


Assessing Learning Opportunities in EFL Classroom Interaction: What Can Conversation Analysis Tell Us?

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Abstract

The present paper seeks to assess the opportunities for learner involvement and negotiation of meaning that teachers provide in the unfolding interaction in an EFL setting. Classroom data from a Chilean EFL setting were collected in order to assess how teachers deploy a number of interactional features when managing contingent learner turns. The analysis of the interaction was carried out under a conversational analysis framework, which is suited to illuminate local classroom discourse. Analysis of the interaction showed that a number of interactional features were found to influence the quality and amount of negotiation of meaning and learner involvement. The data also suggest that instances for negotiation of meaning can be nurtured and prompted by the teacher, and that their absence can be explained to some extent by a misuse of the interactional features that teachers have at their disposal. It is suggested that teachers should be more aware of the local, dynamic and context-sensitive aspects of their interaction with learners in order to make moment-by-moment decisions that will likely increase negotiation of meaning and opportunities for learning.

Keywords

Opportunities for learning, negotiation of meaning, conversation analysis, classroom interaction, teacher talk

Introduction

The importance of understanding classroom events and the role of this understanding in the achievement of desired language goals has been stressed in second language learning literature (Kumaravadivelu, 1999; Seedhouse, 2004; Van Lier, 1988; Walsh,

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2006). A number of approaches have been proposed, each with its own strengths and weaknesses. Walsh (2006) identifies three major areas of investigation: interaction analysis, discourse analysis and conversation analysis. Interaction analysis (IA) approaches provide the most 'reliable' tools for analysing classroom interaction, as they make use of coding systems that manage quantitative data and provide statistical accounts. Under this perspective, instruments such as the Communicative Orientation of Language Teaching (COLT) (Fröhlich et al., 1985) framework have been widely used. As Walsh points out, these instruments have been validated by previous research and are highly comparable to other fixed systems. However, the main criticism made to these types of approaches is that they do not provide a complete picture of what is occurring in the classroom, as everything that the researcher sees has to be matched to pre-existing categories in the instrument. Because the focus is placed on what can be measured or observed a priori, a limited account of facts is thus presented (Kumaravadivelu, 1999; Walsh, 2006). Discourse analysis (DA) approaches make use of structural-functional linguistics in order to analyse naturally occurring interaction. One of the best-known DA classroom approaches is Sinclair and Coulthard's (1975) list of 22 speech acts portraying the verbal behaviour of teachers and students in primary education contexts. A disadvantage of this approach is that it mainly outlines power relationships in primary classrooms (such as IRF sequences) which are not adequate to describe the dynamic nature of more contemporary L2 classroom environments (Kasper, 2001; Walsh, 2006; Wu, 1998). More recent analyses of classroom interaction have shown complex relationships arising from longer stretches of discourse characterized by the overlapping of functions performed by an utterance (Jarvis and Robinson, 1997; Kumaravadivelu, 1999; Van Lier, 1996). This collaborative nature is unpredictable because it is subject to the particular exchanges that take place in the moment-by-moment interaction. In this respect, the findings that IA and DA approaches generate from the data are reduced to functional categories that cannot be maintained when the discourse that generates them is submitted to a systematic analysis tailored to look at particular moment-by-moment exchanges.

The Conversation Analysis Approach

Conversation analysis (henceforth CA) is an empirical approach to the analysis of oral interaction whose purpose is to discover systematic features present in the sequential organization of talk (Lazaraton, 2004). CA emerged from the ethnomethodological tradition in sociology in the 1960s, led by Harold Garfinkel. Ethnomethodologists are interested in the resources and procedures that members of a society use to recognize and make sense of common objects or events. These procedures emerge from small-scale social order, that is, contextualized messages and situations. In the early 1970s, drawing from Garfinkel's work, Harvey Sacks, Emanuel Schegloff and Gail Jefferson set out to investigate social order as it was produced through the practices of everyday talk. This is where CA began to take form as an independent area of study. It draws from ethnomethodology in the sense that it is still concerned with understanding how social order is achieved in social interaction, and also because it is an empirically-based methodology that seeks to make detailed analyses of the object of CA research, namely, talk-in-interaction (Liddicoat, 2011).

