EFL LEARNERS' INTERACTION IN ONLINE DISCUSSION TASKS: A CONVERSATION ANALYSIS PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

The aim of the presentation is twofold. First is introduced the concept of online discussion tasks. Second is presented the research methodology and selected results of an empirical study. The underlying research question was whether learners' communicative competence changed after using a series of online discussion tasks. The research was conducted as a case study in which 18 university learners in an EFL course at the CEFR A2 level participated in three online discussion tasks. Methods of data collection and analysis included pre- and post-tests, learner corpus compiled from the texts written by the students in two online discussions and its analysis, and a questionnaire survey. The results showed that learners' overall level of communicative competence in writing improved. Specifically, the syntactic complexity of learners' language produced at the end of the course increased and learners' perceived fluency in writing improved. These findings support the claim that learners' active participation in online discussion tasks develops their communicative competence. However, the results in the field of language accuracy remain inconclusive, especially in the area of morphological tense errors.

ROZVÍJENÍ KOMUNIKAČNÍ KOMPETENCE STUDENTŮ ANGLIČTINY JAKO CIZÍHO JAZYKA POMOCÍ ONLINE DISKUSNÍCH ÚKOLŮ: VYBRANÉ VÝSLEDKY

Tato prezentace má dva cíle. Nejprve bude představen koncept online diskusních úkolů. Poté bude prezentována metodologie souvisejícího empirického výzkumu a jeho vybrané výsledky. Základní výzkumnou otázkou bylo, zda se komunikační kompetence studentů změnila po jejich absolvování připravených diskusních úkolů. Výzkum byl proveden jako případová studie, ve které 18 vysokoškolských studentů v kurzu angličtiny na úrovni A2 dle SERRJ participovalo ve třech online diskusních úkolech. Metody sběru a analýzy dat zahrnovaly pre- a post-testy, žákovský korpus zkompilovaný z textů studentů ve dvou diskusních úkolech a jeho analýzu a dotazníkové šetření. Výsledky ukázaly, že celková komunikační kompetence studentů v psaní se zlepšila. Konkrétně se na konci kurzu zvýšila syntaktická složitost jazyka produkovaného studenty a také jejich vnímaná plynulost psaní. Tato zjištění podporují tvrzení, že aktivní zapojení studentů do online diskusních úkolů rozvíjí jejich komunikační kompetenci. Nicméně výsledky z oblasti jazykové přesnosti zůstávají neprůkazné, zvláště v oblasti morfologických chyb ve slovesných časech.

ONLINE-DISKUSSIONSFOREN ALS HILFSMITTEL ZUR FÖRDERUNG DER KOMMUNIKATIONSKOMPETENZ DER STUDENTEN DES FACHES ENGLISCH ALS FREMDSPRACHE: AUSGEWÄHLTE ERGEBNISSE

Diese Präsentation verfolgt zwei Ziele. Zum einen wird ein Konzept von Online-Diskussionsforen vorgestellt. Hernach werden die Methodologie einer zusammenhängenden Untersuchung und ausgewählte Ergebnisse daraus präsentiert. Die Untersuchung ging von der grundlegenden Frage aus, ob sich die kommunikative Kompetenz der Studenten nach deren Absolvierung der vorbereiteten Diskussionsaufgaben geändert hat. Die Untersuchung wurde als Fallstudie durchgeführt, worin 18 Hochschulstudenten in einem Englischkurs auf dem Niveau A2 nach dem europäischen Referenzrahmen drei Online-Diskussionsaufgaben unterzogen wurden. Die Methoden der Sammlung und Analyse der Daten umfassten prä- und Posttests, einen Schülerkorpus aus Texten, die in zwei Diskussionsaufgaben zusammen gestellt worden waren, deren Analyse und eine Fragenbogenerhebung. Die Ergebnisse zeigten, dass die gesamte kommunikative Kompetenz der Studenten sich im Schreiben verbessert hatte. Am Ende des Kurses hatten sich die syntaktische Komplexität der von den Studenten produzierten Sprache und auch deren wahrgenommene Flüssigkeit im Schreiben gesteigert. Diese Feststellung erhärtet die Behauptung, dass aktiv in Diskussionsaufgaben eingebundene Studenten ihre kommunikative Kompetenz verbessern. Nichtsdestotrotz sind die Ergebnisse im Hinblick auf die sprachliche Genauigkeit nicht beweiskräftig, besonders was die morphologischen Fehler bei der Bildung der Zeiten betrifft.

