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Reversal of Participation Roles in NS-NNS Synchronous Telecollaboration

Rose van der Zwaard¹ and Anne Bannink²

Abstract

In this article we investigate data from digital interactions between native speaker (NS) and non-native speaker (NNS) dyads of English during synchronous computer-mediated communication. As opposed to most studies into the NS-NNS interface, we reversed the expert-learner participant roles: during the task performance, the NS was the (cultural) learner and the NNS the expert. Our aim was to observe the influence of these reversed participant categories on participant behavior and task performance, i.e., to see if NNS behavior as described in earlier studies also applies to the NSs in a similar apprentice position during a cross-cultural exchange, and vice versa. We found that, in both video calls and written chats, the NSs and NNSs behave in a similar manner when cast in both apprentice and learner roles. We conclude that, in task design and telecollaboration practice, the situated identities of the participants should be taken into account.

KEYWORDS: SYNCHRONOUS COMPUTER-MEDIATED COMMUNICATION, SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION, TASK-BASED LANGUAGE LEARNING, TELECOLLABORATION

1. Introduction

Firth and Wagner (1997) were among the first to challenge the categories of “native speaker” (NS) and “non-native speaker” (NNS) in second-language acquisition (SLA) research. They argued that this binary distinction, based on the cognitive perspective on language learning, does not do justice to the socio-cultural complexities involved in the display of communicative competence

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as originally defined by Hymes (1961). NNSs are not by definition “defective communicators,” nor are NSs always the idealized language users that feature in much SLA research. Rather than approaching expert and apprentice language users as different species, defined solely by their (lack of) language competency, Firth and Wagner claimed that the *situated* social identities of both groups should be factored in (cf. Kasper, 2004). In NS–NNS interactions, the NS is often seen as more powerful because they “own” the language, which inevitably places the NNS in a subordinate position (Davies, 2013; Liddicoat & Tudini, 2013). For the NNS, therefore, there is more involved than simply producing L2 discourse (Dörnyei, 2009): communicating with native speakers in the L2 language also involves the shaping of a different L2 self, or an L2 voice. Indeed, “no message,” Vandergriff observes “is truly neutral” (2016, p. 105). As such, learners have sometimes been found to be more concerned with what their NS interlocutor thinks of them (e.g., fear of incompetent self, cf. Markus & Nurius, 1986, or fear of loss of face, cf. Van der Zwaard & Bannink, 2014) than with completing the institutional task of L2 learning. In other words, the meta message (Vandergriff, 2016; cf. “face-appropriate behaviour,” Van der Zwaard & Bannink, 2014) can overrule the message (cf. “task-appropriate behaviour,” Smith, 2003; Van der Zwaard & Bannink, 2014) as a result of an L2 self that is struggling with its subordinate position during interaction with an NS in the target language. As language learners, the NNSs, then, have been found to align themselves vis-à-vis their NS interlocutors during the interaction by presenting a part of themselves that moderates their apprentice position (cf. “social presence,” Kehrwald, 2008), which inevitably influences the ongoing communication (Vandergriff, 2013). The NSs, in their turn, have been reported to be pivotal in the interaction by initiating sequences, by keeping the interaction going, for instance by recasting and comprehension checks (Long, 1983; Kasper, 2004; Hauser, 2003).

The introduction and development of digital synchronous communication technologies have impacted on and added a further layer of complexity to social identities enacted in NS–NNS interactions. NNSs have been found to experience more social constraints and communication apprehension during video calls compared to written chats (Van der Zwaard & Bannink, 2014), for instance, due to the close proximity of the image of their interlocutors. During written chats, participation roles have been found to be more symmetrical and less constrained as a result of the relative anonymity: learners feel “safer” and more at ease during communication, e.g., because the participants do not see each other and the chat medium allows them to review their messages before they are sent (Abrams, 2003; Anderson & Corbette, 2013).

This article investigates data from interactions between dyads of NSs and NNSs of English in two types of synchronous computer-mediated communication. In the context of the task, the NSs, although still “owners of the language,”

became cultural apprentices, whereas the NNSs—the language learners—were explicitly cast in the role of (cultural) experts. Our aim was to observe the influence of reversed participant categories on participant behavior and task performance, i.e., to see if NNS behavior as described in earlier studies also applies to the NSs in a similar subordinate position and vice versa. In other words, is L2 behavior as reported on above solely attributable to the NNS or will the NS in a comparable position display the same behavior? And will NNS L2 behavior be influenced by the hybrid discursive roles they perform? To find answers to these questions, we focused on the sequential responses of NS participants after a potential instance of nonunderstanding, as well as NNS response when the NS is hesitant to indicate nonunderstanding.

