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## Extending talk on a prescribed discussion topic in a learner-native speaker eTandem learning task

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**Abstract:** Opportunities for language learners to access authentic input and engage in consequential interactions with native speakers of their target language abound in this era of computer mediated communication. Synchronous audio/video calling software represents one opportunity to access such input and address the challenges of developing pragmatic and interactional competence (Barron and Black 2015, Constructing small talk in learner-native speaker voice-based telecollaboration: A focus on topic management and backchanneling. *System* 48. 112–128). The synthesis of telecollaborative technology with the development of pragmatic and interactional competence is an area of burgeoning research (Taguchi 2011, Teaching pragmatics: Trends and issues. *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics* 31. 289–310). The present study represents a contribution to this growing area set in the particular context of an eTandem partnership. Data is drawn from Language LINC, a corpus of telecollaborative eTandem interactions between German-speaking learners of English and English-speaking learners of German. The eTandem meetings that comprise this corpus were centred around tasks to be completed for the students' respective language classes. The study investigates how learners and native speakers manage a pre-specified discussion topic set for the English portion of an eTandem meeting. As the topic is prescribed, it imposes constraints on the students' interactions and requires them to continue talk on this topic for an extended amount of time. Student participants delimit their talk by clearly initiating and later closing down the topic. Within these boundaries, questions are used as a resource to confront the interactional problem of extending talk on the prescribed topic.

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## 1 Introduction

Language is, fundamentally, a communicative tool, the use of which is entwined in the communicative situation in which it occurs (Kramsch 1986: 366). Early models of communicative competence conceived language ability as a manifold set of competencies including, in various groupings, grammatical, sociolinguistic, strategic, discourse, and illocutionary competencies (cf. Bachman 1990; Canale and Swain 1980; Hymes 1972). These competencies are considered to be possessed and developed by the learner and to be drawn upon for *individual* contributions to a communicative situation. Such conceptualisations led to a considerable focus in second language (L2) pragmatics on the isolated speech act and on elicited data designed to collect evidence of learners' competencies via their metalinguistic knowledge (e.g., discourse completion tasks). In contrast, interactional competence (IC) (e.g. He and Young 1998; Young 2013) incorporates this manifold view of communicative competence, further elaborates it to include additional interactional features (e.g. turn-taking strategies and topic management), and shifts the focus from the individual to joint interactional achievement. Hence, IC conceives a learner's contributions in a communicative situation as belonging not only to that learner alone, but as constructed and interpreted in interaction. Such a shift necessitates a corresponding shift towards data comprised of naturally occurring interactions in order to investigate learners' IC. The present investigation aims to contribute to this growing field by focusing on one of He and Young's interactive practices – topic management – through the lens of conversation analysis (CA). CA, the study of talk-in-interaction, is one methodological approach commonly adopted in examinations of IC. It deals with each utterance in its sequential context, considering the contributions of all interactants and how, together, they achieve (or not) joint action. This makes it an instrument well suited to the examination of both longer stretches of conversational data in general and the joint achievement of topic management in particular.

The specific focus of the following paper will be on the management of an assigned discussion topic by German learners of English and their Irish English-speaking partners in the context of a video computer mediated (video CMC) eTandem partnership. Within topic management, the analysis will look at the participants' collaborative construction of the task initiations and closings, and, in particular, at questions used as a resource with which to advance talk on this

prescribed topic. The paper begins by discussing the CMC context, then goes on to define topic and characterise how language learners manage topic. Ultimately, the paper will examine the potential influences of the CMC context and the eTandem relationship on topic management practices.

## 2 Video and audio based computer mediated communication (video CMC /audio CMC)

The physical, teacher-fronted language classroom as a site for L2 acquisition has a number of limitations. Not only are learners exposed to the (often) non-fluent L2 speech of their fellow classmates as well as classroom-specific interactional patterns (e. g. Initiation-Response-Feedback, cf. Sinclair and Coulthard 1975) and role expectations, they also have few opportunities to engage in interactions that are authentic (occurring outside the classroom setting) and consequential (having goals and outcomes that concern all interactants) (Bardovi-Harlig and Hartford 2005). Neither do they have frequent opportunities to engage in such interactions with native or proficient speakers of the target L2 in a variety of social and communicative settings (Cziko 2004). CMC, when introduced to the L2 classroom, offers students the opportunity to use language in authentic situations and produces a “student-centered environment which promotes greater student empowerment, autonomy, and equality” (Gonzalez-Lloret 2011: 308). And not insignificantly, it provides the potential for exposure to the language as it is used by speakers of students’ own generation (Kern 2014: 354).

The rapid evolution of internet enabled communications technologies over the past quarter century has, from very early on, caught the attention of language educators and enabled new ways to “create and participate in communities” (Cohen 2008: 223). As technology advanced, early feasibility and evaluative studies (e. g. McAndrew et al. 1996; Wong and Fauverge 1999) gave way to research exploring the learners’ experience and perspectives (e. g. Tian and Wang 2010; Trinder 2016), teacher competencies and effective incorporation into a curriculum (e. g. Katz 2001; Mullen et al. 2009), and potential as an intercultural learning opportunity (e. g. Guth and Marini-Maio 2010; O’Dowd 2005).