Introduction

This study builds on the data collected in a research project [1], whose aim was, in the context of an English as a foreign language (EFL) course at university, to investigate how the students' communicative competence in writing changed after implementing a set of online discussion tasks. In these tasks, the students were asked to communicate in online discussion forums. The study showed that the students' scores on standardized writing tests increased, their written production was syntactically more complex and their perceived fluency was higher at the end of the course. Although the results for accuracy were inconclusive [1, 2], it can be assumed that the students' participation in the discussion tasks led to improvement in writing in the above-mentioned areas, since the skill of writing was developed only through the online discussion tasks within the blended learning course.

A review focused on the research on the use of ICT in education as reflected in Czech educational journals in the years 2005-2011 [3] showed that there was only one study dealing with using ICT in teaching foreign languages. In addition, there were very few studies dealing with the actual processes of teaching and learning. By analyzing the actual interaction on the discussion forum, this study attempts to fill in this gap.

Apart from that, this study can be seen as the first step in extending the scope of the research project [1], whose original focus was solely on outcomes as regards individual students, by revealing the nature of online interaction by applying conversation analysis on one of the discussion threads. This study is structured as follows. First, the concept of online discussion tasks is briefly introduced and the task whose thread was analyzed is described in more detail. Second, the method of conversation analysis is outlined. Third, the results of conversation analysis are presented. Last, the results are compared and contrasted with relevant findings from other empirical as well as theoretical studies.

1   Online discussion tasks

Since the data for the present analysis came from a research project [1], the concept of online discussion tasks is briefly introduced. Online discussion tasks as tools for both teaching and research were designed in accord with post-communicative language teaching as a part of a blended learning language course whose target level was A2 according to the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) [4]. The structure of each task reflected the sequence of activities in accord with task-based language teaching. The main part of each task was realized by means of asynchronous discussion forum on Moodle. This phase is referred to as discussion in this study. Theoretical positions underlying the design of discussions included insights from pedagogy and psychology (cooperative learning, social constructivism), theories of second language acquisition (input, interaction and output hypotheses) and linguistics (structural and functional views of language). A more detailed account of these theories can be found elsewhere [1]. For the present study, it is important to note that the student activity involved interaction with peers on the forum, i.e. reading peers' messages and responding to them. In the light of the above-mentioned theories, this activity is seen as one through which students developed their communicative competence in writing.

The research sample comprised 18 students whose initial level was slightly lower than the fully developed CEFR A2 level [4]. These were distributed into groups of 5–6 students and in these groups they worked on three online discussion tasks. Each discussion lasted for 12–14 days. The topics for the tasks were derived from the topics appropriate for the CEFR A2 level [4]. Each discussion had an outcome and required mutual agreement among the group members. A separate discussion thread was dedicated to each student group.

The discussion whose one thread is analyzed in this study was situated at the end of the course. The topic of the discussion was the plans for the summer holiday. In the discussion, the students had to, first, talk about their plans for the summer, and second, to agree on a list of activities that the group members had in common. The participation was further specified by the teacher before the beginning of the discussion. The discussion started on Day 1 and by Day 6 everybody was expected to have shared their plans. Then the students could start seeking an agreement on the plans in common, for which the deadline was Day 12. On Day 13, the group leader was expected to email a list of plans in common to the teacher. After that, the students were assessed on the basis of their participation. One of the requirements was to read the forum regularly and to contribute to the discussion at least three times per week. What preceded and followed this phase and how exactly the students were assessed is elaborated in more detail elsewhere [1]. The discussion took place in May 2011.