As far as we know, no research has been done into the effects of digital tasks with *reversed* NS and NNS participant roles. Since this study is exploratory with a relatively small number of participants, it is difficult to generalize the findings beyond the scope of the data, but we would like to argue that our small-scale investigation will help identify issues that need to be addressed in following research projects.

This article builds on, and complements, earlier studies which report on differences of NNS speaker behavior and absence of negotiation of meaning by NNSs after nonunderstanding, both in video calls and chats (Van der Zwaard & Bannink, 2014, 2016). Together, the studies aim to contribute to a better understanding of the complexity and versatility of participant roles in L2 interactions in online environments.

2. Theoretical Framework

For the analysis of our data we draw on two widely used SLA interaction paradigms: the Varonis and Gass model for NNS negotiation of meaning (1985) and Long's classification of NS modified output (1983).

Varonis and Gass's "Model of Nonunderstandings" (1985) claims that negotiation of meaning episodes can be divided into two main stages: a trigger and a resolution (see Table 1).

Table 1
Varonis and Gass Model for Nonunderstandings

Trigger	Resolution
T	I → R → RR

The trigger [T] is a word or sentence part, usually uttered by the expert, that the learner does not know or understand, consequently putting the discourse on hold [I]. During the resolution [R], the trouble source is solved: the learner

initiates repair by appealing for help, and the expert rephrases or clarifies [RR], as illustrated in Table 2.

Table 2

Example Dialogue Illustrating the Varonis and Gass Model for Nonunderstandings

Expert	Don't you think he is very phlegmatic?	Trigger (T)
Learner	What is phlegmatic?	Indicator (I)
Expert	It means very cool and composed	Response (R)
Learner	Ah, I see. Yes, I think he is	Reaction to Response (RR) discourse pops up again

In the example dialogue of the Varonis and Gass model (Table 2), the word *phlegmatic* appears to be a trigger (T), a word the hearer is not familiar with. For the interaction to continue, this trouble source needs to be resolved. Indeed, without knowing the meaning of the word *phlegmatic*, the learner will not be able to truthfully answer the expert's question. As such, the hearer is expected to settle this breakdown in communication by starting up negotiation of meaning, usually by explicitly appealing for assistance with an indicator (I) of nonunderstanding. The speaker will then attempt to resolve the problem by explaining or modifying the trigger with a response (R). As a final turn, the hearer ties up the routine with a reaction to response (RR), explicitly confirming and demonstrating understanding, after which the discourse can continue. When applied to expert–learner interaction, the pivotal prime in this model is the second-turn initiation of repair (I) instigated by the learner after a trigger: if the learner does not initiate negotiation of the trigger and does not ask for clarification, the communication might break down.

Varonis and Gass emphasize that the highest incidence of initiation of negotiation of meaning is to be found between members with equal participation status, such as between NNS–NNS dyads. This is, they argue, because participants in these interactions feel they can indicate nonunderstanding without embarrassment: both interlocutors are equally (in)competent. Asymmetry of participants, such as between NS–NNS dyads, in this reasoning hinders negotiation of meaning because the NNSs tend to feel embarrassed at having to explicitly acknowledge failure of understanding. Other authors argue that NNS response during NS–NNS interaction is not always as predictable as the Varonis and Gass model suggests, however. Participants do not always engage in negotiation of meaning when they encounter problems of understanding (Aston, 1986; Foster, 1998). Although the NNSs are generally expected to be primarily concerned with their own pedagogical improvement during NS–NNS interaction, having to communicate a signal

of nonunderstanding—however pedagogically sound—can be experienced as an embarrassing and face-threatening indication of “having failed” to understand (Van der Zwaard & Bannink, 2014, 2016; Foster, 1998; Foster & Ohta, 2005; Eckerth, 2009; Slimani-Rolls, 2005; Vandergriff, 2016).