Although video and audio CMC have become commonplace, it is important to acknowledge the technology as mediating factor. The associated hardware and software may appear to create a neutral conduit, but the technology actually “filters and transforms what gets included in the signals transmitted between ourselves and our conversational partners” (Kern 2014: 342). Delays and

desynchronisation of audio/video may occur on both sides of the interaction, or the voice of one participant may be garbled for the other without the speaker being aware (Kern 2014: 345). These characteristics of the medium may lead to what Erben (1999) calls amplification or reduction of interactive practices: that is, in order to realise the intended force of an utterance a speaker may need to either increase or decrease the production, frequency and/or intensity of both verbal and non-verbal behaviours as compared to what would be needed in a face-to-face interaction.

The differences between audio and video CMC have generated interesting, albeit non-conclusive, studies. Yamada and Akahori (2007) found video CMC to have the potential “to engage the learner more fully, intellectually and emotionally” than audio CMC (p. 61) due to the presence of the partner’s image and the accompanying ability to use non-verbal communicative devices. However, van der Zwaard and Bannink (2014: 145) note that the availability of the partner’s image can also lead to incomplete/unresolved or non-existent negotiations of meaning in order to preserve face. Conversely, they found that the more anonymous text-chat medium engendered more uninhibited communication. The participants, according to van der Zwaard and Bannink, made discourse decisions based on the affordances of the medium: their decisions were more face-appropriate in the video CMC medium, but more task-appropriate in the text chat. Finally, turn-taking patterns in video CMC and face-to-face groups have been found to be very similar, while audio CMC is different in that additional linguistic strategies are required to compensate for the lack of visual clues (Yanguas 2010).

CMC has the potential to provide learners with opportunities for the development of interactional competence and can provide an engaging, student-centred environment within which participants are able to engage in meaningful interaction outside constraints of the classroom environment. However, we must bear in mind that “in facilitating or constraining certain types of interaction, the functionality of an environment affects how people handle language, and promotes or impedes the display of different types of competence” (Kenning 2009: 9).

### 3 Topic

This section will first define topic, as understood and operationalised in the present study, and then present research findings on how language learners manage topic in native speaker–non-native speaker (NS–NNS) pairings.

### 3.1 Operationalising topic as a unit of analysis

Discourse topic is variably understood and formal attempts to define topic have been consistently inadequate (Morris-Adams 2014; Stokoe 2000). McLaughlin (1984) outlined two approaches: in the first, topic is understood in a referential or local sense as “the entity or entities to which an utterance *refers*” (McLaughlin 1984: 46, italics in original). With the possibility for multiple referents in a single utterance, this view can lead to “a restricted view of topic whereby it may inhabit a single turn or a single turn can include multiple topics” (Holt and Drew 2005: 39). Alternatively, topic can be seen as being “‘about’ the proposition” (McLaughlin 1984: 48) that succinctly summarises a stretch of conversation. The latter is a more common-sense understanding of topic wherein conversation is envisaged as organised by discrete topical units, each containing a subject that was “talked about”. Indeed, Schneider (1987) demonstrates that “ordinary language users seem to have a very definite notion of what topic is” (p. 248) as they are able to consistently identify, post hoc, the topics of a small talk conversation. A further view on topic is put forth in the CA tradition by Sacks (1992a), who envisions topic as an emergent feature born from the preference that each utterance show consistency with that which came immediately prior. The preference for an utterance to be linked to the previous one results in a “stepwise” progression of topics (Sacks 1992b: 566). That is, participants build each turn “to display an understanding of and ‘fit’ with the previous turn” (Holt and Drew 2005: 41). Thus, in CA, topic is recognised as an interactional achievement unfolding in the turn-by-turn accomplishment of talk.

The present analysis considers topic to be both a discrete unit and an emergent turn-by-turn achievement. The discrete unit considered is the assigned discussion topic that participants construct by delimiting the talk on the discussion task. The analysis also considers how participants manage to maintain and continue talk on this prescribed topic. In particular, questions within the constructed bounds of the topic largely function to progress this macro topic; they can function to launch a distinctly new “sub-topic” within the task, or to elicit further information that can also be a slight shift of topic.

### 3.2 Language learners managing topics

The ability to introduce, shift, and maintain topic are skills vital to successful interactions in any language, and, not inconsequentially, they are skills which contribute to the establishment and development of social relationships

(Morris-Adams 2013). Studies addressing the topic management behaviour of language learners have generally focused on topic initiations and shifts from one topic to another. Iwata (2010), for example, found Japanese speakers to be passive in terms of topic initiations, instead showing their involvement by offering backchannels while listening and by responding to topic shifting questions when asked. This led their American counterparts to shift talk more frequently, a finding that the author attributed to differing cultural discourse patterns, each affecting the development of talk. Wilkinson (2002) found that in conversations with American NNSs of French, the French NS hosts often adopted an instructional and leading discourse role. In one case where the NS did not adopt such a role, the NNS appealed to an onlooker to assign the topic-initiator role rather than take on the lead. Long (1983) paired NSs of English with NNSs of various linguistic backgrounds and also found the vast majority of topic shifts to be introduced by NSs in the form of questions. Barron and Black (2015), similarly, found one German learner of English to leave the burden of topic initiation completely to her NS partner in a small talk conversation. In contrast, however, the second learner in the double case study took an active role in topic initiation. The authors attributed this result to varied opportunities for interaction outside the context of the language classroom. In contrast to these studies, Morris-Adams (2014) examined naturally-occurring data recorded by intermediate and advanced learners and found that English NS and mixed NNS speakers initiate topic to a similar extent. In sum, learners have been found to vary in terms of their topic initiation and shifting behaviour on a cline from very passive to very active participation.

