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Anne Barron, Emily Black

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Abstract:

Developments in technology, including the use of synchronous telecollaborative tools, promise to address the challenge of providing opportunities for interaction in the foreign language classroom. The present study investigates how learners and native speakers (NS) of English co-construct small talk in the opening phase of a voice-based Skype telecollaboration. Specifically, learner and NS self-oriented and other-oriented topic shifts, topic replies and verbal listenership behaviour are analysed. The focus is on the English interactions of two learner-NS dyads, each made up of German NS and Irish English NS. One dyad includes a learner who exhibits a high level of interactional competence while in the other dyad the learner shows no active participation. Specifically, she reveals a low use of topic shifts, a high use of equivocal short-form topic replies, few long-form replies and a very limited use of backchannels/backchannel forms, leaving the interactional burden on the Irish English NS. The analysis illuminates small talk construction in the voice-based telecollaborative context and highlights the possibilities it offers for developing interactive competencies. It also sheds light on the roles played by NS and learners in topic management and adds to our understanding of individual differences in small talk construction in the foreign language.

1. Introduction

In early models of communicative competence (e.g. Canale & Swain, 1980; Bachman, 1990), L2 pragmatic competence was largely seen as learner-internal L2 competence, as an individual trait, and as an "acquired toolkit to be applied later in appropriate contexts" (van Compernolle, 2013, p. 327). With the rising prominence of the concept of interactional competence (IC), however, has come a growing recognition that actions are not the locus of individuals alone but are rather jointly constructed in particular contexts (cf., e.g. Hall, 1993; He & Young, 1998; Kramsch, 1986; Young, 2013; cf. also Kasper & Ross, 2013; Tecedor Cabrero, 2013, pp. 15–30 for an overview). Hence, pragmatic abilities are increasingly seen as contextually situated and dependent on the actions of others, a fact which necessitates an increase in L2 pragmatic studies on learners in interaction. In addition, this recognition goes hand-in-hand with an acknowledgment that gaining competence in interactional practices via participation is an integral part of acquiring pragmatic competence.

Gaining competence in interactional practices over a range of discursive practices, however, remains a challenge in the foreign language classroom due to a lack of focus on interaction in the classroom, classroom-specific discourse patterns, classroom-based role expectations and also differing first language (L1) pragmatic norms (cf. 3.2, cf. also Morris-Adams, 2014, pp. 151–152). It is not surprising, therefore, that foreign language students experience difficulties when interacting in the target culture. Indeed, as Tudini (2013, p. 187) notes, there is no doubt that "To complement highly structured classroom interactions where the teacher controls turn-taking and participation, learners require exposure to alternative naturalistic environments and conversational structures which are likely to be produced in an out-of-class context."

Telecollaboration, defined as "the use of Internet communication tools by internationally dispersed students of language in institutionalized settings in order to promote the development of (a) foreign language (FL) linguistic competence and (b) intercultural competence" (Belz, 2003, p. 68), "provide[s] exposure to community practices and opportunities to participate in such practices" (Takamiya & Ishihara, 2013, pp. 185–186; cf. also Sykes, 2005, p. 399; Taguchi, 2011, p. 298) (cf. 2). As such, it promises to address the challenges of developing interactional competence in the classroom. Communication may be in the L1 and L2 of the individual participants or alternatively in a common lingua franca (cf. Guth & Helm, 2012, pp. 44–49; O'Rourke, 2005, p. 434). The communication tools used to facilitate telecollaboration include both asynchronous forms, such as email, internet forums or message boards, and synchronous forms, such as text-based chat, teleconferencing and videoconferencing (cf., e.g. Takamiya & Ishihara, 2013, p. 187). Communication may be oral (e.g. teleconferencing, videoconferencing) or written (e.g. email, text-based chat, blogging, forums).

Interlanguage pragmatic (ILP) research interest in telecollaboration has increased in recent years. Pragmatic features that have been investigated in this context include pronouns of address, modal particles, sentence-final particles, hedging devices, refusals of invitations, backchannel signals and reactive expressions, with a number of studies also focussing on the use of telecollaboration for pragmatic instruction.[1] However, although this marks an advance, there continues to exist a dearth of ILP research on telecollaboration with regard to the focus of

[1] Pronouns of address: cf. Belz & Kinginger, 2003; González-Lloret, 2008; Kinginger & Belz, 2005;
Modal particles: cf. Belz & Vyatkina, 2005; Vyatkina, 2007; Vyatkina & Belz, 2006;
Sentence-final particles: cf. Kakegawa, 2009;
Hedging devices: cf. Wishnoff, 2000;
Refusals of invitations: cf. Sykes, 2005; Takamiya & Ishihara, 2013;
Backchannel signals and reactive expressions: cf. Sardegna & Molle, 2010.
Studies focussing on the use of telecollaboration for pragmatic instruction: e.g. Belz & Vyatkina, 2005; Cunningham & Vyatkina, 2012; Kakegawa, 2009; Sardegna & Molle, 2010; Takamiya & Ishihara, 2013; Vyatkina, 2007; Vyatkina & Belz, 2006.

analysis, the languages used in telecollaboration, its developmental potential and also the effect of learner proficiencies. In addition, ILP telecollaborative research has concentrated almost exclusively on text-based computer-mediated communication (CMC) to date, a focus ILP research shares with CMC research in general (cf. Nguyen, 2008, p. 27).[2] Indeed, Alcón Soler (2012, p. 184), in an overview article on discourse and pragmatics in second language acquisition, emphasises the need for increased research in the CMC context focussing on "how learners negotiate meaning, use speech acts or develop their interactional competence".

The present paper is designed to further L2 pragmatic research on telecollaborative learner discourse by examining the construction of small talk by two mixed nationality pairs consisting of a German learner studying English and an Irish student studying German, each in their respective home countries. The small talk exchanges are taken from the openings of an audio-recorded telecollaborative Skype session. The focus of analysis is on learner and NS use of self-oriented and other-oriented topic shifts, on topic development and on the participants' verbal listenership behaviour examined via their use of backchannels. The specific research questions posed are the following:

- Is topic selection reliant on the NS in NS-learner telecollaborative discourse?

- Do learners/ NS develop topics similarly in NS-learner telecollaborative discourse?

- Does the learners' use of backchannels differ from that of the NS' in NS-learner telecollaborative discourse?

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[2] A rare exception is Sardegna & Molle (2010), a study focussing on the effectiveness of teaching verbal backchannel signals/reactive expressions via videoconferences between EFL students in Japan and ESL teachers in the United States.

The paper begins by sketching the telecollaborative context and highlighting the features of synchronous computer-mediated communication (SCMC), particularly of voice-based CMC from a pragmatic perspective. Attention then turns to small talk and in particular to a description of the focus of analysis, namely self-oriented and other-oriented topic shifts, short and long-form responses, and backchannels. The particular challenges confronting learners, particularly German learners of English, in these areas are also highlighted. Following this, findings are presented and discussed before the paper examines the pedagogical implications and considers potential avenues for future research.

2. The telecollaborative context: L2 pragmatics in interaction

A wide range of speech acts and discourse features have been shown to be present in the SCMC context, e.g. requests, apologies, agreements, disagreements, expressing opinions, joking and even flirting (cf. Belz, 2003; Blyth, 2012; Sotillo, 2000; Vyatkina & Belz, 2006, p. 319, cf. also Sauro, 2011, pp. 376–382 for an overview). Indeed, in a contrast of synchronous and asynchronous communication, Sotillo (2000, p. 82) reports that "the quantity and types of discourse functions present in synchronous discussions were similar to the types of interactional modifications found in face-to-face conversations that are deemed necessary for second language acquisition." Asynchronous discussions by contrast were found to be more limiting or controlled, and more similar to the traditional language classroom pattern of question-response-evaluation. In addition, SCMC has been found to facilitate interaction management to a higher degree relative to product-oriented communication forms, such as email. It provides opportunities for relationship-building in a foreign language. Indeed on the topic of small talk, Nguyen (2008, p. 28) comments that process-oriented forms of communication, such as text-

based and voice-based chat, are "inclined toward phatic communion, reinforcing social contact in and of itself". In addition, Darhower (2002, pp. 265–272) finds social cohesiveness to be an important part of text-based chat. He writes: "Many of the episodes in the study began with … lengthy greeting and small talk before learners dove into their assigned tasks" (Darhower, 2002, p. 267; cf. also Abrams, 2008 on elaborate opening and closing sequences and Gonzales, 2013 on shortened and extended closings both in text-based SCMC).