These findings reconfirm the outcomes of Long’s study into NS–NNS conversation (1983). Long describes how native speakers tend to use strategies for avoiding conversational trouble (such as checking NNS comprehension, using a slower pace, and pausing before key words) and tactics for repairing trouble (such as accepting unintentional topic-switches, tolerating ambiguity, or the repetition of utterances). Long argues that, without these NS-initiated modifications, communication runs the risk of breaking down. Native speakers, then, employ face-saving strategies since signaling conversational trouble threatens both the face of the speaker (who apparently has not succeeded in getting his or her message across) and the hearer (who has not understood and has to initiate repair). So it seems that NS behavior during NS–NNS interaction can be *both task* appropriate (Task-Appropriate Response: TAR; Smith, 2003), i.e., in the interest of the task (for instance, by checking NNS comprehension), and *face* appropriate (Face-Appropriate Response: FAR; Van der Zwaard & Bannink, 2014, 2016), i.e., in the interest of guarding both their own and the NNS’s face, sometimes at the cost of the task (for instance, where NSs tolerate NNS ambiguity or topic changes).

3. The Study

3.1 The Telecollaboration Project

The data investigated in this article—transcripts of 11 hours of recorded videoconferencing sessions and logs of written chats as automatically saved on Skype—derive from a task performed in a tele-exchange that brought Dutch and Australian students together to investigate and exchange their respective cultural humors by telling each other cultural jokes. In our qualitative analysis, we focus on NS indication of nonunderstanding (or lack thereof) and on the NNS in an expert role; however, in order to compare the reversed roles, we have included data from the NNS in their more conventional apprentice roles and NS in expert roles in our quantitative findings (see Tables 4 and 5; for a full report on NNS responses, see Van der Zwaard & Bannink, 2016).

3.2 Participants

The NS–NNS dyads investigated in this study were randomly selected from the cohorts ($N = 22$; age 18–22; male and female; the students did not know each other; none of the students had extensive intercultural or living abroad experience). The Australian participants consisted of a group of undergraduate students in their third year of drama and education (all

native speakers of Australian English); the Dutch participants consisted of a group of first year undergraduate students doing a minor in English language proficiency as part of their European studies major. The Dutch students were all *advanced* speakers of English who had completed the same level of English in Dutch secondary education, comparable to level B2/C1 on the proficiency scales of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR).

3.3 Task Design

Designing a task that will generate a satisfactory amount of data consisting of negotiated routines from advanced learners is challenging. Any (highly) advanced or even near-native language learner would admit, however, that jokes and puns in a foreign language are a potential source of nonunderstanding and frustration. In her recent study on advanced language proficiency, Byrnes observes that advanced L2 learners need to be “highly aware language users, with regard to the language as a culturally embedded system for making meanings” (2012, p. 515). Similarly, in her study on the feasibility of translating humor, Raphaelson-West (1989) concludes that linguistic and cultural jokes are amongst the hardest aspects of the language to transmit and translate. Since the telecollaboration under study was part of a cultural exchange project where participants were asked to compare and contrast their respective cultural humors,¹ we designed a task based on a number of “canned” jokes (Fry, 2011). The Dutch students were given four Dutch jokes they had to translate into English and relate to their Australian counterparts; similarly, the Australian students had to communicate four Australian jokes to their Dutch counterparts. The jokes that were selected belong to a category that Hay (2001, p. 77) has labeled “boundary humor”: jokes grounded in ethnic humor and self-deprecation with both a comic and a serious component. As such, they contained potential referential problems that were expected to foster NS negotiation of meaning. Although it may be argued that exchanging jokes may inherently elicit more face-appropriate behavior, the students were explicitly instructed that the jokes were expected to function as prompts for discussions on how representative they were of each other’s cultures, which makes this task markedly different from a social situation where it may be challenging to indicate nonunderstanding.

3.4 Procedures

During a single exchange, each dyad performed the task using both desktop videoconferencing and written chats. Time on task for each dyad was approximately one hour. The Dutch student performed the task from the university computer lab; due to the time difference, the Australian students performed

the task from their home computers. The Skype sessions were recorded, transcribed, and coded by two researchers; the chat logs (including emoticons) were automatically saved by the program.² No instructions were given with respect to the initiation of repair in case of nonunderstanding.

As can be seen in Table 3, NS and NNS participants assume both expert and learner participant roles during task performance, each with regard to different types of expertise.

