



# Multimodal instruction-giving practices in webconferencing-supported language teaching



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## ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on instruction-giving practices, a crucial but under-researched aspect of online language tutorials. The context for this qualitative study is a telecollaborative exchange focusing on French as a foreign language. We investigate trainee teachers' instructions for a role-play rehearsal task during webconferencing-supported language teaching sessions.

Multimodal (inter)action analysis of the data from three sessions reveals how the trainees mark different stages in the instructions using gaze and webcam proximity, allocate roles helped by the use of gaze and gestures, and introduce key vocabulary using word-stress, gaze and text chat strategies. The paper sheds light on the need to demonstrate clear boundaries between instructions and beginning of the task and the need, in future online teacher training programmes, to prepare trainees to direct learners' attention to the resources needed for task accomplishment, explain how the task will be accomplished using the online resources and harness the potential of semiotic resources during this teaching phase.

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## 1. Task-based language teaching and instruction-giving

In Second Language Acquisition, task is considered an important component of the language classroom as it offers opportunities for authentic, meaning-focused interaction (Ellis, 2003; Nunan, 2004). Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) research distinguishes between two approaches to task accomplishment: task-as-workplan, i.e. what is designed, and task-as-process, i.e. the actual performance that takes place when accomplishing the task (Breen, 1987).

Several typologies identify various task types (e.g. Pica, Kanagy, & Falodun, 1993). Nunan (2004) classifies pedagogical tasks on a continuum from activation to rehearsal tasks. Activation tasks offer learners opportunities to activate their emerging language skills in creative ways, whilst rehearsal tasks require learners to practise some out-of-class performance. As such, a rehearsal task “bears a clear and obvious relationship to its corresponding real-world counterpart” (Nunan, 2004:20) and may take the form of role-play. Yen, Hou, and En Chang (2015) argue for the use of role-play as “an

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important strategy in that it focuses on the ability to speak and communicate by playing different roles in a given real-world situation” (p.386) helping to improve learners’ writing and speaking skills.

The role of the teacher in guiding and facilitating learning during task completion also merits attention. [Van den Branden \(2006\)](#) assigns two roles to teachers in TBLT: motivating the learners and interactionally supporting task performance by ensuring that rich input is comprehensible, by triggering negotiation for meaning sequences and by supporting output and focus on form. [Raith and Hegelheimer \(2010\)](#) further describe a model for task-based teaching competencies for teachers in task introduction, performance and evaluation stages. They identify three competencies for the task introduction stage:

- A1.** Can pose tasks in such a way that students can set goals for themselves and actively participate during the task.
- A2.** Can introduce the task in such a way that task demand and task support are balanced and that students actively participate during the task.
- A3.** Can explain tasks so that the purpose, expected result and the steps towards task completion are clear and understandable for the students (p.162).

Following [Raith and Hegelheimer's \(2010\)](#) teacher competencies, instruction-giving sequences are relevant at this task introduction stage of teaching competencies ([Watson Todd, 1997:32](#)). describes instructions as “a series of directives, possibly mixed with explanations, questions and so on, which as a whole aim to get the students to do something”. [Watson Todd, Chaiyasuk, and Tantisawetrat \(2008\)](#) argue for the significance of instruction-giving sequences, stating that “the success of the activities which follow instructions is often predicated on the effectiveness of these instructions” (p.26). They underline that instructions are an important part of the language classroom as an occasion in which language is used for real communication. However, there is limited research to date that investigates instruction-giving practices in TBLT.

One of the few studies that explores instruction-giving practices in TBLT was conducted by [Seedhouse \(2008\)](#). He studied classroom interaction within a conversation analysis (CA) approach and his analysis of instruction-giving practices illustrates how experienced teachers and trainee teachers create, manage and maintain a shift in focus. He concludes that experienced teachers’ instructions “tend to be simple, clear and focused” (p.53). Seedhouse argues for the presentation of a full, explicit and single focus, and summarises the different ways in which teachers established and managed focus as follows:

Shifts in focus seem to be distinctly marked in the data in some way by successful experienced teachers. They may be marked by use of discourse markers, by prosodic features, by changes in the spatial configuration of the participants, by *meta-discoursal* comments which indicate that a shift is occurring and by semiotic means (pp.48–49).

Other studies have emphasised the role of the semiotic resources in classroom interaction. [Hellermann and Pekarek Doehler \(2010\)](#) show how learners’ employ posture shifts as “an important signal characterising classroom task starts” (p.30) and how mutual posture alignment functions as a signal to launch the task without further verbal meaning negotiation. Moreover, [Kääntä \(2015\)](#) demonstrates “how teachers employ gaze, pointing gestures, and head nods to nominate next speakers (i.e. give response turns to students)” (p.65).

[Markee \(2015a\)](#) is the only study to date that aims to specifically study teachers’ instruction-giving practices in task-based instruction. His investigation follows an ethnomethodological perspective and he concludes that “non-verbal aspects of communication are a vital part of instructions” (p.126). [Markee \(2015a\)](#) evidences how participants orient to cultural artifacts, employ gaze, gestures and embodied actions in order to “collaboratively converge on courses of action” (p.127). Moreover, he identifies six fragments included in instruction-giving sequences informing learners:

- (1) how they will be working (in dyads or small groups),
- (2) what resources they will need,
- (3) what tasks they have to accomplish,
- (4) how they will accomplish the task,
- (5) how much time they have to accomplish these tasks,
- (6) why they should do something (pp.120–121).

In a further study, [Markee \(2015b\)](#) highlights the lack of research on instruction-giving sequences, especially in second language studies and stresses the need for further research as “we still know little about how instruction giving sequences in language classrooms are set in motion” (p.3).

The studies cited above on instruction-giving in language learning classrooms relate to face-to-face classrooms predominantly using a CA methodology focusing on the moment-by-moment construction of interaction.<sup>2</sup> Although several studies have examined the use of multimodal resources in webconferencing-supported teaching ([Codreanu & Combe Celik, 2013](#); [Develotte, Guichon, & Vincent, 2010](#); [Guichon & Wigham, 2016](#); [Hampel & Stickler, 2012](#); [Satar, 2013](#); [Örnberg Berglund, 2009](#)), we failed to identify any studies specifically dedicated to instruction-giving sequences. For instance,

<sup>2</sup> Given the fact that few studies we found on instruction-giving practices followed CA, our literature review does in a way frame our study within the ethnomethodological/CA analysis. However, our interest is not particularly on the moment-by-moment construction of the instruction-giving sequences, but only on the salient moments in the instructions in which semiotic resources are employed. Therefore, we used multimodal (inter)action analysis following [Norris \(2004\)](#); [Norris and Pirini \(2016\)](#), [Jewitt \(2011\)](#) and [Jewitt et al. \(2016\)](#) as explained under section 2.3 Theoretical framework for data analysis.

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