

# Interpersonal Struggle in an EFL Writing Talk Task: Challenging a Teacher's Interpretation

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## Abstract

A variety of second-language classroom instructional constraints may often lead the teacher to interpret by assumption or appropriation the "successful completion" of small-group workshop talk tasks. As a consequence, individual contributions to "shared" teaching-learning talk may go unrecognized (Fulmer, 2003c, 2004a). This paper presents one example of challenging this teacher-researcher's (the first author's) interpretation of what transpired in a small group's talk task and why. Specifically, five Japanese university EFL writing learners participating in an English writing workshop were encouraged to review their classroom video and audio tapes and task sheets and to describe what they believe occurred in one talk task. The participating students were invited to recount reflectively how they resolved the functional English paragraph and essay metalanguage recall/inference task and to comment on their "cooperative" relations within the group during their task resolution. Three of the students revealed that, under pressure of the task-specific requirements, they purposefully oriented away from normal conversation convention, ignored or left unresponded the other two students' queries, and pressed ahead to conclude the task. Doing so gave rise to an interpersonal struggle that dramatically deepened as students' writing task-generated discourse progressed. This post-analysis interview with students suggests a possibly more insightful alternative to customary teacher "interpretation at best" (Christie, 2002) of the successes we may believe learners are "accomplishing together" in their small-group talk work.

## Introduction: Research Background and Questions

This paper develops from the findings of a previously presented analysis of metalanguage-scaffolded small-group workshop talk involving first-year university EFL reading-writing students (Fulmer, 2003a & b). In their focused talk for that study, the students worked together to confirm or correct their responses to one recall-inference writing task. Successfully completing the task necessitated students' appropriate use of specific English writing metalanguage in their discourse to determine the corresponding paragraph and essay parts. Reviewing the completed task sheets and discourse transcript of one representative small group's talk revealed that the students engaged in four sequences through which they negotiated the completion of the task. A preliminary analysis of the students' completed task sheets suggested that they made use of the appropriate metalanguage. Though students seemingly "successfully concluded" their confirmation-correction talk to resolve the recall-inference task as revealed on initial analysis, however, an interpersonal struggle was shown to have ensued among individual members that served as the key factor in the dynamic of driving the task to completion (Fulmer, 2003c, 2004a). Presented were several major linguistic features illuminating the kind of tenor relations

at work in the small-group task resolution. The point was made that individual student contributions to talk task resolutions may not be readily discernable from reviewing task sheets and tape transcripts alone.

This paper furthers the previous effort by seeking to address one classroom teacher issue of familiarity (Fulmer, 2004b). Often in pair and particularly in small-group work, not only is it difficult to hear and see this kind of second-language talk struggle developing in the classroom, but also, as Christie (2002) well states, the reasons for it are interpretive at best (p. 22). Although Fulmer had several speculations of his own as to why this “rift” in relations arose, he sought to address Christie’s point, by challenging and refining his own developing interpretations. The authors thus invited student interview confirmation to explore why this small group’s interpersonal struggle ensued and their talk unfolded as it did from the participating students’ perceptual vantage. In seeking to deepen Fulmer’s awareness, we posed two questions in this follow-on aspect of the research: How do learners view their “cooperative” relations during their task resolution? Do they believe an interpersonal “struggle” actually occurred or not, and if so, why or why not?

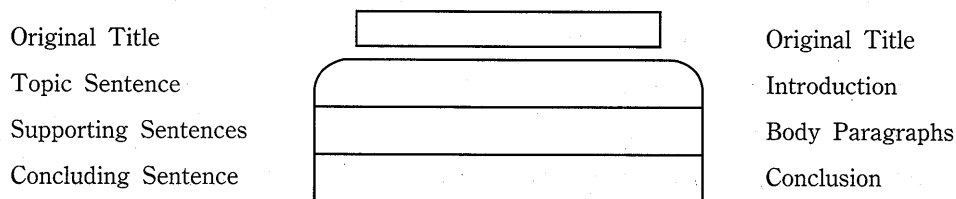
### **Instructional Setting, Participants and Writing Talk Task**

This study was initiated at a private women’s university in Tokyo in support of students’ ongoing preparation for their required overseas study and continuing academic work on their return. The participants were five of 24 first-year students of one representative mid-performing talk group (Group 3) of an integrated reading-writing class meeting twice weekly for 90 minutes. All students gave their oral and written consent to participate in this action research.

The task of focus here is on the students’ talk developing to answer one question of one recall-inference writing task given toward end-term in Figure 1.

**Figure 1. Recall-Inference Writing Task Question 6 and Expected Students’ Metalanguage/Metaknowledge Response**

“Draw a TOPS CAKE below and then write the matching 4 key parts of a paragraph on the left-hand side and the 4 key parts of an essay on the right-hand side.” (Note: TOPS cake is a popular 3-layered chocolate cake in Tokyo that Fulmer uses as one of many structural models for explaining English writing.)



This Group 3’s workshop seating arrangement backgrounds the talk logogenesis depicted in Figure 3, Frames A-D.

