Locating change in language use: participant orientations to temporalities of learning

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A key feature of language learning, as conceptualised by a range of SLA theories, is that it concerns a temporal change in an individual’s language competence or use. Accordingly, the empirical task of the analyst is often to demonstrate that such change over time has taken place and to investigate what may have led to it. This presentation aims, firstly, to tease out largely implicit perspectives to time and its granularities in prior SLA research, focusing particularly on studies that use oral or interactional data as the empirical basis for investigating learning practices and processes. Secondly, the paper will contrast such analyst’s perspectives to time in learning with the ways in which learners themselves orient to the temporal nature of their language learning experience while doing classroom tasks. Investigating selected classroom interactional data from a conversation analytic (CA) perspective, the paper will describe two temporally opposite orientations to learning that students display in interaction: 1) looking forward in time to learning something that will enable some action to be completed, and 2) looking back in time to build on knowledge from previous events or experiences in order to make sense of the interaction here-and-now. These observable orientations and their linkages with learning tasks, it is argued, provide the analyst an emic view on how learning develops over time, as it is constructed through participants’ accounting practices. Furthermore, they also suggest new ways in which learning manifests itself in interactional details, thereby contributing to SLA research and methodology involving spoken data.

The data corpus consists of video-recordings of secondary-level Content and Language Integrated (CLIL) lessons taught in English to native-Finnish students.

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