

Teaching Assistants as Interactional Mediators

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Abstract

This study explores interaction in an EFL CLIL classroom that involves a specialist science teacher, three Teaching Assistants (TAs) and six groups of Japanese EFL learners. The TAs act as interactional mediators, helping the learners to understand the specialist teacher's instructions, such as by repeating key words and rewording difficult terms. They also assist with class management tasks, such as getting the groups to listen to the teacher and preparing them to answer in whole-class discussions. In order to do this, the TAs monitor the teacher's instructions, projecting the sequence of activities and brokering them in ways that mobilize a timely response from the learners. The TAs therefore occupy a shifting middle ground between the teacher and the students, adapting and augmenting the participation framework to facilitate the complex content.

Keywords: classroom management, conversation analysis, brokering, multiparty interaction, mediation

In classrooms where a teaching assistant (TA) is available, the TA is often assigned to help students carry out learning tasks. This study explores such interaction in an EFL CLIL classroom that involves a specialist science teacher, three TAs and 24 Japanese EFL learners seated in six groups of four. The TAs act as interactional mediators, helping the learners to understand the specialist teacher's instructions (and vice versa), such as by repeating key words and rewording difficult terms. They also assist with class management tasks, for example, by preparing the groups to listen to the teacher or to respond in whole-class discussions. In order to do this, the TAs monitor the teacher's instructions, projecting the sequence of activities and brokering them in ways that mobilize a timely response from the learners. The TAs occupy a shifting middle ground between the teacher and the students, adapting and augmenting the participation framework to facilitate the complex content.

What the TAs are doing, therefore, can be viewed as a form of brokering. This suite of interactional practices mediates communication between the specialist and the students to foster intersubjectivity by rendering whole-class talk into comprehensible chunks at the individual and small-group levels. Bolden (2012) views brokering as instances when one participant acts as an intermediary to address interactional trouble that can be attributed to other participants' linguistic or cultural limitations, such as by translating or simplifying something that has been said.

To date in the CA literature, brokering has generally been investigated in small groups, such as intergenerational immigrant families where members of the middle generation translate for the grandparents and children (Bolden, 2012; Del Torto, 2008), around the homestay dinner table (Greer, 2015), in business meetings (Tsuchiya, 2020), or in mixed proficiency study groups (Hynninen, 2011). By definition, this sort of repair requires at least three people, with the third person stepping in to deal with the problem (Greer, 2015). This may require a momentary reworking of the participation constellation, so that the repairer moves from being a peripheral overhearer to an active speaker (Greer & Ogawa, 2021, Harjunpää, 2021).

However, the data in this study involves talk between a much larger number of people (28 in all), so the participants often orient to groups of students as a single party. Nonetheless,

the principles of brokering still ring true. In addition, the TAs anticipate potential interactional trouble and deal with it *in situ* via a range of pre-emptive strategies (Svennevig, 2010; Svennevig et al., 2019), that make the specialist teacher's explanations more accessible to the learners. Rather than impeding the progressivity of the whole-class talk, the TAs mediated contributions often take place in overlap or during gaps in the specialist's turn, or after the whole-group talk is complete. The TAs also monitor the specialist's turns for potential speakership transition points and mobilize their students to provide a response (Stivers & Rossano, 2010; Taleghani-Kikazm et al., 2020). The sort of interactional mediation I will focus on in this study therefore includes both orientation to (potential) issues of intersubjectivity, but also, by extension, turn-taking complications that may delay the progressivity of the talk.

Background to the Data

The data form 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 2019, and the recordings in the current study come from a 2-hour science class that followed a Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) approach. The students were 24 Japanese junior high students arranged into three groups seated at six circular tables. The main teacher (Lyn) was a specialist science teacher who usually taught primary school in Australia, but had recently been seconded to the institution in Japan: as such, she was relatively unfamiliar with Japanese language and culture. There were also three TAs (known institutionally as agents), each assigned to help assist with one of the three groups of eight students.

Figure 1

Participants and Classroom Configuration



As shown in Figure 1, groups of four students are seated around two desks. There are three TAs (Kim, Tom and Ben) and each is responsible for eight students. Tom (Excerpt 3) is helping the students at the two foregrounded tables and there are four other groups of students behind. Lyn is the specialist science teacher who is teaching the entire class. Figure 2 below shows Ben and some of his students, who feature in Excerpts 1 and 2. The class consisted of two science topics (adaptation and absorption), each involving hands-on group tasks and experiments, as well as a class discussion about the purpose of science itself.

