

Multilingualism in Action: A Conversation Analytic View on How Children are Re-Voicing a Story in a French Second Language Learning Lesson

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Abstract

Our paper provides an empirically based perspective on the contribution of Conversation Analysis (CA) to our understanding of children's second language learning practices in a multilingual classroom setting. While exploring the interactional configuration of a French second language learning activity, we focus our analytic lens on how five children and their teacher rely on multilingual resources (French, German, Luxemburgish, and Portuguese) in order to initiate and to improve the re-voicing of a story in French. Through a moment-by-moment (CA) video based analysis we can show how co-constructing the second language learning object involves various embedded linguistic and interactional competencies. We will point out how the participants engage in the re-voicing activity through their mutual orientation to each other's language conduct. Effective second language learning becomes possible because the teacher's student-directed talk provides opportunities for the children to provide oral narratives in a jointly constituted multilingually shaped interaction. Moreover, by offering insights into the interactional features (turn-taking system), CA allows us to visualize how the children's second language learning practices are interrelated with the sequential structure of multilingual talk-in-interaction. Thus, in our case study we emphasize the fundamentally social nature of second language classroom talk.

Keywords: Conversation Analysis; second language learning; interactional competence; oral narrative

Introduction

This paper focuses on the use of Conversation Analysis (CA) (Sacks et al., 1974) to shed light on how five children and a teacher engage in a French second language learning activity in a multilingual classroom setting. The issue we address through our subsequent fine-grained CA driven analysis is to show how the participants are achieving interactional competence through mobilizing multilingual resources, and how the children simultaneously display their linguistic skills. Thus, in the following, we will showcase CA's analytical potency in fostering a deeper understanding of how the children's multilingually occurring interactional competence "allows them to participate in interaction in the first place", and "also furnishes the conditions to engage in the social activity of language learning" (Kasper, G. & Wagner, J., 2011, p. 119).

The case study data for this paper are drawn from a larger sample of classroom activities. In the analyzed episode, one of the children (T) is asked by the teacher to tell a story, that is, to "re-voice" a previously read aloud story, in the target language French. As she hesitates to face the challenge of performing in French, the other participants rely on multilingual resources to overcome the dis-fluency. Adopting a CA approach allows us to point out how the co-participants develop the second language learning activity by effectively organizing talk-in-interaction with respect to each other. Furthermore, we can show how the children and the teacher, through paying mutual attention to each other's language conduct, jointly orient to situated second language learning (Gardner, 2008).

The paper is divided into three general sections. The first one presents the theoretical framework we rely on to analyze the participants' interactions as well as methodological issues related to video data. We then describe the classroom setting. Next, we present our CA based analysis by underlining how the children and the teacher mutually coordinate their verbal conduct and open up opportunities to provide oral narrative in the target language French.

Theoretical and Methodological Issues

Conversation Analysis and Second Language Learning: A Brief Sketch

In the last two decades, CA has had a growing impact on studies of second language learning as a follow-up to "the controversial landmark paper by Firth and Wagner (1997) that appeared in the *Modern Language Journal*" (Gardner, 2008, p. 229), in which the authors argued for a more context-sensitive and participant-relevant approach. A number of recent empirical studies have indeed addressed the issue of what insights CA can offer into language learning activities (e.g. Seedhouse, 2004; Hellermann & Pekarek-Doehler, 2010; Markee, 2008).¹ For instance, Markee and Kasper (2004) point out that CA was not originally designed to analyze language learning. They argue however that language learning may be understood as a "conversational process that observably occurs in the intersubjective space between participants" (p. 496). They further assert that this perspective suggests that language acquisition and use are intertwined as to be inseparable in so far as language as a learning object is inseparable from talk-in-interaction in which it is embedded. Thus, as "CA

¹ We do not pretend to provide an exhaustive overview of CA based research on second language learning; we shall only draw together some common threads that advocate CA to investigate language learning activities.

is uniquely placed to examine the finest details of talk-in-interaction” (Gardner, 2008, p. 229), the use of CA has much to offer to shed light on language learning events.

We should note that our paper does not intend to discuss second language learning theories. Nevertheless, with regard to our understanding of second language learning activities, we emphasize here that we draw upon a sociocultural view on learning (Vygotsky, 1978, 1987) to investigate joint classroom activities (Arend, Sunnen, Fixmer, & Sujbert, 2014). Thus, referring to Mondada & Pekarek-Doehler (2004, p. 504), we assert that “CA and sociocultural theory offer complementary elements.” According to the authors, “the complementarity of the two approaches, however, cannot be reduced to using CA merely as an analytical tool in the service of sociocultural theory” (id.). Indeed, “one of the crucial contributions of CA’s analytic mentality is that it allows us to re-specify crucial notions such as task or competence from a member’s perspective” (id.).

