

ANALYZING EFL CLASSROOM TALK DURING CLASS OPENING: TOPIC SHIFT AND NEGOTIATION

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Abstract

This exploratory study, following a conversation analytic (CA) perspective, investigates topic shift in classroom talk during the class opening. The data, which are natural observational, come from three hours of audio-recordings of verbal interaction between four EFL teachers and their students during the class opening at an Asian university. The findings are threefold. First, the EFL teachers' topic-changing turns are much longer than turns that do not serve the same purpose. Second, the EFL teachers' topic-changing turns consist of two parts: a) the first part deals with the students' preceding topic and turns; and b) the second part is intentionally designed to prompt the next topic. Third, discourse markers are placed between the two parts. A close analysis of the EFL teachers' topic-changing turns suggests that they may make topic shift appear more natural and spontaneous. However, their turns have features that differentiate them from those located in mundane talk.

Keywords

teacher talk, topic shift, classroom communication, class opening, discourse markers

1 Introduction

Hymes' (1972) concept of communicative competence has been highly influential in second language studies. Since the 1970s, several influential researchers (Brumfit & Johnson 1979, Canale 1983, Nunan 1989, Richards & Rodgers 2014, Savignon 1983) suggested incorporating this concept into language classroom activities. Inspired by this pervasive belief about communicative competence, many English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers now focus on 'language as communication' and 'communication strategies' in their classes. As a result, classroom activities are often specially designed to imitate real-world communication and actual language use. Social interaction activities and functional activities are encouraged because they engage EFL learners in authentic and meaningful language use.

While authentic language use is a worthy pedagogical practice, there are classroom situations and activities where it is abandoned in order to achieve the goals of the lesson. The features of talk in institutional domains, classroom talk in general, and EFL classroom talk specifically, are different to the features

of ordinary talk in many ways, mainly due to institutional constraints and participants' roles (Atkinson & Drew 1979, Heritage 2010, Heritage & Robinson 2011). Teachers are found to talk more than students do, control the direction of talk (i.e. whether or not the talk should continue), select the next speaker (i.e. who talks next, or who answers the question), control how questions should be answered (i.e. forms of questions to be answered by the students), and evaluate student responses (i.e. whether feedback should be given on language and content, and how) (Mehan 1979, Seedhouse 2004, Walsh 2011).

Several types and functions of classroom talk between EFL teachers and students have been explored either by second language acquisition (SLA) researchers (e.g. Hua, Seedhouse, Wei & Cook 2007, Markee 2000, Seedhouse 2004, Wong & Waring 2010) or CA researchers (e.g. Lerner 1994, 1995). However, none of these has explored interactional patterns during the class opening. This study is inspired by the long-held expectation in EFL education that second language learning outcomes must include not only second language knowledge, but also appropriate language use and communication skills, and that language is equivalent to communication (Widdowson 1978). As a result, classroom interaction and classroom activities are expected to be as natural, authentic, and spontaneous as possible. The objective of this current study, following a CA perspective, is to explore the speech exchange system, topic shift and turn design in EFL classrooms during class opening.

2 Theoretical background

2.1 Class opening

Class opening is referred to as “procedures the teacher uses to focus the students’ attention on the learning aims of the lesson” (Richards & Lockhart 1994: 114). In this study, class opening refers to interaction that takes place immediately after the greetings and right before the lesson begins. Class opening is found to prepare the students psychologically and pedagogically for the upcoming lesson. Psychologically speaking, class opening gets students ready for the learning mode, i.e. it is a transition that divides what the students did prior to coming to the class, or in the previous class, and an upcoming instructional activity or subject matter. Class opening also tunes the emotional mode for the upcoming lesson. From a pedagogical point of view, class opening is designed to succinctly revisit a previously-learned topic, talk about a general matter, or introduce new background knowledge relevant to the upcoming lesson.

Based on the two broad functions introduced above, there are several strategies teachers can use during class opening, including greetings, housekeeping,

chatting to students, warm-up activities, consciousness-raising, previewing the lesson, or reviewing the previous lesson (Watson Todd 1997). In language classrooms, class opening can be allotted for informal talk where EFL teachers interact with the students using English. It can be observed that there are two main purposes of class opening: non academics-related, such as the first three strategies, including informal talk; and academics-related, such as the last three strategies.

Before proceeding to the discussion of the interactional features of class opening, it is important to briefly talk about classroom interaction, which is made up mainly of questions, either display or referential, from teachers, and answers from students (Mehan 1979). This question-answer sequence aligns well with Sinclair and Coulthard's (1975) I-R-F pattern (I as in Teacher Initiation, R as in Student Response, and F as in Teacher Follow-Up). It can be seen that, due to the power and institutional roles of teachers, they manage classroom talk that may run differently from Sacks, Schegloff, and Jefferson's (1974) characterization of ordinary talk.

The I-R-F pattern can be located throughout language classroom talk, even during class opening. Located in class opening is the sequence of talk that allows a new topic to be initiated, accepted, maintained, continued, or even rejected by teachers. In the language classroom, as many studies (cf. Cazden 2001, Mehan 1979, Sinclair & Coulthard 1975) including this current one reveal, EFL teachers manage the topics to be discussed and how those topics should be discussed during class opening. The next section discusses topic-related social activities, from a conversation analytic perspective.

2.2 Topic and topic shift

Turn-taking systems have been widely investigated in CA studies as they not only display how participants take turns (Sacks et al. 1974) but also how participants, through taking turns, show understanding of the ongoing talk and each other (Schegloff 1992), thereby reflecting social action and socially-shared cognition. The sequential relationship between turns-at-talk is maintained by Heritage's (1984: 242) notion of the "doubly contextual" property of talk, and Schegloff's (1968: 1075) concept of "conditional relevance". There are several elements of understanding that participants exhibit during turns-at-talk; one is topicality because, as Maynard (1980: 263) remarks, topicality is "a matter not only for content, but is partly constituted in the procedures conversationalists utilize to display understanding and to achieve one turn's proper first with a prior".

