et al. (1999, pp. 211–212) showed that nearly a half of the questions in conversation consisted of fragments or tags. Furthermore, "questions" in declarative form (not interrogative form) were also common. Relatedly, Ehrlich and Freed (2009) refer to formal, functional and sequential criteria for defining a question. Although a great deal of Czech research on classroom interaction focuses on teacher questions, attention is paid mainly to formal and functional criteria by adopting a monologist perspective (for more details see Tůma, 2014a, 2014b). In dialogism, the sequential criterion plays an important role, since any utterance "makes response to something and is calculated to be responded to in turn" (Vološinov, 1973, p. 72).

In monologist research, a distinction is often made between referential and display questions. Referential questions are traditionally those which elicit an answer that the teacher does not know in advance, whereas display questions typically have one correct answer that the teacher knows at the time of asking (for other views on teacher questions, see, for example, Hargreaves & Galton, 2002, p. 106; see also Waring, 2012, pp. 453–454, for a review of research on teacher questions). It has been

identified that the majority of teacher questions are display questions (e.g. Šed'ová, Švaříček, & Šalamounová, 2012, p. 58; see also Ho, 2005, pp. 298–299), whose presence in classrooms is criticized for display questions are claimed to be of low cognitive levels. Furthermore, by preventing learners from communicating “naturally” they are believed (along with the presence of IRF exchanges) to inhibit classroom learning (these views are summarized, for example, in Lee, 2006, p. 693; Margutti & Drew, 2014, pp. 436–437; Nystrand, Wu, Gamoran, Zeiser, & Long, 2003, pp. 138–141; Šed'ová et al., 2012, pp. 260–271).

In the analysis below I will show, among other things, that the display questions have their role in the classroom, which in turn can be seen as a contribution to the discussion on the role of display questions (see also Ho, 2005; Lee, 2006).

A microanalysis of a classroom episode

The data for this paper come from a larger research project whose main aim was to investigate the nature of expertise in foreign language teachers and teaching (GA ČR P407/11/0234, see, for example, Píšová et al., 2013). The data collected in the project included a set of video-recorded expert teachers' lessons, which were transcribed using a version of the Jefferson system modified by Waring (2009; see Appendix) and which are subject to a conversation analytic investigation. During the process of close examination of the recordings and transcripts, a collection of interesting episodes (tentatively named as “problem episodes”) has emerged. Typical of the episodes is the teacher's frontal position in which he or she solves a problem related to the content discussed so far. Using a set of question, clues and pauses the teacher enables the pupils to participate in interaction, by means of which the problem is solved. A prototypical episode is analysed in detail below.

The lesson from which the episode comes was conducted in the fifth grade in a basic school in a district town in the Czech Republic. The teacher had been teaching the pupils from the very beginning of their learning English, i.e. for two years and three months. There were 19 pupils in the classroom.

The lesson started by an exchange of greetings followed by a one-minute warm-up activity in which the teacher along with pupils did physical exercise accompanied by a rhyme. Then the teacher told the learners to sit down and asked them a series of questions requiring individual learners to answer, which took approximately five minutes and generally could be characterized by rapid turn-taking: the teacher asked a question and in the majority of cases nominated a learner (verbally, by gesture or by eye-gaze), who responded immediately. The questions were related to time, date and seasons as well as the activities, festivals and objects associated with the seasons. Although the teacher did not specify the aim of the activity, from the smooth transitions (the pauses between the individual utterances were very short) and from the way the teacher initiated the corrections of learner utterances it follows that the activity was designed to revise the grammatical and lexical structures from the previous lessons. This conclusion can be confirmed by the subsequent activity, which was a quiz in which the learners individually wrote down answers to ten questions related to the concepts and forms that were revised in the previous activity.

Although on the first sight the question-and-answer activity before the quiz proceeded smoothly, the process of detailed transcribing and analysing revealed that at the very beginning of the activity there was an episode which differed from the rest of the activity in that the teacher used the board, produced longer pauses within her turn constructional units (TCUs, i.e. within her turns) and the pauses at transition-relevance places (TRPs, i.e. the gaps between TCUs in which the speakers may change) were longer than in the rest of the activity. One can wonder why this episode was different from the rest of the activity, since on the surface the whole activity comprised teacher questions and learner answers. As I pointed out above, this episode can be seen as typical of the “problematic episodes” collection. The research question guiding this microanalysis was: What happened in the episode? The transcript of the episode can be found below.

