

# LESLLA Symposium Proceedings



## Recommended citation of this article

Albers, S., Hellerman, J., & Harris, K. (2008). A Case of a Student with Little Prior Formal Education: Success and Interactional Practices in the Language Classroom. *LESLLA Symposium Proceedings*, 3(1), 109–124. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.8000813>

## Citation for LESLLA Symposium Proceedings

This article is part of a collection of articles based on presentations from the 2007 Symposium held in Newcastle upon Tyne, England. Please note that the year of publication is often different than the year the symposium was held. We recommend the following citation when referencing the edited collection.

Young-Scholten, M. (Ed.) (2008). Low-educated adult second language and literacy acquisition (LESLLA): Proceedings of the third annual forum. Roundtuit. <https://lesllasp.journals.publicknowledgeproject.org/index.php/lesllasp/issue/view/447>

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## A CASE OF A STUDENT WITH LITTLE PRIOR FORMAL EDUCATION: SUCCESS AND INTERACTIONAL PRACTICES IN THE LANGUAGE CLASSROOM

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### 1 Introduction

Research on education and language acquisition has suggested that adults who have little formal education prior to arriving in the United States may progress more slowly in English language programs than their peers with higher levels of previous education (Reder & Cohn, 1984). The reasons for this are likely to include unfamiliarity with classroom interaction, low literacy in the home language, and formal education's focus on decontextualized knowledge (Scribner & Cole, 1978, 1981). Those accounts aside, the true extent of and the reasons for this population's lack of success in the language classroom have not been well understood by researchers, due to the fact that little research has focused on this population (Reder, 2005), and the research that has been done has not systematically looked at what goes on in the classroom.

The research reported on here attempts to add to our understanding of how adult learners of English with little formal educational experience interact and learn in a language classroom alongside other students who may have substantially more years of education behind them. The data for this study came out of a larger study that compared peer-to-peer classroom interactions between two cohorts of students: those who had completed six years or less of prior formal education before immigrating to the United States, and those who had completed seven years or more. This paper presents a subset of that data as a micro-ethnographic case study of one of the learners in the low-educated cohort, Marco<sup>1</sup>. He completed six years of formal education as a child in Mexico City before immigrating to Portland, Oregon in the United States as a 29-year-old adult, where he enrolled in community ESOL classes.

Marco was chosen as the focus of this analysis because, compared to other students in his cohort, his educational background did not preclude him from successfully progressing through, and completing, the four levels of the community ESOL program. In fact, in his participation with other classmates who had more years of prior education than him, Marco displayed motivation and leadership that is more consistent with a teacher's behavior than that of a student who has remote, and what can be considered a small amount of, classroom experience.

Using methods from Conversation Analysis (CA), we uncovered the features of Marco's talk in various task interactions in the classroom. CA examines turns of talk in the context of a sequence of turns to show how talk is locally organized (Sacks, Schegloff, & Jefferson, 1974). The researcher focuses on details of the interaction to show the orientations of the participants in the conversation, or in this case, the language-learning task (see Markee, 2000 and Seedhouse, 2004 for in-depth accounts of Conversation Analysis in the second language classroom).

From a Vygotskian or socio-cultural framework, these didactic conversational features reported on in this paper function to move learners through their Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) (Vygotsky, 1978; Lantolf, 2000). In the context of language learning, the ZPD is a cognitive level where a learner, the *novice* in this theoretical framework, is not independently capable of producing certain linguistic forms. However, within the ZPD the novice is capable of performing a task or producing a linguistic structure if scaffolding (relevant assistance) is provided by a more knowledgeable person or *expert*. Thus, the ZPD is essentially a socially-mediated place

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<sup>1</sup> All names used are pseudonyms.

where knowledge is co-constructed between participants. In order for the novice to internalize new knowledge or acquire new mental functions, which for our purposes is attaining proficiency in a new language, engaging in social interaction in the ZPD is a necessary prerequisite (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006).

### 1.1 *Study purpose*

The idea of ZPD and the co-construction of knowledge fits well with what we already know from second language acquisition theory: adults, unlike children acquiring language, are more able to take advantage of previous learning experiences in deductive learning (Slobin, 1993; Snow & Hoefnagel-Höhle, 1978). Learners require some sort of negative evidence if the interlanguage they produce does not conform to the grammar of the target language (Gass, 1997; White, 1991). The question we must then ask is: who is an appropriate person to fulfill the expert's role of providing negative evidence to the adult learner?

Some studies have concluded that learner-to-learner discourse is a limited way for the learners to receive this important feedback (Pica et al., 1996). However, the purpose of this study is to further document the intricacies of learner-to-learner talk at the beginning level of study and show how learners can indeed serve each other in providing feedback (i.e. negative evidence) on target language production (Gass, 1997). The data indicate that even students who are seemingly either more dominant or less outgoing are capable of alternating between the roles of expert and novice during a given task, providing each other with relevant assistance and feedback. The important result of this is the ability to produce target language that the students would not have been independently incapable of, as documented in other studies (Ohta, 2001).

