Learning in contexts. Four cases in higher education.

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Citation for published version (APA):

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3. NEGOTIATING THE PARADOXES OF SPONTANEOUS TALK IN ADVANCED L2 CLASSES

3.1 Introduction

Since the early 1980s numerous publications on L2 teaching have appeared which recommend teachers to use ‘communicative’ methods. In the communicative paradigm the focus is on language use and the goal of the foreign language class is primarily communicative competence, which implies that during lessons ‘priority is attached to understanding, negotiating and expressing meaning’ (Shiels 1988). This has consequences for the materials used: these should be ‘authentic’, taken from ‘real life’ and not be especially designed for the foreign or second language learner; as for the tasks set to the students – these should be meaningful and related to the world outside the classroom (cf. Brown 1994). The baseline for meaningful communication in this setting is seen as ‘doing conversation’ (van Lier 1996). This view of the talk that should be going on in L2 classes fits in with the prevalent idea among linguists that conversation is the prototypical form of language use. Levelt calls conversation: ‘the most primordial and universal setting for speech and the canonical setting for speech in all human societies’ (1989: 29). Heritage and Atkinson argue that it is ‘the most pervasively used mode of interaction in social life and the form within which ... language is first acquired ...’ (1984: 12-13).

Along more or less similar lines Levinson states:

It is not hard to see why one should look to conversation for insight into pragmatic phenomena, for conversation is clearly the prototypical kind of language usage, the form in which we all are first exposed to language – the matrix for language acquisition.

(Levinson 1983: 284; italics added)
Van Lier (1989) proposes a list of features that characterize conversation: it is face-to-face interaction which is locally assembled (although it may contain planned elements as, for instance, a request or a proposal); the sequence and outcome are unpredictable; there is a potentially equal distribution of rights and obligations in talk, and there is reactive and mutual contingency. If this list is mapped onto the characteristics of the discourse in traditional teacher-fronted classrooms, major discrepancies surface. The organization of talk in this sort of classroom implies more or less strict hierarchical speaker-hearer roles and teacher-student role obligations. The majority of teacher questions in these lessons are so-called display questions and the teacher is the addressee of all student turns. This means that doing conversation in the classroom is problematic, since this has to do with the right to initiate topics and talk. In the classroom setting, as McHoul (1978) rightly argues, only the teacher can direct speakership in any creative way. So it seems that traditional classroom environments do not lend themselves very well to conversation: for effective communicative language teaching informal teaching situations need to be embedded in the formal setting. Edmondson (1985) proposes that the complexity of L2 classroom discourse warrants the notion of coexisting discourse worlds as a useful concept for the understanding of the talk going on there.

In this chapter I will argue, however, that the frame complexity of the communicative L2 classroom has been underanalyzed. The multiplicity of discourse levels obtaining may lead to conflicts and dilemmas for all participants and results in a number of paradoxes which have not been recognized. This has led to assumptions about tasks, materials and classroom organization which are widespread and commonly accepted but which have not been empirically investigated.

I will begin with a brief introduction to the theoretical framework followed by data from two advanced oral proficiency classes which yielded results that I — as the teacher - had not expected when I planned them and in which I identified both positive and negative instances of ‘real’ negotiation for meaning that emerged during the talk.

3.2 Theoretical framework: Discourse analysis

For the analysis of the data a structural discourse framework will be employed which derives from Goffman’s work on participation structures and face-to-face communication (1974, 1979, 1981) and from proposals by Polanyi & Scha and Van Dam van Isselt on discourse units and operations which allow for the
recursive embedding of talk of various types within one another (Polanyi & Scha 1983; Polanyi 1988; Van Dam 1993; 1995).

3.2.1 Participation framework: speaker and hearer roles

In Footing (1979) Ervin Goffman argues that the notions of ‘speaker’ and ‘hearer’ have been grossly underanalyzed both for dyadic and multi-party interactions. A social occasion will have official, ratified participants, but there might also be non-ratified participants, co-present others, in the roles of overhearers or eavesdroppers. Besides, participants may be addressed or unaddressed recipients within a particular stretch of talk. In his analysis of the notion of ‘speaker’ Goffman distinguishes three different roles: principal, someone whose position is established by the words that are spoken, a person active in some particular social identity or role; animator, the talking-machine, a body engaged in acoustic activity; and author, the one who has selected the sentiments which are expressed and the words in which they are encoded.

