

The Underlife of the Classroom

Mai-Han Nguyen

Kapiolani Community College in Hawaii, United States

Abstract

This study examines how students' disruptive behavior occurs while the teacher is carrying out a formal class activity – checking homework. In daily classroom life, it has been common that teachers often follow the most uninspiring teaching method when checking homework (the teacher reads out loud each item in an exercise and then asks students for the answer), which students find boring. In this study, the author looks at the teacher's verbal expressions and embodiments, ones that potentially cause a lack of students' interest in the current class activity, and the students' nonverbal disruptive behavior, constructed by those who do not comply with the classroom's norm of appropriate participation. Using an analysis that combines both talk and the body, the author demonstrates how the students' disruptive behavior occurs alongside the teacher's checking homework activity. The author then discusses how mundane class activities such as checking homework can be boredom for students, and how this boredom can potentially lead to students' disengagement. The author then calls for changes in the checking homework activity to make it more interesting for students.

Keywords: talk, the body, gesture, the underlife of classroom, classroom discourse, second language classroom research

Introduction

During the last two decades conversation analysis (CA) has been used in second language classroom research to understand how instructors and their students achieve teaching and learning (Barraja-Rohan, 2011; Koshik,

1999; Markee, 2004; Wagner, 1996). However, recent scholars have taken an approach that combines analysis of both talk and the body (Majlesi, 2014; McCafferty, 2006; Olsher, 2003; Platt and Brooks, 2008). Along with the work of the recent scholars, this study looks at how a teacher fails to elicit students' engagement in a checking homework activity in an intensive English as a Second Language (ESL) program. This language program offers intensive academic classes about English language such as listening, speaking, reading, and writing for international students who want to improve their English to study at a university in the United States. Students in this study are ESL adult learners who have finished high school or received a bachelor degree in their home countries. Prior to entering the program, these students took a placement test and were placed at the beginning level (there are three language proficiency levels in the program: beginning, intermediate, and advanced. Description of the language proficiency for the beginning level students is provided in details in the data collection section). They come from different countries around the world such as Brazil, Saudi-Arabia, China, and Korea. The participants were selected because they offer an opportunity for the researcher to look into the process of language teaching and learning through an analysis that combines both talk and the body. By looking at the teacher's and students' talk, their embodied movements, and their use of material artifacts, the study sheds light on how students' disengagement occurs alongside the teacher's checking homework activity. The disengagement is analyzed as a playful and nonverbal underlife act, an act which is not congruent with the teacher's formal instruction. The study concludes that the nonverbal underlife act is the result of students' lack of interest in the mundane class activities such as checking homework and calls for changes to make the activity more interesting for students.

In science education, scholars suggest that systematic integration of oral language development along with emphasis in mastery of scientific concepts and process skills determines academic success for bilingual learners (Bass, Contant, & Carin, 2009; Gomez-Zwiep, Straits, & Toops, 2015). Lee and Buxton (2013) propose that effective teachers use appropriate linguistic scaffolding to simultaneously build students' conceptual understanding and discourse skills. Appropriate scaffolding, for bilingual learners, translates into scaffolding that occurs during the "act of meaning making" (Swain, 2001, p. 45), that is, while begin involved in authentic tasks. These tasks require that students consciously engage in the process rather than the product of learning. This is important because it "pushes learners to notice gaps in their linguistic knowledge" (Mirzaei & Eslami, 2013, p. 6) while providing practice in academic language structures and vocabulary.

Literature Review

In his study about the social life of those receiving inpatient psychiatric treatment, Goffman (1961) proposed two kinds of individual adjustments – primary adjustments and secondary adjustments. In primary adjustments, individuals perform their daily activities in accordance with what the institution asks them for, regardless of whether they like it or not. They

behave in a way such that they are no more and no less than they are expected to be, they are obligated to live in a world that has been prepared for them. In secondary adjustments, individuals employ unauthorized means to get around the institution's assumptions as to what they should do and what they should be. They manage to distance themselves from the role and the self that has been assigned to them by the institution. Goffman called their practices of distancing themselves the underlife of the institution. In this underlife world, Goffman further distinguished two kinds of secondary adjustments – disruptive adjustments and contained adjustments (p. 199). In disruptive adjustments, individuals want to abandon the institution or alter its structure by means that lead to a rupture in the smooth operation of the institution. In contained adjustments (which share some characteristics with primary adjustments in which individuals try to fit into existing institutional structures without causing pressure for radical change), individuals try to fit into existing structures with deflecting efforts that might otherwise be disruptive. In Goffman's view, "the settled and established parts of an organization's underlife tend, therefore, to be composed primarily of contained, not disruptive, adjustments" (p. 200).

Goffman's notion of the underlife of an institution (organization) has since been used in attempting to understand life in the school setting. Even though Jackson (1968) did not make use of the concept "underlife" to describe classrooms, Jackson's description of the life of a classroom is somewhat similar to Goffman's notion of the underlife of an institution. According to Jackson, there are four unpublicized features of classroom life: delay, denial, interruption, and social distraction, and these features are caused by the crowded conditions of the classroom. When twenty or thirty students must live and work together in a limited space for five to six hours a day, undesired encounters (e.g., disagreements) on the work they do are unavoidable. In addition, for most students, going to school is not voluntary. They are there because they are expected to be there whether they want to or not, and the work that they are expected to perform daily in the classroom is often not of their own choosing or interest. Similarly, Erickson (1996) proposed that the formal and informal orders of classroom life (where the former is designed by the teacher, the latter by the students) are dimensions within which they interact to form the local classroom "underlife," and this is a local ecology that differs from one classroom to another.