Of the SCMC types, however, voice-based telecollaboration differs significantly from text-based telecollaboration. Firstly, the turn-taking system in voice-based telecollaboration is similar to that in face-to-face conversation (in the sense of Sacks, Schegloff, & Jefferson, 1974). In contrast, certain features of text-based telecollaboration lead to a different turn-taking organisation; each participant, for example, being free to post a conversational turn at any time without waiting for a response to a previous post (cf. Marques-Schäfer, 2013, pp. 56–60; Smith, 2003, p. 42; Tudini, 2013, p. 189; van der Zwaard & Bannink, 2014, pp. 138–139).[3] Secondly, learners have been shown to pay more attention to face-issues in video calls relative to text-based chat. In a recent study by van der Zwaard & Bannink (2014), for instance, L2 learners' willingness to negotiate non-understanding was lower in a video context due to a higher level of face threat relative to a text-based chat context. The learners communicated less freely in the video context and frequently left tasks unsuccessfully completed. In the text-based context in contrast, there was a higher focus on task.

Relative to the face-to-face (FTF) context, voice-chat appears to be characterised by a lower level of pragmatic pressure. This is suggested in a study by Sykes (2005) that investigated

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[3] Further features of text-based telecollaboration which contribute to these differences in turn-taking include that only one message at a time can be transmitted, that messages are composed in a complete form not seen in advance by the interlocutor and that there are delays between typing and posting a conversational turn. In addition, participants may not be completely focused on the chat, but rather may be, and apparently frequently are, engaged in other tasks, such as watching television (cf. Belz, 2005; Darhower, 2008; Marques-Schäfer, 2013, pp. 53–56).

the effect of written chat, oral chat and traditional FTF group discussion on the acquisition of L2 refusals following instructional input. Roleplay data (FTF) gathered prior to and following instruction as well as discussion/ practice dialogues in the written chat, oral chat or FTF context were the primary measure of comparison. Findings show that informants who had participated in the voice chat setting used more complex grounders as head acts and a greater variety of strategies in the post-roleplay. The FTF discussion group by contrast only increased their use of supportive mitigators. Sykes (2005, pp. 418–419) explains these findings with reference to the remote location of learners' interlocutors in the oral online context which is suggested to make negotiation of face somewhat easier than in the FTF context.[4]

3. Social contact via language use: Small talk

The study of small talk goes back to Malinowski's (1923, p. 15) suggestion that individuals share "phatic communion", i.e. that social contact may be created via language use. The concept of small talk itself has not been unanimously defined (cf. Schneider, 1987, pp. 249–251; Schneider, 1988; cf. also Săftoiu, 2012 who attempts a unifying definition) but it may be equated with talk in the opening phase only (cf. Schneider, 2008, Săftoiu, 2012, pp. 218–225), with talk surrounding the business phase, i.e. occurring in both the opening and closing phase (cf., e.g. Laver, 1975), with relational sequences or turns that may be interwoven into workplace tasks, thus occurring also in the business phase (cf., e.g. Koester, 2004). In the present context, the focus is on small talk in the opening phase only, i.e. on initial small talk. In this context, small talk serves an ice-breaking and silence-filling function as well as being important in the

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[4] Cf. also Nguyen (2008, p. 25) on the relative impersonality found to characterise CMC, including computer conferencing, relative to FTF communication.

construction of social cohesion, greasing the wheels for the upcoming task phase (cf.; Schneider, 2008, p. 103; cf. also Coupland, 2003).

3.1 *Doing small talk*

The following section outlines the foci of the present small talk analysis, i.e. topic management and verbal listenership behaviour. Both aspects are first defined before previous research on learner behaviour is presented in 3.2 below.

3.1.1 Topic management

Discourse topic is defined by Morris-Adams (2014, p. 152) as "stretches of discourse, with an identifiable and sustained focus, and bounded by specific moves that led [lead] to a recognisably complete or partial change of focus." Intuitively, topic is understood by interactants as the subject of a conversation, and is recognisable as a discourse structuring element (cf. Schneider, 1988, p. 82). Competence in initiating and developing topic is vital to the regulation of everyday conversation as it "focusses the participants' attention on the conversation, links their contributions and establishes a connection between them (and with them)" (Bublitz, 1988, pp. 16–17).

Following Morris-Adams (2014, p. 153), the utterance initiating a topic is termed a topic shift.[5] Topic shift is considered a superordinate term encompassing a binary distinction between topic changes and topic transitions, as depicted in Figure 1. Although topics are intuitively recognisable as discrete units that were talked about, in conversation there exists a preference for a 'stepwise' progression of topic (Sacks, 1992, p. 291), that is, topics often fade one into

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[5] Terminology varies. Cf. Morris-Adams (2014, p. 153) for an overview.

another. These are topic transitions and they maintain a lexical or propositional connection to the previous topic producing a "gradual transition from one aspect of a topic to another, a smooth movement which nonetheless creates a shift of focus" (Morris-Adams, 2014, p. 154). Topics that change abruptly and bear no propositional or linguistic relation to the previous topic are topic changes. They are disjunctive and involve an abandoning of the previous topic. As there is a preference for topic transitions, topic changes are 'marked' (Levinson, 1983, p. 313).

Topic shifts of either sub-type can also be differentiated by orientation – as either self(speaker)-oriented or other(recipient)-oriented, the former proposing to take the floor for a topic telling, the latter offering the floor to the conversational partner. Other-oriented topic shifts often (but not always) take the form of a question and treat the recipient as 'an/the authoritative speaker' (Schegloff, 2007, p. 170). Self-oriented topic shifts, on the other hand, "[relate] a topic initiation to something relevant to the speaker's likes or interests" (Morris-Adams, 2014, p. 156), and so the speaker is the authority.

A speaker who initiates a self-oriented topic shift may carry that topic forward with varying levels of engagement from their conversational partner (cf. 3.1.2). An other-oriented topic, however, requires the conversational partner to display a stance towards the topic shift, that is, to accept the topic shift and the accompanying role of primary speaker, or reject the topic shift (Schegloff, 2007, pp. 170–171). Maynard and Zimmerman (1984)[6] outline three ways in which a topic shift may be accepted or declined. To be accepted, an other-oriented topic shift is responded to with a long-form reply which includes not only an answer, but further comment or elaboration that helps to further the topical talk. Rejections are achieved via short-form replies with return questions, that is, the recipient of an other-oriented topic shift provides only minimal

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[6] See also Schegloff (2007, pp. 171–180) for a detailed discussion and exemplification of topic replies

information and immediately turns the focus back to the conversational partner. Short-form replies that offer only minimal information and do not offer a topic shift back to the conversational partner leave it open as to whether the topic has been implicitly accepted or rejected. This leaves it to the interactant who offered the topic shift to further drive that topic forward. The reply to an other-oriented topic shift, thus, is a primary determinant of whether or not a particular topic will be taken up and developed. However, the conversational participant's listenership behaviour also plays an important supportive role. It is to this behaviour that we now turn.