3.2.2 Structural dimensions of social situations: floors and subfloors

Most interactions are experienced by participants as belonging to a certain socially recognizable occasion, e.g. an informal conversation, a lesson, a business meeting, and so on (‘speech events’; Hymes 1964). At speech event level a set of specific conventions is defined about who are the participants, what is their role, what is the business at hand, and what are the ritual attributes and procedures. These interactional conventions should be seen as a tool to help people reach consensus on the definition of a current situation. Interactions, however, may be embedded in other interactions and interrupt one type of business for another. We may, for example, tell a story which is part of a conversation which takes place before the beginning of another activity, like getting down to business at a meeting. In that case, our talk is involved in at least three types of interaction: a ‘pre-meeting small talk’, a ‘conversation’ and a ‘storytelling’. The assignment of utterances to the category ‘same sort of talk’ and preceding utterances to ‘different sort of talk’ prompts Polanyi and Scha (1983) to argue that the actual flow of talk is properly seen as separable in various discourse units to which individual utterances are seen to belong. Such units, strung together, make up the actual discourses which are produced. In their model Polanyi and Scha distinguish three types of discourse units. These units range from one word ‘echoes’, response cries (Goffman 1979), and non-verbal acts through minimal clauses and sentences to very large discourse structures. Type I are small, local structures involving turn-taking, i.e. adjacency
pairs (greetings, question-answer). These have traditionally been studied within the framework of conversation analysis. Type II structures are coherent semantic structures built up through sustained talk, such as stories, reports, arguments, and so on. Type III structures are socially defined, recognizable occasions for talk, often of a highly focused sort, defined as speech events above. These discourse units may be recursively embedded. This means that stories may be embedded in stories, but also that a speech event (e.g. a service encounter) may be embedded in a story (if a person pauses in the middle of a story to buy something). An embedded episode is signaled by structural discourse operators, so-called PUSH and POP-markers (Polanyi 1988; cf. Goffman (1981): ‘changes in footing’; Gumperz 1982: ‘contextualization cues’). PUSH-markers signal the beginning of an embedded subordinated constituent or an interruption of the dominant discourse unit. A communicative assignment to be done in groups, for example, creates as many sub-floors as there are groups. When the task is done, the discourse will have to be shifted back to the embedding interactional level: the collective classroom floor. A POP-marker will effect this return to the embedding level. POP- and PUSH-markers may be linguistic, paralinguistic, prosodic or non-verbal. Examples of verbal realizations of POP-markers are ‘okay’, ‘right’, ‘anyway’, and code switches. Verbal realizations of PUSH-markers are particles like ‘for instance’, ‘like’, ‘by the way’; tense or pronoun shift; deictic shifts and code switches.

The question this study addresses is how students and teacher negotiate the multiplicity of potential discourse formats and the variety of speaker and hearer roles obtaining in the communicative L2 classroom.

3.3 Method and data collection

When I taught advanced oral proficiency classes I found that some classes were not a success and some assignments simply did not work, although they met the criteria for communicative materials and tasks (see below). This experience prompted me to take a closer look at the frame complexity of fluency classes. This study then should be seen as an attempt on my part, as a teacher of English as a foreign language, to make sense of my own everyday practice. What follows, then, is the result of action research (cf. Van Lier 1988): my roles of teacher and researcher coincide in the study, and the data analyzed are grounded in participation in and knowledge of the specific real-world settings involved.

The data to be discussed emerged from a proficiency course I taught to first year students of English at the University of Amsterdam. Aim of the course was to improve students’ essay writing and oral fluency. At the end of each fluency
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assignment I conducted an informal evaluation in order to receive feedback on the particular task. Three of the classes were taped by graduate students who had to prepare a paper for the specialization course Topics in Applied Linguistics, which—among other subjects—dealt with classroom discourse. I subsequently used their transcripts and analyzed data from the tapes they had made for the purpose of this study. The feedback my students gave me during the evaluations and my own observations of the classes will serve to complement the data.