Figure 2

Ben and One of his Groups



Analysis

The focus of the current analysis is on the way the TAs fostered student participation through interactional mediation. They did so in a number of ways, but the current study will focus on just three: repeating key words to encourage active student participation; clarifying the specialist's directions; and, helping with class management, such when the specialist transitioned from group work to whole-class discussion.

Encouraging Student Participation by Repeating and Reformulating Key Elements

One way that the TAs assist the learners to follow the specialist teacher's talk is by repeating key phrases to their small groups, often in a simplified manner or with embodied action. This provides an opportunity for the learners to better understand the teacher's English. Excerpt 1 is a case in point. Lyn is addressing the whole group and Ben is standing behind one of his groups.

Excerpt 1: Experiment time

- 01 LYN it is |time to do our ex|periments.
 b-gz |looks at watch->
 y-gz |away----->
- 02 BEN |°'kay |experiment time°
 b-gz |.....|to YUI
 b-fc |smiles
 y-gz |-----~|BEN -----
- 03 LYN |you will do o:ne <at a time.>
 b-gz |to LYN
 y-gz |to LYN
- 04 and |your agent will help you (.)
 b-gz |to desk
 b-bh |distributes equipment -->
- 05 with the wa:ter.
- 06 (0.3)

In line 1, Lyn is addressing the whole class, preparing them to transition to a new phase of the class, which she formulates as “time to do our experiments”. Just after Lyn says the word “time”, Ben looks at his watch, then turns to one of the students to his left (Yui) and says

“okay, experiment time”. Clearly this is a reformulation of Lyn’s just-prior turn, featuring two of the key words (experiment and time), but also changing the order and deleting extraneous grammar so that it is simplified and therefore possibly more comprehensible for the learners. Additionally, Ben’s turn-initial “okay” helps reinforce the activity transition that is only implied via Lyn’s more syntactically complex turn component, “it is time to”. Notice also that Ben performs his *sotto voce* reformulation so as not to disturb Lyn’s on-going explanation. It is quiet and fitted to the gap between her TCUs, and is therefore designed for a sub-set of the participants, i.e., the students at the table directly in front of him. It is not, however, a parenthetical, since it is clearly on topic. Instead, it constitutes one form of brokering, in which the TA provides a timely, succinct version of the teacher’s explanation for the students in his group via a momentary schisming (Egbert, 1997) and pre-emptive reformulation of a key phrase (Svennevig et al., 2019).

Modeling Behaviour

In a related practice, Ben also uses such peripheral participation to projected behavior, and thus model up-coming activity to the learners. Excerpt 2 continues directly after the talk in Excerpt 1.

Excerpt 2: Experiment time (continued)

- 07 LYN I am going to give you (0.3)
- 08 ten minutes to do all of your
- 09 experiments,
- 10 BEN okay let’s start wi:[th]
- 11 LYN [an]d ↑when you
- 12 have [finished], (0.5)
- 13 BEN [this one.]
- 14 LYN I want you to put .hh a ↑↑tick (0.4)
- 15 if you think it ↑does absorb water:, (0.2)

It is worth noting also that Lyn’s tellings (lines 3-5, 7-9) are also a form of recruitment (Kendrick & Drew, 2016), i.e., they serve to mobilize the TAs into action, and formulations like “and your agent will help you” (line 4) can be seen as designed for the TA as much as for the learners, to whom they are ostensibly addressed. Ben orients to it in this way by beginning to distribute the equipment.

As the specialist’s instructions draw to a projectable close (lines 7-9), Ben self-selects in line 10 to address the group of learners with a brief turn “okay let’s start with this one” as he picks up some of the experiment equipment from their table. This okay-prefaced turn orients to topic transition and is formulated as an invitation rather than instruction, with “let’s” subtly positioning Ben himself as part of the projected activity. As it turns out, Ben’s turn is a little premature since Lyn goes on to give a further instruction, but when this happens, Ben delays further talk until she is finished. Several of the learners turn to face Ben as he touches the materials, suggesting that they are likewise now orienting to this as the transition from whole-group instruction to the small-group experiment activity. Ben has thus used reformulated repetition (Excerpt 1) and simplified modelling of the activity (Excerpt 2)

to assist with classroom management and enable students to better follow the specialist teacher's directions.