## **Brief Review of Method and Initial Discoveries**

Procedurally, as previously detailed (Fulmer, 2003a & b), along with their classmates, the five students of this group first worked individually in pencil for 5 minutes to resolve all six questions of the writing task. These individually-done pre-talk worksheets for this question indicated a degree of student difficulty in producing the proper paragraph and essay structure and in recalling or inferring the practical metalanguage (Fulmer, 2004a, p. 37). Students subsequently took their task sheets into their talk group, turned on their tape recorder, and had 3 minutes to confirm or correct their answers together using any color. The overwriting correction these students did denoted their “fairly successfully” completing their task sheets as a group. The students’ transcribed and annotated talk of 2 minutes and 15 seconds to resolve this writing task is given in Figure 2. In evidence is appropriate functional use of the target English paragraph and essay metalanguage in students’ repeated or confirmed paragraph and essay structure as a whole.

Looking more closely at the talk for individual students’ contributions, students’ completed discourse involved four negotiation of meaning sequences that facilitated their working through the task (Fulmer, 2004a). Analysis of these negotiation sequences illuminated an interpersonal “struggle” in the students’ otherwise “cooperative” tenor relations. As will be demonstrated in the section on logogenesis, that struggle is particularly evident in negotiating Sequence 3 during which Students 3, 4 and 5 (S3, S4 & S5) worked to resolve the task and neither responded to nor considered the indicators of Students 1 and 2 (S1 & S2).

Identified and summarized in Table 1 are several of the principal linguistic features of this struggle (Fulmer, 2004a). In particular, of the total utterance and metalanguage counts, S3 and S4 dominated respectively with 16 and 26 as compared to 9 and 7 for S1 and S2. S3 and S4 had all 5 of 5 questions addressed whereas 4 of the 6 questions for S1 and S2 went unaddressed. All 8 of 8 indicators (from Gass & Varonis’s notion of trigger, indicator, response and optional reaction in the negotiation sequence, 1985 & 1991; and in Ellis, 1994) for S3 and S4 were considered while 7 of the 9 indicators of S1 and S2 went unaddressed. Finally, S3, S4 and S5 engaged in considerable self- and other-repair whereas S1 and S2 offered only one such instance and elicited no responses to two of their self-repair efforts. Together, these features characterize the shift in the talk away from S1 and S2 in the south of the seating arrangement facing the teacher and toward S3, S4 and S5 in the north resulting in the initially perceived rift or break in tenor relations among these students. Illustrating first how the struggle took place will foster greater appreciation of the teacher-student perceptual differences that follow.

## **Illuminating the Logogenesis of the Task Talk**

The logogenesis or flow of Group 3’s task resolution talk is illustrated in Figure 3, and is backgrounded by the students’ self-selected workshop seating arrangement (Fulmer, 2004b).

Figure 2. Transcript of Group 3's Question 6 Recall and Inference Task Resolution

Turn	S	Discourse Utterance	Language Function(s)
(1)	S2:	このえが分かんない! どんどん悪くなってる! [laughter; S1 & S3: ちがう!ちがう!]	Puzzling & joking
(2)	S4:	ああ, これさ.... Essay のさ... 2 番めって何?	Directing & asking
(3)	S2:	Essay?	Noticing
(4)	S4:	これさ....	Redirecting
(5)	S1:	あーう!これ ぜんぜん ちがう こと 書きちゃった!	Realizing mistake
(6)	S2:	何かこれ三つ書かれたんだけど! ...ル...ム.... (yawns deeply) [laughter]	Hazarding
(7)	S4:	四 key part of....	Refocusing
(8)	S2:	何 わけ 分かんない とこ 書いてんの?	Puzzling
(9)	S4:	じゃあ, これ 四つで!	Declaring
(10)	S2:	これ 四つの key part を書けてこと?	Asking to clarify
(11)	S3:	Introduction とか....	Hazarding
(12)	S4:	Introduction, problem, solution.... [S3 laughs]	Continuing by hazarding
(13)	S4:	分かんない!	Mock giving up
(14)	S2:	Introduction. Conclusion....	Hazarding
(15)	S4:	こっちが essay なん だよね!	Confirming/Reflecting
(16)	S5:	うん。	Agreeing
(17)	S4:	Problem?	Hazarding
(18)	S3:	何だろうね?..... ああ, origi... あっ, title じゃん! Title?	Puzzling, declaring & self-questioning
(19)	S5:	ううん。	Disagreeing
(20)	S3:	Title. Introduction....	Self-repairing & continuing
(21)	S5:	Introduction...	Prompting to continue
(22)	S1:	Introduction と ID とか 入れる?	Confirming by hazarding
(23)	S3:	...introduction...body...body paragraph....	Continuing
(24)	S2:	何て書いてあったの?	Confirming (looking over at S3's paper) & writing
(25)	S3:	...で conclusion.	Declaring
(26)	S4:	Original title...introduction... [coughing]	Reconfirming by repeating & writing
(27)	S4:	あっ, body paragraph だ!	Declaring & continuing to write
[(28)	Pat:	Hookay! If you're finished...if you're fin-.... If you've finished ah 14, please go to 15.]	Signaling
(29)	S1:	うん?	Prompting to continue
(30)	S4:	...conclusion.	Continuing & writing