3.4 The communicative language class: speech event context

3.4.1 The organization of talk

Looking at the communicative language class it may be argued that the type II structure ‘fluency assignment’ is embedded in the type III speech event ‘LESSON’. This means that during the assignment, even if it entails ‘doing conversation’, teacher and student roles and tasks are inherited from the embedding speech event, although a number of these ritual rights and obligations may of course be suspended during a particular lesson episode. Let us look more closely at these teacher and student roles. Classroom roles and tasks are defined in terms of the asymmetrical distribution of knowledge supposedly obtaining between members of the category ‘student’ and their ritual ‘other’: the teacher. The teacher is there precisely because she is the one who knows or knows more. In principle the teacher is in control of the lesson agenda, and the organization of turns and activities. She initiates tasks and allocates and evaluates pupil turns. Students, on the other hand, do not have the right to speak up in class unless they are invited to do so by the teacher. In teacher-fronted classes the teacher orients towards all pupils, but the pupils do not orient towards each other. All legitimate student utterances are directed towards if not solicited by the teacher. In this type of lesson all students are ratified participants of the social occasion ‘LESSON’, but they may be addressed recipients, unaddressed recipients, and even overhearers. All students are supposed to attend to what gets said without having (spontaneous) access to the floor. This entails that not all ratified participants have the same status and role in the lesson at any moment in the state of talk: the participation structure is non-linear and dynamic. As soon as the teacher allocates a turn to one student, however, this person is the addressed recipient of the teacher’s utterances and therefore the next speaker; the others are ritual listeners. Therefore, the participation framework of teacher-fronted classes results in little opportunity for individual students to practice their oral language skills. Quite radical alterations are needed to remedy these unfavourable
conditions for language learning and to create opportunities for genuine interaction in the classroom.

In the communicative language teaching paradigm pair and group work are advocated to ensure equal distribution of language practice among the students. Students working on tasks in pairs or small groups ensures an informal classroom format and therefore creates the right conditions for successful language learning (Long 1996). When students work in small groups the teacher is not the addressed recipient of students’ turns: the collective classroom floor splits up in a number of sub-floors. With group-work students orient towards each other and this makes it possible to have symmetrical interactions in class, based on the principle of self-selection. Moreover, feedback and evaluation moves will be managed by the students themselves. This way the participation framework of the communicative language class moves into the direction of the ideal dyadic model of generic conversation. This does not entail, however, that fluency tasks in small groups automatically create contexts for conversation. The episode is still embedded in the speech event ‘LESSON’ and therefore during the assignment the teacher retains her ritual right to break in and interrupt ongoing ‘conversations’ and comment upon procedural matters, topics, etc. Moreover, with fluency assignments the pragmatic paradox (Watzlawick 1967) ‘be spontaneous’ obtains. Students are obliged to talk and not allowed to sit in silence, they are given a topic to talk about and are not allowed to shift topic, they are often instructed to make sure the other members of the group get a chance to contribute to the discussion, etc. Students receive instructions about the topic of their conversation, about the time they are supposed to talk about the topic and about the expected outcome of their conversation. All this is clearly not conversational. As we have seen in van Lier's definition: authentic conversation typically has more fluent boundaries.

3.4.2 The role of the teacher

With the introduction of group-work the collective classroom floor is split into several subfloors. The members of each group enter into and maintain a distinct spatial and orientational arrangement by which the members of this particular group are delineated from those who are outsiders, and body posture and spatial orientation are used to collaboratively frame participation for the duration of the task (Kendon 1992). In this interactional arrangement the teacher has organized herself away, she is merely a bystander. This has consequences for the way she is expected to behave. As Goffman states:
Much of the etiquette of bystanders can be generated from the basic understanding that they should act so as to maximally encourage the fiction that they aren’t present; in brief that the assumptions of the conversational paradigm are being realized.  

(Goffman 1979: 8)

However, since the fluency assignment is embedded in the speech event ‘LESSON’, the ritual rights and obligations of teacher and students are inherited from the higher order discourse unit. This means that the teacher still has the right to interrupt, correct or evaluate student performances. Moreover, the teacher will feel the need to know how the students are doing: are they on task; is the activity suitable, of the right level, and so on? In order to get information about these issues, the teacher has to ‘maneuver’ herself, be it temporarily, into the position of eavesdropper in order to be able to hear what is going on in a group. In one of the lessons that will be discussed in this paper it was observed that as the teacher approached a group, the student who sat with her back to the teacher, and therefore did not notice her approach, continued talking as if for her the situation remained the same. The student who saw her coming, however, began talking in a marked, ‘funny’ tone of voice. This is the result of a change of ‘footing’ (Goffman 1979), which ‘implies a change in the alignment we take up to ourselves and the others present’ and which occurs when the participation framework of an interaction changes. If the teacher really wants to know what is going on the only strategy that is left is to use the ‘disattend track’, which Kendon defines as ‘consisting of events that are officially treated as irrelevant to the activity in progress’ (1992: 328). The teacher will ostensibly adhere to her role of bystander and enact a show of disinterest. She will not hover and by her gaze and bodily position try to sustain the illusion that she is not there (Goffman 1979).  