Table 3
Participant Roles During the Humor Task

	NNS	NS
Dutch cultural jokes	+ (expert)	– (learner)
Communication in English	– (user/learner)	+ (user/expert)

Since the interactions are conducted in English, the NS is the expert in the language domain throughout the task, while the NNS fulfills the role of (advanced) apprentice. In the institutional context of task performance the L2 roles of the NNSs collapse: they are both language learners and language users (cf. Kern and Liddicoat, 2008). In the context of our task—the exchange of the culturally specific Dutch jokes—the NNS is the expert in the cultural domain, while the NS is the apprentice; linguistically, however, the NS remains the expert and the NNS the apprentice.

In order to assess the potential influence of the digital medium on task performance, the participants communicated two jokes each through dyadic videoconferencing and two jokes each through written chats.

4. Findings

In Table 4 we list percentages of next-turn negotiation of meaning (NoM), or lack thereof, by the NS in an apprentice role, as compared to NNSs in the same situated role (when they were told Australian jokes).

Table 4
Comparing NS and NNS Next-Turn Response in Apprentice Roles

		Video	Chat
1.	NoM – NS	14%	32%
2.	(NoM – NNS	26%	31%) ³
3.	Absence of NoM – NS	86%	68%
4.	(Absence of NoM – NNS	74%	69%)
	Total number of jokes	22	19

As we can see, in only 14% of the video data does the NS task-appropriately initiate NoM according to the Varonis and Gass model, compared to 32% of the written chat data. A low incidence of NoM logically follows from a high incidence of absence of NoM for both NS and NNS in apprentice roles.

Table 5 compares unsolicited assistance or teacher role behavior (e.g., comprehensible input and comprehension checks) of both NSs and NNSs in their expert roles.⁴

Table 5

Comparing NS and NNS Comprehensible Input in Expert Roles

	Video	Chat
NNS in expert role	60%	32%
(NS in expert role)	37%	26%

Below we have selected a number of excerpts for qualitative analysis. They have been selected to illustrate NS behavior in an apprentice role and NNS in an expert role, during both video calls and chats.

Excerpt 1 shows how both the NNS and NS participants in their expert roles appear to strive for reciprocal symmetrical participation: they mitigate face threats with an act of positive politeness (Brown & Levinson, 1987). Similarly, they use comparable solidarity strategies (cf. Scollon & Scollon, 2001): they try to establish common ground in order to reduce the effect of their counterpart's potential loss of face.

Excerpt 1

Dyad 1 – chat

Turn	Participant	Chat script
1.	NNS	he gets out of the car, gets a (okay i'm sorry i don't know this word, it's the tool with which you raise your car so you can change the tire, does this make sense?) he breaks the window of the car with it and opens the door.
2.		[no immediate response]
3.	NNS	~did you know what i meant with that word i didn't know?
4.	NNS	i feel stupid about it :P
5.	NS	ohh umm its.... a car jack i think
6.	NS	:/
7.	NNS	okay..
8.	NS	haha dont feel stupid i had to think what it was aswell!! Haha
9.	NNS	oh okay haha

In this data the NNS encounters a problem in the translation of the joke on her worksheet since it contains a word she is not familiar with. She conveys her problem to the NS through an apology followed by a request for help (self-initiated other-correction; Schegloff, Jefferson, & Sacks, 1977): *<okay i'm sorry i don't know this word, it's the tool with which you raise your car so you can change the tire, does this make sense?>*. Although her paraphrase is correct and adequate, the NS does not reply immediately, which prompts the NNS into taking an evaluative stance on her L2 knowledge (cf. Vandergriff, 2013) in adding that she feels stupid about not having known the word (turn 4). Both her initial apology (turn 1), her comprehension check (turn 3), and her self-assessment (turn 4) show that her apprentice role in the L2 domain interferes with her role of expert in the cultural domain. When he does respond (turns 5 and 6), the NS—momentarily launched back in his expert role—immediately shows awareness of the threat to his NNS counterpart's face: he uses positive politeness strategies, employs paralinguistic and verbal hesitation markers *<ohh umm its... a car jack I think>* (turn 5) and goes out of his way to establish common ground: *<haha don't feel stupid I had to think what it was as well!! haha>* (turn 8). As such, the NS discursively constructs symmetrical participant roles.

In Excerpt 2 NNS and NS balance both face-appropriate and task-appropriate behavior in an intricate way.

