Okay as a Multifunctional Resource for Giving Feedback in Classrooms

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Drew Fagan (2012), “Okay as a Multifunctional Resource for Giving Feedback in Classrooms,” Language & Information Society 16. While certain second language (L2) learning theories assert that teacher feedback is a key factor in the learning process, one issue has been how teachers mark the purpose of their feedback so that students recognize what they are receiving (Russell & Spada 2006); this is particularly problematic when teachers use the same lexicon or response techniques to signify different feedback functions (e.g., Walsh 2002). The purpose of this article is to investigate how teachers mark or distinguish their feedback in such a way that allows students to recognize the purposes of those turns. Specifically, I examine the teacher’s okay, an “interactionally rich item” (Waring 2008: 586) commonly found throughout classroom discourse but has to date not been examined exclusively and in-depth in teacher-student interactions. Utilizing the methodology of conversation analysis, okay was found to mark different forms of positive and negative feedback. For each type of feedback, the various sequential environments in which they occur are presented, along with the interactional resources used to construct them.

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INTRODUCTION

Feedback has long been considered at the crux of teaching, for teachers “use their judgments of [students’] knowledge or understanding to feedback into the teaching process and to determine...whether to re-explain the task/concept, to give further practice on it, or move on to the next stage [emphasis added]” (Tunstall & Gipps 1996: 389). Within the field of second language (L2) teaching and learning, certain theorists (e.g., Long 1996) assert that teacher feedback is a factor in classroom language learning. One issue, though, is the need for teachers to clearly mark the purpose of their feedback so that students know what is being asked of them (Russell & Spada 2006); this is particularly problematic when teachers use the same wording or response techniques to signify different purposes (e.g., Walsh 2002). Adding to the expansive literature on teacher feedback in classroom discourse, the purpose of this conversation analytic study is to investigate how teachers mark or distinguish the purposes of their feedback turns in order for students to recognize them. Specifically, I examine the teacher’s use of “okay” in these turns. “Okay” has been shown to be an “interactionally rich item” (Waring 2008: 586) which, while commonly found throughout classroom discourse, has not been examined exclusively and in-depth in bidirectional communication (Schleef 2008), including teacher-student interactions.
BACKGROUND

In order to position the current study, it is necessary to review two fields of scholarly work: (a) teacher feedback as it relates to student learning particularly in the L2 classroom, and (b) the functions of “okay” as they have been found in studies of ordinary and institutional discourse.

Teacher Feedback in the Classroom

Within L2 classroom interaction research, teacher feedback turns have been examined for their promotion of language learning opportunities. This has most often been done in tandem with investigating the Initiation-Response-Feedback/Evaluation (IRF/E) sequence (Mehan 1979, Sinclair & Coulthard 1975). Of those studies, few have looked at the influence of teacher positive feedback in this third turn and its influences on subsequent learning. Waring (2008) and Wong and Waring (2009) find that when teachers provide explicit positive assessments (e.g., “Very good.”), learners orient to those as closing the current sequence-of-talk regardless if there are other questions or comments on that topic. Equally few have been examinations showing teachers’ strict negative evaluations of learners’ responses in L2 environments (e.g., “No, that’s not right.”); not surprisingly, when faced with an evaluation that does not provide scaffolding, learners are at a loss for how to reconcile their errors (e.g., Fagan 2011, Lin 1999).

To a much greater extent, the feedback turn has been shown to often initiate a “dialogic interaction” between teacher and student or among students (Hall & Walsh 2002: 190). It has been found that teachers can promote language learning in the classroom when they utilize this turn to: (a) acknowledge what students have said and build on that information in sub-
sequent components of the lesson (e.g., Hall 2002), (b) request for learner elaboration on responses (e.g., Liu 2008), (c) set-up peer-responses to help with elaboration (e.g., Antón 1999), or (d) signal for self-correction (e.g., Gibbons 2003). Furthermore, studies making direct connections between classroom interaction and language learning have found recasts to be the most commonly used form of feedback by teachers (Lyster & Ranta 1997), albeit the least effective in promoting language acquisition (Panova & Lyster 2002). On the other hand, giving clues that allow for learner self-repair has been found to promote more long-term acquisition of a specific language component (Lyster 1998).