Following this line of research, we can point out in our presented case study that CA grants insights into second language learning as sequentially unfolding in the participants’ situated multilingually coordinated utterances. Moreover, CA allows us to show that the children’s “other-oriented” *re-voicing/telling a story* is inseparable from the conversational structure of talk-in-interaction in which it is embedded.

Furthermore, from a theoretical and empirical stance, CA has greatly influenced the current conceptualizations of interactional competence in CA–SLA (Conversation Analysis for Second Language Acquisition),² (e.g., Kasper, 2006; Kasper & Wagner, 2011). From a CA perspective, interactional competence can be considered as the ability to jointly use communicative resources to co-construct understanding and co-accomplish shared (context-specific) goals, that is, the ability “to manage the turn-taking system with co-participants adopting appropriate interactional roles” (Barraja-Rohan, 2011, p. 482).

In the subsequent analysis, we will show how the children and the teacher jointly aim at accomplishing the *re-voicing/telling* task, that means, how they jointly orient to the learning object *French* through “responding to turns in a coherent and sequential manner, displaying common understanding and repairing any threat to or breakdown in communication, showing engagement and empathy when relevant or intended” (Barraja-Rohan, 2011, p. 482).

Conversation Analysis: Some Key Features

In the following, we will point out some key features of CA which are relevant for the purpose of our study.³ Conversation analysis studies the methods human participants orient to when they organize social action through talk. In other words, CA is concerned with how people achieve courses of action in and through talk and how they make their respective understanding of the actions accountable to each other. Thus, conversation analytic research states that humans always adjust their actions to a specific recipient. Sacks et al. (1974) refer to “recipient design” as “a multitude of respects in which the talk by a party in a conversation is constructed or designed in ways which display an orientation and sensitivity to the particular other(s) who are the co-participants”. That means that by building on assumptions

² The concept of interactional competence is not extensively discussed in this paper; for a deeper understanding, readers are referred to papers focusing on interactional competence as a prevalent object of inquiry within CA–SLA (e.g., Kasper, 2006; Hall, Hellermann & Pekarek-Doehler, 2011).

³ See also Arend (2016), Arend & Sunnen (2016, 2017a, 2017b).

about the interactional partner's knowledge and expectancies, participants adjust their turns to the recipient, thus constituting a continuously modified "partner model" (Deppermann & Blühdorn, 2013). In the episode analyzed below, we will point out how the children and the teacher orient to each other by relying on diverse languages, thus displaying both through the addressed language choice(s): their assumptions about the partners' linguistic competence as well as their inferences as to the appropriated language use with regard to the learning object/the task accomplishment. We will show how the participants' ability to build recipient-designed turns is simultaneously instantiating and carried on through suitable other-oriented as well as object-oriented language use.

According to CA, communication is sequentially organized. Sequences are ordered series of turns through which participants accomplish and coordinate an interactional activity. The relevance of any turn is to be understood from its occurrence in a series of turns. Turns are unfolding in time referring to what has been said (done) before. They simultaneously initiate expectations about relevant next turns. The most common type of sequences are dyadic adjacency pairs uttered by two different speakers who produce one turn each. More specifically, turn taking is to be considered in terms of TCU (turn constructional units) and turn allocation at TRP (transition relevance places) (Schegloff, 2007).

In most instances, turn transition (speaker change) is accomplished smoothly at TRP, and such places are accountably projected. At TRP, the different parties negotiate who is taking the next turn. Sacks et al. (1974) propose three options. First, the current speaker can select the next; another option is self-selection; third, if the current speaker does not select the next participant and there is no self-selection from another party at TRP, the current speaker can decide to continue. Moreover, the basic principle for self-selecting to become the next speaker is, according to Sacks et al. (1974), to start as early as possible at the first available TRP. We will see that in the analyzed excerpt, next-speaker self-selections are displaying shared understanding and engagement in the re-voicing/telling process (i.e. visualizing interactional competence).

