

# A Comparison Between Conversations in TOEFL Listening Tests and Real-Life Conversations: A Conversation Analysis of Classroom Interactions

Fang Jia<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Graduate School of Education, University of Pennsylvania, PA, 19104, USA.

## Abstract

This paper uses a CA (Conversation Analysis) approach to examine similarities and differences in conversations appeared in TOEFL exams and conversational patterns from previous literatures. As more international students coming to study in the U.S., taking TOEFL exams is usually required by U.S. high schools and colleges. However, existing literature has shown the inconsistency between students' TOEFL score and their performance later on in the school or college. By examining conversations selected from TOEFL listening tasks, we could better understand similarities and differences between conversations in TOEFL exams and real classroom conversations. Language test makers and teachers could use this resource as a tool to help foreign students prepare for their classroom interactions in the U.S.

## Keywords

Conversation Analysis; Language Assessment; Language Teaching; TOEFL Listening; Academic Performance, ESL.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In the recent decade, many students choose to study abroad in English-speaking countries. Before applying for high schools and colleges in these countries, students often need to take the TOEFL exam (Test of English as a Foreign Language). According to ETS.org (*The TOEFL® Family of Assessments*, 2020), TOEFL measures "academic English skills the way they used in classroom"; most universities in English-speaking countries accept TOEFL scores as a way to decide whether non-native English speakers are ready to participate in English speaking classrooms[1]. However, existing literature suggests that TOEFL scores might not successfully prepare international students for future learning in English-speaking classrooms. Ginther & Yan (2017) even suggests that there is a negative correlation between TOEFL listening scores and students' college GPA[2]. Therefore, the current study aims to find similarities and differences between conversations in TOEFL listening tasks and authentic classroom conversations. The findings may help students better prepare for their classroom participation and interaction before entering English speaking universities. The current study only focuses on one category of TOEFL listening tasks: conversations between a professor and one or two focal students. This paper will first review the existing literature of TOEFL/GPA correlations and features of authentic classroom interactions. Then, the paper will introduce data collection and methods followed by data analysis. In the end, the paper will discuss the conclusions and possible implications of the current study.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1. TOEFL/GPA Correlation

Many previous research studies have examined the relationship between students' initial English proficiency and their academic performance in universities. TOEFL scores are often used to represent students' English ability when they entered colleges, and Grade Point Average (GPA) is one way to measure students' performance in college courses. Assessing the TOEFL/GPA correlation can be difficult because many factors influence both students' performance on TOEFL scores and their college academic achievement[2]. For instance, students' L1 background could influence their performance on TOEFL exams, resulting scores from one section (of reading, listening, writing, and speaking) is significantly higher than the other section. Moreover, students' choice of majors in undergraduate schools is another factor that determines their academic achievement. Therefore, mixed results were found in the existing literature on TOEFL/GPA correlations.

Wait and Gressel (2009) look into the relationship between college students' TOEFL scores and their GPA at a university in the United Arab Emirates, a "US accredited" school. And the university adopts "American style" lesson delivery[3]. The research findings suggest a strong positive relationship between students' TOEFL score and their GPA or success rate in the university. This correlation is weaker in the school of engineering than in other disciplines. Bridgeman, Cho, and Dipietro (2015) also examine this relationship at Drexel University in Philadelphia. The study focuses on calculating the correlations between students' TOEFL scores and their GPA after completing the first year of study. The findings suggest that, for Chinese international students, speaking and writing scores are considered "a very good predictor" for students' achievement in business school while listening and reading scores are not correlated with students' grades [4].

Finally, the research conducted by Ginther and Yan (2017) focuses on examining the relationship between students' TOEFL scores and their GPA at Purdue University. For the class of 2011 and 2012, the study finds that there is a positive correlation between students' performance in speaking and writing scores and their GPA. This result coincides with the findings from Bridgeman, Cho, and Dipietro (2015). However, for listening and reading, there is a negative relationship between TOEFL scores and students' GPA. The study suggests that performing well in TOEFL listening and reading sections do not necessarily lead to better academic achievement [2] [4]. Based on the findings, one implication could be made: the materials used in TOEFL listening and reading section might not represent actual English-speaking classroom experience. There are differences between conversations in TOEFL exams and real-life conversations.