As shown, the teacher’s feedback turn influences how learners know whether or not an alteration, adaptation, or elaboration of a prior response is needed. It has been emphasized, though, that the purpose of this turn needs to be made salient for learners to recognize. In fact, Russell and Spada (2006) assert that when this is not the case, language learning opportunities can be lost on learners. Walsh (2002) finds that one reason for this problem is teachers using indiscriminant communicative cues across feedback turns to signal different information. For example, in his examination of language classrooms, Walsh found that teachers consistently echo learners’ responses at potential feedback turns; learners, in turn, were unsure whether this echoing was meant to be a recast, a non-corrective repetition, or a request for students to raise their volume.

The current paper contributes to the existing literature on teacher feedback by examining how teachers mark the function of their feedback turns; in other words, what teachers do to distinguish the purpose of their feedback turns when they utilize similar techniques and lexicon to signify different functions.
The Multifunctionality of “Okay”

As a discourse marker that possesses similar meanings across languages (Barske 2009), “okay” has been found to do a multitude of functions in both ordinary conversation and in institutional discourses, including business meetings (e.g., Barske 2009), courtroom settings (e.g., Beach 1990), and academic lectures and conferences (e.g., Flowerdew & Tauroza 1997, Levin & Gray 1983, Pillett-Shore 2003, Schleef 2008). Of its many functions, “okay” can be (a) an initiation of or change to a new topic (e.g., Beach 1993) as well as (b) a routine component immediately prior to a topic closure (e.g., Schegloff & Sacks 1973). In combining these, “okay” can be said to have “backward- and forward-looking features” (Beach 1995: 142).

“Okay” has also been found to function as a free-standing marker, where it has been examined as both a second-pair part and a third turn. As a second-pair part, it can acknowledge or align with a first-pair part (Beach 1993). This can be in response to a question, a request, or act as a simple acknowledgement to a statement. “Okay” also surfaces in the third turn of a three-part sequence. On the occasions where these sequences began with a question, it can (a) follow a preferred second-pair part (Schegloff 2007), (b) mark recognition or receipt of the second-pair part (Beach 1993, Davidson 1984), or (c) affirm the correctness of a second-pair part confirmation check (Button & Casey 1984). Davidson (1984) notes that these usages of “okay” are done in lieu of speakers providing a “subsequent version” of a response, including “adding more components, providing inducements, or giving reasons for acceptance” (p. 107). As this is the case, studies of ordinary conversation show that in the third turn “okay” tends to signal closure of a sequence (Schegloff 2007). Jefferson (1986), however, proposes one opposition to this: it is possible for a person to not orient to “okay” as
sequence-closing or not want to orient to it as such. In these instances, she argues for providing more extended transcripts of the discourse so as to determine the reasoning for such a marked action.

Studies of institutional discourse present contradictory findings regarding “okay” in the third turn as sequence-closing. For example, in examinations of clinical interviews, psychologists tend to provide an “okay” after a patient gives an anecdote or a response to a question. Instead of ending the sequence, psychologists present an assessment of what was said before moving on (Antaki, Houtkoop-Steenstra & Rapley 2000). Similarly, Waring (2008) finds in an examination of an adult English as a Second Language (ESL) classroom that in an instance of using “okay” in a third turn, the teacher does not orient to this as sequence-closing but rather goes on to elicit more information from the students regarding the topic. In contrast, Guthrie (1997) shows in academic advisement sessions how both advisor and advisee utilize “okay” following utterances that both interlocutors orient to as being complete, thus ending the sequence. With these varied findings across institutional discourses, it is important to iterate that “okay” is “recruited by coparticipants to achieve particular kinds of actions at specific moments of involvement” (Beach 1995: 154); thus, it is necessary to provide in-depth analyses of the usages of “okay” as they accomplish both similar and diverse institutional functions.

While many studies have focused on the function and placement of “okay”, few have emphasized the importance of the interactional resources (e.g., prosodic cues) that accompany the word. In early conversation analysis studies, it was shown that the manner in which “okay” is spoken, in addition to where it is positioned, plays a large role in how others orient to its function (Jefferson 2004, Schegloff & Sacks 1973). That said, Barske
(2009), in his examination of “okay” in German business meetings, argues that although much has been learned about this word, most research has investigated audio data; without video data, there is much lost with regard to the use of nonverbal conduct, including gestures, eye contact, and body movement. Barske asserts that to truly encompass the functions of “okay”, a co-examination of verbal cues and nonverbal conduct needs to be done.

As described here, “okay” has been shown to have numerous functions across varied discourses. As an expansion to the existing literature on “okay”, this study focuses on the teacher’s use of “okay” in pedagogical interactions, an area that has not received much attention in prior research on this marker (Schleef 2008). In particular, I show (a) how instructors mark “okay” in their feedback turns as signaling different types of feedback, and (b) how students orient to those markings accordingly.

