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Learning to talk the talk and walk the walk: Interactional competence in academic spoken English

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Abstract

In this article I present the theory of interactional competence and contrast it with alternative ways of describing a learner's knowledge of language. The focus of interactional competence is the structure of recurring episodes of face-to-face interaction, episodes that are of social and cultural significance to a community of speakers. Such episodes I call discursive practices, and I argue that participants co-construct a discursive practice through an architecture of interactional resources that is specific to the practice. The resources include rhetorical script, the register of the practice, the turn-taking system, management of topics, the participation framework, and means for signalling boundaries and transitions. I exemplify the theory of interactional competence and the architecture of discursive practice by examining two instances of the same practice: office hours between teaching assistants and undergraduate students at an American university, one in Mathematics, one in Italian as a foreign language. By a close comparison of the interactional resources that participants bring to the two instances, I argue that knowledge and interactional skill are local and practice-specific, and that the joint construction of discursive practice involves participants making use of the resources that they have acquired in previous instances of the same practice.

Keywords: interactional competence, discursive practice, face-to-face interaction, Mathematics, Italian as a foreign language.

Resumen

Aprendiendo a pasar del dicho al hecho: Competencia interaccional en el inglés oral con fines académicos

En este artículo presento la teoría de competencia interaccional y la comparo con formas alternativas de describir el conocimiento de la lengua por parte de los

aprendices. La competencia interaccional se centra en la estructura de situaciones o episodios recurrentes de interacción presencial que adquieren una importancia social y cultural para una comunidad de hablantes. A dichos episodios les denomino prácticas discursivas y convengo en que los participantes co-construyen una práctica discursiva mediante una arquitectura de recursos interaccionales específicos para la práctica. Los recursos comprenden el texto o guión retórico, el registro de la práctica, el sistema de turnos, la gestión de los temas, el marco de participación y el modo de señalizar los límites y las transiciones. Ejemplifico la teoría de la competencia interaccional y la arquitectura de la práctica discursiva analizando dos ejemplos de la misma práctica: tutorías entre profesores ayudantes y los estudiantes de grado en una universidad americana, una en matemáticas y otra en italiano como lengua extranjera. Comparando a fondo los recursos interaccionales que los participantes aportan a los dos ejemplos, argumento que el conocimiento y la destreza interaccional son locales y específicos de cada práctica, y que la construcción conjunta de la práctica discursiva conlleva que los participantes empleen los recursos que han adquirido en momentos anteriores de la misma práctica.

Palabras clave: competencia interaccional, práctica discursiva, interacción presencial, matemáticas, italiano como lengua extranjera.

Interactional competence

The ability to speak a second language is a subset of a learner's overall ability – or proficiency – in the language. Thus the question of what speaking ability is is closely related to the question of what it means to know a second language. Historically, two theories of second language knowledge have been influential: Lado's (1957) structuralist theory and Canale and Swain's (1980 & 1981) theory of communicative competence. Lado maintained that knowledge of a second language could be divided into five parts: the ability to comprehend the spoken language, the ability to speak the language, the ability to read it, the ability to write it, and an understanding of the culture of the target-language community. Lado's four skills (the fifth skill of knowing about the culture was often ignored) were the basis for much curriculum development and language assessment in the two decades following the publication of *Linguistics Across Cultures*, and to some extent are still in use today. Within each skill, knowledge was further broken down into knowledge of the traditional linguistic levels of phonology, morphology, lexis, and syntax. According to this view, second language knowledge

consisted in knowing the four skills and their components. How well a learner knew a language could be assessed by testing each of the four skills and their components separately in what came to be known as discrete-point testing.

The theory of communicative competence was based on the greater understanding of the interrelationship between linguistic form and social context that had developed through the work of Malinowski (1923), Firth (1957) and Austin (1962) but mainly through the broad and integrating perspective on language use put forward by Hymes (1972 & 1974) as "communicative competence". By now well known, Canale and Swain's framework adds to the purely linguistic perspective of Lado and characterizes a learner's competence in a language in terms of linguistic, pragmatic, discourse, and strategic competence. Without doubt, by broadening our concept of linguistic knowledge from a narrow focus on the four skills and on knowledge of linguistic structure, the Canale and Swain framework has given rise to much useful research and has provided a rich view of the knowledge and skills that an individual speaker needs to command in order to communicate accurately, appropriately, and effectively in a second language.

The focus of the Canale and Swain framework is on an individual learner in a social context; that is, the framework helps us to understand what an individual needs to know and to do in order to communicate. Such exclusive focus on a single individual's contribution to communication should, I believe, be problematized in view of current research that has advanced the position that abilities, actions, and activities do not belong to the individual but are "jointly" constructed by "all" participants. This constructivist, practice-oriented view of interaction and competence has also been articulated by various applied linguists under different names. In an early paper, Kramsch (1986) referred to it as "interactional competence". A more recent term was introduced by Jacoby and Ochs (1995: 171), who refer to it as "co-construction", which they define as "the joint creation of a form, interpretation, stance, action, activity, identity, institution, skill, ideology, emotion, or other culturally meaningful reality".