Preparing the Students to Answer and Interpreting their Response for the Specialist

Another way that TAs help manage the class is by facilitating question-and-answer sequences in plenary sections of the class. The next sequence of talk comes from part of the lesson in which the students were asked to define "science" in their groups, writing their ideas on a mini-whiteboard. The specialist teacher (Lyn) then elicited an answer from each group during subsequent whole-class talk, writing each group response on the main whiteboard at the front of the room. With six groups to manage, she seems to rely on the agents to help her select the next speaker. The TAs choose a student from among the group of four and then direct the specialist to the respondent, such as by raising their hands.

Excerpt 3: Study of Earth

The students have been giving LYN examples of things that science studies. All but two groups have spoken. BEN prepares his group then interprets their answer for LYN.

01 LYN ni:ce job. (.) good job. well done.

02 give them a clap everybody.

03 | (0.5)

b-px |claps

b-px |moves toward front of girls' table

04 LYN nice job.

05 (0.5)

06 LYN |how li:fe |works.

l-rh |writing on board

b-rh |points to MEG's mini-whiteboard



07 (0.9)

08 LYN hh |we: have two more groups.

b-px |stands back

e-px |tilts head toward mini-whiteboard

e-rh |points at word



09 (0.4)

Excerpt 3 begins at a point where Lyn has just dealt with a response from another group of learners, praising them (lines 1, 4) and inviting student applause (lines 2-3), both of which are closings that project transition to another group's response. After a brief gap of silence, in line 6 Lyn writes the prior group's response on the whiteboard repeating it aloud as she does so. It is at this point that Ben quietly points to something written on the mini-whiteboard in front of Meg. Emi turns to Meg, and Yui looks at what Meg has written. In other words, Ben has occasioned an apparently silent sequence in which the learners ready an upcoming response.

Excerpt 4: Study of Earth (continued)

```

10 LYN  a::h |this group. |[$yes:$]
    l-rh    , , , , |points to boys in TOM's group
    l-hd                    |nods to DAI
    t-rh          |points to DAI
    d-gz          |turns to LYN

11 DAI                                     [ (      ) ]

12                                     (0.2)

13 LYN  [can] you tell m-

14 DAI  [ah ]

15 DAI  [weath]er (      )

16 ??   [umm: ]

17 LYN  |hhh wow::
    l-px  |turns around, hands in air

18      |science is about the: (.) |[wea:th[er.  thank |you:.      ]
    l-px  |moves to whiteboard
    b-rh                                     |waves to MEG, arm outstretched
    b-gz  |LYN-----~~~~~|MEG-----

19 BEN                                     [| (you gonna have a go?)]
    e-px                                     |leans toward MEG
    m-hd                                     |nods to BEN
    m-gz                                     |down to page

20 LYN  and [that is called (.) |me:teorology.

21 MEG      |[(                                     )] ((to EMI))
    m-px      |leans toward EMI
    m-rh                                     |circles above page

22      >that is a big word.<

23      well done. |thank you= |'bout the weather=
    l-gz  >DAI-----|~~~left~~~~|DAI----->
    l-bh          |claps-->
    l-rh          |points to DAI
    t-bh          |claps-->

24      =|give them a clap. lo:vely

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ss-bh |claps-->
l-gz  |>~~~left to BEN----->
```

25 (0.9)

As it turns out, Lyn goes on to choose a group on the other side of the room (line 10), receipting Dai's one-word answer in full-sentence form (line 18). The IRF sequence is therefore hearably complete and it is at this point that Ben, on the other side of the room, stretches out his hand and waves to Meg, seemingly signalling to her that she will be next to speak. His overlapped turn in line 19 selects Meg as the group representative and Meg's nod acknowledges Ben's gesture. Ben is therefore timing his mediated preparation with the whole-class talk being directed by Lyn, but in line 20 when she adds a turn increment that projects further talk directed at the other group, Ben's outstretched hand (indicating a bid for turn) drops, likewise demonstrating his ongoing attention to the trajectory of the talk.

Finally, in Excerpt 5 Lyn turn's to Meg's group for a response.

