The preallocation of student topic nomination and negotiated compliance in conversation-for-learning

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Abstract

This paper explores teacher-student interaction in the English conversation lounge of a Japanese university, in which students are advised to pre-select a topic of interaction prior to engaging teachers of EFL in conversation-for-learning, i.e. conversation for the students’ implied acquisitional benefit. Such preallocation of student topic nomination presents an attempt to deinstitutionalize discourse by reversing the teacher-student roles which are assumed to otherwise reflexively sustain an apparent institutional default of asymmetry of speaking rights. This institutionally prescribed norm is examined through illustrative transcripts of audio-data in which the participants in conversation overtly signal their expectations of who is to nominate topic. Such framing of talk at the onset of topic nomination is analysed with reference to the participants’ use of pronominal deixis and ‘talk about’ as explicit metacommunication. It is by these means that participant assumptions underlying the nomination of topic are investigated, allowing for a fuller understanding of the implications on interaction of the preallocation of student topic nomination. This provides further insight into the way in which preallocation as an institutionalized process may, in fact, inhibit conversationalization, counter to the way intended.

Keywords: conversation-for-learning; institutional discourse; discourse analysis; conversation; topic nomination; preallocation

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1 Introduction

Implicit in conversation making may be the participant ideal of parity of speaking rights – everyone can expect to have their ‘turn.’ Conversation-for-learning, which aims to promote the acquisition of a foreign language through its use in informal interaction, is likewise intended to afford equal opportunities for participation to the learners by the educational institutions implementing the practice. It is through the learners’ seemingly ‘active’ participation in the production of talk that they are assumed to acquire the relevant language to a higher level of competence. But can such speaking rights be constructed through the institutionalized practice of conversation making? And if so, do they serve to deinstitutionalize discourse?

Although it may be a relatively widespread practice in foreign language pedagogy, conversation-for-learning remains underinvestigated.¹ In fact, as Kasper (2004) notes, it is a rather ill-defined concept. However, it can be generalized that its underlying acquisitional goal requires the participation in talk of a learner of a target language. This also presents the primary medium of the exchange. Such language novices may be paired or grouped with someone who might comparatively be classed as an expert, such as a teacher of the foreign language. In this case, the ideal of parity also underpins teacher-student interaction.

The present paper deals with such a research context, namely, the conversation lounge of a private Japanese university – a designated space for the practice of English conversation, physically demarcated by loosely arranged sofas and coffee tables, and overseen by teachers with scheduled duty times to make conversation. Although it cannot be assumed that an institutional setting itself precludes conversation as a form of interaction with relatively equal participatory rights, it is the reflexivity between talk and context which provides interaction with its symmetrical or asymmetrical form (cf. Seedhouse 2004). In institutional discourse, this context is largely defined by goal-orientedness embodied in the often hierarchical roles that the incumbents perform, and which correspondingly inform their expectations of what it is they are doing in interaction with one another. For this reason, the making of ‘free’ conversation, as unconstrained by a topical agenda, would appear to have no goals other than the use of language itself as the medium of acquisition, despite the fact that the participants may be required to do so as teachers and students of a given institution.

In addition to a non-institutional lack of a topical agenda, the official recommendation that students themselves pre-select a topic of interaction prior to approaching a teacher in the lounge presents an attempt to safeguard the aimed-for conversationality of the encounter. More precisely, it presents an
attempt to offset an assumed potential for asymmetry in talk. My concern here is with the question of whether such preallocation of topic nomination as a speaking right to the student in fact serves to deinstitutionalize teacher-student interaction. This presents a normative ‘given’ in the institutional context under investigation, which is accordingly problematized by the asking of the question, in taking a critical approach to applied linguistics (see Pennycook 2001).

I first consider the role of topic as an agenda in institutional asymmetry, as this presents the assumed default which the institutional norm of preallocation seeks to reshape. For this reason the discussion is mainly restricted to the most constraining forms of classroom discourse, as the most evidently institutional in shape and ‘character’, i.e. in the way that the participants play out themselves and their context in interaction. In the section that follows, I outline the methodology and the discourse analytic framework to illuminate participant expectations in talk with explicit regard to the nomination of topic and its interactional contingency. The institutionally prescribed norm is subsequently investigated through a discourse analysis of conversation-for-learning between teachers and students in the conversation lounge. The paper concludes with a discussion of whether the preallocation of topic nomination can, in fact, be considered to construct a form of conversational parity in interaction between teacher and student, thereby deinstitutionalizing discourse.