A second applied linguistic perspective that advances the interactive nature of communicative activity is Hall's (1993 & 1995) idea of "interactive practices". In talking of interactive practices, Hall indicates that participation in talk does not involve the individual in spontaneous creation of individual

utterances free from social constraints, but rather "talk is comprised of interactive practices, structured moments of face-to-face interaction – differently enacted and differently valued – whereby individuals come together to create, articulate, and manage their collective histories via the use of sociohistorically defined and valued resources" (Hall 1995: 207-208). Interactive practices, according to Hall, are recurring episodes of talk that are of sociocultural significance to a community of speakers.

Interactive practices are co-constructed by participants, each of whom contributes linguistic and pragmatic resources to the practice. Among others, participants bring the following resources to a given practice: a knowledge of rhetorical scripts, a knowledge of register – that is certain lexis and syntactic patterns specific to the practice, a knowledge of how to take turns-at-talk, a knowledge of topical organization, a knowledge of the appropriate participation framework, and a knowledge of the means for signalling boundaries between practices and transitions within the practice itself.

A few examples will show the kinds of resources that participants bring to different practices. Participants bring knowledge of "rhetorical scripts" (Ranney, 1992), or sequences of speech acts that help to define a particular interactive practice. For example, He (1993) has shown that students distinguish between acceptable and non-acceptable peer reviews of their written work by whether certain obligatory acts are present in a certain sequence in the reviews.

Second, participants may construct a practice with a "specific register" – that is specific lexis and syntactic structures. For example, in discussing complimenting behaviour in American English, Wolfson (1984) found that a very limited range of syntactic patterns and adjectives were used in compliments and that the choice of adjective depends to some degree on the gender of the person who is being complimented.

Third, different interactive practices involve different "strategies for taking turns". Research that I and others have done on the discourse of language proficiency interviews (LPIs) has shown that turns are allocated in a very similar way in LPIs from the way turn taking is managed in classrooms (Young & Milanovic, 1992; Young, 1995b). That is, the interviewer (like the teacher) can claim a turn at any time and has the right to allocate a turn to the interviewee by means of questions and other turn-allocation devices.

Fourth, the "management of topics" differs in different interactive practices. Topic management includes preferences for certain topics over others and

decisions as to who has the right to introduce a given topic, how long a topic persists in discourse, and who has the right to change the topic. A simple example of differences in topic management in different interactive practices comes from a comparison of conversations between couples in intimate relationships (Crow, 1983) and conversations in language proficiency interviews. Crow found that the couples in his study shifted the conversational topic on average every 48 seconds. In contrast, in certain kinds of language proficiency interviews, Young (1995a) found that topic shifts were far less frequent: In intermediate level interviews participants shifted turns on average every 67 seconds and in advanced level interviews, they shifted every 84 seconds.

Fifth, Goffman (1981) and Goodwin (1990) have drawn attention to the different ways in which participants in a practice take roles and ratify the roles of others. Participation in interaction is not simply a matter of being either a speaker or hearer; rather it is the ways in which a speaker constructs him or herself as an animator, author, or principal of the words being spoken. Participation patterns also refer to whether people co-present in the interaction are ratified by the speakers as hearers or overhearers and how speakers design their talk in view of the recipient for which it is intended. Tarone and Liu (1995) showed that some kinds of participation patterns that a child learner of English as a second language engages in encourage faster and more complete development of features of his interlanguage than other kinds of interaction. A similar finding was reported by Shea (1994), who compared interactions between Japanese students studying at an American university and four different interlocutors. Shea reported that the Japanese students appear more proficient in English in conversations where they had equal access to the floor and took perspectives that were congruent with those taken by their interlocutor.

Finally, the means for "signalling the boundaries" of an interactive practice differ from one practice to another. Hartford and Bardovi-Harlig (1992) have shown that the ways closings are managed in academic advising sessions between a professor and a student differ quite markedly from the ways closings have been described in ordinary conversations (Schegloff & Sacks, 1973). In closing academic advising sessions, it is not legitimate to re-invoke topics that have already been dealt with during the session, whereas in closing ordinary conversations, re-invocations are used to indicate that none of the participants has any further new topics to introduce.

Participants, then, bring to an interactive practice at least these six kinds of resources: a knowledge of rhetorical scripts, a knowledge of register specific to the practice, a knowledge of patterns of turn-taking, a knowledge of topical organization, a knowledge of an appropriate participation framework, and a knowledge of the means for signalling boundaries between practices and transitions within the practice itself.

