

16 Problem-solving interaction in GFL videoconferencing

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Abstract

This paper reports on the interaction between upper intermediate German as a Foreign Language (GFL) learners in Tokyo and prospective GFL teachers in Berlin in an online videoconferencing environment. It focuses on the way problems in comprehension and production are brought up and solved in the subsequent interaction. Our findings illustrate that our synchronous online medium supports a balanced interaction between Second Language (L2) learners and prospective teachers, the main feature of which is joint utterance construction within scaffolding processes. We will show implications for L2 learning and teacher training.

Keywords: interaction, German as a foreign language, group-to-group video conferencing, questions, non-lexical cues, scaffolding.

1. Introduction

Conversational interaction is one of the most important factors for successful L2 learning (Mackey, 2012). Spontaneous questions in particular, asked to clarify and confirm one's understanding, provide interactional benefits in initiating negotiation of meaning. In traditional teacher-centred classrooms, however, questions often occur in an asymmetrical way: Teachers typically ask display

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questions as first turns of Initiation-Response-Feedback (IRF) exchanges whereas referential questions by teachers or spontaneous questions asked by learners occur rather rarely (Ellis, 2012; Seedhouse, 2004). In this paper, we will report on a group-to-group videoconferencing setting in joint German courses between Waseda University in Tokyo and Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, in which GFL learners and prospective GFL teachers participate. We will address the following research questions:

- How do the interlocutors signal the difficulties they face in comprehension and production?
- How do they solve these difficulties in their interaction?

With our article, we would like to contribute to the discussion on the use of videoconferencing to support L2 learning and teaching (Bahlo, Paul, Topaj, & Steckbauer, 2014; Hampel & Stickler, 2012).

2. Data and methodology

We collected our data in joint GFL courses, conducted from 2004 until 2014 (see Hoshii & Schumacher, 2010, for more details). At Waseda University, the course was titled ‘Videoconferences in German’. The participants were undergraduate students of different subjects (upper intermediate learners of German). The course aimed at promoting the learners’ oral skills in L2 communication as well as their abilities to debate and give presentations in German³. At Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, the course was called ‘Teaching via videoconferences’. The participants were graduate students of German as a foreign language and therefore prospective teachers. They trained how to promote learners’ oral skills by reflecting on their own talk through observations and transcriptions of the recordings.

3. Since 2015, the course has been continued in cooperation with the University of Vienna.

In this paper, we will present representative oral data collected during the first three videoconferences (80 minutes each) of the summer term 2014, produced by five Japanese and six German students⁴.

We used an essentially explorative approach. While assorting interactional sequences containing questions in our data, we also found non-lexical units with interrogative functions. We then classified the questions and non-lexical units with regard to their function and analysed the subsequent interaction.

To gain insight into the characteristics of our interaction with regard to the question of who controls the discourse, we additionally looked at the frequency of questions and non-lexical cues in the two groups (for more details, see [Hoshii & Schumacher, forthcoming a](#)).

3. Results and discussion

In our data, there are no display questions. All questions and signals are open-ended and referential, based on the interlocutors' own intentions. Four categories are pivotal for our analysis: refocusing questions (RF-questions) and refocusing non-lexical cues (RF-cues) indicating problems in comprehension, as well as questions and non-lexical cues revealing problems in production (P-questions, P-cues).

3.1. RF-questions

Following [Rost-Roth \(2006\)](#), refocusing questions refer to previous utterances, focusing on (parts of) the utterances in order to secure understanding. In (1), a learner (non-native speaker) requests clarification of the word *Schulstufe* (level of education), refocusing on the word in the previous utterance of a native speaker. In doing so, she initiates negotiation of meaning.

