Conversation Strategies during an Online Immersion Experience

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This paper investigates the initial segment of a Talk Abroad conversation, an online platform where a non-native speaker can meet a native speaker and talk to him or her for 30 minutes. A Talk Abroad conversation is a part of a final grade in German 1102, the second semester of German, at a Midwestern state university. The analysis focuses on various strategies a language learner uses to manage a conversation with a native speaker. These strategies can be grouped into three categories: 1) the word 'okay', 2) private verbal thinking, and 3) code switching. It also focuses on the reaction of the native speaker to code-switching and his rephrasing of certain sentences. Findings show that the native speaker doesn't correct the non-native speaker unless he explicitly asks for help and that private verbal thinking is a very important set of cognitive skills that can allow language learners to stay focused on task.

1.   Introduction

The main purpose of this study is to show which strategies a non-native speaker (NNS), a L2 learner, uses to interact with a native speaker (NS) and to overcome conversation challenges in order to accomplish a graded assignment. The field of Conversation Analysis (CA) for Second Language Acquisition (SLA) is relatively new and it has evolved from the development of modern technology. It can explain many interesting phenomena that SLA has not been able to, such as situated learning and doing learning. There is a lot of research conducted in CA in L1 and some definitions are coined based on such research, but in order to gain a better insight into interactional competence of L2 speakers there is a need for a larger data corpus in various languages and in different natural situations.

Many SLA researchers diminish the importance of CA, but CA is the only method that can help researchers better understand negotiation of meaning and co-constructed learning. For example, Brower (2003) examines word search sequences in interaction between Danish and Dutch speakers of Danish. The main purpose of this study is to prove whether word search sequences provide opportunities for language learning. The findings show that the non-native speaker must be explicit in interaction with the native speaker to make it clear that he wants his interlocutor to participate in the word search. Although explicit word questions may have the form of a question, they do not

regularly get an answer from another speaker. The non-native speaker needs to provide enough clues to the native speaker for him/her to know which information is sought.

Following Kasper (2004), I examine the initial segment of a Talk Abroad conversation, an online platform where a non-native speaker met a native speaker and talked to him for 15 minutes. A Talk Abroad conversation is a part of a final grade in the second semester of German at a Midwestern state university. The analysis focuses on various strategies the language learner uses to manage his conversation with the native speaker. These strategies can be grouped into three categories: 1) the word 'okay', 2) L1 private verbal thinking, and 3) code switching. I also examine the reaction of the native speaker to code-switching and his rephrasing of certain sentences. Findings show that the native speaker doesn't correct the non-native speaker unless he explicitly asks for help and that private verbal thinking is a very important set of cognitive skills that allows language learners to stay focused on task.

The uses of word 'okay' have been primarily investigated in the English language. Thus, we know that the word 'okay' appears as: a) a free-standing/non-continuative response token, used and relied on by participants to display numerous orientations to what was taken to be meaningful in prior talk; b) a predominant resource for initiating closure of some prior talk and action; and c) a projection device revealing recurrent transitional movements across a variety of 'okay' placements (Beach, 1995, p. 155). On the other hand, there is not enough evidence that the word 'okay' has the same functions in other languages and that L2 speakers use this word appropriately. Therefore, this study should provide exemplary interactional segments of how allegedly chaotic conversations between NS and NNS are meaningfully organized for participants, even though not always correct.