The practices of the classroom underlife then have been investigated in educational classroom research. Brooke (1987) studied the underlife in a writing class and proposed four major types of student underlife activities. First, students tend to find creative uses of classroom activities in ways that are interesting to them. For example, instead of discussing how a potato might change over time and in what contexts this change would be interesting, a topic prompted by the teacher, the students who participated in the underlife activities discussed how to ferment the potato to make vodka. When the teacher asked them what they were talking about, the students explained that the process of fermentation was obviously a "change over time" of the potato – a discussion feature that the teacher was looking for. Second, students tend

to focus on their "game playing" nature and are highly aware of the roles they are taking. The following example shows what occurred during a group discussion of a chapter from Margaret Laurence's *A Bird in the House*:

- Mick: "You know, everyone in the story tries to make themselves seem better than they are, you know, but Vanessa finds out every one of them is worse than they seem. It's like all of them are lying."
Mel: "Good point. She'll [the teacher] like that."
Chuck: "Yeah. Home run. Three strikes."
Mel: (laughing): "Big bucks."
Chuck: "Yeah, big bucks, no whammies."

As can be seen, the group went off the assigned task and turned the discussion to first a game (Home run. Three strikes) and then a TV game show called "Press Your Luck!" (On this show, contestants play a form of roulette to get "big bucks," but would lose everything if they land on a "whammie"). Brooke commented that their interaction in this game highlighted a deep-rooted sense of their experience in the classroom. All participants recognized their game-playing situation, and they were all aware of each other as fellow game-players. Third, students tend to evaluate what is going on in the classroom. They evaluate certain aspects of the classroom whether it is good or bad, and their evaluation is often on their own performance (course materials or class activity), as in the following example.

- Chuck: Did you bring your paper?
Ben: That damn thing-
Chuck: Pretty "damn," huh?
Ben: It's so "damn" I keep forgetting it.

Brooke claimed that situations like this allowed the students to explicitly express their opinions about the class activity that was going on around them. It was a way for them to assert their distance from their classroom roles. Fourth, students tend to get involved in private activities that divide their attention between class activity and something else. The most common example Brooke found was when students were reading the student-newspapers while the teacher was beginning the lecture. In Brooke's view, the students' purpose in all these four major underlife activities was to distance themselves from classroom activities while at the same time they were hoping to remain successful within it. In this way, their underlife activities were similar to contained adjustments proposed by Goffman (discussed above).

Beall and Trimbur (1993) studied students' reaction to the writing assignments in a chemistry class. Beall and Trimbur found that while the majority of the students responded positively to the assignments as a way for them to explain their understanding of chemistry, to help them check their

understanding of concepts, and to provide the faculty with the opportunity to monitor their learning, there were students who reacted negatively to the assignments. One student's "mouthing off" reaction was "It sucks. This is chemistry, not English!" Others interpreted it as a means for the faculty to take attendance, while another made sarcastic comments about the instructor: "Professor Beall forgot what he was going to lecture so he put down random questions on the board to waste time while he tried to recall what the lecture was supposed to be about." According to Beall and Trimbur, by "mouthing off," the students were asserting their independence from the official expectations and voicing their identities in ways that went beyond the role assigned to them.

Gutierrez, Rymes, and Larson (1995) examined how power was constructed in a classroom through the teacher's script which was based on the teacher's own cultural experience: how he selected knowledge for the classroom, and how he made his viewpoint available to the students. To oppose the teacher's imposition of knowledge and power, the students actively participated in producing what Gutierrez and Larson called "the students' counter-script." It emerged as an underlife in their reaction to the teacher's imposition of knowledge and power. For example, the teacher quizzed the students on a current event taken from the Los Angeles Times newspaper; the event was about a whale which swam up a river from the San Francisco Bay to Petaluma and refused to turn around to go back to the ocean. The teacher chose the event because it appeared on the front page of the newspaper that he read every day – a habit which none of his students had or were interested in doing. When the teacher asked the students 'why people are pretty excited in Petaluma California,' the students' counter-script was 'They peed in the river.' Gutierrez and Larson then proposed the possibility of a "third space" – a place where the teacher's script and the students' counter-script intersect to create the possibility for authentic interaction (responsive and collaborative interaction) to occur in their classroom.

Larson and Gatto (2004) looked at the tactical underlife of an elementary teacher to cope with the constraining demands of Academic Standards and Assessment Policy which require teachers to establish a "student-centered, standards-driven, and performance-based" system of instruction. Larson and Gatto found that the teacher and her students employed the interplay between disruptive and contained underlife adjustments (the interplay which they called tactical underlife) to construct a space for their teaching and learning within a restrictive institutional environment. In particular, the teacher cultivated relationships with parents, principals, and district officials that allowed her to negotiate the space she wanted for her classroom. She let the students take the lead in conducting tours, describing the curriculum, and answering questions for those who visited their class. In this way, she scaffolded students' participation in multiple discourses for them to be communicatively competent in a diverse society. In addition, she did not follow the mandated lesson plan format and used her own lesson plans instead; she did not follow textbooks or test preparation workbooks, but she

individualized her instruction to meet each student's need. As a result of her teaching approach, the students perceived learning in her classroom as "fun" rather than "work."