We further emphasize the following "rules" of turn taking: Only one person talks at time. Overlap of speech is common but brief. Participants proceed to the next turn with very little gap. Longer gaps and silence should be avoided; when they occur, they are most of the time perceived as trouble. With regard to the setting and the *re-voicing/telling* process the participants engage in, we should also consider the following issues: In multiparty interaction as opposed to two-party interaction, it seems especially relevant to investigate how the participants negotiate who is the present speaker and who he or she is addressing as the primary recipient. Thus, to analyze participation in a multiparty setting, it may be beneficial to take into account verbal as well as nonverbal resources (body posture, gesture, gaze) that participants rely on to achieve the unfolding activity (Mortensen, 2008).

As the analyzed episode is concerned with oral narrative (i.e., re-voicing/telling a story), we note in addition that "stories go on over more than a single turn at talk, or a single utterance" (Sacks, 1992, p. 18). In the following, we will not focus on how the story is told; our analytic lens will pay attention to how the children's and the teacher's multilingually other-oriented conduct prompts telling a story in the target language French.

Some Methodological Issues

To study the second language learning event in its sequential organization as an emergent and interactional phenomenon, we rely on video data which give access to a situated view of social conduct (Mondada, 2009). Talk is transcribed according to the conventions commonly used in Conversation Analysis. Standard orthography is used for words and partially completed words.

As the participants utter in French, German, Luxemburgish and Portuguese, free translations in English are given; the languages used are indicated at the start of the turns.

Setting the Scene for a Multilingually Co-organized Event

The analysis carried out in this paper uses a video excerpt recorded in a primary school in Luxembourg with a large majority of immigrant children. The event shows five (9-year-old) children of a third grade engaging in a group-based activity and with a teacher. At the time of the recording, the children had their second year of French Second Language class.



Figure 1: Students in the class.

In first grade in Luxemburgish primary schools, the language of literacy is German; children engage in reading and writing activities in German. French is part of the curriculum from second grade onwards. Students and teachers commonly rely on Luxemburgish⁴ language across the whole curriculum of primary school. In the analyzed episode, German and the target language French have to be considered as second languages. We note also that Laura's (L), Nadir's (N) and David's (D) mother tongue is Portuguese, Tania's (T) mother tongue is Luxemburgish and Melissa's (M) first language is Serbian. The five children and the teacher (Te) speak Luxemburgish fluently.

Analysis

In the subsequent analysis, our research will shed light on the interactional configuration of a *French* second language learning activity by focusing on how the participants multilingually co-manage turn taking in order to produce oral narrative.

⁴ Luxemburgish is recognized as national language since 1984.

When we join the scene, David has just read aloud (in French) a story about a giraffe, a little crocodile and a big mouse meeting in a swimming pool. The teacher then asks the children (while addressing Tania through his gaze) if they (she) could *re-voice* the story (see transcription below). Through re-voicing, the children are supposed to display both, their understanding of what they have heard and their oral skills in the target language.

Transcription

- 1 Te (Fr) you can tell the story/
 2 T uh:m uh:m
 3 Te (Lu) if you can say the story/
 4 T (Lu) I beg your pardon/ ((while turning her head towards Melissa))
 5 M (Lu) if you can say the story/
 6 T (Lu) [not correctly ((gazing at the teacher))
 7 D (P) [you have heard/ ((turning towards Laura))
 8 L ((affirmative head movement))
 9 D (Lu) she has understood she can tell it ((pointing to his left to L while turning his head to his right towards the teacher))
 10 D (P) would you tell what happens in the story/ ((shifting his head towards L))
 11 L ((shrugs her shoulders, nods her head))
 12 D (Lu) she wants to tell it Sir ((pointing to his left to L while turning his head to his right towards the teacher))
 13 Te (Fr) in French/
 14 L (Fr) yes
 15 Te (Fr, Lu) yes in French that is good we will listen *we will listen*
 16 D (P) thus tell what happens in the story (..) tell
 (...)
 17 L (Fr) it is about a (.) a little giraffe and a (.) a little crocodile
 ((Laura is re-voicing the story in French, holding the floor for more than one turn-constructural unit))
- (25s)
- 18 T (Lu) may I tell in German/
 19 Te (G) you can say it as you want
 20 T (G) uhm it is (.) uhm about a (.) uhm little (.) uhm gi (.) giraffe
 ((Tanja is *re-voicing* the story in German, holding the floor for more than one turn-constructural unit))

Interactional Competence as Multilingually Expanding a Question-Answer Sequence

The beginning of the episode is quite troubled in the sense that there are sequentially unfolding “hesitations” and reformulations (2–5) after the teacher has addressed his question “you can tell the story/” (1). We note here that the teacher’s “vous/you” uttered in French can be considered as the plural form of the pronoun. Thus, initially we may say that he addresses his question to all five children. Actually, the next speaker, Tania, is selected by the teacher’s gaze orientation to her at the end of his turn. Furthermore, as the teacher starts the sequence in French, he supports that the language of re-voicing should be French.

