12 A proposal to study the links between the sociocultural and the linguistic dimensions of eTandem interactions

Marco Cappellini[1]

Abstract

After identifying a major limitation of current research on telecollaboration, I propose to develop a methodological framework to empirically study the link between the sociocultural dimension and the linguistic dimension of interaction in eTandem via desktop videoconferencing. For the sociocultural dimension, I study which roles the learners take during the interactions using discourse analysis tools. For the linguistic dimension, I focus mainly on different types of conversational side sequences identified in the francophone interactionist literature. In the end, I discuss the relevance that the methodological framework I propose can have for research on telecollaboration and point to studies that explored this avenue.

Keywords: research paradigm, conversation analysis, corpus analysis, eTandem, dynamic complex systems theory.

1.   Introduction

Studies of telecollaboration almost exclusively focus on only one project, which prevents researchers from comparing projects and establishing

grounded claims in respect of their impact on the development of language, intercultural, digital, and/or pedagogical skills. This is linked to the fact that on an epistemological and methodological level, research suffers from a dichotomy between cognitive and sociocultural approaches, which has characterised the literature on telecollaboration, and more widely on second language acquisition thus far (Hulstijn, Young, Ortega, & Bigelow, 2014; Zuengler & Miller, 2006).

On the one hand, the so called 'cognitivist paradigm' is based on the input-interaction framework and the interaction hypothesis (Gass, 1997). This paradigm identified interactional dynamics that are present in any pedagogical environment. It focussed on categories of analysis to develop quantitative studies that allow statistical comparisons between environments. However, this paradigm does not consider the social dimension of learning and it usually ignores the role of the digital environment and of multimodality. When it does, it is within an analytical and experimental epistemology, where different factors are identified as variables and manipulated to study the impact of the presence/absence of an element on (language) acquisition. Such a procedure does not consider, as dynamic complex systems theory suggests (Larsen-Freeman & Cameron, 2008), that the characteristics of an ensemble, a system, are different from the sum of the characteristics of its elements.

On the other hand, 'sociocultural approaches' allow an in-depth view into the development of language competence within the social environment of learners (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006) and consider the relationship between learners and the physical and/or digital environments. However, these studies are almost exclusively case studies and their results are difficult to generalise. Comparison of telecollaborative projects is also quite rare within this paradigm, which hinders the contrastive identification of the outcomes of different models of telecollaboration (O'Dowd, 2018).

The aim of this paper is to suggest a methodological framework proposing categories of analysis that are both relevant for quantitative analysis and anchored to the social and linguistic dimensions of eTandem exchanges.

2.   The sociocultural dimension

(Applied) linguists have taken concepts and tools from ethnomethodology and conversation analysis to study verbal interaction. For instance, Mondada (1999) developed a broad ethnomethodological framework to study how interlocutors categorise themselves as well as the activities they are accomplishing through linguistic and paralinguistic means. Following Mondada (1999), an earlier empirical study charted the discursive positionings that eTandem partners adopt during their online conversations (Cappellini & Rivens Mompean, 2013). The main topics of discussion are personal and cultural, defined in an emic perspective. Cultural topics, within this perspective, are usually defined in relation to national cultures[2], while personal topics refer to socialising, hobbies, and daily life. For cultural topics, the following positionings were found (Cappellini & Rivens Mompean, 2013):

- **expert-novice**: this is the most common positioning. The student who talks about the nation where s/he is born positions as the person who has knowledge about it and the interlocutor as the person who has no knowledge and wants to acquire it;

- **expert-expert agreeing**: both interlocutors contribute some knowledge about the topic discussed and the information provided is not in contradiction;

- **expert-expert disagreeing**: both interlocutors contribute some knowledge about the topic at issue and the information provided is contradictory; and

- **novice-novice**: neither interlocutor has the piece of information needed.

These categories cover the possibilities of co-construction of expertise about sociocultural topics within the conversation from an emic point of view. The

---

2. For the serious issues this raises from an intercultural education perspective, see Dervin (2017) from a general point of view and Cappellini and Rivens Mompean (2013) for eTandem more specifically.

model also provides flexibility, since these are open categories in terms of the ethnomethodological procedures carried out to perform these positionings. This two-layered approach to the sociocultural dimension makes possible the openness necessary to describe social practices of co-construction of positioning, while providing the stability necessary to generalise the categorisation of these, therefore allowing comparison among pairs within an eTandem project, or across eTandem projects.