Marking a departure from these previous studies, the present analysis focuses on a topic that has been assigned, which imposes a requirement for the participants to speak at length about a particular topic. It investigates the extent to which the German NNSs and Irish English NSs participate in the management of this single assigned discussion topic – how this topic is bounded and how, within those boundaries, participants extend talk on the discussion topic. With respect to extensions within a single topical activity, the literature is scarce. García García (2015) finds that participants who exhibit difficulties introducing new topics prefer to maintain the prior topic beyond topical boundaries by offering further assessments. Long (1981) compares American English NS-NS conversations with American English NS-Japanese NNS conversations, finding that the NS-NNS pairings treated topics in a more superficial and fleeting manner, that is, NS-NNS pairings demonstrated far fewer topic-continuing moves per topic-initiating move (see also Iwata 2010). Overall, extending talk on a single topic appears to be a language skill worth addressing in language learning research and classrooms alike.

## 4 The study

### 4.1 The corpus: Language LINC

Data for the present study is drawn from *Language LINC (Language Learners in Interaction Corpus)*, a corpus of telecollaborative eTandem interactions between German-speaking learners of English at the Leuphana University of Lüneburg and English-speaking learners of German at Trinity College Dublin. The tandem language learning approach involves a partnership between learners with opposite target and native languages (for a detailed introduction see O'Rourke 2007), combining aspects of the formal L2 classroom with exposure to the L2 in an authentic communicative environment (Cziko 2004). The two guiding principles for tandem partnerships are reciprocity and learner autonomy (Brammerts 1996). The first principle, reciprocity, is reflected in the division of tandem meetings equally between the two target languages so that each partner benefits from their counterpart's expert knowledge, and "successful learning in tandem is based on the reciprocal dependence and mutual support of the partners" (Brammerts 1996: 11). The principle of learner autonomy – that each partner is responsible for their own learning – is reflected in the expectation that learners take responsibility for their part of the tandem meeting and for their own learning objectives (O'Rourke 2005). Tandem partnerships can be relatively informal arrangements or formal partnerships organised as an integral part of a language classroom.

In the present case, students from two classes were paired for the duration of the semester and pairs met via Skype five to six times with approximately two weeks between each meeting. Students arranged the time and date of their meetings and recorded them using the freely available Callnote software, submitting their recordings to the researcher afterwards. The meetings were all carried out via video CMC and recorded. Video recordings are available only for pairs who volunteered to additionally video record their meetings, otherwise audio-only recordings were submitted to the researcher. During the Skype meetings, each language learner had a task to complete and each meeting was divided into two sections: in one half the German students completed their task in English, and in the other half the Irish students completed their task in German.

### 4.2 The sub corpus: The "women in management" task

The present analysis focuses on the German students' task in their third Tandem session, and accordingly the analysis is limited to the English portion of the recordings. Analysis is limited to one session of recordings as the assigned task

means each pair is engaged in negotiating the same discussion topic with the same task instructions. The English portion of these recordings ranges from 22 to 28 minutes in length for a total of 138 minutes, and the task portions of the conversations range from 12 to 27 minutes for a total of 100 minutes. After completing the task, the German students were required to write a summary text of their own and their partner's positions on the issue.

All recordings submitted for this session, a total of five student pairs, were transcribed and analysed. Of the five recordings submitted, three were audio only and two included the video. For the current study, only transcripts based on the audio data were examined as video was not available for the entire data set. The focus is thus, for all recordings, on the linguistic interactions with the acknowledgement that the reduction of the data may overlook relevant features of the topic management practices under discussion. The multimodal aspects available for analysis in the two video recordings provide material for further in depth research on this subject.

The discussion topic for this session, "The Taboo of Women in Management", asked students to discuss the merits of two positions and decide which position they agree with. The situation presented was of a hypothetical American company which is considered one of the top firms for women: nearly 50% of partners are women and it offers numerous family-friendly employee benefits and working arrangements. The company, however, has come under scrutiny for its practice of excluding female partners from accounts based in countries where women are not openly welcomed in the negotiation process. The company's position is that the reality of international business can mean that assigning women to such accounts means not securing the contract. The critic's position is that change will never come about unless other business cultures are forced to adapt to standards such as those the company promotes on American soil. Students were asked to read the short text that outlined the situation, to discuss the two positions with their partner, and to find out which points they agreed on and which points they disagreed on to determine whether or not they shared the same position as their partner. Instructions were purely task-oriented with no additional language-related guidance.

