Social interaction and competence development: Learning the structural organization of a communicative practice

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**Abstract**
Learning to become a “speaker of culture” in a new language involves not only mastering its linguistic codes but also ways of behaving in situations involving that language. A key ability to participate in social interaction is the ability to project and co-construct the structural organization of particular communicative practices. While this knowledge has been considered to be part of speakers’ competence as members of a social group, a question remains as to how this competence develops when a novice participates in a new communicative practice. This study explores this question by drawing on the notion of interactional competence and by examining longitudinal data of an ESL (English as a second language) learner’s participation in the communicative practice of office hour meeting. Using conversation analysis, I show how the learner displayed her increased interactional competence as she co-constructed the structural organization of the office hour with the teacher over time.

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**1. Introduction**

**1.1. Structural organization in social interaction**

Social interaction, as free and open as it can be, is fundamentally organized around recurrent sequential patterns that participants orient to and co-construct in talk. What happens at a given moment in an unfolding interaction responds to what has just happened and projects a degree of relevance for a range of actions that can happen next (Sacks, Schegloff, & Jefferson, 1974; Schegloff, 2007). In conversation analysis (CA), the “relative positioning of utterances” is generally referred to as sequential organization (Schegloff, 2007, p. 2). Sequential organization can be observed at the turn level as sequence organization or at the level of “big packages” of interaction (Sacks, 1995) as overall structural organization. While sequence organization concerns “the organization of courses of action enacted through turns-at-talk” (Schegloff, 2007, p. 2), overall structural organization involves a recognizable set of activities which follow a certain expected sequential order (Jefferson, 1988; Schegloff, 2007) as well as the signals for transitioning between these activities (cf. Robinson & Stivers, 2001). The focus of this paper is on the overall structural organization of a given communicative practice.

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1 In this paper, the term activity is used to refer to one or several related actions that can be grouped together as a coherent larger unit in the overall structural organization of a communicative event. Activities are the equivalent to Jefferson’s (1988) term “components” of speech-exchange systems (p. 418).

2 The term “communicative practices” is used herein to refer to recurring and bound interactional events (see also Schieffelin & Ochs, 1996). This term owes its root to Hymes’ (1964) notion of “speech events” but without an etic grid of description. It is in overlap with Hall’s (1995) notion of “interactive practices” but without the potential confusion with the interactional practices that are the methods used by participants in talk-in-interaction (e.g., Wong & Waring, 2010). It is also in overlap with Young’s (2008, 2009, 2011) term “discursive practices” but without the emphasis on the social, cultural, political, and historical context beyond the communicative events. Finally, it shares with Schegloff’s (1999) notion of “speech-exchange systems” but with equal emphasis on speech and other meaning-making systems.

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Research in conversation analysis over the years has uncovered the overall structural organizations of many communicative practices, notably, telephone openings and closings (Schegloff, 1968; Schegloff & Sacks, 1973), newspaper sales (Jefferson & Schenkein, 1978), storytelling (Jefferson, 1978), direction-giving (Psathas, 1986), troubles-talk (Jefferson, 1988), and advice-giving (Heritage & Sefi, 1992). The findings suggest that each communicative practice seems to have its own routinized structural organization (see also Hall & Pekarek Doehler, 2011; Young, 2008, 2009, 2011). Importantly, these structures are not given, exogenous rules but they are part of “members’ methods” (Garfinkel & Sacks, 1970), that is, the procedures that conversation participants employ and orient to as they accountably perform actions in talk-in-interaction. “Members’ methods” thus constitute the “common shareware” and the “underlying patterns” (Goodwin & Goodwin, 1992; Streeck, 1995) that enable participants to jointly project what will come next in a conversation and thus co-construct sequentially ordered talk. As Heritage (1984) succinctly pointed out, knowledge of structural organizations in talk-in-interaction is “a major part of the competence which ordinary speakers bring to their communicative activities” (p. 241, emphasis added).

The “ordinary speakers” to whom Heritage referred are adult, native speakers of a given language. For these speakers, the shared knowledge of interactional procedures has been more or less established, ready to be utilized in interaction. A relevant question to ask is: How does this competence take shape? How do novices (children, adult second language learners) learn the structural organization of certain practices in order to successfully participate in ongoing interactions? Garfinkel and Sacks (1970) emphasized that cultural membership involves the “mastery of natural language,” or the ability to use language in social interaction. Yet, little is currently known about the development of the competence that involves the structural organization of talk in a second language.

In the next sections, I will review the concept of interactional competence and current understanding about the learning of the structural organization of social interaction in first and second language learning.

1.2. Structural organization in Interactional Competence

As mentioned above, the ability to interpret and co-construct the ongoing structural organization of a given communicative practice is a part of an individual’s interactional competence. Interactional competence involves “knowledge of social-context-specific communicative events or activity types, their typical goals and trajectories of actions by which the goals are realized and the conventional behaviors by which participant roles and role relationships are accomplished” (Hall & Pekarek Doehler, 2011, p. 2, emphasis added, cf. Young, 2011). Specifically, interactional competence entails the ability to recognize and utilize a number of interactional patterns, including turn-taking mechanisms, linguistic and non-linguistic means, topic management, repair practices, participation frameworks, and the focus of this study – structural organization (Hall, 1993, 1995, 1997, 1999; Hall & Pekarek Doehler, 2011; Nguyen, 2008, 2012; Young, 1999, 2008, 2009, 2011). A key feature of interactional competence is that it is situated in specific communicative practices and it is situated in co-constructed social interaction. It follows that for interactional competence to develop, the learner needs to participate in reoccurring communicative practices, which afford them repeated opportunities to co-construct and negotiate actions contingently with others in talk-in-interaction. In this process of repeated participation, the learner can modify their “methods” so as to achieve the tasks at hand more effectively. Competence is thus not a static individual trait, but exists and emerges in and through social interaction. Competence has, therefore, been perceived as competence-in-action (Pekarek Doehler, 2010) or competence-in-interaction (Nguyen, 2011). Competence development is also contingent upon co-constructed social actions and thus is learning-in-action (Firth & Wagner, 2007).