3. The linguistic dimension

To study the linguistic dimension, I drew on the francophone acquisitionist literature (Pekarek Doehler, 2000), which relates concepts from sociocultural theory to conversation analysis. More precisely, I adapted four categories of conversational side sequences from the literature (Cappellini, 2016):

- **potential acquisition of vocabulary**: the learner has a gap in their vocabulary and asks their interlocutor for assistance;

- **potential acquisition of syntax**: the learner has a gap in their understanding of morpho-syntactic issues and asks their interlocutor for assistance;

- **normative evaluation**: the learner produces an utterance containing what the interlocutor considers a mistake, which leads the interlocutor to 'correct' the learner, usually interrupting them; and

- **explicative conversational sequence**: the learner does not understand something the interlocutor says and asks for help.

From the point of view of sociocultural theory (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006), side sequences such as those described above may be a sign of the internalisation of language. The conversational accomplishment of these categories can vary and actual ethnomethodological procedures can provide borderline cases. However,

these cases are still categorisable in one of the four broad categories (Cappellini & Pescheux, 2015), therefore allowing statistical analysis.

4. Building complex configurations

The elements presented in the two previous sections can be seen as interconnected from a conversational point of view. In other words, to consider the linguistic dimension through the lens of conversational side sequences allows study of where these side sequences appear during broader conversational sequences characterised in terms of conversational positioning related to the sociocultural dimension.

Combining the category sets (personal topics + the four cultural positionings and the four side sequences) and multiplying them for the two languages of an eTandem and for the two parts of the eTandem session results in 80 possible complex categories. An example of a complex category would be a normative evaluative side sequence for French language appearing during an expert-novice exchange about Chinese culture during the French part of the conversation. The number of occurrences of each complex category can be an indicator of the characteristics of an eTandem conversation, of the conversations of an eTandem pair, of an eTandem setting, or to allow comparisons.

5. Future directions

This proposal has two major limits. The first is that the framework does not take into account the digital dimension. The second is that it is based on research on eTandem conversations, which means that, in other models, other positioning categories could emerge. This is why one of the future directions I intend to explore is to compare the interactions within different telecollaborative models, as was done for Normative Evaluation side sequences in Cappellini and Azaoui (2017). Another future direction will be to use this framework as a tool to study the effects of task implementation on the eTandem interactions.

References

Cappellini, M. (2016). Roles and scaffolding in teletandem interactions – a study of the relations between the sociocultural and the language learning dimensions in a French-Chinese teletandem. *Innovation in Language Learning and Teaching*, *10*(1), 6-20. https://doi.org/10.1080/17501229.2016.1134859

Cappellini, M., & Azaoui, B. (2017). Sequences of normative evaluation in two telecollaboration projects: a comparative study of multimodal feedback through desktop videoconference. *Language Learning in Higher Education*, *7*(1), 55-80. https://doi.org/10.1515/cercles-2017-0002

Cappellini, M., & Pescheux, M. (2015). La gestion des normes langagières dans un tandem franco-chinois par visioconférence. *Bulletin Suisse de Linguistique Appliquée VALS/ASLA, special issue, 3*, 171-187.

Cappellini, M., & Rivens Mompean, A. (2013). Positionnements culturels dans un tandem sino-fançais par visioconférence. *Sinergies Chine, 8*, 137-149.

Dervin, F. (2017). *Compétences interculturelles*. Editions des Archives Contemporains.

Gass, S. M. (1997). *Input, interaction, and the second language learner*. Routledge.

Hulstijn, J. H., Young, R. F., Ortega, L., & Bigelow, M. (2014). Bridging the gap: cognitive and social approaches to research in second language learning and teaching. *Studies in Second Language Acquisition*, *36*(3), 361-421. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0272263114000035

Lantolf, J. P., & Thorne, S. L. (2006). *Sociocultural theory and the genesis of second language development*. Oxford University Press.

Larsen-Freeman, D., & Cameron, L. (2008). *Complex systems and applied linguistics*. Oxford University Press.

Mondada, L. (1999). L'accomplissement de l'étrangéité dans et par l'interaction : procédures de catégorisation des locuteurs. *Langages*, *134*, 20-34. https://doi.org/10.3406/lgge.1999.2190

O'Dowd, R. (2018). From telecollaboration to virtual exchange. *Journal of Virtual Exchange*, *1*, 1-23. https://doi.org/10.14705/rpnet.2018.jve.1

Pekarek Doehler, S. (Ed.). (2000). *Approches interactionnistes de l'acquisition des langues étrangères*. *Aile*, *12*.

Zuengler, J., & Miller, E. R. (2006). Cognitive and sociocultural perspectives: two parallel SLA worlds? *Tesol Quarterly, 40*(1), 35-58. https://doi.org/10.2307/40264510

Telecollaboration and virtual exchange across disciplines: in service of social inclusion and global citizenship
Edited by Anna Turula, Malgorzata Kurek, and Tim Lewis