



# Constructing small talk in learner-native speaker voice-based telecollaboration: A focus on topic management and backchanneling



Anne Barron\*, Emily Black

Leuphana Universität Lüneburg, Institute of English Studies, Scharnhorststraße 1, 21335 Lüneburg, Germany

## ABSTRACT

### Keywords:

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Topic selection  
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Small talk  
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Interactional competence  
Pragmatic competence

Developments in technology, including the use of synchronous telecollaborative tools, promise to address the challenge of providing opportunities for interaction in the foreign language classroom. The present study investigates how learners and native speakers (NS) of English co-construct small talk in the opening phase of a voice-based Skype telecollaboration. Specifically, learner and NS self-oriented and other-oriented topic shifts, topic replies and verbal listenership behaviour are analysed. The focus is on the English interactions of two learner-NS dyads, each made up of a German NS and an Irish English NS. One dyad includes a learner who exhibits a high level of interactional competence while in the other dyad the learner shows no active participation. Specifically, she reveals a low use of topic shifts, a high use of equivocal short-form topic replies, few long-form replies and a very limited use of backchannels/backchannel forms, leaving the interactional burden on the Irish English NS. The analysis illuminates small talk construction in the voice-based telecollaborative context and highlights the possibilities it offers for developing interactive competencies. It also sheds light on the roles played by NS and learners in topic management and adds to our understanding of individual differences in small talk construction in the foreign language.

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## 1. Introduction

In early models of communicative competence (e.g. Bachman, 1990; Canale & Swain, 1980), L2 pragmatic competence was largely seen as learner-internal L2 competence, as an individual trait, and as an “acquired toolkit to be applied later in appropriate contexts” (van Compernelle, 2013, p. 327). With the rising prominence of the concept of interactional competence (IC), however, has come a growing recognition that actions are not the locus of individuals alone but are rather jointly constructed in particular contexts (cf., e.g. Hall, 1993; He & Young, 1998; Kramsch, 1986; Young, 2013; cf. also Kasper & Ross, 2013; Tecedor Cabrero, 2013, pp. 15–30 for an overview). Hence, pragmatic abilities are increasingly seen as contextually situated and dependent on the actions of others, a fact which necessitates an increase in L2 pragmatic studies on learners in interaction. In addition, this recognition goes hand-in-hand with an acknowledgement that gaining competence in interactional practices via participation is an integral part of acquiring pragmatic competence.

\* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: [barron@leuphana.de](mailto:barron@leuphana.de) (A. Barron).

Gaining competence in interactional practices over a range of discursive practices, however, remains a challenge in the foreign language classroom due to a lack of focus on interaction in the classroom, classroom-specific discourse patterns, classroom-based role expectations and also differing first language (L1) pragmatic norms (cf. 3.2, cf. also Morris-Adams, 2014, pp. 151–152). It is not surprising, therefore, that foreign language students experience difficulties when interacting in the target culture. In fact, as Tudini (2013, p. 187) notes, there is no doubt that “To complement highly structured classroom interactions where the teacher controls turn-taking and participation, learners require exposure to alternative naturalistic environments and conversational structures which are likely to be produced in an out-of-class context.”

Telecollaboration, defined as “the use of Internet communication tools by internationally dispersed students of language in institutionalized settings in order to promote the development of (a) foreign language (FL) linguistic competence and (b) intercultural competence” (Belz, 2003, p. 68), “provide[s] exposure to community practices and opportunities to participate in such practices” (Takamiya & Ishihara, 2013, pp. 185–186; cf. also Sykes, 2005, p. 399; Taguchi, 2011, p. 298) (cf. 2). As such, it promises to address the challenges of developing interactional competence in the classroom. Communication may be in the L1 and L2 of the individual participants or alternatively in a common lingua franca (cf. Guth & Helm, 2012, pp. 44–49; O’Rourke, 2005, p. 434). The communication tools used to facilitate telecollaboration include both asynchronous forms, such as email, internet forums or message boards, and synchronous forms, such as text-based chat, teleconferencing and videoconferencing (cf., e.g. Takamiya & Ishihara, 2013, p. 187). Communication may be oral (e.g. teleconferencing, videoconferencing) or written (e.g. email, text-based chat, blogging, forums).