Interactional competence, as I have described it, differs from communicative competence in several respects. In one respect, interactional competence is a further elaboration of second language knowledge; in other words, to discourse, pragmatic, and strategic competence, we must now add competence in (at least) the six interactional features that I described above. However, in another respect, interactional competence is fundamentally different from communicative competence. Whereas communicative competence has been interpreted in the language testing literature as a trait or bundle of traits that can be assessed in a given individual, interactional competence – I wish to stress – is co-constructed by all participants in an interactive practice and is specific to that practice. Participants' knowledge and interactive skills are "local": They apply to a given interactive practice and either do not apply or apply in a different configuration to different practices.

Because knowledge and interactional skill are local and practice-specific, the joint construction of an interactive practice involves participants making use of the resources that they have acquired in previous instances of the "same" practice. According to this view, then, individuals do not acquire a general, practice-independent communicative competence, rather they acquire a practice-specific interactional competence by participating with more experienced others in specific interactive practices. Interactional competence in a specific practice, that is, involves participants making skilful use of resources, such as those six that I have detailed, in the joint construction of form, interpretation, stance, action, activity, identity, institution, skill, ideology, emotion, or other culturally meaningful reality. Interactional competence is not an attribute of an individual participant, and thus we cannot say that an individual is interactionally competent, rather we talk of interactional competence as something that is jointly constructed by all participants (including an analyst if the interaction is subjected to analysis). Equally, interactional competence is not a trait that is independent of the interactive practice in which it is (or is not) constituted.

I want to make the case here that certain performances differ significantly not only from one practice to another but also across subject domains so that the same practice in one subject domain requires quite different resources from a similar practice in an another. In order to make this point, I will compare two office hour conversations that were recorded between teaching assistants (TAs) and American undergraduates at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. The conversations were recorded as part of a larger research project into face-to-face interaction in teaching assistant (TA) office hours (Young et al., 1996). In this project, volunteer TAs from a range of different departments agreed to schedule their office hours in the instructional media development centre on campus. They and their students held regular office hours and held conversations about topics that arose naturally as part of the students' courses. The only difference was that the conversations were filmed by remote control cameras. Although participants knew they were being filmed, no one else was present in the room at the time of the filming.

The first conversation was between a female Taiwanese TA in the Math department and a female student, a junior majoring in Spanish who was planning to go on to do an MBA; this conversation is transcribed in Appendix A. The second conversation was between a male Italian TA in the Department of French and Italian and a male student majoring in zoology and Spanish and is transcribed in Appendix B.

A Math conversation

The Math office hour conversation fits our expectations for an office hour because it involves a TA, a student, and a question that the student explicitly raises in lines 1-8.

This particular question arose because of something that the student did not understand from the professor's lecture, as she explains in lines 10-17. The role that both the student and the TA seem to expect of the TA in this office hour is that she will explain material that was covered in the professor's lecture. Let us try to look in this conversation at the features of interactional competence that both participants bring to this conversation. I will consider some of the features that I outlined earlier: rhetorical script, register, the turn-taking system, topic management, and boundaries and transitions. Because the activity itself and the roles of the participants are jointly

constructed by both the TA and the student, I will examine each feature from the point of view of both participants.

Rhetorical script

Both participants seem to orient themselves to a problem-statement and problem-resolution script. The kind of script that both are following can be outlined as follows:

Problem statement

Student states the problem.	(lines 1-8)
TA checks the student's comprehension.	(line 9)
Student displays a lack of comprehension.	(lines 10-17)

Problem resolution

TA explains the solution to the problem.	(lines 18-71)
Student indicates that she is following the explanation.	(lines 22-72)
Student and TA close the topic.	(lines 72-73)

The first part of the script involves a statement of the problem by the student and a request for clarification by the TA. This is followed by the TA's long explanation, which is offered both in talk and through the writing that the TA does. During the explanation, the student displays active listenership by orienting her gaze and her upper body toward the TA's writing and by continuers such as "okay" and "mhm" at the appropriate times during the TA's explanation. Taken together these tokens indicate that she is following the explanation. The topic concludes with two lengthy pauses punctuated by "Okay" from the student and "Mhm" from the TA, indicating closure of that topic.

Register

The TA and student orient themselves to different roles vis-à-vis the discipline of Mathematics by means of their choice of differing lexis. The student chooses non-specialist vocabulary and talks about "graphs and pictures" (line 17) and uses highly context-specific vocabulary in her reference "to make something equal to one another" (line 64). On the other hand, the TA's vocabulary includes discipline-specific lexis such as "three conditions" (line 30), "limit of F as X approach to A exists" (line 37) and "the function satisfy this three conditions" (line 41). At the same time as she

is using the discipline-specific lexis, her writing includes symbols and formulae that are also specific to her discipline. In this way, both TA and student are co-constructing and reinforcing their reciprocal roles as expert and novice through this conversation.