**DATA AND METHOD**

The data for this article come from two larger corpora. The first corpus consists of video data from 22 two-hour English as a Second Language (ESL) classes in an adult community program in the United States (hereafter referred to as the ESL classes). Being a community English program, the focus is on general English needs in everyday interactions that students may encounter outside of the classroom. All students are over the age of 18, and their educational backgrounds range from having some high school to possessing doctorates in their first languages. All classes included in this corpus were at the advanced level of study as deemed by the program’s placement examination. These classes were taught by five different instructors over
the course of two years. Three of the five instructors were students in a Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) certificate program at a major university in the United States. These instructors ranged from having no prior teaching experience to being certified in a primary and/or secondary school content area (e.g., science, literature). The remaining two instructors were doctoral students in that university’s TESOL program, both of whom had extensive experience in the TESOL field. The classes taught by the first three instructors were videotaped by their teacher trainers, while the doctoral students videotaped their own classes.

The second corpus consists of interactions in seven one-hour TESOL Methods classes in the aforementioned TESOL certificate program (hereafter referred to as the TESOL class). The instructor in this class was also one of the doctoral students mentioned earlier. The majority of student teachers in this particular year’s cohort were non-native speakers (NNSs) of English from Korea, Taiwan, Japan, and Colombia who were planning on returning to their countries to teach English as a Foreign Language (EFL). To enter the program, all NNSs needed to pass the iBT TOEFL with a combined score of 102 to show their English proficiency across the four language skills (i.e., listening, speaking, reading, and writing). The instructor of the TESOL Methods course videotaped the sessions. The data for the TESOL Methods classes were included since teachers tend to conduct classes based on how they were taught themselves (Larsen-Freeman 2008, Lortie 1975). The use of “okay” in the teacher-training class could ultimately be reflected in the language instructor’s own uses of “okay” in their professional practices.

Conversation analysis (CA) was used as the methodological framework for this study since it allows for intricate analyses of the discourse, showing
all the interactional resources that are not only utilized by the interlocutors, but are also oriented to by others as doing an activity (ten Have 2007). In other words, CA provides an emic perspective to the data by illustrating how a participant uses X to do Y based on how others orient to X as doing Y. It is here that the importance for videotaping takes precedent: the simultaneous visual and aural data can better encapsulate the entirety of the classroom interactions and, specifically, of how the instructor marks the function of “okay” in a feedback turn.

The data were transcribed using a modified version of Gail Jefferson’s system (see transcript in the introduction of this issue), which shows various verbal and nonverbal cues used by the interlocutors. In all excerpts, “T” signifies the course instructor, and pseudonyms are used for the students’ names. The analysis is based on a total 48 cases of the instructors’ uses of “okay” in their feedback turns within the IRF/E sequences.

ANALYSIS

The intricate conversation analysis of the data shows that in reaction to students’ responses, the instructor’s “okay” can be marked to signify various forms of either positive or negative feedback. In this section, each category is presented by showing the various interactional resources used by the instructors in constructing their feedback turns as well as evidence showing the learners orienting to “okay” as signaling positive or negative feedback.

Marking “Okay” as Positive Feedback

This section highlights “okay” being marked as various forms of posi-
tive feedback. In L2 learning studies, researchers have described positive feedback as being the more proficient interlocutor’s move which (a) follows a learner’s correct utterance and (b) signals in some manner that the utterance was correct (see Iwashita 2003). For the purposes of this study, which investigates the various markings of “okay” in the feedback turn within the IRF/E sequence, I broaden the definition of positive feedback to be the instructor’s turn which (a) occurs subsequent to a learner’s acceptable response and (b) signals somehow that the response was acceptable.

In the first excerpt, “okay” is used to acknowledge that a student’s response in the prior turn is sufficient and that further information is not needed, thus ending the sequence. Here, student teachers in the TESOL certificate program have just finished reviewing the use of the SQ3R (survey, question, read, recite, review) reading method for adult English learners (see Brown 2007). While the class has yet to talk about potential drawbacks to this method, the instructor asks them what those might be; thus, students are responding to an open-ended teacher initiation to which a specific response is not anticipated:

(1) What might be a drawback?
01  T:  .hh 1now. () what might be (1.4) a
02  drawback (0.6) to doing sq3r.
03   (5.0)- ((looks around class))
04  Yuki:  take (.) too much time?

