Meanings at hand: embodied explanations of specialist terms in German SL classrooms

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Word explanations (Mortensen, 2011) are frequently found in classrooms. Produced by students, they involve both content and language learning, i.e. understanding concepts such as ”volume” on the one hand and acquiring discursive practices such as explanations on the other. Dependant on their mastery of language, mono- and multilingual students bring into play different semiotic resources to actively participate in such activities (Gullberg, 2011). The purpose of the paper is to investigate which semiotic resources are made available by both teachers and students and how the coordination of these resources enables forms of interactive organization that allow participants with limited verbal resources to contribute to the activity in significant ways.

The study is based on video recordings of mathematics lessons in fifth grade at five German secondary schools (12 lessons each). It draws on sequential and multimodal analyses of a collection of word explanations of specialist terms in which both mono- and multilingual students are involved.

Findings demonstrate that gestural depiction (Streeck, 2009) and found objects (Streeck, 1996) serve as especially functional meaning-making resources in explanations of specialist terms. Closer analysis reveals the practices by which the interactants transform objects into exemplars of mathematical categories and use their material properties in the activity of explaining. In the same way gestures are oriented to as visual objects to look at and talk about. It will be argued that making such virtual and material objects publicly available for longer stretches of discourse enables a particular interactive organization, ”cooperative semiosis” in Goodwin’s (2013) terminology, that can be deemed conducive for both content and language learning: once an object is established, the teacher, in the role of the recipient, facilitates the structuring and verbalization of the explanation, while the student, in the role of the ‘explainer’, is encouraged to reuse and act upon these resources.

Keywords: gestures, word explanations, cooperative semiosis.