A methodology for the analysis of spoken interaction such as CA departs from a quantitative analysis of data and is more process than product-oriented (Walsh, 2006). This focus on process regards functions of language as a means for social interaction (Sacks et al., 1974), and considers social contexts as being dynamic, i.e. being constantly shaped by how participants make use of turn-taking sequences. Within a CA perspective, these actions represent context-bound meanings and are central to understanding locally managed interaction. This notion of context refers to the particular ways in which the sequencing of actions is formed; the meaning within these actions is such because of the sequence of actions preceding it, and dynamic social contexts will be created and modified as subsequent contributions are shaped in interaction (Heritage, 1997). Heritage's (1997) view of interaction as being *context-shaped* and *context-renewing* is a relevant one for looking at L2 classroom discourse within a CA approach, as it is concerned with the practices that allow participants to make sense of the existing moment-by-moment interaction and make contributions of their own. In CA, no utterance is seen as isolated and deprived from context. On the contrary, every utterance is context-bound and is examined by taking into account the turn where it was instantiated, the position of the turn in a conversation and the type of sequence that is created. Thus, classroom events that are solely understood by means of context-unbound labels used in interaction analyses (e.g. communicative-uncommunicative) will fail to acknowledge the relationship between language use and pedagogical purpose (Seedhouse, 2004; Walsh, 2006). If classroom interaction is understood as a multi-context construct, particular verbal behaviours of teachers can be looked at and regarded as more appropriate than others once specific pedagogical aims are defined. For example, if the pedagogical goal is to get across a grammar point, learner involvement may not need to be prolonged, and this should not be taken as an 'uncommunicative' feature of a lesson.

The dynamic contexts being shaped in the L2 classroom can be assessed by identifying patterns of language use arising from the data (Liddicoat, 2011: 9; Markee, 2000: 29) and by analysing them in terms of particular learning goals (Walsh, 2002; 2006). In this respect, CA differs from IA or DA approaches, in the sense that there is no set of preconceived categories that are applied to the data. The type of structural organization identified by CA will be determined solely by the interaction in which participants are engaged (Walsh, 2006). In other words, the existence of categories must be demonstrated by the data alone, and not by matching the data to preconceived instruments or notions that researchers may hold before the analysis (Seedhouse, 2004). Thus, the role of the observer in the analysis of the interaction focuses on an emic perspective, i.e. the observer attempts to approach experience through the eyes of the participants. Unlike DA approaches, CA regards a classroom context as a dynamic entity being co-constructed by participants and being renewed by means of the various linguistic and pedagogical purposes emerging from lesson to lesson. These variations in focus of the lesson and language use are reflected in the sequencing of contributions produced by participants in the interaction, and CA is better equipped to take account of those variations.

Opportunities for Learning

Walsh (2002; 2006) adopted a CA approach in order to show how interactive decision-making in the language classroom can affect learning outcomes in various ways. Here,

