"I Don't Know Word":
How L2 Learners Recruit Assistance to Overcome Reading Difficulties

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Abstract

This study undertakes an interaction-centered analysis of how EFL learners recruit assistance from co-present participants in order to overcome reading difficulties. Applying Conversation Analysis (CA) methods, we examine moments when Japanese learners of English face reading difficulties and how this creates interactional opportunities for recruiting the teacher, and occasionally also other students, to provide assistance. Learners recruit assistance through interactional practices such as (a) explicitly requesting help, (b) framing the trouble source to initiate repair, and (c) attempting to read the trouble source word. The study also analyzes the role of embodiment in eliciting attention from others prior to recruiting assistance. The data were collected in an educational facility that offers an experience-oriented program where students use English in realistic roleplay and content-focused contexts. The analysis contributes to our understanding of how students use recruitment to co-accomplish learning tasks that involve L2 reading.

Keywords: recruiting assistance, reading difficulties, embodied action, English- as-a-foreign-language

Reading is an integral part of English-as-a-foreign-language (EFL) classes, but it can be challenging for beginning learners. When they do not know how to read or pronounce a word, learners often collaborate with their teacher to overcome these temporary hurdles and continue with the assigned task. This study investigates how EFL learners deal with reading difficulties, focusing particularly on how they recruit assistance from their teacher and classmates to decode problematic words. Learners can, for example, recruit assistance explicitly, such as by asking for help or reporting trouble verbally, or they can do so more subtly, such as by reading the words before the problematic word or attempting to read it in order to prompt others to assist them.

Recent multimodal CA scholarship has begun to focus on the organization of assistance recruitment. Members may use gaze, gesture, and/or verbal actions to prompt others to help them (Drew & Kendrick, 2018). In the classroom, for example, language students have been found to recruit assistance from their peers to help them with word searches (Tůma & Sherman, 2022). CA studies have also focused on the actions of members who offer assistance (Other) as opposed to those who request it (Self) (Kendrick, 2021). Other displays his/her availability and readiness to assist through certain embodied actions, including gaze and head movement. These actions allow Self to request assistance or report difficulties.

The current study further explores the notion of recruitment by analyzing how EFL students deal with reading problems that prevent them from progressing interaction within a learning task. We present a series of excerpts from our data that demonstrate participants

recruiting assistance through explicit requests, by framing the trouble source and by designedly unsuccessful attempts to read the problematic word.

Background to the Data

The data were recorded as part of the Simulating the Wild through Experiential Language Learning (SWELL) project.[1] The video-recordings were collected at an educational facility in Tokyo, Japan in July, 2019, and the excerpts in the current study come from a media/broadcasting class that followed a Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) approach. The students were Japanese junior high students seated in two groups of four as shown in Figure 1. They were preparing to perform a roleplayed news broadcast by rehearsing from a written script that had been given to them. Tom, a TA (known institutionally as an agent), was assigned to help assist with these two groups.

Figure 1
The Learners Were Seated in Two Groups of Four
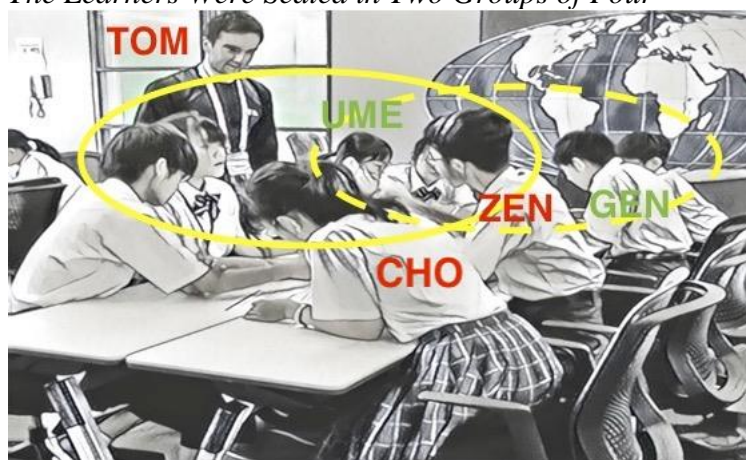
Analysis

The focus of our analysis is on the way the learners recruit assistance from their teacher and their peers when they face reading difficulties. Our initial investigation of such recruitment has revealed three main practices: (a) explicitly recruiting assistance; (b) framing a trouble source word; and (c) attempting to read the problematic word.

Explicitly Recruiting Assistance

In Excerpt 1, Gen is reading a script in order to prepare for his role as a weather reporter. The sentence he is reading is "In the western and eastern parts of Japan the temperature will rise over 35 degrees". Gen faces trouble reading the word *temperature* and directly recruits assistance from the teacher, Tom.