3.5 The data

3.5.1 Task 1: discourse ambiguity

During one of the classes the students worked with a questionnaire on childhood experiences. In it were items like: do you come from a noisy family; did you receive any pocket-money; did you watch television a lot, etc? The task was to be

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1 In my data I found that when I, as the organizer of the activity, felt obliged to interrupt a group’s interaction, I also oriented to the conversational rules for bystanders: I stood at a distance from the group involved, waited for a pause in the talk and apologized for breaking in (‘Sorry to interrupt but could you …’). In this way I did my best to sustain the illusion of the conversational frame of the talk that was going on in the group.
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done in groups of four and was aimed at encouraging the students to exchange ‘stories’ on childhood experiences. In my instructions for the assignment I explicitly addressed interactional dimensions:

(Data 1)

T: what I want you to do is to talk about your childhood

Cl: [unintelligible noises]

T: je jeugd (your childhood) .. your childhood

Cl: oh [unintelligible noises]

T: it’s always interesting I think to talk about each other’s childhood

Sx: it’s personal

T: yes well uhm I’ve made I’ve come up with some questions to talk about some things to give you material to talk about .. If you think one of these topics is a bit too uh too personal you don’t want to talk about these things you can just skip the question or you could even make up another childhood if you uh want to

S: [laugh]

T: that’s okay with me

......

T: now remember it’s not supposed to be a sort of Ivo Niehe [Dutch talk show host] conversation if you know what I mean

S: nee [(no)]

T: Ivo Niehe has this list of questions those sort of tv people they just ask a question and their guests answer the question and they go on to the next question because they are not really interested in the answer but you are all interested in each other .. OKAY? [hands out questionnaire]

In some of the groups, however, the activity organized itself as follows: one of the students would introduce the question by reading it aloud. She would then give the floor to the next person, often after first having answered the question herself.

The group of four in data 2 was seated around an oblong table, one student on each side. S1, who read the questions aloud had appropriated the paper with the questionnaire, which was supposed to set the agenda for the interaction, by placing it right in front of her, thereby virtually denying the others physical access to the questions.
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(Data 2)

S1  did you get pocket money? [non-verbal turn allocation: gaze direction S2]
S2  I did=
S1  =yeah
S3  I did
S4  I didn’t until I found out [unintelligible] then I demanded to get it
SSS  [laugh]
S1  why didn’t you get it?
S4  I just got the things I wanted but you want candy uh uh ... anduh you want to go to
the shops [unint] you want to buy clothes and later I found out that
S1  it can’t have been much
S4  everyone else got it
SSS  [silence; S1 reads next question]
S1  when did you go to bed? .. what time? .. when my older brothers went to bed I could
go to bed
S2  no I only remember I always had to go too soon

The data show that there were hardly any interruptions, although they are the
norm, even in story-type turns (e.g. appreciative noises, back-channeling) and no
collaborative floors (Edelsky 1981). There was hardly any overlap and the turn-
taking organization was a-typical for ‘conversation’ in groups of three (cf. Kerbrat-
Orecchioni 1997). There were no ‘struggles for the floor’: a distribution of turns
obtained which strongly resembles the participation framework in the teacher-
fronted lesson.

3.5.2 Task 1 revisited: off-record floors

At one point, however, the students did what they were supposed to do. It occurred
when the group involved had decided they had finished doing the assignment. The
‘stand-in’ teacher said: ‘Okay, that’s it, we’ve done all the questions’, which ended
the formal question-answer sequence. This remark unequivocally proves that the
students interpreted the assignment as ‘doing the questions’ and also, clearly, that
they felt they had completed that task. Because of their interpretation of the
instructions for the task they had finished long before the time allocated to the
assignment was up, before I told them they could stop talking. After a short pause
the students then resumed their talk:
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(Data 3)

S3 and well I was always the boss of our street so I made out what happened

[S3 [laugh]]

S2 street

S3 where we were going to play and uh made me quite uncomfortable it really did - I don't wanna be the boss of those children they do everything I say

[S3 I can imagine]

S4 S2 I felt really stupid

[S2 they did that to me as well]

[S3 [laugh]]

S2 I remember when you when you got in fights with your friends or the neighbour- the children next door you know you'd always say from uh I'LL GET

[S3 yeah yeah]

S2 MY OLDER BROTHER if you don't stop teasing me=

[S3 yeah yeah [laugh]]

S4 = everybody [high pitch] my daddy's a police man=

[S3 [laugh]]

The students now did exactly what I had intended them to do: they shared their childhood experiences. This time there were story-type turns, there were overlaps and interruptions, there were collaborative floors. There was no need for them to continue on this topic: here the questions functioned as lead-in to authentic conversation and sharing in a classroom context. There were no leading questions: there was a real conversational flow.

