Emic approach to research on conversational gap in the foreign language classroom*

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An emic perspective, or insiders’ perspective, has been widely employed in social interactionism-inspired qualitative studies. This view claims that any interactional behavior can be examined from within the system. Applied to research in which talk is central, this view requires data to come from the participants who are involved in the talk because they document their social actions to each other within the details of their interaction. Researchers can access the perspective by adopting the same perspective as the participants. As a result, the findings yield high internal and ecological validity. Following this perspective, this study, which explores silence, or, to be more specific, gap, in institutionalized talk, demonstrates how interactional data is produced and analyzed by the participants as the talk emerges. This study shows that an emic view allows researchers to indirectly involve participants in the analysis and can be an alternative potential tool in descriptive communication research.

Keywords: emic perspective, interactional data, silence, gap, lapse

La perspectiva émica, o perspectiva desde adentro, se ha utilizado ampliamente en estudios cualitativos inspirados en el interaccionismo social. Este punto de vista sostiene que cualquier comportamiento interaccional puede examinarse desde dentro del sistema. Aplicado a la investigación sobre el discurso oral, este punto de vista requiere que los datos provengan de los participantes que están involucrados en la charla porque documentan sus acciones sociales dentro de los detalles de su interacción. Los investigadores pueden acceder a la perspectiva mediante la adopción de la misma perspectiva que los participantes. Como resultado de ello, los resultados arrojan una alta validez interna y ecológica. Siguiendo esta perspectiva, este estudio, que explora el silencio, o, para ser más

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específicos, la brecha, en el discurso oral institucionalizado, demuestra cómo los datos de la interacción son producidos y analizados por los participantes a medida que discurre la conversación. Este estudio muestra que una vista émica permite a los investigadores implicar indirectamente a los participantes en el análisis y puede constituir una herramienta potencial alternativa en la investigación descriptiva de la comunicación.

**Palabras clave:** perspectiva émica, datos interaccionales, silencio, brecha, lapso

1. **Introduction**

The past forty years or so have witnessed an increasing number of papers intended to explicate human social interaction, i.e., how participants come to understand each other in talk-in-interaction. While there are many influential methods, this paper employs a Conversation Analytic (CA) method which is sociological in origin. This method is inspired by, among others, an emic perspective, or participants' perspective. This paper demonstrates how an emic perspective (see the data analysis for demonstration) can be implemented in qualitative communication research by analyzing, in an institutionalized interaction, problematic conversational gap (see Agar, 1985 for a review). Instead of providing the how-to manual step-by-step, this paper’s emic perspective locates problematic gaps from the perspective of a teacher, the insider involved in the ongoing institutionalized interaction.

2. **Relevant literature**

2.1 **Silence: A social and communicative phenomenon**

Researchers in communication studies have considerable interest in phonics-based codes (e.g., verbal interaction or monologue), graphic or symbolic codes (e.g., written discourse and genres), or visible codes (e.g., gestural, nonverbal, or semiotic codes), while a communicative code such as *silence* receives relatively less attention simply because its scope cannot be easily identified and, therefore, quantified. Silence can be an intrapersonal (e.g., mental process or inner talk) (Sifianou, 1997), social (e.g., avoidance or termination of talk or face-saving strategy) (Jaworski & Stephens, 1998) or interactional activity (Sacks, Schegloff, & Jefferson, 1974).

Silence is defined as a lack of talk from a particular participant involved in the exchange (Liddicoat, 2007), the opposite of talk (Hao, 2010; Kurzon, 1997),
or the non-communicative absence of speech (Jaworski & Stephens, 1998). These definitions do not give a clear picture of what silence exactly is, but simply see it as a meaningless and uncommunicative component of human communication. Comparing silence with speech, its counterpart, is not helpful either because they have different features that are designed to communicate their speaker’s intention.

In fact, in order to have a clear understanding of the concept of silence, we need to investigate its structure, meaning, functions (Saville-Troike, 1985), and sequential and organizational location in relation to the talk which it always accompanies (Sacks, Schegloff, & Jefferson, 1974). This is probably because, as Nakane (2007) and Sifianou (1997) emphasize, silence is a multifaceted and ambiguous phenomenon that needs the context in which it is found to help us understand its structure, meaning, and functions. Silence in the present study is defined as the recipient’s nonresponse, verbal or nonverbal, after the speaker asks a question.

2.2 Silence and context

Conversational silence can be broadly divided into three different types: pause, gap, and lapse, according to its sequential and interactional place (i.e., context which includes what precedes it and follows it in the talk), its owner, and its perceived length (Sacks et al., 1974). Theoretically, these three can be difficult to differentiate from each other without a sequence of talk (i.e., context-sensitiveness, see Heritage, 1984) or merely from an etic perspective (which is an outsider’s perspective, in this case the researcher’s perspective). One type of silence, pause, is shown in Example 1.