Having introduced the concept of online discussion tasks as well as the target group, the topic and the prescribed temporal structure of a discussion from which the data for analysis originated, attention can now be paid to conversation analysis, i.e. the method by which a discussion thread was analyzed.

2   Conversation analysis

Conversation analysis builds on sociological efforts to understand social order and, more specifically, on ethnomethodology, whose aim is to investigate the means through which members of communities maintain sense [5, for more details on the foundations of conversation analysis, see 6 pp 17–39, 7 pp 1–13]. It follows that the aim of conversation analysis is to investigate conversation, or talk in action, through developing an emic, rather than an ethic, perspective on the phenomena under investigation [6 p. 21, 7 pp 12–13]. This is achieved by studying solely "human actions which are manifested through talk" [7 p. 13] and presuming that talk in interaction has its internal systematic structure. The relation of

interpretations to context is twofold: utterances are understood by means of referring to the sequence of previous utterances, and at the same time every utterance shapes and renews the context, since it becomes its part. In the ethnomethodological tradition of conversation analysis, other sources of contextual data than the talk itself, such as participants' cultures, biographies, physical context etc., are not included in the analysis unless the participants refer to these sources in their interaction [6 p. 22, 7 pp 15–16, 42–46]. It follows that conversation analysis is bottom-up and data-driven. The data should not be approached with an a priori theory [5, 7 p. 15]. The core areas of interest in conversation analysis are adjacency pairs, preference organization, turn taking and repair [5 p. 130, 7 pp 17–38].

The steps in doing conversation analysis can be summarized as follows. The first phase is described as "unmotivated looking" [7 p. 38], in which researchers should be open to discovering patterns or phenomena when going through the interaction. Next, regularities and patterns in the data are established in relation to the occurrences of the phenomena, whose prototypical examples are analyzed "using different kinds of text-internal, convergent evidence to establish the credibility of an analysis" [6 p. 48]. This analysis, as well as analysis of deviating examples, should lead to establishing an underlying organization of action [5, 7 pp 38–42].

A search for studies related to applying conversation analysis on discussion forums on Web of Science[1] resulted in 14 articles, whose data sources were predominantly online discussions related to advising and providing support online. One such study [8] as well as in other studies, used conversation analysis in order to reveal how threads on discussion forums are organized and sequenced, taking one posting as a turn. Nevertheless, none of the 14 articles deals specifically with conversation analysis in foreign language learning and teaching.

3   Results

As mentioned above, one discussion thread produced by a group of five university students (Anna, Jarmila, Michaela, Nina and Simona[2]) from the research project [1] was analyzed. This thread comprised 42 postings and one initial posting produced by the teacher in the course, which was numbered 0 and excluded from the analysis. The students in this thread produced altogether 12,019 characters in 2,833 words. The hierarchical organization of the thread can be seen in table 1, whose rows represent individual postings. The first column shows the numbers of the postings and the vertical position of the numbers indicates the hierarchical positions of the postings in the discussion thread. For example, posting 7 is subordinate to posting 6 and posting 8 is subordinate to posting 2. The second column carries the names of the authors, and the last column shows the day[3] on which the posting was added to the forum.

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[1] Topic="conversation analysis" and (online or asynchronous or discussion) and forum

[2] These students gave an informed consent as regards their participation in the research project and publishing the results. For the sake of their privacy, their names have been changed as well as the places that they referred to in their postings. Otherwise, the exctracts from the discussion thread are presented here intact, including language mistakes.

[3] Due to the asynchronous nature of the communication, the times of individual contributions were not included.