**Table 1. Summarized Individual Contributions to Task Resolution**

1) Total utterance and metalanguage counts/student:

Total # of utterances/S			Total metaL used as functional vocab/S		
S1	3	10.34	S1	2	5.88
S2	6 (+ joke [1])	24.13	S2	5	14.70
S3	5	17.24	S3	11	32.35
S4	11	37.93	S4	15	44.12
S5	3	10.34	S5	1	2.99
Totals:	29	99.98%		34	99.99%

2) Instances of questions being **addressed**/unaddressed:

Total question turns	Questions <b>addressed</b> /unaddressed
S1 2	<b>(22*)</b> (29) 1/2
S2 4	<b>(3)</b> (8) (10) (24) 1/4 = 2/6
S3 2	<b>(18): 2 questions</b> 2/2
S4 3	<b>(2) (15) (17)</b> 3/3 = 5/5
[S5 0	None asked. 0/0]

\*Gets S2's and S3's indirectly writing down S1's hazarded "ID."

3) Instances of indicators being **considered/addressed** or overlooked/unaddressed:

Total indicator turns	Indicators <b>considered</b> /overlooked or unaddressed
S1 3	(5) <b>(22)</b> (29) 1/3
S2 6	<b>(3)</b> (6) (8) (10) (14) (24) 1/6 = 2/9
S3 3	<b>(11) (18) (20)</b> 3/3
S4 5	<b>(2) (9*) (13) (15) (17)</b> 5/5 = 8/8
[S5 0	None made. 0/0]

\*Since no one counters or offers other-repair, which is a form of consideration, S4 declares "Yeah, four [parts] here!" in turn (9).

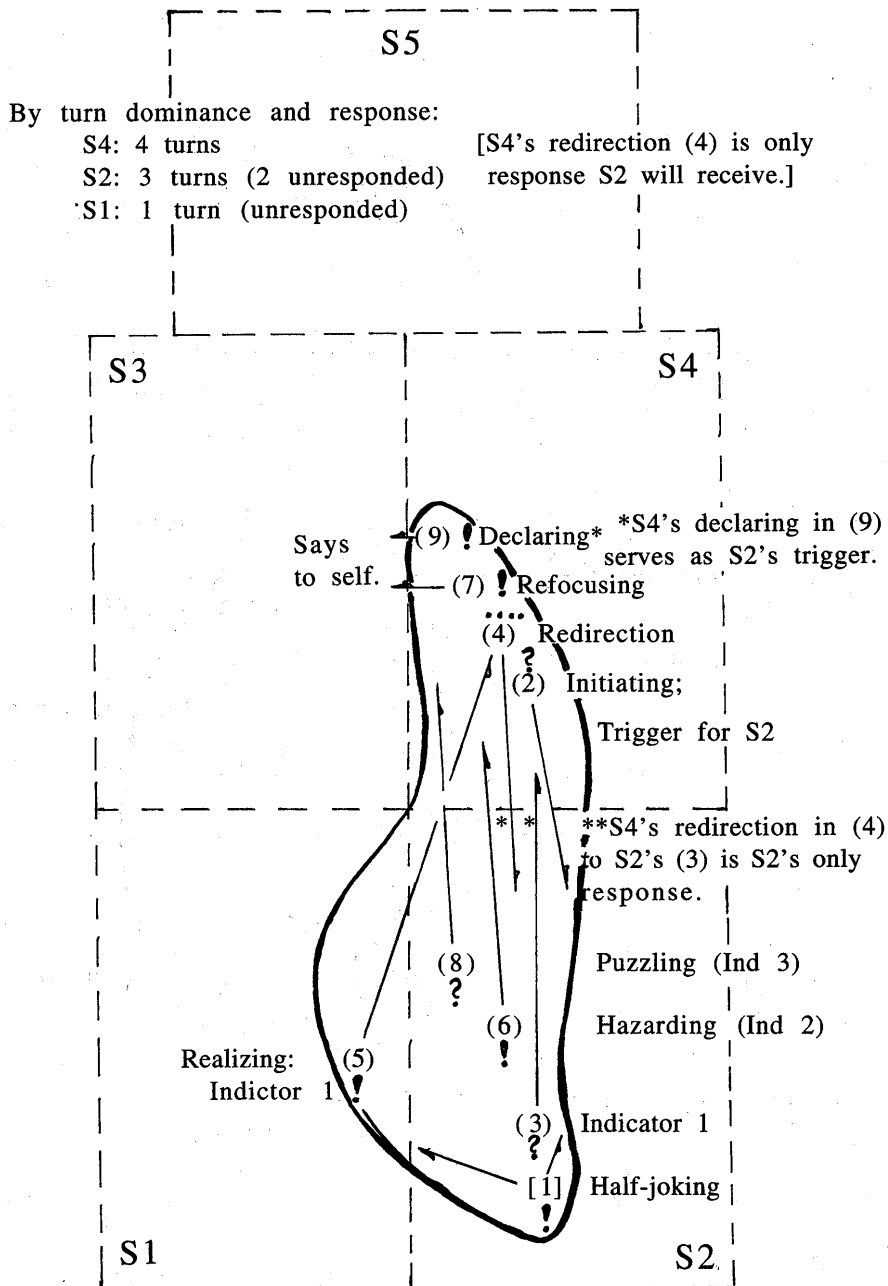
4) Efforts to stimulate self- or other-repair:

- S5's brief but guiding responses encourage repair in turns (16) & (19), and continuing in (21).
- S3's self-repair response sequence in turns (18), (20), (23) and (25).
- S4's persistence in hazarding, realizing and self-repair in turns (12), (13), (15), (17), (26), (27) and (30), pushing ahead with 11 of the total 29 student utterances.
- S1 offers 1 self-/other-repair effort (22) & gets indirect written response from S2 & S3; S2 attempts 2 self-repairs in (10) & (14) but gets no response.
- S1's and S2's 7 of 9 indicators go unresponded or elicit no other-repair.

Here, logogenesis means “growth and development in the text” or the “unfolding of the text itself, moving from its beginning to its middle to its end” (Christie, 2002: respectively, pp. 5 & 97). In Sequence 1 in Frame A, S4 initiates the talk in turn (2). This leads to the only direct exchange in talk between S3, S4 and S5 and S1 and S2 in turns (2)-(4). S2 and S1 respectively indicate but elicit no response or address. The sequence ends with S4 refocusing and declaring to herself in turns (7) and (9). In Sequence 2 in Frame B, S4 initiates again from pivotal turn (9), serving as the trigger for S2, and this time begins to get direct responses from S3 and S5.

**Figure 3. Logogenesis of Group 3’s Task Resolution Talk Depicting the South-North “Rift” in Tenor Relations**

**A. Sequence 1: Turns [1]-(9); initiated by S4 in (2).**

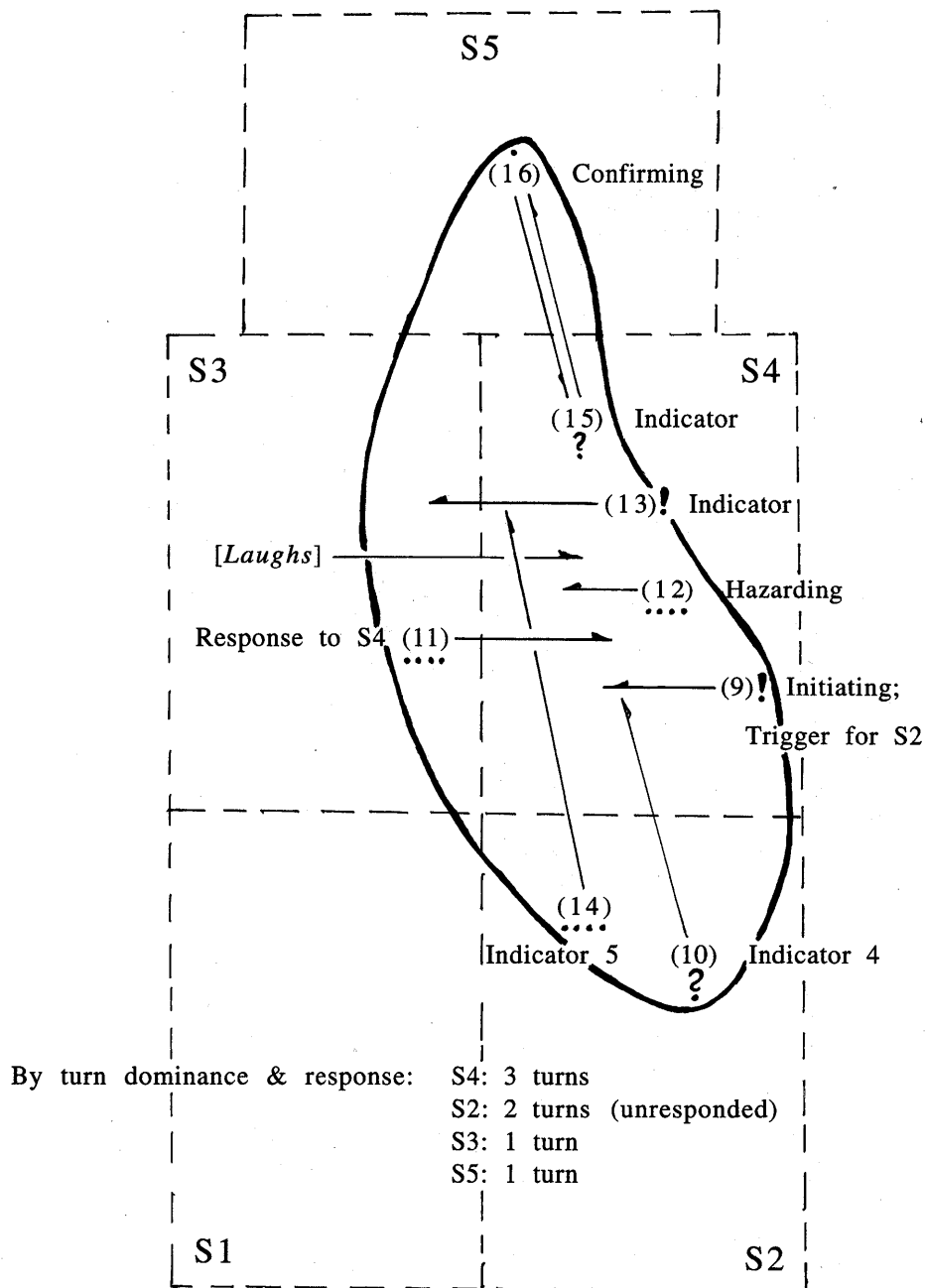


(Desktops are 39.5 cm x 59.5 cm after Dewey.)