We have two main goals in mind for this research as it is read by language practitioners who may be working with low-educated students or multi-level classes. The first is to support the idea that having low-educated students in the second language classroom does not always entail a painful struggle or even an unsuccessful experience with instructed language learning. On the contrary, low-educated students can contribute in valuable and unexpected ways to the classroom community. The second goal is to make teachers aware of the suite of interactional features that we will profile in this paper because they corroborate classroom management that strategically pairs students based on their participation patterns in class.

## 2 *Methodology*

### 2.1 *Micro-ethnographic setting: The Lab School*

As a micro-ethnography this study is empirically grounded and concerned with observing the participants' natural behavior and language as it happens on a regular basis in a given community (Steeck & Mehus, 2005; Nunan, 1992). What is micro about the approach is that the researcher defines the community being studied as a circumscribed group within a larger society. The prototypical example of this circumscribed community is a classroom. Here, we have defined the study community as an adult ESOL program in the United States.

The site of data collection for this study was the National Labsite for Adult ESOL, locally known as The Lab School.<sup>2</sup> The Lab School is a federally-funded collaboration between Portland State University and Portland Community College: the facilities are located on the university campus while the students, instructors, and curriculum are

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<sup>2</sup> The National Labsite for Adult ESOL was supported, in part, by grant R309B6002 from the Institute for Education Science, U.S. Dept. of Education, to the National Center for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy (NCSALL). The research for this paper was also funded, in part, by a Language Learning research grant. Continuing research in this area is being funded by a grant from the National Science Foundation.

part of the community college's system (Reder et al., 2003). Before enrolling in an ESOL class at the community college, students are placed according to their proficiency level using a measure called CASAS Listening (for more information on the assessment, visit [www.casas.org](http://www.casas.org)). There are no educational prerequisites for students to enroll in ESOL classes at the community college, so by default, each class contained a wide variety of prior educational attainment and mixed home language literacy levels. Figure 1 below provides an image of a Lab School classroom.



Figure 1: A Lab School class in session.

Despite the diversity in the student population at the Lab School, it is important to remember that all of the students attended the program voluntarily, which is evidence of their shared goal of becoming members of a proficient English-speaking community (Hellermann, 2008). Following from socio-cultural theory, being proficient in a language is much more than having structural knowledge of the language's grammar and lexicon (Kramsch, 1986). Rather, proficiency should be defined in terms of interactional competence, or "a learner's ability to co-construct appropriate linguistic forms...and sequential routines in appropriate contexts in order to accomplish discursive practices [or essentially,] the development of skill in interacting" (Hellermann, 2007: 85). Additionally, a teacher-fronted classroom configuration alone is not adequate in driving students toward the development of interpersonal social skills in the second language (Kramsch, 1986). Rather, interactional competence in the second language is developed through the performance of tasks (Prabhu, 1987), or teacher-assigned work units, with peers (Ellis, 2000, Skehan, 2003).

It is because of the need to develop interactional competence, as well as the processes of providing and receiving scaffolding in the ZPD, that every student in a language classroom has an investment in each one of their peers. The students depend on each other as much as, if not more than, they do the teacher to accomplish the shared goal of gaining membership in a proficient English-speaking community. As part of their routine practice, the teachers in the Lab School project dedicated at least one portion of each three-hour long class to learner-centered activities.

## 2.2 Data

### 2.2.1 Data collection

During the 2001-2006 data collection project at the Lab School, each class was audio and video recorded. The Lab School consists of two classrooms that are each equipped with six cameras mounted on the ceiling. The teacher and two students wore lanyard microphones each class on a rotating basis throughout the terms. The microphones recorded the speech that matches with the video data. The result of recording from 2001 to 2006 was almost 4,000 hours of classroom data. During the span of data

collection, about 750 students from approximately 50 different countries and various educational backgrounds attended the Lab School.

For each day of class at the Lab School, the cameras focused on the students with microphones. The focused recordings of certain students during the classes provide researchers with a privileged view of learner-to-learner interactions. All of the recorded data was saved digitally into a multi-media corpus that is accessible using a software suite called ClassAction (Reder, 2002). The specific program used for this analysis is a viewer called Toolbox. A screenshot of the Toolbox interface can be found in Figure 2.