Research on interactional competence has found CA as a compatible method of inquiry and theoretical backdrop. First, CA provides an excellent tool for the description of “members’ methods” — the interactional practices that make up interactional competence. More importantly, as an ethnmethodological approach, CA “is concerned with the analysis of competence which underlies ordinary social activities” (Heritage, 1984, p. 241, emphasis added). The tracking of competence development can be then made possible by lining up observations of the same learner’s interaction in the same communicative practice over time. CA thus enables the observation of the learner’s competence in action — how it is utilized, displayed, and modified — when s/he participates in recurrent communicative practices. Indeed, this has been done in a growing number of longitudinal SLA studies (Cekaite, 2007; Hellermann, 2008; Markee, 2000; Nguyen, 2011; Pallotti, 2001, 2002; Wagner & Brouwer, 2004; Young & Miller, 2004; see also Hall, Hellermann, & Pekarek Doehler, 2011; Pallotti & Wagner, 2011). Among the first to track interactional competence development in interaction by adult second language learners, Wagner and Brouwer (2004) showed how a second language user became more fluent (as seen in the reduction of disorderliness and non-fluency such as pauses, overlaps, re-starts, and language shifts) over time in three telephone openings involving the same interlocutor. Focusing on the learner’s degree of participation, Young and Miller (2004) documented how a Vietnamese learner of English as a second language took a more active role in performing the actions involved in revision talk in writing conferences with his teacher. Examining learners’ interactional competence to participate in classroom discourse, Hellermann (2008) reported how adult learners of English as a second language developed the ability to co-construct task opening sequences, storytelling sequences, and disengagements from dyadic task interaction. The present study contributes to this body of research, and extends knowledge about how interactional competence develops with respect to the ability to orient to and project the structural organization of a given communicative practice.

Before I describe the communicative practice under study, I will review the literature on the role of structural organization as both a mechanism and a target of first and second language learning.
1.3. Structural organization in language learning

Discussion of sequential structures in language learning is predominantly found in studies that take a language socialization approach (Schieffelin & Ochs, 1986a, 1986b). Language socialization is the process of becoming a social, cultural, and linguistic member of a group through language use in social activities. In this view, development of language and competence involves an increase in the ability to recognize and interpret the social activity that one is in and the role relationship of the participants through verbal and nonverbal actions, and to interact accordingly. These abilities are developed through participation in “routinized verbal practices” (Peters & Boggs, 1986; Schieffelin & Ochs, 1986a) or “communicative practices” (Schieffelin & Ochs, 1996). Interactional routines facilitate language socialization and, as explained by Peters and Boggs (1986, p. 84). Numerous studies in first and second language learning have contributed to our understanding about how routines help children and adults acquire language and social norms in a target language (Watson-Gegeo & Gegeo, 1986; Poole, 1992; Willett, 1995; Cook, 1999; Kanagy, 1999; Ohta, 1999). For adult second language socialization in particular, Ohta (1999) showed how students of Japanese as a foreign language learned to do alignment (via expressions of assessment) through repeated peripheral and active participation in initiation–response–follow-up routines with teachers and peers. Thus, it is through interactional routines that language socialization occurs.

However, interactional routines are not only the mechanism for learning — they are the targets of learning as well. In order for learners to rely on interactional routines as a mechanism for language socialization, they also need to learn the very structure of the routines in order to participate in them. Little research, however, has focused on the learning of the structural organization of events in a new language. In adult second language learning, studies indicate that ‘non-native’ speakers (NNS) differ from ‘native speakers’ (NS) of English in their perception of and performance in the same speech events with respect to their sequential structures (Hartford & Bardovi-Harlig, 1992; Ranney, 1992; Tarone & Kuehn, 2000). For example, Hartford and Bardovi-Harlig (1992) compared NS’ and NNS’ performance in academic advising interviews and show that lower-proficiency NNS tended to reopen academic topics in the closings while advanced NNS and NS did not do this. These studies strongly point out the importance of learning the sequential structures of speech events in second language development. Although research on the development of participation sometimes touches on the structural organization of a practice in order to show how the learner’s degree of participation increases (e.g., Ishida, 2011; Nguyen, 2011; Rine & Hall, 2011; Young & Miller, 2004), the question of how adult second language learners develop the ability to recognize, project, and perform the structural organization of a given communicative practice with other co-present participants has not been adequately addressed in the literature.

2. Data

The communicative practice under study is one that is familiar to students and teachers at most universities in the United States — office hour meetings. Designed to provide students the opportunities to seek assistance from professors in addition to class time, office hours are usually weekly time slots where students can meet their professors at the professors’ office to discuss class assignments. Office hour meetings may be pre-arranged or non-scheduled. In this study, all office hour meetings were pre-arranged.

The data for this study consist of five weekly office hour meetings between one student of English as a second language (ESL) and her teacher over a period of six weeks in an eight-week intensive English program. Unique to the setting of this study, the teacher and student agreed ahead of time to meet regularly once a week for the student to get help with a writing assignment of her choice. The learner was Lien, a female Vietnamese in her early thirties. Her English proficiency was low intermediate (her TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language) score was 500). Lien had never been a student in an American program before, had never had office hour meetings in her native culture or in America, and received no explicit instructions on how to participate in office hour meetings. The teacher was Jeff, a male American in his mid-twenties. He had been an ESL teacher for a number of years and was familiar with the practice of office hours. Each meeting between Lien and Jeff lasted from 25 to 40 minutes and was video recorded. In another paper (Nguyen, 2011), I have described how Lien learned to respond to topic proffers and to initiate topic proffers over time in these meetings. In this paper, I focus on how she changed in her orientation to the transition point between social chat and writing talk. Taking the view that social interaction involves not only language but also embodied actions such as gestures, facial expressions, and the manipulation of objects in the physical environment (e.g., Goodwin, 2006), my analysis will pay attention to all these phenomena in the recorded conversations.