Example 1 (ten Have, 2007, p. 107)

Maude: I say well it’s fine Missiz uh: Schmidt ih you’d think she’d help< hhh

→ Well. Missiz Schmidt was the one she: (0.2) assumed responsibility for the three specials

In Example 1, the turn belongs to Maude. Before she completes the turn so far developed, she paused for 0.2 (two tenths of a second). This pause intercedes not only to her turn as a whole but also the syntactic structure of the second half of the turn (she and assumed responsibility for the three specials). As a result, pause is considered an ‘intra-turn’ or ‘within-speaker’ silence (Heldner & Edlund, 2010). In addition to happening in an intra-turn position, silence can be found after a turn-constructional unit (or TCU), the basic unit of turn, which performs actions in turn-at-talk (see Sacks et al., 1974, for details) as illustrated below.
Example 2 (Button & Casey, 1984 cited in Liddicoat, 2007, p. 80)

N: =You'll come about (.) eight. Right? = (1)
H: =Yeah, = (2)
N: =Okay. (3)
→ (0.2) (4)
N: Anything else to report. (5)

In Example 2, silence (line 4) occurs at the end of a completed action of a talk sequence (lines 1–3). N’s turn (line 3) does not require any co-participant to take the next turn, nor demand the continuity of the talk. On the other hand, N’s turn (line 5) is not conditionally relevant to the previous talk sequence, implying that the previous sequence (lines 1–3) is over and the silence (line 4) is unproblematic. This (0.2) pause is a place where the change of speakership becomes relevant. Because a ‘current-speaker-selects-next’ rule and a ‘self-selection’ rule (Sacks et al., 1974) do not operate, N, the current speaker, continues. However, the example below runs interactively differently.

Example 3 (Liddicoat, 2007, p. 80)

Harry: Did you speak to Mary today? (1)
→ (0.2) (2)
Harry: Did you speak to Mary? (3)
Joy: Oh, yeah I saw her at lunch. (4)

In Example 3, Harry’s question (line 1) implies that the continuity of talk is not yet complete. Once his question turn is complete, the silence (line 2) then belongs to Joy; that is, she is expected to respond to the questions, which she does not. Her no-response is socially accountable and is perceived by Harry as such. Thus, he repeats the question (line 3) and Joyce answers the question (line 4); this makes the talk sequence complete.

It should be noted that, while silence found in Example 1 is named ‘pause’, those identified in Examples 2 and 3 are referred to as ‘gap’. While pause occurs intra-turn, gap can be found once a preceding turn is complete and before the next turn begins. That is, gap can be spotted when the change of speakership becomes relevantly possible. While ‘lapse’ is not a focus here, it is important to point out that lapse is similar to gap, but its length is longer, possibly implying that the talk may be terminated. This study does not focus on all kinds of silence, but only on gap that is considered ‘socially accountable’, as illustrated in Example 3. The next section discusses gap in relation to adjacency pairs (see Schegloff & Sacks, 1973, for a review).
2.3 Adjacency pairs as an indicator of complete sequence

The most basic talk sequence is an adjacency pair (AP) which claims the conditionally relevant relationship between the occurrences of two consecutive turns-at-talk (Schegloff & Sacks, 1973). Example 4 demonstrates an AP.

Example 4
A: Hi
B: Hi

In Example 4, A’s ‘Hi’ (line 1) is used to initiate a sequence. B recognizes A’s ‘Hi’ as a combination between the sound (/haI/), meaning (greeting), and function (bonding, verbal recognition). ‘Hi’ is a greeting which demands B’s contribution that is relevant to A’s ‘Hi’. In addition, B is expected to recognize that A’s ‘Hi’, a one-word turn, is complete, allowing B’s speakership to be possibly relevant. In other words, A’s ‘Hi’ creates a context in which B’s ‘Hi’ becomes conditionally relevant.

Example 5 (Atkinson & Drew, 1979, p. 58)
A: Uh if you’d care to come over and visit a little while this morning I’ll give you a cup of coffee.
B: hehh Well that’s awfully sweet of you, I don’t think I can make it this morning Hh uhm I’m running an ad in the paper and-and uh I have to stay near the phone.

Example 5 shows that B takes A’s turn as an invitation. As a result, the conditionally relevant response to the invitation B can provide is either an acceptance or a refusal. In this extract, B chooses to refuse the invitation. Both B’s subsequent action (e.g., a reply) and the meaning of the reply are considered relevant to A’s turn. Examples 4 and 5 introduce four rules of conditional relevance exercised in an AP. First, there are at least two participants in the sequence. Second, each participant produces one turn (referred to as a ‘first-pair part’ (FPP) and a ‘second-pair part’ (SPP) consecutively). Third, the two parts are placed adjacently to each other. Fourth, more importantly, the FPP creates a context which makes it conditionally relevant for the second speaker to provide an appropriate SPP. Such a context here is referred to as ‘pair-type’; both parts of the AP should come from the same pair-type (Schegloff & Sacks, 1973).
However, a talk sequence may consist of more than just two turns; a reason being that the second-pair part is neither provided nor relevantly provided. This can be shown in Example 6.

