

Transactional/Interactional Exchanges in Service Encounters: A Discourse Study of Textbook Conversations

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I. Introduction

Service settings are a common genre introduced into school coursebooks. The pedagogical features of transactions between customers and clerks are the learning objectives, for example, greetings, openings and closings. In addition, intercultural exchanges are frequently included in the transactions, as in buying and selling goods with a foreign currency. Even the manner of receiving change is an important expression of culture and quite validly put into course syllabuses.

Transactional conversations at service encounters, however, vary depending on the goods sold and bought. A conversation between the clerk and the customer at a fish-and-chip shop is short and with not much talk by the clerk, while the conversation at the shoe shop requires more interpersonal skills and more communication. If this style is reversed, the customer of the shoe store would think the salesperson is very rude (McCarthy & Carter, 1994). Thus, the register is differentiated by the context.

The structure of a service encounter, however, has common generic structure potential. Among the numerous studies (Mitchell, 1951 cited from Aston, 1988; Eggins & Slade, 1997; Hasan, 1985; McCarthy, 1998; Ventola, 1987), Hasan's schematic of a generic structure potential for a shopping transaction is:

[(Greeting)(Sale Initiation)] ^ [(Sale Enquiryⁿ) {Sale Request ^ Sale
Compliance}ⁿ ^ Sale] ^ Purchase ^ Purchase Closure ^ (Finis)
quoted from (Eggins & Slade, 1997)

Key words: service encounters, transaction, interaction, discourse, GSP

The caret sign ^ means the procedure moves from the left to the right. Elements in the brackets () are optional, while others are obligatory. Stages in braces { } are recursive, as are elements in square brackets [] are also recursive. The above structure is explained thus: Greeting is optional, Sale Initiation precedes Sale Enquiry. Sale Request and Sale Compliance are obligatory and recursive. These are followed by an obligatory element Purchase Closure. Then Finis, an optional element may/may not follow the Purchase Closure to complete the business of giving-receiving services.

Besides those elements mentioned above, some personal exchanges or jokes may be embedded in the structure of necessary elements, producing an interactional exchange between the clerk and the customer in the transactional conversation (Carter & McCarthy, 1997). Thus, transactional conversations of shopping can be utilised to enhance interactional activities of the learners if the exchanges between the clerk and the customer are activated by context. Aston writes,

I shall argue that we need to overcome the transactional bias in applied linguistics if we are to come up with appropriate principles for the pedagogy of interactional speech. (1988, p.46)

However, some coursebook studies have revealed pessimistic phases of pedagogy in shopping settings, by which I mean unnatural conversations created to teach vocabulary or syntax, for example. They do not reflect every-day real conversations in context. Taborn(1983) examined schoolbook conversations and compared them with a corpus of actual dialogues. He argued that schoolbook conversations are long, grammatically and semantically complex and unpredictable in structure. Corpus evidence has presented opposite results. To our surprise, however, teachers of English reacted negatively to those real conversations which were shorter, simple and predictable. Taborn claimed that that was misguided judgement and what EFL textbooks require is genuineness, simplicity and usefulness.

This paper examines service encounters of the Oral/Aural Communication (OC henceforth) A, B and C textbooks written for high school students in Japan, approved by the government and put into use (for details, see (Hayasaka, 2001). Do the concocted textbook conversations present adequate spoken discourse features in service settings to help learners with transactional and interactional communicative skills?

II. The Study

1 Aims

The present study aims to find out how the generic structures of service encounters are realised in the contrived textbook conversations written for EFL learners and how they contribute to the learners' acquisition of transactional/interactional skills for communication.

The definition of service encounters used for the current study is that of McCarthy: "interactions

concerned with the transaction of goods, information and services, most typically exemplified by conversations in shops, restaurants, etc." (1998, p.27)

If only the obligatory elements are applied, with regard to Hasan's schematic (pp1-2), the service exchange is short and simple, but quite opposite if all the optional and recursive elements are applied. Carter and McCarthy (1997, p.93) propose a simpler structural model as follows.