1 While the use of the word correct may be appropriate for language learning research in experimental and quasi-experimental conditions, in examining natural classroom interaction it could presuppose that teachers (a) solely focus on linguistic accuracy and (b) initiate sequences to which there can be only one definite response. As such, the use of the word acceptable in these classroom contexts broadens the type of student responses that teachers could deem appropriate for specific sequences-of-talk.
05  T:  {((extends arm to Yuki))} .hh} {((nods head))} number one.} (0.4) yes.
06
07  (2.0) {((T looks around class))} who else.
08
09  (4.8) {((looks around class))} ((Jorge raises hand; T nods towards Jorge))
10
11 Jorge:  °it could be-° (.) less focus on (0.4) the thing that you might want to cover.
12
13  (0.4) {((T opens mouth about to speak))} or, (0.2) >it’s less directional.<
14
15  T:  ➔ <okay.- {((one nod))}
16
17  0.6- {((T nods to another learner with hand raised; Jorge disengage eye contact))}

After Yuki provides an answer of “take too much time,” the instructor proceeds to ask for other people to provide drawbacks for using the SQ3R method (line 8). After a 4.8-second gap, Jorge volunteers and provides an answer (lines 11). It is after line 12 that there is a transition-relevance place (TRP) (Schegloff 2007), where Jorge’s turn appears to be both grammatical-ly and pragmatically complete. This is supported by the instructor appearing to orient to Jorge’s turn as being completed as he readies himself to self-select the next turn (line 13). Instead, Jorge continues with further information (line 14). It is after “directional” that there is another TRP; this time, the instructor hastily takes over the turn with a rushed “okay”, combined with both turn-final prosody (Ford 2001) and a single nod. The instructor appears to accomplish three things with “okay” in this turn: first, to quickly take over the turn before the first speaker (i.e., Jorge) can continue with
more information; second, to acknowledge Jorge’s previous turns, as can be shown with the single nod; and third, to end the current sequence-of-talk, as shown with the turn-final prosody (i.e., decreased intonation) at the end of the “okay”. Immediately after “okay” is said, both the instructor and Jorge simultaneously disengage eye contact, one common way in which interlocutors signal that the current sequence is at a close and that a new one is to begin (Goodwin & Goodwin 1992). In so doing, both men can be said to orient to “okay” in line 15 as officially ending the sequence-of-talk. This is followed by the instructor initiating a sequence with a different student.

While “okay” can be used to acknowledge learner responses to open-ended teacher initiations, it can also be used to affirm a learner’s expected response to a teacher’s specific question. In excerpt 2, ESL learners have just listened to a radio broadcast about the difficulties construction builders had in New York City immediately following the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks. The instructor had told learners to listen for which stakeholders (e.g., corporations, private investors) specifically mentioned by the narrator were most affected by the attacks:

(2) Stakeholders

01 T: (((looks at Ss)) - did anybody) (((turns to board)) - (0.2) catch) (((looks back at Ss)) -
02 (0.4) the stakeholders
03 (0.2) - ((T looks at Ss; Ss look at T))
04 it talked about several different (0.4) {organizations - ((makes cutting motion with hand))}
05 (0.6) - ((T looks at Ss; Ss look at T))
07 u:m - ((look at computer screen and then back}
The excerpt begins with the instructor providing not only three opportunities for learners to say which stakeholders were mentioned (lines 3, 6, 11), but also giving justifications for why they may not have heard them due to the fact that there was no learner uptake at those three opportunities (lines 12-14). As this justification continues, Tim overlaps in line 15 with the answer “Port Authority”, the main transportation center in New York City. As the word “port” is given, the instructor nods in a recognitional overlap (Jefferson 1986), for the word “port” in the context of the listening allows for a prediction of the word “authority”. In moving her focus from Tim to the board while he is continuing his answer, it can be inferred that the instructor has received all the information needed for her purposes. It is in
line 18 that she affirms Tim’s answer via her use of elongation of the word “okay”. The elongation (i.e., lengthened duration) of the feedback turn often marks positivity, particularly when coupled with other communicative cues, e.g., prosodic changes such as decreased intonation (Hellermann 2003). Since “okay” affirms the second pair part in this sequence, it also signals sequence-closing, as can be seen with the turn-final intonation and with Tim disengaging eye contact with the instructor and looking at his neighbor with a nod (line 19).