Example 6 (Atkinson & Drew, 1979, p. 52)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Turn</th>
<th>Text</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>John: Is there something bothering you or not?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>→ (1.0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>John: Yes or no?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>→ (1.5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>John: Ehhh ↑</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Fred: No</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Example 6 shows that, at first glance, there are three sets of AP (1–2, 3–4, 5–6). However, the first set is not complete as no SPP is provided (line 2). Neither is the second set, from which the first set results. Gap (lines 2 and 4), replacing the answers, is not expected and, is therefore, accountable (as witnessed in lines 3 and 5). However, question 3 (line 5) leads to the proper SPP which completes the ongoing sequence (since line 1) and the AP (a question-answer sequence; lines 5 and 6 or originally lines 1 and 6). Another example should suffice.

Example 7 (Atkinson & Drew, 1979, p. 52)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Turn</th>
<th>Text</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Child: have to cut these Mummy.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>→ (1.3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Child: won’t we Mummy?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>→ (1.5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Child: Won’t we?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Mother: yes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In Examples 6 and 7, gap occurs in the AP of the speakers’ turns. Gap, while frequently broadly referred to as inactivity or unwillingness to communicate, can be located in turns-at-talk. Gap affects the trajectory of the preceded talk when the owner of the turn prior to gap believes that there is an unnecessarily long gap and then decides to deal with the cause of the gap. There are several causes of an unproblematic gap; however, in many cases, the causes and the meanings of a gap are indistinguishable.

Whatever the cause is, an unnecessarily long gap is an undesirable response, at least from the recipient’s perspective. This is explained by Grice’s (1975) Conversational Maxim of Manner. When gap is operational, the Conversational Maxim of Manner is violated (e.g., being irresponsible). Also the hearer’s positive
face, according to Brown and Levinson (1979), is threatened (being non-cooperative). This explains why gap is considered ‘socially accountable’ as it requires involving parties to halt the talk-in-progress to deal with the cause of the gap.

To conclude, this section introduces an AP which consists of an FPP and an SPP. When an FPP is a question which demands a response from the recipient and a gap is subsequently provided, the talk sequence is not complete. That is, gap produced as a reply is considered a second conditionally relevant action, but it is not a preferred one. The next section deals with gap from an emic perspective.

2.4 Emic perspective on conversational gap

In general, research is conducted to systematically study an event or phenomenon. The first important activity the researcher has to do is to specify an event or phenomenon they want to study (or the unit of analysis). In other words, its scope must be specifically identified in order to yield high validity. This study aims to demonstrate how an emic perspective can be of particular help when there is a need to locate a problematic gap.

So far researchers, mainly experiment-inspired ones, have investigated gap, not from an *emic*, but from an *etic* perspective (also referred to as the perspective of a researcher or an outsider, or as a deductive or top-down analysis). From the beginning, studies in what is now considered inclusively as ‘silence’ have experienced some methodological difficulties. For example, the studies have to first define what silence is (e.g., its properties). Then they have to differentiate one type of silence from others (e.g., pause, gap, and lapse) (Edlund, Heldner, & Hirschberg, 2009). In addition, they have to locate boundaries of silence (its length and its surroundings) (Kendall, 2013). This is experimentally challenging and relatively arbitrary due to the inconsistent measurement of and criteria for silence.

Later, many researchers (Goldman-Eisler, 1968; O’Connell & Kowal, 1980; Robb, Maclagan, & Chen, 2004; Thomas, 2011) identified the length of pause and came up with greatly varying lengths. This was explored without a definite or clear definition of each type of silence, the umbrella under which pause, gap, and lapse are grouped. As demonstrated above, these three can be more accurately identified when a sequence of talk is taken into account. That is, conversational interaction helps differentiate each type of silence.

Several researchers have explored the features of silence. A technical difficulty they experienced is to locate the beginning and the end of different types of silence. Afterwards, researchers were interested in several factors that affected the length of silences the individuals produced. Such experimental investigations began with a phonetic context (the speaker’s intentions and social factors) and then a situational context. These laboratory studies were etic by nature, meaning the
researchers used theories, hypothesis, perspectives, and concepts from outside the settings under investigation (Pike, 1967; Lett, 1990).