Request for service > Acknowledgement and stating price > Handing over the goods >
Giving money and receiving change > Closing the encounter

As McCarthy and Carter (1994) suggest, however, not all service encounters are generated with the structures above but are differentiated by situation. Even commonly shared underlying structures can display different surface structures. If a service encounter occurs at a fast-food outlet, some elements of the structure may be eliminated or non-verbally acknowledged. By contrast, if an encounter occurs at a car sales, much more negotiation and interaction would occur between the salesperson and the customer. Realisation of the generic structure varies depending on the context and the settings. If so, the question is: Do the textbook conversations present enough examples and context to see a variety of exchanges?

2 Data

Following McCarthy's (1998) definition of service encounters, twenty-seven examples were extracted from the OCABC Corpus (a corpus of 50,000 words made by the author: a collection of conversations from OC A, B and C textbooks). They include purchasing clothes, food, flowers, music CDs or tickets as well as ordering food in a restaurant. Moreover, enquiries at a library or checking-in at a hotel also display generic features of service encounters and included in the present discussion (see the definition of McCarthy above). The following discussion cites 6 extracts out of those 27 conversations and their generic structures are argued to be nominally that of service encounters. In addition, spoken discourse features link the discussion of the conversations.

3 Conversation Analysis

3.1 Buying a T-shirt

Extract 1 <A14:L09:service encounter>*

- 1 <Clerk> May I help you?
- 2 <Customer> Yes, I'm looking for a dark blue T-shirt.
- 3 <Clerk> We have dark colors over here, black, brown, dark green ...
I'm afraid the dark blue ones are all sold out. Sorry.
- 4 <Customer> Oh. That's too bad. But this dark green is nice, too.

- 5 <Clerk> What size?
 6 <Customer> Medium.
 7 <Clerk> This is a medium.
 8 <Customer> Good. I'll take it.
 9 <Clerk> That's twelve eighty-eight. Cash or charge?
 10 <Customer> Cash.
 11 <Clerk> That's twelve eight-eight out of fifteen. Eighty-nine, ninety, thirteen dollars, fourteen and fifteen. And here's your T-shirt.
 12 <Customer> Thanks.
 13 <Clerk> Thank you.

Buying a T-shirt is a very popular shopping conversation found in the corpus. This extract is an example where the essential elements of service encounters are fulfilled and generic pattern is well-realised. It starts with an offer of help by the clerk (1.1), followed by the customer's request (1.2). After enquiries and investigations for the appropriate colour and size of the object, the item is finally accepted by the customer (1.8). After this comes the exchange of price and payment (11.9-11). Receiving the change and the purchased goods (1.11) leads to the final stage of the conversation, i.e., closing (11. 12-13).

The language of this dialogue illustrates some common features of real conversation. Following is a line by line analysis of the conversation. In line 3, the clerk takes the customer to the shelf where T-shirts are displayed. S/he tries to comply with the customer's need to find a dark blue T-shirt, but the clerk looks for the colour in vain. The pause after 'dark green' indicates s/he could not find the right colour and apologises for that. The customer's discourse marker *Oh* in line 4 functions as information management and acknowledges the clerk's remark with disappointment and the stage moves to an alternative item (a dark green T-shirt) (Schiffrin, 1987, p.93).

Another feature of spoken language, that of ellipses, is everywhere: 'Sorry', 'What size?', 'Medium', 'Good', 'Cash or charge?' and 'Cash'. In line 10, the customer replies 'cash' to the clerk's question of how to pay. It is not transcribed but there must be some pause here, while the customer silently gives the clerk \$15. During this pause, the clerk fulfils the 'goods handover' part of the model by putting the T-shirt into a bag. Payment in line 11 is one of the essential elements of service encounters. Moreover, this element also introduces learners to a custom of receiving change which might be unfamiliar. That is, the familiar way for the Japanese learners is 'Here's your change, \$2.12,' the calculation having been done by the clerk (15.00 minus 12.88 = 2.12). However, the calculation illustrated here in the conversation is one of addition (12.88 + 0.01 + 0.01 + 0.10 + 1.00 + 1.00).