Sterponi (2007) examined children's clandestine (underlife) practice in a silent reading activity, an activity in which a student reads in silence with a book in front of himself/herself. The children were second and third graders, and they tried to get away from the current activity by continuously engaging in a covert peer activity which was not encouraged by the teacher. In particular, they secretly participated in an interactional reading activity (joined by two or three students either in the classroom or when they were in the library) during the silent reading time. When they were in the library, Sterponi documented an interactional reading incident between two male students. They sat at a round table and whispered to each other about what they were reading. They knew that their behavior could be caught by the teacher anytime, thus they skillfully enacted verbally and nonverbally without any unnecessary movements which might catch the teacher's attention. In another incident, Sterponi documented an interactional reading between two female students in classroom during "book time," (a daily 20 minutes silent reading after lunch time). The two female students were lying on a rug in a hidden corner of the classroom and secretly engaging in a discussion about zebras and bears, which were on the illustrated books they had chosen for the reading activity. Sterponi then argued that interactional reading is a peer cultural practice in which children momentarily escape the rules of the dominant order, and their tactical maneuvering under the desk may help facilitate their learning.

In the book "Police in the hallway: Discipline in an urban high school," Nolan (2011) described with compassion about the underlife of the students at a high school in Bronx, New York. The school is a poorly performing and racially segregated one. Students who entered the school had a high level of violence and disorder; therefore, the police was employed to maintain the school's order. To oppose the police force and the school's curriculum (which students found boring and irrelevant), they performed what Nolan called "oppositional behaviors." For example, they talked, slept, and were busy doodling in classrooms. Another oppositional behavior was cutting classes. Students chose to cut classes which they found boring or hostile, and they were usually confronted by the police as soon as they left the classroom. They also wore baseball caps and do-rags to signify their gang affiliation. Nolan then concluded that students' underlife acts were a way for them to express their sense of autonomy and to alienate themselves from classroom standards as well as school management.

As we have seen, the underlife of classrooms has been given ample attention in the literature in the last few decades. However, the classroom underlife in which students are nonverbally involved in a playful act alongside the teacher's checking homework activity because they lack interest in this mundane activity still has not been discussed in the literature. The data in this study captures this. ***Italics indicate some form of emphasis, which may be signaled by changes in pitch and/or amplitude.***

Overlap bracket: A left bracket marks the point at which the current talk is overlapped by other talk.

Lengthening: Colons indicate that the sound immediately preceding has been noticeably lengthened.

Intonation: Punctuation symbols are used to mark intonation changes rather than as grammatical symbols:

A period indicates a falling contour.

A question mark indicates a raising contour.

Comments: Double parentheses enclose material that is not part of the talk being transcribed.

Problematic Hearing: Material in single parentheses indicates a hearing that the transcriber was uncertain about.

Time: Numbers in parentheses indicate silence, represented in seconds. For example, (5.0) represents 5 seconds of silence.

Pause: A dot in parentheses (.) indicates micropause. It is hearable but not readily measurable.

Material Artifacts

I also asked the teacher's permission to collect material artifacts in the classroom, such as the textbooks, handouts, and tools. These materials are as important as the verbal and non-verbal behaviors for my data analysis. As C. Goodwin (2007) suggested, language, non-verbal language (gestures, facial expressions, postures), and material artifacts in a particular interactional scene "all mutually elaborate each other to create a whole that is different from, and greater than, any of its constituent parts" (p. 55).

Data Collection

Site

The site where I collected data is an intensive ESL program at a university in Los Angeles. The program provides English language skills for students who come from all over the world. The students' goal in the program is to learn English so that they can mainstream into regular classrooms in the U.S. universities.

The Students

The students in this study are international students who came to the U.S. to pursue their undergraduate and graduate degrees. The students' language proficiency is beginning level. There are three levels of language proficiency in the program: beginning, intermediate, and advanced. The students who are at the beginning level have limited ability to express themselves in daily conversations. Their reading and writing skills are also limited. For instance, they can read a short and simple text on daily life topics such as getting acquainted, student life, beautiful places, etc. Their writing skill is at the sentential level or at most a paragraph of five to ten sentences in length. The students' ages range from early to late 20s.

The Teacher

The teacher is experienced. He has been teaching English for second language learners for more than 20 years. He is known for his sense of humor and his understanding of the students' academic needs.

Participation/Observation and Video Recording

The data collected for this study are forty eight hours of classroom participation/observation and ten hours of video recording. My total classroom participation and observation was two months. To make the students and the teacher comfortable with my presence, I spent my first four weeks getting to know the teacher, the students, and the class materials. I then proposed to the teacher the plan to video tape the class on week five. The video recording lasted for two weeks. After the video recording, I continued my role as a participant/observer on weeks seven and eight to see if there was any difference in the students' performance on the days they were video-taped and on the days they were not. My conclusion was that the students did not display any difference in their classroom performance. In particular, they participated in class activities in the same way that I had observed during the period of video-recording.

