Displays of (non)understanding in L2 service encounters and their treatment in the classroom

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This paper analyses how understanding or nonunderstanding is displayed during service encounters by second language users and how this is talked about back in the classroom. More specifically, the analytic focus is on the third turn following an answer in question-answer sequences. This turn displays how the second language user treats an answer given by the service provider to his/her question. The turn either exhibits clear understanding or nonunderstanding or is equivocal. The analysis shows that in the retrospective discussions these alternatives are treated differently and lead to different sequential trajectories of situated second language learning.

The analysis draws on two data sets that open complementary views to language learning activity by second language users of Finnish. The data sets originate from pedagogical experiments designed adapting the sit-talk-sit model (Clark & Lindeman 2011). The students first prepared for service encounters outside the classroom. Second, they participated in the service encounters and video-recorded these in pairs. Third, back in the classroom, they reflected upon their experiences. The complementary data sets are formed of 1) the actual service encounters and of 2) the retrospective discussions about these encounters back in the classroom.

The findings contribute to the study of L2 learners’ interactional competences as co-constructed and sensitive to the contingencies and material ecologies of different types of social activities. They shed new light on the differences between classroom learning and social interaction “in the wild”, and contribute to recent pedagogical initiatives which aim at bridging the gap between the different environments. Detailed analysis of the two data sets reveals that while L2 learners put their interactional resources to effective use in service encounters, problems of understanding can surface after the event, and that retrospective reflection of these using the video-recordings creates affordances for locating, analyzing and elaborating objects of learning.

Keywords: interactional competence, CA-SLA, display of understanding.