In addition to using “okay” in the feedback turn to acknowledge and affirm a learner’s response, it can also act as an EPA (Explicit Positive Assessment)-like token. Waring (2008) defines EPA as a feedback turn in which “positive assessment terms” (e.g., “very good”, “excellent”) are used to clearly indicate a high level of positivity. As will be shown in the ensuing analysis, although “okay” does not indicate positive assessment explicitly as does “very good” or “excellent,” it can convey a similar level of positivity. In the following excerpt, the TESOL class is talking about monologues activities (i.e., speeches) and their potential for providing language learning opportunities in EFL contexts specifically. Hyun has just stated that one positive attribute of having learners give monologues is that there is no worry about being interrupted by other speakers. The instructor is now asking Hyun if she is talking about planned or unplanned monologues:

(3) Planned monologues

01 T: are we talking about planned (.) monologues (0.2) or (.) unplanned monologues.
02
03 (0.4)
04 Hyun: uhm.
Okay as a Multifunctional Resource for Giving Feedback in Classrooms

After Hyun states that she is talking about planned monologues (line 6), the instructor responds with a hurried “okay” that overlaps with the learner’s answer. This recognitional overlap (Jefferson 1986) occurs after Hyun says “planned,” the key word that answers the instructor’s question. It is this specific word to which the instructor responds with a smiley-voiced “okay”. Hyun orients to the instructor’s turn as a positive assessment of her answer, for she smiles and quietly and very positively says “yeah” after the instructor’s turn (line 8). The learner also treats the instructor’s turn as closing the sequence, for she does not respond further to that specific query, nor does she continue eye contact with the instructor (line 10). The instructor then confirms Hyun’s original response (lines 12-18). Numerous charac-
teristics of the two “okay’s” in line 7 distinguish them as EPA-like. First, the special prosodic use of the word “okay” demonstrates the instructor’s positive tone with Hyun’s answer to the question. Second, as shown by Hyun’s turn in line 8, she orients to this “okay” as EPA-like feedback. Third, one salient characteristic of EPAs is that they more often than not are considered a sequence-closing turn. One beat after Hyun smiles at the instructor, she disengages eye contact with him even as he quietly says “good,” a more commonly-used EPA term. Indeed, it is Hyun’s orientation to the instructor’s turn (lines 8 & 10) that justifies the argument for the “okays” being EPA-like here as opposed to the simply acknowledging or affirming.

The previous three excerpts illustrate teachers’ various markings of “okay” as positive feedback in the turns immediately following the learner’s acceptable response, which aligns with work on positive feedback in language learning research; additionally, these excerpts also show “okay” as a sequence-closing turn, as was found in prior research on this discourse marker. Excerpt 4, while also illustrating “okay” marked as positive feedback, deviates from these two characteristics. The ESL instructor is about to begin a discussion on the different meanings of adjectives ending with the morphemes “-ed” and “-ing”. The instructor has written the word pairs “confused/confusing” and “bored/boring” on the board and is now asking the learners about the differences in their meanings:

(4) But it’s also…

01 T: so. † what’s {(the same thing about all of
02 these -((points to confusing and
03 boring on the board)) what are all of-
04 Ana: <not adjectives.
As the instructor asks the learners for the similarities among the words ending in “-ing”, Ana rushes a turn initiation in line 4 with the answer “not adjectives.” The instructor initiates his response in line 5 with “well,” a commonly used discourse marker that marks the beginning of a dispreferred response (Pomerantz 1984, Sacks 1987). Indeed, the instructor, after a 0.4-second pause, states that “boring” is an adjective, giving an example of its use as an adjective in line 8. Ana retorts in lines 10-11 with the example “I am boring.” It is in line 14 where the instructor originates a response to Ana’s example, but then refrains from saying it, as shown with the pivot. He appears to consider the example (line 14) before using in line
15 a combination of “okay” in lowered pitch with a single nod towards the board to signal an agreement with what Ana said. Pitch has been found to be one of the “primary linguistic resources employed by…teacher[s] to accomplish other interactive work” (Hellermann 2003: 83). Similar to what Hellermann found, lowered pitch used with “okay” in this instance appears to signal positive feedback. In fact, with the single nod, the instructor’s turn can indeed been viewed as agreeing Ana’s response. This is followed by the student’s use of a smile, showing her orientation to the instructor’s “okay” as agreeing with her earlier statement (line 16). As opposed to the previous excerpts, where “okay” also signaled the end of the sequence, the instructor provides an example in support of Ana’s statement to the rest of the class demonstrating how “boring” could be used as a verb; this may be done so as to ensure that the other learners understand. It is in line 19, though, that the use of “okay” with a single nod acts as an official close to this sequence. The instructor then moves on to his original focus of examining “–ing” as an adjective.