As discussed above, experimental studies in silence result in methodological difficulty and impracticality, while the findings, affected by an etic view, may not yield high validity, especially an external and ecological one. As a result, the emic perspective about gap which is adopted in this study means that what researchers believe to be a gap is a gap only when the participants in the talk in which the gap is found believe so. Below is a diagram of an unproblematic gap, from an emic perspective.

![Diagram 1. Unproblematic Silence](image)

Diagram 1 suggests that, although the students do not respond to the teacher’s question (line 2), silence is unproblematic. This is because the teacher does not treat it as such but continues talking (line 3). Silence in Diagram 2 is considered by the teacher a problematic one. It can be noticed that the talk runs sequentially differently.

![Diagram 2. Problematic Silence](image)

This second diagram presents problematic silence which occurs when the students do not respond to the teacher’s question (line 2) and the teacher treats it as such by using the strategy to deal with the students’ silence (line 3). The strategy works and the students respond (line 4). If not (i.e., they remain silent) (line 4*), the teacher may try a new strategy.

1. N stands for the number signifying the gap length. 0.N means the number of tenth of a second.
2. Ss refers to a student (it also applies in this paper when ‘St’ appears in diagrams, examples, and extracts).
3. Tr refers to the teacher (it also applies in this paper when ‘Tr’ appears in diagrams, examples, and extracts).
3. Research methodology

3.1 Research questions

The literature reviewed above demonstrates how methodologically difficult it is to locate gap from an etic perspective. A few questions implicitly raised above are ‘how can we be certain if the phenomenon we want to study is gap or non-gap?’, ‘who should have the right to interpret gap as a problem in talk; outsiders or insiders of the talk?’, and ‘how can we explain the validity of the findings?’ This study was designed to demonstrate how to locate a gap using an emic perspective. Research questions are:

1. How can a problematic gap be located in instructional communication?
2. Who should interpret gap as a problem?

3.2 Participants and context

There are two parties engaged in the conversational interaction analyzed in this study: 1) a teacher and 2) students. This type of interaction is considered institutionalized talk because of the (power) relationships between the two, the context in which the talk took place, the social expectation placed on how the two should talk and behave toward each other, and which language code should be used. The data were collected by recording three class meetings of three hours each with approximately nine hours total recording. The researcher listened to the nine-hour recording, and then transcribed only the sequence of talk that was relevant to the research in course.

3.3 Research instrument

A video-recorder was used to record the conversational interaction in which gap was found. It was set at the back of the class so that it was not intrusive to the classroom talk. While the researcher sat in the back during the class, her only role was to check on the recorder to avoid a technical problem, not to observe the class interaction nor later provide additional data to the analysis.
4. Data analysis

4.1 Emic perspective and the analysis of talk

The emic viewpoint asks that the analysis come from the inside of the system being studied. Participants who are involved in the talk document their social and communicative actions to each other in the details of the interaction. Their turn taking reveals how they analyze each other’s actions and helps them check if the other’s analysis is correct (Schegloff, 1992). Researchers can access this perspective by adopting the same perspective as the participants. To put it differently, the participants’ talk and the talk that has gone immediately before reveal the establishment of mutual understandings and, if necessary, the reestablishment of mutual understandings. This is outlined below.

A: First turn 
B: B’s Analysis of A’s Previous Turn 
A: A’s Disapproval or Approval of B’s Analysis

Diagram 3. Emic Perspective and Turn-Taking System

Diagram 3 emphasizes the importance of talk, in general, and in particular, the emic perspective the participants adopt. This perspective can point out to us when participants think there is a problematic gap in their turns-at-talk.

4.2 Locating a problematic gap using an emic perspective

Diagrams 1 and 2 show how a problematic gap is perceived by the teacher, one of the insiders to the talk. The presence of strategies she used suggests that she has detected gap and perceived it as a problematic one. However, like other studies, this study needs justifications, which are as follows:

1. The students’ nonresponse is not always problematic. It is problematic only when the teacher considers it as such. A problematic gap can be identified when the teacher puts the ongoing talk on hold and deals with the gap using a variety of strategies. A problematic gap can be located if any strategies are identified (see Diagrams 1 and 2 for a talk sequence involving silence).
2. An emic perspective suggests that the length of a problematic gap is not pre-specified by prior theories and assumptions. However, the difficulty in identifying a problematic gap can be properly solved using the same tool presented in 1.
3. There are two types of gap: problematic or unproblematic. A gap that is of our interest is the former, from an insider’s perspective. This study will demonstrate
that a problematic gap can be detected, while an unproblematic gap may not be pinpointed. An unproblematic gap, if not talked-into-being, may not be theoretically possible to locate, at least from an inductive viewpoint and, as a result, needs a different method.

5. Data presentation

The below extracts present how a problematic gap created by students is detected by and dealt with by a teacher.