the classroom setting is seen as portraying a number of interrelated contexts that are constantly renewed by means of moment-by-moment interaction. The role of the teacher in managing this interaction goes further than that of a 'facilitator', a feature that is encouraged in classrooms adopting Communicative Language Teaching or Task-based Language Learning approaches. Teachers are central to the learning process, because it is in the locally generated interaction that they are able to successfully (or unsuccessfully) manage learners' oral contributions in a lesson through their talk. From this perspective, it can be said that the teacher is directly responsible in shaping learners' contributions (Jarvis and Robinson, 1997; Johnson, 1995). Walsh (2002) looked at the interactional features of communication between teachers and learners and claimed that these interactional processes can have a pivotal role on the facilitation or hindering of learning opportunities. In order to explore this idea, Walsh asked eight experienced EFL teachers to make two 30-minute recordings of lessons that contained teacher-learner interaction in a context nurturing fluency development. The analysis undertaken demonstrated that a number of interactional strategies were found to promote learner involvement and interaction. This increased learner participation was evidenced in the sequential analysis of extended turns generated by learners and the steering of the discourse engineered by teachers with their use of specific interactional features. The interactional features identified as promoting interaction were direct error correction (a direct, minimalist approach to correcting errors in order to facilitate oral fluency practices); content feedback (feedback on the message rather than its form may promote more genuine communication); checking for confirmation (teachers who do not accept learners' first contribution, check for confirmation and seek clarification are likely to maximize learner opportunities); extended wait-time (if teachers give learners enough time to answer questions, this will likely lead to an increase in teacher-learner and learner-learner interaction); and scaffolding (teachers must be sensitive enough to know when to intervene and provide the missing language, by means of modelling, paraphrasing and prompting). Walsh went on to identify a number of features found to reduce learner involvement in his study, that is, instances where pedagogical goals and language use do not coincide. The features of interaction said to obstruct learning opportunities are turn completion (filling in the gaps and smoothing over the discourse will likely reduce opportunities for interaction); teacher echo (it disrupts the flow of communication, and is unnecessary in contexts where oral fluency is being encouraged); and teacher interruptions (interrupting students' contributions causes learners to miss chances for interactional adjustments). In light of the analysis, Walsh provided a number of implications for teacher education and research. He called for an increased focus on the importance of appropriate language use that matches specific pedagogical goals in the classroom. He also highlighted the need to foster language use awareness, as the collaborative creation of opportunities for learning will depend on how teachers and learners co-construct meaning through interaction. Interaction, then, 'does not simply happen, nor is it a function of the teaching methodology; interaction, in an acquisition rich classroom, is both instigated and sustained by the teacher' (Walsh, 2006: 21). This perspective on language learning with a focus on the teacher has its roots in socio-cultural theory. Learning is a product of the interaction that takes place between learners and the teacher – 'the expert' (Lantolf and Appel, 1994).

Thus, the co-construction of meaning will need to be assisted by the teacher, through a process of ‘scaffolding’, or linguistic support provided by a tutor to a learner (Bruner, 1985). The discourse that is developed through social interaction will contain more opportunities for learning when teachers shape their contributions by providing linguistic assistance when necessary and by engaging learners in discussion-based activities (Walsh, 2002). These ideas are later incorporated into what Walsh called ‘classroom interactional competence’ (Walsh, 2006), where teachers are encouraged to align pedagogical goal with language use, and the interaction is said to be fertile ground for developing opportunities for learning when it is provided with ‘space for learning’ (e.g. increasing wait time) and when it is shaped by teachers and learners (e.g. providing scaffolded feedback). In the next section, a study is presented where some of these interactional features were identified and discussed by means of a CA approach to classroom interaction. The analysis sought to understand how these interactional features can assist or hinder the opportunities for participation, involvement, and interaction available to learners and also to assess how opportunities for negotiation of meaning are handled by teachers in the ongoing discourse.

Rationale and Methodology

The quality of interaction in the second language classroom has usually been understood by means of dichotomies such as ‘communicative-uncommunicative’ and high or low teacher talking time (Cullen, 1998; Walsh, 2006). These distinctions do not allow for an adequate analysis of the ‘interactional architecture’ (Seedhouse, 2004) of the classroom. An analysis of classroom interaction can shed light on learning that is assessed not from a rationalist paradigm, but from an interpretive perspective that attempts to understand teachers’ decision making processes in the course of their interaction with learners. As Walsh (2006) puts it, rather than focusing on the quantity of interaction (an aspect that has been addressed with experimental studies), a CA approach emphasizes the quality of the interaction between teacher and learners. Moreover, research showing a relationship between interaction, input, output and negotiation of meaning (Long, 1996), albeit not conclusive, provide evidence of the relationship between teacher language use and learning opportunities (Walsh, 2002).