In sum, “okay” can be marked as various forms of positive feedback in the sequential environment of addressing a learner’s acceptable response. In particular, it can be used to mark the sufficiency of a student response to either an open-ended or a known-answer question. It can also act as an EPA (explicit positive assessment)—like token on par with terms such as “very good” and “excellent”. In all these cases, “okay” signals sequence-closing as well. In addition, “okay” can also be used as an agreement to a learner’s unexpected but nevertheless acceptable response, in which case “okay” may not be placed immediately subsequent to the student’s response, nor may it be marking sequence-closing; instead, the teacher may choose to continue the sequence explaining the new information. Overall, a
host of prosodic and nonverbal resources are used to mark “okay” as positive, including lowered pitch, decreased intonation at the end of the words (whether preceded by elongation of sounds or not), the use of smiley voice (i.e., extremely positive voice quality), and nonverbal cues such as nodding.

**Marking “Okay” as Negative Feedback**

Thus far, I have shown various instances in which “okay” can be used to mark the teacher feedback turns as conveying positive feedback. In this section, I present instances of “okay” marked as negative feedback. Adapted from the field of language learning (see Gass & Mackey 2006), negative feedback can be defined in the classroom as the prompting a teacher does to signal to learners that a prior utterance needs to be re-addressed. Excerpt 5 shows “okay” being used to signify the need for learners to elaborate on their responses. An ESL class is going over vocabulary from an extended silent reading on the different disciplines one can major in at an American university. The instructor is asking Miki to define “humanities”:

(5) Humanities classes

01 T: m1iki. tell me something. humanities classes.
02 wh- what are that. whats that.
03 (1.4)- ((T looks at Miki; Miki looks at T))
04 Miki: the humanities are the- (.) like language? and
05 the (0.2) others?
06 (0.8)- ((T looks at Miki; Miki looks at T))
07 and [ um hehehe]
08 T: [so what is it.]
09 (0.4)
In response to the teacher’s elicitation about humanities classes, Miki slowly states that they are “like language and the others” (lines 4-5). To further her along, the teacher gives her prompts on three occasions to add additional information (lines 10, 14, 18). It is in line 14 that the use of “okay” is used to help course her towards providing other disciplines that could be included under the umbrella “humanities”. The use of “okay” appears to have two functions here. As Miki appears to be struggling with answers, the teacher may be trying to emphasize the answers that she has already provided (i.e., “society”) in addition to having her continue giving responses, as is seen with the slightly elongated sound and increased intonation at the end of the turn, which often signals a need for more information (Ford 2001, Hauser 2005, Hellermann, 2003). This complements Schleef’s (2008) on “okay”, which found that its sound lengthening and prosodic distribution are “important cues for [its] communicative function” (Schleef 2008: 68). Furthermore, the instructor’s use of a circular motion with his
hand is an *iconic gesture* (McNeill 1992) symbolizing the need for a continuation of the response. Indeed, both the teacher and Miki continue the sequence in overlap in lines 16-17, with Miki providing an additional answer of “history”. It is at this point, when the teacher makes the third prompt for more information, that another learner, Carmen, provides an answer.

In excerpt 6, “okay” is used in the middle of a student’s response to signal an issue with what has already been said; in this case, a more specific response is needed. The TESOL class has been discussing how to teach speaking to English language learners via monologue and dialogue activities. The instructor is asking different groups of student teachers to give two reasons for the importance of doing monologues in the L2 classroom:

(6) Two things for monologues

01 T: let’s start with this group over here. >allan.
02 yumi.< (0.2) †and (0.4) hyun.
03 (0.8)
04 two things for monologues.
05 (1.2)
06 Hyun: okay. †monologue has (.) relatively (0.2) um
07 (.) <much information in> >short time
08 because< there’s no pause between
09 ↓speakers.
10 T ➔ [.HH] okay?
11 (1.0) - ((T looks at Hyun; Hyun tilts head and maintains eye contact with T))
12 are we talking about (.) †planned monologues
13 or (.) unplanned monologues.
After Hyun provides her first of two reasons for using a monologue activity, (lines 6-9), the instructor does a transitional overlap (Jefferson 1986), in which he orients to the grammatical and pragmatic completion of Hyun’s turn (line 9) and self-selects to speak before Hyun can continue with more information (line 10). This appears to be used in order to have Hyun specify her already acceptable answer before proceeding with any further information she might provide. The overlap is done with a loud in-breath, a communicative cue commonly used to signal that much information is to follow (Wong & Waring 2010). Similar to excerpt 5, the instructor’s lengthening of “okay” and use of rising intonation indicates questioning of Hyun’s prior turn. It is her tilting of the head and maintaining eye contact with the instructor in lines 11-12 that shows her orientation to the use of “okay” in line 7 as questioning her response and, thus, not closing the sequence-of-talk. In fact, mutual eye contact is present throughout the remainder of the excerpt. Here, it is the instructor who continues the sequence and asks for clarification as opposed to the learner taking it upon herself to do so. Upon receiving the expected answer of “planned monologues”, the instructor provides an explicit positive assessment of the student’s answer (line 19).