### **4.3 Conversation Analysis (CA)**

CA analyses begin with the production of a detailed transcript. The meticulous work required by this task functions also as a "noticing device" (Ten Have 2007: 95). That is, the researcher may, through the process of transcription, notice phenomena of interest for further investigation. Additionally, a major analytic cornerstone of CA is the concept of "unmotivated looking", encouraging the

researcher to be open to “discovering phenomena rather than searching for instances of already identified and described phenomena or for some theoretically preformulated conceptualization of what the phenomena should look like” (Psathas 1990: 24–5). One approach to doing a CA analysis involves repeated readings of the transcripts to examine the interlocking “organizations” of interaction: turn-taking organization, sequence organization, repair organization, organization of turn design. Attention is paid to sequences of action and the boundaries of those sequences. During this process, observations are made concerning emerging phenomena of interest and the analysis is gradually narrowed down to a particular phenomenon to be described in further detail. CA is more concerned with the trajectory of action in an interaction than with the composition of particular utterances, and analysis of an utterance is grounded in what came before that utterance and what follows it (Clift 2016: 64). It is this approach that was adopted and the following analysis was developed from initial observations that the German students demonstrated a high orientation to task – they brought small-talk phases to a close to initiate the task phase, for example. It was also observed that the German students often seemed to be guiding the task via (sometimes abrupt) questioning while there was a tendency for the Irish students to attempt to develop a topic through questioning.

Regarding the use of CA on audio/video CMC conversational data, it is important to note the potential temporal lag during the transmission of both audio and video from one speaker to another. Significantly, an inter-turn lag may be experienced differently by each speaker. A questioner may experience a lag before the answer when, in fact, in the experience of their partner, the answer was given without delay. As the recordings in this data set are all from the German side, comparisons to the experiences of the Irish partners are not possible. Thus, while pauses make up part of the following sequential analysis it is important to acknowledge that they might have been measured slightly differently in a recording from the Irish side of the conversation. Shorter pauses may thus, at times, be due not to interactional factors, but to technical ones. Longer, more significant pauses, however, are more likely to have involved interactional factors.

## 5 Analysis

The following analysis will illustrate how the discussion topic is orally/linguistically enacted by the participants in their video CMC eTandem meetings. Additional systematic analysis of the available video data may later reveal multimodal features such as eye contact, gaze direction, or shifting posture

also characteristic to these enactions. Section 5.1 will begin by illustrating the participants' demonstrable orientation to the macro discussion topic via their opening and closing of talk on this topic. Section 5.2 will illustrate how participants use questions within the task phase to deal with the interactional problem of continuing talk on this macro topic.

The transcription conventions for all excerpts are given in the Appendix. Each pair was assigned a number and the individuals in each pair distinguished by their nationality: G(erman) and I(rish).

## 5.1 Orienting to topical boundaries: Initiating and closing the discussion topic

Excerpt (1), a video recording, displays a transition to the assigned discussion topic.

### Excerpt (1)

- 1 G146: So will you learn in (.) your free time there,  
(0.5)
- 2 I146: Yeah.  
(1.9)
- 3 G146: ( ) =
- 4 I146: = A lot to do. ehuh  
(2.6)
- 5 G146: Yeah. (2.6) Well ahm (0.3) Did you get a: (1.6) text in your German (.)  
class?  
(0.7)
- 6 I146: ↑Yeah. We did we got it. (0.3) I got it d-  
(0.2)
- 7 G146: It's about a woman in management; is it right?  
(0.6)
- 8 I146: Yeah-  
(0.6)
- 9 G146: Ah,  
(2.0)
- 10 I146: What did you, (.) think, (.) about the text.  
(2.2)
- 11 G146: tch (0.8) We:ll (.) ah my first impression was, (1.0) it sounds very good?  
(0.3) to have (0.4) women in in your company?

Prior to the beginning of this excerpt the pair discussed their current university obligations and the upcoming Christmas holidays. In turn 5 G146 initiates the task topic, which is a marked topic change (Morris-Adams 2016), following signals of closure to the previous topic but representing a clear departure from it. The change is preceded by a turn-initial “yeah”, which acknowledges the prior turn, followed by a 2.6s pause after which G146’s “well”, a contextualization cue (Dorr-Bremme 1990), signals change of context from small talk to task. G146 then turns attention to the task by first inquiring about his partner’s receipt of the text and in turn 7, confirming the content of the text. These adjacency pairs in turns 5–6 and 7–8 can be seen as pre-sequences leading to the base adjacency pair, which comes in turns 10–11. In an exception, this base adjacency pair is initiated by G146’s Irish partner. In the two pre-sequences, G146 has established mutual access to the topic and set the stage for talk on the task itself. These two turns can be heard as leading to something else – the discussion-initiating question. The participants’ mutual orientation to this question as the relevant next step is demonstrated when, after G146’s hesitation in turn 9 and subsequent two-second gap, it is I146 who offers this discussion-initiating question in turn 10. In doing so, he demonstrates a recognition of the action that G146 had begun at turn 5 – that is, to initiate the task discussing the text. This excerpt underlines the collaborative nature of topical talk; G146 initially takes responsibility for guiding and developing the topic until he exhibits trouble in this role and his partner, understanding the direction of the conversation, fills in the blanks.