The data sample for analysis was taken from an upper-intermediate EFL class in Chile where the goal was to develop oral fluency. The participant teacher has more than five years of experience teaching classes at university level. The five students in her class were asked to predict and describe possible solutions to a mystery. The activity is called ‘Death on the Canal’ and involves the discussion of possible situations explaining the death of an art dealer who can be seen waving to a girl in a picture taken in Venice. This data sample portrays teacher-student interaction and illustrates the relationship between this teacher’s language use and learner participation and involvement. The analysis of these data were done under a CA framework and sought to identify convergent patterns that are characteristic of the classroom discourse (Ulichny, 1996) and that are relevant to the following question: In what ways do teachers’ interactional features promote or hinder opportunities for learning?

Analysis of Data

The activity promoting oral fluency lasted 16 minutes and was transcribed in its entirety. From the interaction, relevant episodes were analysed in terms of the opportunities for learner involvement, interaction, and negotiation of meaning that the teacher provided through her use of language in the classroom. A number of relevant features of language interaction found in this teacher's data are discussed below. The turns produced by the teacher (T) were placed on the left hand side in order to appreciate learner (L) participation in a more visual manner. Transcription procedures were adapted from Atkinson and Heritage (1984).

Direct Error Correction

Extract 1

141	T:oh::: yeah:::	
142		LL: (laughter)
143		L3: and:: he:: fall [down]
144→	T:[fell down]=	
145		L3: =fell down=
146	T:=fell down	
147		L3: it was [an accident]
148		L2: [it was an accident] (laughs)
149→	T:he was [trying to] (may have) wanted to save the cat, right?	
150		LL: [(unintelligible speech)]
151		L1: can I have another::?
152	T:okay	
153		L1: these two people are on the gondola
154	T:h hh. Oh=	
155		L1: =the man and the girl (.) eh:: are looking for the: (0.8) the paint=

Extract 1 suggests that the teacher opted for a very direct approach to error correction. Previous research has suggested that when the pedagogical goal at a given moment is to develop speaking skills, this overt and quick way of correcting errors is preferred to more time-consuming explanations of error that can disrupt the flow of the interaction (Seedhouse, 1997; Walsh, 2002). In turn 144, T swiftly reacted to a learner's contribution. T provided implicit feedback, i.e. feedback where there is no evident indication that the learner has committed an error (Ellis et al., 2006), and this particular utterance took the form of a recast (Long, 2007). The quick recast of L3's error allowed for the continuation of the interaction with a focus on meaning by means of content feedback provided by the teacher in turn 149, which segued into L1's self-selection in turn 151. It can be seen that the time that would have otherwise been spent on minimalist focus on form was instead spent on providing opportunities for the development of fluency, in line with the pedagogical goals of the teacher at this time.

Extract 2

66		L3: [maybe:]
67	T: uh-huh?	
68		L3: maybe maybe (.) she wasn't (0.3) waving Mister Robinson=
69→	T: =oh! (laughs)	
70		L3: but, she:: ehm:: (.) was (.) make assignment for another person(.) [who (whom)] he was!=
71	T: [ahm::]	
72→	T: =oh! I like this, I like this. maybe she was waving at somebody else=	
73		L3: =yes
74	T: she maybe, she may be (.) pointing, [yeah?]	
75		L3: [yes]

Extract 2 suggests that T also adopted —willingly or not— a strategy involving no error correction. In Extract 2, a sequence is identified where she does not provide feedback for L3's missing preposition in line 68, ('she wasn't waving Mister Robinson') nor models the faulty contribution made by the learner in line 70. Instead, she provided content feedback in turns 69, 72 and 74. Interestingly, in turn 72 T provided content feedback which included the clause with the missing preposition that was not corrected by T in turn 69, but is not delivered as a direct repair of a learner's error. Teachers must be sensitive to the errors being made by learners and act upon them in ways that will not disrupt interaction.