Topic is roughly defined as what the conversation is about (Brown & Yule 1983, Maynard 1980). A string of talk consists of one or more topics and typically begins with ‘greeting’; after this the turn-taking systems allow the mentionables, or topics, to be mentioned (Schegloff & Sacks 1973). This is made possible because of the two features of naturally-occurring conversation, as Sacks et al. (1974: 700) articulate in talk-in-interaction, “one party talks at a time” and “speaker-change recurs, or at least occurs”. These permit not only the same topic to be talked about, but also at some point a new topic to be introduced to the talk by participants. That is, interactional features allow participants to take turns, and introduce and talk about a topic (or what to talk about). What follows discusses which topic(s) are used and the sequence of topics in talk-in-interaction.

In everyday talk, it is unquestionable that “what parties say is not specified in advance” (Sacks et al. 1974: 701), which suggests not only the occurrence of unforeseen topics, but also an array of topics brought sequentially into the talk by participants. The sequence of topics in talk implies the existence of two interrelated phenomena; the boundaries of topics, and topic shift (or previous-topic termination or new-topic introduction). When there are more than two consecutive topics in turns-at-talk, the boundary between two topics is an interactional point at which a previous topic is put to an end, and a new one is initiated. This phenomenon is known as topic shift and is evident when there is an “utterance which employs referents unrelated to prior talk in order to implicate a new set of mentionables” (Maynard 1980: 280). A question is how we as analysts know when there is a topic shift, or, in other words, how do we know if there are topics in a talk.

Tracy (1984) introduced two rules used to determine whether the interactants stay on the topic. The first rule, a local connection, should be produced by the new speaker to chain to something in the last one or two sentences of the previous speaker’s message. The first rule is best explained by Sacks’s (1973) preference of contiguity, which suggests the relationship between two turns by two interactants. The second rule, a global connection, occurs when a contribution the current speaker makes responds to the main idea of what has been said so far.

Tracy (1984) also states that the boundaries between topics, and topic shift or topic termination, can be identified when the two rules are violated by the current speaker, i.e. when the current speaker does not chain to the last part of the previous speaker’s utterance or does not extend the main ideas in the last speaker’s utterance. While Tracy’s observation is useful, it does not provide a guideline for researchers on how to clearly locate the boundaries of topics or, therefore, topic shift and termination in talk.

Maynard (1980) studied the sequential environment of topic shift in mundane encounters and proposed techniques used to locate boundaries between two consecutive topics. His observation reveals that topic shift is a social action involving two participants taking turns to signal each other that topic shift is coming up momentarily, to allow each other to mention the mentionables, and finally to bring a new topic to the continuous talk. He found that topic changes are caused by failed speaker transitions, which can be signaled when there are responding silences, unsuccessful story-exit devices, absent solicits, refocusing, and disagreements. Maynard's observation of sequential environment in which topic shift is located illustrates the relationship between the topic-changing turns and interactional activities in the preceding turns.

Maynard's work draws our attention to co-occurrences of the two following phenomena: topic-changing turns, and the conversational features that signal the upcoming topic change. However, his work does not discuss what is present in the topic-change turn. At this point, it is necessary to take a close look at topic-changing turns in terms of content or what is being talked about. While it is possible that a previous topic can completely end on a previous turn and a new topic can be placed on the immediate next turn (Example 1), it should be noted that topic shift or determination can occur in both an intra-turn position (Example 2) or even intra-sententially (Example 3).

Example 1: Two topics on two different turns

- Jack: *Love the movie. What do you think about it?* (1)
OT¹ Tim: *Yes, I think it is good too.* (2)
NT² Jack: *Oh, what do you want to have for dinner?* (3)

In Example 1, there are two topics located in the talk, i.e. 'movie' (lines 1 and 2, where 'it' refers also to 'movie') and 'dinner' (line 3). The first topic is over in line 2, when Jack does not talk about the movie in line 3 but brings up a new topic. It can be concluded that once one topic ends on one turn, a new topic is proposed on the next one; both turns are designed by different speakers. However, in Example 2, both a previous topic and a new topic are dealt with by the same speaker on the same turn.

Example 2: Topic shift in an intra-turn position

- Joe: *Finally I got it done, did you?* (1)
MT³ Bill: *I left the file on her table, though I couldn't find some information she wants. Anyway, I'm excited about the cruise trip to the Caribbean.* (2)

In Example 2, Bill does two topic-related activities consecutively. First, he terminates the first topic about submitting a file to their boss (line 2). Second, on the same turn, he proposes a new topic about his cruise trip. As we can see, two topics are present on turn 2: one being terminated (i.e. gathering documents), the other then being talked about. However, in the example below, the previous topic is terminated during the syntax-in-progress, allowing the new topic to be initiated.

Example 3: Topics in one sentence

Beth: *Do you like your future office?* (1)

MT Seth: *The wall color is not what I expect and there's something wrong with the corners. You can see the poles on the corners. The layout is...I don't want to talk about it...What was your day like?* (2)

In Example 3, Seth complains on turn 2 about his new office and talks about the wall color, the unexpectedly visible poles, and the layout. However, he does not complete the sentence about the layout but quickly changes the topic to talking about Beth's wellbeing. We can see here that topic shift can terminate the syntax-in-progress.

The three examples above and data in Maynard's (1980) study on topic shift came from everyday ordinary encounters, where the issue of power did not seem to influence how the participants conversed. In other words, the issues of power between the interactants in the above examples were not as apparent as between interactants in institutionalized settings, such as courts, police stations, doctors' surgeries, or schools. As Drew and Heritage (1992) and Heritage (2010, 2011) have shown in their studies, institutional constraints and participants' roles greatly influence the language the participants use and the way they interact with each other. This study explores institutionalized interaction between EFL teachers and their students during the class opening, where EFL teachers are considered more knowledgeable and older than the other parties. Topic in turns-at-talk, in this study, refers to what is talked about, while topic relevance can be located when what is currently talked about is built on and responds to what immediately comes on the immediately preceding turn. The following section introduces research methods.