2 Topical asymmetry as pedagogy in action

One of the characteristics which has often been taken to define ‘conversation’ is the relative freedom of its participants to select their speaking turns ‘locally’, i.e. contingent on interaction as it unfolds (Sacks et al. 1978). Constraints to doing so are thus considered to be largely internal to the mechanism of conversational organization itself, when compared to more ostensible forms of institutional discourse, shaped to varying degrees by the preallocation of speaking rights (Drew and Sorjonen 1997; Sarangi 1998; Thornborrow 2002). Indeed, certain forms of pedagogy in action have been taken to exemplify asymmetry of speaking rights in relation to topical agenda: most notably, teacher-fronted instruction involving the elicitation and display of target information, realized through the well-documented triadic sequence of i) initiation (by the teacher), ii) response (by the student[s]), and iii) follow up, feedback or evaluation (by the teacher), i.e. IRF or IRE patterning (Sinclair and Coulthard 1975; see also Bellack et al. 1966; Sinclair and Brazil 1982; Mehan 1985; Edwards and Westgate 1994).

It is through initiating moves that the teacher is able to maintain control of both topic management and turn-taking procedures (McHoul 1978; Edwards and Westgate 1994), an interactional process which reflects, in part, the
goal directedness of the educational endeavour as commonly formalized in predefined syllabi and the consequent practice of assessment. This embodies the wider goals of the institution, which must, in turn, comply with the external agendas of other accredited organizational bodies, from local to national to supranational, as they codify current ontological schemes within an epistemology of a given subject domain. In effect, the instrumental goal of education as the mediation of knowledge trickles down to the bottom-most substratum, whose interactional foundation therefore serves to support the institutional edifice. This, on the other hand, delimits and provides structural grading to the vastness of information and know-how which could potentially be selected as the object of learning.

Bernstein (1975) classifies curriculum, pedagogy and evaluation as the three ‘message systems’ of educational knowledge, whereby ‘[c]urriculum defines what counts as valid knowledge, pedagogy defines what counts as a valid transmission of knowledge, and evaluation defines what counts as a valid realization of this knowledge on the part of the taught’ (Bernstein 1975: 85). The core educational aim of advancing and evaluating learning within a given subject domain often requires a pedagogic focus to supersede other potential topics of interaction, where these are considered irrelevant to the accomplishment of a particular goal, and insofar as this accords with the higher institutional agenda.

These messages are mediated, to a large extent, by the language of the classroom, as the teachers play the institutionally accorded role of conveying their expertise in a given subject domain to the students (Edwards and Mercer 1987), and most evidently so through the triadic or ‘essential teaching exchange’ (Edwards and Westgate 1994; my italics). This might, then, be taken to represent ‘the characteristic language of a teacher conducting his or her profession’ (Sinclair and Brazil 1982: 89). In other words, the teacher expresses him- or herself as teacher through the ritualized practice of topicalized asymmetry, marked by initiation and closing moves which procedurally inhibit both topic nomination and its subsequent development by the students, whose ‘allowable contributions’ (Levinson 1979) are correspondingly restricted to the middle response slot (van Lier 2001). It is through such habitualized action that the teacher plays out his or her ‘role’, or a ‘set of norms and expectations applied to the incumbent of a particular position’ (Banton 1965: 29; see also Sarangi 2010 for a discussion of role in professional discourse). As Markee (2005: 197) succinctly puts it: ‘teachers “do” being teachers by exercising privileged rights to nominate conversational topics, and by deciding which learners may talk when’.

Given such ascription of asymmetrical practice to the teacher at his or her most institutional, it is somewhat unsurprising that the contrastive ideal of symmetry underlies an educational practice which aims to promote interac-
tion between teacher and student as conversational equals, namely, conversation-for-learning. However, more questionable than the ideal itself is the practice of intervention by which an institution, or its incumbents, would aim to accomplish this. As Richards (2006) notes, it cannot be taken for granted that deinstitutionalization is an inevitable outcome of the attempt to reverse teacher-student roles in interaction. The current research therefore aims to examine one such institutionally prescribed norm: that of student topic pre-allocation, with a view to establishing, by means of the signalling of participant expectations in talk, whether this can be considered to ‘conversationalize’ discourse through the granting of speaking rights.

3 Data

The data to be analysed were derived from MD audio-recordings of teacher-student interaction in the conversation lounge of a private Japanese university specializing in the teaching of foreign languages and intercultural studies. The student participants were second-year undergraduate English majors of Japanese nationality who had been asked to record a 10–15 minute conversation with English teachers on duty in the lounge. I have selected excerpts from three such conversations as a way of illustrating diverse approaches towards the practice of topic nomination, as signalled by the metacommunication of the participants involved (see section 4). The three selected conversations formed part of a wider data set of 26 teacher-student conversations of 7 ½ hours in total, involving individual on-duty teachers (n=26) from various English-speaking countries and students (n=51) who approached them on their own, or in pairs. In keeping with institutional guidelines at the time, the student participants were advised to pre-select a topic of interaction prior to engaging with the teachers in conversation. This activity was integrated with their Oral Communication syllabus as non-assessed speaking practice, with consent for its use in research formally obtained from the participants after completion of the task.