Each of the five pairs follow this pattern – pre-sequence followed by base adjacency pair – in their topic initiations and, in the other four pairs, the initiation work is successfully performed by the learner. In Excerpt (1) the preparatory work is brief, while in other pairs the preparatory work is more extensive and includes comprehension checks of the text itself. This preparatory talk in the pre-sequences, according to Hellermann (2007: 84), “also serves as a site for goal-oriented language use in a real-world, goal-oriented way. As students engage in talk while in interaction with one another in their task openings, they use the language being learned, and they are accomplishing a task in their lives as language students.”

The talk on the discussion topic lasts for as little as 12 or as long as 27 minutes across pairs, after which the topic is explicitly closed down, effectively bookending the topic and defining it as a completed action – a topic that was “talked about”. These closings are not preliminary to the closing of the eTandem session, merely of this particular task. After this, pairs move either into small talk or into the German portion of the call. These closings are not presented in detail: the point is that boundaries are created within which extension of this

discussion topic can be examined. Topic/task closings and the movement from one task and one language to the next in these eTandem partnerships are subjects for future research. An example of a closing is shown in Excerpt (2), a video recording, below.

### Excerpt (2)

- 1 G144: °Yeh° (1.3) ↑Yea:h ahm (0.6) can we say anything else ab(h)out thi(h)s to(h)pi[c].
- 2 I144: [.hh hhhoh my go::d I don't kno:w. (breathy voice)=
- 3 G144: =aaah yeah we talked about the text? And our position? (0.3) an:d=
- 4 I144: =we agree: hh=
- 5 G144: =Mmm, (1.0) And we talked about:t, (.) woman in business in Dublin:; and here in Germany:, hheh .hh (0.5)
- 6 I144: ↑Yah:=( comical voice)
- 7 G144: =heh
- 8 I144: Y [e:h (comical voice)
- 9 G144: [what to find something, (1.2) for- (0.7) heh .hh=
- 10 I144: Ok:. Mmm what else can we do.

After a quiet, minimal acknowledgement in turn 1 of the previous contribution by I144 and a 1.3 second pause, G144 asks, in a laughing voice, whether anything else can be said on the topic, initiating the closing. I144's response exhibits mock exasperation which, combined with G144's laughter filled speech in turn 1, suggests a mutual orientation to the required nature of the discussion topic. In turns 3 and 5, G144 summarises what they have talked about, confirming that they have completed the task, which I144 confirms in turn 6, but in a comical voice, again marking the topic talked about as a task that needed completing. In turn 10, I144's question confirms the move away from the task topic. Her "else" articulates the topic as having been "done" and after this they move on to talking about their classes and class teachers. O'Rourke (2005: 434) notes on tandem learning that it "facilitates an autonomous mode of learning since partners can negotiate the desired balance between topical and pedagogical communication and choose conversational and pedagogical topics according to their interests and needs." While in the current case the discussion topic is not a matter of choice, we do see each pair negotiating the boundaries of this prescribed topic. Outside of these boundaries, however, each pair negotiates

their own balance of conversational topics and spends the desired time conversing freely.

## 5.2 Questions

Once questions arose as a point of interest in a general CA analysis of the task phases (cf. Section 4.3), all questions in the five task conversations were identified and examined. Those questions that belonged to an other-initiated repair sequence were excluded, as were inquiries into lexical meaning. The remaining questions all function to propel the talk on topic forward. The resulting set of thirty-three questions were distributed quite evenly between the learners and NS participants. They were not, however, distributed evenly between the pairs, with two notable outliers in pairs GI143 and GI146, as shown in Table 1. The frequency of questions per minute of talk is provided to allow such comparison.

**Table 1:** Frequency of questions per pair during the discussion topic.

Pair	Length of task	Number of Questions	Questions per minute
GI141	28 min	4	0.14
GI143	12.5 min	8	0.64
GI144	21.5 min	4	0.19
GI146	19 min	14	0.74
GI148	20.5 min	3	0.15

The questions were further divided into two categories. The first category, topic transitioning questions (TTQs),<sup>1</sup> were questions that represented a step-wise expansion of the immediately prior talk, that is, they maintained a close propositional connection to the prior turn. TTQs embody the turn-by-turn unfolding of topic, each turn designed to display its fit to the prior. As shown in Table 2, these type of questions represent the majority of the set and are used more frequently by the NSs than by the learners. The second, topic changing questions (TCQs), were questions that represent a more marked or disjunctive shift<sup>2</sup> of focus and initiate a distinctly

<sup>1</sup> TTQs and TCQs are termed in such a way to remain consistent with previous descriptions of stepwise versus disjunctive topic shifts. Topic shift is considered a superordinate term encompassing a binary distinction between topic changes and topic transitions. Topic transitions maintain a propositional connection to the previous topic while topic changes are disjunctive and involve an abandoning of the previous topic (cf. Barron and Black 2015; Morris-Adams 2014, 2016).