3 Data and method

3.1 Research questions

This exploratory study, following a CA perspective, investigates topic shift and negotiation, and the turn-taking systems during the class opening in teacher-

fronted classrooms. The focus is on how EFL teachers, the participants in this study, manage classroom interaction during the class opening, in relation to topics and talk direction. Two research questions to which this study aims to give answers are:

- How do EFL teachers manage topics during the class opening?
- What are the features of teachers' and students' turns-at-talk in relation to topic shift and negotiation during the class opening?

3.2 Participants and setting

3.2.1 Teachers

Four EFL teachers, who were novices with two to three years of teaching experience, participated in this exploratory study. They were trained in Communicative Language Teaching principles and learner-centeredness, how to implement authentic interactional activities, such as informal class talk, and the use of referential questions and group-work activities to promote authentic classroom interaction. These teachers, after taking some MA courses, intended to have their classroom talk analyzed, and hoped the result would raise their awareness of authenticity in classroom talk in relation to topic management.

3.2.2 Students

There were forty students, aged 19-20, in each class who studied at a tertiary level in an Asian country, where English is considered a foreign language. They have studied EFL for approximately twelve years, mainly with nonnative English-speaking teachers. The students' English language proficiency was considered intermediate; their receptive skills were stronger than their productive skills. They knew how to form simple sentences and use basic English in everyday settings. In general, this was a relatively homogenous class in terms of language proficiency and learning performance.

3.2.3 Setting and teaching material

The classes met for three hours, once a week. The language of instruction was English, though there were times when the EFL teachers used their mother tongue in class. The EFL teachers used a commercialized textbook which was adopted by the university. In general, English classes begin with greetings, followed by the lesson, and end possibly with assigning homework and housekeeping. A typical class opening is located between greetings and the actual lesson. The talk during class opening usually lasted for five to 15 minutes.

3.2.4 Data collection

The data in this study were video-recorded interactions between the EFL teachers and their students. The video-recorder was set at the back of the classroom to minimize intrusion on the teaching and students' verbal and interactional behavior. The classroom interactions between the EFL teachers and students during eight class openings were recorded and then transcribed. The analysis will emphasize topics that were brought chronologically into the classroom talk by both parties.

4 Results

This section presents the findings from the analysis of the data collected during class openings. It is divided thematically into four sections: boundaries between two consecutive topics; lengths of the EFL teacher's topic-changing utterances; components of the EFL teacher's topic-changing utterances and functions thereof; and discourse-markers as sequential boundaries between two consecutive topics.

4.1 Locating the boundaries between topics

In the data collected during the class opening, there are several incidents of a sequence of turns in which two consecutive topics are located.

Excerpt 1

- | | | |
|----|--|-----|
| | Tr ⁴ : <i>I have two <u>pictures</u> to show you.</i> | (1) |
| | Sts ⁵ : <i>A man and woman.</i> | (2) |
| | Tr: <i>So, what do you think about <u>them</u>?</i> | (3) |
| | Sts: <i>Beautiful <u>picture</u>.</i> | (4) |
| | St ⁶ : <i>Short <u>legs</u></i> | (5) |
| | Sts: <i>(laugh)</i> | (6) |
| NT | Tr: <i><u>Today</u> we will learn about describing people's <u>personalities</u></i> | (7) |

In Excerpt 1, the EFL teacher reviews what the students learned in the previous class. The class opening deals with previously-learned adjectives before introducing the day's topic about describing people's personalities. A picture is used to initiate the conversation, while the teacher's question in line 3 invites the students to supply adjectives that could be used to describe the characters in the pictures.

However, the word 'them' in line 3 is problematic because the students do not know whether it refers to the two pictures the teacher brought to class or to a man and a woman in the pictures. As we can see, some students who believe that 'them' refers to the pictures reply with 'beautiful picture' (line 4), while for some,

'them' means a man and woman as evident in line 5. In either case, the EFL teacher does not fix the problem, but immediately introduces the lesson and the new topic in line 7. The new topic, which is about describing personalities, is not topically relevant to what has been conversed (i.e. pictures, a man and woman, or short legs). A similar topic shift trajectory is presented below.

Excerpt 2

- Tr: *Last time we learned about adjectives, remember?* (1)
 Sts: *(Yes* (2)
 St: *New*
 St: *Old*
 St: *Beautiful*
 St: *Easy*
 St: *Difficult*) (3)
 NT Tr: *In this new chapter, we will study how to describe appearance. Now look at the pictures on the board.* (4)

In Excerpt 2, the EFL teacher initiates a question that is preceded with a declarative statement. This declarative statement functions as a reminder, while 'remember?' is taken as a *yes/no*-question requesting the students to reply. A few students reply with a positive answer, e.g. *yes*, while many list some adjectives they learned last time, implying that the students still remember them. While the list of adjectives does not exactly respond to the EFL teacher's *yes/no*-question, they could reasonably be considered relevant.

On turn 3, we can see that a student mentions the word, 'difficult', which responds to the question (turn 1). Nevertheless, while the student is doing so, the teacher immediately moves to the day's lesson, as signaled by, "*in this new chapter*", which is not topically related to words on the adjective list the students give. That is, the content found in her turn does not topically relate to the students' responses. Her topically-unrelated turn (i.e. turn 4) suggests that what has been talked about is over, and that there is a new topic. On this topic-changing turn, we can see a topical development from talk about the previous lesson, to describing appearance, and finally to talk about the pictures on the board. A few more excerpts that present a similar phenomenon should suffice.