Again, no consideration is given to S2's queries (10) and (14). In Sequence 3 and Sequence 4 embedded in it in Frame C, the task talk becomes considerably intensified, focused, and resolved. For emphasis in the embedded sequence, the questions of S1 (22, 29) and S2 (24) go noticeably unaddressed.

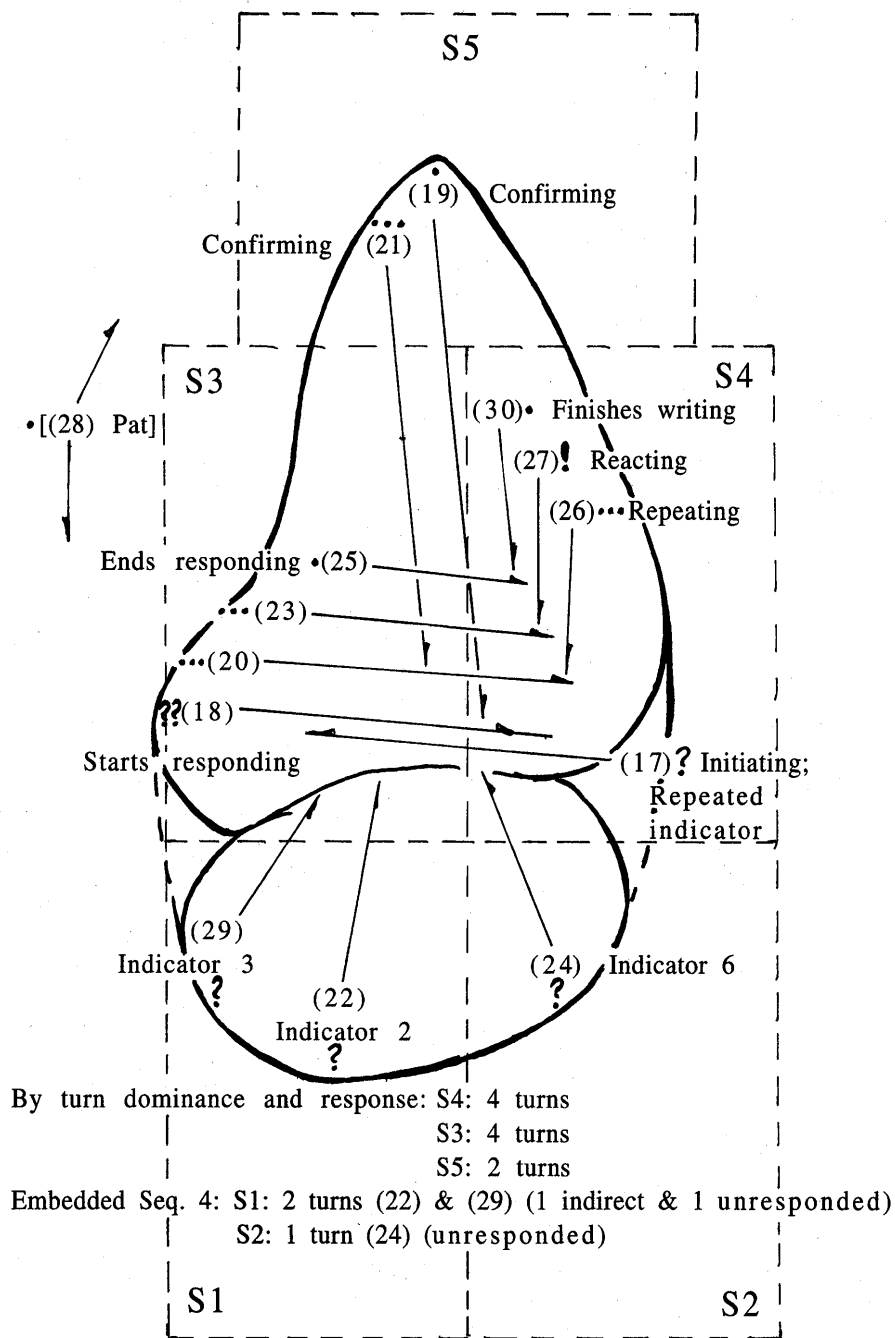
Embodied more dramatically as a composite in Frame D are the students' contributions and the developing struggle in the flow of their talk. Prodded by S4, hazarded by S3, confirmed by S5, and then repeated and written by S4, the talk very quickly collapses in the south and shifts to the north. Notably, from a logogenesis or talk flow point of view, the talk shifts away from S1 and S2 in Sequence 1 and is accomplished almost exclusively by S3, S4 and S5 in Sequence