'Cash or charge' is a lexico-grammatical feature which can be used to teach the word *charge*, as well as

to introduce a way of payment which is not very common in Japan yet and not frequently asked by Japanese clerks. It is the customers that enquire very politely, 'Would you mind if I pay it with the credit card?'

3.2 Buying a Burger

Extract 2 <A05:L08:service encounter at a burger shop>

1 <Sales Clerk> What'll it be, ladies?

2 <Kim> I want a cheeseburger with ketchup and mustard. Oh, and hold the onions. What are you having, Mariko?

3 <Mariko> I'll have a hamburger.

4 <Sales Clerk> What do you want on it?

5 <Mariko> Just lettuce and tomato, please.

6 <Sales Clerk> O.K. Would you like mustard, ketchup, mayonnaise?

7 <Mariko> Pardon me?

8 <Sales Clerk> Do you want mustard, ketchup, or mayonnaise?

9 <Mariko> Oh, uh, just ketchup will be fine.

10 <Kim> What about you, Carmen?

11 <Carmen> I'll have a hamburger with the works.

Extract 2 has different structural details to that of the previous one. The service offered here is more casual due to the burger bar setting. A transactional exchange is expected rather than an interactional exchange between the sales clerk and the customer(s). The conversation in Extract 2, however, has some interaction among the three customers who are friends. The conversation starts with the clerk's service bid followed by the vocative ' ladies ' (1.1), which summons the attention of the customers (McCarthy & O'Keeffe, 2002). The enquiry to the next customer was collaboratively done by her friend, not the sales clerk (1.2, and 1.10). The sales clerk hears her order and moves on to the next step of the sale (1.4). It may be that Kim is the person most familiar with the situation given here. To support this assumption, she does not wait to be asked what she wants on her burger but gives all the information needed to get what she wants (I want a cheeseburger with ketchup and mustard. Oh, and hold the onions.) leaving the clerk nothing to ask. Discourse marker *Oh* (1.2) suggests she recalled she needs to tell the clerk her choice of topping (Schiffrin 1987, p.91). The phrase following the discourse marker (and hold the onions) illustrates her familiarity with buying this kind of food in this kind of situation.

On the contrary, Mariko is supposed to be new to this situation. Her order was given with a very simple phrase (1.3), but it does not complete her order. The clerk asks what she wants on the hamburger (1.4 and 1.6). The clerk's enquiry had to be confirmed by Mariko (1.7). The phrase she uses for clarification (pardon

me) sounds formal in this situation. The clerk's rephrased enquiry was then acknowledged by Mariko with the discourse marker *Oh* (Schiffrin 1987, p.81), which is followed by a backchannel *uh* to earn time to think. Compared to Mariko's ordering, that of Carmen is very concise, ordering everything she wants in one short phrase(1.11). If the conversation continues, more exchanges will be conducted between the clerk and the customers, but more is not transcribed here. No phrases of payment or encounter closing are transcribed either.

3.3. Buying a Train Ticket

Extract 3 <A10:Unit05:L01:service encounter>

- 1 <Yukio> I'd like a ticket to Boston, please.
 2 <Clerk> Round-trip or one-way?
 3 <Yukio> Is round-trip cheaper?
 4 <Clerk> Not to Boston. There's no discount.
 5 <Yukio> In that case one-way will do.
 6 <Clerk> Do you want to go by express? There'll be a ten dollar additional charge.
 7 <Yukio> What is the fare on the local?
 8 <Clerk> It's twenty dollars. So, for the express it's thirty dollars altogether.
 9 <Yukio> I'll take a ticket on the express.
 10 <Clerk> Here you are. Have a nice trip.