Excerpt 3

- Tr: *You look tired, you went to bed late last night?* (1)
 Sts: *[nodding]* (2)
 Tr: *What did you do last night?* (3)
 Sts: *(Projects)* (4)
 St: *Soccer*
 Tr: *What about others? What about the rest?* (5)

- St: *Internet, no homework=* (6)
 Sts: = $\left. \begin{array}{l} \text{Videogames} \\ \text{indistinctive sounds} \end{array} \right\}$ (7)
 Sts: (8)
 NT Tr: *Er.: now please open the book on page thirty-one, sorry thirty-two.
 One the left, you will see.* (9)

In Excerpt 3, there is the exchange of turns devoted to activities the EFL students did the previous night (lines 1-8). Line 1 is designed to invite the EFL students to respond, which they do on line 2. Line 3 invites the EFL students to list the names of activities they did. Answers on turn 4 are given simultaneously, and are relevant. To involve more students, the EFL teacher designs turn 5 to solicit answers from those who have not yet answered. Her turn 5 is considered relevant because it is the result of turn 4 and is designed because some students do not provide answers. In other words, the two turns were in a cause-effect relationship.

On turns 6-8, we can observe that new, appropriate, and relevant answers, which all relate to activities, are provided. That is, activities found on these three turns respond to turn 3 (i.e. *what did you do last night?*). Without responding to the students' answers, in line 9, the teacher initiates a new topic which is about the day's lesson. Activities listed by the students are not responded to or topically used to build the teacher's turn (line 9), implying the end of the activity-related talk.

Excerpts 1, 2, and 3 are similar to Example 1 in that the previous topics are abruptly terminated. In other words, a previous topic ends on one turn and a new topic is placed immediately on the next turn. However, in Excerpts 4 and 5 below, both the termination of the previous topic and initiation of a new one are on the same turn.

Excerpt 4

- Tr: *What did you do last weekend?* (1)
 Sts: $\left(\begin{array}{l} \text{Shopping} \\ \text{Videogame} \end{array} \right)$ (2)
 MT Tr: *Oh good umm oh yesterday I had sushi, do you like sushi?
 So, I'm going to tell the history of sushi* (3)

In Excerpt 4, the class is about Past Tense, where the EFL teacher intends to use the discussion about sushi as a lead-in activity. In line 1, the teacher initiates the conversation with a typical question about the previous weekend's activities. After the question is asked, two relevant topics: 'shopping' and 'videogame', are simultaneously given by the students in line 2. The turn-initial acknowledgement token ('*oh good*') by the teacher in line 3 is short, yet topically relevant to what

has been talked about in class. The teacher's topic on sushi (as in *'I had sushi'*), is considered relevant because it is an activity.

However, later, a new topic which is also on sushi is then immediately proposed by the EFL teacher in line 3, inviting students' participation (i.e. *'do you like sushi?'*) and leading to a new yet relevant topic (i.e. *'I'm going to tell the history of sushi'*). It should be noted here that, although the three consecutive topics are proposed by the teacher on the same turns (i.e. *'eating sushi'* as an activity, *'like sushi'* as a personal preference, and *'history of sushi'* as a historical topic), only the first one relates topically to what has been talked about (i.e. eating sushi as an activity). The other two, however, are irrelevant to an activity; the theme is proposed on turn 1 and is not designed sequentially to respond to any of the activities mentioned on turn 2.

It is evident that these new topics on liking and history are not a topical continuation of the previous ones (i.e. last weekend's activities, shopping, videogame, or even sushi). Another excerpt below shows a similar turn design.

Excerpt 5

- Tr: *I love watching movies. The last one I saw was Boyhood. Do you know it?* (1)
- Sts: $\left(\begin{array}{l} \text{No} \\ \text{Yes} \end{array} \right)$ (2)
- Sts: *I like คิดถึง วิทยา* (3)
(several only mention the name of this movie)
- MT
- Tr: *Nice, OK.:, You see the word 'SAW' 'SAW' I see I saw. It's the past. It happened in the past. So use saw* (4)

In Excerpt 5, the EFL teacher initiates a topic on movies; she tells the class about her preference for watching movies and about a movie she saw. Then, the general topic on movies is refined by the teacher to a talk about a specific movie, *'Boyhood'*. *'Do you know it'* prompts the students' responses, while many students later mention a Thai movie they saw and like (line 3). After that, in line 4, the teacher only acknowledges the responses with a token, *'nice'*. On the same turn, moreover, she brings in a new topic that calls the students' attention to the forms of the verb *'see/saw'* and the use of Past Simple Tense.

It should be noted that there are two types of trajectories specified in Excerpts 1-5 above. The first trajectory, identified in Excerpt 1 line 3, Excerpt 2 line 2, and Excerpt 3 line 2, shows how the new topic is immediately initiated at the beginning of the EFL teachers' turns. There is no topical connection between the previous turns which belong to the students, and the teacher's following turns. The second trajectory, located in Excerpts 4 line 3, and 5 line 4, displays how the teachers acknowledge, though minimally, the students' responses

before proposing new topics later on the same turns. This study pays particular attention to the second type of trajectory. The next section explores the length of the EFL teachers' topic-changing utterances, or the turn on which the teacher acknowledges the students' responses and then begins new topics.

4.2 Length of the teacher's topic-changing utterances

Several observations from Excerpts 4 and 5 can be made as follows. In Excerpt 4 turn 3, and Excerpt 5 turn 4, the EFL teachers' turns, which function as topic-changing turns, are longer than those of the students or even than those of their own in the same speech exchanges. This is due to the turns' functions, i.e. to minimally deal with the previous topics and to initiate a new topic (this is discussed later in Sections 4.3 and 4.4). Excerpt 6 below compares the length of the two parties' turns during the class opening.