Scaffolding

Extract 3

183		L4: and ah:: (1) too much (1)too much hesitation you know? during this day because [he::]
184		L1: [((laughs))]
185		L4: bought a really::
186→	T: <u>expensive</u>	
187		L4: expensive painting, ah, maybe the painting, the painting of a: (.)his dreams, you know (.), eh:: he's going to marry next ah: month (.) a:nd (.) it was a heart attack
188		LL: ((laughter))
189→	T: he might have [had a heart attack]	
190		L4: [(he didn't) ()]

- 191 T: he was, he was an art
dealer so he dealt
with[paintings all the
time]
- 192 L4: [() accidentally]
193 L5: and he's reading the
newspaper
- 194 T: [yeah:]
195 L5: [maybe] he /ri:d/-he read
something terrible
- 196 L3: (laughs)
197 LL: (unintelligible speech)
- 198 T: yeah, yeah (0.5) well,
whatever the situation
is..

Language breakdowns are likely to occur when learners cannot find the right word or expression in the flow of communication. In order to avoid this, teachers feed in the missing language by means of 'scaffolding', or linguistic support provided by the tutor to a learner (Bruner, 1983). The scaffolding is provided to ensure that the learner can manage the task at hand. The elements in the task can be modified, changed or deleted depending on how the learner reacts to them. Once the learner has shown an understanding of the task and shows signs of being ready to 'take over', the scaffolds are removed and the learner internalizes the task and reflects on it (Van Lier, 1996). In extract 3, T tried to shape L4's contribution by scaffolding in the form of latched modelling (turn 186) and alternative phrasing (turn 189). In particular, T's brief latched modelling led to a long, complex learner's turn which evidences L4's reflection on the input, as she repeats the word 'expensive' (turn 187). However, in turn 189, T re-phrased the contribution of L4, but this was not acknowledged by the learner in the next turn, which suggests that scaffolding can yield different results depending on the linguistic environment where it is being delivered and also on the manner in which the teacher's subsequent turns unfold. In this case, T decided to go on with the interaction and didn't focus on L4's failure to use the verbal structure that T was trying to elicit from her. It seems that a trade-off between successful instructional scaffolding and adequate management of interaction can be at play in these occasions, and teachers must consider the intricacies of the local micro-contexts that are generated with each turn.

An example of how scaffolding can be misunderstood by teachers and misused in the classroom is presented in Extract 4, below. It portrays a sequence where T completed L4's turn by providing the expression 'to get rid of the evidence' (turn 113) before allowing L4 to think of an adequate way of conveying that meaning. This suggests that T did not give enough time for L4 to find a way to express herself and tried to make her contribution look smoother by 'glossing over' it (Walsh, 2002: 7). This may have caused L4 to stop contributing to the interaction after reacting to T's turn (turn 114). The scaffolds were never removed because L4 neither internalized the task nor reflected on it (compare this with Extract 3, turn 187). The hasty completion of L4's turn by the teacher prevented L4 from using her own linguistic resources to negotiate meanings, which may also have discouraged her from further contributing to the interaction. It is crucial, then, that teachers find

ways of providing scaffolding without inhibiting learners' involvement. It is a teaching strategy that requires adequate timing and sensibility on the part of the teacher.

Extract 4

- 109
 110 T: [that's right]
 111 T: that's right, uh-huh?=
 112
 113→ T: to get rid of the evidence
 114
 115 T: [into the canal] that's right
 (.)
 116 T: so maybe they (.) have,
 ah, may have wanted to
 hide the crime to get
 rid of the evidence
 .that could have been
 (.) why they did that.
 ((addressing L2)) what
 do you think?(3)
- L4: =and he: is wearing: eh
 (.) I mean, they-they didn't
 plan to [kill him]
- L4: =and then they decided that the
 best way to:: eh:: (0,8)
- L4: yeah, right?, was threw
 him (.) into [the canale]

Content Feedback

Feedback on the message rather than on the form may be more conducive to language learning in language settings that seek to promote learner involvement and negotiation of meaning. The learners' task here was to provide possible scenarios explaining the death of an art dealer. This type of task usually requires the teacher to ask open questions about a particular story. In Extract 5 below, the feedback given by T focused on the story that was being discussed and took the form of a content question (turn 83). In addition, T attempted to further develop the learner's idea by asking about information on the activity sheet ('but they want to marry, right?') (turn 85), by adding more information to the discussion (turns 91, 93) and by checking for confirmation (turn 89). As has been said above, this teacher's choice of language use was focused on favouring meaning over form, which encouraged L5's involvement in the interaction, as the rather extended turns taken by L5 seem to suggest (turns 84, 86, 88).