Unlike the previous two excerpts, where “okay” was used as feedback on the sufficiency or specificity of students’ responses, the next excerpt illustrates “okay” marking what the teacher perceives to be an incorrect
response. In excerpt 7, an ESL class is in the middle of a pronunciation lesson. The teacher has just introduced the tongue twister “lovely Lisa likes riding red rollercoasters” to the class. After reading it in chorus, the teacher asked Maria, a native Spanish speaker, to explain the difference between the “r” and “ł” sounds in this tongue twister to the native Japanese speakers in the class:

(7) What do you notice?

01 T: >whattaya notice is the difference.<
02 (0.2)
03 <between err (.) and uhl.
04 Maria: like the ell?
05 T: mhmm?-(gestures to Maria))
06 Maria: with the tongue go (.) press the (1.6) >the
07 front of the< teeth. (0.8) ↓ down.
08 T: okay. >upper or lower teeth.<
09 (2.0)- ((T looks at Maria; Maria looks at T))
10 Maria: eh- lower.
11 (0.6)
12 T: {uhl. uhl. uhl- ((makes sounds with tongue
13 behind lower teeth))} is it (.) uhl? or is it (.)
14 {↑ uhl.- ((tongue behind upper teeth))}
15 Maria: <it’s the ↑ uhl.
16 (0.6)- ((T looks at Maria; Maria looks at T))
17 ↓ uhl.
18 (0.8)
19 the beginning of the tongue (0.2) is down?
20 and the middle of the tongue is up?
21 T: \(\rightarrow\) uh- (_) oka::y?
22 Maria: in my mouth at least. hehehe
23 Ss: hehehe
24 T: “okay.” that’s important. so the tongue is
25 definitely important here. lets try again.

As Maria explains the physical positioning of her mouth as she differentiates the “l” and “r” sounds, the teacher takes two turns to clarify what Maria is trying to say, first using “okay” to acknowledge what was said and then asking if the tongue goes behind the upper and lower teeth (line 8), followed by exemplifying her answer and asking for clarification of its correctness (lines 12-14). After Maria attempts to clarify her response (lines 15-20), multiple characteristics of the teacher’s turn in line 21 signal issues with Maria’s clarification. First, the teacher begins the turn with “uh,” a commonly used discourse marker to minimally delay the remainder of a turn (Clark & Fox Tree 2002, Schiffrin 1987), which often projects a dispreferred response (Levinson, 1983). Second, similar to excerpt 5, the elongated use of “okay” combined with rising intonation follows en suite to prior research examining rising intonation in feedback turns as questioning the prior turn (e.g., Ford 2001, Hauser 2005, Hellermann 2009). Maria orients to this usage of “okay” as questioning her response, and takes control of the talk in line 22 to provide an account for why she said what she did: “in [her] mouth” that is how she forms those sounds. Essentially, Maria orients to the teacher’s turn in line 21 as negative feedback and a request for continuing the sequence. Her account (line 22) causes laughter in the class (line 23) and leads the teacher to give some acknowledgement to her response:
something about the tongue is important. This is followed by him expressing to Maria that he wants her to try it again.

Overall, “okay” can be used to convey negative feedback in the sequential environment of learners not (a) providing the full information needed for the activity, (b) specifying their responses, or (c) giving what is perceived as correct information. Various interactional resources can mark “okay” as negative feedback in these environments, including: elongating the word followed by increasing one’s intonation; having a prior discourse marker that prefaces disagreement (e.g., “uh”); utilizing large in-breaths that signal much information is to follow; using nonverbal cues that signal either more or different information is needed (e.g., maintenance of eye contact, use of hand gestures). It is in all these instances, too, that “okay” signals sequence-continuation as opposed to sequence-closing.

**DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION**

In this paper, I have presented various constructions of “okay” in which instructors can mark positive or negative feedback by detailing (a) the various sequential environments in which “okay” can occur, (b) the diverse interactional resources that are used in those formations, and (c) the learners’ orientations to those constructions as doing different forms of feedback.

