

Moving out of IRF (Initiation-Response-Feedback): A Single Case Analysis

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A common practice in classroom discourse is the IRF sequence (teacher initiation–student response–teacher feedback; Sinclair & Coulthard, 1975; cf. IRE in Mehan, 1979). Based on a single case analysis from an adult English as a second language (ESL) class, this article demonstrates how one ESL student manages, in close coordination with the teacher, to move out of a series of uninterrupted IRFs during a homework review activity, establishing instead a renewed participation structure that allows for student-initiated negotiations, which her coparticipants then jointly orient to and successfully accomplish. The analysis suggests that creating negotiation-rich opportunities is paramount not just during pair and group activities, but more critically, during teacher–whole class interactions.

Keywords classroom discourse; conversation analysis; IRF; learner initiation; single case analysis; participation structure; homework review

This article examines the constraints and possibilities surrounding a prevalent practice in classroom discourse, namely the IRF sequence (teacher initiation–student response–teacher feedback; Sinclair & Coulthard, 1975; cf. IRE in Mehan, 1979). Specifically, I show how one English as a second language (ESL) student manages, in careful coordination and cooperation with the teacher, to move out of an uninterrupted series of IRF sequences, establishing instead a renewed participation structure that allows for student-initiated negotiations,

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which her coparticipants then jointly orient to and successfully accomplish. I will begin by outlining the background that informs and inspires this inquiry.

Turn-Taking, IRF, and “CA for SLA”

According to Sacks, Schegloff, and Jefferson (1974), conversational turn-taking is a locally managed, party-administered, and interactionally contingent system, in which participants orient to the achievement of “one [speaker] at a time” with the minimization of gaps and overlaps. At the end of each possible turn-constructural unit (TCU; e.g., a word, a phrase, a clause or a sentence), a transition-relevance place (TRP) becomes available, which then triggers the application of a set of rules in the order of (1) “the current speaker selects the next speaker,” (2) “the next speaker self-selects,” and (3) “the current speaker continues.” In other words, turn-taking is managed one TRP at a time.

This utterly “democratic” machinery, however, becomes less so in less flexible speech-exchange systems such as the classroom, where, as McHoul (1985) pointed out, “the ‘next speaker self-selects’ option is not available to student next speakers” and “the ‘current speaker selects next speaker’ option is only minimally available to them as current speakers” (pp. 58–59). In fact, a central structure in classroom discourse is the IRF sequence (teacher initiation–student response–teacher feedback; Sinclair & Coulthard, 1975) or IRE, where E stands for Evaluation (Mehan, 1979). According to Wells (1993), “if there is one finding on which learners of classroom discourse agreed, it must be the ubiquity of the three-part exchange structure” (p. 1). Varying views have been put forward regarding the value of IRF for learning (e.g., Hall, 1998; Nystrand, 1997; Seedhouse, 1996; van Lier, 2000; Wells, 1993). The current project joins this conversation by offering a detailed look into the role of a particular type of IRF in a homework review activity and by showing how this machinery of IRF may become relaxed or suspended. In this respect, McHoul’s (1985) words may in part characterize the motivation of my inquiry: “educators who have an interest in ‘freeing up’ or ‘democratizing’ classroom talk could well begin their investigations with strategies for re-organizing any given classroom’s turn-taking structures” (p. 62). It is important to note, however, that IRF is not the only interaction that takes place in the classroom (Cazden, 2001); neither is it a single sequence type. The “initiation” turns of IRFs carry out different kinds of actions, and the third turns from the teacher may launch a range of teaching activities (Lee, 2007).

The larger intellectual atmosphere for this study is the now well-underway movement of “CA for SLA” (Markee & Kasper, 2004; also see *MLJ* 2007

focus issue), the gist of which is to utilize the powerful tools of conversation analysis (CA) to address issues of second language acquisition (SLA). As an empirical method that treats social interaction as an object of inquiry in its own right, the serious introduction of CA into the field of SLA only began in the late 1990s (e.g., Firth & Wagner, 1997; see recent elaboration in Firth & Wagner, 2007). It is not surprising, then, that CA-oriented research on SLA within and outside the classroom is limited in both amount and scope. Still, the rapidly growing number of CA-inspired classroom-based studies have generated important insights into a range of interactional practices typically not recognized or dealt with in great detail in traditional SLA studies (e.g., Frazier, 2007; He, 2000; Hellermann, 2006; Markee, 2004; Mori, 2004; Seedhouse, 2004; for overviews of CA and language learning, see Kasper, 2006, Mori & Zuengler, 2008, and Seedhouse, 2005). Although it is not always clear or made explicit how an understanding of these practices may inform our understandings of learning, we *have* learned, for example, that tasks do not always unfold as planned (Markee, 2005; Mori, 2002), which provides a useful basis for refining or reconsidering our instructional practices in task-based language teaching.

Attempts have also been made to draw a more direct connection between CA and language learning. Brouwer and Wagner (2004), for example, used the CA method to describe one learner's increasing participation in the second language (L2) community of practice. Markee (2008) also strived for an emic account of learning by tracking how one participant incorporated the word "prerequisite" into his interactional repertoire over time. Kahn (2008) showed the emerging ability of adult learners in a community-based ESL class to use the simple past or to tell a story over the course of a 10-week semester. Hellermann (2008) detailed ESL learners' changing practices during dyadic interaction based on longitudinal data collected in multiple classrooms using multiple cameras. In her recent review article, Kasper (2008) specified the connection between CA and learning by calling attention to those "cognitive moments" uncovered by detailed CA analyses.