A further way in which lexical choice helps to co-construct role identities is through the TA's and student's use of the indexicals, "we" and "they", whose meaning depends on the context in which they occur. The TA is the exclusive user of the indexical "we" in lines 18-21, "to illustrate this problem in picture *we* just think the picture should be the graph should be connected," in lines 54-55, "*we* need the left-hand side limit is equal to the right-hand side limit," and in line 57–59 "*we* will check this condition and when when that will satisfy this and that will give *us* an equation." Not only does the student never use "we" but she also accepts that the extension of the TA's "we" does not include her – the student – by responding with "they" in line 66. Again such mutually exclusive use of indexicals helps the TA and the student to mutually construct their respective roles as expert/insider and novice/outsider in the field of Mathematics.

Turn taking

In one respect, the participants in this conversation seem to manage turn taking in a similar way to the way turns are managed in a classroom; that is to say, the TA may take a turn whenever she wants, and she also has the right to allocate the next turn to the student. In the opening sequence of the conversation, for example, the student's question in lines 1-8 would normally implicate an answer from the TA as part of a normal question-answer adjacency pair. However, we see in line 9 that the TA postpones the answer by replying with a clarification question, thus allocating the next turn to the student. Further on, in lines 60-62, although the student's comment, "Okay and that's what they equal over here", overlaps with the TA's turn, she does not succeed in taking the turn away from the TA, who continues on through the student's talk with "that will give us an equation … involving K" (lines 59-61). A few lines later, the TA uses a similar strategy to manage turns by denying the student a turn with her interruption "because, ya the left- left-hand limit is uh is uhm three minus K times three plus K" (lines 67-70).

During the TA's long turn-at-talk through lines 18-71, she keeps the floor and the student does not make any attempt to claim a turn, merely ratifying the fact that the TA holds the floor by verbal tokens of active listenership

such as backchannels "mhm" and "okay." At the same time as she holds this long turn-at-talk, the TA is also writing the formulae on her notepad and the gaze direction of the student indicates that she is following what the TA is writing. When the student again takes the floor at the end of the TA's turn, she does so by indicating her own notepad. Thus, in this interaction, it seems that turn transition relevant places (Ford, Fox & Thompson, 1996) are signalled by both verbal and nonverbal means and that, where Math is the topic of discussion, the orientation of the speakers to their notepads is significant in indicating boundaries of a turn-constructional unit.

Topic management

In terms of the categories of topical structure put forward by Young and Milanovic (1992), this conversation appears to be highly goal-oriented. That is, once introduced, a topic persists over a long stretch of talk from both participants. This contrasts with the relatively short topics that are found in language proficiency interviews. The topic that begins the office hour conversation in line 1 and continues through line 80 in the transcript lasts a total of 3 minutes and 12 seconds. Compare this with the couples in Crow's (1983) study, who shifted the conversational topic on average every 48 seconds. It is also much longer than the average duration of topics (55 seconds) in ACTFL oral proficiency interviews at the intermediate level and above (Young & Halleck, 1998).

This long topic in this conversation is also structured in a way that may be specific to the discipline of Mathematics. It proceeds as follows.

Student asks a question.	(lines 1-8)
TA negotiates the question with the student.	(lines 9-17)
TA sets up the answer in terms of pictures.	(lines 18-23)
TA restates the question in "rigorous mathematical terms".	(lines 27-34)
TA states the first condition.	(line 36)
TA states the second condition.	(lines 36-37)
TA states the third condition.	(lines 39-40)
TA restates the problem in terms of the three conditions.	(lines 41-44)
TA shows how to test that the conditions hold.	(lines 46-55)
Student displays acceptance of the TA's answer.	(lines 56-72)

The topical organization imposed by the TA in this sequence is reminiscent of the way in which a mathematical theorem is stated and proved. The

theorem to be proved is stated by the TA in lines 27-34 and the first part of the proof consists of stating the "givens" in lines 36-40. Once the givens are stated, the proof involves testing whether the conditions stated in the givens hold in this particular case. Once that is shown in lines 46-55, the student's acceptance of the TA's proof in lines 56-72 is a concluding move similar to the traditional *quod erat demonstrandum* of mathematical theorems. Thus a reflex of learning in office hours is the socialization of the student to the topical organization imposed on the discourse by the TA – an organization that may well be specific to a given discipline. In an office hour, the student is learning how to talk the talk of the discipline by means of the topical management imposed on the conversation by the TA.

Boundaries and transitions

The opening move in the Math office hour involves the student opening the conversation with a statement of a problem related to an assignment in lines 1-8. On the other hand, in the Italian office hour, the TA provides an opening by asking the student if he has a question, to which the student responds. This is seen in lines 1-12 in Appendix B.

Thus both office hour conversations are initiated by a question from the student related to some assignment that the student has attempted. However, one office-hour conversation begins with a pre-opening by the TA while the other does not. In comparison, the opening phases of interviews between strangers generally involve the participants introducing themselves to each other. Here is an example from data I collected in Prague in 1990.

Opening of an interview between strangers (IR=Interviewer, RE=Respondent)

IR: Can you tell me your name please.
RE: My name is Libuse.
IR: And how old are you?
RE: Twenty-one year.
IR: Well Libuse where were you born??
RE: I was born in a town called Litomysl in east of Czechoslovakia..
IR: What is that like? I have never visited that town. Tell me about that town.
RE: It is a very small town.xxxxxx.