Within the environment of addressing a learner’s acceptable response to a teacher’s initiation, “okay” has been marked as doing four types of positive feedback. The first three have been found to occur in the turn immediately following the learner’s response. After a learner responds to
a teacher’s open-ended initiation, “okay” can be used to acknowledge the sufficiency of the learner’s ideas. When they correctly respond to a teacher’s specific inquiry, “okay” can then be used to affirm the answer or it can act as an explicit positive assessment-like token when used with enhanced positive voice quality (i.e., smiley voice). In these instances, the interactional cues used with “okay” (i.e., lowered pitch, decreased intonation, positive voice quality, disengagement of eye contact, and change in body torque) signal that the turn is sequence-closing, a common characteristic of positive feedback (Hellermann 2003, Waring 2008). One deviant case would be “okay” as ultimately agreeing with a learner’s unexpected yet acceptable response; here, “okay” may not occur immediately after the response, for the teacher may question it. Although the various interactional cues used in this instance simulate positive feedback and signals sequence-closing, the teacher may instead allow for further explanation.

When used in the environments of addressing a learner’s contribution that (a) is in need of further elaboration, (b) is not specific enough, or (c) is perceived as incorrect, “okay” can also mark negative feedback. In these cases, numerous interactional resources can be used by teachers to mark “okay” accordingly: elongating the sound of the word followed by increasing intonation at the end of it (Hellermann 2003); using certain iconic gestures (McNeill 1992) simultaneous to the word that signify a need to readdress the response; preceding “okay” with a large in-breath that precludes a long turn is about to be taken; preceding the word with mitigating particles (e.g., “uh”) and a slight delay in the initiation of a turn, both of which are oriented to as the beginning of a dispreferred turn (e.g., negative as opposed to positive feedback) (Pomerantz 1984, Sacks 1987, Schegloff 2007). It was found that the students oriented to these formulations of “okay” as signal-
ing a continuation of the sequence, which in turn was evidence that their prior response needed to be re-addressed (Ford 2001).

The findings from this study both complement and build on previous research examining both “okay” and teacher feedback. In particular, this study has addressed Schleef’s (2008) call for in-depth and exclusive analyses of this particle within this context. While confirming the findings of prior research that “okay” can provide acknowledgments, affirmations, and agreements, the data also show that “okay” could perform a function similar to that of an explicit positive assessment. Aligning with Schegloff’s (2007) findings, these instances of “okay” also signal topic or sequence-closing. However, similar to Beach’s (1993) analysis of “okay,” even when “okay” is marked as positive feedback to an unexpected answer, the sequence may not end but rather continue with further discussion or explanation. The analysis also elaborates on “okay” as marking negative feedback. Unlike much prior research on this marker, the current study shows that teachers can use “okay” to signal negative assessment as well. While the sequential environments allow us to see where these different uses of “okay” occur, it is the interactional resources used with the term that show us how it is being constructed by the teacher and oriented to by the learners as doing a specific type of feedback. As such, the current study reinforces the importance described in prior studies of other discourse contexts (e.g., Barske 2009, Jefferson 2004) of investigating the verbal and nonverbal cues associated with “okay” to determine how the coparticipants incorporate it into the discourse.

This conversation analytic study also addresses the issue that has surfaced in language learning literature: the importance of marking the purpose of feedback turns (Russell & Spada 2006). As shown, the teacher deploys a
range of resources to mark the same wording “okay” as doing different types of feedback work, thereby underscoring the importance of examining (a) within what sequential environment the feedback is occurring, and (b) what interactional resources (i.e., verbal, nonverbal, timing) are being used to mark the purpose of the feedback.

In terms of pedagogical applications to the classroom, teachers should note the manner in which they present feedback to their learners as well as focus on whether they and their learners orient to the given feedback in the same way. It is also necessary to note the wording and interactional cues (e.g., prosodic cues, nonverbal conduct, timing) used throughout a lesson and to consider how certain words, e.g., okay, can have multiple functions. In language teacher education, it is important that have novice instructors pay attention not only to how they deliver feedback, but also to how learners orient to it. For educators at all levels, utilizing conversation analysis as a tool for self-analysis and teacher observations provides insight into both the verbal and nonverbal communication that takes place between the teacher and learners. Performing a microanalysis of a lesson such as this enables one to see all communicative cues a teacher uses to respond to learner contributions in class as well as how learners orient to those cues as affecting their own subsequent classroom interaction.
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Okay as a Multifunctional Resource for Giving Feedback in Classrooms


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