14 Vocabulary learning in Mandarin Chinese – German eTandems

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Abstract

This article deals with vocabulary learning in synchronous, multimodal eTandems focussing on Mandarin Chinese as a target language. In doing so, the study adopts an emic, conversation analytic perspective and triangulates self-reported data from learner diaries with recordings of actual eTandem conversations. The analysis of the learner diaries showed that the participants perceive to have mostly improved their vocabulary. In order to identify the video extracts for qualitative analysis, the vocabulary items mentioned in the learner diaries were located within the interactions and analysed by means of Conversation Analysis (CA). For the most part, the analysed sequences classify as instances of word searches during which a clear preference for self-initiated collaborative repair was observed. Peer-assistance of the expert speaker was only performed on request of the learner. Furthermore, the multimodal setting shows how the participant's gaze plays a key-role in assessing the status of the word search.

Keywords: multimodal eTandems, conversation analysis, vocabulary learning, word searches.

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1. Introduction: CA-for-eTandem language learning research

CA is a research approach that centres around the question of how people manage talk-in-interaction. In the field of language learning and teaching research, CA is recognised as a method to investigate learner interaction since it may "document in a way that, for example, main-stream [second language acquisition] 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).

Research on synchronous, multimodal eTandems has only recently started to focus on interactional dimensions from a CA point of view. Existing studies cover topics such as role taking and scaffolding (Cappellini, 2016), thematic development (Black, 2017), and repair (El-Hariri & Renner, 2017). The current study falls into this line of research, while putting a particular emphasis on the multimodal nature of eTandem interactions. Adopting an emic perspective, the current study poses two research questions:

- What do the Mandarin Chinese learners perceive to have learnt during the eTandem sessions?
- How is this learning interactively realised within the conversations?

2. Project outline

Altogether, six Mandarin Chinese/German dyads participated in the eTandem initiative of the current study. The Mandarin Chinese learners were students or graduates of the 'Chinese Studies' programme at the University of Vienna in Austria; the German learners were students of 'German Studies' at the National Kaohsiung First University of Science and Technology in Taiwan. The main objective of the project was to promote oral interaction in real-time, therefore

the participants communicated with each other through video-conferencing tools such as ooVoo or Skype. To facilitate communication, a list of possible communication topics (e.g. 'hobbies', 'travelling', 'future plans', etc.) was provided by the organisers, however, the participants were strongly encouraged to develop their own topics. Since the initiative was created as an outer-curricular activity, the interactions took place outside the regular language courses and students were free to choose the time and location of their sessions. Regarding the research agenda of the project, the participants were explicitly involved in the process of data collection. They were encouraged to provide as much data as possible, but decided on their own terms what they wanted to submit to the researcher. To ensure full transparency, all participants were informed about the research goals and methodology beforehand.

3. Methodology

The current study triangulates self-reported data from learner diaries with interactional data from the actual eTandem-sessions. The learner diaries were semi-structured and consisted of three blocks: (1) 'General thoughts about today's session', (2) 'My learning process', and (3) 'My tandem partner's role'. Each block included up to three open-ended statements (e.g. 'In today's session I have learnt…') that the participants were asked to complete. For the purpose of the current study, the second block has been selected as a basis for the analysis.

Interactional data from the eTandem-sessions were obtained by recordings through ooVoo itself or an additional desktop recording programme for those who chose Skype, as well as by copies of the text-chat scripts. The final data corpus (Table 1) consists of 29 hours and 33 minutes of audio/video recordings with corresponding text-chat scripts, 28 learner diaries (Chinese learners), and 17 tutoring reflections (Taiwanese tandem partners).

The current study proceeded with a two-step analysis: firstly, the learner diaries were analysed to understand what the learners perceive to have learnt during the eTandem sessions; and secondly, specific items listed in the learner diaries

were located within the interactions and examined from a conversation analytic perspective.

Table 1. Overview of the data corpus

Dyad	Recordings	Learner diaries	Tutoring reflections
eTandem 1	6 (altogether 6h 29 min.)	7	5
eTandem 2	5 (altogether 4h 27 min.)	3	0
eTandem 3	5 (altogether 5h 24 min.)	5	5
eTandem 4	4 (altogether 4 h 30 min.)	4	5
eTandem 5	5 (altogether 5 h 07 min.)	3	2
eTandem 6	4 (altogether 3 h 36 min.)	4	0