IR: Yeah.
RE: But I think nothing interesting in this town.

The interview between participants who do not know each other involves introductions, whereas the TAs and students in the office hour conversations know each other quite well and can dispense with the getting-to-know-you openings.

To summarize the interactional features of the Math office hour, then, both participants follow a problem-statement and problem-resolution script; both participants orient themselves to the complementary roles of expert and novice through specific lexical and syntactic choices; turns are managed cooperatively in such a way that the TA is free to take a turn whenever she wishes, while the student's turns take the form of questions. Turn-transition relevant places are indicated by changes of participants' orientation toward the TA's writing. In addition, the conversation is characterized by a single long topic indicating orientation by both participants to a complex and distal goal. What appears to be highly discipline-specific in this conversation is the organization of information imposed on the conversation by the TA, who first states the theorem to be proved, proceeds to state the assumptions – the givens – under which the proof is made and steps through the proof. The proof is concluded by a statement – *quod erat demonstrandum* – by the student to the effect that the theorem has been proved. Finally, opening moves in both the Math and Italian office hour are statements or elicitations of the problems to be discussed and are radically different from the openings of interactions designed to evaluate the suitability of international students for possible roles as teaching assistants.

I have claimed that interactional competence is local and practice-specific and I have attempted to show how some interactional features of office hours differ from interactions in language proficiency interviews, which are designed to predict the performance of international students in these practices, among others. The question I wish to address in the remainder of this paper is "how" local and "how" practice-specific must that competence be. By comparing the interactional features of the Math office hour with those of an Italian office hour, I wish to investigate the interactional similarities which lead us to identify an "office hour" as an interactional genre and, at the same time, to highlight those interactional differences which must be attributed to different ways in which knowledge is constructed in different disciplines.

A conversation in Italian as a foreign language

The first topic of the Italian office hour is transcribed in Appendix B. In this conversation a native Italian-speaking TA and an undergraduate student, both male, are discussing the student's written exercise, which has been read and annotated by the TA in advance of the office hour. Using the same framework for describing interactional resources that was used to analyze the Math office hour, I first turn to the sequence of speech acts – or rhetorical script – that participants follow in the Italian office hour.

Rhetorical script

The sequence of speech acts in the Italian office hour is a problem-statement and problem-resolution script similar to the one identified in the Math office hour. The principle difference between the two is that, in the Italian office hour, the TA invites the student to state the problem in lines 1-6. After a pause, the student takes the floor with a problem statement in lines 7-12. With the framing move, "Okay okay" in line 13, the TA displays that he has understood the problem and is prepared to answer. The resolution of the problem happens in three stages in which this student is more active than the Math student in suggesting possible resolutions.

In lines 13-39, the TA explains the reason why *darle un bacio* ("to give her a kiss") is preferable to the student's version, *bacciarla* ("to kisss she" [sic.]).

In lines 40-42, the student attempts to suggest another version, *che avevo bisogno di* … ("that I needed to …") but he is pre-empted by the TA, who offers a second explanation for the student's error in lines 43-53.

In lines 54-56, the student confirms his understanding of the TA's explanation, an understanding that is strongly confirmed by the TA's string of eleven *no*'s in line 55.

This is followed by a third explanation from the TA in lines 57-68 and the topic is closed by the student's statement, "I understand now", in line 62.

In comparison with the Math office hour, then, the Italian office hour also follows a problem-statement/problem-resolution script with obligatory moves in which the problem is stated and in which the TA's explanation is accepted. The style of problem resolution, however, appears to be quite different in the two office hours, with the Math interaction being more one-sided than the Italian. The question arises at this point of whether the differences in

rhetorical script are a reflection of different disciplinary discourses or whether they simply reflect individual differences between the participants in the two conversations. In the absence of further data to support either individual or discipline-related differences, it is possible to arrive at a speculative answer by a thought experiment. Imagine a Math office hour in which the student hazards a version of his own and then imagine an Italian office hour in which the student simply follows the TA's explanation, contributing only tokens of active listenership. My own view is that both conversations are plausible and that problem-resolution styles can be readily switched across the two disciplines. This leads me to conclude, albeit speculatively, that the differences in rhetorical scripts that we observe in these two conversations are not related to the academic disciplines of which they form a part.

Register

Turning now to the lexical and syntactic resources that participants bring to the Italian office hour, we find that in this as in the Math office hour these interactional resources are employed for a similar purpose: the construction of expertise. This is most obvious in the abundant technical terminology of linguistics employed by the TA and by its total absence in the student's speech. The TA uses "preposition" (line 16), "pronoun" (line 22), "indirect object pronoun" (lines 24-25), "direct object pronoun" (line 28), "misspelling the verb" (lines 35-37), "indirect object pronoun" again (line 50), "idiom" (line 57), and "conjugate" (line 58). In stark contrast, none of this technical vocabulary is controlled by the student who refers instead to "the form *dare*" (line 9) and "*guancia* … Ah that's a new word" (lines 46-48).