Excerpt 1: Recruiting assistance explicitly ("temperature")
```
01 GEN     |westin ↑a:nd, ea:stin parts of japan,
   t-px    |>>leaning toward script
   t-rh    |>>pointing to script
```



```
02        ↑the:, |(0.3) |(0.4)
   t-gz          |to GEN
   g-hd                 |moves to back/right

03        ↓i don't know word(s).

04 TOM    tempracha¿

05 GEN?   ˚tempracha?˚

06 UME    tempracha,

07        (1.2)

08 GEN    ˚thank  you˚
```

In line 1, Tom is leaning toward Gen and pointing to the script. Gen stops reading in line 2 and tilts his head a little. He then recruits assistance from Tom in English (line 3, "I don't know word") via a report of need/difficulty (Kendrick & Drew, 2016). Delaying the production of the sentence at this particular point makes it clear to the recipients that Gen is facing trouble reading the word *temperature*. Tom makes that understanding public in next turn (line 4) by providing assistance and both Gen and Ume repeat the target word (lines 5-6). Finally, Gen closes the sequence by thanking Tom in line 8 and goes on to continue reading the sentence (not shown).

In this case, the learner's appeal for help was relatively direct and the teacher's assistance involves just reading the word without explaining its meaning. Gen does not particularly gaze to Tom, yet Tom still seems to acknowledge that it is him who Gen is recruiting. This might be because he already has Tom's attention as Tom is looking at the script and placing his hand on it. This suggests that the actions that precede a recruiting of assistance are only required when the participants are not in contact at the moment of trouble.

Framing a Trouble Source to Recruit Assistance

In the next excerpt, Zen recruits assistance from Tom through embodied actions and by reading what comes before the problematic word, *current.* It is worth mentioning that Zen has recruited Tom's assistance with the same word prior to this case.

Excerpt 2: Framing the problematic word to recruit assistance ("Current")
```
01 TOM    |are there any wor:ds y'need- help- with.
   t-px   |crouches down to table
```

```
   t-gz     |to CHO

02 CHO?     [|°(            )°]
   c-gz      |~~turns to MIO
   c-hd      |nods
   t-px      |leans in to CHO slightly

03         [(1.0) |(0.2)   ]
   t-rh           |...okay sign-->

04 TOM     |or are [|you okay].
   t-rh     |--"okay sign" to CHO

05 CHO?            [|°(yeah)°]
   c-gz             |to MIO
   c-hd             |nods
   c-rh             |"okay" sign to TOM

06         |(0.1)  | (0.2)
   t-gz     |to desk
   z-lh            |moves script toward TOM -->

07 ZEN?    |(uh I: don't have) |thi|s.
   z-lh     |------------->
   z-rh                         |points to the script
   t-gz                            |to the script
```



```
08         (.)
09 ZEN     |i:n,
   z-px     |leans down to page
```



```
10         |(0.3)
   t-gz     |~~to ZEN-->
   t-rh     |points to ZEN-->

11 TOM     |try try
   t-rh     |--waves toward self
   t-gz     |--ZEN--->
```

```
12            |(.)    |(0.2)
   z-px       |sits back
   t-gz       |~~page|~~to ZEN-->
   t-rh             |points to page-->

13 ZEN     ˚hm?˚ i:n:: (.) current

14 TOM     |PERFECT! |PERF|ECT!      =|current.
   t-rh    |raises palm===|high five |...
   z-rh              |~~~~|high five |...

15            |(0.7)
   t-gz      |to page
   t-rh      |points to page

16 TOM     |'kay? now.
   t-rh    |points down twice
   t-gz    |to ZEN

17            (0.3)

18 ZEN?    |˚uhuh.˚
   t-rh     |points to page
   t-gz     |to page

19 TOM     in current, events.
```

This excerpt starts with Tom interacting with Cho to make sure she is not facing any issues in preparing for the upcoming role-play (lines 1-5). After Cho confirms that she does not need any assistance at that moment, Zen takes the opportunity to grab Tom's attention. In line 6, Zen moves the script toward Tom, setting the stage for the recruitment by rearranging visible elements of the environment. In line 7, he points at the script and produces the deictic "this" in combination with other verbal clues to pinpoint the trouble. This secures Tom's attention in order to help recruit him and that is what happens when Tom shifts his gaze to Zen's script indicating his availability. In line 9, Zen reads the word *in* (which comes before *current* in the script) to frame the trouble source by specifying the readable elements around it and leaving silence at the unfolding slot where the unreadable element becomes due. Since Zen has earlier asked about how to read this exact word, Tom treats this recruitment differently because Zen should be able to read it by himself. Instead of directly assisting Zen, Tom encourages him to try to read the problematic word by himself (line 11). This leads Zen to produce the target word, after which Tom provides positive feedback (lines 13-14).