4 Framework for the analysis of topic nomination

Topic itself is often taken by interlocutors to be the thing that is ‘talked about’ (Orletti 1989; Bergmann 1990; Svennevig 1999), an expression which is, in fact, utilized by the participants in the following excerpts. While such impression of ‘talking about’ something provides an abstracted sense of thematic orientation, topic is procedurally instantiated in talk by the participants as a negotiated means of organizing discourse (cf. Svennevig 1999). In the three illustrative excerpts of topic nomination and its allocation, however, such a collaborative process becomes manifest through the metacommunication of
the participants, a term which is here employed in that very sense of ‘talk about talk’.

The participants’ use of ‘talk about’ is analysed along with the sequential contingency of interaction through which they both signal and (re)negotiate their expectations in situ. The participants can be seen to ‘frame’ their interaction in a certain way as they convey to each other a superordinate message about how communication is intended (Tannen 1984: 23; cf. Bateson 1972), with particular regard to topic and its nomination. The present analysis of such metacommunication focuses on the participants’ use of the pronominal indexicals ‘I’, ‘you’ and ‘we’, which display their person-perspectival approach to topic nomination and its allocation in the initial phases of interaction. In other words, it is by means of pronominal deixis that the participants can be seen to signal their intentions of who is expected to nominate topic in interaction.

As indexicals depend in meaning on their context of use (Levinson 1998), with the same linguistic expression relative, in referential terms, to place and person as bound in time, they might be considered to index the so-called ‘external’ context in language use itself (Schegloff 1992). This hence becomes ‘internal’ to the interaction, from a methodological point of view of analysis. As an expression of the perspectival relativity of the participants (Levinson 1998), person indexicality is of inherent relevance to their context, as opposed to the researcher’s. In other words, ‘indexicals “point” to the contexts they invoke or identify’ (Auer 1995: 14). In so doing, they can represent a valuable analytic resource in any form of interaction analysis which seeks to examine participant expectations in relation to one another and what it is they are doing in interaction. An analytic focus on framing through the metacommunication of the participants, combined with attention to the sequential organization of talk, is thus intended to address the research question of whether the preallocation of the right to nominate topic to the students serves to deinstitutionalize interaction in conversation-for-learning, as intended.

5 Negotiating topic nomination in the act

The following analyses of discourse excerpts explore three diverse approaches towards topic nomination in the opening phases of interaction among teachers and students in the conversation lounge, all of whom are unacquainted with one another. This diversity allows for a comparative analysis of its framing, as signalled in the first instance by the participants through pronominal deixis and metacommunication. The excerpts have been selected for their ‘relative’ potential, namely, to illustrate a cline in responsibility assumed by the students for the nomination of topic at the outset of interaction, from a lesser to greater
degree. The first of these, which follows, thus presents an initial attempted concession of topic choice by the student, Yuto (m), to the teacher, Fraser (m).5 (Please see appendix for transcription conventions.)

Excerpt 5.1

1 Yuto: so what do you want to talk about hah hah=
2 Fraser: =what do ↑ I want to talk about!?=
3 Yuto: [uh::
4 Fraser: ↑not true=
5 Yuto: =yes uh:: I I heard you a- you are Australian.
6 Fraser: hm~THAT’s not true.
7 ()
8 Fraser: =you heard incorrectly.
9 ()
10 Yuto: really?
11 Fraser: yes.
12 Yuto: ↑where are you from.
13 Fraser: °I’m from New Zealand°
14 ()
15 Yuto: New Zealand!?
16 Fraser: yes.
17 Yuto: oh(h) rea(h)lly (. ) uh:: so:: hah [hah
18 Fraser: [who told you I was from °Aus↑tralia°=
19 Yuto: =my friend my friend told,
20 ()
21 Fraser: your friend who is that.
22 (.)
23 Yuto: °↑who° ah::::=
24 Fraser:=((clicks tongue))°oh:::: well you’d better tell your friend that,°=
25 Yuto: ↑hah hah hah .hhh really? uh:: ↑so: ah::: (...)
26 (.)
27 Fraser: >I’m ↑Fraser I’m from New Zealand.<
28 Yuto: >anyway< uh anything else? uh:: what’s your hobby.
29 ()
30 Fraser: hobbies? Uh I ↑LIKE uhm:: sports and I ↑like uh:: cultural things like uhm:: (...)((clicks tongue))
31 Yuto: °sports? (. ) what what (. ) uh:: which sports (^)
are popular in New Zealand.°
Fraser: well of course the main sport in New Zealand is rugby.

Yuto: rugby?

Fraser: and of course TOMORROW is a very IMPORTANT DAY FOR RUGBY.