A further way in which the TA constructs himself as an expert is through his reference to correctness and to the student's mistakes as in the following examples.

"your mistakes"	(line 4)
"the right preposition"	(line 16)
"*baciarla* would be correct"	(lines 25-27)
"it would be correct"	(lines 32-33)
"you were misspelling the verb"	(lines 35-37)

These statements of what is correct and incorrect in Italian go unchallenged by the student, whose silence thus helps to construct his own role as novice vis-à-vis the TA.

A characteristic syntactic structure in the Italian office hour is the use of *irrealis* mood by the TA. The student's question in lines 11 and 12 is formulated with the modal "can": "And why why can't we use here instead of *darle un bacio baciar- le*". The TA begins his response in line 13 using the same modality, "Okay you can use it", but shifts immediately to irrealis mood, which he maintains throughout the explanation in lines 18-42: "You *wouldn't use* the right preposition"; "It *would be* an indirect object pronoun"; and "If you say *baciarla* and and it *would be* an indirect object pronoun if you say *baciarla* (…) *would be* correct since you *would be using* what, a direct object pronoun".

The Italian TA's use of irrealis mood contrasts with the Math TA, whose only modal is "should". It appears to originate with the discussion of hypothetical sentences proposed by the student as part of the problem resolution script. For reasons that I will detail shortly, I believe that the TA's use of this modality is specific to the discipline.

Turn taking

When we look at the turn-taking system employed by participants in the Italian office hour, there seems to be a marked similarity between this and the Math office hour. That is, the TA may take a turn whenever he wishes and he also enjoys the right to allocate the next turn to the student. As evidence of this, overlapping speech from the student is never sufficient for the TA to yield the floor. The student either begins a turn or makes a turn that overlaps with the TA's turn but in no case does the TA yield the floor.

As we have seen in the opening sequence, the TA allocates the next turn to the student by means of soliciting a question in lines 1-6. The TA then fills his slot by asking the question. Throughout the TA's answer in lines 13-39, the student – just like the student in the Math office hour – does not make any attempt to claim a turn, merely ratifying the fact that the TA holds the floor by means of backchannels and other tokens of active listenership.

There are only two other occasions in this excerpt from the Italian office hour when the student takes an unsolicited turn, and on both occasions the student's utterance is understood as a question by the TA. In line 40, the student asks, "Could you also say *ave-*" and the student's statement in line 54 "You could never say *le dare un bacio*" is interpreted as a question and answered by the TA.

Thus the TA and the student may allocate the next turn at talk to the other party in different ways in this excerpt. The student does so only by means of questions, which are signalled both by grammar and intonation. On the other hand, the TA allocates the next turn to the student by clearly indicating a turn-transition relevant place that is signalled by grammatical and intonational means. The TA's turn in line 39 ends at a clause boundary and on a falling pitch. And a clause boundary and a salient falling pitch similarly indicate a turn transition-relevant place in line 53.

Thus it appears that the turn-taking systems in both the Math and Italian office hours are similar: The TA may take a turn at any time he wishes and may also allocate the next turn to the student. Unsolicited student turns are understood by the TA as questions. This kind of turn-taking system also characterizes discourse in teacher-fronted classrooms. Students are able to take unsolicited turns in office hours only at turn-transition-relevant places that are indicated by syntactic, prosodic, and nonverbal cues.

Topic management

So far, by comparing four out of the six interactional resources that participants bring to these office hours – rhetorical scripts, lexical/syntactic expectations, patterns of turn taking, and means for signalling opening, closing, and transitional moves – I have argued that similar resources are used by participants in both Math and Italian office hours and that any differences were the result of individual differences in interactional styles of the participants and not the result of the different ways in which knowledge is constructed in the two disciplines. However, as we turn now to topic management, I wish to claim that the topical structure imposed on the discourse by the Italian TA differs markedly from the topical structure of the Math office hour.

The discourse topic of the two conversations is clearly different. The Math conversation is about how to establish whether a function is continuous while the Italian conversation is about the complementation structures of the Italian verb *baciare* ("to kiss"). That much is obvious. What is not obvious, however, is that there are two possible discourse topics in the Italian conversation. The student, after all, has not simply done a grammar exercise, he has written about his first kiss, a life event to which we may believe he attaches considerable importance because of his desire to write about it and the considerable detail with which he recalls it.

The Italian TA does not respond in any way to the nature of the experience that the student has described but focuses the conversation on the formal grammatical means that the students has employed to communicate his experience. By his choice of discourse topic, the Italian TA communicates that learning Italian licenses two kinds of knowledge – knowledge of personal affective states, particularly those involving sexual relations, and knowledge of grammar. Writing about one's first kiss appears to be an appropriate assignment for an Italian class but I can imagine that it would not be licensed in other foreign language classes – German or Chinese, say. Despite the appropriateness of the personal topic for the Italian conversation, the TA clearly indicates by the focus that he chooses for the conversation that, of the two, knowledge of grammar is more highly valued within his discipline.