L1 private verbal thinking, another strategy that lower level L2 speakers employ in their interactions with NS, plays a crucial role in the case of L2 speakers engaged in problem-solving, and it should be recognized in the process of learning. It actually only refers to such instances in which a language learner uses her/his native language (L1) to restructure her/his thoughts while speaking to a native speaker of her/his second language (L2), e.g., 'let's see' or 'let me think'. It is different than previously mentioned word 'okay' due to its different function. The word 'okay' usually refers to an utterance initiated by another speaker as a sign of understanding and listening, whereas private verbal thinking is used as a filler prior to a new turn in conversation so that interlocutor gets more time to self-regulate her/his thoughts before talking. However, not many studies focus on this strategy, especially not on interaction between German and English speakers. One of a few studies was conducted by Centeno-Cortes and Jimenez Jimenez (2004). This study analyzes private verbal thinking during problem-solving activities carried out in a second language and it outlines the importance of the L1 in an L2 language classroom. Participants in this study are 18 individuals who were randomly chosen and divided into three groups: 6 native speakers of Spanish, 6 American advanced speakers of Spanish as a second language, and 6 American students of Spanish from an intermediate conversation class. The findings of this study show that a higher language proficiency level provides the speaker with an extra set of cognitive strategies in the second language that can be employed to solve a challenging problem in the L2.

Code-switching, according to Kasper (2004), is "one device by which the novice requests a target language action format from the L2 expert" (p. 551). Code-switching functions as an explicit introduction into a metalingual sequence in which the native speaker acts as an expert. In this paper, I will compare Kasper's findings with mine.

The most recent studies in the field of CA-for-SLA show a variety of natural situations in which L2 learners employ their strategies, such as Eskildsen et al. (2017). This study shows how Anna, a Canadian English- and French-speaker, developed certain strategies while studying Icelandic

for 3 years through various interactions with local service personnel and other local people. This study also shows how such situations can be created even if language learners don't spend time in the target country. In the modern world, these situations are usually created in online chatrooms, which, according to Jenks (2010), do not entail pre-determined, fixed standards, but which support incidental, interactional and multidirectional language learning.

Another way to foster natural or semi-natural conversations between native and non-native speakers would be through audio- and video-platforms, such as TalkAbroad. This platform can provide short and affordable immersion experiences to students who are unable to leave their home country. It is also good for all students who are afraid of talking in front of their classmates, and even more important for students who want to learn new words, to learn more about their interlocutors and their culture. Students can get a feeling of an actual conversation and engaging in a real world setting with a native speaker. The data used for this study is elicited from one TalkAbroad conversation.

TalkAbroad

At the end of semester, all students in German 1102 at a large Midwestern state university need to make an appointment individually or in a self-selected pair with a native speaker of German on TalkAbroad. Native speakers are mostly students in Germany and fluent German-English bilingual speakers. All students receive task-based instructions prior to their conversation with a native speaker. They need to talk about their personal interests, college, spare time, trips, favorite music and movies. The most important advantage of this platform is that students can gain much more than just getting and giving a response. The benefits of online immersion experience are two-fold: cultural and linguistic. Non-native speakers can develop their interactional competence and get to know how a real conversation with native speakers looks like. They need to talk 8- to 10-minutes in German as much as possible, but "no German-only policy" is enforced. At the same time, non-native speakers can improve their fluency and accuracy, and develop their morphosyntax, pragmatics, or discourse ability. All conversations are audio-recorded, and for the purpose of this study the participants also gave consent.

2.   Study

This study aims to investigate what the word 'okay' does in an interaction between a NS and NNS, when a NNS uses L1 private verbal thinking, how a co-participant understands L1 private verbal thinking, whether L1 private verbal thinking initiates repair, when a NNS initiates code-switching, and how he returns to L2.

2.1.   Participants

There are only two participants in this study. The first participant in this study is one male non-native speaker (L) who has studied German for 2 semesters at a large Midwestern state university and whose native language is American English. He learned Spanish in his high school, but decided to learn German because a foreign language is one of the general education requirements, and because his grandfather came from Germany to the U.S. He showed a high level of preparation in each class and his overall performance in German 1102 was astonishing. The German language learner could stay on task during partner and group activities, and he used German almost exclusively. The second participant is a male German native speaker (T) who works at TalkAbroad as a trained expert. He just graduated from University in Vienna, Austria, and lives in Hannover, Germany. The participants met for the first time in December 2017 and talked for 15 minutes. For

the purpose of this study, I will provide the transcribed data of the first 5-minute-long conversation sequence. Below you can find a prompt that they had in front of them while speaking to each other.