Excerpt 6

Tr: *Now let me ask you this. You have been to the south, right?* (1)

Sts: *(yes)* (2)

Sts: *(Phuket)* (3)

Sts: *Hat Yai=* (3)

MT Tr: *=Wow great OK now think about the tsunami there ten years ago. Villagers had no time to prepare but* (4)

The day's lesson in Excerpt 6 is about Past Tense. The teacher plans to use 'tsunami' as a lead-in topic in an informal talk. In line 1, she wants to see if anybody in class has been to southern Thailand, where a 'tsunami' hit in 2004. Some students simply reply with 'yes' (line 2) to her *yes/no*-question, while some students name a province or city they visited (lines 2 and 3). All responses are considered topically appropriate. The topically relevant response from the teacher, which functions as an acknowledgment token, appears at the turn-initial position of the following turn (turn 4) before she immediately introduces the prepared topic 'tsunami'. The introduction of this new topic terminates the previous talk about southern Thailand, Phuket, or Hat Yai, which could otherwise have been used to develop a new relevant topic.

The teacher's turn in line 4 is considered a topic-changing utterance where a previous topic is touched upon at the turn-initial position, and a new topic is proposed at a turn-final position. It can be observed that this turn is longer than the students' turns (lines 2 and 3), and the teacher's turn in line 1, neither of which is a topic-changing utterance. The teachers' topic-changing utterances, which are longer than other utterances in the same speech exchange, are evident in the following excerpts.

Excerpt 7

- Tr: *anything anyone wanna share?* (1)
(0.5)
- Tr: *Actually, I went back umm to my hometown.
It is four-hour drive from here* (2)
(0.2)
- Tr: *Are you all from Bangkok?* (3)
- Sts: (nodded) (4)
- Tr: *Which district...I mean which area are you from?* (5)
- Sts: (Bang Bon) (6)
- Sts: (Bang Khun Thian)
- Sts: (Thung Khru)
- St: (Rat Burana)
- MT Tr: *Oh, so many places here. Right, before we begin our class,
there is an activity, well it's a game. Here is the rule.* (7)

In Excerpt 7, the teacher begins her class with a weekend-activity talk. Then this is followed by an invitation for the students to talk about what they did the previous weekend (turn 1). The invitation appears unsuccessful as there is a 0.5 pause and still no students take the next turn. Instead of nominating some students or rephrasing the question, the teacher answers the question herself ('I went back umm to my hometown' line 2) which leads to a related talk about the distance ('it is four-hour drive from here').

A relevant topic question is asked by the teacher on turn 3 which successfully solicits the students' responses, though they are nonverbal (turn 4). The next question (line 5), where she corrects herself, is designed to gain additional information on students' whereabouts. The solicit for the next speaker is successful as several students answer (line 6). However, this topic is terminated on turn 7, where, after the teacher acknowledges the students' responses, she initiates a new topic which is about the day's lesson. We can see that turn 7, which is considered a topic-exchanging utterance, is longer than preceding turns by both parties. One more excerpt illustrating this phenomenon would suffice.

Excerpt 8

- Tr: *How was your holiday? Did you travel anywhere...by air?* (1)
- Tr: *'by air' means flying...by plane* (2)
- Sts: (yes, no plane) (3)
(no no plane)
- Tr: *Good especially if you had to fly back
from Bangkok to China many weeks ago.* (4)
- Sts: (what happen) Krab Ajarn⁹ (5)
- Sts: (aria wa¹⁰)
- Sts: (some start laughing)
(some look confused and ask their classmates what actually happened)

MT Tr: *It is about two Chinese tourists, you can ask your classmates about it=it was in the news. Ok, now to...go...let's look at what we have to study today. Where is your book?* (6)

In Excerpt 8, the main topic to be used in an informal talk is from a newspaper. The topic is about a delayed flight caused by two Chinese tourists, though the very first question on turn 1 appears to be about a weekend activity. Although turn 2, which is not topically relevant, is inserted to explain the meaning of ‘*by air*’, the same topic resumes on turn 3 when the students answer the first question asked in turn 1. Turn 4 reveals the main topic which the talk so far has built up. It turns out that some students can follow and then laugh, while some ask a follow-up question, or some do not follow.

The fact that some students ask a follow-up question and that some do not follow up the story (line 5) implies that the teacher should hold the talk on this topic, either by re-announcing the topic or going into detail about what happened. Instead, she only gives brief information (‘*it is about two Chinese tourists*’) at a turn-initial position, which may not give a clear picture of the event, before rushing to initiate a new topic (‘*what we have to study today...*’) located at the turn-final position. This topic-changing utterance is longer than any other turns in the same speech exchange and in this study’s corpus.

We have now seen that topic-changing utterances, always belonging to the EFL teachers, are designed to cover not only a previous topic but also a new topic. This purpose makes them longer than ordinary utterances. This phenomenon is elaborated upon in depth in the following section.

4.3 Components of the teachers’ topic-changing utterances

The previous section shows that topic-changing utterances (i.e. Excerpt 4 turn 3, Excerpt 5 turn 4, Excerpt 6 turn 4, Excerpt 7 turn 7, and Excerpt 8 turn 6), all by the teachers, are significantly long due to their two topic-related functions. The first function signals that the previous topic ends by completing the relevant follow-up responses. In other words, the topics at the turn-initial position in topic-changing utterances are the same as the topics that have been talked about. What is underlined in the excerpts below are the topics that are located in the turn-initial position.

Excerpt 4

Tr: Oh good umm oh yesterday I had sushi, do you like sushi? So, I'm going to tell the history of sushi

Excerpt 5

Tr: Nice, OK.:, You see the word 'SAW' 'SAW' I see I saw. It's the past. It happened in the past. So use saw

Excerpt 6

Tr: =Wow great OK now think about the tsunami there ten years ago. Villagers had no time to prepare but

Excerpt 7

Tr: Oh, so many places here. Right, before we begin our class, there is an activity, well it's a game. Here is the rule.

