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Establishing the explainable in Finnish-as-a-foreign-language classroom interaction: Student-initiated explanation sequences

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ABSTRACT

This conversation-analytical study belongs to the field of CA-for-SLA. It deals with student-initiated explanatory sequences in which students problematize linguistic matters by addressing the teacher with a question. The analyzed data were collected from Finnish-as-foreign-language lessons at university level. The analysis focuses on sequences in which participants engage in multi-party discussion to identify the specific linguistic problem. In order to become part of the teacher-agenda and the classroom interaction the explainable matter must be established as relevant and intersubjectively meaningful. Students readily participate in the discussion when the common focus and mutual understanding are endangered. Thus, student linguistic knowledge is inherently connected to the interactional event and to the specific social context. During the explanatory sequence participants ensure intersubjective understanding, while the student becomes the linguistic expert and has the opportunity to share her expertise with the others. For this reason, explaining in a larger sense can be considered a learning practice that leads to situated and general linguistic expertise.

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1. Introduction

Foreign language students regularly notice unexpected or surprising linguistic matters during their language studies. They may even momentarily recognize phenomena to be contradictory to already acquired knowledge. One strategy used by students to test their own understanding as well as the reliability of their previously acquired knowledge is to ask a question and to launch an

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explanatory sequence. Previous studies in CA-for-SLA have dealt with instances where knowledge gaps are introduced and turned into “learnables” by learners themselves, during so called *epistemic search sequences* (Majlesi & Broth, 2012, Jakonen, 2014, Jakonen & Morton, 2015). The previous studies provide micro-analysis of the interactional work that is needed from participants to make the knowledge gap relevant, and subsequently establish the learnable. Connected to previous research, the present study raises the issue of how to find and formulate the “right” gap or learnable and introduce it during a classroom discussion. In order to find solutions to the posed problem, participants in a language classroom need to establish mutual understanding concerning the unclear item, which I will call the “explainable”. The overall activity in which the participants engage in the sequences under scrutiny will be categorized as explaining. I use both terms explanatory and explanation sequence to refer to epistemic search sequences under scrutiny.

Philosophical and sociocultural theories provide multiple approaches to the activity of explaining, with all of them focusing on the individual as well as the collective advantages attained from explanations (Fleck, 1980/1935, Vygotsky, 1978). The main premise of these approaches is that explanations which are shared and collaboratively produced promote both the understanding and the development of individual knowledge.

In order to be a successful epistemic search and hence an explanatory sequence, participants need to show evidence that they consider the delivered explanation (explanans) to be an appropriate and acceptable solution to the raised explainable (explanandum) (Zalta, 2009). In other words, the relationship between the explainable and explanation must be established and accepted by both the questioner(s) and explainer(s) in order to be considered an explanation. In this sense, explaining is inherently a social activity¹ as well as a recognizable interactional practice (Schütz 1932: 172; Deppermann and Schmitt 2008: 220: 220). While the aim of explanations is to clarify something that is unintelligible, they also serve to maintain intersubjectivity when mutual understanding is endangered.

Moreover, *understanding* and *explaining* in interaction are created interdependently and are therefore deeply connected. Understanding is both an object and a method of scientific research (Deppermann, 2008, Deppermann and Schmitt 2008: 221; Macbeth, 2011, Lindwall & Lymer, 2011, Koole and Elbers 2014: 59) as are explanations (Barbieri, Colavita, & Scheuer, 1989, Woodward, 2003, Mayes, 2005, Zalta, 2009, Spreckels, 2009, Blum-Kulka, Hamo, & Habib, 2010). Explanations can be regarded as the same type of scientific method that is both subordinated to understanding and coordinated with it. Explanations provide speakers with an opportunity to test and display their understanding.

1.1. Aims of the study

The sequences analyzed here feature instances in which students raise explainable matters through questioning and launch the activity of explaining. These questions concern matters that do not directly belong to the teacher's agenda which means that students take the initiative in problem management, a step that lead up to larger explanation-seeking sequences. The analysis will show that the challenge presented by those instances is twofold. Firstly, background knowledge and pre-analysis are needed to formulate the problematic matter. The student's analysis of the problematic item might not be appropriate so that the participants need to identify the appropriate explainable. A first aim is to show that participants need to gain a mutual understanding of the explainable in order to establish a satisfactory explanation.

Secondly, the questioner must relate the request for clarification to the on-going interaction and to the current topical discussion (Lee 2010: 418) so that the addressee and potential explainer may identify the explainable correctly and accord relevance to it. This needs interactional work in which participants cooperatively engage in confronting problems in both understanding linguistic matters and understanding each other. The second aim is to discuss how both student-initiated questions that trigger explanations and the subsequent engagement in problem solving and mutual understanding can constitute a learning practice.

Especially in the classroom, explaining is regarded as a means to clarify unclear matters and to solve problems. Responses to student questions are supposed to help the student overcome difficulties. Moreover, the learner should ‘learn’ from answers and explanations. To link the explanation activity to learning, it is useful to focus on the students' need to indicate their problems in comprehension, their commitment to clarifying matters that remain unclear and their engagement in solving challenges of mutual understanding.

1.2. Background

The present study draws on recent conversation analysis of second-language acquisition (Kasper & Wagner, 2011, Pekarek Doehler, 2013), and within this paradigm, focuses on the studies that present short-term development and learning as a social activity through detailed interactional analysis (Mondada & Pekarek Doehler, 2004, Mori, 2004, Kim, 2012, Melander, 2012, Majlesi & Broth, 2012, Kääntä, 2014, Jakonen & Morton, 2015). More precisely, the study connects to conversation analytical studies which have explored the interactional management of explanations and teacher's responsiveness to students' problems (Mortensen, 2011, Waring, Chepkirui, & Difelice, 2013, Gosen, Berenst, & de Gloppe, 2013, Koole & Elbers, 2014). For example, Koole and Elbers (2014) have addressed the problem of student questions that remain unanalyzed in dyadic teacher-student

¹ Social scientists have addressed the issues of definition and the functioning of explanations in social life (Antaki, 1994). Explaining is an activity which speakers use to categorise and recognize what happens in the world around them. On the socio-interactional level, explanations and explanation-seeking are analyzed as accounting for and warranting social realities and telling how things ‘really’ are (Antaki, 1988).

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