### 2.2. Language Features of Classroom Interaction

Numerous research studies have looked into conversational sequences and classroom interactions using the CA (conversation analysis) approach. The CA approach allows researchers to record naturally occurring conversations and analyze language features embedded in these interactions (Wong & Waring 2010). In the study of Walsh & Li (2013), Reddington (2018), and Lee (2006), the researchers investigate how classroom conversations can be used to engage students' participation and create space for learning. The study offers several findings in classroom interaction [5-7].

First, Walsh & Li (2013) and Reddington (2018) argue that classroom interactions are different from ordinary conversations. Although classroom conversations resemble daily conversations in several ways, including one speaker speaks at one time, occasionally overlaps in talking, and the use of repair (Walsh & Li, 2013, p.252)[6][7], there are differences between these two types of conversations. The researchers suggest that classroom conversations are

usually goal-oriented, and the teacher takes a more dominant role in the conversations. Therefore, teacher talk plays an essential role in engaging students' participation and students' learning.

Second, the studies present different techniques that teachers could use in classroom interactions. Walsh & Li summarizes speech features, such as "teachers' increased wait-time, teachers' reduced echo, teachers' and students' scaffolding of contribution, and teachers' shaping of learner responses" (p. 252)[6]. By conducting CA, the authors also find other features including, seeking clarification, clear shifts of orientations, making topic change, and allowing students to make errors (p.256). Reddington (2018) and Lee (2006) also argue that the use of teacher echo, binding contribution, and response and pre-closing tokens could successfully encourage students to participate and orient classroom conversations towards learning goals [7] [8].

Lastly, Lee (2006) introduces several functions of the teacher using third turns. The author argues the teacher could help students learn by engaging through series of IRF (Initiation-Response-Feedback) sequences. The teacher could use third turns to break down difficult concepts into smaller questions, which eventually leads to students' understanding. Third turns can also be used in eliciting answers and orienting the classroom discussion to the learning topic. This process is described as "a procedural and contingent work" that helps students analyzing the course content[8]. Overall, the findings from previous studies provide reference points for finding similarities and differences between conversations in TOEFL listening tasks and authentic classroom interactions.

### **3. DATA AND METHOD**

#### **3.1. Data Collection**

The data collected for this study comes from the videos that are uploaded by TST Prep at YouTube.com. TST Prep is an online organization aiming to help anyone who wants to improve their TOEFL exam scores. TST Prep provides vocabulary lists and learning tips for test-takers, and it also uploads practice tests videos to YouTube.com that create similar test-taking experiences for students (Goodine, Healy, & Lazur, 2020). Listening tasks, which focus on the current study, are delivered through these YouTube videos with the same structure in real TOEFL exams. The video often starts with a voiceover who announces instructions for listening tasks and moves on to playing conversations with five to six questions attached at the end of each conversation. There are two types of conversations in the TOEFL listening section: conversations during a college-level class and conversations that occur outside the classroom but under the theme of student life. The present study only focuses on conversations during the class between a professor and student(s) [9].

#### **3.2. Method**

This study aims to find similarities and differences between classroom interactions in authentic classrooms and those in TOEFL tests. Therefore, the present study compares the data between conversations collected from TST Prep and findings from Wong & Waring (2010), Reddington (2018), Lee (2007), and Walsh & Li (2013)[5-8]. Data excerpts from these studies are naturally occurring conversations in classroom interaction; thus, the findings from the existing literature could provide a point of reference for authentic classroom interaction. Non-verbal interaction, including body gestures, facial expressions, will not be analyzed in this study because listening tasks in TOEFL exams only present audio recordings for conversations. After comparing the collected and existing data, the following aspects will be discussed in the next section: teacher talk, managing classroom participation, and creating space for learning.

#### 4. DATA ANALYSIS

In this section, selected data excerpts from TOEFL listening tasks will be presented to show similarities and differences in classroom conversations between TOEFL exams and previous findings on classroom interaction. The following conversation is extracted from TOEFL listening conversations, and the setting of the conversation is in a college-level astronomy class. In this part of the conversation, the teacher is engaging in an IRF sequence with student Sarah.

```

1      T:      So(.)I would †like to continue our discussion
2              about the †MOON, more particularly about the
3              or::igins of the †moon and how it was actually
4              CREAated.(.)we †talked about three possible
5              solutions †um:: more like theories about how the
6              moon was created. can anyone tell me the name of
7              one of these theories? (.)Sarah.=
8      Sarah:  =well:: I DO remember the †capture theory? which
9              †proposes that the moon was located somewhere else
10             in the galaxy (.) until eventually it was kind of
11             like(.)captured? by the Earth's gravitational
12             pull.
13             (.)
14      T:      YES(.)and I'm glad you started with the capture
15             theory because it's the EAsiest one to
16             reject(.)its primary drawback is that no one knows
17             of any way that >earth could have captured such a
18             large moon from elsewhere<.