Excerpt 8

Tr: it is about two Chinese tourists, you can ask your classmates about it=it was in the news. Ok, now to... go.. let's look at what we have to study today. Where is your book?

However, a further analysis of the topics at the turn-initial position reveals that there are two types of topical responses they provide. The first type is illustrated by the underlined turn-initial topics, which function as an acknowledgement token (i.e. 'nice' in Excerpt 5, and 'wow great' in Excerpt 6). Topically speaking, these are parts of the topic that have been said in the turn-initial position. In addition to Excerpts 5 and 6, Excerpt 9 turn 5 below presents the same function.

Excerpt 9

Tr: *What did you find on the newspaper? Read it?* (1)

St1: A movie star. (2)

Tr: *Anything else?* (3)

OT St2: Soccer. (4)

MT Tr: Good. Well...but...no one read about the little kangaroos caught not far from Bangkok. Did you hear this news? (5)

In Excerpt 9, it can be seen that the teacher's turn 5 contains two topics; 'Good' which is an acknowledgement token and continuation of the previous topic, while a new topic is introduced at the turn-ending position. It can be noted that what these turn-initial responses, which function as acknowledgement tokens, have in common is that all are brief and are one-syllable words. The second type of some underlined turn-initial topics can be observed in Excerpt 4 ('Oh good umm oh yesterday I had sushi'), Excerpt 7 ('Oh, so many places here'), Excerpt 8 ('it is about two Chinese tourists'), and Excerpt 10 ('Really? We cannot save water'), where they function not only as an acknowledgement token, but also as a topical talk on the previous topic. That is, the previous topics are actually being talked about.

Excerpt 10

- Tr: *What a hot day! Do you think it gets hotter?* (1)
 Sts: [nodding] (2)
 Tr: *I read a newspaper many days ago which talked about summer in southeast Asia=* (3)
 Tr: *=It said we will be...have problem with water this year.* (4)
 Tr: *=not enough water for plant and animal so what can we do?* (5)
 Sts: *plant trees* (6)
 St: *Save water=* (7)
 OT Sts: *=don't use water* (8)
 MT Tr: *Really? We cannot save water=You know Songkarn is coming. So any plan for Songkarn? Hm?* (9)

The second topic-related function of these topic-changing turns can be observed when they, at the turn-final position, include the new topics, the mentionables, that are not topically relevant to what is mentioned in the turn-initial positions. This is illustrated below (the underlined position represents a new topic).

Excerpt 4

- Tr: *Oh good umm oh yesterday I had sushi, do you like sushi? So, I'm going to tell the history of sushi*

Excerpt 5

- Tr: *Nice, OK::, You see the word 'SAW' 'SAW' I see I saw. It's the past. It happened in the past. So use saw*

Excerpt 6

- Tr: *=Wow great OK now think about the tsunami there ten years ago. Villagers had no time to prepare but*

Excerpt 7

- Tr: *Oh, so many places here. Right, before we begin our class, there is an activity, well it's a game. Here is the rule.*

Excerpt 8

- Tr: *it is about two Chinese tourists, you can ask your classmates about it=it was in the news. Ok, now to...go...let's look at what we have to study today. Where is your book?*

Extract 9

- Tr: *Good. Well...but...no one read about the little kangaroos caught not far from Bangkok. Did you hear this news?*

Extract 10

- Tr: *Really? We cannot save water=You know Songkarn is coming. So any plan for Songkarn? Hm?*

This section is designed to elaborate on the length of the teachers' topic-changing turns introduced in 4.2 above. This section also reveals the organizational components and functions of such turns. We have seen that the components of the EFL teachers' topic-changing turns include the turn-initial positions and turn-ending positions: both deal with different topics in the ongoing classroom talk. However, there is an additional part which is found between these two components. This part is introduced below.

4.4 Discourse markers in the teachers' topic-changing utterances

The two components of the teacher's topic-changing utterances found in Excerpts 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, and 10 function differently. The first component, however long, occurs at the turn-initial position and functions as an acknowledgement token. It is designed to help the teacher stay on the topic. The second component, placed at turn-final positions, aims to introduce a new topic. However, a further investigation of the components of the teacher's topic-changing utterances shows that there is a word, a set of words, or a sentence whose functions are not directly related to topics *per se*. They are underlined and shown below.

Excerpt 4

Tr: *Oh good umm oh yesterday I had sushi, do you like sushi? So, I'm going to tell the history of sushi*

Excerpt 5

Tr: *Nice, OK∴. You see the word 'SAW' 'SAW' I see I saw. It's the past. It happened in the past. So use saw*

Excerpt 6

Tr: *=Wow great OK now think about the tsunami there ten years ago. Villagers had no time to prepare but*

Excerpt 7

Tr: *Oh, so many places here. Right, before we begin our class, there is an activity, well it's a game. Here is the rule.*

Excerpt 8

Tr: *it is about two Chinese tourists, you can ask your classmates about it=it was in the news. Ok, now to...go...let's look at what we have to study today. Where is your book?*

Excerpt 9

Tr: *Good. Well...but...no one read about the little kangaroos caught not far from Bangkok. Did you hear this news?*

Excerpt 10

Tr: *Really? We cannot save water=You know Songkran is coming. So any plan for Songkarn? Hm?*

In the above excerpts, the discourse markers, which are underlined, are placed immediately after the first component or before the second component. They might be used to give a signal to the listeners that an old topic is terminated (*OK*:: in Extract 5), a new topic is coming up (*'so'* in Extract 4; *'OK now'* in Excerpt 6; *'right'* in Extract 7; *'but...'* in Extract 9; *'You know...So'* in Extract 10), and a change in speakership is now possible (*'well...'* in Extract 9). That is, although discourse markers are found in topic-changing utterances, they do not deal with any topic in particular or carry any topical information.