Yuto: ah you mean Japan?

Fraser: uhm it’s the Rugby World Cup.

Yuto: really?

Fraser: yes!

Yuto: of rugby

Fraser: and uh: that’s kicking off tomorrow in Australia.

Yuto: England? hah [hah

Fraser: [in Australia] [in Australia] [in Australia] .hhh uh (. so:: ((clicks tongue)) uh:: you are not from Australia .hhh

Yuto: [h] [h] [h]

Fraser: I am not from Australia no.

Yuto: so~uh: (.uhtm uhm I was (^) pre(h)pa(h)ring (.)

Fraser: =>to talk about Australia I used to- I lived in Australia for about a year.

As Yuto begins with ‘so what do you want to talk about’ (line 1), topic choice is transferred sequentially with speakership to Fraser through next turn allocation. An answer by Fraser to the question would present the ‘preferred response’, i.e. ‘that response to the first pair part which embodies or favors furthering or the accomplishment of the activity’ (Schegloff 2007: 59) – in this case the nomination of topic in pursuit of conversation. Although Yuto, by means of projected action, ‘wants’ Fraser to supply a topic in asking the question, the latter’s response suggests that he thinks otherwise. He echoes the question with a deictic shift in person reference from ‘you’ to ‘I’, which is heavily stressed: ‘what do I want to talk about?’ (line 2). Pronominally stressing ‘I’, while returning the question to Yuto as non-preferred action, serves to pinpoint a seeming locus of contention. Fraser thereby signals that it is not his
expectation that he select a topic (in line 2). This, it would appear, represents an unexpected breach of the topical order.

The present case might be classed as ‘deviant’, and is singular in its local allocation of topic nomination to the teacher in the data set. For this very reason, however, it can be accorded its special analytic status as the first of the three selected interactional segments to be examined in illustration of participant expectations of topic nomination. As Svennevig (1999: 67) notes:

Deviant cases also testify to the norm in that the deviation itself will either be accounted for or else sanctioned by the participants in the interaction. In this way, they provide extra strong evidence for the normative character of the conversational procedures.

In the current context of conversation, student topic selection represents the prescribed norm, while the present case of deviation is accounted for by the participants in their reshaping of the interactional course of its projected nomination. The institutional order becomes implicitly sanctioned as Yuto makes consequent reference to Fraser’s assumed nationality, namely, ‘I heard you are Australian’ (line 4). His statement by hearsay is ‘pre-topical’ in that it invites Fraser to make a relevant contribution, or ‘bid’ (Maynard 1980; Maynard and Zimmerman 1984), which would serve to instantiate topic if further extended by Yuto. At this stage, then, he pursues the interactional task of selecting topic, having initially ceded his preallocated right to Fraser.

A reinstatement of the institutional topical order is temporarily sidelined, however, as it appears that Yuto has been given the wrong information: Fraser is not from Australia, but New Zealand. This is established by Yuto in the lack of any readily forthcoming information from Fraser himself (lines 5-11), who compels Yuto to explicitly formulate the question ‘where are you from’ (line 12). Following a brief side sequence in which Fraser attempts to glean from him the source of his erroneous information (lines 18-21), Yuto is once again placed in the interactional position to initiate topic, as Fraser does not extend his response beyond the requisite information, i.e. that he is from New Zealand (line 13).

Yuto’s next step, then, is to ask Fraser to introduce himself, saying ‘I don’t know about you anything’ (line 25). Yuto’s presentation-eliciting request is, however, met with a propositionally unelaborated response, as Fraser merely tells him what he already knows, i.e. that he is Fraser and he is from New Zealand (in line 27). His nationality does not immediately serve as a topical bid, as Yuto temporarily switches tack in response, asking instead about Fraser’s hobbies (in line 28). With the mention of sports, however, he forges a thematic link to Fraser’s country of origin, asking ‘which sports are popular in New Zealand?’ (line 31).
Having mentioned rugby, Fraser this time chooses to extend his contribution by informing Yuto of the upcoming World Cup, which paves the way for topic progression. Somewhat comically, as a result of this, 'Australia' crops up again as the location of play (line 47). When Yuto contrastively stresses: 'so you are not from Australia' (line 50), he thereby implicitly foregrounds his former mistake, explaining that he had been preparing to talk about Australia (in line 54). Fraser then volunteers the relevant experience of having previously lived there for a year, from which the topic is 'legitimately', i.e. by means of accurate information, allowed to proceed. Yuto's first-nominated topic of Australia, following his opening 'false start', thus becomes established through its reintroduction and extension as a *bona fide* student-selected topic of interaction.