Interlanguage pragmatic (ILP) research interest in telecollaboration has increased in recent years. Pragmatic features that have been investigated in this context include pronouns of address, modal particles, sentence-final particles, hedging devices, refusals of invitations, backchannel signals and reactive expressions, with a number of studies also focussing on the use of telecollaboration for pragmatic instruction.<sup>1</sup> However, although this marks an advance, there continues to exist a dearth of ILP research on telecollaboration with regard to the focus of analysis, the languages used in telecollaboration, its developmental potential and also the effect of learner proficiencies. In addition, ILP telecollaborative research has concentrated almost exclusively on text-based computer-mediated communication (CMC) to date, a focus ILP research shares with CMC research in general (cf. Nguyen, 2008, p. 27).<sup>2</sup> Indeed, Alcón Soler (2012, p. 184), in an overview article on discourse and pragmatics in second language acquisition, emphasises the need for increased research in the CMC context focussing on “how learners negotiate meaning, use speech acts or develop their interactional competence”.

The present paper is designed to further L2 pragmatic research on telecollaborative learner discourse by examining the construction of small talk by two mixed nationality pairs consisting of a German learner studying English and an Irish student studying German, each in their respective home countries. The small talk exchanges are taken from the openings of an audio-recorded telecollaborative Skype session. The focus of analysis is on learner and NS use of self-oriented and other-oriented topic shifts, on topic development and on the participants’ verbal listenership behaviour examined via their use of backchannels. The specific research questions posed are the following:

- Is topic selection reliant on the NS in NS-learner telecollaborative discourse?
- Do learners/NS develop topics similarly in NS-learner telecollaborative discourse?
- Does the learners’ use of backchannels differ from that of the NS’ in NS-learner telecollaborative discourse?

The paper begins by sketching the telecollaborative context and highlighting the features of synchronous computer-mediated communication (SCMC), particularly of voice-based CMC from a pragmatic perspective. Attention then turns to small talk and in particular to a description of the focus of analysis, namely self-oriented and other-oriented topic shifts, short and long-form responses, and backchannels. The particular challenges confronting learners, particularly German learners of English, in these areas are also highlighted. Following this, findings are presented and discussed before the paper examines the pedagogical implications and considers potential avenues for future research.

## 2. The telecollaborative context: L2 pragmatics in interaction

A wide range of speech acts and discourse features have been shown to be present in the SCMC context, e.g. requests, apologies, agreements, disagreements, expressing opinions, joking and even flirting (cf. Belz, 2003; Blyth, 2012; Sotillo, 2000; Vyatkina & Belz, 2006, p. 319, cf. also Sauro, 2011, pp. 376–382 for an overview). Indeed, in a contrast of synchronous and

<sup>1</sup> Pronouns of address: cf. Belz & Kinginger, 2003; González-Lloret, 2008; Kinginger & Belz, 2005; Modal particles: cf. Belz & Vyatkina, 2005; Vyatkina, 2007; Vyatkina & Belz, 2006; Sentence-final particles: cf. Kakegawa, 2009; Hedging devices: cf. Wishnoff, 2000; Refusals of invitations: cf. Sykes, 2005; Takamiya & Ishihara, 2013; Backchannel signals and reactive expressions: cf. Sardegna & Molle, 2010. Studies focussing on the use of telecollaboration for pragmatic instruction: e.g. Belz & Vyatkina, 2005; Cunningham & Vyatkina, 2012; Kakegawa, 2009; Sardegna & Molle, 2010; Takamiya & Ishihara, 2013; Vyatkina, 2007; Vyatkina & Belz, 2006.

<sup>2</sup> A rare exception is Sardegna and Molle (2010), a study focussing on the effectiveness of teaching verbal backchannel signals/reactive expressions via videoconferences between EFL students in Japan and ESL teachers in the United States.

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