2.2.   Prompt

The prompt was provided to both interlocutors in the German language, which you can find on the left side, and parallel to the original version you can find the translation of the same questions.

Table 1. Instructions used during TalkAbroad Conversation

Wie heißt die Person?	What is the person's name?
Woher kommt die Person?	Where does the person come from?
Wo wohnt die Person?	Where does the person live?
Studiert die Person? Oder arbeitet er/sie?	Does the person study? Does he/she work?
Was ist sein/ihr Lieblingsfilm?	What is his/her favorite movie?
Was macht er/sie in seiner/ihrer Freizeit?	What does he/she do in his/her spare time?
Sprechen Sie über sich:	Talk about yourself:
Ihr Name?	Your name?
Woher kommen Sie?	Where are you from?
Wo wohnen Sie?	Where do you live?
Wie ist die Stadt? Wie ist Ihre Heimatstadt?	How about the city? How about your hometown?
Was machen Sie in Ihrer Freizeit?	What do you do in your spare time?
Was ist Ihr Lieblingsfilm?	What is your favorite movie?
Sprechen Sie mindestens 8-10 Minuten lang. Sie können aber auch bis 30 Minuten lang sprechen.	Talk at least 8-10 minutes. You can also talk up to 30 minutes.

2.3.   Data

The excerpt I examine (Excerpt I) is from the beginning of the first TalkAbroad conversation between L, a native speaker of American English, and T, a native speaker of German. This conversation is included here in its intact sequence.