In this case, Zen recruits Tom's assistance with a combination of multimodal actions. He starts by grabbing Tom's attention and moving the script closer to him. Once he has secured his attention, Zen starts his recruitment. However, the recruitment is countered: Instead of assisting Zen, Tom asks him to try to read it by himself, turning this into a teachable moment where he challenges the student to read withholding assistance to provide the learner with a slot to attempt reading. The fact that the teacher does not help Zen but encourages him to solve the problem himself might be a practice that is occasioned in teaching contexts. The teacher judges what the students can and cannot read and based on that he designs his response.

Recruiting Assistance by Attempting to Read the Problematic Word

In the final case, the learner recruits assistance through a designedly failed attempt to read the problematic word. The speaker displays to the recipients that he is trying to read the word and uses the delay in progressivity to prompt others to help.

Excerpt 3: Attempting to read the trouble source word ("western")

```
01 TOM     |so do you understa:nd?
   t-gz    |to GEN


02          (0.7)
03 TOM     all the words
04          (0.2)
05 UME?    yes all
06 TOM     can you read to me ˚the news˚
07 GEN     oh
08 TOM     the weather.
09          (1.1)
10 GEN     ((reading)) |here is tomorrow's weather.
   t-rh                |pointing to GEN's page


11          (0.6) in the: |(0.7) |w[eh-]
   g-gz                   |to UME
   t-gz                   |to GEN
   g-rh                          |points to the script


12 UME                               [wes]tin we[(stin)]
13 GEN                                           [westin] ↑a:nd,
14          ea:stin parts of japan,
```

Excerpt 3 starts with Tom asking Ume and Gen if they understand all the words in the script (lines 1-3). In line 5, Ume claims her understanding by providing a positive response. From line 6 to 8, Tom asks Gen to read the script for him, which he commences in line 10, until he meets with difficulty reading the word *western* (line 11). He stops reading for 0.6-sec and then reads what comes before the problematic word and pauses again at the slot where it is due. These silences, accompanied with gaze toward Ume, indicate Gen's trouble and make public his need for assistance. Finally, Gen attempts to read the first syllable of the word, while also pointing at it to make it more visibly available to others, in this case Ume. This attempt prompts Ume to provide assistance reading the word *western* in line 12. Gen repeats it and continues reading the rest of the script (lines 13-14). In this case, the teacher does not assist Gen: instead he lets Ume help him. The reason for this might be that Gen gazes toward Ume and not Tom, which suggests he is recruiting her as the primary recipient.

Concluding Discussion

This study has provided an analysis of some of the ways EFL learners deal with reading difficulties. The focus was on the way they recruit assistance from others to help them overcome reading problems and thus accomplish their learning tasks. The findings revealed that the learners use multimodal resources to indicate trouble and to recruit assistance. Prior to recruiting assistance, the interlocutors need to grab the attention of others, usually via an array of embodied and sometimes verbal actions.

The participants recruit assistance in a variety of ways. They can explicitly use verbal actions to request help or to report trouble, as shown in Excerpt 1. Another type is where the participants use less explicit means to recruit assistance by framing the problematic word. They do this by reading what comes before the trouble source word and stopping at it to indicate difficulty and prompt others to assist (Excerpt 2). Finally, the participants recruit assistance by attempting to read the target word while pointing at it, as a display of difficulty in reading it. Such actions likewise prompt others to help (Excerpt 3).

Our findings provided evidence of a process of learning-in-interaction as the students were able to read the trouble source word after recruiting assistance and collaborating with other participants (Ro, 2019). They also revealed that recruiting assistance occurs in a systematic way in classroom interaction and can therefore facilitate the learning experience and help the students accomplish their learning tasks.

To date, CA research into recruitment has focused largely on mobilizing others with regard to physical objects, such as by asking for a lighter or prompting someone to offer a pen. Our analysis here is a little different in that the purpose of the assistance is language related, both with regard to spoken and written modalities. In many ways, these examples (and others in our collection) are more like repair initiations than requests. However, at the same time, they are also quite clearly recruitments and the participants orient to them as a specific language-related form of assistance. Clearly more research is needed in order to more carefully explore the relationship between recruitment and repair.

Finally, the current study also offers some initial insights into the nexus of written and spoken language, particularly in relation to grammar-in-interaction. The learner is able to locate the problematic word via both embodied and verbal means, such as by pointing at the page, moving their finger and reading words aloud. Conversely, when such actions stop, they project (and therefore identify) the unreadable word, and invite assistance from the recipient(s). Thus, recruitment in reading aloud activities exploit grammatical progressivity and turn trajectories as resources for mobilizing assistance.

Acknowledgments

Notes

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