3.1.2   Active listening

Lambertz (2011, p. 12) defines engaged listenership as "(…) the desire of the listener to portray active, supportive and polite listenership." The operationalisation of this term has not, however, been straightforward, having engendered a range of varied concepts and definitions relating to listenership responses. Most concepts and terms are, nevertheless, hinged on the notion of a speaker turn and in particular on the concept of the back channel, a concept put forward by Yngve (1970, p. 568). He defines the 'back channel[7]' as the channel

> over which the person who has the turn receives short messages such as "yes" and "uh-huh" without relinquishing the turn. The partner, of course, is not only listening, but speaking occasionally as he sends the short messages in the back channel. The back

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[7] The terminology used to describe responses in the back channel varies in the literature, from "listener response" (Dittmann & Llewellyn, 1967, 1968) to "accompaniment signals" (Kendon, 1967) to "response tokens" (Murphy, 2012; O'Keeffe & Adolphs, 2008). Other terms, such as "continuers" (Schegloff, 1982), "acknowledgement tokens" (Drummond & Hopper, 1993) and "minimal responses" or "minimal feedback" (e.g. Coates, 1986; Fellegy, 1995; Fishman, 1983; Gardner, 2001; Holmes, 1997), refer to more narrowly defined functional or formal qualities (cf., e.g. Gardner, 2001, pp. 13–17 for a discussion).

channel appears to be very important in providing for monitoring of the quality of communication. (Yngve 1970, p. 568)

Here, the back channel is to be understood in relation to a main channel within which a speaker's utterances lie. The listener's utterances occur in the back channel for as long as they refrain from claiming a speaking turn (White, 1989, p. 59). Yngve (1970) maintains a broad definition of the type of utterances that may occur in the back channel, noting:

At one extreme there is simply an attitude of attention and interest. This shades into nods of agreement and short utterances such as "uh-huh" and "O.K." Then there are short comments such as, "Oh, I can believe it," or short questions like, "You've started writing it then – your dissertation?" (p. 574)

Indeed, Duncan & Niederehe (1974, p. 237) also list requests for clarification, restatements and sentence completions as more significant utterances that may occur in the back channel, but do not themselves constitute a speaking turn. McCarthy (2003) also defines a cline of formal backchannel realisations from non-verbal acknowledgements to extended responses (cf. also 4.2). The question frequently arises, however, as to whether such longer utterances actually occur in the back channel or whether they in themselves constitute a speaker turn, as such not being attributable to listenership, but rather to speakership (cf., e.g. Duncan & Niederehe, 1974, p. 237; Maynard, 1986, p. 1084; McCarthy, 2003, p. 39; Murphy, 2012; O'Keeffe & Adolphs, 2008, p. 74; Tottie, 1991, p. 260). As a consequence of such debate perhaps, much research has focused on non-word like vocalisations such as 'mhm' or common tokens such as 'yeah', both easily identified and thus non-contentious backchannels (cf., e.g. Drummond & Hopper, 1993; Gardner, 2001; Lambertz, 2011). Acknowledging the potential difficulty in establishing whether an utterance claims a speaker turn, Yngve (1970, p. 568) notes a higher-level notion of 'floor'

that plays a part in the determination of conversational roles. He analysed small talk dialogues between strangers who were given the simple instruction to 'get to know each other.' These dialogues, Yngve observed, appeared to be organised into topics and subtopics; when a participant is engaged in a topic telling, that participant is engaged primarily in speaking activities, while the other participant is engaged primarily in listening activities. Those listening activities are considered to be happening in the back channel and are thus categorised as backchannels.[8] It is because of this system of identification that the original term covered the wide range of utterances outlined above. Excerpt (1) below aptly demonstrates the relationship of the back channel to the main channel in an excerpt wherein it would be otherwise difficult to discern a listenership response from a speaker turn.

The contributions coded as backchannels in this excerpt are identified by arrows. Prior to line 16, G21 has been telling I21 about her day at university, which was quite stressful. I21 relates to her experience by telling her about his exams and his contribution at line 16 is considered a self-oriented topic transition. Lines 17–21 are considered a repair sequence beyond which the topic telling continues at line 22. I21 has cast himself in the role of the primary speaker and while he is speaking on this topic, while G21's contributions are considered to be in the role of the listener and thus, backchannels. The single word contribution 'okay' at line 27 exemplifies an easily identified, non-contentious backchannel. G21's contribution at line 29, however, exemplifies how the notion of 'floor' is more powerful than the notion of 'speaker turn' in the identification of backchannels in the small talk context. Though the contribution is in itself a speaking turn that arrives at a transition relevance place (cf. Sacks, Schegloff & Jefferson, 1974). G21 is not attempting to take the floor, but rather is prompting I21 to continue on his exam

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[8] Thus, the back channel is the channel over which utterances, or backchannels, occur

topic. So it can be seen how the exam topic emerges as a discourse structuring element; the two participants orient to the topic and to their respective roles within it.

(1)

16.   I21: (0.8) Yeah we had exams as well: last week they were really hard, I thought anyway. (0.3) [They were really]

17.   G21:   [You were at,] you were at our?

18.   I21: (0.5) No no no we had exams, [exams.

19.   G21:   [A:h.

20.   I21: (0.3) Yeah [[yeah yeah.

21.   G21:   [[Ok yeah.

22.   I21: (0.4) Yeah for like (0.2) Accounting and Business (0.3) and uh Economy, like Economics. It was pretty difficult. Yeah it wasn't good ehuhuh.

→ 23.   G21: So three exams?

24.   I21: (0.15) Th[ree exams.

→ 25.   G21:   [In one week?

26.   I21: (0.8) Ah no they were spread out over like, two weeks?

→ 27.   G21: (0.4) Okay, [(yeah?).

28.   I21:   [and it was (a big stress?) b[[ut..

→ 29.   G21:   [[And you were done right now, or, (0.2) you still have a few left.

30.   I21: (0.3) No I'm finished exams but I've got an: project still.

→ 31.   G21: (0.7) Okay=

32.   I21: =(Group?) project still like that's why could only meet now so (0.2) yeah=

33.   G21: =Yeah no problem. (0.2) I have um also a project um: in Psychology because I am studying (0.9) Law in my major and my minor is Psychology, (0.6) and so I understand group work is always difficult. ehheh (0.2)

3.2   Learners doing small talk: Focus on L2 topic management and backchannels

Doing small talk in the L2 involves competence in a range of areas, including competence in the appropriate rhetorical scripts, characteristic register, the turn taking system, topical organisation, participation framework and the use of boundary signalling features and transitions (cf. He & Young, 1998; Young, 2013; Kasper, 2006, p. 86; cf. also Cruz, 2013 on small talk). On each of these levels, learners bring with them their L1 interactional norms, some of which facilitate interaction in the L2, others which cause negative transfer. In addition, L2-specific features as well as the effects of classroom discourse patterns often have explanatory potential.

In the German-Irish context at present, cross-cultural sociopragmatic differences in the status of small talk are a possible source of interactional problems. O'Reilly (2003, pp. 223–224), for instance, in an analysis of German expatriates' experiences of life in Ireland, finds small talk to hold a higher status in the Irish culture. Also, O'Sullivan et al. (2011) report of a student discussion about differences in small talk in the Irish/German context held during a telecollaborative group chat. The opinion that emerges in the students' discussion is that "an absence of small talk is typically German". Rather, German communication is strongly task-oriented (cf. also Evans Davies, 2004, pp. 221–223 on small talk in German/ American English). Such sociopragmatic differences may conceivably result in a lack of familiarity with the appropriate rhetorical scripts and characteristic register and must thus be taken into account in the analysis (cf. He & Young, 1998; Young, 2013; Kasper, 2006, p. 86; cf. also Cruz, 2013 on small talk).

Turning now to topic management, previous research by Iwata (2010) reveals cross-cultural differences in the American English/ Japanese context. In an analysis of two interactions between American English NS and Japanese learners of English, American speakers were found

to talk more and to disclose more about themselves, both features that Iwata relates to cross-cultural differences in L1 and L2 conventions (cf. also Itakura, 2010 on gender-specific Japanese L1 norms transferred to English). In addition, learner/NS interactional effects were recorded as a result of such cross-cultural differences. Specifically, as a result of the Japanese learners' behaviour – and a lack of knowledge of Japanese L1 conventions on behalf of the American interactants – Japanese speakers were relegated to the role of the listener, a role with which they were not always happy. Furthermore, Iwata (2010, p. 155) found Americans to engage in topic shifts more frequently, a feature which is suggested to have been a possible reaction to their uneasiness with what they perceived as a passive Japanese partner.