EXCERPT 1
Introduction
L=L1 English
T= L1 German

```
001 T: Hallo, L!
       Hi, L!
002 L: Hallo, T!
       Hi, T!
003 T: Wie geht es dir?
       How are you doing?
004 L: Uh:m...Gut. Ich bin ein bisschen betont, weil ich viele Schularbeite
       habe.
       Uh:m...Well. I am a little bit stressed because I have a lot of school
       work.
005 T: Auuuu.Das ist jetzt das Finale vom Semester.
       Ouch. It is the end of the semester now.
006 L: Ja, uh:m. Ich habe drei (0.2) Essay und (0.2) zwei Exams in die
       nächste Woche.
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```
          Yes, uh:m. I have three (0.2) essay and (0.2) two exams in the
          next week.
007 T: Und ein Essay...hat [wie
          And one essay...has [how
008                            [uh:m (0.2)
                               [uh:m (0.2)
009 T: Wie viele Seiten musst du schreiben?
          How many pages do you have to write?
010 L: hhhhhh (0.2) I think 5-6 Seiten
          hhhhhh (o.2) I think 5-6 pages
011 T: [  ] Du musst sehr fokussiert schreiben. Das ist kompliziert.
          [  ] You have to stay focused while writing. That is complicated.
012 L: Okay. Uh:m: (0.2) let's see (0.2) Woher kommst du?
          Okay. Uh:m: (0.2) let's see (0.2) Where are you from?
013 T: Uh:m: (0.2) Ich komme aus Hannover.
          Uh:m: (0.2) I am from Hannover.
014 T: Hannover (0.2) das ist in Norddeutschland ...
          Hannover (0.2) it is in North Germany.
015 L: Okay. Okay. Und wo wohnst du jetzt?
          Okay. Okay. And where do you live now?
016 T: Ja, genau. Jetzt wohne ich in Hannover.
          Yes, right. I live in Hannover.
017 L: Okay. Und bist du ein Student?
          Okay. And are you a student?
018 T: Nein, ich studiere nicht mehr. Ich habe studiert in Österreich.
          No, I don't study anymore. I studied in Austria.
019 T: In Wien habe ich studiert.
          I studied in Vienna.
020 L: Let's see.
          Let's see.
021 T: Und zwar habe ich studiert internationale Entwicklung...heißt das.
          And I studied international development...it's called.
022 L: Okay.
          Okay.
023 T: In den USA wäre das development studies.
          In the U.S.A. it would be development studies.
024 L: Okay.
          Okay.
025 T: So ein Mix aus Soziologie, Ökonomie und Politik und so gemixt.
          Such a mixture of sociology, economy and politics.
026 T: Und was studierst du?
          And what do you study?
027 L: Ich studiere Kriminologie aber ich nehme viele
          I study criminology but I take many
028 L: (0.2) science (0.2) science courses, weil ich ein Ärzt werde.
          (0.2) science (0.2) science courses because I want to be a doctor.
029 T: Genau.
          Right.
030 L: Uh:m
          Uh:m
031 T: Das heißt Kriminologie wie CSI.
          That means criminology like CSI.
032 L: Ja, ich mag Soziologie und society. Es ist nicht Medizin, [aber...
          Yes, I like sociology and society. It is not medicine, [but…
033 T:                                          [Also, transziplinär. Psychologie,
                                                 [Well, interdisciplinary.Psychology,
034 T: Soziologie, Geschichte. Das ist auch cool.
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          Sociology, history. That is cool too.
035 T: Und wie lange studierst du Kriminologie?
          And how long have you been studying criminology?
036 T: Wie lange geht das?
          How long do you have to study?
037 L: Es ist 8 Semester. Ich habe ein Semester (0.2) left.
          It is 8 semesters. I have one semester (0.2) left.
038 T: Ein Semester studierst du jetzt noch und dann fertig.
          One more semester and then you are done.
039 L: Fertig. Und dann gehe ich zum Schule Medizin.
          Done. And then I will go to the medical school.
040 T: Okay. Das ist eine interessante Kombination.
          Okay. That is an interesting combination.
041 T: Medizin und Kriminologie...das ist echt CSI.
          Medicine and criminology...that is really CSI.
042 L: Ich ein Ärzt werde, aber ich nicht mag Wissenschaft.
          I want to be a doctor, but I don't like science.
043 T: Eher so pragmatisch, praktisch.
           Rather so pragmatic, practical.
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This 5-minute-long sequence shows that L is very engaged in the conversation and answers all questions T asks him. T starts the conversation with a personal question and L is able to answer it, even though he uses the wrong word 'betont' (line 4), which in this case is a wrong translation of the English word stressed. The word 'betont' in the German language can only be used when a person talks about stressed words and syllables, not about his/her own emotional status. The next question (line 7) L presumably understands and interrupts T (line 8), but the interlocutor is aware that the NS is not able to understand the questions just by hearing one word. T rephrases his question (line 9) and L provides an appropriate answer (line 10). After that, L dominates the conversation by asking questions from the prompt (line 12, 15 and 17). T returns to asking questions in line 26. The initial turn-taking in asking questions and providing answers is summarized in Table 2.

Table 2. Initial Turn-Taking in Asking Questions

Turn	**Participant**	**Action**	**Line**
T1	T	Question	3, 7, 26, 35, 36
T2	L	Answer	4, 8, 10, 27, 28, 37
T3	L	Question	12, 15, 17
T4	T	Answer	13, 14, 16, 18, 19

During the whole conversation, L uses certain strategies to show that he listens to his co-participant even when he doesn't know how to answer correctly as we can see in line 4. The strategies that L uses can be grouped into the following categories: 1) okay, 2) L1 private verbal thinking, and 3) code-switching. In what follows, I examine smaller segments of this large excerpt based on the three different categories.

Okay.
EXCERPT 1A
```
014 T: Hannover (0.2) das ist in Norddeutschland ...
         Hannover (0.2) it is in North Germany.
015 L: Okay. Okay. Und wo wohnst du jetzt?
         Okay. Okay. And where do you live now?
016 T: Ja, genau. Jetzt wohne ich in Hannover.
         Yes, right. I live in Hannover.
017 L: Okay. Und bist du ein Student?
         Okay. And are you a student?
```

In this segment, L repeats the word 'okay' twice in line 15. We could say that he uses the first word to show his understanding and the second word to move directly to the next question he feels pressured to ask. In line 17, L uses the word 'okay' only once which here has a dual function: to facilitate closing of the previous action, and by so doing, to make possible the projection of and thus movement toward accomplishing some forthcoming and relevant activities (Beach, 1995, p. 139). In the same vein, L doesn't let T ask him the same question or reciprocate the turn because he feels obliged to finish the assignment. He doesn't follow the patterns of a natural conversation and thus seems to be circumventing turn transition by compressing the space and not enjoying the conversation with the NS. L could have also asked T more questions about the city, since he has never been to Germany.

L1 private verbal thinking.
EXCERPT 1B

