'Now we are teachers': The role of small talk in student language teachers' telecollaborative task development

Melinda Dooly [a,*], Vincenza Tudini [b,1]

[a] GREIP: Grup de Recerca en Ensenyament i Interacció Plurilingües (Research Centre in Teaching and Plurilingual Interaction), Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, G5-107 Ciències de l'Educació, Cerdanyola del Vallès, 08193 Barcelona, Spain
[b] Research Centre for Languages and Cultures, School of Communication, International Studies and Languages, University of South Australia, Magill Campus, Magill 5072, Adelaide, South Australia, Australia

Abstract

While a number of investigations of online language learning behaviours are available, there are currently few 'micro' analytic studies that explore the role of different types of small talk to complete institutional tasks online. This study focuses in particular on an institutionally-initiated, out-of-class telecollaborative Skype video exchange between two student teachers based in the US and Spain (studying to become Spanish as Foreign Language and English as Foreign Language teachers, respectively). Building upon Hudak and Maynard's (2011) proposal of four varieties of small talk (topicalized, co-topical, minimal and brief), this study looks at the way in which these student–teachers deploy different varieties of small talk in order to advance towards a mutual, task-oriented goal during Skype sessions held over two days. The study highlights the important role of co-topical talk, which is at the same time pro-social and work-related, in preparing the ground for seemingly 'off-topic' topicalized small talk and the achievement of institutional teaching and learning objectives in a hybrid social–institutional setting. It also provides evidence that topicalized small talk may promote creativity and epistemic change, leading to advancement of new ideas for elaboration during work-related talk, and implementation in a real life professional setting.
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1. Introduction

There is evidence that telecollaboration provides foreign language students with opportunities for target language use and intercultural exchange, which is likely to promote learning (Thomas et al., 2013). Online interaction between L1 and L2 speakers of foreign languages, using a range of technological tools, including dyadic and multiparty text, voice and video chat, is a core element of telecollaboration projects. Therefore researchers have begun to explore these interactions from a conversation analytic perspective, in a variety of technological–interactional settings to provide insights on how users

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* Corresponding author. Tel.: +34 93 581 3252.
  E-mail addresses: melindaann.dooly@uab.cat, melinda.dooly@gmail.com (M. Dooly), enza.tudini@unisa.edu.au (V. Tudini).
[1] Tel.: +61 8 83024592; fax: +61 8 83024396.

achieve understanding, affiliation and learning, despite constraints of the medium (cf. Antoniadou, 2011; Dooly, 2011; Dooly and Sadler, 2013; González-Lloret, 2011; Tudini, 2010).

Although a number of investigations of online language learning behaviours are available, there are currently, to the authors' knowledge, few 'micro' analytic studies that account for the importance of different types of small talk to complete institutional tasks online in a telecollaborative setting, in particular in educational contexts. This article aims to take a step in that direction. Following from Hudak and Maynard's (2011) proposal of four varieties of small talk (topicalized, co-topical, minimal and brief), this study aims to explore the transferability of these categories to an online environment by looking at the way in which two student–teachers deploy different varieties of small talk during a telecollaborative exchange in order to advance towards a mutual, task-oriented goal. Specifically, the student–teachers are engaged in a teletandem exchange that allows them to practice their target language (the language they will be teaching) with an L1 speaker of that language; in this case Spanish and English, however, they are expert speakers of both languages. As the selected excerpts deal principally with moments when the participants were using English it could be argued that the exchange is located within an English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) paradigm. For instance, in a business ELF context, Pullin (2010) found that ''small talk functions in a number of ways in building, maintaining, and reinforcing rapport and solidarity'' (p. 468). The comparison of ELF in education contexts is worth pursuing in a separate study, but is not within the scope of this text.

As will be seen in the analysis, participants use different types of co-topical small talk at the initial phases of the exchange to overcome technological difficulties, become acquainted and find common ground. However the co-topical small talk gradually transitions into (institutionally) goal-oriented talk as participants align more towards their mutual identities as teachers.

Adapting slightly Barab and Duffy's concept of 'activity group' (2000) to the notion of 'activity pair', the authors look at the dyad in this study as ''a temporary coming together of people around a particular task'' (Barab et al., 2001, p. 49). Within this concept of activity pair, the term activity is not ''a disembodied action''; the pair is engaged in contextualized behaviour that aims to transform something (text, artefacts) into an object (e.g. presentation, lesson plans). Commonly these activities are done in-class and, at least for the teacher, there is an implicit understanding that the group members (or pairs) will negotiate how to best achieve the set goals or expectations (usually established by the teacher prior to beginning the group negotiation). Nonetheless, as it has been shown elsewhere, in online tasks, there is frequently a divergence between the teacher's 'task-as-workplan' and the way in which learners may ''integrate [activities aimed for content knowledge] into their own learning process'' which is often ''in a different sequence than anticipated in the task-as-workplan'' (Dooly, 2011, p. 83).

Arguably, this is even more so in circumstances such as the one in this study in which the two student–teachers negotiate, collaborate and take ownership of a very loosely constructed activity assignment conducted outside of the classroom and with minimal vigilance from the teachers. In the context under examination, submission of recordings following the sessions and evaluation of final output stemming from the exchange were in fact the only teacher 'control' strategies.

Although the focus is on student–*teachers* of foreign languages, it is important to highlight that the study looks at interaction that takes place outside of the regular classroom, which arguably adds a dimension of complexity to the interaction. Still, the fact that the student–teachers are completing an activity assigned to them suggests that institutional orientations and professional identities are likely to play a role in participants' deployment of interactional resources to achieve the externally and institutionally imposed goal of task development, as an assessed activity (both in and outside of the classroom). In this sense, our understanding of the participants' orientation during the online interaction is as principally aimed towards a learning-oriented goal. Admittedly, the out-of-class online environment, which involves video interaction via Skype, suggests that a social dimension is also likely to emerge, though this requires more precise investigation than can be done here.

While Heritage (2004) provides criteria for identification of institutional talk, he also points out the complexities of distinguishing institutional from 'ordinary' talk, which may emerge in any setting, institutional or not, with participants using the same interactional resources. Drew and Heritage (1992) also underscore that making distinctions between ordinary and institutional talk is difficult: ''there is not necessarily a hard and fast distinction to be made between the two in all instances of interactional events, nor even at all points in a single interactional event'' (p. 21). This study however maintains that a focus on small talk may shed some light on this complex phenomenon.

2. The role of small talk

As Mirivel and Tracy (2005) point out, researchers interested in 'institutional talk' have begun to recognize the importance of 'small talk' for ''building relationships in which institutional interactants feel comfortable and are able to work well together''. In their study on small talk between medical doctors and patients, Hudak and Maynard (2011) state that