Further research on NS/ learner roles in topic development points to the possible influence of proficiency on NS/ learner roles. Long (1983), for instance, shows NS to make considerable adjustments to interactional structure when in conversation with low proficiency language learners. The vast majority of topic shifts in the experimental non-native speaker (NNS)-NS interactions analysed were introduced by NS and most of these took the form of question-answer sequences (cf. Long, 1983, p. 133). Similarly, Kasper (2004) is a further study that reports on beginner learners of German relying on German NS to manage interactions, with initiation-response-feedback (IRF) routines recorded in NS/ learner discourse outside of the classroom context. In the study abroad context, Wilkinson (2002, pp. 164–165) illustrates how interactants may inappropriately adopt the norms of instructional discourse in informal social contexts. Specifically, the study looks at speech and speaker perceptions in intermediate American learners interacting with French NS hosts. It finds both learners and NS to believe that the NS is destined to play the leading discourse role with topic initiations delegated to NS. In addition, topic initiations in the form of statements were not recognised as topic shifts by learners due, Wilkinson (2002, pp. 163–164) suggests, to the fact that these function as reactions

rather than initiators in the classroom context. In contrast to such research findings, however, a more recent study by Morris-Adams (2014, p. 163) using naturally-occurring data with intermediate to advanced learners and NS found learners to topic initiate to the same extent or more than NS. Morris-Adams also reports that 85% of the topic shifts identified in the learner-NS corpus were topic transitions, as opposed to disjunctive topic changes. Apart from differences in proficiency, Morris-Adams (2014, p. 152) comments that the data type analysed might explain the contradictory findings. Interestingly, however, Meierkord (1996, pp. 104–107), in an analysis of naturally-occurring dinner-table conversations recorded in an English as a lingua franca context in Britain, does not find any correlation between language learner proficiency or cultural heritage and number of topic shifts.

Finally to backchannels, there is a general consensus that although backchannels are employed in all languages, backchanneling conventions vary across languages and across varieties of a single language with respect to the type, frequency, distribution, function and placement in the discourse context (cf. Sardegna & Molle, 2010, pp. 282–284 for a comprehensive overview of backchannel use across cultures). Heinz (2003), for instance, reports of cross-cultural differences between backchannels in American English and German. She finds German NS to use fewer backchannels than American English NS and to use them less frequently in overlapping position.[9] As for learners, they have also been found to use a smaller variety of backchannel types and to exhibit different preferences in the realisations of backchannel types (cf. Cutrone, 2005, 2010, p. 29 on Japanese EFL speakers) – a feature which may be a result of negative transfer, as Cutrone (2005) suggests for the case of Japanese EFL

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[9] Examples of further studies revealing cross-cultural differences in the use of backchannels include, for instance, Clancy et al. (1996) on Mandarin Chinese, Japanese and English, Maynard (1990) on backchannels in Japanese and American English, Tottie (1991) on British and American English backchannels and Wong & Peters (2007) on backchanneling in Australian English, New Zealand English and American English.

speakers, but which may also conceivably relate to a lack of pragmalinguistic knowledge in the L2. Furthermore, learners may use backchannels to gain processing time (cf. Cutrone, 2005). Negative transfer of L1 conventions and also learner-specific uses of backchannels may be negatively perceived, possibly being interpreted as listener impatience in the case of overly frequent use or conversely, as lack of interest (cf., e.g. Cutrone, 2005).

4. The Study

The present analysis focuses on how two dyadic learner/ NS pairs attempt to build social cohesion during small talk in the opening phase of the recorded interactions. Data are taken from a corpus of telecollaborative interactions between German NS learners of English at the Leuphana University Lüneburg and Irish learners of German at Trinity College Dublin, who have English as a native language. The corpus is supplemented with a background data questionnaire based on Freed et al.'s (2004) Language Contact Profile, a Likert scale based evaluative questionnaire drawn from Cutrone (2005)[10], and post-telecollaboration focus interviews conducted with the informants. The corpus and the coding procedures are detailed in the following before we turn to the analysis in 5.

4.1 The data: Language LINC

The *Language LINC (Language Learners in Interaction Corpus)* is a voice-based telecollaborative corpus comprised of authentic discourse between learners and L1 speakers engaged in the same communicative event. It contains interactions in both English and German.

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[10] Cutrone (2005) is itself based on Hecht (1978)

The tandem exchange was organised around fortnightly Skype discussions of twelve dyads over a period of twelve weeks. As such, the corpus allows access to several comparable naturally-occurring interactions from the individual learners at different points in time, facilitating both individually-oriented analyses and longitudinal investigations. In line with research on telecollaboration, task-based language learning was the methodological approach adopted, with tasks ranging from information exchange to collaboration (cf. Guth & Helm, 2012, pp. 44–49; cf. also O'Dowd & Waire, 2009). In keeping with a task based approach (cf., e.g. Ellis, 2012), the project was organised with a target task and the individual Skype sessions served as pre-tasks that systematically provided practice and support in order to meet the demands imposed by the target task.

The present analysis of initial small talk in English is based on interactions of two dyads from the second of six sessions. The participants had thus interacted on one prior occasion via Skype in addition to the email communication required to arrange mutually appropriate dates and times. In this session, students were instructed to begin their interactions in English. The German students' English task was to obtain feedback on a business idea previously discussed in class. Additionally, Skype offers both text and audio/video functions. In the present case, the chat function was available to students, and while any resulting transcripts comprise part of the corpus, this function was not used in the excerpts under analysis.

The initial small talk between pair G21 and I21 (pair GI21) is 6:20 in length and contains 805 words; that between pair G27 and I27 (pair GI27) is 2:42 in length and contains 301 words. These sections begin once the pairs have sorted out any Skype or recording related logistics and end upon first mention of the task. Pair GI21 is a female-male dyad, while pair GI27 is a female-female dyad. Although it is recognised that language use varies according to the speaker's sex and also according to the interactants' sex (cf., e.g. Holmes, 1995), the focus in the present

analysis is on the learners' co-construction of small talk and, as sex did not arise as a significant factor in the analysis, it does not form part of the following discussion.

4.2 Coding procedures

Building on 3.1.1 and 3.1.2, data coding procedures are outlined in the following. Here, the close interplay between topic management and backchanneling becomes particularly evident.

The initiation of a topic was coded as a topic change or transition, and according to the self-orientation/ other-orientation, i.e. whether the speaker was relating a topic to themselves, or inquiring about their conversational partner (cf. 3.1.1). A speaker who initiated a topic shift, or picked up a topic shift initiated by their interlocutor was considered to hold the floor for the duration of their topic telling. This topic telling itself, if other initiated, was coded as a long-form topic acceptance, short-form equivocal, or topic rejection (cf. 3.1.1). While one speaker held the floor, the other was considered to be in the role of a listener, and all their contributions considered backchannels in the sense of Yngve (1970) (cf. 3.1.2). Excerpt (2) from pair GI27 illustrates this procedure:

(2)

       38.   I27: (0.5) Yeah ehehehe .hhh o:h. tch So, what have you been up to the last two weeks? Just.

       39.   G27: (0.5) .hhh oh hh university and yeah.

       40.   I27: (0.9) Yeah.

41.   G27: (0.6) All the same. Hhh

42.   I27: (0.4) Yeah. (1.6) Have you uh, have you gone home to Munster?
        (0.8) L[ately]?

At line 38 I27 elicits a new topic from G27 asking about the last two weeks. Lines 39 and 41 are considered to be G27's short-form equivocal telling on that topic as only very minimal information is given, and no move is made by G27 to propose a topic shift to her Irish partner. Line 40 is considered to be a backchannel as I27 is currently in the role of the listener. Once backchannels were identified, they were coded using the categorisation scheme set out in Table 1, a scheme based broadly on McCarthy's (2003, p. 39) cline of formal[11] options available to a listener[12]. Data was coded for the presence of an element furthest up the scale, e.g. 'Yeah, I know' was coded as 'clause(+)' as it contained a clause as well as a function word.