3. Transition points in office hour openings

While the institutional goal of office hour meetings was for the teacher to help the student with her writing assignments, it did not mean that all talk that occurred was directly related to the writing assignment. In the five office hour meetings recorded, the teacher and student always began with some casual chat about the student’s social and academic life before they started the ‘business’ of the meeting, i.e., the activity of working on the student’s writing. This positioning of social chat preceding the main

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3 How much of these sequential structures have to be learned anew in a second language remains to be a question for future research. While this is beyond the scope of this paper, I will revisit this issue in the context of the findings.

4 All personal names used are pseudonyms.
business is not unique to this dyad of teacher and student; it has been noted in other office hour meetings (Schegloff, 1998), and in other institutional settings, such as academic counseling (He, 1995), gate-keeping interviews (Erickson & Schultz, 1982), medical exams (Robinson, 1998), and business meetings (Mirivel & Tracy, 2005).

For the newcomer to the practice of the office hours, there are two things she needs to simultaneously figure out. The first is that their structural organization can include some social chat preceding the business of the meeting. Second, she needs to learn to interpret and employ the interactional procedures or “methods” available for closing the social chat and opening the business of the meeting. One way to observe the learner’s orientation to the sequential structure of the practice is to look at transition points, where a current activity is being closed, and a new activity emerges. These are points in conversations where interactants acutely need to rely on their knowledge of the structural organization of the event in order to interpret the closing of one activity, and project the beginning of a next activity. For this reason, I will focus closely on the transition points between the social chat activity and the writing activity in the openings of the office hours as a window into the learner’s understanding of the structural organization of office hour meetings.

My observations of the transition points in the data are informed by research in social interaction. Transitions are usually signaled by the closing of the current sequence, which can be displayed by the absence of solicits for further talk on the current topic (Maynard, 1980), the recycling of old information (Schegloff & Sacks, 1973), the use of minimal responses or short comments (Button, 1987) such as okay, right, and it’s nice. Pauses or a series of silence can also indicate that no participant is taking the floor for further talk (Maynard, 1980). Furthermore, transitions are often signaled by discourse markers such as okay, all right, now, let’s see, which are sequentially dependent elements that bracket conversational units and serve to indicate transition in conversations (Schiffrin, 1987; Bangerter & Clark, 2003; Beach, 1993, 1995a, 1995b; Robinson & Stivers, 2001; Sinclair & Coulthard, 1975). In particular, discourse markers such as okay and all right have been observed to enact “vertical transitions” between “higher level actions” (Bangerter & Clark, 2003), that is, they serve to close down the current activity and initiate a next activity. A very noticeable aspect of transition points is that as participants shift their orientation to different activities, they also tend to shift their eye gaze and body orientation (Schegloff, 1998) and manipulation of objects of concern (Robinson & Stivers, 2001). A transition point is completed with the beginning of the next activity, which often involves a new participation framework (Goffman, 1981).

Successful co-construction of transition points with the other interactants is an important part of participating in an interactional practice, as it allows the learner to accurately interpret the actions of the other participant and to take appropriate actions on their own part. How did Lien, the student in the data, learn to project that it is time to move from social chat to the ‘business’ of the meeting? In the sections below, I will report on how she changed over time in this regard.

4. Results

4.1. The learner’s delayed orientation to the next activity

4.1.1. The first office hour meeting

In the first meeting, Lien and Jeff began with talking about Lien’s TOEFL class, which ended before the meeting. Their social chat surrounded Lien’s general academic activities and plans not immediately related to the concern of the meeting, i.e., Lien’s writing assignments. The transition point from this social chat to writing talk occurred around line 117 in Excerpt 1 (transcription conventions are listed in the Appendix A). The evidence for this sequential transition was Lien’s subsequent nonverbal orientation to the writing activity: She turned sideways toward the bag at her feet to retrieve her papers (line 126 onward).

In this meeting, Lien aligns quite finely with Jeff in co-constructing the emergence of the current sequence’s closing.7 Prior to the beginning of this excerpt, Lien had expressed worries that her TOEFL score was still very poor. Jeff’s optimistic projection into the future (lines 79–85) is then hearable as orienting to Lien’s problem, and as closure-implicative for this type of troubles-talk sequence (Jefferson, 1988). Further evidence of Jeff’s closing projection can be seen in his next turn (line 89), when he produces a stand-alone “so” with a falling intonation, indicating that he has no more to say at this point and he is passing the turn to Lien (Schegloff & Sacks, 1973). Simultaneously with Jeff’s “so,” however, Lien cancels the central possibility of closing by invoking further talk and introducing some unmentioned mentionables (her TOEFL practice, Hanh’s help) — but this type of extension is not unusual in pre-closings (Schegloff & Sacks, 1973). In line 97, Jeff produces a minimal evaluative token in response to Lien’s turn, thus signaling that he is not pursuing any of the new mentionables in Lien’s recent turn. Further, he re-invokes materials mentioned earlier in the conversation, about Lien’s TOEFL class teacher, Shawn (lines 100–105), which serves as another pre-closing for the current talk (Schegloff & Sacks, 1973). Lien’s minimal response to this (line 107) seems to be her co-construction of this closing sequence. In the next turns, both participants produce minimal tokens (lines 108–114) and withhold

5 Note that some of these studies refer to “small chat” as the non-work-related talk that occurs before the main business of a meeting. In this study, I use the term “social chat” to capture the type of talk that involves personal or general school-related topics but does not relate directly to the purpose of the meeting, i.e., working on the student’s paper.