Finally, one way to pursue the "CA for SLA" enterprise, given the reconceptualization of learning as participation in sociocultural theory (Donato, 2000; Pavlenko & Lantolf, 2000; Sfar, 1998), is perhaps to utilize the empirical power of CA to detail the interactional practices that either create or inhibit the opportunities for participation and, by extension, the opportunities for learning (cf. Allwright, 2005; Walsh, 2002, 2006). In other words, although CA may not be the appropriate tool to study learning directly (He, 2004), it *can* contribute to the larger inquiry of learning by investigating learning opportunities. Agnes He (2004), for example, demonstrated how conversation structures can be used

as a resource to shape the learning environment and participation opportunities. The current study is an attempt to further demonstrate the potential of CA as an approach to SLA.

In short, previous research in turn-taking, IRF, and “CA for SLA” serve as an important knowledge base upon which this current project is conducted and to which it is intended to contribute.

Method

Data

The data come from a corpus of fifteen 2-hr adult ESL classes videotaped at a community English program in the United States in Fall 2005 and Spring 2006. A research assistant and I collaborated in the data collection. For the class analyzed here, I was behind the camera. This intermediate-level class met three times a week from 10 to 12 a.m. on Monday, Wednesday, and Thursday for 10 weeks. On this particular morning, there were 10 students in the room, representing three different first languages: Japanese (3), Korean (3), and Spanish (4). Their ages varied from 22 to 51. The students were seated in roughly a semicircle with irregular seating outside the “inner ring.” The room was almost filled to its full capacity.

The small size of the room made it impossible for the single camera to capture a full view of the class at any given point in time. As the “technician,” I placed the camera at a position that maximizes the number of participants on camera. At the same time, I adjusted the tripod handle and sometimes moved the entire tripod throughout the 2 hr to capture different frames of interaction. Because I was not focusing on any particular practice at the time of the videotaping, my camera angle was essentially guided by my intuitive behavior as an observer in the classroom. In other words, my “electronic” eye very much replicated my naked eye. I was not fully aware of this “partial view” problem until later during analysis when the nonverbal behavior of certain participants became relevant but not accessible. Using multiple cameras would certainly have yielded a fuller view of the interaction, but it might also have intensified the problem of the observer’s paradox. As Mori and Zuengler (2008) pointed out, “the more elaborate recording equipment becomes, the more likely it is for the participants to be influenced by its very existence” (p. 23).

The 2-hr class has been transcribed and analyzed line-by-line in its entirety using a modified version of the system developed by Gail Jefferson (see Appendix). The transcription modifications are mainly designed to specify the

timing of nonverbal actions and to incorporate artifacts specific to classroom interaction such as textbook (TB) and blackboards (BB). In particular, I use a single dash to link verbal (or silence) to nonverbal actions that occur simultaneously, as in “Yes-((looks down))” or “(0.8)-((walks away)).” I also use the braces { } to indicate where the simultaneous occurrence begins and ends when necessary. For example, in “°Okay° how long have {yo:u-((looks up at M))} know::n,” the movement of looking up only co-occurs with the utterance of “you.” Finally, I also use (syl syl) to indicate the number of syllables heard when transcription is impossible.

The class began with “checking homework” (cf. “checking episodes” in Gourlay, 2005). It represents what Walsh (2006) referred to as the “materials mode” of classroom interaction, where “the interaction is organized exclusively around the material” (p. 70). The particular material comes from an ESL workbook (Purpura & Pinkley, 2000). The entire “check homework” segment, which lasted 25 mins, contained four different exercises, and the majority of the time was spent on the last two exercises: Practices 5 and 6. Practice 5 is a fill-in-the-blanks task for which the students are asked to use the present perfect or the present perfect progressive with six given verbs in a passage on the Harlem Globetrotters. Here is an example:

*The Harlem Globetrotters are a world-famous comic basketball team.
They (1. play) _____ basketball since 1926.*

In Practice 6, students are asked to read the sentences and complete the questions using the present perfect or present perfect progressive as in the following:

*Oh really? I didn't know you were training for the Olympics.
How long _____?*

As an initial observation during my “unmotivated looking” (Psathas, 1995), a series of IRF¹ sequences (Sinclair & Coulthard, 1975) transpired as the class went through each homework item. Nothing seemed particularly interesting. At one point, a student raised a question with regard to an earlier item. It turned out that she was not the only one who had a question. Her “I have a question” initiative becomes the “pivot”² of the entire “check homework” segment. I was struck by how different the qualities (or tones) of the interactions were before and after the “pivot.” I also found myself wondering why the student’s question was not raised much earlier, immediately after the problem. Finally, I was curious about how this “pivot” question, which literally launched an entire phase of qualitatively different interaction, came about in the first place.

I decided to conduct a single case analysis (see below) to get a better grip on what I had found to be puzzling and intriguing at the same time.

Let me emphasize, before proceeding, that the series of IRF sequences (cf., sequence-of-sequences in Schegloff, 2007) to be considered in this article are of a particular type associated with calling on learners to report their answers from a previously completed written exercise. They typically show up in the following format:

T (I): Names item number; nominates student.

S (R): Reads answer aloud to class.

T (F): Accepts (“Okay.”), evaluates (“Very good.”), or launches an error correction sequence (“Let’s write this down.”)

Because of this narrow focus, my analysis yields understandings of these IRF series only, not IRF in general although I may use “IRF” now and then for efficiency of reference.

Based on my experience as an ESL teacher, a teacher-trainer, and a classroom discourse researcher, “check homework” is a fairly routine activity found in ESL classes. It provides an opportunity (a) for the teacher to gauge the learners’ level of understanding vis-à-vis certain materials and (b) for the learners to display their mastery of or problems with these materials. Understanding how this routine activity is managed *in situ* can therefore offer critical information on the nature of learning.