Extract 3 is a service encounter at a train ticket window. There should be a counter between the clerk and the customer, which engenders distance and a focus on transaction and with little interaction expected. The exchanges have a lot of questions and answers by both participants. The first salutation is omitted and the exchange starts with an enquiry as to the object of the sale, investigation of the object of the sale and bargaining followed by the conclusion. The conversation starts with the customer's request for a ticket to Boston (1.1). Two adjacency pairs are found, both of which are embedded with other pairs. The first one is 1.2 and 1.5. The answer to the question 'Round-trip or one-way?' (1.2) comes in 1.5 'In that case one-way will do.' Between them, another adjacency pair of question-answer is embedded in lines 3 and 4 (Is round-trip cheaper? - Not to Boston. There's no discount.) In the same way, the adjacency pair of question and answer (1.6 - 1.9) is embedded with another pair of question-answer (11.7-8). After the enquiries and investigations of the fare, this conversation is concluded by the clerk's phatic closing remarks of 'here you are. Have a nice trip.' (1.10)

The lack of money exchange between lines 9 and 10, or closing remarks ("thank you") by the customer after line 10, however, violates the generic structure and closes the conversation incompletely.

3.4. At a Supermarket

Extract 4 <A13:L10:service encounter>

- 1 <Clerk> Good morning!
- 2 <Jeff> Hi! It's pretty quiet here for a Sunday!
- 3 <Clerk> Well, it's still early.
- 4 <Jeff> Oh, I forgot to get toothpaste! Where would I find it?
- 5 <Clerk> Aisle 7A, top shelf, near the paper napkins.
- 6 <Jeff> Thanks.
- 7 <Clerk> Okay, that comes to \$53.40 ... out of \$54 ... there's 50, 75, \$54.
Thank you. Would you like someone to carry that out for you.
- 8 <Jeff> No, thank you. I can manage.
- 9 <Clerk> Have a nice day, now.

This conversation takes place at a supermarket cashier. Unlike Extracts 1 to 3, the clerk's service is a sequence of responding to the customer's enquiry, completing payment and closing rituals. Handing over of goods is not required in this sequence. The opening I-R-F exchange (1.1 - 1.3) by the clerk and the customer suggests that they know each other and so behave interactively. Moreover, the discourse marker *Well* uttered by the clerk expresses a shift in reaction to the customer's slightly accusative response (Schiffrin 1987, p.116). In a phatic exchange about the weather or business, the clerk's response should be a more positive one. This formulaic exchange is suddenly broken by the customer's enquiry for the location of the toothpaste and is given the direction (11.5-6). Since the clerk is the cashier, there is no direct handing over of the sales item (*toothpaste*) but informing the customer where it is, very briefly with ellipses (1.5). There should be surely a pause after 1.5 before the customer comes back from Aisle 7A with toothpaste. Giving the change is done in the same way as Extract 1, i.e., by addition. Before closing the exchange, the clerk offers to call someone to help carry the goods, which was declined by the customer. This conversation is closed by the utterance of the clerk (1.9).

3.5. Ordering Food at a Restaurant

Extract 5 <A06:L06:service encounter>

- 1 <Waitress> What would you like to have?
- 2 <Ichiro> First of all, I'd like to have corn soup.
- 3 <Waitress> What will you have for your main dish?
- 4 <Ichiro> I'll have a steak.
- 5 <Waitress> What kind of salad would you like?

- 6 <Ichiro> Tomato salad, please.
7 <Waitress> Would you like some dessert?
8 <Ichiro> Yes, please. I'll have some cheesecake and a cup of tea.
9 <Waitress> Thank you.

Extract 5 takes place between a customer and a waitress at a restaurant. The conversation starts with the waitress taking the order and the customer's request. The ordering of the soup first, then the main dish, salad, dessert and tea is done rather mechanically.

The pattern of this exchange looks similar to the classroom conversation between a teacher and students: a teacher asking questions and students answering them (Coulthard, 1985). In this setting, teachers are likely to control the conversation procedures. Similarly, in this waitress-customer exchange, it sounds as if it is the waitress that controls the conversation. Here, the waitress asks three sequential wh-questions of the customer (1.1, 1.3, 1.5) concluding with a last modal enquiry (would ...)(1.7). This type of conversation: enquiries by one person and responses by another person is not as much interactional as transactional. There is no possibility that these exchanges vary depending on one's response. All the questions by the waitress are very specific and role-oriented. There is no enquiries by the customer about the food he is going to order. This kind of short exchange can happen when the customer is not accustomed to the situational context: for example, not being familiar with the menu, or with the sequence of meal ordering.