Tab. 1: *The hierarchical structure of the discussion thread*

Posting number and position	Author	Day
0	Teacher	1
1	Anna	1
2	Nina	1
3	Michaela	2
4	Nina	2
5	Anna	2
6	Nina	3
7	Anna	4
8	Jarmila	5
9	Nina	6
10	Jarmila	9
11	Anna	10
12	Michaela	2
13	Anna	2
14	Jarmila	5
15	Anna	9
16	Jarmila	9
17	Anna	10
18	Simona	6
19	Michaela	2
20	Anna	2
21	Nina	3
22	Michaela	4
23	Anna	5
24	Michaela	8
25	Simona	12
26	Anna	5
27	Nina	6
28	Simona	6
29	Anna	9
30	Simona	12
31	Jarmila	5
32	Anna	9
33	Jarmila	10
34	Anna	10
35	Simona	5
36	Anna	9
37	Michaela	8
38	Anna	9
39	Nina	9
40	Jarmila	10
41	Simona	12
42	Nina	13

The postings as numbered in table 1 were subject to conversation analysis, whose aim was to investigate whether the interaction on the forum had some underlying organization, and if yes, to describe this organization. Below are presented the results, which are structured under the following phenomena: public messages and private exchanges, unanswered messages and redundant content, affect and directives, and task orientation. The labels indicate that the presentation of results is organized in the light of actions which the students did. Each section explains the mechanisms underlying the interaction and includes relevant examples.

3.1　Public messages and private exchanges

A distinct feature of all messages was the greeting, from which two types of messages were identified. First, messages addressed to all group members ("public messages") always started with "*Hi girls*" or "*Hello everybody*". The former greeting, which was the most common one, reveals that the group members saw themselves as young females. Second, messages addressing a particular participant ("private messages")[4] always started with "*Hi*" and a name, almost exclusively in a diminutive form. For example, participants addressed Michaela by starting their messages with "*Hi Míša*".

The subthreads of the discussion, starting with postings 1, 19, 26, 31, 35 and 37, see table 1, always related to the whole group and the "public" greetings reflected this. Messages marked by "Hi" and a name were always subordinate to the addressee's posting. When an addressee was asked a question in such a "private" posting, only the addressee answered, nobody else placed their posting directly in response to such a question. On the other hand, if no question was asked in a "private" posting, anybody could reply.

The following postings illustrate a transition from "public" to "private" exchanges. In posting 2 addressed to everybody, Nina introduced her holiday plans and said, apart from other things, that she was going on a last-minute holiday with her sister. Michaela replied to the posting and asked Nina a question. In posting 4 Nina replied.

> Posting 3 by Michaela
> *Hi Ninuška,*
> *Do you have already an idea where you will go with your sister on last minute?* […] *I want to visit some nice places too, so please inspire me ;-)* […]
>
> Posting 4 by Nina
> *Hi Míša,*
> *I'm going to my holiday with my sister. We will choose destination at the last time because it's cheaper. But I would to go to Turkey because I have never been to Turkey. I traveled only Spain's islands for example Mallorca.* […]

Fig. 1:　An example of a private exchange

In posting 3, Michaela asked Nina a question, and therefore only Nina replied. An analogous situation occurred in exchanges 8–9, 9–10, 12–13, 14–15, 16–17, 28–29 and 32–33. This rule was broken once in exchange 20–(21)–22, which can be found in figure 2.

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[4] Although such postings are called "private" in this study, every member of the group could read them.

> Posting 20 by Anna:
> *Hi Míša,*
> *why you won't go to abroad this summer? But I think, that you have very interesting plans for your holiday. You are really sporty and active girl :-)* […]
>
> Posting 21 by Nina:
> *Hi Míša and Anička,*
> *Anička had a good question for Míša. Why you won't go to abroad this summer??? So can I ask.*
> *Bye Nina*
>
> Posting 22 by Michaela:
> *Hello Anička :-)*
> *I am going to a kemp with my friends. and it is only big action in my holyday, cause I will finish my studium at university. […]*

Fig. 2: *A violation of a private exchange*

In posting 20, Anna asked Michaela why she would not go abroad that summer. Therefore, it was Michaela who was supposed to answer. Instead, Nina reacted by showing her interest in knowing the answer. It seems that Nina was aware of her breaking into Anna and Michaela's private exchange, which is marked by the greeting "*Hi Míša and Anička*". This is the only greeting comprising two proper names. In posting 22, which is subordinate to posting 21 (not 20), Michaela answers the question. However, in this posting she greets only Anna, not Nina. This deviation and Michaela's reaction to the deviation exemplify the underlying mechanism described above: if a private message includes a question for the addressee, only the addressee is expected to answer.