```
019 T: In Wien habe ich studiert.
         I studied in Vienna.
020 L: Let's see.
         Let's see.
021 T: Und zwar habe ich studiert internationale Entwicklung...heißt das.
         And I studied international development...it's called.
022 L: Okay.
         Okay.
023 T: In den USA wäre das development studies.
         In the U.S.A. it would be development studies.
024 L: Okay.
         Okay.
```

In this segment, L uses again the cue marker 'let's see', but in line 20 his response seems to be awkward because it does not fit into the conversation. However, T continues talking and does not seem to pay attention L's faux pas. L, on the other hand, tries to prepare his next question which he does not ask in the initial segment of their conversation. Even though L shows his understanding in lines 22 and 24, it is remarkable that his answers are not extensive or profound and thus we might question his understanding to some degree, since he does not ask any follow-up questions.

'Okay' in combination with private verbal thinking.
It is remarkable that the word 'okay' can also precede private verbal thinking as shown in the following example.

EXCERPT 1C

```
011 T: [   ] Du musst sehr fokussiert schreiben. Das ist kompliziert.
       [   ] You have to stay focused while writing. That is complicated.
012 L: Okay. Uh:m: (0.2) let's see (0.2) Woher kommst du?
       Okay. Uh:m: (0.2) let's see (0.2) Where are you from?
013 T: Uh:m: (0.2) Ich komme aus Hannover.
       Uh:m: (0.2) I am from Hannover.
```

As we can see here, L is eager to start eliciting answers which might help him accomplish the assignment and he rushes through this part of the assignment by abruptly using the word 'okay', which marks understanding (e.g. confirmation) and alignment (agreement) with what prior's utterance was taken to be projecting (Beach, 1995, p. 130). In a conversation between two native-speakers, however, we would expect to see a confirmation of the previous turn and that the interlocutor builds his answer upon the previous turn. Here, on the other hand, L diverts from T's TCU and proposes a new question. We can also see that L relies on the posted instructions and that he cannot formulate his own questions. The discourse marker that leads me to this conclusion is the repeated L1 verbal thinking. In this case, the cue phrase 'let's see' marks a hesitation in speech and introduces a new topic, and it is followed by the question in German. Thus, it does not initiate repair. L's L1 helps him stay on task and has an important regulatory role in his verbalized thinking (Jimenez Jimenez, 2013).

EXCERPT 1D

```
007 T: Und ein Essay...hat [wie
       And one essay...has [how
008                        [uh:m (0.2)
                           [uh:m (0.2)
009 T: Wie viele Seiten musst du schreiben?
       How many pages do you have to write?
010 L: hhhhhh (0.2) I think 5-6 Seiten
       hhhhhh (o.2) I think 5-6 pages
```

T wants to know more about the amount of pages L has to write at the end of semester, and tries to ask L but gets interrupted. He might expect a full answer from L, but instead he only gets a sign that he needs to rephrase his barely started question. L understands the question, but he is not sure about the correctness of this answer and code-switches to his L1. The phrase 'I think' often expresses the speaker's degree of belief, opinion or subjective evaluation of a proposition (Screibman, 2001). In this case, L uses the phrase 'I think' in lieu of the German phrase 'Ich glaube'. This phrase also displays a new personal perspective on the same topic (Landgrebe, 2012, p. 112). L is able to return to L2 right away without any hesitations, which shows that he only code-switches when he doesn't know how to answer a question in L2. In the next segment (Excerpt 1B), L code-switches even more frequently.

EXCERPT 1E