**B. Sequence 2: Turns (9)-(16); initiated by S4 in (9).**



3. For emphasis, the vertical curve shows the first half of students' talk up to turn (16) rather dominantly shifting in the second half toward very speedy resolution, again initiated repeatedly by S4 in turns (2), (9) and (17). Further, the exclusively shared or considered talk in the north between S3, S4 and S5 strongly contrasts with the unanswered indicators S2 and S1 continue to pose from the south. Outside of the single initial exchange in turns (2)-(4), the horizontal curve thus delineates this south-north tear line in their tenor relations.

**C. Sequence 3: Turns (17)-(30); initiated by S4 in (17).**

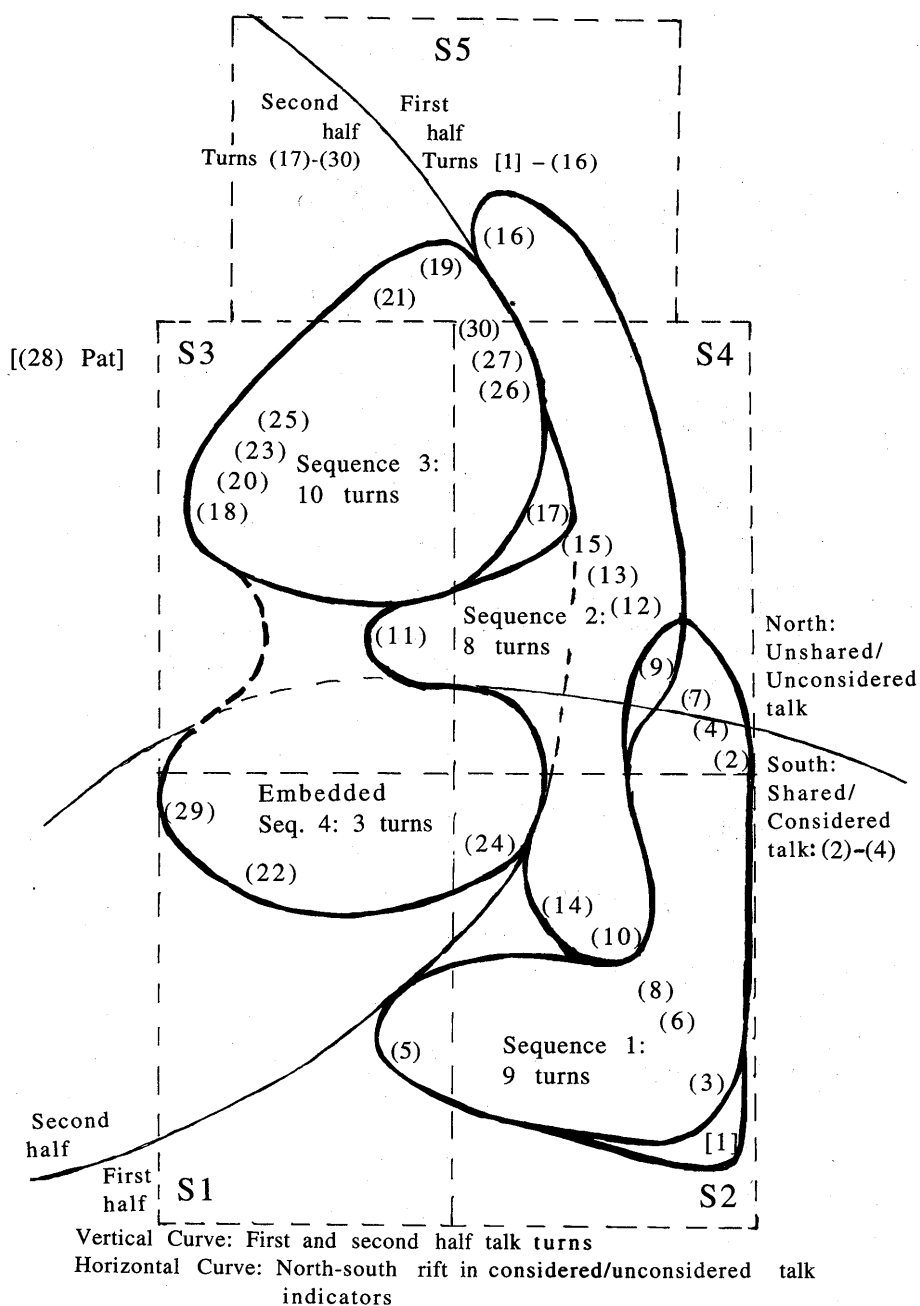




## Narrowing Teacher-Student Perceptual Gaps

In the foregoing, we briefly reviewed *what* happened in the 2-minute 15-second talk and *how* it happened. Here we explore *why* the interpersonal “struggle” arose as we believe it may be of some value to those of our readers who are also involved in classroom instruction, particularly that scaffolded by small-group workshop talk. In our exploration here (given on a first-name basis as we teach and learn using first names), we limit our focus particularly to how inviting participating students to review and discuss their talk task sheets, transcripts, and audio and

### D. Logogenesis (flow) of the shifting talk: Pivotal initiating turns (2), (9) and (17).



video tapes served to refine Pat's perceptions as a classroom teacher of the reasons for the unfolding talk. As we wanted to know how the teacher's and participating students' perceptions compare and what we might learn together, we present in summary form Pat's refining perceptions in four stages.