Although Yuto's concession of his preallocated right to nominate topic represents an initial breach of interactional norms, or because of this, the present excerpt may serve as an exemplary illustration of topic negotiation, as the participants establish a ‘working consensus’ (Goffman 1959) of what it is they are undertaking in interaction, i.e. the engagement of topic in the making of conversation; and who it is that bears the primary interactional onus for its formulation, i.e. the student.

The initial ‘faulty’ attempt at negotiating topic by Yuto appears, moreover, to be lightheartedly contested by Fraser, firstly, in deflecting the request for its nomination back to Yuto, and secondly, in his seemingly playful withholding of information, which compels Yuto to actively pursue a topical agenda. While such withholding of personal information succeeds Yuto’s opening question in breach of the institutional topical order and may hence be consequential to it, it could also mark the ongoing effects of Yuto’s mistake in his topical pre-sequence, based on nationality. As the topic of error, i.e. Australia, is once more comically brought to the fore by Yuto himself towards the end of the excerpt (line 50), with Fraser accommodatingly volunteering topic relevant information, this suggests an ongoing potential relevance of Yuto’s pre-topical error to the participants thus far.

The following excerpt similarly illustrates a humorous delay in topic nomination by the participants which conversely, however, precedes its framing by the students in conversation. As they do so, the students, Saori (f) and Sanae (f), in this case defer choice of topic to the teacher, Graham (m), in a way which implicates all of the participants inclusively.

**Excerpt 5.2**

1 Saori: °hai° (yes)
2 Sanae: °°okay°°
3 (.)
Graham: hello::!
Sanae: hell[o::!
Saori: [hello::!
Graham: hello::
Saori?: hah hah hah
Sanae: hello!
Graham: HELLO::! ((speaking to recorder))
Sanae: hah hah hah hah hah .hhh
Saori: uhm (^) [uh (.) [my name is Saori.
Graham: [hm
Sanae: [hah hah
Graham: hi Saori
Sanae: °°yeah°° (^) I'm Sanae.
Graham: I'm ↑Graham (.) nice to ↑meet you!
Sanae: [nice to meet you::
Saori: [nice to meet you::
Graham: nice to ↑meet you
Sanae: hah hah hah
Saori: (.)
Graham: how are you?
Sanae: I(h)'m [very well thank you how are you?
Saori: [hah hah hah hah hah hah
Graham: °°very good°°
Sanae: °°hah [hah hah°°
Saori: [so:::
Graham: so[:?
Sanae: [so:: hah hah
Saori: s(h)o hah hah
(...)
Sanae: what shall we talk about
Saori: [yeah hah hah
Graham: [ah you can you can decide
Sanae: I can decide hah hah
Saori: heh[:
Graham: (you can decide.
(...)
Saori: ah [uhm
Sanae: [hah hah hah
(...)
Saori: wh- [(.) what about summer vacation?
Sanae: [hah hah hah
The above episode is characterized by playful repetition, which delays the introduction of conversational topic. Graham repeats his ‘hello’ (line 7), having initiated the greeting himself, and having since received a response from his interlocutors (lines 5 and 6), whereupon it is once more repeated by Sanae (line 9). Moreover, in greeting the recording equipment with a resounding ‘hello’ (line 10), Graham overextends socialities to address a temporally and physically displaced listener who is unable to respond. Having performed the greetings, the participants proceed to the introductions, after which Graham adds a ‘nice to meet you’ (line 18). Despite the phrase having been reciprocated by both students (lines 19 and 20), he repeats it once again (line 21), with a sudden rise in intonation lending a singsong and comical air to the utterance, to the apparent amusement of Sanae (laughing in line 22).

As Saori laughingly pursues the introductions with a ‘how are you?’ (line 24), Graham, also laughingly, responds and reciprocates the question (line 25). Upon Saori’s response (line 27), he adds a third turn assessment, namely, a ‘very good’ (line 28). While this may be characteristic of such personal state inquiry (Sacks 1975), Graham’s turn also functions as a ‘sequence-closing third’ (Schegloff 2007), as it closes off a question-answer two-part sequence. It does so, moreover, without extending or renewing conversational preliminaries. As a lengthy pause ensues (line 29), Graham waits for the students to proceed with the conversation, and does not himself opt to nominate topic. Moreover, when Saori resumes talk with an extended continuer, ‘so’ (line 31), this is also repeated by Graham in rising intonation (line 32). The continuer becomes further extended through speaker transfer, neither leading anywhere in Graham’s own turn, nor in the successive ones by Sanae and Saori (lines 33-34), who themselves both laughingly repeat the ‘so’. The topic of conversation is thereby lightheartedly deferred from one speaker to the next, none of whom appears immediately willing to assume the role of topic nominator from the outset of interaction.