6 For a detailed description of what often takes place during the transitioning between speech exchange systems in ESL classes, see Markee (2004).

7 As will be explained later, we do not have evidence that Lien understands that this is the closing of the social chat activity (and thus the next relevant activity will be working on the writing assignment); what we have evidence of is her orientation to the closing of the current activity, whatever the next activity might be.
Jeff (J) = Teacher; Lien (L) = Student

72  J: when was the last time you took it.
73      J ends smile
74      L ends smile
75  L: tsk. I think about (.) six months ago. =
76      L looks up, 'thinking face'
77  J: =okay.
78  L: yes.
79  J: I'm sure. (0.2) it will- it will improve.
80      J smiles, nods rhythmically several times
81      es[pecially (.) being- (.) studying here in an
82      [yeah. (.) [I hope so.
83      L nods, smiles
84  J: English program (.) must be surrounded
85      (.) by <LOTS OF ENGLISH>. =
86      J smiles, scratches cheek, rests chin on hand
87  L: [yeah.
88  L: =right.
89  J: [so.
90  L smiles, nods, chin remains on hand
91  L: [that why I spend a lot of time to: (.) practice
92      with ah TOEFL (0.2) preparation book, Hanh help
93      L smiles, points to Hanh
94      me a lot to ah (.) to borrow some books from ah
95      the library (to use here).
96      (0.2)
97  J: 'mmm'. good.
98  J nods several times
99      (0.5)
100  J: and then you have an expert like Shawn to ah
101      J smiles
102      J removes hand from chin,
103      points outward with palm up
104      J rests arm on desk
105      answer your questions too, right,
106      L gazes down at desk
107      L smiles
108  L: right.
109  L smiles
110  J: ((coughs)) 'that's nice'.
111      J smiles, gazes down at desk quickly
112  L: 'uh huh'.
113  L smiles
114  J: 'OK good',
115  J ends smile
116      (1.0)
117  ®J: U::HM. [NOW.
118  [J quickly gazes at paper on desk,
119      then looks up at L
120      (J taps on desk next to papers,
121      in space between papers and chest
122      [L ends smile, gazes at J
123      do you have any: (1.0) specific questions
124      [about (.) [what we've
125      [J taps
126      [L leans sideways towards bag
127      done [in class so far: [or (.) your essays:
128      [J turns body torso
129      and faces desk,
130      realigns papers on desk
131  L: [yes.
132  L reaches down to bag for papers
133      (1.0)
134  J: I know we talked about it a little bit in-
135      (0.2) class the other day::.
talk during the one-second silence (line 116), thus signaling to each other their shared orientation to the closing of the current topic (Maynard, 1980).

While Lien shows fine alignment with Jeff in the closing of the current sequence, there is evidence that her orientation to Jeff’s projection of the opening of the next activity is delayed. Crucially, as Jeff produces the pre-closing back in lines 100–105, he also briefly gazes down at the desk, the work area for the writing task (line 106). He gazes at this desk area again (line 111) when he produces another pre-closing minimal token (line 110). This is the first time since the beginning of the meeting that Jeff makes repeated orientation to this desk area, and I propose that, similar to physicians and pharmacists in medical settings (Nguyen, 2012; Robinson, 1998; Robinson & Stivers, 2001), these nonverbal actions signal the imminent commencement of the upcoming writing activity. In this context, Jeff’s ending of his smile (line 115) is another sign that he is shifting from a phatic orientation to some task-related orientation. In line 117, as he produces a loud and lengthened discourse marker (“U::HM. NOW”) to mark the closing of the current activity and initiate the next activity (Bangerter & Clark, 2003), he again glances quickly down at the papers on the desk, and taps on the area between his chest and the papers. The papers are the objects of concern that are directly related to the business of the meeting, so making verbal or non-verbal reference to them can be taken as further orientation to this business. While Jeff is nonverbally projecting the upcoming writing talk, Lien still shows little orientation to the business of the office hour meeting at this point. She ends her smile after Jeff has ended his, but still sits straight up gazing at Jeff (line 122). Her bag by this time is by the side of her feet (Fig. 1).

Jeff’s next salient signal for the transition to writing talk is the question “Do you have any: (1.0) specific questions about (. ) what we’ve done in class so far or (. ) your essays:” (lines 123–127). With this question, Jeff opens up a relevant next slot for Lien to voice any concerns. I submit that by displaying the responsibility to offer her this opportunity, Jeff is indexing his role as a teacher and Lien’s role as a student. With this participation framework (Goffman, 1981) being foregrounded, Jeff is further displaying his orientation to the business of the meeting. Only at the point where the force of the question becomes clear (after the word “about”) that Lien makes her first (nonverbal) move to orient towards the business of the meeting: she reaches down to her bag and gets her papers out (lines 126–132). Lien’s delayed orientation may be further evidenced by Jeff’s mid-TCU (turn construction unit) pauses in his turn (lines 123, 124, 127), the sound stretches (lines 123, 127) and in the way he extends his question with an increment (“or your essays:”) beyond the first transition relevant place (“do you have any: (1.0) specific questions” line 123).

Thus, in Lien’s very first time participating in the communicative practice of office hour meetings, she actively oriented to the structural organization of the meeting only after Jeff has produced several actions that project the next activity.

4.1.2. The second office hour meeting

In the second meeting one week later, Lien continued to show delayed orientation to the structural organization of the meeting and failed to take actions in synchrony with Jeff’s moment-to-moment projection of the upcoming writing activity (Excerpt 2).