This section presented interactional organization and sequence of classroom talk during class opening, with a particular focus on topic shift. We have observed boundaries between two consecutive topics, lengths of topic-changing turns, and components of topic-changing turns which include turn-initial topics, discourse markers, and turn-final topics. The next section discusses the findings and provides pedagogical implications.

5 Discussion

Since communicative competence has been adopted in foreign language teaching, classroom talk, including class opening, has been expected not only to improve EFL students' communicative skills but also to bring real communication activities into a classroom context so that EFL learners can better appreciate the grammatical, communicative, and dynamic facets of language. However, a few questions remain; 'is classroom talk during class opening authentic?', 'if not, how inauthentic is it?', 'if possible, how can we as teachers authenticate it?', and 'at the end, how authentic can it get?'. These questions about authentic classroom talk in relation to topic shift are discussed below.

5.1 Classroom talk: Almost authentic or inauthentic?

Several pioneering CA researchers such as Sacks et al. (1974), Schegloff (1968), and Schegloff and Sacks (1973) have outlined what they believed to be the sequential and interactional norm of mundane talk. However, there remain several unknown properties of ordinary talk, one of which is how a topic is brought into conversation after a brief phatic interaction, developed during the talk, and terminated either during or at the end of the talk, or how a new topic is subsequently introduced or deferred in an ongoing talk.

Studies on conversational topics need further scrutiny, and this study only shows how topics are locally managed in EFL classrooms, mainly by the teachers, during class opening. The topic-changing utterances designed by the

EFL teachers make classroom interaction during the class opening somehow not conversation-like and therefore unnatural. The degree of unnaturalness of classroom talk during class opening, as presented in Excerpts 1-10, can be classified into two groups as illustrated by the following diagrams.

	Tr:	X ¹¹	(1)
OT	St(s):	X	(2)
NT	Tr:	Y ¹²	(3)

Diagram 1: Immediate topic shift

Diagram 1 shows that there are two topics in the talk: topics X and Y. However, there is a disconnection and discontinuation between the two which can be illustrated when a new topic by the teacher is immediately introduced on turn 3, when the former topic does not come to a complete end (line 2). This can be witnessed in Excerpts 1, 2, and 3. How participants in ordinary encounters bring in a new topic to the ongoing talk in order that it fits with a prior topic, and the criteria for topic relevance, remain controversial. However, the first trajectory presented in Diagram 1 suggests that the topic shift is abrupt and not smooth, and appears unnatural. Diagram 2 below presents a different trajectory.

	Tr:	X	(1)
OT	St(s):	X	(2)
MT	Tr:	XY	(3)
NT	St(s):	Y	(4)

Diagram 2: Co-present topics on one turn

This trajectory runs differently from the one presented in Diagram 1 in that the two topics (i.e. a topic being talked about so far, and a newly-introduced one) are on the same turn (i.e. the MT turn). That is, the teacher completes the first I-R-F sequence before she initiates a new I-R-F sequence (which is devoted to topic Y). This is found in Excerpts 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, and 10. As presented in Section 4.4 above, the MT turns consist either of an acknowledgement token or a longer talk on the old topic, and a new topic. Although this trajectory presents topic shift that appears more natural and spontaneous than the one presented in Diagram 1, topic-changing turns that consist of a longer talk on the old topic and a new topic (e.g. Excerpt 8) tend to be smoother, and more natural and spontaneous than others.

It can be concluded here that, although what constitutes the authenticity and spontaneity of classroom talk involving topic shift remains unclear, the collected

data reveal that such topic shift during classroom talk appears unnatural and unspontaneous, making it not as authentic as ordinary talk. The next section introduces how to authenticate classroom talk during class opening.

5.2 Classroom talk: Authenticate the inauthentic

It should be noted, again, that features of topic shift in naturally-occurring talk remain under investigation; as a result, there is no benchmark against which this study can compare topic shift during classroom opening. Although it is found in this study that topic-changing turns consisting of a longer talk on the old topic and a new topic appear to be more natural and spontaneous than other types (as presented in 4.4 above) topic shift remains unnatural and unspontaneous as compared to that located in mundane interaction. This section aims to suggest possible conversational strategies EFL teachers can use to stay on the topic and gradually introduce a new one during the class opening.

First, the longer the teacher stays on the old topic on the topic-changing turns (this is demonstrated in Excerpt 8), the more natural and spontaneous topic shift can appear. This does not mean that EFL teachers should not change the topic, but can do so more strategically. To topically connect what is talked about with what will be talked about, Maynard (1980) suggests the use of related referents in turn design. The use of related referents can also be applied even when the teacher wants to introduce a new topic into an ongoing talk, as long as those related referents are made salient.

Third, the use of questions seeking additional information from students (e.g. *'when did that happen?'*, *'who else was there?'*, *'what's gonna happen after that?'*) can help the classroom talk stay on the current topic because this type of relevant next-speaker selection questions (Sacks et al. 1974) are based topically on what has been previously talked about. Another next-speaker selection strategy teachers can use is go-ahead responses (Gardner 1997, Jefferson 1984, Schegloff 1982) which include *'tell us'*, *'yeah'*, or *'mm hm'*. These last two strategies allow the conversation to flow more naturally, the students to talk more, and the class to stay longer on the topic, while the new topic is able to be incrementally introduced and connected to the previous one once talk progresses.

This section recommends what EFL teachers should do to make topic shift in class opening appear more natural and spontaneous. Essentially, there are not absolute conversational strategies used to authentic classroom talk and interaction, though it is advisable that teachers be engaged fully in classroom talk moment by moment. It is necessary to point out that the classroom is a formal or institutional setting, which therefore leads to interactional practices different to those in an informal setting or in everyday talk. This is discussed in the following section.