Sanae finally puts an end to topic delay with ‘what shall we talk about?’ (line 36). By contrast with Yuto (of Excerpt 5.1), she places the emphasis on the collective pronoun ‘we’, thereby framing the exchange as a joint exercise in topic negotiation. Her question nevertheless compels a response, which in answer to the ‘what’ would similarly position Graham as topic nominator. He, however, returns the option to his interlocutor with ‘you can decide’ (line 38), stressing the ‘you’ to contrastive effect. Sanae is thus explicitly, i.e. message intrinsically, cast as topic nominator, over and above the sequential contingency of next turn allocation.
Sanae then parallels both his proposition and positioning of stress with the relevant pronominal deictic shift: ‘I can decide?’ (line 39), questioningly underscoring her own interactional role as the agent of topic choice, as reallocated to her in interaction by Graham. Despite her laughter and Sanae’s apparent backchannelling of uncertainty (‘heh’, line 40), Graham repeats ‘you can decide’ (line 41), in falling and definitive-sounding intonation.

Although Graham’s use of ‘can’ appears to cast the choice of topic as an entitlement, the students are at the same time interactionally compelled to select a topic, given his own apparent lack of intent to do so. It is classmate Saori who finally proposes the summer holidays as a potential topic, and despite Graham’s summer appearing to have been uneventful, the topic is subsequently adopted by all parties in interaction.

The extensive process of topic negotiation in the first two excerpts analysed appears contingent, to varying degrees, on the concession of topic choice by the students to the teachers – in the first case, a complete and immediate concession, i.e. ‘so what do you want to talk about’ (Excerpt 5.1, line 1); and in the second, a partial inclusionary concession, i.e. ‘what shall we talk about’ (Excerpt 5.2, line 36), following a prolonged period of seemingly playful delay in topic nomination. In both cases, the teachers return the ball to the students’ court, re-establishing the institutional default position of student topic initiation. The final excerpt to be examined, on the other hand, involves the students’ (Jun [m] and Kenichi [m]) ready appropriation of topic, in complete accordance with institutionally prescribed norms of interaction, leading the teacher Phil (m) to follow a different course.

Excerpt 5.3

1 Jun: hello nice to meet you (^) ah ↑my name is Jun Kawaguchi
2 Phil: ah okay [hi
3 Jun: [and he is
4 Kenichi: [my(^) my name is Kenichi Hashimoto
5 Phil: right (^) so I’m- I’m Phil
6 Jun: Phil
7 Phil: yeah (^) Phil O’Riordan
8 Jun: °nice to meet you°
9 Phil: how are you doing? hah hah
10 Jun: ah: (.) fine
11 (.....)
12 Kenichi: ah: (...) so: (...) today we (.) we are going to (.) talk about (.....)so ↑sports
13 Phil: aha aha
14 Kenichi: ah ↑Mary said (.) you you came fro:m
The preallocation of student topic nomination

In the above excerpt, the students, Jun and Kenichi, instigate the greetings and introductions themselves, which are reciprocated by Phil (lines 1-10). Following this, there is a lengthy silence before Kenichi hesitatingly (interspersed with considerable pauses) introduces the topic with: ‘so today we we are going to talk about so sports’ (line 12). Conjoint reference is then made to Phil’s place of origin, i.e. Ireland, by the students (lines 15-16), having solicited the
information prior to the activity. This serves as a personalized segue to the chosen topic of sports, as Kenichi’s subsequently related experience of having met the Irish national football team happily marries both.

While Phil has taken a back seat until this stage, particularly in allowing the students the interactional space within which to introduce a topic (i.e. the lengthy pause of line 11), he subsequently plays an active part in its co-construction, mentioning the World Cup (line 22), expanding on the name of the goalkeeper (lines 25 and 27), and asking for particulars with regard to where the incident took place (line 31) and the Sankei Shinbun newspaper (lines 40 and 42). Nevertheless, the responsibility for topic progression subsequently falls back to the students, following another pause, with Kenichi pursuing his line of questioning related to sports (line 46), which then remains the topical focus of interaction until the end of the recorded conversation.

In this excerpt, the student Kenichi tacitly claims the preallocated right to select topic, while assuming the voice of authority with: ‘so today we we are going to talk about so sports’ (line 12). Such framing appears to ‘set’ the interactional agenda, with his formulation of the ‘day’s’ topic bearing notable similarities with the interaction of the classroom (cf. Heyman 1986) as a regularly scheduled institutional event (Mehan 1985), despite the present event being a once-off. The topic is syntactically ‘scheduled’ through the temporal adverbial ‘today’ and use of ‘going to’ to signal the plan for the future, or incipient, event. Such formulation of topic thus conforms with Sinclair and Coulthard’s (1975) definition of metastatement in classroom interaction as ‘[r]ealized by a statement which refers to some future time when what is described will occur’ (1975: 43). With the teacher determining the agenda, ‘[i]ts function is to help the pupils to see the structure of the lesson, to help them understand the purpose of the subsequent exchange, and see where they are going’ (Sinclair and Coulthard 1975: 43).