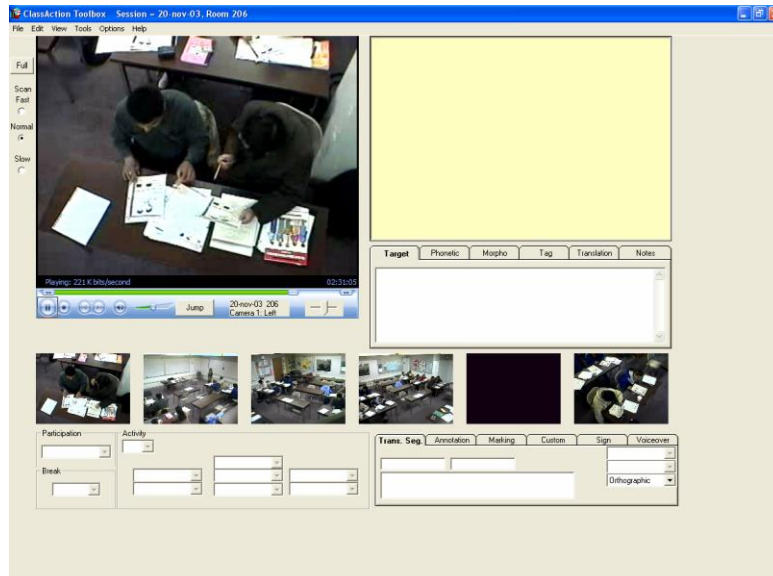


Figure 2: Screen shot of the Lab School's software. The student on the left is Marco, who is the focus of this analysis.

### 2.2.2 Participant and data selection

The focus of this analysis is a 29-year-old male L1 Spanish speaker from Mexico City, Mexico. Marco was classified as a 'successful' learner based on his teachers' evaluations, standardized test scores, and the pace at which he progressed through the four levels of the community college's ESOL program. Before he enrolled in classes at the Lab School in 2003, he had been living in the United States for four years.

Marco was chosen as a participant in this and an ongoing Lab School study because of having little experience with formal education (6 years) and being considered a highly successful student. Impressionistically, what we found unique about his behavior when we observed the video recordings of him in the classroom was a consistency in leadership and initiative in performing tasks with his classmates. Closer observation of his transcripts lead to the noticing of how his verbal behavior was very similar to a teacher's discourse in the use of such features as third-turn feedback (saying things such as "good", "yes", or "uh huh" with rising intonation in response to his partner's answers to questions), and initiating repair sequences (e.g. correction) for his partners.

The data for this analysis consist of transcribed "clips" or segments of recorded dyadic interactions from four different dates spanning Marco's first 30 weeks in the program. In order for a clip to be selected as part of the analysis, Marco or his partner had to be wearing a microphone, and the video clip had to be some interactional period lasting longer than one minute. We looked at interactions with a peer of a different L1, as well as different task activities. Not only are the data highly illustrative of how

students assist each other in the co-construction of knowledge, they also show this particular student's emerging interactional competence as he participates in and facilitates socially-mediated learning.

### 2.3 Transcription

The transcripts for this analysis are orthographic, though they do loosely represent when a learner does not articulate a word in a way that matches English phonetics. Because we analyzed the students' discourse from a CA perspective, the transcription conventions are adapted from Schegloff and can be found in the appendix (2007, see [http://www.sscnet.ucla.edu/soc/faculty/schegloff/Transcription Project/page1.html](http://www.sscnet.ucla.edu/soc/faculty/schegloff/Transcription%20Project/page1.html)). In this text we include links to the recordings themselves so the reader can hear and see the recordings of each learner-learner classroom interaction.

## 3 Analysis

### 3.1 Classroom discourse

We can think of classroom interaction as a type of institutional discourse (for a more general overview of Conversation Analysis done in institutional settings, see Drew & Heritage, 1992; Heritage, 2004; van Lier, 1988). Along with the notion that the classroom is part of an institution comes the assumption that there are certain rituals, as well as pre-defined roles for behavior and interaction (Heritage, 2004; Kramsch, 1986). According to the norms of the institution of school, it is the teacher who is responsible for either directing or facilitating classroom talk, and we assume that the teacher has certain objectives in mind for lessons. A teacher can be more or less explicit in conveying the goals of particular language-learning tasks as they relate to the larger lesson. However, even if the teacher is thorough in explaining or modeling certain activities, the way the students actually do the activities depends on many factors; ultimately everything that is done in the language classroom is interpreted differently by different students (Harris, 2005; Schmidt, 1993).

Our research takes advantage of technological developments which have recently allowed researchers new insights into the language and interaction of students in classroom talk (Harris, 2005; Hellermann, 2008; Markee, 2000; Ohta, 2001; Reder, Harris & Setzler, 2003). The occurrence of what we call didactic talk in Marco's peer interactions is a result of him interpreting the objectives from the teacher's work plan (Breen, 1989), adapting those objectives to his own needs, and then trying to achieve (through talk) a shared understanding or 'intersubjectivity' (Markee, 2000) of these goals, with his partner (Seedhouse, 2004). Sometimes the achievement of intersubjectivity looks like scaffolding, or relative assistance that an expert provides to a novice in helping them transition out of the ZPD towards independent proficiency; however, this depends on how each partner is interpreting the purpose of the task.

### 3.2 Features considered

After viewing Marco's recorded interactions from his first 30 weeks at the Lab School, we developed a categorization of features to illustrate how his talk was markedly didactic. The three features are:

1. Meta-task talks about pedagogical goals
2. Initiation-Response-Feedback (IRF) sequences
3. Choral co-production where Marco is both issuing the questions and participating in the choral response.

These practices give evidence of Marco's high degree of concern for mastering language form and performing the task according to the teacher's model. The

organization of the rest of the paper dedicates a subsection to each of the didactic features.