5. Analysis: The case study

Within the larger corpus of conversations, two were chosen for the current analysis, both from session two of six (cf. 4.1). Pair GI27 is a native-speaker dominated conversation exhibiting considerable interactional difficulties in the opening phase. In contrast, pair GI21 is an interaction in which the learner showed a high level of interactional competence.

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[11] While most of the distinctions are at the formal level, the distinction between functional responses and lexical responses is a functional one.

[12] McCarthy (2003) also identifies non-vocal acknowledgements. These were not considered given the availability of audio recordings only. Furthermore, the present category "clause(+) responses corresponds to two individual categories in McCarthy, namely that of short clauses and extended responses. These were merged in the present context given difficulties in establishing an operational and useful distinction between the categories.

Interestingly, in their subsequent Skype session (session three), the latter pair GI21 engages in similarly lively small talk while the former pair GI27 avoids any phatic communication in the opening phase, instead proceeding directly to the task at hand. This fact provides a glimpse into the interpersonal implications of small talk for the ongoing relationship.

Both learners were shown to have a B2 level according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages, as certified by the Oxford Online Placement Test taken prior to participation in the tandem exchange. Importantly, this test does not include a spoken component and tests only grammar, vocabulary, situated meaning and listening skills. However, the students' backgrounds, as reported in a Language Contact questionnaire also completed prior to data collection, are quite different. G21, on the one hand, reported early English study from birth to kindergarten in addition to the then traditional English tuition beginning in the 5th grade (approximately 11 years of age). She also reported both a six week and a two month trip to the United States and regular contact with English speaking family members via Skype. G27, on the other hand, reported only the standard English education starting in the 5th grade. G21, thus, has had greater opportunities to develop interactional competence (cf. 1). In the following, the topic shifts, topic replies and backchannels employed in both dyads are analysed.

5.1 Topic Shifts

The total topic shifts identified per speaker are displayed in Table 2, with distinctions made between self-oriented and other-oriented topic changes and self-oriented and other-oriented topic transitions (cf. 3.1.1). As the two small talk exchanges differed in length, the numbers in brackets are normalised as a percentage of speaker changes for that speaker.[13] Pair

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[13] Speaker change does not necessarily correspond to a speaker turn. The speaker change refers to lines of transcript. In other words, if one speaker is taking an extended turn and the other offers a backchannel, the sequence would be represented over three lines of transcript, or speaker changes, with the backchannel on its own line between two lines of the extended turn. For an example, see lines 42–45 in excerpt (3).

GI21's exchange covered 86 speaker changes (43 per speaker), while that of pair GI27 covered 50 speaker changes (25 per speaker).

The comparison of topic shifts per speaker provides insight into which conversational partners were actively managing the conversation via topic transitions and changes. Strikingly, pair GI27 is NS led, I27 carrying the weight of moving the conversation forward, initiating all of the topic shifts (cf. Table 2). Indeed, as many as 40% of I27's 25 speaker changes (or 20% of the total 50 speaker changes) contain topic shifts, suggesting a disjointed conversation with little time spent on each topic. The interaction among pair GI21 also reveals a conversation wherein topic shifting is overwhelming initiated by one participant, this time by the German student. G21 initiates 10 of 11 total topic shifts, showing, in contrast to G27, a very proactive participation in topic management. Notably also in pair GI21 the combined number of topic shifts for the two speakers is as low as 12.8% (11) of the total 86 speaker changes suggesting a conversation wherein the topics are longer and more developed.

Morris-Adams (2014, p. 163) found that 85% of the topic shifts identified in her learner-NS corpus were topic transitions, as opposed to disjunctive topic changes. This result is mirrored in both pairs. Ten of pair GI21's eleven topic shifts, or 91%, are topic transitions. Similarly, eight of pair GI27's ten topic shifts, or 80%, are topic transitions (cf. Table 2). On a qualitative level, however, it is worth noting that although the figures for GI27 and GI21 are similar, once pair GI21's topic is established, each subsequent topic shift is a transition that bears some relation to the content of the previous topic. Pair GI27 has one additional topic change, which is offered by I21 after a series of topic transitions that are not developed by G27 (cf. below).

Finally, it is notable that both self-oriented and other-oriented topic shifts are employed by I27 and G21, with a tendency by I27 to engage in more other-oriented topic shifts (I27: 7 of 10 (28% of her speaker changes); G21: 5 of 10 (12% of her speaker changes)), a fact reflecting

previous research into the predominance of question-answer sequences initiated by NS outside of the institutional context, at least in the case of learner G27 (cf. Long, 1983, p. 133; Wilkinson, 2002; Kasper, 2004; cf. also 3.2).

5.2 Topic replies

As mentioned above (cf. 5.1), in pair GI27, it is the Irish student who carries the weight of moving the conversation forward via topic shifts. Additionally, the average length of a sub-topical exchange is 5 (range of 2–8) speaker changes, as opposed to pair G121 where the average is 7.8 (range of 2–17) speaker changes. Meierkord (1996, pp. 99–100) in an analysis of lingua franca naturally-occurring dinner-table interactions in English finds most interactions to be between 6 and 10 speaker changes long. Interactions of more than 15 speaker changes were seldom in her corpus, a finding she proposes to point to more abrupt topic change in such NNS discourse. The reason for the high number of topic shifts resulting in short topical exchanges in GI27's small talk exchange is further elucidated by examining the German student's replies to her Irish partner's topic shifts, and in particular to her other-oriented topic shifts. As mentioned in 5.1, the Irish NS, I27, employed comparatively many such topic shifts (7 of 10 (28% of her speaker changes)). Other-oriented topic shifts are dependent on the addressee embracing the topic. As seen in Table 3, G27 does not produce any reciprocal questions, which would signify rejection of a topic shift but also serve as topic shifts in themselves and thus contribute to overall topic development. Only three out of seven replies can be considered long-form, i.e. replies that include not only an answer, but further comment or elaboration signifying acceptance of a topic shift (cf. 3.1). One of the long-form replies produced by G27 is given in excerpt (3) and spans lines 43, 45, 47 and 49. Lines 43 and 45 would be considered the minimal information required to answer I27's question and lines 47 and 49 provide minimal elaboration. Although the

elaboration in lines 47 and 49 classifies this as a long-form reply, overall it is still only minimally informative. Additionally, the final intonation on G27's 'so' at line 49 followed by a 'Yeah' that is quickly cut off make G27's contribution 'sound' final. It is not a rejection of the topic, given the absence of a return question, but it is left to I27 to further develop the topic, which she chooses to do via another other-oriented topic transition at line 50.

(3)

42.   I27: (0.4) Yeah. Tch (1.6) Have you uh, have you gone home to Munster? (0.8) L[ately]?

43.   G27:   [Yeah], on

44.   I27: [[Yeah]]

45.   G27: [[u h]] this weekend I was at uh home?

46.   I27: (0.7) Oh good.

47.   G27: (0.4) Yeah hh it was very nice. hh .hh=

48.   I27: =Yeah.

49.   G27: (0.2) To see family and uh friends and so. Yeah-

50.   I27: (0.5) Oh good. (0.5) Are you still good friends with your friends from

school?

As many as four of G27's seven replies are short-form, short-form replies being understood as the minimum amount of information required to answer a question providing no elaboration or only very minimal elaboration. Excerpt (4) is an example of such short-form replies. G27's answer at line 25 is not only minimal in terms of information, the drawn out 'n' and a sharp cut-off on the 'o' make it sound particularly abrupt. Additionally, her response is not aligned with the polarity of the question which, according to Schegloff (2007, p. 171–172) is part of denying access to the topic. This seems to catch I27 off guard and at line 26 it takes her 1.9 s before she responds, a significant inter-turn pause relative to the norm.[14] I27's contribution at line 26 then is an attempt to further the topic and to stay in the back channel. This attempt again elicits only minimal information, that exams are in March (line 27), leaving I27 to continue to propel the conversation forward. Although G27's contributions after I27's topic transition in line 24 span four lines (line 25, 27, 29, and 31), combined they are still considered to be a short-form equivocal response to the topical invitation as no information is offered that could be considered to be contributing to topic development. As Schegloff (2007, p. 171) notes, short-form equivocal responses are "response turns composed of a single TCU [turn constructional unit], and a brief one, or several brief TCU's (especially if they are redundant or repetitive) are ways of embodying minimal responses." Faced with an insistently short-form equivocal response to her topical invitation, I27 attempts again at line 32 to develop the topic with another other-oriented topic transition, but after receiving a short-form reply (line

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[14] Jefferson (1989) suggests a standard maximum silence of 0.9–1.2 s after which one participant will start to do some resolutional action, unless a reason for the silence is apparent. This suggestion is based on analyses of transcripts of American English conversations in various contexts as well as select transcripts of Dutch conversations.