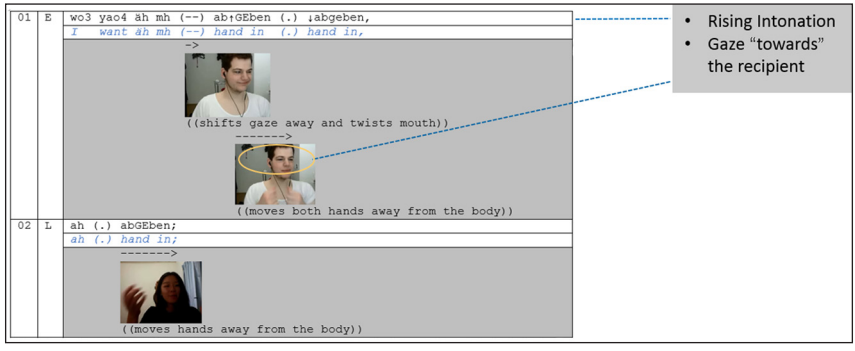
4. Results

The analysis of the learner diaries showed that learners perceive to have improved in three domains: (1) language-related aspects, (2) content-related aspects, and (3) technical aspects. For the purpose of the current study, language-related aspects have been examined more closely. Most entries were concerned with vocabulary learning (10 entries), followed by formulaic expressions on phrasal and sentence level (5 entries) and function words (3 entries). The individual entries varied in their specificity – some were written in a more general manner, some mentioned specific items. From the latter, a total of 41 listed vocabulary items were located within the interactions and sequentially analysed. Except for one, all sequences were negotiations that could be described as sequences of word searches (altogether 30 instances; 25 instances within the learners' speech, and five instances within the tandem partners' speech), language-related feedback (six instances), non-understandings (three instances), and one metalinguistic reflection. The analysis of the interactional data revealed that word searches by the learners were indicated verbally through syllable stretches, repetitions, pauses, re-starts, and perturbation signals, and non-verbally through a gaze-shift away from the camera/screen and/or a distinct thinking-face. During that stage, the tandem partners did not interfere in the process of the word search yet. From the perspective of the tandem partners,

non-verbal cues, in particular the direction of their interlocutor's gaze, seemed to play an important role in assessing whether a co-participation in the word search process is solicited or not. The following two transcripts exemplify this argument.

Extract 1 in Figure 1 shows an unproblematic, straightforward sequence of a collaborative word search activity. E's (Chinese learner) speech in Line 1 starts out in Mandarin Chinese and is characterised by non-lexical perturbations, followed by a longer pause. He then switches to German and articulates a word while shifting his gaze away. After a short pause he repeats the same word with a rising intonation while re-focussing his gaze towards the recipient. L (Taiwanese tandem partner) interprets E's code-switched utterance with a rising intonation, combined with a gaze shift towards her/the camera as a clear invitation to participate in the word search, as her contribution in Line 2 shows.

Figure 1. Extract 1



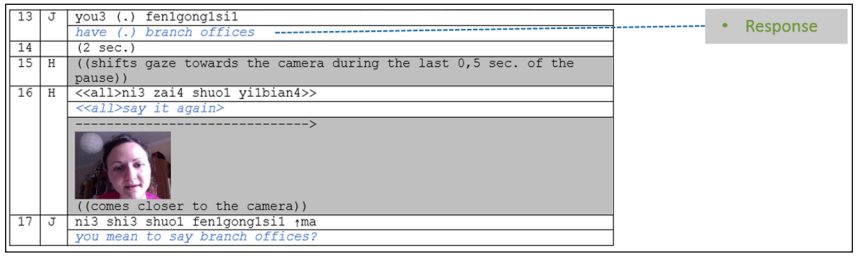
The beginning of Extract 2 (Figure 2, Line 8) shows how H (Chinese learner) articulates an explicit request for help (how do you say) while at the same time shifting her gaze away from the interlocutor/the camera. Even though the request for help is verbalised more explicitly (direct question) than in Extract 1, the tandem partner remains silent here (Lines 9-12). In comparison to Extract 1, the crucial difference here is that H's gaze is not focussed on the interlocutor/the

camera during her verbalised invitation to the word search; the verbal and non-verbal behaviour of H are giving off conflicting cues. The analysis of this extract therefore arrives at the conclusion that, at least for this example, the non-verbal cues override the verbal cues.

Figure 2. Extract 2

These conflicting cues lead to a very delayed response of J (Taiwanese tandem partner, Line 13), which is not taken up by H, but followed by a distinct pause (2 seconds) (Figure 3, Line 14). To clarify the argument being made here, it is important to note that H's gaze is still not focussed towards the interlocutor/the camera at that time. Only during the last 0.5 seconds of the pause in Line 14 does H re-focus her gaze and asks for repetition (Line 16). In Line 17, J responds again, which finally leads to a solution of the word search (not shown in Extract 3).

Figure 3. Extract 3



5. Discussion and conclusion

The literature shows that gaze seems to play a key role in regulating the invitation to the recipient(s) to the word search, assessing its status, and to what extent a co-participation is perceived to be solicited (Goodwin & Goodwin, 1986). Critics of Goodwin and Goodwin's (1986) position, such as Rossano (2013), claim that "no systematic evidence for this claim is presented and […] this apparent solicitation through gaze is, in fact, unsuccessful" (p. 316). The current study shows that in this context, the occurrence of a recipient-focussed gaze seems clear to the recipient, while the absence of it causes trouble. The results therefore correspond with the findings of Goodwin and Goodwin (1986). All analysed sequences of successful word searches shared the common feature that a favourable environment for co-participation was created by the learner (verbalised, through intonation and facial expressions) before the tandem partner interfered. Previous research on word searches (Brouwer, 2003) in non-native/expert speaker interaction defined the solicited co-participation of the expert speaker as one of the crucial aspects that turn word searches into language learning opportunities. The current study supports these findings for language learning in an eTandem context.

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