In addition to the above exchanges, there are other features which make this conversation unnatural. In many restaurants, I believe, waitresses are expected to ask 'How would you like your steak?' after 1.4 or 'What dressing would you like?' after 1.6. The enquiry (1.7) should come after the customer finishes the main dish. These phrases would not only make the conversation more natural but also introduce useful vocabulary like 'medium,' 'well-done,' 'thousand island,' or 'French dressing.'

Moreover, it is odd to order dessert with the main course. A lot of interactional conversations are expected in natural settings between ordering the main course and the dessert: "Is everything OK?" "Have you finished?" "Are you ready to order some sweets?" etc. , none of which has been shown in this extract.

The next extract occurring in a similar situation, exhibits the phrases the previous extract lacks.

3.6. at a restaurant

Extract 6 <B03:L09>

- 1 <A:> May I take your order, sir?
2 <B:> Yes. I'll have the sirloin steak and some onion soup.
3 <A:> How would you like your steak?

- 4 <B:> Well-done, please.
5 <A:> Would you like French fries, mashed potatoes or a baked potato?
6 <B:> A baked potato.
7 <A:> What kind of dressing would you like on your salad?
8 <B:> Italian.
9 <A:> Anything to drink?
10 <B:> Coffee, please.
11 <A:> Very good, sir. Now may I take your order, sir?

The setting of this conversation is similar to Extract 5: ordering a meal in a restaurant, and a sequence of courses being selected by the customer. The customer's choice is always preceded by the clerk's enquiry. Like the extract above, this exchange is filled with a series of questions by the clerk and answers by the customer. Unlike the previous extract, however, the questions the clerk asks are coherent in some part. 'The sirloin steak' on 1.2., 'steak' on 1.3 and 'well-done' on 1.4 are coherent. Giving the customer a chance to select how the steak is done and the kind of potatoes and salad dressing makes the Questions-Answer pairs less clerk-oriented.

III. Conclusion

Some excerpts of service encounters were discussed with regard to the norm of generic structure potential of service encounters. Since the participants of the conversations are mainly high school students, the goods and services they deal with are invariably limited to the transaction of goods such as shirts, sweaters, fast foods and train/bus tickets. Consequently, it is to be expected that negotiations with a car salesperson or real estate agent or bargaining over price would not be found in the present study. The register of the exchanges is not so varied as seen in literature. If there were transactions of a car purchase, for example, a greater variety of register and interactions would have been found (Carter & McCarthy, 1994; Ventola, 1987). Many of the conversations were tuned to introduce the method of payment, more precisely the method of receiving change, which is different from that in Japan (see p. 5). Textbook writers are believed to put an emphasis on this style of calculation.

The obligatory stages of generic structures were realised in most extracts, but exchanges did not extend to the optional ones which would have produced more interaction in service encounters. Here we need to listen to Taborn:

A drastically new approach to the whole question is needed, a basic reorientation in which the [textbook] writer and teacher come to see in this type of dialogue a heaven-sent opportunity to present material that is not only genuine, but often stunningly simple and of enormous practical value to the

learner too. (Taborn, 1983, p.212)

Note

* Information in the <> is for my reference.

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[Abstract]

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This paper examines service encounters in the Oral/Aural Communication A, B and C textbooks written for high school students in Japan, approved by the government and put into use from 1994 to 2002 (for details, see Hayasaka, 2001). The research question raised is, "Do the concocted textbook conversations present adequate spoken discourse features in service settings to help learners with transactional and interactional communicative skills?" Six extracts out of 27 service encounters are discussed with regard to the norm of generic structure potential of service encounters (Hasan 1985). The obligatory stages of generic structures are found to be realised in most extracts, but exchanges did not extend to the optional ones which would have produced more interaction in service encounters. Transactional conversations of shopping could have been utilised to enhance interactional activities of the learners. The current study argues that the concocted conversations are aimed for teaching pedagogy. They are lexico-grammatically schemed and only limited pragmatic features are illustrated in the textbooks.

Key words: service encounters, transaction, interaction, discourse, GSP

