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# Analysis of Turn-Taking System and Gender Differences in Online Iranian EFL Classrooms

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## Abstract

The Covid-19 Pandemic has influenced EFL learners' turn-taking system due to the sudden shift from traditional face-to-face classes to virtual learning. This study aimed at investigating the role of gender in turn-taking patterns in online Iranian EFL classrooms. To this end, the discourse exchanges of 55 Iranian upper-intermediate online English learners were collected and analyzed. The approximate equality of male and female students paved the way to scrutinize the role of gender. The data were recorded, transcribed, and analyzed through the lens of turn-taking system. Descriptive statistics followed by the Chi-square tests and paired comparison tests revealed that teacher selection occurred more frequently than self-selection, and using vocatives was the most preferred strategy applied by the teachers. Moreover, males took more turns compared to the female students. Therefore, gender was a determinative factor in the dominant patterns of turn-taking in online classrooms. The results could provide insightful information for teachers on creating a dialogic atmosphere in virtual classes in which all students can engage in a cooperative discussion.

Keywords: *Conversation Analysis, EFL Classrooms, Gender Differences, Online Education, Turn-Taking*

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## 1. Background

The Covid-19 Pandemic has compelled institutions to have a transition from traditional face-to-face instruction to online learning. One of the challenges of online education is that many learners are not inclined to participate in online discussions (Wut & Xu, 2021). Under this circumstance, technology-related problems often disrupt turn-taking or the sequential organization of actions and hinder smooth turn-taking (Seuren et al., 2020). Analysis of turn-taking in an online environment can reveal how the lack of immediacy in space can make learners struggle to take or hold turns in the discussion (Braak et al., 2021).



In conversation analysis, turn-taking refers to how conversation takes place (Hyland & Paltridge, 2011). Sacks et al. (1974) elaborated the underlying principles of turn-taking. Their model makes some meaningful prediction about the structure of turn-taking. Accordingly, the transition between speakers usually occurs at a transition relevance place (TRP) that speakers employ a handful of conversational techniques to assign the responsibilities of the interlocutors.

Various scholars (Amani, 2020; Lerner, 2004; Talbot, 1998) have investigated the relationship between turn-taking behavior and gender. The general belief is that men follow a speech style based on power and try to dominate the conversation. However, within the frame of the sociolinguistic context, men are often dominant in social settings; therefore, women may be taciturn (Lerner, 2004). Thus, men might dominate the exchanges using interruptions and overlaps; and women are more likely to be subject to disruption (Amani, 2020).

Although several studies (Amir & Jakob, 2020; Chalak & Karimi, 2017; Yakushkina, 2018) investigated the role of gender in turn-taking patterns, there are many issues with participation in online environments. For example, technology-related troubles such as delays and orientation disparities, the absence of some valuable resources, lack of immediacy in time and place, and lack of non-verbal behavior can affect the turn-taking system. Therefore, the existing account fails to address the EFL learners' strategies to take or hold a turn in an online environment.

The principal objective of this paper was to investigate the turn-taking system applied in the online Iranian EFL classrooms. Moreover, the study sought to discover the preferred strategies of turn-taking used by males and females. The finding of this study could shed light on how males and females contribute differently in collaborative synchronous online classroom discourse, and it might empower teachers to give equal opportunities to all students and increase students' motivation to interact more.

## 2. Literature Review

CA emerged from ethnomethodology, and it is devoted to the study of talk-in-interaction. The pioneers of CA were Sacks et al. (1974), who described it as a “naturalist observational discipline that could deal with the details of social action rigorously, empirically and formally” (p. 289). CA aims to gain an in-depth understanding of talk as a fundamental and consecutive feature of human social life (Sindell, 2010). It has the roots in ethnomethodology, which studies how members of society produce and recognize mutually intelligible interactions (Liddicoat, 2007). The nature of turn-taking in interactional exchanges is at the heart of CA.

Sacks et al. (1974) initiated the modern literature on conversational turn-taking by outlining how turn-taking strategies constitute a complex system. This complex system has been defined in terms of two components, turn construction and turn allocation. The talk that constructs turns comprises language units, such as sentences, clauses, phrases, and lexical items. At the start of a turn, the speaker is initially entitled to use a language unit called a turn-construction unit (TCU). The first completion of TCU constitutes an initial transition-relevance place (TRP) through which the next potential speaker will be identified.