<sup>2</sup> Morris-Adams (2016) makes a distinction between *marked topic changes* and *disjunctive topic changes*. Marked topic changes are not topically connected to the prior talk, but do follow

**Table 2:** Distribution of topic transitioning (TTQ) and topic changing questions (TCQ) between speakers.

Pair	Number of TTQs (learner)	Number of TTQs (NS)	Number of TCQs (learner)	Number of TCQs (NS)
G1141	2	1	1	0
G1143	2	3	3	0
G1144	1	2	1	0
G1146	3	7	3	1
G1148	1	2	0	0
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>1</b>

new sequence of talk. It must be noted, however, that these TCQs remain within the bounded task phase; they are oriented to as relevant to the discussion topic but do not otherwise embody a relationship to the previous turn. They are less frequent than the topic transitioning type and are almost exclusively contributed by the learners (see Table 2). Both types of question share one particular sequential feature: all but two occur after a lull in the interaction. That is, there is a pause between turns, or between a response to the previous turn and the question itself (cf. excerpt 3, lines 3, 7, and 20). For TTQs, pauses range from 0.5s to 5.0s (median 1.2s, mean 1.5s). For TCQs, these pauses range from 1.0s to 6.4s (median 3.3s, mean 3.2s). Recall the note in Section 4.3 on the potential inaccuracy of pause measurements due to the CMC nature of these conversations. Smaller pauses may be lags in communication, but longer pauses are more likely to be due to interactional features – the greater length of pauses in the TCQs is considered to be due to interactional features. In no case was a pause oriented to by participants as a potential lag or breakdown in the communication signal.

### Excerpt (3)

- 1 I143: *In terms of managing in a who:le though. (0.9) what do you think, (0.6) if you know it co:mes down to the ability of the person it doesn't necessarily matter if they're ma:le or female? (2.5)*
- 2 G143: °Yah° (6.4) °( )° *Did your mother work? (0.7)*
- 3 I143: *.hh Yeh-. My mother is an accountant.*

signals that the previous topic is coming to a close. Disjunctive topic changes are abrupt in that they do not follow any such signals.

[2 intervening turns]

- 6 G143: *E:hm m:y mother wo:rked as ahm: (0.7) tch assistant; (0.3) in a company: that (0.2) offe:rs (0.8) ah:m pro (0.7) programmer service to other companies, (1.4)*
- 7 I143: *tch ↑Oh ri:ght ok. (5.0) And does she work in a position of (.) manage: (.)ment? (0.6)*
- 8 G143: *No:, she wo:rked uh in the middle management, (1.6)*

[10 intervening turns]

- 19 I143: *Ahm my mother: s:topped working for a couple of years cause sh:e had (0.2) ahm she had us quite young I m- she had us th- th- there's a small gap in between me 'n my sisters; (1.8)*
- 20 G143: *°Ok° (2.0) and and (0.3) was it easy? for your mother: to: ah return on the work an':, (0.5)*
- 21 I143: *tch .hhh (0.7) Ahm I- it was ea:sier (.) i- than ce:rt'n professions because, (0.6) it was an accounting position; whereas if she and she wasn't in: (0.2) management whereas if she'd been (.) higher up (1.0) it would've been a bit more competitive for her; (0.7)*
- 22 G143: *Ok. (9) I have no more to say on this topic,*

Excerpt (3), an audio recording, illustrates both types of question. Turn 1 begins with what becomes the end of a topical sequence on quotas. Just prior to turn 1, G143 has offered the opinion that quotas are necessary to ensure equal numbers of women in management. I143's turn in line 1 stays on the topic, but makes a slight transition by asking whether her partner agrees that management roles should be offered to those with ability, regardless of gender. I143's turn, however, has been posed in a particularly complex and ambiguous fashion; her "what do you think" and final rising intonation imply a question while, otherwise, the declarative syntax implies an assessment. It starts to become apparent that the complexity of I143's turn is problematic for G143 when there is a 2.5s gap before the beginning of G143's answer in turn 2. G143 offers only a quiet, minimal "°Yah°", in turn 2, after which there

is an additional 6.4s pause that is followed by a TCQ. Indeed, in each case wherein the learner offers a topic changing question, it is apparent that they are not equipped to further engage the previous sequence. Turn 2 of Excerpt (3) presents the most extreme case of the learner using a question as a resource to move away from the previous talk. This TCQ comes in place of what would be a sequentially relevant answer or assessment to the question/assessment posed in turn 1; the TCQ is a disjunctive topic change, which comes with no closure of the previous topic (Morris-Adams 2016: 5). Additionally, the new topic moves away from the complex discussion of quotas in the workplace to the more straightforward topic of what I143's mother did for work. In turn 3, I143 joins the new trajectory of talk and allows the trajectory she proposed with her turn in turn 1 to be completely dropped. Then, turn 7 shows an example of a TTQ when I143 advances the talk about G143's mother by asking whether she had been in a management position. Further on, G143 again shows signs of trouble in turn 20 when she acknowledges I143's prior turn with a quiet, minimal "Ok" followed by 2.0 seconds of silence. This time, however, her TTQ builds on the previous turn to successfully extend this trajectory of talk. In turn 22, G143 once again shows signs of trouble engaging with I143's turn 21 answer to her question in an extended, uninterrupted 9s pause. I143 makes no move to fill this silence either and it is G143 who finally ends it with the (abrupt) onset of the closing for this pair's on-task talk claiming that she has nothing more to say on the topic – a statement that might also be interpreted as her not having anything more she is able/prepared to say in the L2.