Not only does Kenichi appear to be voicing the teacher as he assumes the institutionally preallocated responsibility for topic nomination, but the explicit formulation of topic itself can be seen to present the purpose of the exchange. In its formulated essence, or topical framing, the conversation is cast as ‘content based’, in the spirit of the foreign language classroom, and arguably institutionalized, despite, or because of, the attempted inversion of teacher-student roles in interaction.

6 Discussion: Negotiated compliance to institutional norms

The signalling of communicative intent by the students in the three excerpts analysed is evidently interlinked with topic, as manifest in their use of ‘talk about’ in the cline of student responsibility presented:
(1) so what do you want to talk about (Ex. 5.1, line 1)
(2) what shall we talk about (Ex. 5.2, line 36)
(3) today we we are going to talk about so sports (Ex. 5.3, line 12)

Such framing of the interactional exchange implies that the ‘conversation’ is topic driven, while the participants’ use of pronominal deixis in topical pre-sequence and negotiation through the contingent interaction both shapes and reflects the institutionally accorded role of the students as its nominators. This is incrementally evident from the responsibility for topic introduction being lightheartedly contested by the teacher in response to an initial attempted concession by the student in Excerpt 5.1; to renegotiated in interaction, following an inclusive framing of topic nomination with ‘we’ by the student in Excerpt 5.2; and straightforwardly accepted by the teacher, following the ready appropriation of topic by the students in Excerpt 5.3. The consequent element of withholding by the teachers is apparent in all of the excerpts, as the teachers neglect to nominate topic themselves at pertinent points of interaction, namely, when sequentially contingent change of speakership would enable them to do so, and when the explicitly formulated questions of the students might further compel them to.

Disregarding initial topics which are temporary or preliminary, such as introductions, Schegloff and Sacks (1974) consider the position of first topic to be of special significance to the interlocutors, arguing that:

[T]o talk a topic as ‘first topic’ may provide for its analysability (by co-participants) as ‘the reason for’ the conversation, that being, furthermore, a preservable and reportable feature of the conversation. In addition, making a topic ‘first topic’ may accord it a special importance on the part of its initiator. (1974: 243)

In the present case of conversation-for-learning, such perceived special importance of ‘first topic’ also provides a ‘reason for the conversation,’ as evident in its initial framing and subsequent interactional reinforcement by the participants in situ, who demonstrate that it is the students who are here and locally expected to nominate a topic in pursuit of conversation practice. In other words, the special significance of the actual topic to the student relates to its required nomination by the students, as a means of making conversation with the teacher. The student-nominated topic thus serves as both the motive and motif of the interactional exchange.

Yet the ‘free’ conversation at the same time lacks the goal-orientedness of an institutional agenda. The institutional direction to students to pre-select a topic of interaction is itself pre-emptively founded on the belief that the teachers would otherwise be expected to nominate and consequently manage the topic themselves (thus also bearing the ongoing onus for its development through the course of interaction). It is therefore intended to offset an inequality of
in institutional roles which might otherwise be normatively assumed and played out by the participants in interaction, if modelled on the classroom default. While the interaction is topic driven through preallocation, the attempt to invert the roles embodying the particular goals of an institution may be undermined by a corresponding absence of a goal with respect to conversation-for-learning, other than that of mobilizing the medium of English. Take away such instrumental goals, yet keep the requirement to make conversation, and the question would ordinarily present itself: what exactly are teachers and students supposed to talk about and under what pretext, while doing so in a language whose use alone is assumed to promote its acquisition?

The motive for interaction thus arguably lies in the preallocation of topic nomination itself. This represents an inversion of an assumed institutional asymmetry of speaking rights, whereby the students have the right to self-select speaking turns along with the initiation of topic, which may remain implicitly relevant throughout the interactional course of its maintenance and renewal. Ironically, however, this would appear to conflict with the local contingency of conversational organization (Sacks et al. 1978), as the predetermination of topic and speaking rights are themselves characteristic of institutional discourse (Marková and Foppa 1991). At the same time, the prioritization of first topic, potentially of 'special importance' (Schegloff and Sacks 1974: 243) to the student, underscores its use as a conversational resource. This suggests a potential conflict between topic as both conversational and institutional agenda.

The consequent tension embodied within the roles of the participants in the institutionalization of conversation in fact manifests itself in Excerpts 5.1 and 5.2 in contested frames of topic nomination in the case of its deferred initiation on the part of the students, accompanied by a corresponding withholding, and consequent reallocation, on the part of the teacher. Such interactional shaping and reworking of topic initiation thus represents a form of negotiated compliance to institutionally prescribed norms. Where the students, on the other hand, immediately assume their institutionally accorded role as topic nominators in Excerpt 5.3, the framing of the exchange presents a seemingly non-conversational inverted form of institutional discourse, with the students appropriating the voice of the teacher in asserting and adhering to the topic of the day's conversation.