In this meeting, Lien also aligned well with Jeff in closing the current sequence, but again, her orientation to the projection of the upcoming writing activity was delayed. In line 94, Jeff makes a positive assessment about Littleville as an uptake to Lien’s telling that she will stay in Littleville for the rest of the summer. In line 97, Lien produces a minimal response, thus signaling that she is not developing the topic further (Maynard, 1980). In line 100, Jeff’s softened repetition of his comment about Littleville functions as a pre-closing move (Schegloff & Sacks, 1973). Lien’s withholding talk during the one-second pause (line 104) indicates her co-construction of this closing of the current topic. Again, as in the first meeting, while there is evidence that Lien orients to the closing of the current topic, there is no evidence in the talk that she understands this to be the closing of the social chat phase and thus the next relevant activity will be working on the writing assignment.

Meanwhile, Jeff has displayed several orientations to the upcoming of the writing activity. Earlier, while producing the first evaluative comment about Littleville (line 94), he also glances down at the desk, the work area for the meeting (line 95). As he
repeats the comments (line 100), he picks up the pen on top of the pile of papers in front of him (line 101). The pen is another object related to the writing business, and thus orienting to it signals the relevance of the writing task as a next activity (Robinson & Stivers, 2001). At this point, Lien still rests her elbow on the desk, with her chin on her palm, and continues her gaze at Jeff, thus not orienting to the upcoming writing activity (lines 98–99).

In line 105, Jeff says “OKAY” with a louder voice and taps his hand on the work area in front of him (but away from Lien), signaling the transition to the business of the meeting (Bangerter & Clark, 2003; Beach, 1993, 1995a, 1995b; Robinson & Stivers, 2001). As he produces a hesitation marker, “let’s see:”, further marking the transition, he taps again, this time on the papers right in front of him, i.e., a little bit closer to Lien (line 110). Simultaneously, his gaze is fully on the work area on the desk. At this point, Lien maintains her posture as before, showing no orientation to the writing task (line 108). Perhaps in response to this lack of collaboration from Lien, Jeff cuts himself off in the middle of what seems to be the beginning of an utterance that could open up the writing activity, “Uh we can talk-” (line 111). He then reformulates his turn with a more tentative conditional to invite Lien to propose a first writing-oriented activity, “if you have anything you wanna” (lines 114–118). As he does this, he taps in the area between his papers and Lien’s folder, thus even a little bit closer to Lien than the previous tap, his gaze steadily on the work area on the desk. I submit that together with the turn reformulation, the increased proximity of Jeff’s each tap during this turn is a subtle but clear display of his recognition of Lien’s delayed projection of the next activity.

Only after so many cues from Jeff that Lien initiates the first action to orient to the upcoming writing task: in the middle of Jeff’s turn (line 118), she removes her hand from the chin, shifts her gaze down to the folder, and opens it up to look for a paper to work on (lines 121–122). Thus, in this meeting, as in the first meeting, while Lien aligned finely to Jeff’s closing of the current activity, she was not as in tune with Jeff’s projection of the next activity.

4.2. The learner’s ability to project the next activity

Two weeks from the first meeting, when Lien met Jeff for the third office hour, she showed the ability to project the course of action and collaborate with Jeff in the achievement of the transition point in a more successful manner than in the previous two meetings (Excerpt 3).
As Jeff produces a third-turn response to Lien’s answer to his question (line 45), he also wipes his fingers and folds the napkin up (line 450), opening up the possibility for the closing of the current chatting and snacking activity. Lien’s moving closer to the desk (line 52) can be seen as corresponding to Jeff’s non-verbal action and opening up the possibility for the beginning of the writing task. As Jeff selects to continue the social chat with the first pair part of a new adjacency pair (line 53), Lien picks up the folder and...
opens it to get a paper out (lines 55–56), which is a clear display of her orientation to the task of the meeting in alignment with Jeff’s closing actions back in line 50. As Lien answers Jeff’s question (line 57), she continues her orientation to the upcoming business of the meeting (lines 58–59). While she does so, Jeff picks the napkin up to wipe his lips (lines 60–61), thus also continuing his closing of the social phase of the interaction. Here we have the participants doing two synchronous activities – the teacher is closing up the social chat, and the student getting ready for the upcoming task – each participant advances his or her part by picking up the signals from the other in a coordinated manner, with each step making the potentiality of a transition point stronger. While their verbal talk is still about a topic not related to the paper to be revised, their non-verbal actions strongly indicate a preparation for the business of the meeting.8

In line 62, Jeff makes a verbal move that signals a closing-up: he gives an optimistic projection (Jefferson, 1988), which often implicates closing in troubles-talk (here Lien is treating her upcoming exam as a trouble). Further, Jeff’s comment is repeated twice, and the recycling of information is also a means to signal closing (Schegloff & Sacks, 1973). In addition, at the end of this turn, Jeff ends his smile, further marking a shift from social chat to the business of writing.

The participants’ fine-tuned coordination of actions to close the current social chat and open up writing talk is displayed in their co-constructed arrangement of the objects of concern in the next few seconds (lines 66–77). At the point where Jeff utters line 62, Lien puts her paper down on the desk. As her paper is about to land on the desk, Jeff starts to touch his, which has been lying in the space between him and Lien. Rather than putting her paper down in one movement on top of Jeff’s paper and thus blocking his paper from being ready to use, Lien holds her paper in the air and only puts the paper down after Jeff has moved his paper away from her and towards himself. I surmise that by holding her paper a little longer, Lien displays her understanding of Jeff’s orientation to the upcoming writing task and simultaneously aligns herself with this projection of the sequence of actions.