The second sequence is the turn allocation component that deals with how speakers allocate turn to parties in an interaction. Sacks et al. (1974) elaborate on various ways of selecting someone to speak next. The first technique, self-selection, occurs when participants take a turn without receiving any cue from the current speaker. However, the current speaker is likely to address the next speaker by gazing at the addressee, attaching a vocative, asking tag questions, and asking reduced questions with two forms of confirmation and interrogation.

Different researchers (to name a few, Dewi et al., 2018; Gorjian & Habibi, 2015; Yoshida, 2008) have investigated turn-taking analysis in classroom discourse. They asserted that the crucial issues in classroom settings are how students construct turn-taking, what kinds of questions they ask, and who will initiate talking. For instance, Yoshida (2008) recorded spoken interaction between the teacher and student to analyze the classroom discourse regarding the discourse markers, interactional sequences,



and speech acts. The results revealed that the language used in the classroom contained various functions of integrational sequences that exist in authentic and natural communication.

What most studies in this regard imply is that different from the natural conversation in which participants construct turn symmetrically; the teacher, which leads to an asymmetrical relation dominates turn allocation in institutional contexts (Ansori, 2019; Evnitskaya & Berger, 2017; Garton, 2012; Sari, 2020). In addition, in face-to-face classroom interaction, teachers impose power structures and continuously ask questions to evaluate the responses of students. That is why Initiation, Response, Evaluation (IRE) or Initiation, Response, Feedback (IRF) are frequently observed (Brooks, 2016).

In the light of gender and language analysis, researchers often anchor on the theory of Lakoff (1975) and Wardhaugh (2006), who maintain that the words of the speech act of women are distinctive from men. They claim that some linguistic features, such as tag questions, linguistic expletives, and question intonation correlate more with women than men do. Accordingly, males are more direct and present concise ideas, while females use lengthy emotional sentences (Gregoria et al., 2021).

When it comes to turn-taking, women take more turns in conversation indicates full of assertiveness (Ghilzai & Baloch, 2016). However, on the other hand, men were more talkative in class when the teacher was female, while they opted to be passive when the teacher was a boy. Thus, others concluded that the teacher's gender plays an important role in the participation of the male student (Iqbal & Azhar, 2019). Moreover, men often dominate the discussion of topics by utilizing different strategies like integration with women's ideas, changing the topics of discussion, and opt to be silent to hesitate women (Hellum & Olah, 2018).

Regarding the relationship between gender and turn-taking patterns, Rashidi and Rafiee Rad (2010) found that boys were more likely to interact with their teachers, volunteer to answer the questions, and take longer turns. In the same vein, Rashidi and Naderi (2012) recorded and transcribed 24 classes. They concluded that the patterns of the student-teacher talk were affected by the gender of the students. Male students initiated more exchanges with their teachers, whereas female students preferred to be addressed by their teachers. Similarly, another study was conducted on the turn-taking and repair strategies employed by Iranian EFL learners. The results of the study revealed that the teacher made the female students take turns to talk in every classroom discussion, especially with voluntary discussion; however, the male students commonly utilize voluntarism (Chalak & Karimi, 2017).

The emergence of virtual classrooms and online educational forums has provided powerful learning experiences and offered EFL learners a sense of immediate contact, motivation, and even some fun (Havwini, 2019). However, in terms of discourse in EFL virtual classrooms, teachers attempt to regulate the students' participation by initiating linguistic exchanges, assigning turns, and having the right to the third move. In a study conducted by Jocuns et al. (2020), classroom discourse practices that emerged during the COVID-19 Pandemic crisis were analyzed. The researchers employed nexus analysis, an action-focused approach incorporating aspects of ethnography, to examine the discourse in complex social behavior. Through a series of case studies and using the initiation-response-evaluation sequence (IRE), they concluded that the communication within the online environment was more between teachers and students, and the virtual classrooms negatively influenced the interaction between students.

In the same vein, Rahmatika and Laila (2021) analyzed the discourse structure of a classroom session during the Covid-19 Pandemic. They recorded the students' speech on the platforms of Google Meet and Zoom in Indonesia and abroad, and they used Van Dijk's (2004) critical discourse analysis, which focused on the structure of the text. They found that the interaction between teachers and students was not balanced. The teachers were too dominant, and they were not successful at constructing an interactive learning environment.



Bannink and Van Dam (2021) also investigated the turn-taking procedures in online classes in the early days of the pandemic. The researchers collected the data from online English classes held through the Zoom Platform. What they observed was not drastically different from traditional classrooms: After a brief formulaic greeting, the teacher announced the main activities on the lesson plan. Then, he explained the key contents and made students do a reading task. After that, the students had to answer some questions about what they read. According to their observation, confusion and misunderstanding may arise about who is to speak next, which leads to loss of involvement.