```

**Figure 1.** Astronomy Class (Goodine, Healy, & Lazur, 2020) [9]

The extract opens with the teacher using a discourse marker “so” (line 1), which indicates the teacher is departing from the previous topic and moves on. The increased volume when pronouncing “So” also helps to get students’ attention (Walsh, 2006 as cited in Walsh & Li, 2013) [10]. Then, the teacher introduces the current topic, “the origins of the moon” (line 3). The elongation in pronouncing the word “or:igins” reflects that the teacher is trying to emphasize the topic of the discussion and make it explicit for students by pronouncing the word slower and in a higher volume. The rise of volume in pronouncing the word “CREAtion” also indicates that the teacher informs students of the main theme for the current discussion. The introduction is followed by the teacher producing an FPP (first-pair part) of a request to students. One thing worth noticing is that the teacher does not make the request directly; she engages in pre-pre before asking the question (line 4-6). According to Wong and Waring (2010), pre-pre is a device that allows the participant to provide some background information before the actual question (p.27) [5]. By producing a pre-pre, the teacher lets the students know that there are three possible answers to the question, and the students only need to provide one theory in their response.

Moreover, the teacher asks the question to the class by saying, “Can anyone tell me...”. Interestingly, it seems like the teacher opens the question to all the students in the class by saying “anyone” in the question; however, the teacher nominates student Sarah almost immediately after the question. The brief pause before nominating Sarah might not provide enough time for students to self-select. This phenomenon is different from the findings in Walsh and Li (2013), where the teacher usually waits several seconds for students to self-select. The teacher will nominate if no students volunteer to answer the question [6]. After Sarah was nominated by the teacher, she immediately picks up the conversation and pronounces “well:” with elongation. Then, Sarah responds to the teacher’s question by first indicating that she might know one answer to the teacher’s question. However, Sarah uses “I Do remember” (line 8) instead of producing a phrasal response before answering; this could indicate there is some trouble in the sequence. According to Fox and Thompson (2010), clausal response to wh-

questions might indicate there is some trouble in the sequence [11]. Although the teacher's question is prefaced by modal verbs, the question can be interpreted as a wh-question: "what is one of the three theories we have talked about?". Sarah's rising intonation at the end of the turn, "capture theory?", and the clausal response at the beginning could indicate that Sarah might find the sequence problematic. The reason could be that she is not sure whether she interprets the teachers' questions correctly or provides the appropriate answer. The utterance of "well:" and the rising intonation of "captured?" (line 11) further shows that Sarah is uncertain about her answer.

After Sarah provides an account for her answer, the teacher replies, "YES", in higher volume (line 14), which indicates a positive assessment for Sarah's contribution (Reddington, 2018). Also, the teacher provides a personal response by saying, "I'm glad you started...", and Reddington (2018) argues that a positive personal reaction could create a "hospital segue for student talk", which encourages students' participation [7]. The data excerpt concludes when the teacher moves on to explaining the capture theory.

After analyzing this excerpt from the TOEFL listening task, similarities can be observed. First, the teacher uses a discourse marker with an increased pitch to draw students' attention and signal the topic's shift. Second, the teacher uses FPP to ask questions and nominates students to answer the question, promoting classroom participation. During this process, the teacher has control of the conversation and uses questions to orient class discussion to the pedagogical goal (Walsh & Li, 2013). Third, the student (Sarah) engages in clausal response and uses rising intonation to express her uncertainty in the response (Fox & Thompson, 2010). Lastly, the teacher provides a positive assessment and appreciation for students' contributions in her third turn (Reddington, 2018) [6] [7]. Although the conversation in this TOEFL task resembles some interactional and pragmatic features in authentic classroom interactions, there are several differences.