3.5.3 Task 2: unsuccessful contexts for participation and negotiation

The second task I would like to discuss concerns an assignment from the book that was used in the course. It was to be done in groups of three. The type of activity is well-known in the communicative language teaching syllabus: the students are supposed to plan a weekend together but receive instructions to make sure that they have divergent aims and agendas and need to negotiate compromises. Below you find one set of instructions (see appendix for the full text of the assignment):
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Your two friends have agreed to spend the weekend with you. Here are your ideas on what to do:

Saturday: Spend day on the beach - enjoy sun and relaxing
Take picnic lunch (tell them what food you’ll take)
Evening: party at Michael’s (tell them about Michael’s
last party which was really great).
Sunday: Meet rest of class at railway station.
All go to London for the day (tell the others what you can see
and do there).
Stay till late - go to a restaurant (tell the others what they
can eat there).
Take it in turns to present your plans to each other. Be enthusiastic! Then decide which plan
sounds best. If necessary work out a compromise plan.

The assignment meets the criteria Clark (1987) formulated for the activities and
materials in a communicative, task-based approach to language learning:

The learner must participate in meaningful interaction in the target language,
so that information-processing mechanisms can be involved at some depth.
For this to occur there must be some sort of information gap.

(Clark 1987: 63-64)

The assignment itself, however, was not a success. When I observed the groups I
noticed that the students were not really focused on their task. When they had
finished I asked them whether they had enjoyed doing the assignment. They were
quite unanimous in their view that it had not been an inspiring activity to do. They
felt it was highly artificial. During their discussions they had found it hard to
remember what they were supposed to want to do so eagerly in their assigned
pseudo-identities, which necessitated frequent looking at their instructions to
‘remember their text’.

3.5.4 Task 2*: the original task revised

On the basis of the student feedback I decided to redesign the speaker roles of the
assignment. My goal was to make the task more ‘authentic’, which meant
changing the production format of the talk ensuing. In the new design I enabled my
students to be the author of their utterances – a role which has clear connotations
of creativity and authenticity – by giving them the opportunity to set their own
agenda for the discussion, within the framework of the task. I used the revised
version in a parallel group I was teaching at the time. This is the text of the new
assignment:

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2 Here the pragmatic paradox is spelled out in the instructions.
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Write down individually how you would like to spend your ideal weekend (Saturday and Sunday; morning, afternoon and evening). If you plan to go to a restaurant for a meal, specify the restaurant; if you plan to go away for a break, specify where to, etc.

Make groups of four.
Decide which member of your group will report the discussion to the entire class.
Discuss your plans with the others and try to come up with one plan you all agree on.

There are two important differences between the original and the revised assignment. Firstly, a pre-activity or advance organizer has been inserted: the students first have to make up their own minds for their ideal weekend and put their ideas on paper, before discussing them with the other members of their group. This means that during this pre-activity the students have the opportunity to invent their own ‘personae’ to be enacted and thus indeed can be the authors of their talk during the discussion. Secondly, I announced that one member of each group would act as an official spokesperson, who was supposed to report the discussion in the group to the entire class in order to force the groups to really reach agreement on their joint plans. The redesigned assignment thus consisted of an advance organizer, followed by the original activity, and was rounded off by a post-unit, the class report.

This exercise provoked lively interaction among the members of the groups. Students presented their ideas with passion and long discussions ensued. The reporters mentioned quite a few heated arguments. The introduction of the pre-activity clearly made the assignment more realistic for the students: in the problem-solving discussion in the groups they presented and defended their own ideas and therefore they felt more involved in the outcome of the decision-making part of the activity. There were no constraints on memory, which meant hardly any ‘gaps’ and more conversational overlap. So the task resulted in rich interaction and a wide participation among the students.

3.5.5 Task 2* revisited: complex speaker roles

The introduction of the reporter role in the revised weekend assignment, which I had designed to make sure the students would take the assignment seriously, had an unexpected side-effect.

In one of the groups the students agreed to have dinner in a Chinese restaurant and one of the students mentioned that he wanted to eat ‘Peking Duck’ there. At the time none of the others asked for an explanation. The participant-reporter, however, fulfilled a double, ‘relay’ role, which necessitated not just an approximate but a perfect understanding of what was said. Thus she was trying to ‘rehearse’ what was said so as to be a competent reporter in the public classroom.
follow-up of the group-work episode. This resulted in a prolonged episode of negotiation of meaning, during which default conversational conventions were overruled, as is shown in data 4:

(Data 4)

1  S1     so, what do you want to eat there?
S2     uh, I'll have the Peking Duck please
SSS    [laugh]
S1     the what?

5  S2     Peking Duck
S1     what's that?
S2     [fast; Dutch] Peking eend ((Peking Duck)) - uh - [laughs]
S3     Peking Duck=
S2     =Peking [ei: Dutch value for vowel]