Excerpt 2

Dyad 2 – video

Turn	Participant	Transcript
1.	NNS	OK. I'm gonna tell you some jokes
2.	NS	OK. [laughs] I'm already laughing [looks uneasy]
3.	NNS	OK. I'm gonna tell you a joke. The first one ... ok ... it's written in Dutch here so I have to translate it. OK, so, joke number 1. How does a German eat clams?
4.	NS	[laughs] What? [laughs] I don't know
5.	NNS	No? OK. He knocks on the shell very hard and shouts: "Aufmachen".
6.	NS	[laughs briefly, uneasily; shifts position]
7.	NNS	No?
8.	NS	OK
9.	NNS	Well, it's a joke which is uhmm ... well, it's a European joke, I'd say, more or less, coz uhmmm ... do you get it? More or less?
10.	NS	[laughs - embarrassed]
11.	NNS	Not really, right?

Turn	Participant	Transcript
12.	NS	[smiles and shakes her head]
13.	NNS	Coz aufmachen ...
14.	NS	Yeah, I don't know what that means

Rather than launching straight into the joke, like the NNS in Excerpt 1, the NNS in Excerpt 2 begins the task with a contextualization cue <OK, I'm gonna tell you some jokes> ("formulation"; Dorr-Bremme, 1990). In her response the NS seems to protect her partner's face even before the joke has been told: she laughs and even adds a meta comment <I'm already laughing> (turn 2). She also shifts uneasily in her seat, however, and seems to be a little perturbed by the uncertainty of what is to follow.⁵ Once the joke has been communicated, the NS's reaction is ambiguous: she provides the ritually appropriate response of laughter, suggesting understanding, but her nonverbal behavior suggests the opposite. This triggers a face-threatening minimal comprehension check <No?> (turn 7) from the NNS. The NS reacts to this with <OK> (turn 8), which seems to indicate understanding, but the NNS, firmly lodged in a teacher role, presses on: he frames the joke as typically European (turn 8), which can be interpreted as a face-saving act—i.e., it suggests that, in his view, it is perfectly understandable for an Australian not to understand the joke—but follows this with another, now even more face-threatening explicit comprehension check <do you get it? > (turn 9), which he mitigates by adding <more or less?>. When the NS does not provide a clear response to this question (turn 10), the NNS fills in the answer himself, followed by yet another comprehension check <not really, right?> (turn 11). There seems to be no escape for the NS, who now, finally, nonverbally admits nonunderstanding. The NNS now ventures on an explanation of the German word in the joke, the most likely source of the conversational trouble. The focus on a third language provides the NS with a face-saving way out of her precarious position: there is no reason to expect her to be proficient in this language. His strategy works: in line 14 the NS, finally, overtly admits nonunderstanding.

Excerpts 3a and 3b also illustrate how face-appropriate communicative behavior of the NSs in their role of cultural novice is counterbalanced by the NNS with task-appropriate behavior.

Excerpt 3a

Dyad 3 – chat

Turn	Participant	Chat script
1.	NNS	Q: Who is at the same time the perfect Finance Minister as well as your perfect father-in-law?
2.	NNS	A: Jorge Zorreguieta, he let the public debt as well as your mother-in-law dissapear!

Turn	Participant	Chat script
3.	NS	aha I don't know who that is but I'm sure if I did it would be funnier
4.	NS	still pretty funny though
5.	NNS	he is the father of Maxima (who will become Queen in a few weeks)
6.	NS	ahh
7.	NNS	and he was one of the Ministers in Argentina during the Videla regime
8.	NS	oh ok
9.	NS	well the next part...

The NNS launches the question part of the riddle joke and sends off the answer-part without waiting for an NS response. The NS responds with contradictory messages. On the one hand she conveys nonunderstanding <*I don't know who that is*>; on the other hand she adds two consecutive appreciations of the joke <*but I'm sure if I did it would be funnier*> and <*still pretty funny though*> (turns 4 and 5). This response can only be interpreted as face work, since the joke does not make sense to those who do not know who Jorge Zorreguieta in fact is. So, although the NS has conveyed her appreciation of the joke (turn 4)—albeit only verbally <*pretty funny*> without any paralinguistic signs (such as *hahahaha* or a smiley emoticon)—the NNS acts in the interest of the task: he continues by proactively backtracking and filling in who Zorreguieta is, even though the NS does not overtly appeal for assistance. In other words, the NNS proceeds to provide comprehensible input to ensure successful task completion. The NS promptly sends a message indicating that she wants to move on, away from the joke (see Van der Zwaard & Bannink, 2014, 2016).