Single Case Analysis

In CA, analysts mainly work from a collection of instances to describe “a single phenomenon or a single domain of phenomenon” (Schegloff, 1987, p. 101). There is also what has been referred to as the “single case analysis” (Hutchby & Wooffitt, 1998), as epitomized in Harvey Sack’s (1992) work. In single case analysis, “the resources of past work on a *range of phenomena* and organizational domains in talk-in-interaction are brought to bear on the analytic explication of a *single fragment* of talk” (Schegloff, 1987, p. 101). The purpose of a single case analysis, then, is not to discover a new practice, but to (a) showcase CA’s analytical potency in illuminating the intricacies of a single utterance, speech act, or episode (Hutchby & Wooffitt, 1998; Schegloff, 1987, 1988); (b) develop a richer understanding of an existing phenomenon within its extended local context (Macbeth, 1994; Maynard & Frankel, 2003; Raymond & Heritage, 2006); (c) create a starting point from which collections of a candidate phenomenon may be built (Hutchby & Wooffitt, 1998); and (d) uncover a particular aspect of interaction previously unnoticed by but important

for professionals working within a specific (institutional) context (Maynard & Frankel, 2003; Mori, 2004; Schegloff, 1999).

For example, by examining a single episode during an interview between a researcher and a man with the pseudonym Alvin, who is believed to have compromised capacity in the discourse and pragmatic domains due to his surgically separated brain hemispheres, Schegloff (1999) demonstrated Alvin's ability within a few seconds "to parse and to grasp the talk of an interlocutor and to respond effectively in interaction" without saying a word (p. 419). Through a single case analysis, Maynard and Frankel (2003) showed how physicians managed troublesome diagnostic news in relation to other news deliveries within the same interview, proposing that it may be useful for physician training to include issues such as how to share serious results or, more generally, how to manage uncertainty and indeterminacy in delivering diagnostic results. Mori (2004), in her analysis of a single episode in a Japanese as a foreign language classroom, showed that pair work was intermittently treated as an individual task or an interactive task by different participants at different junctures of interaction. Members of a pair, for example, moved in and out of a word-search sequence, where they switched to their first language (L1) but did not always agree on the timing of doing so. This finding holds potential implications for the use of L1 and the design of pair work in the language classroom.

Along similar lines, the goal of the single case analysis to be reported in this study is to achieve what Mori (2004) referred to as "promot[ing] the overall sensitivity to the intricacy of classroom talk and generate critical reflections on classroom policies and instructional designs" (p. 536). My specific aim is to reach a more detailed understanding of the web of constraints and possibilities presented by a series of IRFs surrounding a homework review activity. Finally, in addition to using CA as the primary method of inquiry, more general principles of qualitative analysis such as asking questions and making comparisons, which involves a constant interplay between induction and deduction, are also invoked throughout this project (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

Although the research outcome is highly pertinent to instructional practices, the two initial questions that guide my analysis are (a) Why is the "pivot" question massively delayed? (b) What eventually enables the series of student initiations?

Findings

In what follows, I will consider first the delay of the "pivot" question and then the achievements of student initiations. In the transcripts, the original line

numbers of the data extracts have been preserved to reflect the chronological order of the events.

Delay of the “Pivot” Question

The “pivot” question is produced at a time when Miyuki has completed the last item of Practice 6 and the check-homework segment is possibly complete. As shown below, Miyuki’s question targets a problem that arose four items earlier when Kevin correctly produced the response “How long have you *been* married?” Miyuki wonders, four items later, whether “How long have you married?” would be incorrect, thus implicitly questioning Kevin’s answer as the only acceptable one.

Practice 6

Item	Respondent
1	Vickie
2	Sarah
3	Kevin
4	Miyako
5	Marie
6	Yuka
7	Miyuki

In what follows, I will provide a detailed account of what is only glossed here, starting with Kevin’s item:

Wow, I didn’t know you were married.

How long _____?

(1) [Kevin-married]

- 219 Kevin: Wow. I didn’t know (.) you were married.
 220 (0.8)
 221 Ho:::w lo:ng
 222 have you::[:::: (.)b: e e n m a r r i e d.]=
 223 T: [((slight nod turns into large encouraging nods))]
 224 =((smiley voice)) Very good=how long have
 you been married.
 225 → =Very good. Nu:mber four. Miyako,
 226 (0.5)
 227 Miyako: ((reading)) °that’s great . . .

The sequence begins with Kevin's response (R) and is followed by the teacher's feedback (F). Note that the nonverbal portion of the teacher's positive assessment in lines 223–224 is launched very early, whereas Kevin is inching toward completing the present perfect form of "be married." Her encouraging nods are followed by the smiley "Very good," which is produced immediately upon the completion of Kevin's response, and two more TCUs ensue in latching (i.e., without allowing even the normal space between TCUs), where Kevin's response is repeated with the emphatic "been" and given a second "Very good." Two features may be noted of the teacher's evaluation. It is done in a multiunit turn specifically designed not to allow for any turn incursion. In other words, learners might otherwise have had the opportunity to self-select after, for example, the teacher's first "Very good" or her repetition of Kevin's response. Second, it is delivered with much verbal and nonverbal "fanfare," which contributes to putting Kevin's answer "on a pedestal" so to speak, thereby constituting any other alternative as potentially deviant and less than competent (Waring, 2008). Both features make it difficult for Miyuki to raise the possibility of an alternatively correct answer. Unfortunately, because both Miyuki and Kevin are off-camera during this segment, we do not have access to any nonverbal behavior (e.g., puzzling look) of Miyuki that may have shed further light on the analysis.