Excerpt 5: Study of Earth (continued)

```
26 LYN |nice |(work) .
l-gz  |> BEN----->
l-rh  |index finger raised--->
```

```
27 LYN |one more |group.
l-gz  |> BEN----->
l-rh  |+++-----+--->
b-bh |points to MEG's group
m-rh |lifts hand-->
m-gz  |to NOA
```

```
28 | (0.2)
m-rh |circles page
```

```
29 LYN |[yes.] |↑can you tell us?
m-gz  |turns to LYN
m-rh  |raises hand to LYN
b-rh  |points to MEG
l-lh  |points to MEG
l-px  |leans toward MEG
```

```
30 BEN [(ah-)]
```

```
31 MEG |u[:h]
m-gz  |to page
m-rh  |circles page
```

```
32 BEN [re]ady?
```

```
33 | (0.2)
m-gz  |to LYN
```

```
34 BEN |o:ne two three.
m-gz  |to NOA then YUI
```

```
35 | (0.6)
m-hd  |slow nod
```

```
36 MEG st[u:dy ar:se? ]
```


37 YUI [|study: the [ar]se
 m-hd |nods

38 EMI [ear]th.

39 | (0.9)
 m-gz |to LYN
 y-gz |to LYN
 b-gz |to LYN
 l-gz |>to group



39 BEN >study of eart'?=they say science is

40 the study of (the) ear't'.<

41 (0.5)

42 LYN study of earth.

43 BEN yeah

44 LYN study of- oh my goodness!

45 well |done |yes it is. the: study of earth.

 l-bh |claps-----

 Ss-bh |clap----->

 As-bh |clap----->

46 |\$thank you.\$ (2.7)

 Ss-bh |clap-----

 As-bh |clap-----

Having receipted a response from Dai's group on her right, Lyn turns to her left to search for the next group. Even as she is giving a positive assessment to Dai (line 26) she is turning to Ben and preparing the gesture she will use to accompany "one more group" (hearable as a request for a bid for turn) in line 27. Evidently monitoring this visible transition, Ben gives an embodied response of his own, pointing to Meg's group with both hands and Meg raises her hand before Lyn has finished her turn (line 27). This transition is therefore very smooth, unlike the long delays that can often be experienced in Japanese classrooms when students are unwilling to raise their hands. The mediating work by the TA up to this point is largely responsible for achieving the effortless transition from one group to the next.

In line 29, Lyn then selects Meg as the next speaker and leans toward her slightly. Interestingly, the "yes" part of this turn may be directed at Ben, since the pitch rise at the start of "Can you tell us?" seems to design it for Meg. This would suggest that Lyn is acknowledging the work of both Ben and Meg in offering to respond.

As it turns out though, Meg does not respond by herself and she initially looks down at her notes and utters a hesitation token (line 31). Ben attempts to orchestrate a choral response from all four group members, prompting them with “ready? One, two, three” (lines 32 and 34). Meg then gives a slow nod to likewise co-ordinate the choral response (line 35), but the end result is somewhat staggered (lines 36-38) and along with the Japanese pronunciation of “earth”, it appears that Lyn does not understand the response. When the learners turn to her for 0.9-sec (line 39), Lyn does not provide any immediate uptake. This leads Ben to deliver a second version of the group’s response (lines 40-41), which is much faster and includes a self-repetition with target-like pronunciation of the keyword (“earth” instead of “arse”). Lyn finally provides receipt through repetition (Greer et al, 2009) in line 43 and then goes on to deliver a second, more animated receipt that is perhaps directed at the entire class (lines 45-46). This segment of the sequence demonstrates that the TA’s interactional mediation is a two-way process, and is therefore not only for the benefit of the learners. When Lyn is unable to follow what the learners have said, Ben is able to step in and initiate third-person repair for her, restoring the interactional progressivity and keeping the class on track.

Concluding Discussion

By acting as interactional mediators, these TAs work to make the specialist’s instructions comprehensible to the students. They repeat keywords and reformulate difficult terms, and they assist with class management tasks, like preparing the learners to answer in whole-class discussions. In order to do this, the TAs monitor the teacher’s instructions, projecting the sequence of activities and brokering them in ways that mobilize a timely response from the learners. Such mediation relies on constant subtle adaptations and augmentations of the participation framework.

The TA’s strategies work in the background, allowing the whole-class talk to progress smoothly. While some of their pre-emptive repairs target possible linguistic trouble, at other times these strategies are oriented to upcoming turn-taking issues. By monitoring the specialist teacher’s talk, the TA projects a next action and readies their learners to respond. The TAs are therefore accomplishing an important intermediary role within this sort of classroom interaction.

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Notes

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