Extract 1 (21 November 2012)

Tr: It’s the fact. He is speaking alone, right? He speaks alone. He speaks to himself in a play, how do we call the technique? (1)

→ (2 sec) (2)

Tr: Jeff, you should know it. You have already studied Shakespeare. (3)

→ (2 sec) (4)

Tr: Starting with an s. When a character speaks on the stage, right? And he speaks to himself we have a term for it. (5)

(At this turn, the teacher looks at the whole class)

→ (2 sec) (6)

Tr: Starting with an s. (7)

→ (3 sec) (8)

S1: Sophomore (9)

Tr: Sophomore. That’s your second year students. That’s okay, you can try. (10)

S2: Solo (11)

Tr: Almost, yeah, solo. You know, you have a more beautiful term. We called it a soliloquy. A soliloquy is when a character performs on the stage. He speaks to himself. (12)

In Extract 1, the whole talk sequence is designed to elicit ‘soliloquy’ from the students. From the transcript, there are four gaps (lines 2, 4, 6, and 8). The first one is spotted after the first question is asked (line 1); as a result, the gap accountably belongs to the students. The silence results in the teacher’s nomination of a student, Jeff (line 3). However, he cannot answer, resulting in another accountable silence of which he is the owner (line 4), and the teacher perceives it as such, before providing a hint (line 5). Gap in line 6 is perceived by the teacher to belong to the students and is thus accountable. Whatever the reason of the cause of the silence
in line 6, the teacher partially repeats line 5 in line 7. The last gap in line 8 leaves a three-second absence of speech. Before the teacher thinks that it is problematic, a student ends the absence of speech (line 9). The next extract presents relatively longer gaps.

Extract 2 (21 November 2012)

Tr: What are we talking about here? (1) → (12 sec) (2) Tr: I’m waiting. (3) → (9 sec) (4) Tr: No something. Mike, what do you think? (5) Mike: If you die, you probably get away with all the problems in the world. (6) Tr: Thank you. If you die, you probably get away with all the problems in the world, right. (7)

Extract 2 presents two incidents of gap (lines 2 and 4); both are considered by the teacher as a problem because of the teacher’s lines 3 and 5. The question (line 1) does not get answered; the silence belongs accountably to the students. A request (line 3) echoes the fact that the first question does not get answered, that it still demands an appropriate answer, not a gap, and that someone is supposed to provide an answer. A gap is still found in line 4, which is recognized by the teacher to be a problem; this is evident when it is immediately followed by the teacher’s strategy (line 5) designed to deal with the silence. Extract 3 presents one of the longest examples of gaps found in this study.

Extract 3 (23 November 2012)

Tr: What is it talking about? (1) St1: Tradition (2) Tr: Tradition of what? (3) → (9 sec) (4) Tr: Family history, of course, has its proper dietary laws. One is supposed to swallow and digest only the permitted parts of it, the halal portions of the past, drained of their redness, their blood. Unfortunately, this makes the stories less juicy, so I am going to have to ignore family laws. (5) (The teacher reads a passage) → (19 sec) (6) Tr: Paul, what does it mean? (7)
In Extract 3, the teacher asks a question to the whole class (line 1) about that day’s discussion topic. A student’s reply in turn 2 is not complete, leading the teacher to request additional information. This is followed by a gap (line 4). Taking it as a problem, the teacher provides help by reading a passage from the reading. Expecting someone will reply (i.e., the SPP) to the question, ‘tradition of what’ (i.e., the FPP), she finds a gap instead which lasts 19 seconds (line 6). This gap is taken as a problem; consequently, she nominates Paul to fill the gap (line 7), which results later in a 28-second gap (line 8).

Another strategy, throwing the same question to the whole class, is employed in line 9. This is found to be unsuccessful as it is followed by a gap (line 10). A few assistances from the teacher, unsuccessful (line 11) and moderately successful (line 14) respectively, are then provided. The last one (line 14) successfully prompts the students to provide the answer (line 15). The next extract introduces another relatively long gap in this study.

Extract 4 (21 November 2012)

Tr: What about this one, skilled and skillful.
   (the teacher writes the two words on the board).
   Those two words mean the same, right? Talk about people with
   skills but again they are different, skilled and skillful. (1)
   (25 sec) (2)
Tr: What is the difference between skilled and skillful? One you were
   born with it. One you practice to get it. Which is which? (3)
   (2 sec) (4)
Extract 4 presents three different gap lengths: 25 seconds (line 2), 2 seconds (lines 4, 6, 10), and 4 seconds (line 8). These four gaps (except that in line 10) are recognized by the teacher to be socially accountable because there are strategies employed by the teacher to deal with them (lines 3, 5, 7, and 9).