Extract 5

- 83 T: could that be (1) a
 reason? (addressing L5)
 what do you think?
- 84
 L5: I think that eh:: (0.5)
 the girlfriend is not going to
 attain anything ()the:: this

- man because she's only the girlfriend, she's not the wife=
- 85 T: =but they want to marry, right? a[bout to marry]
- 86 L5: [but:: eh:] if you're a girlfriend, you have nothing (but) your boyfriend [this ()you're not]() with him
- 87 T: [ah:::]
- 88 L5: so () is she (.) if she's involved in this murder she must be with a familiar or a relative of(.) this man
- 89 T: hmm:: to take some advantage of that=
- 90 L5: =yeah
- 91 T: yeah, because they're going to get married next month=
- 92 L5: =but at the moment they are: not married so=
- 93 T: =that's right, they couldn't even: have time to get married so, you're right=

Back-channel Feedback

The use of backchannel feedback is another feature of interaction that can be found throughout this teacher's speech. Extract 6 provides a good example of teacher-student interaction promoting space for learning (Walsh and Li, 2013) as the learner was given enough room to speak. T accomplished this by producing back-channel verbal responses ('uh-huh?' in turns 48, 53, and 55) as a means of letting L4 know that she was heard and also to keep communication channels open. Thus, the turns produced by L4 were extended (52, 54, and 56) and learner involvement was maximized. Careful analysis of this sequence shows that back-channel feedback in turns 53 and 55 was given right after there was a pause in L4's contribution before finishing the turn (turn 52) and a repetition of a verbal form (turn 54). Both ideas were successfully completed by L4, which means that T allowed enough time for L4 to finish these turns. Thus, the analysis suggests that when back-channel feedback is used at the right time in the interaction as a means of giving confidence to learners when they are attempting to make a contribution, learner involvement is more likely to emerge.

Extract 6

- 47 L2: it might be but(.) well, it says that (0.3) ah: ((reading from the sheet)) look, a passing tourist took

- it- this picture, ah(0.8) but
it (if) was a robbery the
painting not-the painting is
not there=
- 48 T: =uh-huh?
49 L2: so (1.5)
50 LL: (unintelligible speech)
51 T: ((reading from the sheet))
just a few hours before
mister Robinson's death (1)
52 L4: so ahm:: I think ah:: that
the:: the girlfriend (.) wasn't
very () was interested in:
(.) his money
53 T: uh-huh?
54 L4: and (.) it is very
suspicious that a:: a girl with
/this/ characteristics (1)
were: or was: so interested in
a very old person like, he was
money, I mean, he had, he had
money
55 T: uh-huh?
56 L4: I think, to buy a
Picasso's picture (1.5) you
know? (1) and I think they
planned- they, I said they
because I think the person who
took the photo here (0.5) was
a:(1) had a certain relation
with ah (.) her girlfriend.
57 T: Oh::: [so you're talking about
the] (.) triangle [here]
58 L4: [his girlfriend]
59 L4: [something] like that=

On the other hand, back-channel feedback was also found to interfere with the opportunities for negotiation of meaning that teachers provide. In Extract 7 below, L2 provided her own account of who might have killed the art dealer. In turn 119, L2 tried to find the word 'will' to express the idea that the art dealer might have been murdered because the lady in the picture knew her name was in the will (testament). She was unable to find the word in her lexical repertoire and thus sought to negotiate that meaning with T in turn 121 by asking, 'you know but, what – what's the name for fortune'. T reacted to this petition by completely disregarding it and misusing the back-channel particle 'okay?' in turn 122. T did not provide any type of relevant information about the missing word or enquire about the nature of the question being asked by the learner. Then, in turn 123, L2 resumed her sentence after the unsuccessful outcome of the side sequence (Jefferson, 1972) initiated by her in turn 121. What can be seen in the turn-by-turn analysis of the sequence is that the teacher was not being sensitive to the negotiation of meaning initiated by L2 and failed to see the potential exchange that could have taken place had she acknowledged L2's question by means of a clarification request or a confirmation check.