Right after this arranging of papers, the two participants engaged in a highly coordinated body shift. In lines 73–74, Jeff hitches his body on the chair, turning his torso from facing Lien to facing the paper in front of him. Only one small beat after he has started this move, Lien also turns her torso away from Jeff to facing her paper (lines 75–76). This perfect collaboration suggests that the two participants must share the same projection of the upcoming transition to the writing business of the meeting. The coordination is so fine-tuned that it is impossible to be the result of an imitating mechanism; it can only be a display of the participants’ shared construction of the structural organization of the meeting (Kempton, 1980; Streeck, 1995).

This shared projection of the upcoming transition point results in Jeff and Lien’s highly coordinated actions at the actual transition point in line 78. Right after Jeff says the transitional discourse marker “OKAY” (Bangerter & Clark, 2003) with a louder volume, Lien immediately reaches down to her bag (for a pen, lines 80–81), not having to wait till Jeff explicitly refers to the writing task, which comes later in the turn (Fig. 2). This is a marked difference from the first meeting Lien had with Jeff.

Thus, in this third time doing the office hour meeting with Jeff, Lien was able to project the transition point quite accurately ahead of time, and accordingly constructed the sequence of action as an active participant.9 Further, in this meeting, Lien even oriented to the transition point slightly ahead of Jeff’s actions. This has particular importance for the understanding of Lien’s learning process, since it has been observed in first language socialization that a sign of development is when the child can “initiate the routines themselves (rather than waiting for the caregiver to do so)” (Peters & Boggs, 1986, p. 91).

8 The projecting power of nonverbal actions ahead of verbal ones has been noted in ordinary conversations (Schegloff, 1984).

9 Bilmes (2004) pointed out that there might be a reason for why Lien “got it” the third time participating in office hours. In Sacks (1978) discussion of the structure of a dirty joke, he mentioned that it takes a minimal of two repeated occurrences to make a third irregular occurrence noticeable. That is, it takes at least two repeated occurrences to establish a pattern. Possibly, the first two office hours were sufficient for Lien to recognize the sequential organization of this type of meetings, which enabled her to participate successfully in the third.
4.3. Evidence of sustained change

In the fourth meeting a week later, Lien continued to show very fine attunement to Jeff’s signals of the transition point. This can be taken as evidence that Lien’s collaboration with Jeff in the third meeting was not a chance performance, but she had indeed made some developmental changes in her interactional competence. Her consistent learning process was evident in the fifth and last meeting she had with Jeff.

In this fifth and last meeting between Jeff and Lien, Lien displayed the same competence, if not a little more advanced, in her orientation to the transition point compared to the third and fourth meetings. In this meeting, the two participants collaboratively achieved the closing of social chat and the opening of writing talk. In lines 38 and 40, Jeff makes a positive comment as an uptake to Lien’s story about her advisor’s help with her statements of purpose (before Excerpt 4 begins). He then extends his comment with more details (lines 44–55), and repeats the earlier positive comment (line 57). Together with the uptake, this recycling of

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Due to space limit, it is not possible to provide an analysis of this meeting here. The transcript of the transition point is below:

Jeff–Lien Fourth Meeting.

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111 J: I'm sure you'll be fine.
112 J smiles,
113 and you took a course this summer.
114 J removes arms from desk, gestures, self-grooming
115 L moves chair closer to J
116 L: uh huh.
117 ( . )
118 J: took the languages, the tutor. ( . )
119 J leans on desk towards L, arms back on desk
120 L raises eye brows, looks down
121 you know that's- I think that you'll find
122 that your score 'll improve quite a bit.
123 ( . )
124 J: 'I'm sure that it will-.''
125 J looks down at desk
126 L: 'I hope so. ''
127 L smiles, looks down, self-grooming
128 J: good luck.
129 L smiles, looks down
130 L: yeah [thank you].
131 L smiles, looks down, touches pen on desk
132 J: [GOOD LUCK. 'I hope it all works out.'
133 J reaches out towards
134 door knob and pushes door close, ends smile
135 L gazes up at J then
136 moves chair closer to desk
137 L: thank you.
138 L moves folder towards J, glances at J, ends smile
139 J glances at L
140 (1.0) J moves chair closer to L, turning torso from
141 facing L to facing paper
142 J: OKAY,
143 (1.0) J moves paper into space between him and L,
144 gazes down
145 L moves chair closer to J and turns torso
146 to face paper, which is parallel to J's paper
147 J: uh: ( . ) do you have any ( . ) question before ( . )
148 L leans forward to face J, gazing at J
149 I start talking,
150 (1.0) L gazes at J, 'thinking face'
151 J: about any thing?
152 L: mmm so ( . ) I think it's up to you.
153 you want to talk about this one first and [then-
L: but she- she think that ahm the-
the concept in the=
J: mm[m.
J: [statement’s fi:ne.
J: “okay good”.
(.)
J: “good” I’m glad she could help you with,
J smiles
L: yeah.
L smiles
J: she’s the expert.
J smiles, shifts body in chair quickly,
crosses legs, touches hair
L: uh.
L shifts in chair, self-grooming
J: so she knows exactly what (.)
J smiles
L ends smile
the medical school (.) you know (.) expects,
L ends smile, chin back on hand
L: [ri: ght.
J: “[you know in ah statements of purpose like that”.
L nods
J: “okay good. I’m glad she could help you”.
J smiles
L: me too,
L smiles, raises eyebrows
J: “okay good”.
J smiles, then ends smile
(0.5) L ends smile, turns body to face desk, touches pen
J: OH::K(h)AY::,
J puts stop watch aside
L removes arms from desk
u:h. let’s (.) >look at<-
J puts top papers aside,
L moves closer to desk
do you have any questions
L moves pen
before we look at your- (.) first draft?
(1.0) J holds pencil up to touch chin
L: mmm. (.) I think now we can work on
L points index finger
in the direction of the pile of paper
in front of J
my- [my draft. my first draft
J: [okay,
J turns and touches pile of papers,
shifts top pages, puts a paper down
in front of L
L: so I can ah change some[thing that you want me to.
[okay. ((breathy))