The TA's choice of topic helps to construct the discipline of Italian in this conversation: knowledge of Italian exists on two separate levels, one of which – grammatical knowledge – is more highly valued than communication of content. In addition, the structure of the TA's grammatical explanations helps to construct grammatical knowledge as a process of reasoning. Grammatical knowledge is not arbitrary but consists of a system of lexical alternatives, and the choice among these alternatives is based on a process of inference. Grammatical reasoning is instantiated in this office hour by means of a series of IF/THEN/BECAUSE statements. In each of the following five excerpts from the Italian office hour, the TA constructs a grammatical explanation with an IF/THEN/BECAUSE template, in which the student actively collaborates.

> IF you use *baciarle* / THEN you wouldn't be using the right preposition / BECAUSE *le* is a pronoun meaning "to her" (lines 13-22)
>
> IF you say *baciarla* / THEN it would be correct / BECAUSE *la* is a direct object pronoun (lines 24-31)
>
> IF you say *avevo bisogno di baciarla* / THEN it would be correct / BECAUSE *la* is a direct object pronoun – mentioned in lines 24-28 (lines 32-39)
>
> IF you say *avevo bisogno di baciarle una guancia* / THEN you could use an indirect object pronoun / BECAUSE it is *una guancia di lei* (lines 43-53)
>
> IF you say *le dare un bacio* / THEN it would be incorrect / BECAUSE of the idiom *avere bisogno di* (lines 54-58)

This combination of an inferential template and the irrealis mood of the first and second propositions help to construct a discipline-specific knowledge of Italian grammatical reasoning for the student.

In the same way that the sequential organization of topics in the Math office hour constructs a process of mathematical reasoning for the Math student, in the Italian office hour the IF/THEN/BECAUSE template constructed over at least three turns by the TA constructs linguistic reasoning for the student of Italian. In both conversations the students are being exposed to far more than simply answers to their questions. They are being actively co-opted by their TAs into a collaborative structuring of topics that socializes them to the organization of discourse within the disciplines of Mathematics or Italian. By learning to talk the talk and walk the walk, they are being socialized into the discourse communities of mathematicians and Italian linguists.

Conclusions

I will conclude by summarizing the framework of interactional competence that I have put forward and exemplified in these conversations.

- Interactional competence is not an individual achievement; rather it is co-constructed by all participants in an interaction – in this case by both the TA and the student.
- Interactional competence is local and practice-specific. Competence in a given interactional practice such as an office hour can only be acquired by participating in office hours. And a TA acquires the interactional resources for success in an office-hour interaction by participating as a TA (not as a student) in office hours.
- A rich way of characterizing an interaction such as an office hour is in terms of how participants deploy each of the six interactional resources that I have outlined: rhetorical scripts, characteristic register, the turn taking system, topical organization, participation framework, and means for signalling boundaries and transitions. There may be further features that are important but these are the six that have been most thoroughly researched so far.

In the comparison between office hour conversations in Math and Italian, we have been able to identify common interactional features that allow us to

talk of a genre of office hour conversation. This genre is characterized by the following elements.

- A problem-statement/problem resolution script.
- An opening sequence that moves quickly to a statement of the problem.
- Lexical and syntactic choices by both participants that mutually construct the TA as an expert and the student as a novice.
- A turn taking system in which the TA may take a turn at any time and may allocate the next turn to the student and may fail to yield the floor to the student by means of overlapping speech.

However, this comparison of office hours has also highlighted interactional differences in office hour interactions in different disciplines that are apparent in the topics that are chosen and in the way that topics are sequenced. Discipline-specific modes of reasoning are instantiated in these office hours by the way that topics arise, persist, and change in conversation and by the semantic relations between adjacent topics. I have argued that a reflex of learning in these office hours is the socialization of the student to the topical organization imposed on the discourse by the TA.

For the past two decades, SLA research has focused on the acquisition of communicative competence. In doing so, we have greatly increased our understanding of second language use in context and, in particular, the acquisition of pragmatic competence in a second language. However, as I hope to have shown in this paper, much more understanding can be gained if we expand that focus to include co-construction and interactive practices in face-to-face communication – in short, interactional competence.