10 S1    Peking [ei] - OH!
S2      Peking
[]
S3      Beijing=
S2      =Beijing Duck
S3      Beijing Duck

15 S1   you mean that? - duck?
[]
S2      Donald Duck
S3      duck, ja (yes))
S1      Peking Duck - alright
[]
S3      Beijing

20 S2    serious ((seriously))
S1 [non-verbally allocates turn to S3]
S3     uhm, I'll decide when I see the menu I really don't know what I'll have
[
S4      it's Chinese
[
S2      I really recommend it

In line 1 the reporter comes back to a topic that had been nominated before: to the dish S2 has stated as his preference earlier in the discourse. In his response to this question S2 adopts a different ‘footing’. He recontextualizes S1’s question as a move in the ‘script’ of another speech event: ‘ordering a meal in a restaurant’, which accounts for the laughter of the others in line 3. S1’s problem, though, remains unsolved and she reports her trouble source once more. This time her effort is interpreted as a mishearing or a request for a rerun by S2 (line 5). An explicit clarification request is the only option left to her to fulfill her need and this move follows in line 6. The clarification request triggers extensive repair work and language play. Communication strategies (Poulisse 1990; Mitchell & Myles 1998) are employed to achieve understanding: the students go back to L1 (lines 7 and 9) and use a L2-based segmentation strategy (Peking # Duck), which solve the problem for the reporter. This is indicated by the update marker ‘OH’ in line 10,
which might have ended the repair sequence. This does not happen, however. In
line 15 there is a confirmation check by the reporter which receives a positive
response in line 17. In line 18 the reporter rounds up the discussion by repeating
the correct name of the dish. It is clear that a POP to the interrupted task-in-
progress would be sequentially relevant, but even a second update marker (‘alright’
in line 18) does not cause this POP to the embedding floor. In line 21 the reporter
makes a non-conversational move and non-verbally allocates a turn to a member of
the group who has not stated his preference yet. But even then the POP is not
entirely successful: there is still overlap with the previous business (lines 23 and
24). The group goes beyond the task narrowly considered: the item for the list has
been delivered, but it is reframed for real world evaluation. The result of the
reporter role in this case has led to embedded language play, which is very much
‘on task’: students help each other choose a dish they think is delicious.

3.6 Discussion

The data investigated show that ‘doing conversation’ in the communicative L2
classroom is a recommendation that is complicated to follow. Whatever task is set
to the students, in whatever way the classroom is organized, the fluency episode
will always be embedded in the speech event ‘LESSON’ and a lot of work is
needed to overrule the classroom frame. Data 2 show that, with group work, there
is the risk that the teacher role is taken over by one of the student members of the
group, who nominates the topics, handles transitions, allocates turns and generally
takes charge of the organization of talk. The distinct spatial configuration of the
members of the group in the data may play an important part in this respect.
Student 1 is the only member of the group who has physical access to the questions
supposed to set the agenda for the ‘conversation’, which makes it more or less
‘logical’ for her to adopt the role of teacher. Besides, the question-answer format
of the task might have caused discourse ambiguity: the questions in the
questionnaire may be interpreted as the first pair part of a question-answer
adjacency pair instead of prompts for story-type turns. In the latter type of talk the
question functions as a ‘story preface’ that creates an answer slot which
necessitates a ‘PUSH’ to an embedded ‘story telling’ floor. After the ‘point’ of the
story, a ‘POP’ will occur to the embedding floor and the story telling world. In the
teacher-fronted lesson frame, however, the unmarked, default student response to
questions is a simple answer, not a story-type turn. The instructions I gave the
students made clear that they should not take the questions as short-form questions,
but I clearly had not anticipated that a mini-classroom would be created, embedded
in the speech event ‘LESSON’, a frame within a frame, which inherits ritual
classroom roles, and results in formal discourse with fixed procedures.
The task eventually does yield interaction of the type intended, as is shown in data 3. This occurs when the students have rounded off the official assignment. Now they are finally ‘on task’ while they are at the same time – paradoxically – ‘off task’. The group has created a time-out, that still orients to the higher order ‘LESSON’ context: the students are doing conversation while practicing their English fluency. This means it could very well be that ‘authentic conversation’ only occurs in the, as we might say, ‘cracks and seams’ of the lesson. This then might lead to a paradox in communicative L2 classes: if we accept that ideally the talk in those lessons should be conversation, then it might be that the task of the teacher is to plan unplanned discourse. It shows at least that it is important to be aware of the potential for off-record interactional meta-floors which might emerge within the context of current tasks.