materials implicates a closing for the current talk (Schegloff & Sacks, 1973). Lien’s elliptic response “me too,” (line 59) effectively agrees with Jeff while not introducing any new mentionables, thus maintaining the central possibility of the closing (Schegloff & Sacks, 1973). Jeff’s next repetition of the minimal response token (line 61) shows his orientation to this topic closing (Maynard, 1980). Through these turns, the two participants have indicated to each other that they have no more to say about the current topic.
At this point, Lien initiates the first orientation to the upcoming writing activity. During the co-constructed pause in line 63, Lien ends her smile, turns her torso to face the desk, the working area of the meeting, and touches the pen, the object of concern in the writing task. Lien and Jeff's remarkably fine-tuned participation in the transition point is evidenced in the fact that only one split second after Jeff begins to mark the transition point to writing talk with the discourse marker "OH::K(h)AY:: hh."

Rather interestingly, Lien has not opened her folder up to this point. Could this be a sign of her lag behind Jeff in orienting to the business of the meeting? As the conversation moved on, it becomes clear that there is no such lag. Lien has not opened her folder because she wants to work on a paper that is in Jeff's possession, as she later points out (lines 75–77). Her lack of orientation to her own folder up to this point is in fact a very far-ahead projection of what she is going to construct next in the interaction.

Thus, through the five writing office hour meetings with the teacher, Lien showed increased ability to orient to and co-construct the transition from small chat to the writing business.11 For further evidence of the changes in the student's construction of the structural organization, I also examined the changes made by her co-participant, the teacher, around the transition points. This is motivated by the notion that in ordinary social interaction, a participant's talk-in-interaction displays their own understanding of the behavior of the other participant (Sacks et al., 1974).12 Lien's higher level of collaboration in the achievement of transition points can be further seen in the ways Jeff formulated the question after the transition marker in each of the five meetings.

As noted in the analysis above, in the first meeting, Jeff's one-second pause at a point where his question is not complete syntactically or intonation-wise (line 123) and the way he extended his question (lines 124–127) seem to indicate his hesitation to move forward with the upcoming task. This may further reflect Lien's delay in showing orientation to the next phase of the meeting. In the second meeting, the gradually increased proximity of Jeff's each tap (lines 106, 110, 115), together with the hesitation marker, "let's see" (line 109), and the cut-off of a potential projection of the next action (line 111) could indicate his postponement in launching the next part of the meeting. Similar to the first meeting, this could be a reflection of Lien's delayed orientation to the writing task. In the third meeting, following the transition marker, Jeff immediately proposed the next writing activity (lines 78–85). This is a remarkable difference from the previous two meetings and Jeff's change in the formulation of his turn after the transition point could be directly related to Lien's change in the third meeting. Continuing on to the fourth meeting (see footnote 12), after the transition marker (line 142),13 Jeff's question (line 147) simultaneously invites Lien to ask questions ("do you have any (.) questions") and claims a relevant slot for his next action ("before I start talking"). The fact that Jeff proposes the next course of action without hesitation immediately after the transition could reflect his understanding of Lien's readiness to begin the writing task at this moment. This pattern recurred in the fifth meeting, when Jeff's question after the transition marker again both invites Lien to ask questions (lines 70–72) and announces the next course of action (line 67 then line 72). Thus, the

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11 One might possibly argue that in the first two meetings, Lien was abstaining from taking actions that anticipated the next activity as a way to position herself as being subordinate, which in turn could express her politeness. This interpretation, however, is not supported by the data. First of all, it would mean that in the last three meetings, Lien ceased to be polite toward the teacher, which is not evidenced in the transcripts. Second, this interpretation does not explain why Lien still did not orient to the next activity after Jeff had marked its initiation clearly (lines 117–127, Excerpt 1 and lines 105–118, Excerpt 2).

12 In physician–patient encounters, the occurrence of the doctor's verbal instruction depends on whether the patient collaborates with the doctor's transition (from history taking to physical examination) or not (Robinson & Stivers, 2001).

13 The one-second pause after "OKAY" was perhaps necessary for Jeff and Lien to manipulate the papers in preparation for the writing activity, and thus does not indicate hesitation.
way Jeff constructed his turns after the transition markers shows further evidence of Lien’s change in her competence regarding the structural organization of office hour meetings. This finding concretely demonstrates that not only interactional competence but also competence development is co-constructed (Young & Miller, 2004; cf. Hall, 1993, 1995; He & Young, 1998). Far from suggesting that the teacher’s and student’s longitudinal changes are simply their individual behaviors, evidence from the data shows that the participants’ changes during their co-participation in the office hours were highly reflexive of each other’s actions and adaptation processes.

5. Discussion and conclusion

The above analysis of a longitudinal series of interactions by an ESL learner with her teacher has shown that over time, the learner displayed observable signs of increased collaboration with the teacher in achieving the transition from social chat to business. Kempton (1980) provided the following insight that can shed light on the findings in this study:

Interactional synchrony cannot be explained as a reaction or reflex to the sound or movement as it is being perceived. Unless we are prepared to propose some sort of extrasensory perception, we must hypothesize that synchronization occurs as a result of both interactants sharing mutually known rhythmic patterns. (p. 71, emphasis original)

More interactional synchrony over time signals a greater degree of sharing of these “mutually known rhythmic patterns” between participants. Lien’s understanding of the structural organization of the beginning of a writing office hour, together with the ability to fit her verbal and non-verbal actions into the flux of on-going talk show that her interactional competence has developed to a higher level.