3.2 Unanswered messages and redundant content

From the elaboration above it may follow that private questions and answers comprised adjacency pairs and that each question was answered. However, there were two private postings (no. 11 and 36) with questions which were left unanswered.

The mechanism related to private question-and-answer exchanges can explain the missing answer to posting 11. A private conversation between Jarmila and Nina, i.e. exchanges (2)–8–9–10, was interrupted by Anna, who asked Nina a question, but her posting was unanswered.

Second, Anna's posting 36 was unanswered. She asked Simona about the temporary job that Simona was going to do during the summer holiday. It should be pointed out that Anna asked this question four days after Simona had added posting 35, which is a long delay. The same delay occurred in exchange 14–15, but then Jarmila reacted, whereas in exchange 35–36 Simona did not. What was the reason for this?

First, Simona's posting 35 is special in that she joined the discussion by adding this posting on day 5, by which the discussion had been running for more than 4 days and Anna, Nina and Michaela had contributed to it quite extensively (see table 1). Anna was the only person who reacted to Simona's initial posting, however, with a long delay. The delay can be explained as the group's reaction to Simona's late joining the discussion, for which she did not apologize. This is in contrast with posting 31, in which Jarmila joined the discussion on the same day as Simona. Nevertheless, Jarmila introduced her posting by saying "*I am sorry that I am write so late but I haven't much free time :-(*". Similarly, in posting 6, Anna said that she was going away for several days and could not contribute to the discussion. Both postings 31 and 6, in

which the participants apologized for their not being able to contribute to the discussion, were accepted by others by responding to the postings. This may suggest that the participants had created an internal rule for pacing the discussion. The data show that a violation of this rule required an apology, which Simona had not provided in posting 35. The group might have reacted to this by ignoring her posting until day 9. Simona then did not respond to Anna's question in posting 36, perhaps because she did not find it relevant with such a delay.

Second, Simona's activity seems slightly different from the other members' activity as regards relevance. For example, in posting 28 addressed to Anna, Simona repeated her summer plans (which she had articulated in more detail the day before in posting 35) and finished her posting by asking "*And you?*". Anna replied: "*Hi Simonka, I wrote about my plans for this holiday in last post :-) [...]*" and she summarized her plans again. Clearly, Anna interpreted Simona's posting and question as redundant. Similarly, in her public posting 41 Simona summarized the holiday plans of the whole group. She was the last one to do so and she inserted her posting under the four summaries by Jarmila, Nina, Anna and Michaela. In fact, she only paraphrased what the girls had mentioned. In the final posting, which is inserted as a reply to Simona, Nina says to Anna that the discussion is over (see section 3.4 for more details). Obviously, Nina ignored what Simona had written.

The hierarchical structure of the forum and the dates of the messages give evidence that all participants had been involved in exchanges within the forum effectively except Simona. The analysis above indicates that she contributed to the running discussion relatively late in contrast to other participants, for which she had not apologized. Furthermore, some of her messages were redundant, and in turn, she had not answered a question in posting 29 asked by Anna. An interpretation for this can be that some of Simona's messages were not accepted by others due to their irrelevance and Simona's late activity, although nobody explicitly referred to the latter.