In design, the attempt to pre-emptively equalize interactional procedures through student topic selection is itself rooted in institutional asymmetry. Although the participants in the three examples demonstrate compliance with the institutional norm of student topic nomination, and the students are hence granted the right to nominate topic, this would not appear to deinstitutionalize talk. On the basis of the analysis provided, it might further be questioned whether, in effect, student allocation of topic nomination presents a right
which is granted, or a responsibility which is interactionally enforced: does the teacher serve as conversational equal, as institutional direction would intend, or as the arbiter of parity?

Acknowledgements

I would like to acknowledge the ESRC as the awarders of a postdoctoral fellowship (PTA-026-27-2648), held in Linguistics and English Language at University of Edinburgh (2010/11), which has allowed me to disseminate my work. This builds on my PhD research, undertaken at the Centre for Language and Communication Research at Cardiff University under the supervision of Nikolas Coupland and Srikant Sarangi, to whom I am grateful for feedback on my work in progress. Many thanks also to Joseph Gafaranga and to four anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments on a previous draft of the paper. Finally, I am indebted to the institution which granted me access to the data.

Appendix: Transcription conventions

The following transcription conventions have been adapted from Gail Jefferson’s system of notation (see Atkinson and Heritage 1984: ix–xvi).

- **over [lap**
- **ov [eralp**
- **[overlap**

A left bracket indicates the onset of overlap with other left bracketed segments directly aligned above or below

- **latch=**
- **=latch**

Latched speech between speakers, adjacent in time; or continuing turn of the same speaker from a prior line, i.e. one interpolated by an overlapping utterance by another speaker

- **italics**

Japanese words

- **stre::::tching**

A colon represents the extension of the preceding sound; the more colons, the longer the stretch

- **emphasis**

Underlining represents emphatic stress

- **LOUD SPEECH**

Capitals denote emphasis through loudness, whereby the capitalized words are noticeably louder than the neighbouring speech

- **ºquiet speechº**

Words enclosed by degree signs are noticeably quieter than the neighbouring speech; double degree signs are used for barely audible speech

- **↑ rise in pitch**

An upward arrow represents a marked rise in pitch of the subsequent word or syllable, or higher than average pitch of speaker

- **↓ fall in pitch**

A downwards arrow represents a marked fall in pitch of the subsequent word or syllable, or lower than average pitch of speaker
question mark? A question mark is used to denote a rising inflection, as in questions
full stop. A full stop is used to denote falling intonation
comma, A comma signifies continuing intonation
exclamation ! An exclamation mark indicates an animated tone
trunc- A dash denotes an abrupt cut-off, as in a false start, or clipped sound
< slow > Speech enclosed by outer chevrons is noticeably slower than the surrounding speech
> fast < Speech enclosed by inner chevrons is noticeably faster than the surrounding speech
run~together A swung dash between words indicates that the speech is run together
(^ ) Indicates a short pause of less than 0.5 seconds within a speaker’s turn
(.) Each bracketed dot represents a pause of circa 0.5 seconds
{wavy brackets} Indicates transcriber doubt
.hhh Indicates an audible inbreath
hhh. Indicates an audible outbreath
(h ) Represents aspiration through laughter
hah Represents a laughter particle
heh A backchannelling token commonly used in Japanese, which can signal interest or surprise; otherwise represented as he (e.g. Iwasaki 1997), or hee (e.g. Ishida 2006; Mori 2006)
((double brackets)) Contains additional paralinguistic information
[square brackets] Square brackets contain information substitution in order to maintain anonymity of person or institution
[translation] Square brackets in italics contain English translations of Japanese words

Notes

1. The scant body of research on language learning contexts which might be classed as conversation-for-learning has not sought to question the practice of institutionalizing conversation itself, or its underlying ideal of parity of speaking rights (see, for example, Mori 2002; Kasper 2004; Hauser 2005).

2. Note that Richards (2006) makes the point that deinstitutionalization may not necessarily result from an attempted role reversal in particular respect to knowledge asymmetry.

3. Students come across institutional guidelines to nominate topic in their orientation materials to the lounge, which are integrated with their core course curriculum. Advice on pre-selecting topic in the making of conversation is additionally provided in pamphlets which are displayed on tables bordering the lounge.
4. The present discussion restricts itself to a view of linguistic indexicality as deixis with ‘demonstrative reference’ (Hanks 1992: 46), as opposed to the more widely encompassing parameters of social deixis (see Levinson 1983, 1998).

5. Pseudonyms have been used for all participants, who signed consent forms, in order to safeguard their anonymity.

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