Iwata (2010) in her study of US-American – Japanese conversational data finds that NSs shift topic frequently in an attempt to land a topic that their NNS partners would (or could) engage with. Similarly, Long (1981, 1983) finds that NS-NNS pairings treated small talk topics in a superficial and fleeting manner. The assigned discussion topic, in contrast, encourages extended talk on the prescribed topic and maintaining talk on this topic is, at times, problematic and is itself an interactional achievement. Questions are used as resources to extend talk on a particular subtopic or to abandon a particular subtopic by introducing a new one. In their questions, the NSs show a preference for elaborating on the prior talk. The learners also use questions in this fashion, but also use questions to initiate marked or disjunctive topic shifts that still remain in the realm of the macro discussion topic. Not all pairs exploit this resource to the same extent and the two pairs who do use questions more extensively exhibit more trouble with the extension of topical talk overall, as exemplified in Excerpt (3). The vast individual differences suggest there are further discoverable resources used to extend topical talk and the contrasting use of resources amongst learners and between learner and NS is an area for further research. What is apparent from

the data is that questions are used to advance topical talk in moments where continuity is at risk – where there has been a lull in the flow of talk. The reasons participants shifted topic at those moments may be related to complexity of the previous topic, or they may be related to a student having a prepared set of questions for the task. Stimulated recall data might offer further illumination in this respect, but without it the analysis is limited to such speculative reasons, or reasons revealed linguistically, as in excerpt (3).

## 6 Discussion

As Maynard (1980: 263) notes, “topicality is an achievement of conversationalists, something organized and made observable in patterned ways that can be described.” The assigned discussion topic is demonstrably oriented to by participants in all five pairs analysed. In a patterned fashion they create boundaries indicating the beginning and the end of their talk on this topic with the learners most often in the leading discourse role. In contrast, Wilkinson (2002) found both NSs and NNSs to orient to the NS as being naturally in the leading discourse role in respect to topic management. We can begin to explain the contrasting results by reference to the differing contexts; participants in Wilkinson’s (2002) study were hosts and students engaged in informal conversations, while in the present data set the participants are in a tandem learning context. On a general level, the institutional nature of these latter interactions results in participants’ institutional identities being “made relevant to the [...] activities in which they are engaged” (Drew and Heritage 1992: 4). More specifically, the task analysed was for the learners’ language class and it was they who were required, after the tandem meeting, to write a summary of the discussion they had with their partner. The active part that the learners took in the management of the assigned discussion task, in sum, speaks clearly to the goals of tandem language learning. Students were instructed that in the tandem model of language learning they are, according to the principles of reciprocity and learner autonomy (Brammerts 1996; cf. Section 4.1), responsible for their portion of the meeting and for their own learning objectives; in contrast to more traditional language pedagogy, the responsibility for initiative lies on the shoulders of the learner. Indeed, it is the learner’s role in a tandem partnership to “decide the direction and shape of the interaction by taking most of the discourse initiatives” (Little 2001: 32). The NS partner, on the other hand, is to “provide the discursive support necessary to keep the conversation going” (Little 2001: 31–32) by clarifying, rephrasing, expanding, and commenting. The

consideration of the institutional nature of the conversation and the associated roles offers insight into the learners taking the lead discourse role.

The institutional context and the effect that it has on the conversations draws attention to the claim of the authenticity of tandem interactions (cf. Section 4.1) and of CMC in the language classroom (cf. Section 2). Authenticity has been defined as a property of language use occurring outside of the classroom (Bardovi-Harlig and Hartford 2005), having a real-life communicative purpose (Lee 1995), and “genuine communication” involving a “real world connection” (Gan 2010: 599). Tandem interactions themselves have been described as authentic because partners “should in principle be interested in one another as individuals and not just as sources of language input” (O’Rourke 2005: 434). Authenticity is perhaps best understood on a cline rather than as a binary choice between authentic or not authentic. The eTandem interactions these students engaged in can be considered more authentic than many activities occurring inside the language classroom – from scripted dialogues to free role plays between learners. That there is an assigned discussion topic does impose some of the structure of the language classroom on this out-of-class activity, reducing authenticity by removing the complete freedom of choice available in, for example, a conversation between friends. The completion of a language task is itself a real-life communicative purpose, but the real claim for the (relative) authenticity of these eTandem interactions is the opportunity that they provide for learners to connect and communicate with NSs of English belonging to their own generation.