1. *What happened in the task?* (Pat's first interpretations immediately pre- and post-task as a classroom teacher after initial task sheet examining and one tape listening)

Pre-task assumptions:

1. S1 and S2 were the group leaders; and
2. S3, S4 and S5 were quiet and more self-reflective.

Post-task perceptions:

3. Group members worked cooperatively to resolve the task as they were in their 11th week together.
4. "Successful task completion" was evidenced in 1) appropriate paragraph and essay metaknowledge structure and metalanguage on the task sheets, and in 2) appropriate use of English writing metalanguage functionally in the task talk.

2. *How did the shift happen?* (Pat's second interpretations after discovering students' negotiation of meaning in task resolution leading to an interpersonal "struggle")

1. All were under time pressure as this was a 3-minute timed task.
2. S1 and S2 were the group "leaders" but S4 was the driving force (prominent motivator) in the task completion.
3. S3, S4 in particular, and S5 were not "quiet" but vocally active.
4. S4, and then S3, were initially deferential to their seniors.
5. S1 and S2 offered S4 and S3 little to no on-task interaction or interchange, and gave few or inappropriate responses except in turn (3).
6. S4, wanting to finish quickly, became more persistent with the increasing frustration of getting little to no response from S1 and S2.
7. S3 took the lead to complete the task, stepping in to hazard metalanguage responses, even though writing nothing on her task sheet, and got minimal but salient support from S5.

Pat wondered if the struggle occurred because:

8. S4, S3 and S5 knew each other well as "Go-shusei" (still officially high school seniors, and junior to S1 & S2) and thus fell back on their close and comfortable familiarity?
9. There was outright violation of conversational rules or simply no accommodation?
10. S4, S3 and S5 simply gave up on S2 and S1 and pressed ahead with the task completion?

In the third stage, in their review and discussion in separate sittings of their classroom materials of why the talk shifted north, participating students either confirmed, negated or amplified Pat's perceptions.

3. *Why did the shift happen?* (Students' first disclosed perceptions after their initial review and discussion of their tape, transcript and task sheets)

Confirmed:

1. S3, S4 and S5 were comfortable with and used to each other as "Go-shusei."
2. S4, and then S3, wanted to get the answers quickly and finish the talk.
3. S4 and S3 felt considerable time pressure; were initially deferential to S1 and S2 as their seniors; and got little to no interaction or responses from S1 and S2 to their inquiries.
4. S3, S4 and S5 gave up on S2 and S1 and went ahead on their own to finish the task.

Negated:

5. S1 and S2 "didn't understand what to do and had no suggestions" for S3, S4 and S5.
6. S4 and S3 quickly experienced an increasing degree of impatience and discomfort, not "frustration."
7. S1 and S2 were not "leaders" but seniors and S3, S4 and S5 were not "quiet."

Amplified:

8. S3, S4 and S5 were anxious to talk together and finish the task.
9. S4 had hazarded all but the middle part correctly, and S3 began hazarding metalanguage responses though she was initially unsure what to write on her task sheet.
10. S1 and S2 were "thinking too much" instead of attending directly to the task and did not seem to grasp the pace of the task; S2's questions especially seemed inappropriate and inconsequential.
11. S4 and S3 felt a physical and verbal division happening, so they discarded their politeness and opted to hurry on and finish the task.

In the final Stage 4, in order to minimize as much as possible the observer's as well as participant's paradox, Pat then asked Ruriko, who was in the same class as these classmate friends, to talk casually with these five learners' further about why they believed their talk shifted north. In separate sittings, Ruriko found that there were learning style considerations operating at the center of students' talk, as may be expected, which we believe is sufficient to say here. More importantly and more revealingly is that Ruriko also found that all five participating students agreed with seven key points they believed contributed to the dynamic of their talk "struggle."

4. *Why did the shift really happen?* (Students' second, privately revealed perceptions of agreed key contributors to the dynamic of their talk "struggle")

1. S1 and S2 were focused on the talk but were taking too much time considering instead of hazarding responses; S2's inquiries in particular were off pace and off task.
2. S4, as was accustomed, asked seniors first, and then tried shifting to someone else (to S5 and then to S3).
3. S3 also deferred to seniors but became more uncomfortable with S1 and S2's inattention (silence and neglect) to the task; stepped outside her customary reservation, risked a response, and then assumed the lead in completing the task.
4. Anxious to solve the task quickly, S3, S4 and S5's perspective was: "Not expecting S1's and S2's full cooperation, we forgot them." Equally salient and agreeably conceded, S1 and S2's perspective was: "Knowing S3, S4 and S5's tenacity, we let them go ahead."