4. All participants gave us permission in written form to use their oral and visual data for academic purposes.

(1)

498 NS 5 und in welcher schulstufe warst du dort?
 and in which level of education were you there?
→ 499 NNS 1 schulstufe?
 level of education? (VC03_2014)

130 of 242 RF-questions (54%) are asked by the students in Berlin, 112 (46%) are asked by the students in Tokyo. The discourse control is thus evenly balanced since both groups of interlocutors initiate negotiation of meaning sequences (see [Hoshii & Schumacher, forthcoming a, b](#), for more details).

3.2. RF-cues

Refocusing cues are non-lexical utterances indicating a comprehension problem with the previous utterance. They may function as clarification requests just like RF-questions, often causing the interlocutor to modify his/her original utterance and thus initiating negotiating of meaning. This non-lexical refocusing can be observed in (2), where the learner's *hm?* causes the native speaker to reduce her original sentence to only the subject and the verb, expressed twice, thus tailoring her utterance to the learner's needs.

(2)

1193 NS 5 sie spart darauf ins ausland zu gehen
 she is saving money to travel abroad
→ 1194 NN 3 hm?
 hm?
1195 NS 5 sie spart – sie spart
 she is saving – she is saving (VC03_2014)

3.3. P-questions

In questions indicating planning phases of production (P-questions), internal thoughts are produced in utterances like “How do I say...?”, often in line with disfluency and hesitation phenomena. In (3), we see a question indicating that

the learner is searching for a word. P-questions are not necessarily directed to the other interlocutors and may involve code switching to the L1 or a previous learned L2 (English), both of which can be seen in (3). Here, it leads to self-initiated other-repair.

(3)

- 189 NNS 3 nur-<<eng>men.> ah nur; <<jap>nan to iu,
otoko?=was heißt otoko?>
*only <<eng>men.> ah only; <<jap>nan
to iu, otoko?=what is otoko?>*
- 190 NNS1 [männer?]
[men?] (VC02_2014)

3.4. P-cues

Non-lexical cues indicating the planning phase of production often occur as hesitation phenomena in form of filled pauses, indicating that the speaker needs time for production or repair (Schwitalla, 2012, p. 90). In our data, such cues often initiate joint utterance constructions, as in (4). Here, one learner (NNS 5) scaffolds another learner's (NNS 3) utterance, thus reacting to her disfluency marker *hm*, that follows the beginning utterance of the comparative form *mehr* (more). The self-initiated other-repair *leichter* leads to a confirmation by the first speakers (*ja, leichter, einfacher*), thus completing the collaborative utterance.

(4)

- 258 NNS 3 zum beispiel; diese prüfung für wase-waseda ist
ganz schwer
*For example; this exam for wase-waseda is
very difficult*
- 259 NNS 3 aber für andere universitäten vielleicht; mehr-hm
but for other universities perhaps; more-hm
- 260 NNS 5 leichter
easier
- 261 NNS 3 ja, leichter, einfacher
yes, easier, simpler (VC02_2014)

Interestingly, only the learners use non-lexical (RF- or P-) cues. This reveals that their speech is quite natural and spontaneous. The absence of these cues in the native speaker data, on the other hand, indicates that they are aware of their role as prospective teachers. They try to control their speech in a way to provide the learners with comprehensible input to offer them learning opportunities.

4. Conclusion

Videoconferencing in joint foreign language courses enables conversational interaction in institutional settings. Two features are pivotal to the interaction in our GFL videoconferences: First, interlocutors on both sides initiate problem-solving interaction, hence the control of the discourse is evenly distributed. Secondly, problems in comprehension and production are solved collaboratively and the learners' utterances are scaffolded and tailored to their needs (see [Hoshii & Schumacher, forthcoming b](#), for more details). For learners, this setting therefore facilitates authentic L2 communication and promotes their autonomy. Within teacher training, it may raise the prospective teachers' awareness of their own speech. Videoconferencing in joint foreign language courses may thus promote the interactional competence of both L2 learners and L2 teachers.

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New directions in telecollaborative research and practice: selected papers from the second conference on telecollaboration in higher education
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