33), in line 34, she relates to the topic with a self-oriented topic transition, casting herself in the role of the speaker.

(4)

24.   I27: (0.5) tch Oh ok. (1.2) Yeah, do you have like Christmas exams or anything. Tch

25.   G27: (1.2) N:o-.

26.   I27: (1.9) N[o?]

27.   G27:   [O-] Only u:m (0.6) in: March.

28.   I27: (1.7) Oh in March.

29.   G27: (0.2) Yes:.

30.   I27: (1.3) .h ;Oh handy. (0.5) t.hh [(ok?)

31.   G27: [Yeah, I am.=

32.   I27: =So you have Christmas holidays to study.

33.   G27: (0.3) Yes: hh

34.   I27: (0.5) Oh, that's good. (0.6) tch.hh Yeah, we have, like small exams

to do at Christmastime, so that's kind of what's happening now, so

everyone's kind of tch freaking out. ehuh

These excerpts from pair GI27's small talk exchange provide clear evidence of a lack of

pragmatic competence on the level of topic development, which may have several causes.

Unfamiliarity with the small talk genre given Anglo-Saxon/German cross-cultural differences

(cf. 3.2) may represent one possible source of insecurity. Others include a discrepancy between

declarative knowledge and actual procedural behaviour in the online telecollaborative context.

That is, G27 may actually possess the declarative knowledge required to participate more fully

in this conversation by offering more elaborated responses, return questions, and initiating topic

transitions. Yet, because of a lack of interactional opportunities in the foreign language

classroom in which she learned English, she is not able to retrieve this knowledge online to meet

the demands of real time conversation. Finally, it might be suggested that this learner's language

use is reminiscent of the classroom context in which answers are given without much

elaboration, and where the teacher is understood to control the conversation (cf. Wilkinson,

2002) (cf. 3.2). A lack of familiarity with the online telecollaborative context is also a possible

reason, as G27 did not report any prior experience with Skype in English.

In contrast to pair GI27, a similar examination of pair GI21 reveals a different picture.

Although G21, much like I27, seems to carry the weight of moving the conversation forward

via topic shifts, her Irish partner I21 is also active in further developing the conversation in the

form of long-form replies. Excerpt (5) is 30 lines into the macro-topic on university stress. In

line 35, G21 offers an other-oriented topic transition, to which I21 provides what is undoubtedly

a long-form reply and certain acceptance of the topic (which is in actuality a return to this topic,

as I27's exams have already been discussed).[15] At line 37, G21 offers another other-oriented topic transition, to which she receives another long-form reply. With a further other-oriented topic transition at line 41, G21 continues to co-develop the topic with I21. Morris-Adams (2014, p. 163) found that the NNS in her data set often offered a greater number of topic shifts than the NS, and in doing so, were able to actively participate in topic development. Pair GI21 mirrors these findings, with G21 dominating the topic shifts. However, I21's repeated long-form replies also demonstrate the importance of the addressee's active participation in developing topic. In contrast, pair GI27 demonstrates the implications when one speaker, G27, does not actively participate in topic management via long-form replies, topic shifts or as we will see in 5.3 an engaged use of backchannels. Here, the complete burden of developing the conversation falls on I27.

(5)

35.   G21: [Difficult] to manage and so that all people have time. (1.2) no problem. (0.7) Yeah. And how did um the exams went?

36.   I21: (0.7) Eh: some of them went ok I thought, the the business one organisation and behaviour was really difficult, but ah, the other two went alright like. (0.5) so I'm hopin' I passed, hopin' I passed. yeah.=

37.   G21: =kay, and so you just have to pass or do you have to (0.2) um get a good grade (inc.) is the grade important or,

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[15] This focus on the topic of university in both dyadic small talk interactions supports previous research by Meierkord (1996, pp. 96–97) who finds this topic to be particularly frequent in her corpus of lingua franca interactions among students.

38.   I21: (0.5) Nah the grade is pretty important like cause, (0.2) next year if I wanna go on Erasmus I've gotta get like, a 2-2, (0.6) (inc.) some universities you've got to get like a 2-1,

39.   G21: (0.25) M[hm

40.   I21:   [which is like (0.7) a 60 to 70 which is pretty hard to get, like that's pretty difficult but uh, (0.2) yeah I don't know, I hope I do well in the end. (0.2) huh

41.   G21: (0.5) And um (0.4) you you're planning to do Erasmus, or is it sure. (0.9) That you will do it?

42.   I21: (0.4) No we have to go next year.=

43.   G21: =Ah ok you have to.

44.   I21: (0.3)Yeah with our course you have to.=Other courses it's optional, but with m- with my one you have to go yeah=

45.   G21: =Oh ok, because you're studying (0.3) bilingual, (0.4) so=

5.3 Backchannels

In addition to the contributions of topic initiation and development to the interactional difficulties of pair GI27, backchannel use by the dyads offered additional insights into possible contributors to these interactional difficulties. The distribution of the backchannels employed by each speaker is shown in Table 4. These figures are then normalised by topic in which a participant was cast in the role of the listener, i.e. they are given according to the number of backchannels uttered while the respective partner was involved in a topic telling. Hence, G21, for example, was cast in the role of the listener during the five other-oriented topic shifts which she initiated (cf. Table 2) plus in the one self-oriented topic shift initiated by her partner I21, totalling six topics in which she played the role of the listener (cf. Table 4).

G21's backchannel use reflects the variety of formal categories employed by both Irish NS. In contrast, G27's backchannel use stands out. She uses the least backchannels overall, also relative to I21 who like her, is regularly offered the speaking role in the initial small talk exchanges analysed. Of the backchannels used by G27, the range is limited, including only function and clause(+) backchannels. Functional backchannels are those that serve the minimum of transactional requirements. McCarthy (2003, p. 43) notes that most often, they

> would be enough to maintain the economy and transactional efficiency of the talk, to show agreement and/or acquiescence and to function as an appropriate second pair part in an adjacency pair. Listeners regularly choose to say more and choose response tokens that orientate affectively toward their conversational partners and project and consolidate interactional and relational bonds in the same way that extended small talk episodes do.

Indeed upon closer inspection of the data, we see that three of the five clause(+) realisations employed by G27 are also combinations with a function word, specifically the function word 'yeah', i.e. 'Yeah I am', 'Yeah I know', 'Yeah, that's right'. Arguably these, similar to single realisations of 'yeah', serve only the minimal transactional requirements. Also, the three tokens used within the functional category are all single realisations of 'yeah'. Hence, G27's use of function words is high and the variety of the backchannels used even more limited than it appears at first glance. The other participants, like G27, also show an affinity towards the functional token 'yeah'; 'yeah' or combinations including 'yeah', such as 'yeah ok' or 'yeah yeah' make up 81% (22/27) of all functional token realisations for all participants (leaving the 'yeah' combinations in the clause(+) category aside). However, though the other three participants show a similar preference in their realisation of functional backchannels, they show greater variety over all categories.