With regard to the above-mentioned rules of turn-taking, Tania is responding to the teacher’s allocation of the turn to her by vocalizing “uh:m uh:m” (2) at the transition relevance place (TRP). Thus, she acknowledges being the next speaker. Her turn is launched and, by “a

slightly lengthened turn-holding (“uh:m” . . .), she has diminished the likelihood of incursion into her turn space” (Gardner, 2008, p. 232) from her fellow students. In turn 1, the teacher has prompted the children to give an account of their ability to accomplish oral narrative in French (“you can tell the story/”). By reformulating then his question in Luxemburgish (3), the teacher displays that he is understanding Tania’s “uh:m” as a hesitation related to the subject matter French: or T has not understood his former question as uttered in French or, instantly providing the response in the second language French is probably impeded by the pressure to draw on new linguistic resources.

Moreover, in terms of syntax, the teacher makes translation recognizable as such by using the reported speech structure to build his turn. The phrase “if” appears to introduce a second turn part (an indirect question), whereas a potential first part, that is an introductory clause, is not uttered. Furthermore, the teacher relies once again (this time in Luxemburgish) on the plural form of the personal pronoun “you” while eliciting Tania’s response through his gaze orientation (3). Subsequently, Tania achieves a retardation of the requested response by uttering “I beg your pardon” in Luxemburgish (4). Simultaneously with her verbal utterance she turns her head towards Melissa thus selecting Melissa as next speaker, that is, seeking help. Melissa immediately replies to Tania’s request (5) by building on the teacher’s prior translation. Melissa also designs a reported speech turn constructional unit (TCU) in Luxemburgish (if you can say the story) thus making her utterance recognizable as a translation “of second degree”: Melissa is exclusively addressing Tania as recipient by using the singular form of the pronoun you.

We can see that the teacher and Melissa are building bridging turns in Luxemburgish (3, 5) in order to provide some support for Tania who delays twice the preferred response “yes” (2, 4) to the teacher’s initial question (1). By this means, the teacher and M display inferring T’s hesitations as arising out of linguistic lapses in the second language French. In terms of sequence organization, we can identify an insert-expansion (Schegloff, 2007, p. 106) in the question-answer sequence. Through their other-oriented utterances (2–5), the teacher, Tania and Melissa co-construct mutually complementary post-first and pre-second inserts thus organizing sub-sequences. The co-participants jointly look backward to clarify the talk of the first pair part (1) while simultaneously looking forward to implement the second pair part which is pending. Tania’s accounts of hesitation ensuing delays meet the teacher’s and Melissa’s reformulations (translations) aiming at accomplishing the sequence.

Then, subsequently to Melissa’s mediational turn, Tania provides her answer (in Luxemburgish) (6) while gazing at the teacher, thus closing the sequence. Tania’s utterance is overlapping with David’s turn (7). Tania has finally answered the teacher’s initial question through her utterance not correctly, thus evaluating her ability to re-voice the story as not good enough to perform correctly. Through her answer, Tania validates her former stances (2, 4) as hesitations, that is, as attempts to postpone the requested re-voicing. Furthermore, the occurring delays invite potential incoming speakers to take the floor. Thus, David self-selects synchronically with Tania at transition relevance place after Melissa’s turn.

Interactional Competence as Multilingually Moving Ahead the Interactional Process of Task Accomplishment

David is orienting to the forward movement of the task accomplishment (re-voicing his story) and acting upon the fact that at some moment in the unfolding sequence a problem has arisen in its progression towards completion (Jefferson, 1984). The occurring overlap (6, 7) can be

considered as both the temporally and locally situated ending point of the teacher initiated sequence (1–6) and the starting point of a new sequence. David is orienting to Laura while asking “you have heard?” (7). From this point onward, Laura is directly involved in a new sequence initiated by David self-selecting and addressing her as a next potential performer. Without any delay Laura responds “yes” to David by a head movement while gazing at him (8). We note that David is addressing Laura in Portuguese thus identifying Laura and himself as members of a Portuguese speaking community. Then, David addresses the teacher while pointing at Laura and suggests that she has understood (and) she can tell it (9). Here David switches to Luxemburgish displaying his assumptions about the teacher’s language knowledge and by that way his own interactional competence. In the following, David will several more times address Laura in Portuguese (10, 16) and “transmit” Laura’s reply in Luxemburgish to the teacher (12). Furthermore, David puts on equal terms having heard (7) and having understood (9); he thereby assumes that Laura’s French language skills (comprehension and performing) allow her to tell the story.