Transcript:

- 1 T: **What is the (0.3) date (0.4) today?** {What is the (0.2) date today? Look.-((T writes "DATE:" on the board))}
- 2 T: What is the date today? (1.8) Helenko↑
- 3 Hel: Err the twenty-seventh of No [vember]
- 4 ?L: [Twenty-eighth]
- 5 T: The:, sorry↑ The=
- 6 ?L: =The twe eh the twenty-eighth of err November.=
- 7 T: ={Yes, today is the twenty-eighth of November.-((T writes "28th November" on the board))}
- 8 T: Say, everybody ((T points at the date on the board))
- 9 Class:The twenty-eighth of November.
- 10 T: Yes, the two twenty-eighth of November. Or we can say:↑ ((T starts writing "N" on the board))
- 11 LL: {November. ((inconsistently)) Twenty-eighth.-((T continues writing the date on the board))}=
- 12 T: =November { ((T points at the pupils))-[the: twenty-eight]}=
- 13 LL: [the twenty-eighth] =
- 14 T: ={Ok.-((T finishes writing the date on the board))}
- 15 (2.3)
- 16 T: **{And (0.5) what is (0.3) the day today?}-((T writes "DAY:" on the board))}** (2.3) Kájo?
- 17 [(1.1)]
- 18 [(other learners raise their hands)]
- 19 T: What is the day today? ((T keeps looking at Kája))
- 20 Káj: Ehm [(1.0)] Wednesday.
- 21 ?L: [°Wednesday°]
- 22 [((T shows 1, 2 and 3 fingers))]
- 23 T: Perfect, it's Wednesday. ((T writes "Wednesday" on the board))

The episode can be divided into two parts. Whereas lines 1–14 relate to the question *What is the date today?*, the central issue in lines 16–23 is the question *What is the day today?* These two parts are divided by a 2.3 second gap (line 15). The relatively long gaps within the teacher's TCUs in lines 1 and 16 (0.3–0.4 s), the teacher's stressing of date (line 1), the content of the teachers' writing on the board (lines 1, 7, 11, 14, 16 and 23) and her final evaluation (line 23) indicate that the focus of this episode was the difference between the concept of "date" and "day" (and related questions), which are marked in lines 1 and 16 and the questions are repeated in lines 2 and 19, respectively.

First, the teacher wrote the word "Date" on the board (line 1), elicited the date (note the correction performed by another pupil in line 4, which was taken up by the teacher in line 5) and wrote the two forms for the date on the board (lines 7, 10 and 11). The false beginning in line 6, the teacher's elicitation of the other form (line 10, note the marked "or") and the subsequent omission of the definite article in the choral elicitation (line 11) followed by teacher-initiated correction (line 12) indicate that the focus of this episode was on accuracy rather than meaning (Seedhouse, 2004) and seems to suggest that the learners had not internalized the way(s) of saying the date in English yet.

The pause in line 16 followed by the marked "and" (line 16) along with the teacher's writing of "day" on the board seem to be aimed at turning the learners' attention to the concept of "day", which might be confused with "date". The words "day" and "date" generally cause problems to elementary EFL learners, since the forms of both of them are similar (phonetically it is only the consonant /t/ which makes the difference) and since both the questions (What is the day/date today?) are related to the present day. Therefore the underlying aim of the overall episode, as the transcript suggests, seems to be to help

learners realize and internalize the difference, and to practice saying the date in English, which is related to the concept of “date”.

In the second part of the episode, in line 16, the teacher asked the question, wrote “day” on the board and after a relatively long pause (2.3 s) nominated Kája. After another gap (1.1 s, line 17) the teacher repeated the question, kept looking at Kája and used fingers to count to three, which was intended to represent the days Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday in the Czech culture (line 22). Although it can be observed that other learners were eager to answer (line 18) and although somebody had whispered the answer just before Kája said it (line 21, see also the discussion below), the teacher focused on one learner and helped him produce the answer. The answer was evaluated by the teacher, who also wrote “Wednesday” on the board (line 23). This confirms the orientation of the participants on form (or accuracy).

The above microanalysis shows that in the episode the teacher and the learners worked on the concepts “date” and “day”, which the learners had not internalized yet. The false-beginning on the part of a learner (line 6) and the gaps between teacher’s questions and learners’ answers (lines 17 and 20) show that the learners might not have been able to produce the answers on their own. Therefore, from the perspective of SCT, with the help of the microanalysis we can observe the (assisted) language use and learning in the zone of proximal development. During the activity we could observe one stage of the internalization of the concepts “date” and “day” as well as the way of saying the date in English from the social plane to the intrapersonal plane (Vygotsky, 1978, pp. 55–57, 84–91, 1981; Wertsch, 1991, pp. 19–28). In this episode, the pupils produced responses to the questions with the teacher’s assistance, whereas later on in the question-and-answer activity and quiz they responded to these and related questions without assistance. Two other specific points can be made in relation to the episode.

Firstly, although it may seem that the whole-class repetition were mechanistic choral drills, a more in-depth analysis reveals that the learners were consciously aware of the focus of the activity on accuracy, and more specifically, they seemed aware of both the communicative goal of the exchange (i.e. answering the questions about today’s date and day) and the means (i.e. the correct form). I can support this claim, for example, by the learners’ relating the gesture performed by the teacher (lines 12 and 13) to the definite article, which had they omitted (line 11), the same applies to the second part of the episode (lines 20–22). In the light of SCT I can refer to imitation (i.e. conscious attempts to internalize, and relatedly externalize, the socioculturally constructed forms of mediation while paying attention to both the purpose and the means), not emulation (i.e. paying attention mainly to the purpose of the operation) or mimicry (i.e. unconscious parroting) (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006, pp. 166–176).