It is important to draw attention to the three two-second gaps (lines 4, 6, and 10), which are responded to by different turn functions by two different recipients. The first two two-second gaps are recognized by the teacher as an accountable reaction. Consequently, the first two-second gap is handled by the teacher’s repetition of alternative definitions of ‘skilled’ and ‘skillful’ (line 5). This technique failed, as evident in line 7 where she followed up by using an incomplete sentence, expecting the students to complete it with one of the alternatives originally given in line 3. This remains unsuccessful as evident in line 9. However, the last two-second gap (line 10) is not problematic from the teacher’s perspective because it is followed by a student’s response (line 11), not the teacher’s solution to the gap. Many problematic two-second gaps which are found throughout the recording are presented in Extract 5.

Extract 5 (23 December 2012)

Tr: How has the number of people working in 19 changed? When you talk about how, what are they asking? (1)

→ (5 sec) (2)

Tr: How? (3)

→ (2 sec) (4)

Tr: Look at this one. Look at the graph, right? It’s here. In 1994. In 2006, it’s up here. So, how do you describe this source of increase? Is it slight increase or dramatic increase? (5)

→ (2 sec) (6)

Tr: From below 10 percent. Right now you have over 20 percent in 10 years or 12 years. How would you describe the increase? (7)
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In Extract 5, three two-second gaps are found in lines 4, 6, and 8. What immediately follows each of them can be categorized into the teacher’s response (lines 5 and 7) and a student’s response (line 9). The first category implies the incomplete exchange-sequence of which the SPP is not provided and is thus accountable. This is confirmed by the teacher’s prompts and assistance (lines 5 and 7). The second category, though followed by silence, is completed later by a student’s reply (line 9). Extracts 6 and 7 illustrate how a two-second gap is perceived by the teacher to be problematic.

Extract 6 (23 December 2012)

Tr: Now, can you guess what makes a play a tragic? What makes it so tragic? What makes the play or what makes the story so tragic? (1)
(The teacher writes “tragic” on the board)

→ (2 sec) (8)

Tr: So, in a tragedy what makes the play so tragic? (3)

→ (8 sec) (4)

Tr: What makes the play so tragic? (5)

St1: Feelings (6)

Tr: Elaborate, you need to make it clearer. Clarify it, what sort of feelings are we talking about? (7)

S1: Sad (8)

Extract 7 (21 November 2012)

Tr: Do you think all those five words can be substituted perfectly? (1)

→ (2 sec) (2)

Tr: Can we use them for one another perfectly? (3)

St1: No (4)

Tr: Not really. Why not? (5)

St2: Depends on the context. (6)

Tr: Yeah, depends on contexts, right. Some words can be used with in some particular contexts but not all, so be careful. (7)

This section presents a wide range of gap lengths and how each gap is interpreted and treated by the teacher. Some gaps are taken by the teacher as a problem because
the students do not give a response, while some gaps are followed by the students’ response and, as a result, are not considered a problem. Gap lengths do not always determine whether a gap is a problem. Factors other than the gap duration are the teacher and the context. The next section discusses the findings in detail.

6. Data interpretation and discussion

All the Extracts presented above display two types of gap; an unproblematic and a problematic gap, according to the teacher’s reaction subsequent to the gap. This study derives from an assumption that, once a problematic gap (i.e., a problematic between-speaker silence) is detected, a gap in general can be identified, and that an unproblematic gap, a truly between-speaker phenomenon, can be located when it is followed by a ‘deferred’ recipient’s response. The interpretation of the data is four-fold.

6.1 Gap and gap length: Inductive perspective

Following an insider’s perspective, both problematic gap (e.g., Extract 1 line 2; Extract 2 line 2; Extract 4 line 2) and unproblematic gap (e.g., Extract 1 line 8; Extract 3 line 14; Extract 5 line 8) were traced as shown above. The insider (in this case, the teacher) employs several strategies once she recognizes a problematic gap. The presence of her strategies indicates the occurrence of a problematic gap. To put it differently, the identification of a problematic gap becomes methodologically sound after the strategies used by the teacher to request an SPP from the students are spotted.

In contrast, the data show some between-speaker silence which the teacher does not consider to be a problem, but a tolerable silence. Because such a phenomenon is found to occur between an FPP and an SPP (e.g., Extract 1 line 8; Extract 3 line 14; Extract 4 line 10), in a place where the change of speakership is conditionally relevant, it is essentially a gap. While an unproblematic gap can be observed by the teacher and precisely timed by the researcher, it is not the main focus of this study, though it is mentioned below.