Data Analysis

This section discusses how the students were involved in a playful and nonverbal underlife act alongside the teacher's homework checking activity, and what the teacher was doing during the underlife. The transcription segment below illustrates the underlife act.

Note that the following abbreviations are used for names.

Tea: teacher *Stu: Students*
Hel: Helen *Lis: Lisa*

Other students who are also mentioned in the transcript are Sam, Kevin, Brent, Kent, Tom, Wes, and Kao.

- 01 Tea: Bad smell. ((looking around the classroom, his face was
02 indicating a disgusting smell, then shaking his head))
03 Hel: ((hand raising up, preparing to throw a paper ball at Wes
04 while eyes were gazing at the teacher))
05 Stu: ((Lisa, Sam, and Kevin were laughing at the teacher's
06 comment about the bad smell after playing soccer))
- 07 Tea: Alright. Okay. ((looking to the classroom, then his hand
08 was preparing to tap on the homework page in the book))
09 Hel: ((leaning from her chair to her table, then throwing the
10 paper ball at Wes))
11 Tea: Let's go now to Part A. Topics of paragraphs. ((looking
12 at the page in the book where Part A was))

- 13 Hel: ((eyes were gazing at Wes waiting for his reaction, her
 14 hand was sticking out to ask him to hand her something,
 15 then hopping up from her chair and leaning over the table))
- 16 Tea: This is homework. Right? So everybody is ready. ((still looking
 17 at the book while speaking))
- 18 Hel: ((dragging Wes' book closer to her, then getting her cell phone
 19 from Wes and smiling))
- 20 Tea: In Part A we have six paragraphs. a five tastes of food is in
 21 paragraph three. ((reading from the book and walking toward
 22 the board))
- 23 Hel: ((glancing at Wes, picking up her cell phone on the table and
 24 looking at it))
- 25 Tea: (How about b) Uh... Lisa Helen. ((walking away from the board,
 26 then looking up from the book and glancing at Lisa and Helen,
 27 then walking back to the board while his eyes were looking
 28 back down at the book))
- 29 Hel: ((glancing at Wes, then to the teacher, then to her book))
- 30 Lis: ((talking to Brent))
- 31 Sam: ((tapping at Lisa's hand and pointing to Item b in his
 32 book))
- 33 Lis: ((looking at her book, but not at Sam's pointing))
- 34 Tea: Oh. I am sorry. ((eyes were still at the book))
- 35 Hel: One.
 36 ((Helen's cell phone was ringing))
- 37 Hel: ((picking up her cell phone and laughing))
- 38 Stu: ((Sam, Kevin, Brent, Tom were turning to Helen, Kao and Kent
 39 were laughing with Helen, and laughing from multiple others))
- 40 Tea: Very good. Thank you. Yes. Paragraph one. ((standing, his back
 41 was facing towards Helen, his eyes were looking at the book,
 42 then walking toward the board))
- 43 Hel: ((picking up an object from the table and throwing it at Wes))
- 44 Stu: ((laughing from multiple students))
- 45 Tea: ((erasing the board)) Yes. Not correct. Yes.
- 46 Hel: ((still holding her cell phone, looking at it and laughing))
- 47 Stu: ((Kent and Kao were gazing at Helen and laughing with her while
 48 Sam, Kevin, and Brent were gazing at Helen))
- 49 Tea: Lisa Helen. Helen you get the point. ((making a chart on the
 50 board and putting down one point for Helen))
- 51 Hel: ((picking up a bigger object from the table and throwing it at
 52 Wes))
- 53 Tea: Very good. Paragraph one. (Our) five tastes senses are in
 54 paragraph one. ((walking away from the board, his eyes were
 55 looking at the book while speaking))
- 56 Hel: ((turning to Kao and laughing with him))

In this social participation structure, the students were the center of the class activity. The teacher called out the students' names and assigned a task to them. The task was to read out loud which paragraph number on the right matches a main idea on the left (the task is illustrated in the table below). Each time the teacher called on two students, and they competed to see who read the answer out loud first. The student who gave the answer first would be awarded one point, and this point counted for the student's team (see page 21 for an explanation how the teacher assigns team members). The whole class listened to the teacher to see which students were singled out to perform the items assigned. Turn taking, therefore, was teacher selected, and the students waited for their names to be called to take turns. The other students who were not called were expected to have their eyes on the book and to listen to their classmates' performance. If the student who had been singled out did not answer the item assigned to him/her correctly, a team member could give an alternate answer without waiting for his/her name to be called.

The task for this activity is as follows (note that this task is for the after-reading activity).