In Excerpt 3b—same joke as in Excerpt 3a, different dyad—the NNS is extremely active (she is responsible for 18 out of the 23 messages sent), while the NS only sends five messages, none of which are explicit initiations of repair, such as questions or requests for clarifications.

Excerpt 3b

Dyad 4 – chat

Turn	Participant	Chat script
1.	NNS	Q: Who is a perfect minister of finance and also a perfect father in law?
2.	NNS	A: Jorge Zorreguieta, he is able to make your mother in law and the debt of the state disappear
3.	NNS	-_-

Turn	Participant	Chat script
4.	NNS	this is so bad
5.	NS	I kind of understand it. (I think)
6.	NNS	Do you know who Jorge Zorreguieta is?
7.	NS	No
8.	NNS	I know some of it
9.	NNS	But he was a political person in
10.	NNS	what's the name of the country
11.	NNS	Argentina
12.	NNS	Argentinia?
13.	NS	First one
14.	NNS	And he was very corrupt and killed many people etc.
15.	NNS	But he is also the father of our princess
16.	NS	Oh that is bad i don't think this is funny at all. :(
17.	NNS	No it isn't aha
18.	NNS	But i think they're referring to the fact that he killed al these people
19.	NNS	So he can make your mother in law disappear
20.	NNS	and i don't know what he did with the money
21.	NNS	but it's a cruel joke
22.	NS	I get it, and I think it is cruel to.
23.	NNS	Go to the next page?

In this excerpt we see that the NNS sends off the question part of the riddle and waits nearly a minute for a response from her counterpart before sending off the answer part. Although, as we observed above, the task is a cultural exchange embedded in an institutional telecollaborative setting, where the students were instructed to use the jokes as stimuli for discussion—as opposed to the exchange of jokes in noninstitutional, “authentic” settings, which requires the full humor support of recognition, understanding and appreciation (Hay, 2001)—face work already seems to start right after the joke has been sent. Immediately when she has related the joke, before the NS has had a chance to respond, the NNS sends two messages of negative appreciation: a paralinguistic “meh”-emoticon, used to express a straight-faced lack of emotion (turn 3) and a verbal appreciation *<this is so bad>* (turn 4). The NS response to this is an ambiguous claim of understanding in turn 5: although she states she understands the joke, she mitigates her words with *<kind of>* and *<I think>*. So instead of sending a task-appropriate appeal for assistance, the NS messages a face-appropriate, tentative claim of understanding (Koole, 2010). As noted above, the joke is perplexing for someone who does not know

who Zorreguita is, so the NS's claims of understanding are not very convincing. It is only after the NNS has acted task appropriately by sending a direct comprehension check (turn 6) that the NS reveals that she has not understood the joke at all (turn 7). Although there is a brief participant role reversal in the L2 domain between turns 10 and 13—where the NNS explicitly asks for assistance from the expert (NS) by checking the correct English name for Argentina—it is the NNS in her role of cultural expert who is the proactive participant throughout, whereas the NS, in her role as learner, mostly acknowledges her counterpart's messages and sends off appreciative remarks about the joke (turns 16 and 22), rather than actively finding out more about its cultural context. In other words, the information the NNS sends is mostly unsolicited, sent off on her own account rather than at her counterpart's request.

In Excerpt 4 we see multiple role reversals.

Excerpt 4
Dyad 5 – video

Turn	Participant	Transcript
1.	NNS	[looks at his task sheet – starts laughing] It's a funny one.
2.	NS	[smiles]
3.	NNS	We in Holland always have the competition jokes with Germany. Or a next country, you know?
4.	NS	[smiles and nods] Yes
5.	NNS	And the jokes are like: There was a German guy who ... and then the joke starts
6.	NS	[smiles] OK
7.	NNS	Then you already know it's a joke. When a sentence like that starts.
8.	NS	[smiles]
9.	NNS	I'll translate it. Uhhmm. How does a German person eat ... uhhh ... I don't know the translation of that word. You know ... in the sea [cups his hands]. A shell?
10.	NS	[nods] Yeah. A clam.
11.	NNS	OK. A clam. With a little animal in it. You know?
12.	NS	Yes.
13.	NNS	Who keeps the two shells together. You know what I mean?
14.	NS	Yes. It's like a clam. And it opens up [cups hands].
15.	NNS	Yeah. But when you try to open it, it won't.
16.	NS	No
17.	NNS	OK. You know what I mean. How does a German person eat that?