The tandem roles and their influence on the task conversations also call into question the etic categorisation of the participants as NSs and NNSs/learners (Kasper 2004: 554). While these categories are based simply on the mother tongues of participants, another, complementary set of membership categories comes to the fore as more relevant: the dominant task leader and nondominant task participant (Yule and Macdonald 1990). These categories subsume those of NS-NNS as the particular task-focused format of this tandem partnership is such that the NNS is often the task leader. The fact that the learners dominate the work of initiating the discussion topic, and of closing it down, is evidence that they are assuming the role of task leader rather than the “role” of NNS, and is in contrast to prior research (cf. e.g. Iwata 2010; Wilkinson 2002). The TTQ’s are largely contributed by the NS and provide discursive support to extend a current subtopic that is faltering, fitting in the NS role of task participant. The TCQs (8 out of 9 of which are offered by the learners) occur at moments where continuity is at even greater risk, or where negotiation of meaning might be perceived as face

threatening. The learner role of task leader can be seen in these TCQs, as they often seem to be pre-prepared questions. It is here that it becomes particularly evident that the orientation to this role is not always in the best interest of the task or the interaction more generally. In Excerpt (3), turn 3, the learner abruptly abandons a previous line of discussion and rather than answering a question posed, she poses a new topic of her own in a TCQ. Posing this next question can be interpreted as an orientation to her role as task leader – moving through possible topics that may even have been prepared in advance. Her partner, in the role of task participant, accepts this disjunctive topic change and allows the talk to move in the newly proposed direction. On the other hand, as discussed in Section 5.2, the learner, G143, uses the TCQ as a resource to move away from what was a relatively more complex topic for which she may have lacked target language, or may have not understood her partner's immediately prior question. Rather than engaging in a negotiation of meaning to re-establish intersubjectivity, the TCQ is posed and the conversation moves in a new direction.

Comparing two different media (video CMC vs. textchat) and modes (speaking vs. writing), van der Zwaard and Bannink (2014) found NNS participants to make more face appropriate decisions during video calls and more task appropriate decisions during text chats. More precisely, in the video calls, negotiation of meaning sequences were either quickly aborted or not initiated at all resulting in an unsuccessful completion of the task. The authors attribute this difference between text and video task completion to a number of medium-related factors including the necessity to respond instantly and the need to negotiate both verbal and non-verbal communication signals. They conclude that, “if we consider human interaction in an L2 environment as a social situation in which two forces operate simultaneously – negotiating for meaning is beneficial for language learning, but dispreferred in a “real world” social environment due to issues of loss of face – then we may draw the conclusion that the participants in our data made different discourse decisions during chat and video call” (van der Zwaard and Bannink 2014: 146).

Although this study is not concerned with comparing and contrasting two different media (audio vs. video CMC) and all the conversations took place in the same mode (spoken language), the findings from van der Zwaard and Bannink (2014) shed light on what might be happening in the present data set. The TCQs in particular mirror van der Zwaard and Bannink's abandoned or non-existent negotiation of meaning sequences resulting from characteristics of the medium. These questions, thus, may be themselves a product of the medium of interaction: video or audio CMC.

## 7 Conclusions

L2 speakers have at their disposal a range of interactional resources from their L1 that they are able to exploit in an effort to interact successfully with more competent speakers of the language (Gonzalez-Lloret 2011: 309). These resources are employed and their success determined, as the concept of IC underlines, in interaction. He and Young (1998) list topic management as an interactional practice fundamental to IC. The present analysis demonstrated how, despite disfluencies, the learners actively participated in the management of the discussion topic, and their actions were recognised as such by their NS partners, both participants demonstrably orienting to roles defined by the tandem relationship. Additionally, the video CMC context may itself have had an influence on the unfolding of the task conversations. Learners faced with the time pressure inherent to oral conversation combined with the visual access to their partner (and their partner to them) choose to move the macro task topic forward rather than negotiating meaning when the previous topic becomes too complex. This finding must be understood within the limits of a study describing one particular context: that is, unlike van der Zwaard and Bannink's (2014) study, there is no parallel data in a second context to demonstrate more firmly that the avoidance of negotiation of meaning sequences seen in the abruptness of the TCQs is due to the CMC context itself.

This paper has merely drawn a frame around the picture of topic management within this particular context. The analysis uncovered distinct differences in the use of questions by the various pairs and this finding prompts questions for further investigation on the individual differences in the deployment of interactional resources to manage and extend topic. In addition, further research is required to unearth further resources used by both learners and their NS partners to extend talk on an assigned discussion task, questions being only one such resource. Finally, as the present data set also contains the German conversations wherein the tandem roles are reversed, an investigation into the realisation of the opposite roles enacted by the same individuals would be of interest.

Among the limitations of this investigation is the fact that the data comprises largely audio-only recordings of video CMC interactions. This is an important caveat and limitation to this study, as the various visual cues (body language, facial expression, gesture, etc.) that was available to the participants is available to the analyst in only two of five cases. This more complex dataset could be analysed using a different method, for example multimodal analysis. Nonetheless, the above linguistic analysis has established a linguistic

foundation that could be further enriched by a multimodal analysis of the video data available. The study also yields a nuanced view of language learners not as deficient in their language skills, but as making use of the resources available to them in order to maintain and develop topical conversation – at times leading to abrupt changes, but most often successfully leading to further talk.

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## 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
()	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 rise stronger than a comma but weaker than a question mark
↑Word	Indicates a higher than expected pitch on a word

## Bionote

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