3.3 Directives and affect

Apart from mere asking and answering questions, the participants used the forum to convey a set of more complex actions which can be classified as suggestions, recommendations and requests. An example of a suggestion can be found in posting 5, in which Anna addresses Nina:

> Posting 5 by Anna:
> [...] *I have the idea for your trip in Moravia :-) I was in Pálava, this is a very nice place, there is a big dam, which name is Novomlýnská. There are many wine field and cellar where have very good wine :-))) [...]*

Fig. 3: *An example of a suggestion*

The extract in figure 3 includes two emoticons, one of which is placed just after a suggesting a trip for Nina, probably to downgrade the directive to a less pressing act. Similar examples were found in postings 3, 5 and 29: in these postings, the emoticons seemed to mitigate the directives (suggestions and requests). Emoticons also accompanied the utterance "*I'm looking forward for your plans at summer. :-)*" in posting 1, which can be interpreted as a directive eliciting other members' plans.

In contrast to mitigating the content of directives, emoticons were also used to emphasize the content of some utterances. For example, in posting 34 Anna reacted to Jarmila's message stating that her sister-in-law was going to have a baby:

> Posting 34 by Anna:
> [..] *Sonja will have a baby? It's wonderful!!! :-) Gongratulation:-)*
> *You will have very busy holiday, but I hope, that you find a few minutes for*
> *your relax :-)*
> *have a nice weekend, Anča :-)*

Fig. 4: *An example of expressing emotions through emoticons*

Figure 5 clearly shows that emoticons complemented the words like "wonderful" and "congratulation". Negative emotions were expressed, for example, in posting 19, in which Michaela expressed her difficulty with the topic of summer holidays. Similar uses of emoticons for expressing positive and negative emotions were identified in postings 6, 19, 26 and 38, and in a number of postings (similarly to posting 34 in figure 4) emoticons complemented the final part of a posting. In addition to that, flattering and wishing good luck were always accompanied by emoticons, e.g. posting 20 in figure 2 or "*I'm your big fan, so I'll thinking of you, you will be the best!!!! :-)*".

3.4   Task orientation

Some types of utterances and exchanges, e.g. directives or private question-and-answer exchanges, helped the participants keep the discussion going. This discussion resembles very relaxed social talk. Nevertheless, the end of the discussion had a slightly different character. The final chain started in posting 37 and was reinforced in posting 38:

> Posting 37 by Michaela:
> *Hi girls,*
> *we should try to find what we have common for holiday. Do you have any ideas? Any*
> *activites? For example sunbuthing or some beautiful trip in Czech republic?*
> *Thx for reply.! :-)*
>
> Posting 38 by Anna:
> *Hi Míša,*
> *yes, I think, that sunbathing and trips in CZ are activities, which we have in common*
> *:-) Super!*
> *And I think, that other plans which we have in common are: spend time with our*
> *family and with our friends :-)* […]

Fig. 5: *Re-orientation of the discussion*

In posting 37, Michaela oriented the discussion towards a synthesis of plans that they had in common, which was in accord with the instructions. Michaela made her message more pressing by adding "*Thx for reply!*", which is in fact a directive. Similarly to other directives, she mitigated it by using an emoticon. This ending is also quite unusual, since the majority of other postings finished with a question or a phrase like "*Bye*" or "*Have a nice day*". The re-orientation of the discussion flow was confirmed by Anna in posting 38, in which she first summarized what Michaela had stated, and next, she reinforced it by adding a smiley and saying "*Super!*". In addition to that, she added some new ideas. A similar approach was taken by Nina in posting 29. Nina added some more ideas, and also stated what she had in common with other members of the team (not necessarily the whole group). In posting 30, Jarmila added some information about herself, so that the team members had more plans in common. This demonstrates the team members' adherence to the task. In the end, Simona joined the

conversation by generalizing the outcomes suggested in the previous three postings. The discussion is closed by Nina, who says:

> Posting 42 by Nina:
>
> *Hi Anča*
>
> *I'm thinking we agree with our things which we have in common. So you can write as our leader to teacher.*
>
> *Have a nice holiday :-) […]*

Fig. 6:   The concluding message

It is striking that Nina placed her posting as subordinate to Simona's one, but addresses Anna (see section 3.2 for an explanation). Another striking feature of posting 42 is that it is the only reference to Anna as a group leader, which confirms the task orientation of this part of the discussion rather than social talk. Last, Nina ended the discussion by wishing a nice holiday, which is an unusual ending in the thread.