Turn	Participant	Transcript
18.	NS	I don't know.
19.	NNS	You don't know [smiles and pauses]. OK. [laughs] Here comes the clue. He knocks very hard on the shell [makes knocking movement with his hands], and screams: <i>Aufmachen</i> .
20.	NS	[Laughs]
21.	NNS	And <i>aufmachen</i> means in German like ... to open it, you know.
22.	NS	Yeah
23.	NNS	[laughs] but it won't work that way. Actually, it's a stupid joke. We always make bad jokes about German people like they're stupid, or not very intelligent or something.
24.	NS	Yeah [then silence – then looks at his task sheet]

First, the NNS qualifies the joke as funny (turn 1), explains that the Dutch tend to joke about their neighboring countries (turn 3), and finally comments on the particular type of joke he is about to tell (turns 5 and 7). In between the NNS utterances, the NS transmits verbal (*Yes; Okay*) and nonverbal (smiling and nodding) discourse markers (Schiffrin, 1987), minimal response signals that are to be expected in dyadic oral interaction, both in informal and institutional settings. It can be argued that, in turns 1–8, the NNS draws on the strategies native speakers resort to during NS–NNS conversation to avoid conversational trouble, as observed by Long (1983) and Kasper (2004): in his role of cultural expert, the NNS provides comprehensible input before the joke in an attempt to minimize the risk of conversational trouble (cf. Van der Zwaard & Bannink, 2014, 2016).

When, in turn 9, the NNS reports trouble in the L2 domain (he does not know the translation of one of the key words in the punchline of his joke) the participant roles are temporarily reversed: the NNS is cast back in the role of apprentice, whereas the NS slips back into his role of the expert. Once the NS has provided the target word (*clam*), the roles are reversed yet again. The NNS proceeds with four consecutive comprehension checks (turns 11, 13, 15, and 17) as another—usually NS—strategy for avoiding conversational trouble (Long, 1983). In short, rather than simply translating and relaying the joke, as the instruction on the task sheet says, the NNS takes the NS by the hand and guides him through the potential hurdles of cracking a canned joke originating in a, to the NS, unknown culture. Once the question part of the riddle joke has finally been posed (turn 17), and the NS gives the ritual response, the NNS again uses NS tactics as described by Long, by repeating his counterpart's utterance (<*You don't know*>) and slowing down the pace of the discourse. Additionally, he inserts a contextualization cue (*formulation*, cf. Dorr-Bremme, 1990), by announcing <*Here comes the clue*> (turn 19). The

NS response is laughter (turn 20), the default and, socially, most appropriate response after a joke in noninstitutional settings, suggesting understanding and appreciation. However, judging from his response, the NNS is not convinced the NS has in fact understood and hypothesizes that he may be feigning to understand in an attempt to save his own face by not being exposed as someone who does not understand or appreciate humor, and he guards the face of his counterpart by preventing the joke from falling flat. In turn 21, the NNS continues by providing unsolicited assistance yet again, by explaining the German word *<aufmachen>* despite the absence of NS-initiated negotiation of meaning, as such positioning himself in an expert role in the third language domain. The NS response in turn 22 is *<Yeah>*, which in this case seems to be more what Long (1983) calls “polite backchanneling noises rather than expressions of agreement or understanding” (p. 135). This interpretation is reinforced by his nonverbal behavior: he looks at his tasks sheet as a nonverbal sign he wishes to move on.

5. Discussion and Conclusions

This study aims to shed light on participant responses to interactional trouble during a telecollaboration task where NNS and NS participant roles are reversed in the cultural domain and focuses on whether they correspond to interactional behaviors as described in the Long and Varonis and Gass paradigms. Our data show that the NNS tends to use the very same strategies Long attributes to the NS when adopting a cultural expert member participation role. They actively try to avoid conversational breakdown by employing teacher-like devices such as comprehensible input or comprehension checks; i.e., in their role as cultural experts, NNSs often use the same task-appropriate communicative strategies as NSs in their language expert role, although they still fulfill an apprentice role in the language domain.

Overall, NSs, in their turn, are reluctant to explicitly initiate negotiation of meaning even if it is clear they cannot have understood the joke. As such, they tend to respond face-appropriately rather than task-appropriately, despite the fact that the interaction is in their L1. In their role of cultural natives, the NNSs in our data take on the responsibility of successful task completion when the NSs do not initiate negotiation of meaning. As such, the NNSs tend to compensate NSs’ face-appropriate behavior by task-appropriate behavior, even more so than NSs in an expert role (see Table 5).