Back to the sequence then: Observe further that in line 225 no space is left for any learner initiation after the teacher's "Very good," as she immediately proceeds in the same turn to launch the next elicitation sequence, clearly not orienting to any possibility of student questions, and indeed, none is raised. The "integrity" of the IRF sequences is therefore jointly preserved by the teacher and the students.

This locally constituted orientation to a string of successive IRF sequences appears to be honored throughout the next three opportunity spaces, where Miyuki could have raised her question but did not. Extract (2) is a rather striking case where the IRF string remains undisturbed throughout what appears to be a rather "permissive" space (lines 232, 234–235):

*That's great! So you go hiking every weekend?
How long _____?*

(2) [Miyako-hiking]

227 Miyako: ((reads)) °that's great. So you (0.8) you go hiking
228 every weekend.=How long have you been (0.2)
229 going hiking every weekend.°=

- 230 T: =Good. How long have you been going hiking.=or
 231 how long have you been going hiking every
 232 → weekend. Right?
 233 Vickie: ((nods))-(all Ss on camera looking down at TB))
 234 T: → °okay.°
 235 → (0.6)-((all Ss on camera continue looking down))
 236 T: Number fi:::ve? Marie did we skip you?
 237 Marie: ((looks up and smiles))
 238 T: Did we? I'm so:rry. Go ahead number fi:ve?

Miyako's response is received with the teacher's "Good" without any delay. Similar to what transpired in the prior segment, a partial repetition of the correct response ensues. Instead of using a second "Good" to bracket the correct response, however, the teacher provides in latch a full repetition of the correct response. Thereafter, a sequential boundary appears to be emerging. The teacher's "right?" in line 232 is designed to prefer agreement (Sacks, 1987), and it receives the minimal response in accordance with the preference structure. Her soft "okay" further signals that the sequence is now complete, thereby marking the boundary after which a new item may begin. The (0.6) second gap presents a final opportunity for learner self-selection. (The teacher is off-camera at this point, unfortunately.) Still, none is taken. The operation of these uninterrupted series of successive IRF sequences remains intact.

Extract (3) begins with the end of Marie's item that involves a prolonged error correction sequence:

*I don't believe it! I didn't know your sister wrote poetry.
 How long _____?*

(3) [Marie-poetry]

- 240 Marie: ((reads)) I don't believe it. I didn't know you sister
 241 wrote poet.
 242 (0.5)
 243 T: Poetry.
 244 Marie: poetry. How long your sister (.) has been writing
 245 poetry. ((looks up at T))
 246 T: °Oka:::y, let's write this d↑own.°
 247 ((lines omitted))
 248 How long (0.2) has she >°been writing

- 249 poetry.[◦]<=It's a question.
 250 (0.6)
 251 Marie: [◦]A[.:h.[◦] yeah.]
 252 T: [Oka y.]
 253 → (0.5)
 254 T: [◦]Good.[◦] Number six, Yuka?

In lines 248–249, the teacher repeats the now corrected version in a decreasing volume and quickened pace, followed by a latched, concluding account for the subject-operator inversion, thereby winding down the extended sequence. After a brief (0.6) second gap in line 250, Marie produces her “change of state” (Heritage, 1984) “A:::h” followed by a confirming “yeah,” which overlaps with the teacher’s boundary-marking “Okay” in line 252. By this time, both the teacher and Marie are orienting to the “poetry” item as having been completed. The (0.5) second gap in line 253 may be a window of opportunity for student initiation, but again, it is not treated as such, and the teacher proceeds to nominate Yuka as the next respondent.

In Segment (4), Yuka responds to the “saxophone” item:

*Oh, come on! You really play the saxophone?
 How long _____?*

(4) [Yuka-saxophone]

- 274 T: [◦]Good.[◦] Number six, Yuka?
 275 (0.8)
 276 Yuka: ((reading)) >oh< come o:::n. You really play the
 277 saxophone.
 278 (0.5)
 279 How lo:ng (.) have you been playing the sa- the
 280 saxophone.=
 281 T: =The ↓saxophone.↓Very good. [◦]very good.[◦]
 282 Number seven? Miyuki?

Yuka produces the correct form of “play saxophone” in lines 279–280. The teacher repeats the final phrase of Yuka’s response with a tinge of emphasis in downward pitch, which is then followed by two consecutive “very good”s in a decreasing volume. The sequence is thus drawing to a close, and Miyuki is subsequently nominated as the next speaker. The end of the “saxophone” sequence appears to be another space where Miyuki could

have initiated her question. Instead, she waits to be nominated. Moreover, upon gaining her turn, as will be shown later on, Miyuki further delays her question by first responding to the teacher's summon to complete "Number seven."

The picture that begins to emerge is this: At the end of each IRF sequence where it seems as though anything could happen for Miyuki, nothing in fact does. Neither the teacher nor the students (maybe not at the same time) appears to orient to that sequential boundary as a place for possible student questions. Even at places where the boundary seems to be loosely managed with gaps of silence, that silence does not appear to be a free-for-all silence, but a specific pre-"next teacher move" one. In other words, the IRF sequences are not only stringently structured within themselves (as one move makes conditionally relevant the next), they are also tightly chained to one another within the same exercise, offering few spaces in between: The completion of one IRF makes the next conditionally relevant. In addition, up until now, the teacher has been nominating the next speaker after bringing up each item. Although the order in which the students are called on is not predictable, the teacher does orient to the general principle of giving everyone a chance (e.g., "Marie did we skip you? . . . I'm so::rry" in Extract 2). Although IRF specifies R as the next relevant action, it does not specify whether the response turn is designated, solicited, or volunteered (cf. "hand raising" in Sahlstrom, 2002). Hence, what propels Miyuki's "delay" appears to be an aggregate effect of IRF and participants' understanding of the overall turn allocation system for the moment. In short, this chained IRF structure works with the "teacher nomination" turn allocation system to establish who speaks when, and that appears to be the dominant contingency for this "check-homework" segment so far, which is jointly oriented to by the students and the teacher. It is within this specific sequential environment that Miyuki's question is delayed.³