The major difference is the lack of wait time; the use of wait time is often found in authentic classroom interactions. Both Walsh and Li (2010) and Lee (2006) suggests that silence and extended wait time are common features in classroom interactions. By providing wait time at the end of the teacher's turn, students will have time to process the information and form answers. However, in the excerpt above, the teacher nominates Sarah immediately after asking the question. Although the teacher indicates in her question that everyone can volunteer and answer this question, she does not leave enough time for students to self-elect. The other difference is that there is almost no repair in the conversation. Wong and Waring (2010) mentioned that repair is an essential component in interactional practices (p.212). In real-life conversations, people engage in different types of repair to build mutual understandings among participants. Walsh and Li (2013) also mentioned that classroom interaction is similar to ordinary conversations regarding the use of repair [5-6] [8]. However, there is no repair observed in the excerpt above, which makes the conversations in TOEFL conversation different from how people interact in ordinary conversations and classroom interactions.

The following excerpt also highlights the similarities and differences in classroom interactions between TOEFL listening tasks and authentic classroom interactions. The following conversation takes place at a college-level psychology class, where the teacher asks two students to review the examples of circadian rhythms. Before the teacher asks the questions in this excerpt, the teacher has reviewed the definition of circadian rhythms and provided one example.

```

1      T:      Now >does anyone remember a few other examples?
2      Janet?=  

3      Janet:  =yes:: I think that your glucose level ;changes  

4             based on the last time you ate.  

5      T:      Yes, that's right(.)anyone else?  

6      George: I think they also mentioned heart rate and body  

7             temperature? but I forget the specific examples.=  

8      T:      =don't worry about that George we will discuss  

9             these other circadian rhythms in much more detail  

10            later in the course(.)but for now:the MOST  

11            important thing to keep in mind about cirCADian  

12            CYcles(.)is that they are Usually aligned with the  

13            outside world.

```

**Figure 2.** Psychology class (Goodine, Healy, & Lazur, 2020) [9]

In this data excerpt, the teacher utilizes many strategies similar to the ones from previous excerpts. In line 1, the teacher uses the discourse marker “Now” (line 1) to signal students that they are moving from teacher lecturing to classroom discussion. Immediately after providing the FPP, the teacher nominates Janet to answer the question. Again, the teacher’s turn indicates no wait time for students to self-select. Janet continues the conversation by answering “Yes” (line 3), which indicates Janet hears the request made by the teacher. After Janet providing the answer, the teacher uses the third turn to assess Janet’s response by saying, “Yes, that’s right.” (line 5), which indicates Janet’s response is affirmed. Then, the teacher produces another FPP to make a request, “anyone else?” (line 5). By asking this question, the teacher directs students’ attention from Janet’s answer and moves back to the entire class by open the question to “anyone”.

Although the teacher doesn’t nominate a student this time, George picks up the conversation quickly after teacher’s FPP and produces an SPP to the question. In George’s response, he indicates a problem in his sequence that he does not remember the details of the example. The teacher responds to him that there is no need to worry about forgetting specific examples and provides an account that he will talk about details later. It is worth noting that the teacher produces a prolonged utterance in “but for now:” (line 10), a preface for what he is going to tell students next. The elongation of “now” might indicate the teacher shifts students’ attention again from George’s response back to the entire class. Then, the teacher speaks in an increased volume, “the MOST important thing...” (line 10-11). This also suggests that there is something important coming up, and students need to pay attention to the teacher. In the following part, the teacher suggests that the important feature of “circadian rhythms is they align with the outside world”.

In this data excerpt, some common features of classroom interactions are observed, such as the use of discourse marker, response tokens, and teacher’s questions. Also, the teacher uses third turn sequences to orient students to the pedagogical goal of the course. The teacher asks students to provide several examples of circadian rhythms first. He only responds, “yes, that’s right”, to Janet’s response without seeking clarification or asking the student to elaborate on her response. This might indicate the pedagogical goal for this part of the conversation is to check whether students know examples of the circadian rhythm instead of having them explain the examples in detail (Walsh & Li, 2013)[6]. After George providing his response, the teacher does not extend George’s turn as well, and this further proves that the pedagogical goal is only to check if students know some examples. Thus, the teacher shifts the topic quickly after he finds students are familiar with the examples and moves on to tell students the general pattern found in circadian rhythms. By observing the elongation and increased volume, we could know that the teacher focuses on telling students the patterns can be found through examples of circadian rhythms.