Task 2 was meant to be a role play. The student evaluations of the assignment, however, show that, in order for this type of activity to result in ‘conversation’, it is important to realize how much information can be stored in students’ short-term memory so that it can be immediately accessed. The student feedback shows the weak points of the assignment: because they do not succeed in remembering their list of activities, they have to ‘cheat’ to remember what they are supposed to want and have to take long time-outs which is typical for formal classroom contexts of talk (‘gap’; McHoul 1979), but is incompatible with the flow of authentic conversation. The result is disfluency and inauthentic speaking-roles. If we contend that fluency assignments should contain information gap and problem-solving type elements, we usually consider the content level of the task. The problem here has to do with speaker-hearer roles. This task does not allow the students to be, to use Goffman’s terms, the authors of their words, they are merely the animators or, we might even say, the principals: actors-in-function. It might be argued that this sort of role-play is normal practice in communicative L2 classes, but for a successful simulation of ‘conversational’ contexts of talk students should be able to really sustain the illusion that they are ‘acting out themselves’. This means framing (Goffman 1974) is all important: classroom realities and roles need to be temporarily overruled. Students are asked to construct a make-believe or pseudo-identity in an imaginary story or text world, while discourse world parameters and values are temporarily suspended (cf. Werth 1999). As Breen (1985) argues, one of the conventions assumed to be honoured by participants in the culture of a language class is the willingness and capacity to suspend disbelief, to participate in simulated communication within classroom specific interaction. If this fails the result is not conversation, it is saying one’s part as reading aloud in a rehearsal for a play. Some of these negative results might have been avoided if I had given the students time to study their ‘role’. I wonder, however, whether this would have solved the problem: the activities listed for each participant in the text of the
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assignment were hard to memorize: they seem to be chosen randomly and do not create ‘round characters’.

In data the students actively negotiate for meaning, which traditional SLA research tells us is crucial for second language input to become intake and to result in learning. As early as 1967 Corder claimed that the negotiation of meaning between the conversationalists makes language input comprehensible for non-native speakers, which is crucial to create intake. Ellis states that ‘negotiation of meaning makes input comprehensible and [...] in this way promotes second language acquisition’ (1985: 142). Long argues:

... environmental contributions to acquisition are mediated by selective attention and the learner’s developing L2 processing capacity, and these resources are brought together most usefully, although not exclusively, during negotiation for meaning.

(Long 1996: 414)

Negotiation of meaning is claimed to bestow three benefits on L2 learning: improved comprehensibility of input, enhanced attention to form and the need to produce output. Pica (1994) claims that negotiation of meaning may lead to manipulation of form which may be noticed by learners because it interrupts the conversation. Swain (1985) proposes that a function of negotiation of meaning may be that the learner is pushed towards the delivery of precise, coherent and appropriate messages.

Interactional modifications such as comprehension checks and clarification requests are seen as evidence that negotiation of meaning and thus ‘learning’ is taking place. However, the assumption that in everyday interactions non-comprehension always results in comprehension checks and clarification requests is too strong (cf. Firth & Wagner 1996). When in everyday conversation a problem of understanding occurs, repair by a participant other than the speaker is typically initiated in the turn immediately following the trouble source (Wong 2000). Explicit clarification requests and comprehension checks in later turns are dispreferred, since they create disfluency which interrupts the smooth ongoing flow of talk and do not move the agenda. So although in SLA research the norm is ‘don’t let it pass’, in natural conversation zero or non-verbal clarification requests are the norm, the norm is ‘let it pass’. The latter is a consequence of the conversational preference for self-correction as Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson (1977) have shown. It is therefore not surprising that the claim that learners when engaged in communicative language tasks will automatically initiate negotiated interaction (cf. Clark 1987) is not corroborated by classroom studies. Foster (1998) found that her students employed a different communication strategy when they confronted a gap
in understanding: they pretended to understand and hoped that a future utterance would cast light on their darkness, which concurs with the tolerance for uncertainty that is quite normal in everyday conversation.

To achieve mutual understanding in the negotiation of meaning sequence reported in data 4, the students employ communication strategies such as code switching, repetition and parallelism. These are instances of language play, which is claimed to be beneficial for language learning in a number of ways. Cook (1997) argues that in language play the introduction of patterns of linguistic form (e.g. rhythm, rhyme, parallelism) beyond those demanded by meaning and purpose, destabilizes the relation of meaning and form, allowing change in the range of possibilities open to both. Exploiting such destablization may be important to creative thought, and to adaptation in general, including the adaptation involved in second language acquisition. Sullivan (2000b) points out: ‘in a second language classroom, storytelling and wordplay can increase motivation, serve as mediation in expert-novice interaction, and encourage a focus on form’ (2000b: 74). Real-life language of native speakers includes form-focused and playful language as well as task-based language. Story telling and wordplay, therefore, may contribute to prepare students for the demands of the multiple forms of communication outside the classroom (cf. Polanyi 1985; Van Dam, in press).