In general, new technologies are integrated into the education world profusely to enhance the process of learning English. Although the studies mentioned above focused on turn-taking strategies in virtual learning environments, there has been a preliminary quantitative analysis of turn-taking systems. In terms of the discourse, online classroom discourse has several features that distinguish it from traditional classes. However, what is not yet clear is the strategies employed by online L2 learners to take and hold a turn. The present study aimed to address the following research questions:

- 1) What is the turn-taking system used by Iranian EFL teachers and students in online classrooms?
- 2) Are there any differences in turn-taking systems of Iranian males and females in online English classrooms?

### **3. Method**

#### ***3.1. Design and Context of the Study***

The design of this study was a non-experimental descriptive research design. The goal of descriptive research is to describe the characteristics of naturalistic data, and a non-experimental descriptive design provides a more in-depth examination (Nassaji, 2015). The data were collected quantitatively, using frequencies, percentages, averages, and other statistical analyses to determine the relationships between the turn-taking system and gender,

The ongoing COVID-19 Pandemic has affected different contexts, including educational settings such as universities and language institutions, and has suspended face-to-face classes. Thus, using a variety of platforms like Zoom, Blackboard Collaborate, Google Meet, and Microsoft Teams has received popularity worldwide. In this study, we obtained the data from the classes held on the Zoom Platform. This platform allows for synchronous interactions between educators and students. In this online context, individuals use a webcam and a microphone to chat in real-time, enabling interactions similar to those occurring in the traditional classroom setting (Rahayu, 2020).

#### ***3.2. Participants***

In the presents study, an initial number of 87 EFL learners, aged 18-30, were selected through convenience sampling based on availability from the upper-intermediate English learners of a language institute located in Isfahan, Iran. After administering an online English proficiency test, the researchers excluded those students who did not meet the criteria. Thus, the research participants comprised 55 upper-intermediate (27 males and 28 females) English learners randomly assigned to four groups. Each group had 14 or fewer students with an appropriate distribution of males and females. Small groups made it possible to see all the students at once in the Gallery View of Zoom platform.

The participants used Zoom as an online platform for learning in the academic year 2020-2021, the period of learning affected by the Covid-19 pandemic. It is worth mentioning that all the participants were university students or graduated in various fields of study. They were all native speakers of Persian, and their English language proficiency was upper-intermediate. In addition, five female English instructors participated in the study. They all had the experience of teaching online courses via the Zoom Platform.



### 3.3. Instruments

As mentioned earlier, Sacks et al. (1974) worked on turn-taking in conversation; and by improving the findings, Sacks et al. (1974) proposed a framework. According to the SSJ's turn-taking system, researchers can identify the ways of selecting the next speaker and self-selection. However, in this study, some slight modifications were made to make the framework more applicable to the current online situation. For instance, we added unmuting the microphones as a strategy of self-selection. Table 1 depicts the framework used in this research.

Table 1

*Turn-taking System*

Turn-taking System	Strategies
Teacher selects next speaker	1. Addressing
	2. Reduced questions
Students' self-selection	1. Raise hands virtually
	2. Unmuting the microphone

To rely on the results of this study and generalize the findings, Cronbach's alpha was calculated, and the reliability of the framework was at .81, which was an acceptable level. Moreover, to assess its validity, the researchers interviewed 5 English teachers who were experts at handling virtual classrooms. According to the consensus collected from the experts, the components of the framework were clear and concrete. In addition, the Zoom Platform was the leading application utilized in this study. The teachers started a zoom meeting as a host and clicked the Record Button. In order to identify the teachers' gazing direction, the Thumbnail View opted in a way that the teacher view was scaled down, and the thumbnails showed the participants who were most recently the active speakers. Furthermore, the researchers, as the hosts of the meeting, allow the participants to mute or unmute themselves.

### 3.4. Data Collection Procedure

First, the researchers assigned 55 upper-intermediate English learners to four online classrooms to examine the turn-taking strategies applied by the teachers and students. To collect the data, we selected discussion classrooms held three times a week, and the discussion topics were from the book Speak Now. Each session lasted one hour and a half, and it primarily focused on discussion. The teachers had to share the lesson plan by Screen-Sharing a document or slide at the beginning of the course to have a homogenous classroom syllabus. This gave students a clear idea of how the session would progress. The teachers also discussed the online etiquettes and expectations in the first session. For instance, the participants' microphones had to be mute upon entry to avoid background noise; however, they were allowed to unmute them whenever they wanted to take a turn. In addition, they had to keep their cameras on and create eye contact with their teachers. Regarding the teachers' responsibilities, they were allowed to use the Whiteboard or Annotate to share documents.