Achievement of Learner-Generated Questions

Given the overpowering mechanism of these chained IRFs, we can now begin to appreciate the extraordinariness of Miyuki's "pivot" question and those that follow suit. This subsection takes a closer look at their achievements. Upon a closer look, however, it becomes clear that what initially appeared to be Miyuki's individual achievement is in fact brought about in meticulous coconstruction with the teacher. Therefore, it would seem more accurate to speak of the

“pivot” *sequence* (lines 291–301 in Extract 5 below) rather than the “pivot” question.

“Pivot” Sequence

What I would like to capture, more specifically, is the very delicate balance managed by Miyuki, in close collaboration with the teacher, between observing the IRF and breaking away from it. Miyuki’s assigned item is the following:

*Oh, really? I didn't know you were diving in Madrid now!
How long _____?*

(5) [Miyuki-pivot]

283 Miyuki: ((reads)) Oh really? I didn't know you were (0.5)
284 diving in (.) Madrid now?
285 T: mhm?
286 (0.2)
287 Miyuki: How long have you been ()- diving in Madrid.
288 T: Madrid.
289 (.)
290 ↓Very good.
291 Miyuki: ° (syll syll)°-
292 T: [>°Does anybody°-<]
293 Miyuki: → [I have one ((raises hand))] [ques]tion,
294 T: [Yes.]
295 Miyuki: Number three is if without “be:” °is not good?°
296 T: How lo:ng (1.0) you've been marrie[d?
297 Miyuki: { [Have you
298 married. ((looks up from textbook)) }
299 {°have you married.°-((looks at T))}
300 T: °Oka::y?° ((walks to blackboard)) >Let's write this
301 d↑own. < ((starts writing))

Even in the immediate vicinity of Miyuki’s initiation, the constraints of IRF remain clearly relevant. First to be noticed is the micropause in line 289 after the teacher’s correction of Miyuki’s misplaced stress on “Madrid.” The absence of uptake on Miyuki’s part may be attributed to her failure to register what the teacher said as a correction. It may also be a byproduct of the “pre-occupation”

with her upcoming question (Raymond & Heritage, 2006, pp. 682–683). In either case, no move is made by Miyuki until *after* the teacher's explicit (positive) evaluation or the completion of the IRF in progress. As Mehan (1979) observed, the "appropriate juncture for students to gain access to the floor is after an initiation-reply-evaluation sequence, not after any speaker turn" (p. 140). Second, the normative IRF procedure of "teacher nominates/selects" continues to underpin the ways in which Miyuki's turn is sought and granted. Note that through her action projection (Schegloff, 1980) "I have a question" along with the hand raising, Miyuki *seeks the permission* to speak as opposed to speak freely. Third, the very composition of Miyuki's initiation shows her orientation to such initiation as dispreferred (Schegloff, 2007), and more specifically in this case, unexpected against the parameters of IRF. That is, in addition to the potential of action projection in adumbrating delicate matters, the *sotto voce* cutoff in line 291 and the decreased volume of the actual question in line 295 ("is not good?") convey the mitigation typical of a dispreferred action. So does the design of "if without "be:" is not good?" By constructing her suggested alternative as potentially "not good," Miyuki further mitigates her initiating action.

In the midst of maneuvering the constraints of these particular IRF sequences, Miyuki simultaneously manages, in close coordination with the teacher, to maximize her opportunities to move out of the IRF. One can note, first of all, her effort to speak, albeit an initially feeble one in line 291, *immediately* after the closing of the prior IRF. We can perhaps explicate her interjection at this juncture in part by the "last as next bias" (Sacks, Schegloff, & Jefferson, 1974, p. 712)—namely the one who speaks just prior to the current speaker is also favored as the next speaker. Indeed, this is the first opportunity that Miyuki gets to be the "last" since Kevin's item, which she grasps without missing a beat. A second opportunity for Miyuki is being presented with a different sort of sequential boundary—the end of not just a single IRF but of all the IRFs within an exercise. This major sequential boundary is also a frequent juncture, as borne out not only in line 292 in this extract but also in the larger dataset, where the teacher issues her "final call" (e.g., "Is everybody okay?" "Any questions?") before moving on to the next item. Again, it is an opportunity that Miyuki seizes and exploits. Third, the specific turn design that Miyuki employs to gain the floor is her initiation of a presequence (see "action projection" earlier) with "I have one question," which is then completed by the teacher's overlapping "Yes." This presequence paves the way, or, more specifically, "buys" the turn space for the delivery of the actual question. Finally, the substance of Miyuki's

question may also play a role in the success of her self-selection. As Mehan (1979, p. 152) wrote,

in order for a student's contribution to change the course of a lesson once it is in progress, it must not only be placed in the proper juncture, and be relevant to previous discussion, it must make an "interesting" or "original" contribution as well."

Miyuki's question regarding the acceptability of "How long have you married?" fits the profile as partially evidenced in its extended treatment in the transcript, which is not shown here. One might argue, however, that her question does not exactly change "the course of a lesson" as originally meant by Mehan (p. 152) because it still addresses an issue within the homework review activity.