Topics of Paragraphs

- A. Look at the list of paragraph topics from "Your Sense of Taste." Find the paragraph on each topic in the reading. Write the paragraph number (1-6)

a. Five tastes of food	Paragraph <u> 3 </u>
b. Our five senses	Paragraph <u> </u>
c. Why a sense of taste matters	Paragraph <u> </u>
d. Tastes and temperatures	Paragraph <u> </u>
e. Our taste buds	Paragraph <u> </u>
f. The relationship between the senses of taste and smell	Paragraph <u> </u>

In line 1 the teacher was talking about the 'bad smell' that one has after playing soccer as an example to illustrate the meaning of the word 'smell' from the reading. While talking, the teacher's eyes were glancing around the classroom. He then made a disgusting face together with his head shaking to illustrate one's unpleasant smell after playing soccer (lines 1 and 2). In this way the teacher did not only verbally present the language form to the students, but he also incorporated facial and bodily demonstrations to make the meaning of the word easy to understand for the students. While the teacher was explaining and demonstrating the meaning of the word, in a corner of the classroom, Helen was engaging in an activity which Caswell (1982, cited in Neill, 1991) called a "concealed open challenge" to the teacher.

According to Caswell, there are two types of challenge to the teacher in classrooms, namely, open and closed. Open challenges often have real implications for the teacher's control and authority, and therefore it must

be dealt with, whereas closed challenges often die away by themselves and require no action on the teacher's part. Many challenges to the teacher are overt open challenges which have the forms of overt confrontation. However, a more difficult situation to deal with is when open challenges are not overt but concealed or "concealed open challenges" using Caswell's term. According to Caswell, "concealed open challenges" differ from "closed challenges" by displaying greater vigilance on the part of the participants. The most common form of this vigilance is a "flick check" in which pupils look rapidly to see where the teacher is and then rapidly look away. The "flick check" is a scan for danger, and it minimizes the chance of getting noticed. It occurs before an illicit action, and the rate increases when the illicit action is about to come. After the action, pupils again check to scan for any responses from the teacher.

By contrast, pupils who are engaged in closed challenges tend not to check where the teacher is, and they are often involved in the action casually (i.e., unconcealed short conversations, hand to mouth conceals a smile or conversation, a coy look at the teacher without overtly looking while hands are doing something else, etc.). The teacher most of the time ignores their actions because they do not cause serious consequences for the teacher's classroom control.

As seen in lines 3 and 4, while the teacher was talking about the bad smell after playing soccer, Helen paid no attention at all to the teacher. Instead, she was actively preparing for a "concealed open challenge" by raising her hand up and planning to throw a paper ball at Wes (a male student sitting in front of her). However, to make sure that her action was not noticed by the teacher, she quickly employed a "flick check" at the teacher. At this time, Helen's preparation for the challenge was still a single act of her own, and it did not distract other students' attention from the teacher. This is seen in lines 5 and 6 when Lisa, Sam, and Kevin were laughing at the teacher's funny comment about the bad smell without any awareness of Helen's upcoming action.

In line 7 the teacher's boundary markers 'Alright. Okay' indicated that he was now ready to move on to a new topic. This is seen in lines 7 and 8 when the teacher looked at the whole class, and then used his hand to tap on the homework page in the textbook to indicate the location of a new task. Ignoring the teacher's boundary markers, his look, and his hand-tapping embodied action to indicate where the new task was, Helen leaned over the table so that she could be closer to Wes. She then quickly threw the paper ball at him (lines 9 and 10).

Helen's action was not noticed by the teacher. This is seen in lines 11 and 12 when the teacher went on to explain what the task was about 'Let's go now to Part A. Topics of paragraphs' while he was gazing at the book. Being certain that the teacher now was totally occupied with the current activity, Helen ignored the teacher's directive to go to Part A and prepared for more concealed open challenges - gazing at Wes to monitor his reaction after she threw the ball at him, sticking her hand out to Wes to ask him to give her the

cell phone which he took from her earlier, then hopping up from her chair and leaning over the table insisting that he return the cell phone (lines 13, 14, and 15).

In line 16 the teacher told the students the new task 'This is homework.' He then requested confirmation 'Right?' which was then followed by a boundary maker and his assumption about the students' readiness for the task 'So everybody is ready.' Notice that while the teacher was getting the students ready for the task, his eyes and his bodily orientation were still on the book (lines 16 and 17). Taking advantage of the fact that the teacher's verbal and bodily orientation were on the current task, Helen, after hopping up from her chair and leaning over the table, now was closer to Wes. She then, in the midst of the teacher's turns, dragged Wes' book closer to her and insisted in a more aggressive way that he give her the cell phone back. After getting her cell phone back, Helen leaned back and smiled about the work she had accomplished (lines 18 and 19).

In lines 20 and 21 the teacher went on to read the first item of the homework exercise which was already done for students as a sample 'In Part A we have six paragraphs. (Item) A five tastes of food is in Paragraph three,' and in the meantime walked toward the board (lines 21 and 22). Helen, at this time, was still not concentrating on the current task with the teacher. While the teacher was reading the sample item and walking toward the board, Helen quickly glanced at Wes, she then picked up the cell phone on the table and looked at it as if she was checking if there were any unusual incidents on the cell phone after she had gotten it back from Wes (lines 23 and 24).

In line 25 the teacher assigned Item (b) to Lisa and Helen '(How about b) Uh...Lisa Helen.' The reason why the teacher assigned one item to two students at the same time was that he wanted to see who would shout out the answer first, and the one who would shout it out first correctly would get one point for the team they represented. This is a game that the students played every day in class, and they got so familiar with the game rules and who would be on their team that the teacher did not have to set up the rules and assign team members at the beginning of the game anymore. Usually the students who were on the right side facing the teacher were Team 1, and those who were on the left side facing the teacher were Team 2. In this way, Lisa was on Team 1 and Helen was on Team 2. Notice also that since the game was played every day, the students had somewhat lost interest in it. In particular, they did not care much which team would win as well as who would be singled out by the teacher.