After clarifying the expectations and guidelines, 20 sessions of the synchronous Zoom classes were recorded. Then, the recordings were transcribed into written forms. The data transcription facilitated the procedure of data analysis. It is worth mentioning that to consider the ethical issues and the researchers notified the students that the class would be recording. Moreover, we were transparent with the students about who would have access to the recording and under what circumstances. Therefore, ethical issues and confidentiality were observed throughout the data collection procedure.

#### 4. Finding and Discussion

##### 4.1. Finding

Data analysis began with the calculation of descriptive statistics. These statistics measured the mean and standard deviation of the data. Table 2 compares the mean scores of classroom turn-taking strategies used by males and females.

Table 2

##### Descriptive Statistics

		Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Turn Taking	Male	.00	47.00	14.2941	11.32961
	Female	.00	32.00	12.4118	7.44579
	Teacher selection	.00	47.00	14.4000	11.68688
	Self-selection	.00	33.00	12.5263	7.53565

The mean score of classroom turn-taking indicated that male students took more turns than female students. Moreover, the mean score demonstrated that the number of times students were selected as the next speaker by their teachers was more than the self-selection frequency. In order to analyze the group differences, the Chi-Square Test was administered.

Table 3

##### Chi-Square Results

	Observed N	Expected N	Residual
Teacher selection	952	908.0	44.0
Self-selection	864	908.0	-44.0
Total	1861		
Chi-Square		4.264	



Df	1
Asymp.Sig.	.039

As Table 3 demonstrates, the p-value was less than .05. Thus, there was a meaningful difference between the number of times that the students were other selected or self-selected for turn-taking. Accordingly, the frequency of turn-taking that was done by the teachers was more than students' self-selection. To identify the frequency of various ways of turn-taking, the Chi-Square Test was run. Table 4 presents the results.

Table 4

*Chi-Square Results on Different Types of Turn-taking*

	Observed N	Expected N	Residual
Using vocatives	488	363.2	124.8
Reduced Questions	402	363.2	38.8
Addressing gaze	62	363.2	-301.2
Hand raising	204	363.2	-159.2
Unmuting the mics	660	363.2	296.8
Total	1816		
Chi-Square		609.132	
df		4	
Asymp. Sig.		.000	

The p-value is less than .05; as a result, there were meaningful differences among different strategies. In order to find out which types of turn-taking strategies were not meaningfully different from each other, a pair-comparison of each item with other items was made. Tables 5 and 6 demonstrate the results of the pair-comparison.

Table 5

*Frequency and Test Statistics of Pair-Comparison of Each Turn-taking Items with Other Items*

	N	N	N	N	N
Using vocatives	488	-	-	-	488
Reduced questions	402	402	402	402	-
Addressing gaze	-	62	-	-	62



Hand raising	-	-	204	-	-
Unmuting the mics	-	-	-	660	-
Total	890	464	606	1062	550
Chi-square	8.310	249.138	64.693	62.678	329.956
df	1	1	1	1	1
Asymp. Sig.	.004	.000	.000	.000	.000

Table 6

*Frequency and Test Statistics of Pair-comparison of Each Turn-taking Items with other Items*

		N	N	N	N
Using vocatives	488	488	-	-	-
Reduced questions	-	-	-	-	-
Addressing gaze	-	-	62	62	-
Hand raising	204	-	204	-	204
Unmuting the mics	-	660	-	660	660
Total	692	1148	266	772	864
Chi-square	116.555	25.770	75.805	495.296	240.667
df	1	1	1	1	1
Asymp. Sig.	.004	.000	.000	.000	.000

The data in Tables 5 and 6 revealed that the pair-comparison of each two-item had a p-value of less than .05, and all turn-taking ways were meaningfully different. Unmuting the microphones, which was a subcategory of students' self-selection had been used the most, and the least preferred strategy was gazing, which was the subcategory of teacher-selection.

The second research question referred to the differences between males and females in the turn-taking system. To answer the question, we measured the frequency of each component of the turn-taking system. Table 7 depicts the male-related information.