As the ongoing interaction unfolded, T in fact mentioned the problematic word in turn 134, not as part of a negotiation of meaning exchange, but rather as part of content feedback. The unchanging gesture by L2 as T said the word (as captured by video) as well as her withdrawing from subsequent interaction suggests that she did not relate the word to her word search in the side sequence. It is possible that L2 gave the word 'will' one of its more common homographic meanings as T was saying it, though this is not clear from the interaction. What is clear from the sequence is that the teacher missed out on the possibility of negotiating meaning in turn 122 by using a back-channel particle instead of attempting to clarify the learner's turn. This may have happened because the teacher was not being sensitive to L2's turn or because she misinterpreted what L2 was trying to convey and did not acknowledge the communication gap. Either way, opportunities to negotiate meaning were lost.

Extract 7

- 116 T: so maybe they (.) have,
ah, may have wanted to hide
the crime to get rid of
the evidence. that could have
been (.) why they did that.
(addressing L2) what do you
think?(3)
- 117 L2: I am still thinking that (.)
the lady (.) is the murderer=
- 118 T: =so, what do you think she did?
she might:?=
- 119 L2: =I think (0.5) eh:: this old
man could huh:: (2.5) ah::
could have (wroted) (.) a::
- 120 T: uh-huh?
- 121 L2: you know but, what- what's
the name for (.) fortune,
- 122 T: okay?
- 123 L2: to her name (.) because he
was alone in the world and
nobody (wants) to live with
him
- 124 T: okay
(...)
- 123 L2: [uh-huh] [maybe she contract
someone
- 134 T: ok, maybe she hired
something, maybe she had
the: his will, and safe,
ahm:: box, and maybe
there was something or
maybe there was some
cash(or who knows) yeah=
- 135 L3: =I have another option
- 136 T: tell me

Discussion

The analysis of the selected sequences suggests that features of teacher-learner interaction such as scaffolding and back-channel feedback can facilitate or prevent negotiation of meaning and learner involvement depending on whether the teacher interprets the local intricacies of the unfolding interaction in context-sensitive ways. Poor calibration of scaffolding techniques and interactional features such as back-channel particles were found to hinder opportunities for learning and reduce the amount and quality of the negotiation of meaning taking place as well as negatively affecting their potential presence in the interaction. Although these interactional features can encourage learners to produce longer turns and be more involved, their misuse can have the opposite effect. This teacher's data show that instances for clarification requests, confirmation checks and comprehension checks were not a common feature in her classroom. This scarcity of negotiation of meaning instances in this classroom context may be explained, at least to some extent, by a misuse of the interactional features teachers have at their disposal. One of the ways in which negotiation of meaning can be nourished in the language classroom is by allocating enough time for learners to give a proper structure to their utterances and by carefully monitoring the ongoing interaction as it is being constructed in order to take advantage of those instances where potential negotiation of meaning and learner involvement are at hand. Global teaching recipes for promoting learner involvement and negotiation of meaning need to incorporate an awareness of the local, dynamic and context-sensitive aspects that are displayed in classroom discourse. Teachers must be made aware that the choices they make are indeed bound to the local context being generated as every turn is produced. More than relying on recommendations that are based on functional categories, more emphasis should be put on the idea that 'the particulars of specific teaching/learning situations determine their effect and effectiveness' (Bannink and van Dam, 2006). It is through the development of interactional awareness that teachers will have better chances of managing the quality and quantity of their interaction according to desired learning outcomes. By promoting a fine-grained sensitivity towards learner speech in the moment-by-moment interaction, teachers and practitioners will be better equipped to delve into the complex processes that mediate language learning.

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