In the meantime, Miyuki's maneuvering would not have been successful without the finely coordinated facilitation of the teacher. As can be seen, as Miyuki launches her initiation, the teacher also shows openness to and alignment with learner initiations via her overlapping "Does anybody-" (line 292). In other words, Miyuki hears the teacher's potential call for participation as she begins speaking and raises her hand, and she proceeds to finish her turn with the word "question" in part as a response to the teacher's incipient invitation. There might be additional nonverbal evidence (e.g., gaze and gestures) that embodies the teacher's "open" orientation at this point, but, unfortunately, she is off-camera in this particular frame. In addition, as Miyuki bids for her turn with "I have a question" and her raised hand, the teacher abandons her own question in progress and immediately ratifies Miyuki's bid with an encouraging (see emphasized delivery) "Yes" (line 294) in recognitional overlap (Jefferson, 1983), thus further orienting to the shift to student questioning.

In short, while successfully maneuvering the constraints of IRF, Miyuki also efficiently exploits the *in situ* sequential opportunities, with the assistance of the teacher, to embark upon a move out of the IRF.

Subsequent Questions

It turns out that what the pivot sequence managed to make possible is not just the voicing of Miyuki's own understanding issue. As shown below, three other questions follow suit, each of which targets a problem (far) earlier in the interaction. Put otherwise, we have a series of "delayed" questions besides Miyuki's.

Practice 5

Item #	Respondent
1 & 2	Miyuki
3 & 4	Kevin
5 & 6	Nobi

Practice 6

Item #	Respondent
1	Vickie
2	Sarah
3	Kevin
4	Miyako
5	Marie
6	Yuka
7	Miyuki

Questions

Order	Initiator
1	Miyuki
2	Kisook
3	Marta
4	Marie

Again, in what follows, I will provide a detailed account of what is glossed here. As will be seen, Miyuki's "pivot" question, although not the only driving force, does make available previously unavailable speaking opportunities for her fellow participants. Extract (6) begins with the final lines of the sequence that addresses Miyuki's question:

(6) [KisookQ-poetry]

- 366 T: Did you marry him? "Ma:rry" is a ve:rb. °b' here
 367 "marry" is an adjective.°
 368 (1.0)-((Ss on camera disengage gaze from T))
 369 T: → °'kay? Kisook you have a question.°
 370 Kisook: () Number five.
 371 T: >Numer five. Okay, d'y know what< poe:try i::s,
 372 (0.2)
 373 Kisook: °yes.°=

Kisook's intention to speak appears to have been signaled nonverbally somewhere between line 368 and the very beginning of line 369, which the video

IRF infrastructure has been compromised, a follow-up push has been made that delays its reinstating, and the “teacher-nominated student response” allocation system is no longer operating. There has been, in other words, a “momentum”—established as a result of the participants’ coordinated efforts in the launching and relaunching of learner questions—for a new participation structure with the students being the question initiators and the teacher the respondent, and Marta is taking full advantage of that “momentum.” Observe that this new participation structure is oriented to by the teacher as well. After Marta’s issue has been attended to, the teacher actively solicits other possible questions, as shown in the next extract:

(8) [MarieQ-win]

- 574 T: Yes. “them”{is fo:r –((circles “them” on BB))}
 575 {(0.5)-((looks back at Marta))} two or three or
 576 four >yeah< two or more people.
 577 Marta: ((nods))
 578 T: → Any other questions?
 579 (0.4)
 580 Marie: → Yeah, an: practice five?
 581 T: mhm,
 582 Marie: number five. u:::h (0.5) ((reading)) The team has
 583 very good players. In fact, the team (.) is- winning
 584 or ()
 585 T: has won

Marie’s question concerns an item that was originally responded to by Nobu (see below). As the final item of Practice 5, it was followed by a major sequential boundary that was available to everyone including Marie, as seen in lines 162–165:

(9) [Nobi-win]

- 156 T: =Good ((The last nod accompanies the uttering of
 157 “Good.”)). >In fact the team has < won >ninety eight
 158 percent of the games< the::y (1.0) ha:::ve (0.5)
 159 [pla:yed] [so:::]]
 160 Ss: [played] [so far.]
 161 Ss: far.
 162 (3.0)-((T walks around))
 163 T: °Is everybody okay?°
 164 (1.0)-((Ss writing))
 165 °Yes?° Okay ((reads instructions))

At a first glance, the local contexts for Extracts (8) and (9) seem very similar: A prior sequence has ended, there is some space before the next one begins, and the teacher is extending an opportunity for students to speak. The question then is: Why did Marie not voice her problem back then (in Extract 9)? Of course, she did not have the benefit of the “last as next bias,” but neither does she now. Upon a closer look, however, two differences emerge. First, in Extract (8), the teacher’s “Any other questions?” is designed to prefer a “yes” answer (Sacks, 1987) and thereby to welcome questions. In Extract (9), the teacher’s *sotto voce* “Is everybody okay?” is also designed to prefer a “yes” answer, but in this case, “okay” means “no questions.” In other words, “Is everybody okay?” does not invite questions as “Any other questions?” does. Second, whereas in Extract (8), the sequence prior to Marie’s question involves a third student-initiated question, in Extract (9), what just ended was an IRF sequence, wherein the student was a mere respondent nominated by the teacher. In other words, by the time Extract (8) comes about, a general context of student-generated questions has already been established.

Hence, between the question initiations and the targets of the questions, the three participants never come under both the conditions that Miyuki is able to exploit: (a) “last as next bias” and (b) end-of-exercise boundary. In other words, for Kisook, Marta, and Marie, the two conditions that favored Miyuki were never simultaneously present. This perhaps constitutes further evidence for the importance of these conditions in furnishing the opportunity for the “pivot” sequence. One might also suggest that it provides at least some basis for crediting the three subsequent questions to the “pivot” sequence, in that, with the two conditions being absent, the latter opens up the first possible environment for such initiations.