```
026 T: Und was studierst du?
       And what do you study?
027 L: Ich studiere Kriminologie aber ich nehme viele
       I study criminology but I take many
028 L: (0.2) science (0.2) science courses, weil ich ein Ärzt werde.
       (0.2) science (0.2) science courses because I want to be a doctor.
```

```
029 T: Genau.
       Right.
```

      In line 27, L uses the wrong word 'nehme' which is a literal translation of the word 'to take' instead of 'belegen' or 'besuchen'. He also code-switches to English in line 28, but T doesn't initiate repair. He just confirms that he understands what L says and moves on. T doesn't try to teach L the new word, 'science', in German. Reasons for this phenomenon may be twofold: T's training at TalkAbroad and his decision to be polite and not correct every single word. Although L does not initiate repair in the next turn, he is able to use the right German word in line 42, which is part of the evidence for a structural 'preference' for self-repair (Kitzinger, 2013, p. 248). In lines 32 and 37, L uses English words 'society' and 'left'. T doesn't offer any German equivalent for the first word in line 32, but in line 38 he rephrases L's sentence and helps him remember the word 'fertig' which he uses in the next turn. The only time when L explicitly asks for help with one word, which is not new to him, but which he is not certain how to use is presented below.

EXCERPT 2

```
073 L:

074 T: wissen, ich weiss, du weisst.
       to know, I know, you know.
075 L: Ja, ich weiss sein kommt aus Deutschland.
       Yes, I know his comes from Germany.
```

      L explicitly asks how to say to know in German and T helps him with this word, which he is able to use correctly in the next turn. This shows that he might not be able to retrieve the word at the moment, but that he has definitely learnt this word.

3.   Discussion

      Following Kasper (2004), I examined the initial conversation between a German language learner whose L1 is American English and a German native speaker in TalkAbroad. I show that L's German repertoire is very limited, similar to Kasper's (2004) findings, but that it is not only scaffolded by NS's rephrased questions, but also by the prompt that is created for this assignment. We have observed that L is able to employ new strategies to complete this assignment very successfully and without complex linguistic breakdowns.

      L uses the word 'okay' more frequently than T (5:1) because German speakers use a variety of other words to show affirmation or to move to another topic. The reason for using only the word 'okay' in L's case might be that he did not learn other phrases that could help him show his interactional competence in a more appropriate fashion. Yet, he talks in this segment to the native speaker for the first time and he is able to develop his own strategy to align himself with the native speaker and to navigate through the conversation. In addition to Beach's (1995) findings, the word 'okay' seems to have two additional functions: 1) a sign of rushing through an assignment, and 2) in combination with private verbal thinking it enables the NNS to dominate the conversation.

      Private verbal thinking, which is in this segment limited to the words 'I think' and 'let's see', helps the NNS introduce a new topic, stay on task, and self-regulate his thoughts. In opposition to Centeno-Cortes and Jimenez Jimenez (2004), it even helps speakers with a lower language proficiency level solve a problem as the first conversation with a native speaker is considered to be extremely challenging for many learners. The co-participant, however, doesn't despise him for not using proper German words. Moreover, he doesn't provide German equivalents for these words, which Brower (2003) showed in his study as well. It seems that it doesn't matter whether native speakers are trained for conversations with non-native speakers or not, they still need explicit clues

to help them find the right word. Thus, L1 private verbal thinking doesn't initiate repair by the native speaker. It only helps the NNS contextualize his thoughts. In the same vein, L initiates code-switching when he doesn't know the right German word or when he cannot retrieve it from his long-term memory. As we have observed, L is able to return to L2 right away without longer hesitations.

      Although there are several limitations to this paper, such as that I examine here only one sequence with a few utterances and limited interactions, this paper contributes to the importance of micro-genetic approach in Conversation Analysis and Brower's (2003) finding that some sequences that on the surface do not even look like word search sequences may turn out to be word search sequences that are language learning opportunities (p. 535). In order for a NNS to know that s/he is invited to participate, the actual wording of a word search initiation must be employed, as my excerpts have demonstrated.

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