### 3.2.1 *Meta-task talk about pedagogical goals*

It is not uncommon for students engaged in pair-work tasks to begin some kind of spontaneous side-conversation. These side-sequences, depending on their purposes, may be thought of as meta-task talk, task expansions, or interpersonally-oriented talk (Ellis, 2000; Markee, 2000). Although some research has discovered off-task talk in the classroom, but as something to be disguised from the teacher (Markee, 2005), we observed Marco engaging in meta-task talk for the purpose of explicitly justifying pedagogical goals, rather than for strictly social reasons.

When students come to a class of their own volition (as Marco did), an explicit justification of what it is that students are doing when they come to class is rare in classroom discourse itself. Generally and implicitly everyone agrees the reason they come to class is to learn. Furthermore, there is an implicit agreement that learning itself is good, and this does not need to be reaffirmed between the students. However, if explicit talk about pedagogy is to occur in the classroom, the expectation is that it is the teacher who would be the one to explain the importance of certain activities. By the very nature of the traditionally unequal status between teachers and students (Kramsch, 1986), the teacher is the "leader with the vision" and the students respect the teacher and follow the lead. However, the data from this case study challenge our expectation about who in the classroom should make discourse moves that provide a rationale for classroom activities.

Excerpt 1 below is from Marco's first term in the program (Level A), and it is an illustration of a student engaging in talk about pedagogical practices. The teacher had set the task up so that the pairs were to exchange *yes-no* questions and practice answering in the complete sentences: *yes, I did* or *no, I didn't*. Excerpt 1 was taken after Marco and his partner, Guangli, had been doing the task for about 7 minutes. They were instructed to write each other's answers in the space provided on their handouts. Guangli was 46 years old at the time of this class. He had had 15 years of formal education in China including three years of college.

At the time Excerpt 1 starts, they had completed one cycle of all of the questions on the paper and had written in the appropriate answers. At that point, they were essentially finished with the teacher-assigned work unit, but the majority of the class was still working. In lines 1-7, Marco asks Guangli to repeat the task questions again. The request he issues in lines 1-7 eventually launches them into a repetition of the task (lines 28 - 41). In lines 1-7 it is clear that Marco's intention is to convince his partner to engage in more task-focused conversation: "one more okay. just for play" (line 2).

There is a one-second pause in line 4 that shows that Guangli does not immediately respond to Marco's request. After his original suggestion to continue practicing the task questions outside the boundary of what the teacher assigned, Marco has to do the work of reaching intersubjectivity with Guangli. Marco's strategy to accomplish this is to elicit a confirmation from him in lines 3 and 5 with "you like it?" After this, Guangli gives a non-verbal (weak) confirmation in line 6, Marco acknowledges it and the two students go on to repeat asking each other the same task questions several times until line 41.

#### *EXCERPT 1: Task expansion*

Marco & Guangli (male Mandarin L1 speaker) Term 1, Level A. 10-20-03 54:00-59:54  
<http://www.labschool.pdx.edu/Viewer/viewer.php?MarcoLESOLLA1>

- 1 G: ((writing on his paper))
- 2 M: ok↑ay. (.) other one. (.) one more. okay? (.) just for play ((rubs hands together))
- 3 heh. ((laugh)) (0.2) ((nodding)) you like it?
- 4 (1)
- 5 M: yes? you like it?

- 6 G: ((slight nod)) ((still writing))  
 7 M: okay. ((looks down at paper and begins to read))  
 ((lines omitted)) 58:09  
 28 M: did you:: did you go and (0.4) an:: mmm. (1) play in the park?  
 29 G: park?  
 30 M: park.  
 31 G: ((looks down at paper))  
 32 M: .hh park. ((points to the word on the board))  
 33 G: park?  
 34 M: yes. (1) did you go::  
 35 G: ((points to his own paper))  
 36 M: ((looks at G's paper)) yes! ((points to question on G's paper)) did you go to the  
 37 park? for play?  
 38 (0.5)  
 39 G: no.  
 40 M: no?  
 41 G: no.  
 42 (11) ((M looking at his paper and coughing. G seems to be waiting for M))  
 43 → M: this is important ((gesturing to paper)) 's more important it's like the  
 44 convention. conversation?  
 45 G: mm.  
 46 → M: you and me and the other people (.) was in English. you understand?  
 47 G: English.  
 48 → M: this is important ((gestures to paper)) okay.  
 49 G: yeah.  
 50 → M: so more important is uh. (0.2) speak. espeak with everybody people.  
 51 G: ((nods))  
 52 → M: mhm. this is important.  
 53 G: important.  
 54 (1)  
 55 → M: ((gesturing to paper)) this is uh. homework. okay? (0.5) homework. so, the  
 more  
 56 important is you speak with other peoples ((waves hand in front of mouth)) (1)  
 mm?  
 57 (0.5) for example ((turns around)) with other guys, with teacher, and the other  
 58 peoples on the street. (0.5) you you you ask (.) with other people. okay? (1) hi  
 59 ((waving)) how are you? oh fine thanks and yourself? pretty good. alright. (1)  
 60 everyday everyday everyday.  
 61 G: [((nodding))  
 62 M: [((nodding)) yes.  
 63 ((both look back at papers))  
 64 (6)  
 65 M: did you go to the library?  
 66 (2)  
 67 G: no.  
 68 (3)  
 69 M: why. ((gestures with hands eliciting more information))