In sum, the extended stretch of interaction surrounding student-initiated questions has been a result of coconstruction among the participants. Although the local context for each student question varies, the “pivot” sequence has clearly played a role in shifting the participation structures, which facilitates the voicing of subsequent learner questions. Meanwhile, both the teacher and the other three questioners actively orient to this renewed context by soliciting and raising previously unresolved concerns. In the end, the student-generated knowledge exploration has been a joint achievement.

Discussion

In this section, I would like to tie the specific analysis of the interactional features discussed so far to the larger issue of learning opportunities, especially

those opportunities brought about by the departure from the IRF series. This is not to suggest that IRF itself is devoid of any learning opportunities. Without a doubt, IRF ensures the efficient undertaking of a preplanned, teacher-designed learning activity. It also allows for, along with the “teacher nomination” turn allocation system, individual access to the opportunity of displaying one’s basic understanding of the grammatical item in question (i.e., present perfect and present perfect progressive) within the limited context of a “fill-in-the-blanks” exercise. The kinds of learning opportunities afforded by the departure from the IRF series, by contrast, appear to be of a different nature.

First, the departure has created a space for considering more complex issues related to the use of present perfect (progressive). Miyuki’s question of whether “How long have you married?” can work as an alternatively correct answer goes beyond the basic understandings of “present perfect.” That is, its form of “have + verb –en” and its meaning of completion of “verb” prior to “now,” which are standard representations of this particular grammar structure in ESL materials as well as instructions. Aside from the issue of “marry” the verb versus “married” the adjective, what is often not dealt with is the idea of verb aspects that becomes relevant to the proper usage of “present perfect.” In “How long have you married?” for example, it appears as if the verb “marry” were perfectly conjugated in its “present perfect” form (no wonder Miyuki is confused!). The problem is that as a punctual or achievement verb, its property of “no duration” is incompatible with the question of “How long.” In other words, Miyuki’s question has given rise to an opportunity to achieve a more in-depth understanding of the core grammatical structure on the pedagogical agenda.

Second, the departure from IRF has also witnessed the surfacing of other important understanding problems unrelated to the core structure. Kisook’s question, which will be simply reported here in the interest of space, is rooted in her lack of understanding of tense usage in indirect speech. What seems inconsistent to her is the past tense of “write” in “I didn’t know your sister wrote poetry” followed by its present tense form in “How long has your sister been writing poetry?” Marta’s question, as shown earlier, has to do with pronoun usage. In the context of “I didn’t know you know Ruby and her Mom too,” she has trouble understanding why the next question wouldn’t be “How long have *they* . . .,” which may be an issue of crosslinguistic difference that involves Spanish being an SOV language with covert subject pronouns.⁴ The point is that these are important understanding

problems that may not have had the opportunity to be “exposed” otherwise, and their very emergence provides a fertile ground for their contingent treatment *in situ*. As Koschmann et al. (2005) showed, learners’ “problematizing moves” were integral to our understanding of members’ methods of learning.

Third, the departure from the IRF series also promotes learning by virtue of the very learner agency it entails. A consistent finding in the advising literature has been that advice tends to be resisted when it is given without being sought (e.g., Jefferson & Lee, 1992; Silverman, 1997). Goodwin (2007) convincingly illustrated the beauty of “occasioned” knowledge exploration where learning occurred as the children voiced their curiosity *in situ*. Vygotskian scholars would view the optimal site for learning as the zone of proximal development (ZPD), which is “the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers” (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 86). Hawkins (2007), for example, demonstrated how, in a successfully orchestrated fourth-grade ESL class, the teacher first “bend[ed] towards the students” to grasp their understandings before getting the students to “converge[d] towards her own ‘expert’ understanding.” Regardless of the differential theoretical leanings or empirical preoccupations of these scholars, a recurring theme seems to be the importance of treating the “less competent” participant as the center and source of all operations. If we apply this principle to the ESL classroom, learning is more likely to happen when the understanding issues are generated by the learners themselves in the first place. As Walsh (2002) wrote, “confirmation checks and requests for clarification are to be encouraged not only from teacher to learners, but more importantly, from learners to teacher” (p. 12). Additionally, according to Ellis (1998), a classroom is acquisition-rich when learners are given a chance to control the discourse (p. 147; also see van Lier, 1988). Hence, these learner-initiated questions play a crucial role in generating learning opportunities.

In short, although the particular IRF series presents its own structured learning opportunities, the departure from these sequences makes available a wider range of opportunities for understanding the core issue in more depth or exploring important peripheral issues that would not have emerged within the constraints of IRF. Hence, with the expert maneuvering of Miyuki in coordination with the teacher as well as the succeeding joint efforts of her coparticipants, a delicate balance is struck between benefiting from the IRFs, on the one hand,

and maximizing the learning opportunities that can occur outside the IRFs, on the other hand.

Conclusion

I have attempted to describe two competing phenomena in a single case. On the one hand, teacher-centered IRFs, especially chained IRFs within a bounded exercise, are almost impervious to restructuring, as one IRF makes the next conditionally relevant (cf. “sequences of sequences” in Schegloff, 2007). On the other hand, during teacher–whole class interactions, certain junctures are relatively more permeable.⁵ In addition, once an initial move has been successfully made to begin the dismantling of IRF, a more favorable sequential context can emerge to allow for subsequent learner-generated questions. The issue of the permeability of IRF is also addressed in Gourlay (2005), who showed that during the checking episodes in a UK university Business English class, participants may step out of the triadic cycle at the end of an IRF sequence, but in Gourlay’s data, such stepping out is predominantly initiated by the teacher.