While the teacher was assigning Item (b) to Lisa and Helen, he walked away from the board while his eyes were on the book. He then looked up from the book and quickly glanced at Lisa and Helen. After calling their names for the task, he walked back to the board while his eyes were also back down on the book (lines 25, 26, 27, and 28). Helen at this time was still not concentrating. After checking her cell phone, she quickly glanced at Wes. Then for the very first time since the beginning of the homework

activity – more precisely after the “flick check,” she glanced at the teacher but this was only because he singled her name out for the task. She then quickly looked at her book to locate where Item (b) was (line 29).

It is interesting to note that even though Helen was totally involved in numerous concealed open challenges concurrently with the teacher’s task from the beginning up to the moment of speaking, she immediately focused her attention on the teacher when he called her name. In this way, she was behaving in line with Jackson’s (1968) argument that detachment and involvement in classrooms “are not permanent. Rather, they are fleeting psychological states that can, and often do, come and go in the twinkling of an eye” (p. 87). In contrast, Lisa who was not involved in any concealed open challenges like Helen, was – after the teacher called her name – speaking with Brent (a male student sitting in front of her), ignoring the fact that her name had been called for the game (line 30). Lisa’s unconcealed conversation with Brent was a closed challenge to the teacher and not an open one. The reason why Lisa lacked interest in the game might be because she was very familiar with it since it was played several times a day in class. To get Lisa back on task, Sam (a male student sitting next to Lisa), who was now acting as a social gate-keeper for the teacher, was tapping on Lisa’s hand and then pointing to Item (b) in his book to remind Lisa that this item was assigned to her and that the teacher was waiting for her response (lines 31 and 32). Ignoring Sam’s effort to get her back on task, Lisa stopped talking to Brent, but she then looked at her book, not at Sam’s pointing (line 33).

In line 34 the teacher’s utterance ‘Oh. I am sorry’ while his eyes were on the book was to alert the students that he had just found out that he had made a mistake. The token ‘Oh’ was an indication that the teacher had undergone a change of state of awareness that something went wrong (Heritage, 1984). However, it was unclear to the students at this point what the teacher’s mistake was about as there was no further explanation from the teacher why he was sorry. Ignoring the fact that there might be a problem on the teacher’s part, Helen gave a verbal response for Item (b) ‘one’ (line 35). It was a short form for her intended answer that the topic sentence for Item (b) was in paragraph one. After Helen’s response, her cell phone started ringing (line 36). It was a turning point for both Helen and the whole class when the informal classroom order took over the formal one as it was well understood that classroom rules forbade using cell phones. Immediately, Helen picked up her cell phone and started laughing (line 37), Sam, Kevin, Brent, and Tom quickly turned to Helen, while Kao and Kent together with other students were laughing with Helen (lines 38 and 39). The classroom’s chaos at this point was similar to a jungle in which half of the students overtly expressed their joy over the cell phone ringing event and ignored the teacher’s current task. The question to ask is why a mundane event like cell phone ringing could alter the classroom order and brought so much joy to the students at a time when they should suppress their temptation to laugh.

In discussing the problem of inattention in the classroom, Jackson (1968) argued that “inattention may have its roots not only in the content of the

lesson per se nor in psychological deficiencies within the student but rather in the nature of the institutional experience called going to school. Often it is school that is boring, not just arithmetic or social studies” (p. 111). In this way, the students’ joy over the cell phone ringing might be due to several reasons – it could be that the current checking homework activity was not interesting, the students might be tired of studying, and the cell phone ringing event was an opportunity for them to momentarily get away from the current situation since overall going to class every day was not something fun for them. They were there because they had to be not because they wanted to be there. It should also be noticed how quickly Kao and Kent, together with other students joined Helen for the joyful event. Here the students were acting in line with Brooke’s (1987) view that the students’ underlife represents game-playing and highlights a deep-rooted sense of their experience in the classroom. They are highly aware of the roles the classroom asks them to play.

Ignoring the chaos of the classroom, in line 40 the teacher praised Helen for her correct answer ‘Very good. Thank you. Yes. Paragraph one.’ Here again we see another sequence of teacher-Initiation, student-Response, and teacher-Evaluation (IRE) (Macbeth, 1991). The teacher first praised Helen for her correct answer ‘Very good’ which was then followed by his acknowledgment for her contribution ‘Thank you,’ and his confirmation that her response was correct ‘Yes. Paragraph one.’ While praising Helen, the teacher was standing close to her, but his back was to her and his eyes were on the book. He then walked toward the board (lines 40, 41, and 42). The teacher’s dis-attentive bodily orientation and movement regarding Helen while praising her created an opportunity for Helen to launch another attack on Wes. In line 43 she picked up an object on the table and threw it at Wes while other students were still laughing (line 44). The teacher’s compliment then went unnoticed in the midst of Helen’s throwing action and student laughter.