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In line 28, Marco begins the task repetition by asking the task question "did you go to play in the park?" The two students negotiate for meaning immediately after the question, but the true trouble source is where Guangli uses a minimal "no" response in line 39. From the following line, we know that Marco is dissatisfied with the minimal "no" because he tries to prompt Guangli by saying "no?" with rising, incredulous-sounding intonation.

The reason Marco prompts Guangli in line 40 could be that the teacher's instructions for the task which were to answer in complete sentences: *yes, I did* or *no, I didn't* and Guangli just uses the simple "no". When Guangli's utterance does not meet Marco's expectation, the two do not achieve intersubjectivity and the long eleven-second pause happens. This is the trigger for Marco to start the key sequence of meta-task talk that we see in line 43.

What Marco says in line 43 is clearly a departure from the actual task, but it is related because he talks about what they are doing in the classroom as assessment of the task. This sequence continues for twelve turns until line 56 - these twelve lines show that Marco is assuming the role of expert in an attempt to motivate his partner to participate more, just as a teacher would do. Essentially, he tells Guangli that the meaning of the questions on the paper is not their true focus. The questions are just a springboard ("homework", line 55) for interaction, and it is the interaction ("speak with other peoples", line 56) that is the important thing for learning English.

There are other pieces of evidence in his discourse that show that Marco is assuming the teacher/expert role. In lines 43 to 60, he delivers several long monologic turns that are similar to the structure of a teacher's talk during the delivery of a lesson (Seedhouse, 2004). Besides the long turns, other structural items are particularly teacher-like in Excerpt 1: the use of the tag question "okay?" in lines 55 and 58 and "you understand?" in line 46. Both of these questions are conversational modifications which might be characteristic of expert speakers' interaction with learners. Another significantly didactic characteristic of Marco's talk is the modeling of the sample dialogue that he does in line 58 ("hi, how are you? I'm fine thanks", etc.). This modeling is what a teacher does in facilitating activities, or providing candidate exercises for students.

One explanation for why Marco would enter into this meta-task sequence is to achieve a mutual understanding with Guangli about why he is continuing to ask him questions again rather than sit quietly and read, for example. Since they had finished the required work, a viable possibility would have been for them to stop engaging with each other. Marco displays an orientation to the activity-focused nature of the task and how that relates to language learning. That is, he thinks it does not really matter if they repeat the same questions. What matters is the basic experience of conversing, or the activity itself. From a socio-cultural perspective, Marco is assuming the role of the expert by encouraging the novice to reach his potential by attempting more target language production.

After the monologue task-expansion, both participants acknowledge the closing of that sequence by nodding and breaking their gaze in lines 61-63. There is a silence of six seconds, and when Guangli does not initiate more interaction, Marco demonstrates his commitment to the goal he has just explained by asking another task-derived question in line 65: "did you go to the library?"

The significance of Marco's persistence in encouraging his partner to maximize classroom time and continue to interact beyond teacher-assigned tasks is not only significant from the socio-cultural lens of showing how learners can assume the role of expert, it also shows that a student with little prior education at an early stage in their formal study (here, in the second month) can display a deep understanding of and a motivation for what it takes to be successful in acquiring a new language in the classroom.

### 3.2.2 *Third-turn 'feedback' in IRF Exchanges*

Another way in which Marco displays teacher-like linguistic behavior is in his response to his partner's answers, sometimes called the 'third turn'. Third-turn feedback is part of a common pedagogical exchange known as Initiation-Response-Feedback (IRF) (Sinclair & Coulthard, 1975) or Question-Answer-Comment (QAC) (Markee, 2004). The IRF or QAC structures are typical patterns found in classroom discourse, and according to institutional norms, it is the teacher who is licensed to use these IRF

sequences in order to give students practice with newly learned forms or to evaluate students' comprehension during lessons.

Typically, the type of question that serves as the initiator in an IRF sequence is a "display" question, where the asker is not concerned with the content or meaning of the response, but the grammatical or phonological form of it. After the Initiation or display question is asked, the student's response is subject to some kind of evaluation or feedback from the teacher such as "good", "great", "mhm", a recast, or a repair initiation.

Excerpt 2 is a sequence of interaction from the classroom that has four examples of IRF exchanges where Marco's utterances correspond with the turns that are canonically reserved for the teacher's role: the Initiation and the Feedback. This excerpt is taken from a single task with a student, Hana, a 28 year old female with 14 years of formal education in Korea. After reading a story from their textbook about a character named Oscar, the students are supposed to take turns asking each other the questions from the book that compare their life with Oscar's. While the purpose of these questions is to presumably check or reinforce the students' comprehension of the story, Marco interprets and adapts the task as one that is focused on language form.