5. S3, S4 and S5 “almost always found the answers by ourselves.”
6. “Pat said we were free to choose our own workshop talk groups, which we did in the second week; but though we wanted to change later, we thought we couldn’t ‘unchoose’ our groups.”
7. “The way we solved our talk tasks became ‘natural’ for us. Asking seniors first and then going ahead was not ‘sudden’ or ‘new’ because we’d been practicing this talk almost every time since the beginning of our small-group work. Yes, it was a ‘struggle’ for us, but we got used to it [this interactional pattern].”

Clearly in evidence in these stages, particularly illuminating following Pat’s first and second interpretations are the participating students’ two deepening perceptions, the first initially disclosed and the second privately revealed. Especially differing considerably from Pat’s initial perceptions are students’ perceptions 4-7 in Stage 4 underscoring that this talk task was not a first-time isolated incident. Again, the principal point we wish to emphasize here is that, for classroom teachers, students’ evidentiary materials such as task sheets, audio and video talk transcripts, and even initial review and commentary perceptions may not reveal nearly as much as we might expect of why students’ talk may unfold as it does.

### **Closing Remarks: Nudging Limitations into Challenges**

There are obvious limitations to this small-scale study and analysis. For one, exploration could go much deeper. For another, the study looks at only one aspect of one language art. Additionally, a degree of perceptual and interpretive error remains as an inevitable result of data selectivity. As Christie notes, selecting down hours of tapes and hundreds of pages of transcripts and discussions is in itself a clear and unmistakable form of interpreting what to present (p. 22). A further limitation is the unquestionable difficulty of another teacher-researcher being able to replicate this study.

That said, as previously stated (Fulmer, 2004a), we believe there are salient implications here for classroom teaching. What we “see and hear” in the classroom, for example, may only hint at the nature and degree of individual students’ contributions to the classroom learning endeavor and of their L2 discourse effort to engage in and stay involved in the talk. Moreover, our perceptions as teachers of how and why talk may be unfolding in the classroom may often be far afield of the perceptions of those with whom we share our classrooms and seek to instruct. Finally, we would again caution against over-reliance on readily observable or evidentiary classroom realia “signaling” individual students’ learning.

Regarding challenges to our perspective, though this is a small-scale study, it illustrates the age-old classroom teacher’s dilemma. As teachers, we are under constant pedagogical, material and time pressure to push students hard to make greater language learning progress, specifically, more fearless production leading to more confident performance and then hopefully to greater proficiency. Yet pushing hard means that we may often invariably rely on traditional “quick and fast” means of evaluating students’ language learning progress that may in fact offer

very little evidence of students' actual performance.

The findings in this study are obviously neither new nor startling in any way. Rather they simply underscore the relevancy to this dilemma of three converging disciplinary issues. Francis Christie (2002) asserts that neither discourse nor discourse analysis is "neutral" and that classroom talk transcripts as well as the video record, once removed from the classroom reality, are interpretive (22). We agree. We also concur with Christie that "we need large-scale collections and analyses of classroom talk, the better to understand and interpret what actually happens" in such talk (118). Yet we must also respectively agree with John Fanselow (1992, 1997) and with Jerry Gebhard and Robert Oprandy (1999) that, in observing our classes, what we need to learn anew is how to see and see again, and as well need more directed inquiry guiding our participant observation. At the same time, in their speaking to the contentious issue of teacher's assessment and evaluation of students' performance about which we have our own misgivings, we support the call Chris Casanave (1995, 2003) and Peter Elbow (1993) make for the need to find other ways to "assess" or "evaluate" what students are doing besides looking at their writing and task sheets alone.

As another challenge to consider, inviting post-analysis interviewing with participating students may be a possibly more insightful alternative to the usual teacher "interpretation at best" (Christie, 2002) of the "successes" we may believe learners are "accomplishing together" in their small-group talk work. Clearly, for example, had Fulmer done the customary appraisal of students' work post-task, he would have missed much and been unfair in his interpretation as evidenced herein. Without engaging the participating students in follow-up review and discussion, particularly in reflecting on and telling back, he would further never have known nor arrived with any certainty at the reasons for the students' continuing struggle with each other.

As a final challenge to our thinking, we believe that involving students in the task talk review and confirmation process may be one resourceful way to apply practically systemic functional linguistics as a classroom teaching-learning tool. We believe including these participating students first-hand in this perceptual analysis certainly presented them with a reflective opportunity to make their own appraisal about shared teaching and learning in the workshop talk setting, and importantly as well, to look critically at their own language production and talk performance.

\*Ruriko Suganuma graduated March 2004 from the English and American Literature Department, Showa Women's University. She received recognition with honors (Shu, 秀) for the Best Graduation Thesis in Linguistics for 2004 ("Considerations in Using Abbreviations and Face Marks in E-mail") under the direction of her Seminar Faculty Advisor, Professor Mutsumi Kishiyama. Ms. Suganuma contributed significantly to deepening Patrick Fulmer's understanding of the participating students' reasons for the shift in their workshop talk as discussed herein. This paper could not have been concluded without her invaluable coauthorship.

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