

Student smiles and the negotiation of epistemics in L2 classrooms



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Abstract

This study investigates the interactional unfolding of student smiles in instructed language learning settings drawing on data from both English as a Second Language and as a Foreign Language classrooms. Conversational actions performed by participants through 'smiles' is an under-researched area, especially in classroom settings where teachers' and students' smiles may serve different functions due to the institutional nature of ongoing interactions. To address this research gap, we aim at investigating the interactional unfolding of student smiles in English language classrooms based on 16 h of video-recordings in Luxembourg and 45 h of video-recordings in the US. Taking a conversation-analytic approach, we show how participants use smiles to index and resolve interactional trouble. Our analysis shows that smiles and epistemic issues in the classroom are intricately connected, and in the case of interactional trouble related to epistemic access, student smiles serve to maintain affiliation and to promote the progressivity of talk. The findings of the paper have implications for understanding the interactional unfolding of smiles in institutional interaction in general, and in classroom interaction in particular.

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1. Introduction

Classrooms are settings where "guided construction of knowledge" (Mercer, 1995:1) occurs in conversations between teachers and students; thus management of knowledge in conversation becomes key for the institutional business of teaching and learning. Conversation analytic work has revealed that the coordination of knowledge and speakers' management of asymmetries of knowledge (Heritage, 2012a) are primary drivers of conversation (Mushin, 2013). Furthermore, the territories of knowledge unfolding in conversation, epistemics in action (Heritage, 2012b), play a significant role in action formation. Action formation in instructed learning settings and the ways information is delivered or requested through utterances provide us with insights on how understanding is co-constructed in L2 classroom contexts and how opportunities for learning and student participation unfold. As Gardner (2013:609) suggests, "problems of understanding" in the classroom become evident through investigation of aspects of interaction including turn-taking (including non-verbal behaviors), sequence organization, and repair. We focus on student smiles in the classroom,

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showing how they are intricately connected to epistemic issues. In the case of interactional trouble related to epistemic access, we argue that student smiles serve to maintain affiliation and to promote the progressivity of talk.¹

Laughter and smiles have been shown to be implicated in the resolution of interactional trouble of various kinds (Glenn and Holt, 2013b; Haakana, 2010; Holt, 2012; Jacknick, 2013; Jefferson, 1984; Potter and Hepburn, 2010). As Glenn and Holt (2013b) note, “in moments of trouble, [laughter] provides a resource for aligning, modifying actions, and mitigating meanings” (p. 2). In this study, we turn our attention to moments when the progressivity of the interaction is at issue, or when trouble of another kind arises. We are not interested in the role of humor in these moments; rather, we show how student smiles contribute to the resolution of interactional trouble.

We draw on data from both English as a Second Language (ESL) and English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts in order to shed light on how students use smiles to manage interactional trouble occasioned by epistemic issues. In this paper, the term interactional trouble, within the limits of instructed learning settings, refers to the emergence of a temporary misalignment in the unfolding of an interactional and pedagogical activity, which is oriented to by the participants as such through verbal (e.g., an epistemic status check) and non-verbal (e.g., smiles) means. In other words, interactional trouble here is mainly related to moments in which the progressivity of classroom talk and activities is affected by observable orientations to the timing (e.g. silences) or nature (e.g. providing a repairable candidate response) of student participation. In particular, our analysis uncovers the interactional unfolding of smiles when such trouble arises from issues of epistemic status.

2. Laughter and smiles in institutional interaction

While laughter and smiles are known to do different interactional work, they have often been discussed together, with much more emphasis on the interactional functions of laughter (Glenn, 2003; Glenn and Holt, 2013a). Laughter and smiles can co-occur (cf. Haakana, 2010), but do not necessarily accomplish the same actions in the same ways. For example, Fatigante and Orletti (2013) mention that smiles have been shown to index both alignment and affiliation, but go on to argue that laughter may represent “the potential ‘splitting’ of alignment and affiliation” (p. 162). However, because these two phenomena are often linked, both laughter and smiles are discussed here, with particular emphasis on smiles and smile voice.

2.1. *Laughter in sequences*

Sequentiality has been a focus of much conversation analytic research on laughter, adding to our understanding of how laughter (and possibly smiles) function in interaction. Jefferson's (1979) early work on invitations to laugh detailed the placement of laughter in an invitation to laugh, as well as the recipient's next action following such an invitation, showing both what acceptance and declination of invitations to laugh look like. In their introduction to the recent collection of studies on laughter in interaction, Glenn and Holt (2013b) similarly explain how the placement of laughter affects its interactional function, arguing, for example, that laughter at the end of a turn can “modulate a...disaffiliative action” (p. 7). The phenomenon of laughing together has also been examined in both everyday (Jefferson, 1984) and institutional (Thonus, 2008) contexts, highlighting how shared laughter is pursued and produced. Haakana (2010) and Ikeda and Bysouth (2013) have also paid attention to the sequential relationship between laughter and smiles, with Haakana noting that smiles may be used as a “pre-laughing device” (p. 1504), setting up something as a potential laughable, and also that smiles as a response to laughter display “mild” affiliation (p. 1509).

2.2. *Actions of laughter*

Beyond sequential placement, research on laughter in interaction has also focused on the actions accomplished by laughter. In particular, much research on laughter has pointed to its complex relationship to (dis)affiliation and (dis)alignment (Fatigante and Orletti, 2013; Glenn, 2003, 2013; Haakana, 2010; Holt, 2012; Markaki et al., 2010; Thonus, 2008; Vöge, 2010). Laughter or laughter particles following a disaligning or disaffiliative move can serve to “modulate the action” without disrupting progressivity (Shaw et al., 2013:102). Laughter as a response to non-humorous turns may serve as a resource for displaying disalignment and/or disaffiliation, as Romaniuk (2013) finds in news interviews and Fatigante and Orletti (2013) find in doctor–patient interactions. Clayman's (1992) analysis of audience responses during presidential debates points to the affiliative and disaffiliative function of laughter; the key in determining which is which lies in analysis of the preceding turn (i.e., does the laughter follow a designedly humorous utterance or an earnest one?). Holt (2012:430)

¹ We are using Stivers' (2008) definitions of *affiliation* as endorsement of the speaker's perspective and *alignment* as acknowledgment of the action being undertaken.

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