Evidence that Marco is orienting to this task as a form-focused one (rather than meaning-focused) comes from an explicit correction he does in line 6. He thinks that Hana uses the negative (*n't*) in her answer that begins with an affirmative "yes" in line 5. In line 8, he clarifies why he issued the repair, "you ask didn't". That Marco interprets the task as form-focused lends credibility to the claim that he is really asking prototypical display questions as part of IRF sequences. The four IRF sequences in Excerpt 2 can be found in the following line numbers: (1) lines 1-3, (2) lines 21-24, (3) lines 27-29, and (4) lines 31-34.

*EXCERPT 2: Marco providing third turn feedback*

Marco and Hana (female L1 Korean speaker). Term 3, Level B. 05-24-04  
<http://www.labschool.pdx.edu/Viewer/viewer.php?MarcoLESOLLA2>

- 1 → M: .hh okay (0.2) did you:, break your /h/arm?  
 2 → H: no i didn't.  
 3 → M: okay. good. (.) did oscar graduation from high school?  
 4 (.)  
 5 H: yes he did.  
 6 M: he DID.  
 7 H: he did. yeah.  
 8 M: you ask didn't.  
 9 H: no:: ((touches M's arm)) yes he did.  
 ((lines omitted))  
 21 → M: okay. he DID. no(t) didn't. (0.2) okay. did you wo:rk, did you work while in  
 high  
 22 school?  
 23 → H: no i didn't.  
 24 → M: okay good. (0.3) something else?  
 25 H: hmm  
 26 (0.5)  
 27 → M: okay. ((looks at other page)) did oscar move to 'u' 's' (.) united states alone?  
 28 → H: yes he did.  
 29 → M: okay good. (.) did you move to 'u' 's' 'a'. d- do you- ah god!  
 30 H: ((laughs))  
 31 → M: ((laughs)) did you move to u- united states alone?  
 32 → H: ((laughs)) yes I did  
 33 → M: yes. ((sits up in chair)) (1) it's good. (1) but this (.) ye::s she did. and yes i  
 did. (.)  
 34 okay? but no: yes he didn't.

35 H: he did. he didn't. ((points to book)) xxx say he didn't?

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Marco uses “good” in each of the third-turns in the conversation, and in three of those he combines it with “okay”. Because Marco combines the “okay” with the “good”, the function of the third turn feedback in the first three IRF sequences is a combination of evaluation and transition. He simultaneously acknowledges that he is going to accept his partner’s response without any repair, and that he is moving on to the next question. By the very nature of deciding about transitions and monitoring his partner’s responses, not to mention the initiation of repair in line 6, Marco is assuming a leadership or expert role in the task with Hana, a student who has much more classroom experience and who we might otherwise expect to be assuming the expert role for a lesser-educated student.

If we compare this example of Marco interacting with Hana in Excerpt 2 with the previous interaction with Guangli in Excerpt 1, we can see that both show Marco encouraging his partner to maximize class time by extending task engagement and repeating the practice questions. Not only does he control this interaction with Hana by using IRF sequences, he also displays persistence in continuing to interact by saying “something else?” in line 24 and starting a repeat sequence of the task questions in line 27 after a short pause.

### 3.2.3 *Choral co-production*

The final didactic feature of Marco’s interactions to be discussed in this analysis shows Marco’s awareness of and participation in the discourse of the classroom as a whole. This participation occurs in sequences of choral co-production (Lerner, 2002). Lerner describes choral co-production in conversation as a type of “properly overlapping speech” where each participant is “simultaneously contributing to the same turn-constructural unit...by recognizably attempting to do such things as match the words, voicing, and tempo of the other speaker” (2002: 226).

In everyday conversation, choral co-production is a unique type of overlapping speech because the conversation partners do not see it as problematic (Lerner, 2002). The form of choral co-production is noteworthy because “grammatically, pragmatically, and prosodically, it is just as one would...[expect if the utterance] was produced by a single speaker” (Gardner & Ko, 2006: 8). Compared to interruption, for example, choral co-production has a cooperative feeling that serves to display the participants’ shared understanding, knowledge, belief, or enthusiasm concerning a given topic. Lerner alludes to the gift-opening ritual at birthday parties as a good situation to imagine how choral co-production happens. He reminds his readers of “the cacophony of verbal and vocal assessments” that occurs when a gift is being opened, or when there is another sort of emotionally-charged or exciting event where talk-in-interaction takes place (2002: 225). Importantly for our purposes, this phenomenon has also been documented to occur in the language classroom (Gardner & Ko, 2006; Ohta, 2001).

Choral co-production, or multi-response sequences (Gardner & Ko, 2006) among language students is a particularly fertile place for learning, or at least evidence of students grappling towards comprehension and accuracy. In teacher-fronted classroom configurations, where the teacher poses an Initiation or display question to an entire classroom, learners can offer responses together with peers so as to feel less exposed when answering a teacher question or to highlight “collaborative achievement” (2006: 8), both of which may have an important affective component for learning. Additionally, the pedagogical value in these types of sequences is one of scaffolding and co-construction of knowledge. Learners are pooling their strengths and weaknesses to arrive at higher level of performance.

