Understanding the task instructions: a micro-analytic study of small group interactions in the French L2 classroom

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In the language classroom, tasks are traditionally conceived as a pedagogical activity enhancing the development of communicative skills in the target language insofar as their completion requires spontaneous language use among the students. A number of studies have observed however that a same instruction can be performed differently from one learner (or group) to another, thereby highlighting the ‘situatedness’ of tasks (see Breen, 1989; Coughlan & Duff, 1994; Platt & Brooks, 1994; Seedhouse, 2004). More recently, conversation analytic studies have investigated how learners jointly organize and accomplish the task through continuous adjustments to each other’s conducts, thereby playing an active role in shaping learning conditions and outcomes (see e.g. Hellermann & Pekarek Doehler, 2010; Mori, 2002). These studies reveal the importance of the learners’ own (re-)interpretation of the task instructions and of the task design.

Following that line of research, this paper investigates the learners’ understanding of the task instructions as it is enacted and collectively negotiated throughout the task accomplishment. The study is based on a corpus of 4.5 hours of video-recorded interactions in the French L2 classroom where students are engaged in group-works. With a sequential and multimodal analysis of selected excerpts of the data, we show how learners display their interpretation of the task goals and jointly organize the conditions for its completion on a turn-by-turn basis while drawing on the multiple languages they share as a group (i.e. their first language and the target language) as well as material and bodily resources (e.g. gaze, pointing, handling of objects). These findings suggest that the participants’ commitment towards a shared understanding of the task is not only relevant for the task completion as such (i.e. the intended performances) but is in itself a site for interactional work to take place.

Keywords: “tasks accomplishment” “classroom interactions” “conversation analysis”.