Table 7

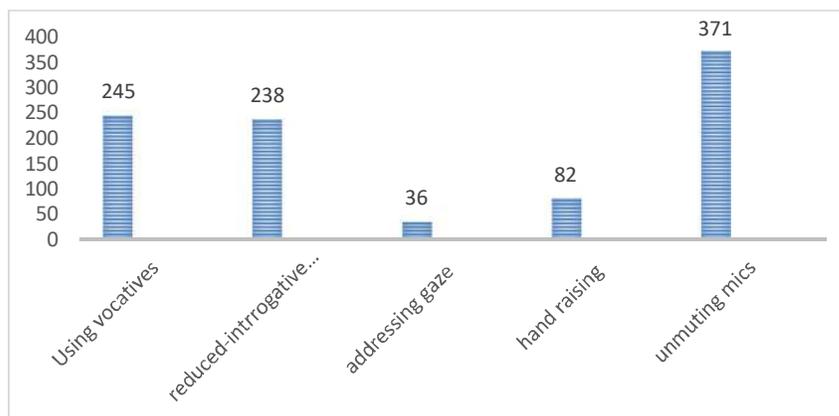
*Frequency and Test Statistics of Applying Different Turn-taking by Male Students*

	Observed N	Expected N	Residual
Using vocatives	245	194.4	50.6
Reduced questions	238	194.4	43.6
Addressing gaze	36	194.4	-158.4
Hand raising	82	194.4	-112.4
Unmuting the mics	371	194.4	176.6
Total	972		
Chi-Square		377.434	
Df		4	
Asymp. Sig.		.000	

The p-value of .000 indicated that all components of the turn-taking system had meaningful distinctions from each other. The results of pair-comparison showed a p-value of less than .05 except two of them. Figure 1 demonstrates the findings.

Figure 1

*Frequency of Turn-Taking Items Applied by Male Students*



As the data depicts, the most frequent males' turn-taking strategy was unmuting the microphones, which was a sub-category of self-selection, and the least preferred strategy was asking questions by the teachers. Moreover, there was no significant difference between addressing gaze and using



vocatives as two sub-categories of teacher-selection. To find out the turn-taking pattern employed by female students the same statistical procedures were administered.

Table 8

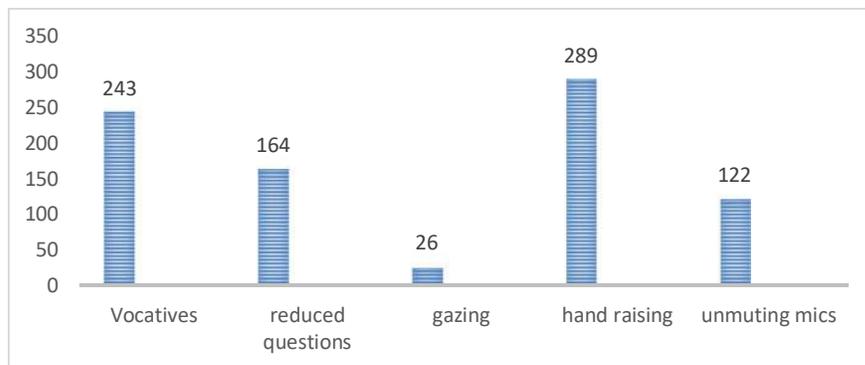
*Frequency and Test Statistics of Applying Different Types of Turn-taking by Female Students*

	Observed N	Expected N	Residual
Using vocatives	243	168.8	74.2
Reduced questions	164	168.8	-4.8
Gazing	26	168.8	-142.8
Hand raising	289	168.8	120.2
Unmuting mics	122	168.8	-46.8
Total	844		
Chi-Square		252.126	
df		4	
Asymp. Sig.		.000	

The p-value of less than .05 indicated significant differences among the usage of various types of turn-taking by the female students. To examine the data, the pair-comparison of each type was made. The findings are shown in Figure 2.

Figure 2

*Frequency of Turn-Taking Items Applied by Female Students*



Finally, the Chi-Square Test was applied to measure the frequency distribution of various turn-taking types used by both genders. Table 9 represents the p-value. As can be seen, the p-value is less than .05, and it indicated the significant differences between males and females regarding the turn-taking items employed in online classrooms.



Table 9

*Chi-Square Results*

	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	24.373	4	.000

**4.2. Discussion**

The Covid-19 Pandemic has a drastic impact on educational settings. Some applied linguists have already begun to pay attention to how discourse and other international norms have been impacted as well. Throughout this study, the researchers investigated how Iranian English learners employed the components of the turn-taking system on the Zoom Platform, and they scrutinized the effect of gender as well.