In specific contrast to G27, I21 who, as stated, was also most often in the role of the speaker, uses backchannels from the whole range of categories in addition to nine functional backchannels (cf. Table 4). His clause(+) realisations that include functional backchannels only raise the total number of such backchannels by two. In comparison to G27's clause(+) realisations (e.g. 'Yeah, that's right'), these two realisations exhibit a higher level of engagement. For example, I21's 'Oh yeah. That's cool yeah, ehuh' includes both an affective 'that's cool' and a laughter token at the end that together accomplish this increase in engagement. Also, it is noteworthy that all of I21's nine functional realisations are 'yeah', however, four of these are doublets and three triplets. This is particularly interesting given that McCarthy (2003, pp. 55–56) notes that doublets can reinforce "convergence or satisfaction with the progress of the conversation" and triplets "clearly serve to intensify the relational or affective

response."[16] Interestingly, many of these doublets and triplets occur latched to the previous utterance or in overlap. Frequent overlap, termed 'cooperative overlap' by Tannen (1994, p. 35), can function to "show enthusiastic listenership and participation" (Tannen, 1994, p. 53) and "occurs when the speakers view silence between turns as impolite or as a sign of a lack of rapport" (Saunders, 1999, p. 274). Thus, set in contrast with G27, I27's larger number and greater variety of backchannels, in addition to the higher level of engagement communicated even by his functional realisations, embody overall, a higher interactional involvement.

An examination of G21's backchanneling behaviour unveils more similarities with that of the Irish students than with her fellow learner, G27. As mentioned, G21 demonstrates a greater variety of realisations overall relative to G27 (cf. Table 4). Additionally, while two of G27's eight backchannels occur in overlap (cf. Heinz, 2003; cf. 3.2), eleven of G21's eighteen backchannels occur in either partial or full overlap, or latched to the previous utterance, mirroring her partner, I21's, use of cooperative overlap. G21, in contrast to I21, does not employ any doublets or triplets. However, such usage is itself possibly a particular feature of Irish English (cf. O'Keeffe & Adolphs, 2008, p. 81). Nevertheless, G21's functional backchannel realisations are more varied than G27's as she also employs 'okay' and 'yeah okay' combinations. Further, as was clearly seen in excerpt (1), many of G21's backchannels show explicit interaction with the content of her partner's talk by asking specific questions and making clarifications (e.g. 'So three exams?' 'In one week?')

G27's lower use of backchannels contradicts Cutrone's (2005) finding of a higher NNS use of backchannels for Japanese-British dyads, but this may be explained by the relatively high use of backchannels in Japanese relative to Anglo-Saxon conventions (cf. Cutrone, 2005, p.

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[16] Interestingly, O'Keeffe & Adolphs (2008, p. 83) in a corpus analysis of backchannels in Irish and British English note that reduplicaton is more common in Irish English. In contrast, their British data included more clusters preceded by the vocalisation 'oh'.

238) and the lower use of backchannels in German relative to English, or at least to American English (cf. Heinz, 2003). Thus, L1 transfer from German may be suggested to explain learner G27's low use of backchannels and also her low number of backchannels in overlap (cf. Heinz, 2003; cf. 3.2). In addition, the fact that G27 revealed a lack of L1 pragmalinguistic knowledge in her more limited use of backchannel type and also differences in backchannel realisation relative to the Irish English NS is reminiscent of previous research (cf. Cutrone, 2005; cf. 3.2). In contrast, G21's advanced backchanneling suggests a decrease in transfer and a high pragmalinguistic competence with increasing interactional experience.

6. Conclusion

Taking an interactional perspective on L2 pragmatic competence, the present case study of two dyadic interactions between German learners of English and Irish NS of English sheds light on NS/ learner topic management and listenership behaviour in constructing small talk in a telecollaborative context. Learner G21 is shown to use topic shifts to actively participate in topic development and to use a wide range of backchannel types and realisations, many of these in overlap. The other learner, G27, in contrast leaves the burden of topic development to the NS, using neither topic shifts nor long-form replies and a very limited use of backchannels and backchannel forms, mostly variants of *yeah*, not employed in overlap. Such features coupled with a high use of equivocal short-form replies are reminiscent of a teacher-controlled setting in which the teacher initiates exchanges (cf. also Wilkinson, 2002: Kasper, 2004; cf. 3.2). In addition, G27's language use reveals possible L1 transfer from German in a lower use of backchannels and a relatively low backchannel use in overlap (cf. Heinz, 2003; cf. 3.2). In addition, sociopragmatic differences between German and Irish English small talk may also

have explanatory potential. Finally, learner-specific features, such as overgeneralisation of the backchannel "yeah", were also identified, a feature which may relate to the fact that backchannels are rarely a focus in the foreign language classroom.

The differences between learners G21 and G27 are clear but how can they be explained? Previous research by Long (1983) and Morris-Adams (2014) on topic selection yielded contradictory findings with regard to the degree of NS/ learner activity in initiating topic shifts. These were suggested to relate to proficiency level and perhaps also to data type (cf. 3.2). However, in the present study differences in proficiency alone do not explain differences in the two learners' use of topic shifts since both learners had a B2 proficiency level. Rather, the differences in the use of topic shifts – and also the differences in the use of long-form and short-form replies and in learners' use of backchannels – are suggested to stem from differences in the learners' prior experiences in, and prior opportunities for interaction in the L2. Especially since the pragmatically competent learner in the present study, G21, had had more interactional experience with users of the language outside of the classroom context (both in the L2 community and also per video-conferencing).

The analysis, thus, underlines the need to increase interaction in the foreign language classroom in order facilitate the development of L2 pragmatic competence. Voice-based telecollaboration, by increasing the amount of interaction in the foreign language classroom would seem to represent an ideal opportunity to develop L2 pragmatic competence, particularly as the context exerts a lower degree of pragmatic pressure on informants relative to the FTF context given the remoteness of interlocutors (cf. 2). The fact, however, that the subsequent Skype session (session three) held between the less competent German learner G27 and her Irish partner I27 did not include any small talk in the opening session must also be considered. Indeed, this fact points to the need to support voice-based telecollaboration with L2 pragmatic

instruction on the construction of small talk, and more specifically with instruction on the use of backchannels, topic shifts and topic development, to try to avoid relational difficulties arising between dyads. Cruz (2013) is a recent proposal designed to teach phatic communication in the classroom context. Also, in the broad area of backchannels, a number of existing solutions may be suggested: Olsher (2011b), for instance, is a publication focussing on response tokens in English that encourage the hearer to proceed but also take a stance and mark speaker talk as newsworthy. Similarly, Olsher (2011a) presents a curriculum, tasks and a wealth of materials on the use of continuers in English, a backchannel that signals understanding and encourages the hearer to proceed.[17] From a developmental perspective, it would seem that such intervention is particularly necessary given the important role that noticing has been shown to play in the development of pragmatic competence (cf. Schmidt, 1993), and also given that interactional norms underlying talk in the L1 are largely unconscious, making their acquisition in the L2 particularly difficult (cf. also Liddicoat & Crozet, 2001). The development of further prototypical instructional units focussing on the construction of small talk represents a research desideratum.

The present study is not without limitations. It is a case study analysis in need of supplementary quantitative analysis. It is also an analysis of oral data only, non-verbal data not accessible given informants' wish for anonymity. Hence, non-verbal behaviour, such as facial expression, body posture, general direction of gaze, are not recorded or analysed despite the fact that such non-linguistic behaviour can provide important information regarding the discourse

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[17] Wong & Waring (2010) is also an excellent resource for foreign language teachers or material developers interested in supporting the teaching of interactional practices. Not only does it focus on turn-taking practices and sequencing, but also on conversation openings and closings to name but a few areas. Cf. also Barraja-Rohan (2011) on using conversational analysis to teach interactional competence, particularly response tokens, greetings and closings, O'Keeffe et al. (2011) for an overview of teaching pragmatics, with suggestions on how to address aspects of pragmatic competence in the classroom, including also an annotated bibliography, Ward et al. (2007) for a training sequence teaching backchanneling in Arabic and Utashiro & Kawai (2009) for a computer-based course designed to teach Japanese backchannels.