According to Jackson (1968), the teacher’s compliment is intended to entice the student to engage in certain behaviors in the future. That is, to do what the teacher tells her to do, to work hard, and to master the material. This is not the effect observed here – Helen was obviously not enticed at all by the teacher’s encouragement of her good work. Instead, she was totally occupied with punishing Wes for calling her on her cell phone and was having fun with the throwing-object game she was playing.

In line 45 while the teacher was erasing the board, he uttered ‘Yes. Not correct. Yes.’ It was still unclear what was not correct at this point, and how it was related to the teacher’s verbal utterance ‘Oh. I am sorry’ earlier. It seems possible that the teacher had mistaken five tastes in Paragraph three with five senses in Paragraph one, and now he realized that he was wrong. However, none of the students seemed to care to find out what the teacher meant by saying ‘Not correct’ as there was no pursuit for clarification from the students after the teacher’s turn - in line 46 Helen was holding her cell

phone laughing and looking at it; in lines 47 and 48 Kao and Kent were laughing with Helen while Sam, Kevin, and Brent were gazing at her. After praising Helen, the teacher rewarded her 'Lisa Helen. Helen you get the point' (line 49). While making the announcement that between Lisa and Helen, Helen was the winner, the teacher drew a chart on the board then put down one point for Helen (lines 49 and 50). Helen once again was not at all enticed by the teacher's compliment. She picked up an even bigger object on the table and threw it at Wes while the teacher was rewarding her one point on the board (lines 51 and 52).

What was significant at this point was that Helen's misconduct was accelerating (throwing even a bigger object at Wes) in the midst of the teacher's constant compliments for her good performance. Neill (1991) claimed that in classrooms, "experienced teachers often take the insult at "nonface" value.... This has the advantage that on the surface amity is retained and the course of interaction is not disrupted" (p. 59). In this way, the teacher might well have been aware of Helen's continuous concealed open challenges but decided to go on with the current activity to maintain "face" for Helen. This is further seen in lines 53 and 54 when the teacher once again complimented Helen 'Very good. Paragraph one. (Our) five tastes senses are in Paragraph one' while he was walking away from the board and his eyes were on the book (lines 54 and 55). Here the teacher's trouble source was within the same TCU. The teacher was aware that there was a problem that needed to be fixed in his original talk, and the problem was he intended to utter the word senses instead of tastes. He then fine-tuned his turn before it reached a possible completion. In line 56 Helen once again ignored the teacher's compliment by turning to Kao and laughing with him.

This section discussed Helen's playful and nonverbal underlife act while the teacher was carrying out a formal class activity – checking homework. The underlife act occurred before the cell phone ringing event and accelerated during and after it. Before the cellphone rang, Helen was constantly involved in numerous concealed open challenges while the teacher was getting the students ready for the homework exercise – her flick check to scan for danger before the illicit action, throwing a paper ball at Wes, hopping out of her chair and leaning over the table insisting that Wes give her the cell phone back, getting her cell phone back, and checking for unusual incidents on her cell phone. At the moment her cell phone rang, she turned the classroom formal order into a jungle in which she, Kao, Kent, and other students freely expressed their joy by laughing and ignoring the teacher's current task. After the cell phone rang, her underlife act was accelerated in the midst of the teacher's constant compliments on her good performance (giving a correct response for item (b) in the exercise) – throwing an object then even a bigger one at Wes to punish him for calling her in class, then turning to Kao and laughing with him. It was assumed that the teacher was well aware of Helen's playful and nonverbal underlife act but decided to keep it at "nonface" value to maintain "face" for Helen and for himself.

Conclusion and Pedagogical Suggestions

The analysis reveals that Helen's nonverbal underlife act occurred alongside the teacher's checking homework activity, and other students joined her with excitement. Even though the teacher's effort to make the activity more appealing to students by calling out both Helen and Lisa to compete for the answer, they were not interested. When being called out for the competition, Helen was involving in numerous concealed open challenges, and Lisa was overtly talking to Brent. They obviously did not interest in the competition, and the cell phone incident was an escape first for Helen and then for the whole class to momentarily get away from the boring class activity.

The findings from our analysis yield the following pedagogical suggestions for teachers to make the mundane checking homework activity more interesting for students, and to deal with the underlife act when it occurs.

To make the mundane checking homework activity more interesting, it is suggested that the teacher give students a chance to compare their answers in pairs first before going over the answers with the whole class. This puts students at the center of the activity and helps create a sense of responsibility for their answers on the part of students. Next, instead of calling out two students to compete for the answer, the teacher can change the game playing routine by taking names out of a hat at random to nominate the competitors. This helps create a moment of excitement as students are eager to find out whose names will be called. Then, at the beginning of the activity, the teacher gives students a chance to write down on a piece of paper which question they would like to answer. The teacher then collects the papers and calls on students to answer the questions of their choices. This ensures that the student that will be called upon will answer the question with interest and confidence. Last, the teacher can do a quick survey in ranking the activity from the most to the least interesting. The teacher then uses student feedback to make adjustments to the subsequent homework assignments to make them more interesting for students. This helps ensure that students will be more alert during the homework correction process.