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Appendix A: Math office hour

1	S:	Well I know one question that I have with
2		math is a math problem is, this is on the
3		take-home quiz
4	TA:	Mhm
5	S:	And um I wanted to ask you about this too I
6		really didn't understand how you arrive at
7		finding how this function becomes continuous
8		at X equals three
9	TA:	Um do you know the definition, of continuity,
10	S:	I know I think I know e- um: ((gaze shifts from
11		pad to TA)) the picture of it cuz I remember him
12		drawing gra- the professor
13	TA:	Mhm
14	S:	drawing graphs on the board and to when a graph
15		is continuous and when it's not continuous but I
16		don't: know if I know it in like mathematical terms
17		just in graphs and pictures
18	TA:	Mhm um if uh uh to uh illustrate this problem
19	S:	Mhm
20	TA:	in picture we just uh uhm think the picture
21		should be the graph should be connected
22	S:	Ya through the the whole
23	TA:	Yeah
24	S:	all the way through
25	TA:	To be continuous uh we mean the graph is
26	S:	Mhm
27	TA:	connected okay and in terms of uh rigorous
28		mathematical definition it's
29	S:	Mhm
30	TA:	so there are three conditions okay so
31		uhm F to be continuous
32	S:	Mhm
33	TA:	at X equal to A if F is state to continuous
34		at X equal
35	S:	Mhm
36	TA:	first uhm F of A exist exists and second the
37		limit of F as X approach to A exists
38	S:	Okay.
39	TA:	And third the value in first
40		uh condition and second condition agree okay
41		if uh the function satisfy this three conditions
42	S:	Mhm
43	TA:	then it's uh say uhm continuous at X equal
44		to A
45	S:	Mhm
46	TA:	and so for this problem uh the first condition
47		holds
48	S:	Okay F of A exists I see
49	TA:	Mm because it's defined
50	S:	Mhm
51	TA:	Okay and so actually we only need uh this
52		okay for this problem
53	S:	Mhm
54	TA:	we need uh the left uh the left-hand side
55		limit is equal to the right-hand side limit.
56	S:	Okay I understand now.
57	TA:	Mhm, and we just uh we will check this
58		condition and when when that will satisfy this and

59		that will give us an equation
60	S:	Okay and that's what they
61	TA:	involving K
62	S:	equal over here
63	TA:	Yes.
64	S:	To make something equal to one another?
65	TA:	Yes
66	S:	Okay so they
67	TA:	because, ya the left- left-hand limit is uh
68		is uhm three minus K
69	S:	Mhm
70	TA:	times three plus K and the right-hand side limit
71		three K minus one.
72	S:	Okay
73	TA:	Mhm

Appendix B: Italian as a foreign language office hour

1	TA:	And do you have questions about what was the
2	S:	I
3	TA:	I won't say the corrections that I made since I didn't
4		make any corrections I simply indicated where your mistakes
5	S:	Mhm
6	TA:	were
7	S:	((Coughs)) let me see um I have a question
8	TA:	Mhm
9	S:	when you used the the uh the form *dare*
10	TA:	Mhm
11	S:	And why why can't we use here instead of *darle un*
12		*bacio baciar- le*
13	TA:	Okay okay uh *baciarle baciarle*
14	S:	Mhm
15	TA:	Okay you can use it but the problem is that you're
16		here you wouldn't you wouldn't use the right preposition
17	S:	Mhm
18	TA:	since *baciarle*
19	S:	Mhm
20	TA:	*le*
21	S:	*le le*
22	TA:	is a pronoun meaning, TO her
23	S:	to her xxx
24	TA:	If you say *baciarla* and and it would be an indirect
25		object pronoun if you say *baciarla*
26	S:	Mhm
27	TA:	would be correct since you would be using what, a
28		direct object pronoun.
29	S:	Okay
30	TA:	to kiss her.
31	S:	Yeah
32	TA:	Okay, so here *avevo bisogno di baciarla* and it
33		would be correct but the problem w- that I indicated
34		here I mean I indicated simply that it was a problem
35		because you were misspelling
36	S:	Right
37	TA:	the verb.
38	S:	Okay
39	TA:	I meaning using two C.
40	S:	Could you also say *ave-*
41	TA:	But, yes

42	S:	*che avevo bisogno di* uh uhm okay
43	TA:	Okay *che avevo bisogno di baciarle* I dunno *una guancia*
44	S:	*una guancia*
45	TA:	Yeah to give her a kiss on a on a cheek
46	S:	*una guancia guancia*
47	TA:	*guancia*
48	S:	Ah that's a new word.
49	TA:	Yeah you know I mean th- the th- the- then you
50		then you could use an indirect object pronoun *baciare*
51		*che cosa* what, *una guancia*
52	S:	Mhm
53	TA:	*ma di LEI*
54	S:	You could never say *le dare un bacio*
55	TA:	No no no no no no no no no no no
56	S:	Yeah I don't think so.
57	TA:	No no because I mean i- it all depends on the idiom
58		*avevo bisogno di* so you are to conjugate *avere*
59	S:	Mhm
60	TA:	but *bisogno di* you can't I mean this is this
61		is just a part which is not
62	S:	I understand now
63	TA:	which cannot be uh conjugated I don't know if you
64		understand what I mean so *Melissa sapeva che avevo*
65		*bisogno che avevo bisogno di darle un bacio*. Which
66		is, PERFECT. *Melissa sapeva che avevo bisogno di*
67		*BACIARLA* but then you will write *baciarla* with just
68		one C