Paradoxically, the affordances for the prolonged ‘negotiation of meaning’ sequence reported in data 4 are created by the introduction of a non-conversational speaker role. The reporter is determined to grasp the exact meaning of her interlocutor’s words, because exact understanding is made conditionally relevant by her formal role on the embedding classroom floor. The negotiation of meaning occurs because the outcome of the discussion is, as it is often called in conversation analysis studies, made consequential for what is to happen in the classroom-frame: after the POP to the embedding discourse unit ‘LESSON’ she will be expected to report faithfully on the outcomes of the discussion in the public domain of the class. The introduction of the reporter role introduced a reflexive element in a communicative activity that was designed to be non-reflexive. The reporter broke the homogeneity of the ‘community of practice’ and therefore served as a mediator between two incompatible discourse genres – informal conversation and formal report.

3.7 Concluding remarks

The data discussed show that a number of paradoxes obtained in the communicative L2 class under investigation which have not been accounted for in traditional SLA theories. Negotiation of meaning and language play, rather
than being features of informal conversation, were brought about by importing a formal speaker-role into an informal, conversational setting. Authentic conversation, rather than being the result of carefully planned group tasks, occurred in a post-task time-out environment. It might be concluded that the fluency class yielded complex interactional domains.

The discussion of the data suggests that the metaphor of the formal-informal, conversational-institutional, authentic-inauthentic dichotomies, on which SLA research has built, should be challenged. The distinctions SLA theory has drawn between speech events and discourse genres in the classroom are too sharp. In the classroom ‘game’ the speech event ‘LESSON’ does not contextualize monolithic discourse structures with invariable speaker and hearer roles and ritual business only. Frames can be embedded in or superimposed upon one another. Interactional arrangements, current roles and identities may be shifted into and out of at will. The classroom may be viewed as an ecological environment in which ‘lesson’ and ‘conversation’ are relational to each other, needing one another for ecological balance. The L2 class might be reframed as a stage for ‘performance’ which includes events like ‘story telling’, ‘conversation’, ‘language play’, ‘role play’, ‘chorus work’ etc. The teacher then should be prepared to act out several scenarios, to try various parts and to introduce new protagonists when needed. Rather than trying to ‘plan unplanned discourse’ she should be alert to perform the role of stage director in the context of current class tasks, who inspires and directs the student-actors: ultimately it is up to them to act and impose their style on the script and become ‘authors’ instead of ‘animators’.

The frame complexity of the classroom has not been sufficiently recognized in theories on L2 pedagogy to date. A precise analysis of what actually happens in the classroom may bring us to re-examine a number of assumptions underlying L2 learning research and ensuing recommendations for L2 teaching methodology. This involves reexamination of the data to be investigated and an unraveling of the cultural, institutional and interactional dimensions of the contexts in which they are nested.
Assignment 2

Your two friends have agreed to spend the weekend with you. Here are your ideas on what to do:

Saturday: Spend day on the beach - enjoy sun and relaxing
Take picnic lunch (tell them what food you'll take)
Evening: party at Michael's (tell them about Michael's last party which was really great).
Sunday: Meet rest of class at railway station.
All go to London for the day (tell the others what you can see and do there).
Stay till late - go to a restaurant (tell the others what they can eat there).

Take it in turns to present your plans to each other. Be enthusiastic! Then decide which plan sounds best. If necessary work out a compromise plan.

Your two friends have agreed to spend the weekend with you. Here are your ideas on what to do:

Saturday: Get up early. Catch bus to country.
Walk back to town. Stop at pub for lunch on the way.
Evening: cinema (tell them about really good film that's on).
Sunday morning: Go and visit your teacher (tell them about the coffee and cakes you had last time you went to his or her house).
Spend afternoon in the kitchen preparing super meal for the evening (tell them the dishes you have in mind).
Evening: invite three more friends for dinner you've prepared.

Your two friends have agreed to spend the weekend with you. Here are your ideas on what to do:

Saturday: Get up late, have big breakfast.
Go to town: shopping (tell them what they can buy) and drink in a nice pub (tell them about the pub).
Evening: super meal in best restaurant in town (tell them about the last meal you had there).
Sunday morning: Play golf (tell them about the course you're going to).
Lunch: Chinese restaurant (tell them about the food you can eat there).
Afternoon: visit local castle (tell them about it).
Evening: watch TV (tell them about fantastic program that's on).
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