(cf., e.g. O'Halloran, Tan & E, 2014). Future research is required to take up this perspective. Likewise, possible personality differences were not accounted for. This also represents an interesting avenue for future studies, the study of individual differences representing a research desideratum in ILP (cf. Barron 2012, p. 45). Finally, further longitudinal research is required to analyse whether learners, such as G27, increase their L2 pragmatic competence via telecollaboration, also in the absence of instruction. Telecollaborative corpora, such as that on which the present study is based, are ideal for answering such questions (cf. Vyatkina & Belz, 2006, p. 319). After all, they allow analysis of L2 pragmatic competence not as an individual competence but rather as contextually situated and dependent on the actions of the interlocutor.

Acknowledgements

Appendix: Transcription conventions

(0.5)	Indicates the length of a pause, measured in tenths of a second
=	Indicates 'latching' between utterances
[ ]	Indicate the onset and end of speaker overlap
[[ ]]	Used to distinguish sequences of overlap

.hh	Speaker in-breath, the more h's, the longer the in-breath
hh	Speaker out-breath, the more h's, the longer the out-breath
soun-	Indicates sharp cut off of prior word
Sou::nd	Indicates that the speaker has stretched a sound
(inc.)	Incomprehensible speech
(tomorrow?)	Transcriber uncertain of wording
Word.	Indicates falling, stopping tone – not grammatical
Word,	Indicates a 'continuing' intonation – not grammatical
Word?	Indicates a rising inflection – not grammatical
;word	Indicates a higher than expected pitch on a word

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Figure 1

Types of topic shifts and topic replies

Topic Shift (Morris-Adams 2014)

Topic Change:
Not propositionally or linguistically linked to the previous topic

Self-Oriented:
relevant to the speaker's likes and interests
→ Speaker may carry topic forward with varying levels of engagement from conversational partner

Other-Oriented:
displays interest in partner
→ Requires conversational partner to accept topic shift, e.g. *"How was your exam?"*

Topic Transition:
Maintains lexical propositional connection to the previous topic

Self-Oriented:
relevant to the speaker's like and interests

Other-Oriented:
displays interest in partner

(Maynard/Zimmerman 1984)

Acceptance via long-form reply, e.g. *"Great, I thought it went very well, except for this one question..."*

Equivocal with short-form reply only, e.g. *"Great."*

Rejection via short-form reply and return question, e.g. *"Great. What about yours?"*
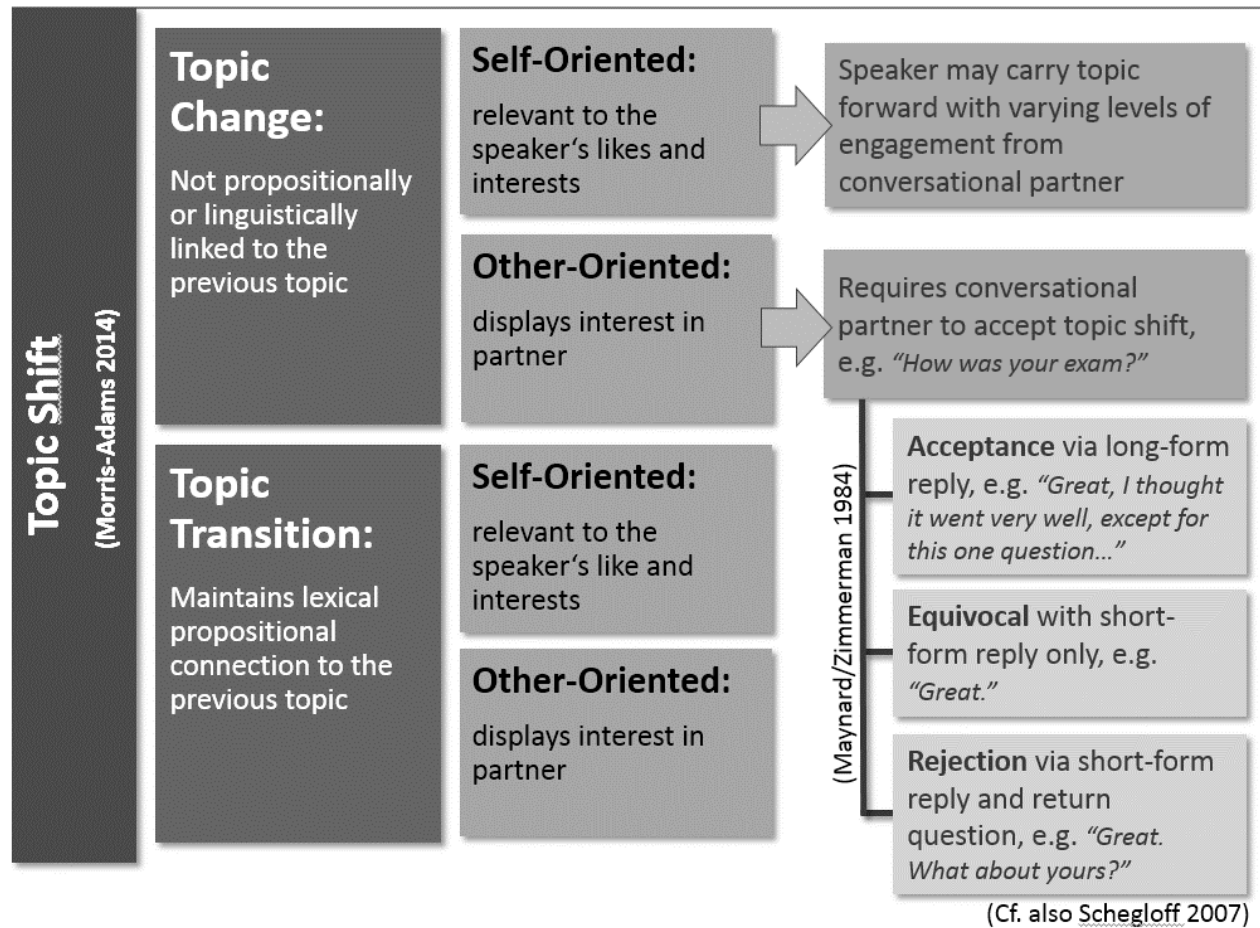
(Cf. also Schegloff 2007)

Table 1:

McCarthy's (2003) formal categories

Minimal responses	Functional responses	Lexical responses	Clause(+) responses
i.e. non-word vocalisations, including laughter	i.e. high frequency tokens that provide adequate acknowledgement and meet the basic transactional requirements	i.e. lexical tokens that accomplish more than basic acknowledgement	i.e. extended responses containing at least one full clause
e.g. *Mhmm* *he .hhh hu .hhh*	e.g. *Ok yeah.* *Yeah yeah yeah.*	e.g. *Really?* *Oh cool.*	e.g. *Yeah I know, isn't it?* *Are you gonna do it?*

Table 2:

Topic shift totals per speaker change (figures in brackets show totals normalised per speaker change)

	Pair GI21		Pair GI27	
	G21	**I21**	**G27**	**I27**
Topic transition – other-oriented	5 (12%)	0	0	6 (24%)
Topic change – other-oriented	0	0	0	1 (4%)
Topic transition – self-oriented	4 (9%)	1 (2%)	0	2 (8%)
Topic change – self-oriented	1 (2%)	0	0	1 (4%)
TOTAL TOPIC SHIFTS	10 (23%)	1 (2%)	0	10 (40%)

Table 3:

Topic development: Long-form and short-form replies to other-oriented topic shifts

	Pair GI21		Pair GI27	
	G21	**I21**	**G27**	**I27**
Topics initiated by partner	**0**	**5**	**7**	**0**
Acceptance (long-form)	0	5	3	0
Equivocal (short-form)	0	0	4	0
Rejection (short-form + question)	0	0	0	0

Table 4:

Formal categories of backchannel use per speaker

		Pair GI21		Pair GI27	
		G21	**I21**	**G27**	**I27**
	minimal	4	3	0	2
Backchannels	function	8	9	3	7
	lexical	3	5	0	4
	clause(+)	3	6	5	1
TOTAL		18	23	8	14
TOPICS AS 'LISTENER'		6	5	3	7
PER TOPIC AS 'LISTENER'		3	4.6	2.67	2