We note that we can uncover here a flexible organization of teacher-student interaction diverging from prevalent normative practices for turn-taking (such as teacher dominates next speaker selection, students have limited rights for self-selecting) (Gardner, 2013). Besides self-selecting, David is submitting a solution to re-enact the pending interactional agenda “telling the story” through multilingually uttered complementary actions: he proposes a new speaker to the teacher (in Luxemburgish) and he elicits the new speaker’s involvement in the process (in Portuguese). In producing and sequentially organizing differentiated “partner model” focused turns, David shows a quite remarkable interactional competence. Moreover, David’s body posture (9, 12) (turning to his right towards the teacher) and his simultaneous gesture (pointing at Laura to his left) are further accounts of his double-oriented procedure.

Thus, recognizing the teacher’s silence as validating his previous submission (9), David asks Laura if she would tell the story. L answers by shrugging her shoulders and nodding her head. David then translates his understanding of Laura’s movement by addressing the teacher “she wants to tell it Sir” (12). We can observe a finely tuned progression in David’s turn design. Besides a well-orchestrated other-oriented language switching, he proceeds in several stages: first he checks if Laura has heard the story (7); then, he invites her politely to tell the story (10). Laura replies to each question with an agreement token (8, 11) subsequently transmitted to the teacher by David (9, 12). The teacher acknowledges Laura as potential next storyteller; in his phrasal TCU “in French” (13), he asks for reassurance regarding Laura’s use of the target language French. Laura confirms (14). We should note here that the teacher and L are re-activating French abandoned at some point (after the first turn). The teacher positively comments on Laura’s response and projects the (her) next turn by announcing that the co-participants will listen (in French) (15). He extends his turn by repeating, “we will listen” in Luxemburgish. David then prompts Laura to tell (16). She will develop the recounting event in multi-unit turns.

As mentioned above, we assert that CA and sociocultural theory offer complementary elements. In that respect, David’s procedure invites us to look at mediation as an organizational activity instantiating in interactional competence thus participating in the ongoing construction of the language learning activity.

Tania’s subsequent self-selection (18) can therefore be considered as fostered in the multilingually organized interactional space of other-orientation and empathy. Indeed, immediately after Laura’s performance, Tania self-selects and, while gazing at the teacher,

she asks in Luxemburgish if she could tell the story in German (18). The teacher provides his agreement in German (19) by that way supporting Tania's request and enabling her to display her understanding of the story (even if she does not rely on the target language to address the issue). Tania then re-produces the story in German (20). Thus, she makes accountable that she is still aiming at giving the preferred answer to the teacher's initial question uttered in turn 1. She shows that she can tell the story. There is no evidence in the data as to whether Tania uses Laura's prior re-voicing as a resource or not. However, Tania dares to take the initiative to launch a new re-voicing, in another second language.

Concluding remarks

In this paper, we point out how a turn-by-turn CA driven analysis allows us to get insights into second language learning activities in terms of interactional competence. We show that deploying language competence is mutually interwoven with "responding to turns in a coherent and sequential manner" (Barraja-Rohan, 2011, p. 482). Furthermore, in our case study, "showing engagement and empathy when relevant or intended" (id.) reveals being inseparable from supporting the fluent progress of the second language learning activity. The teacher and the students jointly orient to the learning object French. The participants' multilingually other-oriented conduct ensures the maintenance of mutual understanding. Although the teacher recognizably re-orient to the learning object French, he allows the children some interactional space to multilingually co-organize the activity. We can demonstrate how the teacher's engagement with the children's propositions and his conversational actions of agreement (enacted in language switching) open up opportunities for successfully providing oral narrative and/or displaying understanding, both in the target language French.

Acknowledgments

We would like to express our sincere gratitude and great appreciation to Professor Dominique Portante for his warm and kind guidance and his generous support in developing our research work.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations were taken into account. The parents gave their informed consent in writing. The names are fictitious in order to maintain the participants' anonymity.

Transcript Conventions

Talk is described according to conventions commonly used in CA.

Abbreviations used in the text and in the transcriptions:

L: Laura

N: Nadir

T: Tania

Te: Teacher

M: Melissa

D: David

(Fr): French language

(G): German language

(LU): Luxemburgish language

(P): Portuguese language

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