To deal with the underlife act that is similar to the one discussed in this study, while the student is participating in activities related to the underlife, it is suggested that the teacher orient his body toward the student to create joint attention while complimenting her. When joint attention has been established, the student is more likely to stop her underlife act and be attentive to the compliments. It is also suggested that the teacher move to the spotlight (the teacher table) where he can monitor and exercise control over students' compliance. When spotting the underlife act, the teacher could employ "the look" to signal to the student a possible intervention or use a command to maintain classroom order such as "Everyone, no noise please." The pronoun "everyone" would address anyone, and the student who is involved in the underlife act would be aware of the disturbance she is creating and eventually stop her disruptive behavior. Using commands addressing the whole class

helps the teacher gain control over classroom order on the one hand and maintain “face” for the underlife actor on the other.

The question remains is in my period of observation, how frequent this underlife act occurs during the checking homework activities, and why it is worth to examine. The answer lies in the fact that the homework activity is generally boring, and the students’ underlife act is a way for them to express their disengagement with the current task. This disruptive behavior may not be common enough to raise our concern, yet as part of life in classroom, this underlife act must be considered as at least one of the incidents that can be resulted from boredom. Addressing the problem of boredom in checking homework activities, therefore, can help engage students in the task and at the same time alleviate the burden for teachers from not having to deal with students’ disruptive behavior. ■

References

- Barraja-Rohan, A. (2011). Using conversation analysis in the second language classroom to teach interactional competence. *Language Teaching Research*, 15(4), 479-507.
- Beall, H. & Trimbur, J. (1993). Writing in chemistry: Keys to student underlife. *College Teaching*, 41(2), 50-54.
- Brooke, R. (1987). Underlife and writing instruction. *College Composition and Communication*, 38(2), 141-153.
- Erickson, F. (1996). Inclusion in what?: Thoughts on the construction of learning, identity, and affiliation in the general education classroom. In D. Speee & B. Keogh (eds.), *Research on classroom ecologies: Implications for inclusion of children with learning disabilities* (pp. 91-105). Mahwah, N.J.: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Publishers.
- Erickson, F. (2005). Definition and analysis of data from videotape: Some research procedures and their rationales. In J. Green, J. Camilli, & P. Elmore (eds.), *Handbook of complementary methods in educational research* (pp. 571-585). American Educational Research Association.
- Goffman, E. (1961). *Asylums: Essays on the social situation of mental patients and other inmates*. Chicago: Aldine Publishing Company.
- Goodwin, C. (2007). Participation, stance and affect in the organization of activities. *Discourse and Society*, 18(1), 53-73.
- Gutierrez, K., Rymes, B. & Larson, J. (1995). Script, counterscript, and underlife in the classroom. *Harvard Educational Review*, 65(3), 445-471.
- Heritage, J. (1984). A change-of-state token and aspects of its sequential placement. In M. Atkinson & J. Heritage (eds.), *Structures of social action: Studies in conversation analysis*. (pp. 299-345). New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Jackson, P. (1968). *Life in classrooms*. Chicago: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc.
- Jordan, B. & Henderson, A. (1995). Interaction analysis: Foundations and practice. *The Journal of the Learning Sciences*, 4(1), 39-103.
- Koshik, I. (1999). *Practices of pedagogy in ESL writing conferences: A conversation analytic study of turns and sequences that assist student revision*. Dissertation: University of California Los Angeles.
- Larson, J. & Gatto, L. (2004). Tactical underlife: Understanding students' perceptions. *Journal of Early Childhood Literacy*, 4(1), 11-41.
- Macbeth, D. (1991). Teacher authority as practical action. *Linguistics Education*, 3(4), 281-313.
- Majlesi, A. (2014). Finger dialogue: The embodied accomplishment of learnables in instructing grammar on a worksheet. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 64, 35-51.
- Markee, N. (2004). Zones of interactional transition in ESL classes. *Modern Language Journal*, 88(4), 583-596.
- McCafferty, S. (2006). Gesture and the materialization of second language prosody. *International Review of Applied Linguistics*, 44(2), 197-209.
- Merriam, S. (2009). *Qualitative research: A guide to design and implementation*. California: The Jossey-Bass: A Wiley Imprint.
- Neill, S. (1991). *Classroom nonverbal communication*. New York: Routledge.

- Nolan, K. (2011). The underlife: Oppositional behavior at urban public high school. In K. Nolan, *Police in the hallways: Discipline in an urban high school*, (pp. 117-143). Minneapolis, M.N.: The University of Minnesota Press.
- Olsher, D. (2003). *Collaborative group work in second and foreign language classrooms: Talk, embodiment, and sequential organization*. Dissertation: University of California Los Angeles.
- Platt, E. & Brooks, F. (2008). Embodiment as self-regulation in L2 task performance. In S. McCafferty & G. Stam (eds.), *Gesutre: Second language acquisition and classroom research* (pp. 66-87). New York: Routledge.
- Sacks, H., Schegloff, E., & Jefferson, G. (1974). A simplest systematics for the organization of turn-taking for conversation. *Language*, 50(4), 696-735.
- Sterponi, L. (2007). Clandestine interactional reading: Intertextuality and double-voicing under desk. *Linguistics and Education*, 18, 1-23.
- Wagner, J. (1996). Foreign language acquisition through interaction – A critical review of research on conversational adjustments. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 26, 215-235.