Excerpt 3 exemplifies several turns of choral co-production by Marco and a 35 year old Amharic-speaking classmate, Alysha, who had 8 years of formal education in Ethiopia. This interaction takes place during Marco’s second term at the Lab School.

However, different than Gardner and Ko's findings, the feature of interest in Excerpt 3 takes place in the context of dyadic task-based interaction, not teacher-fronted interaction. We can see Marco performing two roles at once in this interaction: he is in the role of the teacher by way of asking the display question as part of the task, yet he is also playing the student because he participates in the choral recitation of the response along with his partner. Lines 1-10 show how the teacher introduces the task. The students are to ask and answer yes-no questions about characters from the textbook. The teacher shows that this is a form-focused task designed to get students to respond in "whole sentence(s)" with the form *yes he is* or *no he isn't* (line 1).

When Marco and Alysha begin their interaction, it is Marco who initiates the first task question. At line 31 he is still taking turns as the question-asker. The explicit repair initiation that Marco issues in line 36 shows that he perceives that Alysha is having comprehension problems in the task. Marco asks the task question again in line 41, but this time he provides scaffolding assistance to Alysha in the form of gesture (shaking his head because the answer is *no*). In line 42, Alysha shows that she is still struggling with the meaning of the question by saying "oh now". Marco does not treat this as a viable response and assumes her turn in line 43 giving the full sentence instructed by the teacher "no. he isn't". However, Alysha takes her rightful turn in the sequence (a response to Marco's question) and in line 44 first overlaps with Marco's turn, then shadows his utterance.

It is difficult to say if the turns in lines 43 and 44 are precisely cooperative or precisely competitive; nonetheless, they mark the beginning of more rhythmic turn-taking where Marco asks a task question, and it is followed up by jointly-produced choral responses in lines 48-49, 56-57, 59-60, and 62-63. What makes the sequences from these line numbers rhythmic and almost a chant-like call and response is that, unlike the choral responses in whole-class teacher-fronted interaction, Marco is not issuing third-turn feedback that would separate one adjacency pair from another.

*EXCERPT 3. Marco initiating and participating in choral co-production*

Marco and Alysha (female L1 Ethiopian Amharic speaker). Term 3, Level B. 03-29-04

<http://www.labschool.pdx.edu/Viewer/viewer.php?MarcoLESOLLA3>

- 1 T: uh. and then and then the whole sentence. yes he is, no he isn't. yes she is, no she  
 2 isn't. (.) so (.) the first one is about ana luisa. so it's about this person here.  
 okay?  
 3 .hh is ana luisa from Japan?  
 4 LL: no:.  
 5 T: [no she isn't.  
 6 M: [no she isn't.  
 7 (2)  
 8 T: and then in the next question they just say she. (.) that means they're still  
 talking  
 9 about ana luisa. (.) until they give a new name it means (.) still (.) this person. (.)  
 10 okay? so (.) go ahead and take turns with your partner.

((lines omitted))

- 31 M: is she at home now?  
 32 A: he=  
 33 M: =is he? at home now?  
 34 (1)  
 35 A: yes.  
 36 M: NO. he is at work.  
 37 (1)  
 38 A: where? [xxx

- 39 M: [is HE.  
 40 A: uh he.  
 41 M: is he at home now? = ((shaking head))  
 42 A: =oh now.  
 43 → M: [no. he isn't.  
 44 A: [no. no he isn't.  
 45 (3)  
 46 M: are him and su jin married?  
 47 A: married?  
 48 → M: yes. [they are.  
 49 A: [yes they are.  
 50 (1)  
 51 M: are they from Russia?  
 52 (1)  
 53 A: no (.) they aren't.  
 54 M: they aren't. (.) are they at school now?  
 55 (1)  
 56 → M: n[o. they aren't.  
 57 A: [yes. no they aren't.  
 58 (2)  
 59 → M: is Texas a big state? (.) [yes it is.  
 60 A: [yes it is.  
 61 (1)  
 62 → M: is Austin the capital of Texas? (.) [yes it is.  
 63 A: [yes it is. (.) ah.  
 64 M: ((sits up from leaning over, adjusts in seat))  
 65 (6)  
 66 A: mm::: ((reading book))  
 67 (10)

---

What began as a functionally ambiguous overlapping of turns in lines 43 and 44 developed into an example of how learners provide each other with relevant assistance. We see Alysha struggle with the task from lines 32 to 47. Marco perceives this and takes the lead in establishing the brief rhythmic pattern that models the correct responses for her and then pushes her to say them correctly and more quickly. For example, with Marco's co-participation in the turn in line 57, she is able to repair her own talk (e.g. from "yes" to "no"). The self-correction she does is significant because being able to self-repair is the preferred form of correction in conversation (Schegloff, Jefferson, & Sacks, 1977). Indeed, learning to monitor one's own utterances and self-correct may be the most desirable form of repair for language students because it is the least face-threatening and shows independence development overall interactional competence.