As opposed to multiple negotiation of meaning studies (e.g., Varonis & Gass, 1985; Pica, 1994), where the recipient (in most studies the NNS) is described as the next-turn initiator of repair after an instance of nonunderstanding, the NS behavior in our data concurs with studies that report on how interaction and participant behavior is affected and influenced by social dynamics such

as social identity. In other words, it is not just the L2 learner that tends to juggle task-appropriate and face-appropriate behavior during interaction with a NS: negotiation of meaning is a dispreferred repair sequence (Schegloff et al., 1977) in any context, because having to initiate the repair of a trouble source is face threatening and hampers the progress of the discourse.

6. Conclusion

Our data show that, due to the nature of the task, the participants discursively aligned themselves in hybrid roles (Chouliaraki & Fairclough, 1999; Gebhard, 2005) of both expert and learner through changes of footing (Goffman, 1981) and tended to cope with breakdowns in communication in a similar manner. Power relations became more symmetrical, which allowed the NNSs to play multiple roles and employ a rich repertoire of discourse moves: they elicited negotiation of meaning episodes and on occasion took on the teacher role Liddicoat and Tudini (2013) generally assigned to the NS. This resulted in extended NNS turns and varied output.

Drawing on our analysis of the data, we observe that NSs and NNSs behave in a similar manner when cast in an apprentice role, both during video calls and chats. In their situated roles, both NSs and NNSs markedly negotiated for meaning less frequently during video calls than during written chats (see Table 4), corroborating studies indicating that chat is a less face-threatening digital medium where participants feel safer to acknowledge nonunderstanding (Van der Zwaard & Bannink, 2014), but contradicting social presence studies reporting that communication is more effective if participants see each other (Yamaha & Akahori, 2007; Ko, 2012).

We concur with those researchers who argue that the NS–NNS dichotomy does not do justice to the complex, emerging participant roles and identities that become interactionally salient in educational encounters—as elsewhere (cf., e.g., Firth & Wagner, 1996; Kasper, 2004). Participant identities are clearly not defined by language competence alone. NSs and NNSs are not just language-processing beings. During interaction, they do not only draw on their “linguistic capital” (Bourdieu, 1982, cited in Liddicoat & Tudini, 2013, p. 174); membership of other social categories co-shapes their voice and therefore the emergent discourse (cf. Kasper, 2004). In other words, NSs and NNSs “are playing the same game” (Davies, 2013, p. 156). The data show that the nature of the task—which emphasized the NNS cultural competence—allowed NNSs to index their social identity (cf. Vandergriff, 2013) and influenced the way they positioned themselves vis-à-vis the NS, and how they were positioned by the NS. In our data, the NS in an apprentice role seemed as concerned about the meta-message (Vandergriff, 2016) as about the message itself, if not more.

A final comment on the pedagogical implications of the outcomes of this study: in task design and educational practice, the *situated* identities of the participants—both NS and NNS—should indeed be taken into account. A telecollaboration task with a built-in reversal of nonlinguistic expert roles that foregrounds NNS expertise in other domains (e.g., cultural, professional) allows them to “use an L2 voice that aligns with existing identities” (Vandergiff, 2013, p. 399) and creates the affordances for NS and NNS participants to co-construct interactional configurations where the L2 learner can escape the confining role of apprentice. In this way, expert and novice roles are balanced out and institutionally structured identities are rearranged. As became clear from the data discussed in this article, this rearrangement socially forges symmetrical relations and promotes active and varied NNS participation.

Notes

1. “The notion of humor and what makes people laugh has intrigued scholars of various disciplines for centuries” (Chiaro, 2006, p. 4)
2. We recognize that there were several limitations on data collection. Deletions and repairs cannot be traced back from chat logs, and the need to type responses (delaying the speed of reaction) or the permanency of responses (turns can be reviewed) may have had an impact on negotiation routines.
3. These data are in brackets since this study only focuses on NS (absence of) NoM. NNS (absence of) NoM is only included for comparative reasons.
4. Interestingly, the NNSs in their expert roles are more helpful than their NS counterparts during video calls. This calls for further investigation.
5. On the taxonomy of embarrassing situations, one of the major dimensions is “uncertainty resulting from interaction” (Miller, 1992, p. 193).

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