Secondly, an interesting phenomenon can be observed in line 21, in which another learner whispers the answer. Since it is impossible from the video-recording to see the actual learner uttering “Wednesday”, the utterance can be interpreted in two ways. It is possible that it was meant as “help” addressed to Kája, who was hesitating. Another interpretation can be that in fact this is an example of “vicarious answer”, i.e. an instance of private speech in which “the learner covertly answers questions directed to another student or the class, completes the utterance of another, or provides an alternative to the utterance of another” (Ohta, 2001, p. 39). These vicarious answers can be characterized by being low in volume and often overlapping the responses of others. Furthermore, they are not produced with the intention to be noticed. The purpose of vicarious answers is rehearsal – the learners can consolidate using a language structure which they do not have under control yet (for a review of research on private speech in L2 learning, see Lantolf & Thorne, 2006, pp. 181–206).

If the teachers’ questions are examined in the light of the referential vs. display questions distinction, both the central questions (What is the date/day today?) are obviously display questions aimed at eliciting known information. From the teacher’s and learners’ orientations revealed above I can conclude that the aim of the episode was to help the learners realize the differences between “day” and “date” and to promote their production of answers to respective questions, thus focusing on accuracy, not fluency.

Discussion and conclusions

To summarize the actions observed, the teacher used the board to differentiate the concepts (date vs. day) and to support the learners' production (she directly referred to the board when eliciting learners' answers in lines 8 and 10), she used a gesture to highlight the necessity of the definite article (line 12) and to represent the days of the week (line 22), repeated her questions (lines 2, 19) and she initiated choral repetition in order for the learners to imitate the correct production of the date (lines 8 and 12). From the CA toolbox we can refer, for example, to the teacher's using pauses and intonation to mark important information (lines 1, 16) and for the transition from one concept to another (lines 15–16), to her initiating a repair sequence (line 12) and to her completing learner-performed correction (line 5, see also McHoul, 1990), and to the aspects of institutional talk regarding the organization of turns in the classroom (cf. Mchoul, 1978). The learners' contribution to the learning event can be seen, for example, in performing correction (line 4) and helping Kája by whispering the answer (line 21). I highlight these and other aspects of the analysis from the perspective of the process of the participants' maintaining and negotiating mutual understanding. Therefore this way CA can help us understand the "the architecture of intersubjectivity" (Seedhouse, 2004, p. 237; see also Markee, 2000, pp. 84–96) and can contribute to our understanding of socially shared cognition (Schegloff, 1991).

I also pointed out to the moments in which the interaction was shaped by and at the same time shaped the goals of the teaching and learning process whose one fragment I analysed (for example, after the hesitant production of line 6 the teacher decided to repeat the answer more fluently in line 7 and to initiate the choral drill in line 8), which refers to the reflexive relationship between interaction and pedagogy (Seedhouse, 2004).

I approached the learning in the episode from the perspective of SCT, namely I highlighted the connections between intersubjectivity and the creating and maintaining of the zone of proximal development, in which the participants co-construct meaning and in which the learners imitated, produced vicarious answers in their private speech and learnt. Relatedly, it would be possible to refer to the teacher's (and also some learners') individual actions as scaffolding (Wood, Bruner, & Ross, 1976; see also Tharp & Gallimore, 1988, pp. 44–70), yet I prefer the referring to the mutual construction of the ZPD, since the both the learners and the teachers contributed simultaneously by the presence of their consciousness to the process of meaning making (see also Newman & Holzman, 1993 for the relationship between 'revolutionary activity' and ZPD; see also Pířová et al., 2013 for the teacher's 'being with the learners').

The analysis showed that the two central display questions played a crucial role in the episode. In the analysis I documented that the teacher used display questions to elicit an answer that she had known in line with the aims of the episode and the pupils accepted the focus on accuracy. It can hardly be imagined that the aim of this episode would be realized by means of referential questions. From this perspective, the calls for lowering the number of display questions seem unjustified. Instead, it can be suggested that the research on teacher questions take the pedagogic and content perspectives into consideration.

To go back to the research question, the above microanalysis showed that in the episode the teacher and the learners worked on the concepts "date" and "day" (and relatedly saying the date in English), which the learners had not internalized yet. In a more abstract sense, the microanalysis revealed that the episode was an exemplification of the construction of ZPD and CA made it possible to identify and describe the intricacy of the processes of reaching mutual understanding. In this respect, the presented dialogist perspective can be seen as productive when it comes to researching classroom interaction.

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Appendix

Transcript notations

(2.0)	Two-second pause
<u>underline</u>	Stress
↑	High pitch on word
.	Sentence final falling intonation
:	Lengthened vowel sound
=	Latch
[]	Overlapped talk
°soft°	Spoken softly/decreased volume
(())	Comments on background, skipped talk or nonverbal behaviour
{{()}-words}	{ } marks the beginning and ending of the simultaneous occurrence of the verbal and nonverbal
T:	Teacher
L:	Learner
?L:	Unidentifiable learner
Class:	Whole class (including teacher)
LL:	Learners