39 A conversation analysis approach to researching eTandems – the challenges of data collection

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Abstract

This article deals with the challenges of data collection from a Conversation Analysis (CA) perspective to researching synchronous, audio-visual eTandems. Conversation analysis is a research tradition that developed out of ethnomethodology and is concerned with the question of how social interaction in naturally occurring situations is organized. In the course of the first cycle of data collection for my PhD research, which was carried out within the L3 TASK project[2], four methodological issues ('multimodality', 'completeness', 'authenticity' and 'task-based vs. off-task conversation') that result from the particular requirements of CA to data collection were identified. In the following article these challenges and possible solutions are brought to light.

Keywords: synchronous audio-visual communication, eTandem language learning, conversation analysis, data collection.

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1. Connecting CA to eTandem language learning research

Tandem learning refers to "language-based communication between two learners who are native speakers of different languages and who are learning each other's language as L2" (Cziko, 2004, pp. 26-27). Originally, language tandems were carried out in face-to-face settings, where the participants share the same physical space. Due to technological advancements, eTandems have increasingly been able to overcome spatial distance. Research in the field of synchronous, audio-visual eTandem language learning has been concerned with various aspects such as learner attitudes (El-Hariri & Jung, 2015; Tian & Wang, 2010), task design (El-Hariri, 2016) and interactional dimensions (e.g. Akiyama, 2014). However, detailed analyses of eTandem conversations from a CA perspective remain scarce. CA is an open, inductive approach that aims to understand how people manage spoken discourse. Because of its exploratory, hypothesis-generating nature, it is well suited to gather insight into new forms of social interaction, such as eTandem conversations. While the mechanisms of everyday conversation and various types of institutional communication have been thoroughly studied from a CA perspective, eTandem conversations as a hybrid of natural everyday communication and communication for the purpose of language learning (Bechtel, 2003) are yet to be explored. From the perspective of language teaching and learning, research CA may:

> "document in a way that, for example, main-stream SLA studies cannot, what students are doing when they are engaged in a learning activity, and what they are doing at a later stage when they have […] learned to become accomplished users of certain linguistic resources in interaction" (Gardner, 2013, p. 609).

2. The project: L3 TASK

L3 TASK is a project funded by the European Commission that promotes language learning by means of synchronous, audio-visual eTandems. The

participants of this project are university students majoring in either (Mandarin) Chinese, Spanish or German, who are proficient speakers of one of the other two languages. The main objective of the project was to foster oral communication. The present article refers to the experience of data collection of Chinese-German eTandems. Each eTandem consisted of one student from the University of Vienna (Austria) and one student from Xiangtan University (People's Republic of China). The students from the University of Vienna were majoring in Chinese Studies, the students from Xiangtan University were majoring in German Studies. The students at both universities participated in the project outside their regular language courses, but were offered a supplementary tandem course with monthly meet-ups. In addition, the participants were given a variety of tasks to facilitate communication. In weekly sessions, the students communicated via the online program ooVoo. It was mainly chosen for the purpose of data collection as audio/video chat sessions can be easily recorded with it. The eTandems were asked to record three or four conversations over a period of one semester (October–January 2014/15).

3. Challenges of data collection

3.1. Multimodality

Observations from the first cycle of data collection showed that eTandem conversations were not only limited to oral communication. Instead, participants made use of different modes to orchestrate meaning. Text-chat mode was used in three particular instances: to overcome comprehension problems, during technical difficulties, and to explain new vocabulary. During data analysis, we were able to identify situations that lead to a switch from audio/video chat to text chat, whereas what was actually communicated through the text chat could not be observed. Individual reports revealed that not only text, but also images were sent through the text chat. For a CA approach, it is crucial to get a complete picture of the conversation that is as detailed as possible. This is especially a challenge for telecollaboration practice that allows for the simultaneous use of different modes. Although it is of course not reasonable nor even possible to

try to capture everything that happens on and off screen, the experience from the first cycle of data collection showed how important it is to consider all the possible modes participants may use to make meaning on the one hand and to stay open about making adaptations to the ways of data collection on the other.

3.2.   Completeness

We are naturally tempted to only focus on the 'core' of a conversation, however, openings and closings build the frame of a conversation where the relationship between the speakers, the setting, and the purpose of the conversation is negotiated. From a CA point of view, a conversation cannot be sufficiently analyzed if we do not know how the speakers themselves interpret the situation (Deppermann, 2008, p. 27). It is therefore essential to document the entire conversation, even if conversation openings and closings are not the particular research focus. Observations of individual cases from the first data collection showed that conversations might start out in the text-chat, while then switching to video-chat for the main part of the session. If the participants are assigned to document the eTandem sessions themselves, which was the case in our project, it is crucial to stress the importance of 'complete' data, including conversation openings and closings.

3.3.   Authenticity

Authenticity is a controversial topic in the field of CA. CA originally dealt with naturally occurring everyday conversation. Due to ethical, but also practical reasons, it is nowadays common to work with improvised, re-enacted scenes. From a CA perspective, rehearsed or prepared talk-in-interaction is not eligible for research purposes. The aim of the project was to promote authentic, realistic communication by means of eTandems. However, despite extensive explanations, certain participants were not comfortable being recorded. Although the eTandems were not part of a language course and the students were assured that the recordings were not being assessed, some participants who still felt irritated were more comfortable if they had rehearsed the conversations before. A solution to that particular problem is to thoroughly inform the participants

about the research purpose and then let them simply volunteer for recordings, instead of deciding on a mandatory number.

3.4.   The role of 'tasks'

Certain participants were worried that they were only allowed to speak about the proposed topic and that off-task conversations are of no interest, especially when recording a session. This might be true for research that is concerned with specific task-related research questions, but it is counterproductive for a CA based research. If tasks are given to the participants, it seems to be important to discuss the role of a task beforehand.

4.   Conclusion

CA poses specific demands to its data and the process of data generation. This is especially a challenge if the participants of a study are the ones who carry out the recordings themselves. While for some research it is crucial to conceal the research purpose, the experience from the first cycle of data collection showed that this is the exact opposite for a CA based approach in a telecollaboration context. On one hand, participants who do not only serve as research objects, but are actively engaged in the process of data collection need to be aware of CA-specific demands to data collection, such as 'completeness', 'authenticity' and the 'role of tasks'. On the other, researchers need to consider the different modes participants use to make meaning in order to get a grasp of what really is happening on screen.

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