To answer the first question, which aimed at investigating the most prevalent turn-taking system in Iranian online classrooms, the researchers recorded and observed all the 20 Zoom sessions, filled out the framework, categorized the data, and analyzed them by running descriptive statistics and Chi-Square Test. As the results suggested, there was a significant difference between the frequencies of self-selection and teacher selection ( $p < .05$ ). Accordingly, the teachers mainly chose the next speaker. Among the strategies employed by the teachers for assigning the turns, using vocatives came first, and it was followed by asking reduced questions.

The results of this research are in line with the studies that indicate an asymmetrical relationship between teachers and students (Ansori, 2019; Evnitskaya & Berger, 2017; Garton, 2012; Sari, 2020). In other words, teachers frequently imposed power structure by assigning turns or initiating interactions. The findings also agreed with Rahmatika and Laila's (2021) study that analyzed the discourse structure of a classroom session during the Covid-19 Pandemic. They used Van Dijk's (2004) critical discourse analysis, which focused on the structure of the text. They found that the interaction between teachers and students was not balanced. The teachers were too dominant and did not have a strong relationship to form interactive learners.

To address the second research question, which focused on the impact of gender on the turn-taking system, the frequency of turn-taking and p-value were calculated. The p-value less than .05 indicated a significant difference between males and females regarding the ways used for taking a turn. Accordingly, males took more turns than females, and it was in line with the findings of Rashidi and Rafiee Rad (2010), who found that boys were more likely to take longer turns. In the same vein, Rashidi and Naderi (2012) concluded that male students initiated more exchanges with their teachers; however, female students preferred to be addressed by their teachers. These findings further support the idea of Hellum and Olah (2018), who maintained that men often dominate the discussion of topics by utilizing different strategies. One of the issues that emerged from the research results was the significant difference between males and females and the strategy they used to take a turn. Accordingly, while male students took turns by unmuting their microphones, the female students did turn-taking by using the Hand Raising option available on the Zoom platform.

**5. Conclusion**

The data discussed in this paper were collected in 2020 when due to the Covid-19 Pandemic, online teaching became a new norm in educational practices. The importance of interactional processes by which learners make some ways to take turns in the classrooms is because of the intrinsic link between opportunities for participation and opportunities for learning. Therefore, researchers should



navigate the turn-taking system in online synchronous courses and attempt to complement the extensive literature, which describes turn-taking in face-to-face classrooms.

The findings in the present investigation have provided evidence that the turn-taking system in online classrooms has some resemblance to the traditional classroom settings. First, teachers played an important role in controlling the procedures by which turns are assigned. Among various subcategories of teacher selection, vocatives or using addressees' names was the primary strategy to control or manipulate the interlocutors. Then, the instructors attempted to address the participants by asking reduced questions. The example below is a transcription extracted from the classroom interaction containing both vocatives and reduced questions.

T: so... how'd you face a moral dilemma? **Ali**, you answer, Please.

S: Me? [Raising intonation and gazing at the teacher's screen]

T: Yeah... **How facing a dilemma?**

S: mmm... I ask for other('s) help in fact

Regarding the gaze cues, the teachers were often looking at the whole context, and their gaze shift was not frequent. Although in face-to-face classrooms, eye gaze plays a vital role in turn transitions, the virtual gaze is not very coherent. It seems that in online discourse, eye contact is not an available clue to nominate the next speaker. Furthermore, the research results have shown that males took a significant number of turns by unmuting their microphones while females' preference was asking for permission by clicking the *Hand Raising* button. Generally, males started to speak when others did not finish their remarks yet, and it was considered cooperative overlaps and served as support or engagement in the discussion. Taken together, although technology-related issues could hinder smooth turn-taking, we concluded that interlocutors could overcome the hardship. Therefore, an account of turn-taking is capable of great context sensitivity. This is so because the conversation can accommodate a wide range of situations, from a face-to-face context to a virtual classroom.

Finally, a number of limitations need to be considered. First, the small sample size could affect the generalizability of the findings. Moreover, the framework of the research could not concretely elaborate on the events occurring in an online course. It was indeed designed for analyzing the traditional classrooms where English instruction has not relied on online platforms. Last but not least, implementing a mixed-method design could reveal more about the gender differences in applying the turn-taking system strategies.

It is suggested that researchers replicate the study by recruiting more online learners. It would also be interesting to integrate other aspects of the Zoom platform that have an effect on turn-taking strategies into the existing framework. Finally, collecting quantitative and qualitative data together can provide more in-depth information about the learners' attitudes towards online learning.

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