A natural question to ask is: what seems to have contributed to the learner’s development? As mentioned earlier, the learner in this study never had any office hour meetings before the semester when the data were collected; she did not have any other office hour meetings with any other teachers, nor did she receive any explicit instructions on how to perform during office hour meetings. When she participated in situated interaction with the teacher in the meetings, she had to deal with the on-going flow of interactional actions, in which, as Streeck (1995) observed,

Moment by moment, the speaker’s gestures prefigure the next moment, allowing the participants to negotiate joint courses of action until, finally, a communication problem is solved collaboratively. (p. 87)

It is precisely the repeated participation in solving these communication problems that makes it possible for the learner in this study to develop her interactional competence. This concurs with Schegloff (1989, p. 152, emphasis original). Because structural organization is a point of intersubjectivity in the sense that the speaker of a next slot can display their understanding of the prior part as well as their own alignment or misalignment with the projected sequence (Schegloff, 1991, 2007), social interaction provides the very condition and mechanism of learning for newcomers (Kasper, 2009). Being new to the communicative practice of office hour meetings, Lien’s understanding of it was only possible if she could recurrently see how Jeff displayed his current and projected construction of its sequence of actions, and then from this perception, she could negotiate between her understanding and her own to reach a collaborated realization of the event at hand. Thus, in line with the Vygotskian approach to learning proposed by Rogoff (1990), Hall (1995, 1997), and others, development in interactional competence occurred as a result of the learner’s repeated participation in this negotiation for intersubjectivity in interaction.

A second question one may ask is: what is being learned here? Specifically, when an adult learns to participate in a new communicative practice in a second language, is she learning new language forms, a new communicative practice, or ways to interact with certain new interlocutors? From an emic perspective, second language socialization involves all of these. While it is possible for the analyst to hermeneutically separate these elements, they themselves do not exist independently of one another. Language meaning does not exist outside of its use (Wittgenstein, 1958) and thus to speak a second language is to engage in its communicative practices, in which meanings are reflexively defined by activities (Young, 2008, 2009, 2011). If our goal is to understand how a learner is socialized through and into using a second language, then we should look at how she uses language for meaning negotiation in talk-in-interaction, in which s/he simultaneously orients to the rules of communicative practices, linguistic norms, and ways of behaving towards other participants (e.g., Kramsch, 2002; Ochs, 2002; van Lier, 2000).

A related question is whether interactional competence development in a second language is different from competence development in a first language. Presumably, any newcomer to the communicative practice of office hour meetings will need to learn its structural organization, turn-taking patterns, topic management, repair practices, participation frameworks, and the practice-specific linguistic and non-linguistic means (e.g., names of class assignments, expressions to introduce questions while also showing competence and effort, and non-verbal actions regarding where to sit and when to sit). The difference between a first language learner and a second language learner may be that for the former, these new interactional procedures are developed on the basis of a

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14 The student’s development of interactional competence is perhaps not restricted to office hours, but may also concern the construction of “the social” and “the business” within an institutional setting.

15 Given the situated nature of social interaction, the learner’s development should be demonstrated by her own accomplishments over time and not necessarily by comparing with native speakers’ behaviors in the same practice (see also Firth & Wagner, 1997, 2007; Hatch, 1978; Kanagy, 1999; Markee, 2000; Ohta, 1999; Poole, 1992; Wagner, 1996; Young & Miller, 2004).
richer repertoire gained from previous communicative practices in the language while for the latter, they are developed on the basis of a more limited repertoire. Further research is definitely needed to shed more light on this important issue.

A third and final question is: can we claim understanding of the learning process and competence development if all we have access to is the learner’s observable conduct in social interaction? Given that cognition is socially shared and situated in talk-in-interaction (Resnick, 1991; Schegloff, 1991), competence – as it is and as it is being modified – is constantly displayed in social interaction. In this study, I used the microscopic lens of conversation analysis to observe unfolding moments of the learner’s interaction. Close, systematic examination of social interaction as ongoing processes has enabled the observation of how the learner’s interactional competence is at work at a given point in time, and a comparison across a collection of these descriptions over time has provided an understanding of how the learner’s competence developed. This is the observation of the product of learning. At the same time, by paying attention to the moment-to-moment co-construction of interaction between the learner and the other participant, the analysis also shows the interactional forces that may have triggered competence modification; these forces may have come from the co-participant’s turn formats and actions such as mid-turn pauses, sound stretches, turn extensions (Excerpt 1), and tapping progression (Excerpt 2). In this sense, it is possible to also observe the process of learning in the same series of interaction. This study thus questions the product–process dichotomy sometimes made in research on the development of interactional competence in a second language (see Pekarek Doehler, 2010, for example).

Learning to project and co-construct the structural organization of a given communicative practice in a second language is an important part of learning to communicate and “become a speaker of culture” (Ochs, 2002) in the second language. It is only through detailed examination of the learner’s actions in moments of interaction that one can begin to understand the complex mechanisms of this language socialization process. Further research is needed to shed light on issues such as the transferability of interactional competence across communicative practices and the impact of the learner’s previous exposure to a practice on his/her participation in that practice.

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Appendix A

Transcription conventions

(Based on Jefferson, 2004, with additional attention to non-verbal details)

**bold text** verbal actions and pauses (in contrast to non-verbal actions, see below)

*italics* nonverbal actions occurring without speech or at around the same time as the speech in the line immediately above.

. falling intonation

? rising intonation

↑ rising pitch in the following segment

↓ falling pitch in the following segment

↑↓ pitch rises and falls within the next word

: lengthened speech

= latched speech

- cut off word

 underline stressed syllable

**CAPITALS** louder volume

superscript zero ○ beginning and end of quieter speech

( ) vocal effect accompanying speech or transcriber’s notes

| beginning of overlap of speech or nonverbal actions

> < speed up speech

< > slowed down speech

(number) duration of silence in seconds

( . ) a pause of roughly one-tenth of a second

hhh. audible out-breath or laughing voice

.hhh audible in-breath

References