#### 4 Discussion

The data presented in this paper have shown how an English language learner with limited formal education can demonstrate sophisticated leadership strategies with peers and achieve shared understanding with his language-learning peers, some of them who have the apparent advantage of having more experience with formal schooling. He does this in various ways using features of meta-task talk, IRF sequences, and choral co-production.

We have argued that the reason why he takes on the didactic role can be explained from a socio-cultural perspective in that every student in the language classroom has an investment in their classmates due to their mutual dependence to develop interactional competence. From this perspective, Marco's use of these three features is evidence of

his emerging or already-existing interactional competence, and he is using that competence to invest in his fellow classmates in the process of the co-construction of knowledge.

Whatever the underlying intentions for his behavior, this analysis serves to show how someone with only six years of formal schooling in his home country can take a very active role in shaping the classroom community. We know that Marco brought literacy skills with him from his first language when he began learning English - skills which give him a great advantage over other learners with little formal education (Harris & Hellermann, 2008; Tarone & Bigelow, 2005). He also had strong instrumental motivation to learn English, reporting that he wanted to get a high school equivalency and to start his own business. Marco may be an example of how high motivation and some literacy may be key factors in the determining success in the second language classroom for students with little previous formal education.

## 5 Conclusion

The excerpts presented in this paper have implications for researcher-theorists as well as for teacher-practitioners. From a theoretical standpoint, we have contributed an example of how research methods that consider the turn-by-turn social interaction of learners (CA and Socio-cultural Theory) can add to the body of research in Second Language Acquisition (for more discussion see Hall, 2004; Larsen-Freeman, 2004).

Our data allow researchers and practitioners a privileged view of student-to-student interaction as it happens naturally without the facilitation or interruption of the teacher. What we have seen is that some students like Marco can show surprising agency in helping each other and committing themselves to the goals of the classroom community. This information should encourage language teachers who work with students with little education or with mixed level classes to monitor students' participation patterns during pair and small group to work to the best of their ability. They can note when certain students are exhibiting leadership with fellow classmates like Marco and pair them with students with lower participation when assigning activities.

Finally, this analysis can also serve as a reminder for teachers that learners will take the task-as-work plan (Breen, 1989) and adapt it as task-as-improvisation according to their immediate needs in negotiating their interactional competence (Ellis, 2000; Harris, 2005; van Lier, 1988). An example of this would be when, in Excerpt 2 with Hana, Marco is decidedly focused on the forms of the answers rather than focusing on the vocabulary or ideas from the questions. This adaptation of tasks is part of what it means to be an active participant in classroom life, and this knowledge may help teachers to view students' improvisation and interpretations during tasks as evidence of learner autonomy and a healthy classroom community.

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## Appendix: Transcript Conventions

adapted from Schegloff, 2007

(<http://www.sscnet.ucla.edu/soc/faculty/schegloff/TranscriptionProject/page1.html>).

### I. Temporal and sequential relationships

- [ Overlapping or simultaneous talk
- [
- = “latched utterances” no break or pause between utterances
- (0.5) Numbers in parentheses indicate silence, represented in tenths of a second
- (.) A dot in parentheses indicates a “micropause”
- LL: Several learners are talking together, as in response to teacher’s question to the whole class.

### II. Aspects of speech delivery, including aspects of intonation

A. The punctuation marks are not used grammatically, but to indicate intonation.

- . period indicates a falling intonation contour, not necessarily the end of a sentence.
- ? question mark indicates rising intonation
- , a comma indicates “continuing” intonation
- ;/¿ a semicolon is used to indicate a rise greater than a comma but less than a question mark.
- :: Colons are used to indicate the prolongation or stretching of the sound just receding them. e more colons, the longer the stretching.

- A hyphen after a word or part of a word indicates a cut-off or self-interruption

word Underlining is used to indicate some form of stress or emphasis, either by increased loudness or higher pitch. The more underlining, the greater the emphasis.

WORD Especially loud talk may be indicated by upper case; again, the louder, the more letters in upper case. And in extreme cases, upper case may be underlined.

° The degree sign indicates that the talk following it was markedly quiet or soft.

↑↓ The up and down arrows mark sharper rises or falls in pitch

>< The combination of “more than” and “less than” symbols indicates that the talk between them is compressed or rushed.

<> Used in the reverse order, they can indicate that a stretch of talk is markedly slowed or drawn out.

hhh Outbreath

.hh Inbreath

(( )) Descriptions of events: ((cough)), ((sniff)), ((telephone rings)), ((footsteps))

(word) All or part of an utterance is in parentheses indicates transcriber uncertainty

xxx word was unintelligible to transcriber

# Creaky voice

/ / item between slashes represents non-target pronunciation (or omission of one or more phonemes)

' ' item between single quotes indicates speaker is saying a letter from the alphabet, as in spelling a word aloud or using an acronym.