## 5. CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

By comparing the data excerpts from TOEFL listening tasks to previous findings in classroom interactions, we can find some similarities and differences. Conversations in TOEFL listening tasks resemble real-life classroom interactions in many ways. First, the teacher uses different techniques in his speech to get students' attention, including using discourse markers, elongation of utterances, increased volumes, and pauses. These techniques are also observed in previous research studies (Wong & Waring, 2010; Walsh & Li, 2013; Reddington, 2018; Lee, 2006)[5-8]. Second, the teacher utilizes IRF sequences to elicit students' responses and provide feedback to students. The teacher predominantly uses the nomination strategy to let students give responses and shows appreciation for students in the third turns. The teacher also provides personal responses to create a sense that "students and the teacher are together," and thus encourages students to respond (Walsh & Li, 2013)[5]. Most importantly, as shown in the data excerpt 2, the teacher uses third turns to orient students' attention to his pedagogical goal. The teacher asks students to briefly review some of the examples related to the topic and moves on the main focuses of the lesson through a series of IRF sequences.

Although many similar language features observed in TOEFL listening excerpts, there are still several differences. In general, there is no student to student interaction observed from TOEFL listening task while this type of interaction is common in real classroom interactions. Conversations in TOEFL listening tasks only present student-teacher interaction during the class. Moreover, the teacher in the data excerpts above shows a lack of wait time, which is also a common feature in real classroom interactions. The teachers from previous literature use the wait time to let students process the information and form response. Students usually volunteer to answer the question after a few seconds of silence. However, in the excerpts above, there is no wait time or silence between teacher and students' turns, which is not common in reality. Furthermore, there is no repair observed in the conversations. In the existing literature, repairs are found in both teacher and students' turns. Participants of the conversation both use repairs to increase accuracy in their expressions and reach mutual understanding. Thus, the absence of repair is also uncommon in authentic classroom interactions.

The similarities and differences observed from the present study have several possible implications. First, conversations from TOEFL listening tasks present many pragmatic aspects in real-life classroom interactions. Therefore, these conversations are helpful for students to learn about language features in English-speaking classrooms. Second, English learners also need to become aware of the differences between TOEFL conversations and conversations observed in real life; students need to know that there are more pragmatics and features in addition to those presented in TOEFL exams. If international students could learn these differences after completing the TOEFL exams, they would become more prepared to participate in English-speaking classrooms.

## REFERENCES

- [1] The TOEFL® Family of Assessments. (2020). Retrieved June 27, 2020, from <https://www.ets.org/toefl/>
- [2] Ginther, A., & Yan, X. (2018). Interpreting the relationships between TOEFL iBT scores and GPA: Language proficiency, policy, and profiles. *Language Testing*, 35(2), 271-295.
- [3] Wait, I. W., & Gressel, J. W. (2009). Relationship between TOEFL score and academic success for international engineering students. *Journal of Engineering Education*, 98(4), 389-398.
- [4] Bridgeman, B., Cho, Y., & DiPietro, S. (2016). Predicting grades from an English language assessment: The importance of peeling the onion. *Language Testing*, 33(3), 307-318.

- [5] Wong, J., & Waring, H. Z. (2010). *Conversation Analysis and Second Language Pedagogy: A Guide for ESL/EFL Teachers*. Routledge.
- [6] Walsh, S. & Li, L. (2013), Conversations as space for learning. *International Journal of Applied Linguistics*, 23, 247-266. doi:10.1111/ijal.12005
- [7] Reddington, E. (2018): Managing participation in the adult ESL classroom: Engagement and exit practices, *Classroom Discourse*, DOI: 10.1080/19463014.2018.1433051
- [8] Lee, Y-A. (2007). Third turn position in teacher talk: Contingency and the work of teaching. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 39, 1204-1230.
- [9] Goodine, M., Healy, J., & Lazur, K. (2020). TOEFL Solutions for Open Minds - more practice, better results. Retrieved June 27, 2020, from <https://tstprep.com/>
- [10] Walsh, S. (2006) *Investigating classroom discourse*, London: Routledge
- [11] Fox, B. A., & Thompson, S. A. (2010). Responses to Wh-Questions in English conversation. *Research on Language and Social Interaction*, 43, 133-156.