In a talk sequence in which a problematic gap is uncovered, the teacher’s strategy is usually found placed subsequent to such a between-speaker silence (see Diagram 2). Here we come up with a wide range of gap lengths, ranging from two seconds (in all Extracts except Extract 2) to twenty-five seconds (Extract 4 line 2), or twenty-eight seconds (Extract 3 line 8). The discussion of the different lengths of gap is divided into two subtopics below.
6.2 Same gap-length but different subsequent treatments

There are several incidents of a two-second gap (e.g., Extract 1 lines 2, 4, and 6; Extract 3 line 10; Extract 4 lines 4, 6, and 10; Extract 5 lines 4, 6, and 8). Although they have the same length, which is two seconds, they are treated interactionally differently by the teacher. One group (e.g., Extract 1 lines 2, 4, and 6; Extract 4 lines 4 and 6; Extract 5 lines 4 and 6), named a gap-beyond-permissible length, is taken by the teacher as a problem and, therefore, followed immediately by her strategies. The other group (e.g., Extract 3 line 10; Extract 4 line 10; Extract 5 line 8), coined a gap-within-permissible length, is proximately followed by the student’s response.

Both types; a gap-beyond-permissible length and a gap-within-permissible length highlight the fact that, while two gaps have the same length, one is preferred over the other in a certain context. As a result, both get different reactions from the recipients: either the gap gets prolonged if preferred, or terminated if not preferred. However, it is beyond the scope of this study to explain when a prolonged gap becomes terminated later. In other words, there may be no clear-cut rule for when an unproblematic gap becomes a problematic one and how long it takes for it to become so.

6.3 Negative correlation between gap length and subsequent treatments

As briefly touched upon above, the range of gaps varies considerably. Some last only a few seconds (e.g., Extract 1 lines 2, 4, 6, and 8; Extract 4 lines 4, 6, and 10), while a few gaps last noticeably longer (e.g., Extract 2 lines 2 and 4; Extract 3 lines 4, 6, and 8). At first glance, the longer a gap length is, the more chance it is taken as a problem by the teacher as speculated by Sacks et al. (1974, p. 700), “transitions from one turn to a next with no gap … are common.”

The findings confirm the speculation; many gaps, especially extensively long ones, immediately precede the teacher’s strategy. However, many gaps whose length is as minimal as two seconds (e.g., Extract 1 lines 2, 4, and 6; Extract 3 line 10; Extract 4 lines 4, 6, and 10) lead interactionally to the teacher’s strategy, while there are gaps whose length is longer than two seconds (e.g., Extract 1 line 8 and Extract 3 line 14) which do not. Although there are a few of the latter found from the analysis, it is possible to highlight that the gap length can, but does not have to, correlate positively with it being perceived as a problem.

6.4 Forms of between-speaker silence

The length of gap can vary greatly. Several studies introduced above have looked at an intra-turn pause or within-speaker pause; this study explores a between-speaker
silence or gap. The gap length found ranges from two seconds (e.g., Extract 1 lines 2, 4, and 6) to twenty-eight seconds (e.g., Extract 3 line 8). However long the gap is, the recipients (mainly the students) are expected to provide a response, not silence.

It is found that responses (i.e., SPPs) are sometimes given by the students, but most of the time they are replaced by the teacher’s prompts intended to solicit the answer to the question that immediately precedes. The prompts suggest that the talk sequence is incomplete and thus demands an SPP from the students. In addition, while the differences between gap and lapse, its longer counterpart, remain under investigation, the presence of prompts from the teacher implies that the silence found after the FPP is produced is gap, not lapse. Again, the distinction between the two varies from context to context and can be marked from an emic perspective.

6.5 Roles of participants in locating and interpreting gaps

This section aims to address the second research question: *Who should interpret gap as a problem?* So far, the researcher has located conversational gaps and determined whether each of them is problematic, without appealing to his intuitive judgments of where gaps are and of what should be characterized as a problematic gap. An emic perspective is followed in this study to pinpoint gaps in talk and determine whether each is considered a problem. This section aims to discuss in detail the roles of the participants in the talk being studied.

6.6 How a problematic gap is detected: Whose detection?

In many studies, gaps are detected and then timed by the researchers. While this implies that gaps can be traced and then measured depending on how the researchers think gaps should be characterized, this practice results in methodological problems. In addition, it is worthwhile to point out again that gap has its own structure, meaning, and function; all of which are intended, presented, and evaluated moment-by-moment by the participants. This is different from a gap prespecified by researchers which leaves nothing but what is in general referred to as the ‘absence of talk’ or ‘meaningless silence’. As this study reveals, a gap prespecified by etic view researchers does not accurately reveal the properties and communicative purposes of gap.