5.3 Teachers and power in classroom talk

In the previous sections, we saw what happens in classroom talk during class opening, how new topics are introduced, how old topics are terminated, and what topic changing turns look like. In addition, the sections discussed inclusively why some topic shift trajectories found during class opening appear more natural and spontaneous than others located in the same setting, and suggested some conversational strategies teachers can employ to make topic shift in class opening appear more interactive and natural. This section discusses the factors that may make talk during class opening inauthentic, and if so why. To answer the above questions, it is necessary to point out that this study examines classroom talk during class opening by looking specifically at how the EFL teachers direct or even terminate the topics. As it reveals, classroom talk during class opening is not as natural and spontaneous as it is expected to be. One main reason is the context in which this type of interaction occurs. Because the interaction occurs in an institutional context, the participants' actions and social actions are different from those in non-institutional or ordinary contexts due to some institutional constraints.

Several researchers (Holmes 2000, Holmes & Stubbe 2003, Mayr 2008, Mumby 1988, Thornborrow 2002, Vine 2004, West 1984, 1990, 1998) who center their studies on interaction in the institutional context, reveal that such interaction always involves power; one party having more power than others. Power influences not only how language is used, but also how talk should be designed, organized, delivered, and interpreted during social interaction. Classroom talk, where teachers are more knowledgeable and usually older than students, and therefore presume to have more power, is no exception. This power status can be reflected in classroom talk. It was revealed in Section 4.2 that the EFL teachers' turns are significantly longer than the students'. This asymmetrical power is also witnessed in Sections 4.3 and 4.4 when, on those topic-changing turns, the EFL teachers abruptly discontinue topics in an ongoing talk that could otherwise be talked about longer. In addition, it is evident that it is the EFL teachers who bring in new topics to the current talk. It is teacher power that interactionally affects classroom talk, i.e. topic shift, during classroom talk.

This suggests that, with teacher power and the corresponding social roles inherent in the institutional context, classroom talk may not be as natural and spontaneous as other types of social interaction, such as talk among friends/acquaintances where power is not seriously taken into account. Symmetrical interaction is not to be found in classroom interaction between teachers and students, regardless of how much participants try to create it.

6 Conclusion

This study examines topic shift in class opening. It specifically looks at how EFL teachers manage topics during the class opening and the features of EFL teachers' turns-at-talk in relation to topic shift. It is seen that the EFL teachers' longer turns, in which several topics and discourse markers are located, may seem more natural and spontaneous, helping classroom talk appear authentic. However, a close analysis of the previous topics and the new topics reveals topical irrelevance. In the EFL classroom, topic shift is more abrupt and less natural than in everyday encounters, but necessarily so. The topic-changing utterances designed by the EFL teachers make classroom interaction during the class opening unnatural. The causes may be twofold.

First, in general, several novice teachers strictly follow their lesson plans, which do not usually list possible speaking and conversation-like activities that should be done to bring authenticity into the class. Some lesson plans are so inflexible that they do not allow the teacher to be conversationally sensitive to possible topics proposed by the students. Other lesson plans of EFL teachers even include a strict sequence of questions they should ask and topics they should talk about in class, which gives no room for natural talk. Of course, the content or subject of the class provides the EFL teachers with the direction toward which they should drive the classroom talk. If the EFL teacher is not able to control the classroom talk, it could result in the topic of the lesson not being covered. That is, pedagogical goals control communicative goals of classroom talk.

Second, time constraint can be an important factor resulting in EFL teachers' insensitiveness to students' responses during the class opening. In general, classroom talk during class opening is not included in their lesson plan and therefore little time, if at all, is allotted for this activity. While some EFL teachers who value authentic interaction devote a short period of time to this activity, some might be worried that they cannot complete their lesson plan if the class-opening talk continues. Therefore, some interactional norm of ordinary talk, which Sacks et al. (1974: 701) identify such as "length of conversation is not specified in advance" or "talk can be continuous or discontinuous", do not apply in classroom talk due to foreseen limited time in the talk.

It is necessary to note that the EFL teachers in this study use the I-R-F pattern during the class opening. It should be argued that, essentially, it is not the use of the pattern that makes the classroom talk less natural; it is how well the teachers design the Follow-Up turn. In other words, it is the relevance of the topic the teacher introduces in the Follow-Up turn. Ideally, it should flow and develop naturally from the students' responses in the immediately preceding turn and then

be gradually geared toward the planned topic or questions. In practice, this may not be possible because the teacher, unlike in naturally-occurring conversation, knows in advance the topic to present.

In conclusion, this study presents interactional features of classroom opening talk, such as topic control and turn-taking systems, which are found to be different from those features of other types of communication, such as conversation-like talk. Classroom talk, like other institutional interaction, involves one-to-many and one-to-one interactions where those initiating the interaction have more power, have set the goals, use questions in order to achieve the set goals, and use unchallengeable floor to visit and revisit topics that might help them get closer to the set goals. Therefore, communicative competence may be sacrificed, but with practical reasons.

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(Endnotes)

¹ Throughout this paper, OT stands for old topic or previous topic.

² Throughout this paper, NT stands for new topic.

³ Throughout this paper, MT stands for a turn on which both a previous topic and new topic are located.

⁴ In this study, Tr stands for the EFL teachers who participated in this study.

⁵ In this study, Sts stands for students that the EFL teachers taught, who produced that turn.

⁶ In this study, St stands for a student that the EFL teachers taught, who produced that turn.

⁷ A parenthesis in dialogs represents overlapped speech by participants.

- ⁸ The Thai name of a movie, which translates as, ‘Teacher’s Diary’.
- ⁹ ‘Krab’ is a turn-ending particle used by male speakers, and ‘Ajarn’ means ‘teacher’.
- ¹⁰ ‘Arai wa’ means ‘what’ in Thai.
- ¹¹ X represents a talk about a previous or old topic.
- ¹² Y represents a talk about a new topic.