In my single case in particular, a number of contingencies converge to bring about the “pivot” sequence that transforms the interaction from uninterrupted teacher-initiated IRFs to learner-generated questions. First, the sequence begins at a major sequential boundary at the end of an entire exercise. Second, Miyuki, the sequence initiator, is also the one who just completed the final item on the homework exercise. In other words, as the last person who spoke, she has the advantage of successful self-selection as the next speaker (“last as next bias” in Sacks et al., 1974). Third, in a no-gap onset, Miyuki launches a presequence (i.e., “I have a question”) that succeeds in gaining the floor. Fourth, the teacher orients to inviting learner contributions by designing her incipient question “Does anybody-” in a format that prefers a “yes” answer and by subsequently granting Miyuki the floor without any delay.

I hope that these findings have yielded some further understandings of homework-review activities and learner-initiated questions in the adult ESL classroom. As the fine-grained CA analysis reveals, despite the centrality of student agency in learning, during teacher–whole class interactions and especially homework-review activities, student initiations may be hard to come by and can demand a great amount of interactional laboring. Still, for the ESL students, it is possible, with the facilitation of the teacher, to strike a delicate balance between respecting the IRF and maximizing learning opportunities.

For the ESL teacher, it is important to recognize that a series of uninterrupted IRFs do not necessarily indicate unproblematic learning, and, by extension, one needs to remain vigilant for learning problems during these “unproblematic” times. In addition, insofar as grammatical issues are explored via learner questions, close monitoring of these questions can generate important insights into how learners themselves orient to these issues. Miyuki’s interpretation of “marry” as a verb in the “How long” question is a case in point. In other words, her problem is not with the mechanical conjugation of verbs into the “present perfect” but with identifying the verbs in the first place and understanding that certain verbs are not permissible in the “present perfect” when duration is being queried. Accurate understandings of such learner “thinking” provide a crucial piece of puzzle that allows the teachers to custom-design their pedagogical interventions. More important, the analysis has shown that creating negotiation-rich opportunities is paramount not just during pair and group activities but during teacher–whole class interactions as well. Teacher questions, for example, may be designed with particular preference structures to invite or block participation (e.g., “Any other questions?” vs. “Is everybody okay?”). In a similar vein, teacher evaluations may be designed to encourage, rather than disallow (e.g., tightly structured multiunit turns that leave no space for learner self-selection), learner questions (cf. Waring, 2008). Finally, in managing tasks such as checking homework, it might be more advantageous to begin with student questions from the outset rather than proceed on an item-by-item basis.

This proposal parts company with Walsh’s (2006) suggestion that teacher talk should be “mode convergent” for the purpose of facilitating learning opportunities (p. 92). During the “materials mode,” according to Walsh, features such as the IRF sequence or display questions, which provide for less learner space, tend to be more appropriate, thereby “mode convergent” (p. 70). What this study has shown is that learner space is a coveted commodity not only during Walsh’s “classroom context” mode where fluency is prioritized, but clearly during the “materials mode” as well (p. 66). In fact, I also envision its critical role in the “skills and systems” mode or even the “managerial mode” (Walsh, p. 66).⁶ In other words, learner space may not be a mode-specific consideration after all, but a baseline contingency in every aspect of learning.

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Notes

- 1 There is a difference between being armed with a preconceived notion of IRF and imposing it onto the data, on the one hand, and characterizing what turns out to be a three-turn sequence as IRF, on the other hand. I did the latter.
- 2 I am aware of the various, sometimes controversial, use of “pivot.” In this article, I use “pivot” not in any technical sense.
- 3 There is, of course, the possibility that there was not any delay in the first place and that Miyuki’s question just surfaced later. Because the point of my analysis was to establish the difficulty presented by the series of uninterrupted IRFs to possible learner initiations, I hope that I have shown that such difficulty still stands whether or not Miyuki had intended to speak up earlier. In addition, as the interaction unfolds, it becomes clear that Miyuki was not the only one who had questions. In other words, the “silence” of these other participants also provides at least partial evidence for the “rigidity” of IRF series.
- 4 I thank Barbara Hawkins for this insight.
- 5 Previous research has also shown that student initiations are more likely to happen when the teacher physically turns away from the students to the board (Mehan, 1979).
- 6 Perhaps the problem is not whether teacher talk needs to be “mode convergent,” but what kinds of interactional features (or “interactures” in Walsh’s words) truly facilitate learning opportunities within that mode.

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Appendix

Transcription Notations

(.)	untimed perceptible pause within a turn
<u>underline</u>	stress
CAPS	very emphatic stress
↑	high pitch on word
.	sentence-final falling intonation
?	yes/no question rising intonation
,	phrase-final intonation (more to come)
-	a glottal stop, or abrupt cutting off of sound
:	lengthened vowel sound (extra colons indicate greater lengthening)
=	latch
→	highlights point of analysis
[]	overlapped talk
°soft°	spoken softly/decreased volume
> <	increased speed
()	(empty parenthesis) transcription impossible
(syll)	count of unclear syllables
(words)	uncertain transcription
.hhh	inbreath

\$words\$	spoken in a smiley voice
(())	comments on background, skipped talk or nonverbal behavior
{{()}-words}	{ } marks the beginning and ending of the simultaneous occurrence of the verbal/silence and nonverbal; the absence of { } means that the simultaneous occurrence applies to the entire turn.
T:	teacher
S:	student
?S(s):	Unidentifiable speaker(s)
TB:	textbook
BB:	black/white board