An insider’s identification of problematic gaps confirms when participants believe gaps are a problem. Two-second gaps found throughout the data (e.g., Extract 1 lines 2, 4, and 6; Extract 3 line 10; Extract 4 lines 4, 6, and 10; Extract 5 lines 4, 6, and 8) are the evidence. If we analyze these two-second gaps and if
the analysis is etic-oriented and theory-driven, the findings would show that only two-second gaps are found, and, more mistakenly, that these gaps are considered either problematic or permissible depending on which theory concerning silence length is strictly employed by the researchers. As this study’s emic analysis reveals, these two gaps can be either problematic (e.g., Extract 1 lines 2, 4, and 6; Extract 4 lines 4 and 6; Extract 5 lines 4 and 6) or unproblematic dependent on the context and participants’ moment-by-moment judgment (e.g., Extract 3 line 10; Extract 4 line 10; Extract 5 line 8).

To answer the research question: *Who should interpret gap as a problem*, the answer is whoever is involved in the talk from which the conversational data derives. It is worth mentioning that the participants’ perspectives to be included in the emic analysis must occur not after (as in interviews or questionnaires), but during talk. The participants’ analyses of the ongoing talk are in fact embedded in the turn-taking systems.

### 6.7 When a permissible gap becomes an undesirable one: Whose judgment?

This section intends to answer a question: when does a permissible gap become an undesirable one? An answer to this question needs more systematic procedures because several interactional phenomena we initially need as a tool for distinguishing an undesirable gap from a permissible one remain controversial and vague. That is, to locate one phenomenon from others may not appear to be as straightforward as it looks.

The first phenomenon, turn construction unit (TCU), is what several researchers find relatively difficult to specify if competitive interruption is not noticeably performed. The second phenomenon, transition relevance place (TRP), or place in which the change of speakership becomes possible, intimately interconnects with TCU in that it is the end of TCU where TRP can be expected.

Like TCU, conversational gap is a social practice that performs actions. It is a communicative space in which two turn-allocation techniques (Sacks et al., 1974), namely, 1) a ‘current-speaker-selects-next’ technique (thus, a recipient(s) is expected to talk next) and 2) a ‘current-speaker-may-continue’ technique, are *silently* negotiated strictly moment-by-moment by participants.

The assumption of the occurrence of gaps is twofold. First, while a past-due response from a recipient can result either in the second technique or a lapse, a delayed ‘current-speaker-may-continue’ technique leads either to a recipient response or a lapse. These two turn-allocation techniques in which gap is involved relate to time negotiation. Second, if we take ‘gap as a TCU’ as a departure point, we can reasonably predict that gap can be possibly followed by a TRP. This assumption claims that gap as a turn belongs to the student(s). The occurrence of
problematic gap followed by a teacher’s strategy turn indicates that gap as a TCU (owned by a student(s)) is over and, therefore, a TRP becomes active, allowing the change of the speakership (i.e., teacher as a next speaker) to become possible.

These two assumptions indicate that further systematic investigations are needed in order to determine when a permissible gap either becomes a problematic one or continues. The investigations can be a methodological challenge because, as discussed earlier, a problematic gap, like other conversational phenomena CA researchers study, is a context-bound one. The access to the context in which talk occurs is something the participants have but is not the same as the etic researchers’ context. An emic perspective is the solution to this issue.

7. Concluding remarks

This study demonstrates how an emic perspective can be employed in research on communication and language use, specifically, conversational gap. Long gaps are generally believed by researchers who analyze classroom discourse to be problematic, especially those who are inspired by an etic view. As revealed by many researchers, silence and its variations are a complicated interactional phenomenon, merely because of their ‘empty’, ‘silent’, and, thus, hard-to-observe, -see, or -hear features. These features make it very difficult for an outsider/observer with an etic perspective to find or clearly observe a gap and, as a result, to accurately interpret it. Furthermore, this study shows that employing an emic perspective within the institutional setting of a classroom not only allows gaps to be accurately found but also demonstrates that long gaps do not always indicate a problem from the point of view of the participants. One possible explanation why long gaps may be acceptable in institutionalized interaction is that the owner of the FPP (mostly those who have more power than others in the same setting) is giving the next speaker time to formulate an answer.

This study shows it is the participants who determine whether gaps are problematic and, as the talk progresses, some problematic gaps can be detected and handled by the participants. In institutionalized talk, a researcher with an emic view can directly involve participants in the analysis and consequently demonstrate how interactional data is produced and analyzed by the participants as the talk emerges. Therefore, the findings of the emic view in this case can be very high on internal validity and ecological validity.

Broadly, an emic view could allow researchers within the social interaction field to accurately understand communicative codes in the same way participants in an institutional setting, such as a classroom, do with talk-in-interaction, where codes, such as silence, are found. As part of communication research, an emic view
also circumvents the methodology issue faced by etic view researchers who cannot easily solve some analytical issues about, in this case, silence and gap. Unlike an etic perspective, an emic view is not a theory-driven view but a truly data-driven view. It allows CA researchers to experience new phenomena which are not prescribed by current theories.

References


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