Conclusion

The mechanisms underlying the students' interaction on the forum can be contrasted and compared to findings from other theoretical and empirical studies. First, the analysis outcomes related to "public" and "private" addressing and the nature of private question-and-answer exchanges are to some extent compatible with [9], in which advanced university EFL learners' interaction on a forum was analyzed. However, in [9] a different platform was used and the learners used not only greetings but also titles of the messages and the messages themselves to address others, thus setting the links within adjacency pairs. More generally, multiple conversations can be found in online interaction and participants seem to use the tools available (e.g. greetings, grammar) in order to make the interaction possible [10 pp 24–28]. The use of adjacency pairs to maintain the asynchronous discussion going have been reported in other studies as well [8, 9], yet in each study the concrete realization seems to be shaped, apart from other factors, by the topic and purpose of the discussion. Next, the way in which the group treated Simona's deviant behaviour seems to underline the implicit requirements for participation which had emerged during the (previous) interaction within the group. This is absolutely compatible with the findings reported in [8].

As far as the role of emoticons is concerned, conversation analysis revealed that apart from mere expressing emotions, emoticons were used for downgrading the utterances (in this thread directives). This is in line with [10 pp 23–24]. In contrast to that, it has been reported that emoticons can be used on their own right, yet this happens mainly in synchronous online communication [11]. Some authors report that it is mainly girls and women that tend to use more emoticons [10 p. 24, 11 pp 251–252], which the utterances produced by five young females in this study seem to support. In addition to that, from the extracts cited in this study it is evident that the participants in some instances used not only emoticons, but they also abbreviated words, avoided punctuation and capitalization, which can be explained in the light of economy of expression on online forums [10 pp 24–25].

Interestingly, although repair is one of the core areas of investigation in conversation analysis [7], no repairs or misunderstandings were found in the online discussion. This can be explained in two ways. First, the asynchronous nature of discussion forums makes it possible for the participants to read through their messages before submitting, during which inaccuracies can be eliminated. Second, from some of the findings, especially the creative use of greetings and emoticons, the participants handled the linguistic and typographic tools in a

playful way, which is another feature of online communication [11 p. 260]. Along with increased perceived fluency at the end of the course, this may clarify why the research results in the learners' accuracy were inconclusive [1, 2] – it seems that the learners focused on the effectiveness rather than accuracy when communicating.

It should be pointed out that the findings in this study have their limitations, most of which are inherent in conversation analysis. Since the analysis did not take into account any other contextual data than the discussion itself, the study did not incorporate learner data available from the project or the fact that the learners' mother tongue was Czech. The outcomes of the analysis built predominantly on the talk in action per se. The comparison of other data with the results (e.g. comparing changes in Simona's communicative competence with others') is the next step, which, due to space constraints, could not be included in this study.

Second, only one discussion thread was analyzed, which makes it impossible to generalize the results. The relation of the findings to the body of existing empirical and theoretical research may suggest that the conversation analysis did not reveal anything new. However, conversation analysis offered a microperspective on the nature of interaction in one specific learning group and uncovered interesting mechanisms and regularities, such as addressing others by diminutive forms of their names, which seem to be unique to this particular group. Since the learners had been working in this group for the whole semester, it seems that they formed their own way of working together, which may not have been uncovered by using quantitative methods on a larger sample.

This study documented that the participants developed specific ways of using language and the forum, which can be seen as a call for another perspective on the data. Rather than studying individual students' learning gains and adopting cognitive theories in second language acquisition [1, 2], further investigation of interaction from a sociocultural perspective [12] can bring other interesting insights. Thus this analysis can be seen as the first step in studying the ways in which the actual interaction among the participants functioned.

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