Embodied activities in casual and classroom conversation

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Introduction

The interest for this project arose out of the researcher's involvement in the French Table, an informal, university-organized French conversation group. The researcher's interest stemmed from her desire to understand and explore the nature of second language communication in such communities of practice, particularly as related to the language learner's use of multimodal resources (alignment, artifacts, gaze, gesture, positioning, etc.) in conversation. The purpose of this project was to add to the research on the impact of embodied activities and communicative strategies in the organization of interaction in diverse second language contexts by examining how students aligned to their social and physical environment during communication in the target language.
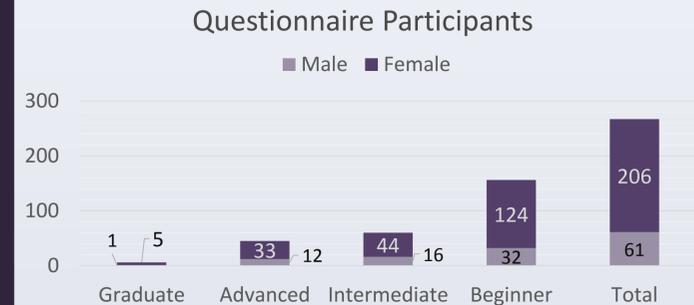
Theoretical Framework

This study followed a sociocognitive approach to language acquisition (e.g. Atkinson et al., 2007; Churchill et al., 2010), attempting to take into account the social, environmental, and cognitive factors implicit in interpersonal communication. Atkinson et al. (2007) defined alignment as "the complex means by which human beings effect coordinated interaction, and maintain that interaction in dynamically adaptive ways" (p. 169). In this study, the interrelatedness of learner, instructor, mind, body, and environment provided a clear example of the jointly-accomplished nature of communication.

In order to better understand the nature of conversational interaction in the present study, this interrelatedness was observed through interaction at the French Table and in the classroom, through the participants' use of the environments and the tools available to them. The objective of these observations was to determine the difference in students' communicative strategies in casual real-world second language conversation and in classroom second language conversation.

Research Questions and Methods

RQ 1: How do students perceive the effectiveness on their oral skills of participating the French Table?

A questionnaire was distributed to all students of French at a large, public, four-year American university. This table shows the students who returned the questionnaire by the level of their French class.

Questionnaire Participants

■ Male ■ Female

	Graduate	Advanced	Intermediate	Beginner	Total
Male	1	33	44	32	61
Female	5	12	16	124	206

The final two questions were as follows:

- *Do you think participation in an informal French conversation group would help you learn French?*
- *Would you be interested in participating in a French conversation group?*

RQ 2: How do communicative strategies vary between the conversation group and classroom conversation?

Four students were selected based on their interest in participation in the French Table. Each was observed twice at the French Table and twice in their French courses, during which the researcher used tally sheets to mark the participants' embodied activities, including their gesture and use of affective tokens, in order to analyze their level of engagement in the environment. This table shows their name, target class level, gender, age, and target language history.

Observation Participants

Name	Class Level	Gender	Age	Years of French
David	graduate	male	24	11
Isaac	advanced	male	20	3
Margaret	advanced	female	20	8.5
Wendy	intermediate	female	19	1.5

Methods, cont.

The observation participants were also interviewed about their communication in class and at the French Table in order to add further insight to the first research question.

The interview questions were created to elicit the students' perceptions of their experience in the classroom and at the French Table, in order to explore the relationship between the varying identities of the students, the communication barriers and communicative strategies in conversation, and the students' perception of the two environments.

Results

Analysis of the questionnaire showed that the majority of students (93.3%) believed that participating in the French Table would help them learn French. Analysis also indicated that most students (55.4%) would be interested in participating in the French Table.

Students' primary reason for interest in the French Table was to improve their French in a less stressful environment.

"It'd help me be more comfortable with speaking outside of a classroom setting, because then it'd be for fun rather than the pressure of performing for a grade."

The main cause for disinterest in participation in the French Table was a lack of time and of motivation in some aspect of the conversation group. Many students had other obligations, but some indicated they were "uninterested in general," or that "it just doesn't sound fun." Disinterest was also frequently attributed to students' anxiety and perceived language abilities.

The questionnaire and interview data indicated that students in advanced French have more interest in the French Table, citing the emphasis on fluency over accuracy, the less stressful atmosphere, the absence of clear master-student roles, and the ability to experiment with language.

Results, cont.

Margaret described the French Table as laid-back.

"You can talk and make mistakes, and other people are there to learn the language as well, so you're kind of all in the same boat."
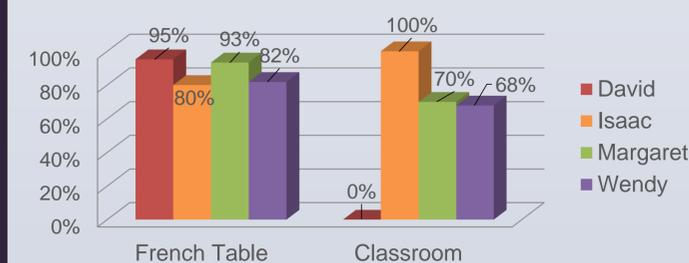
The questionnaire and interview data also showed that students enrolled in beginning French have less interest in the French Table. To explain their lack of interest, these students mentioned the more stressful environment, their dependence on the structures and roles of the language classroom, their language level, and a lower motivation or investment in the practices at the French Table.

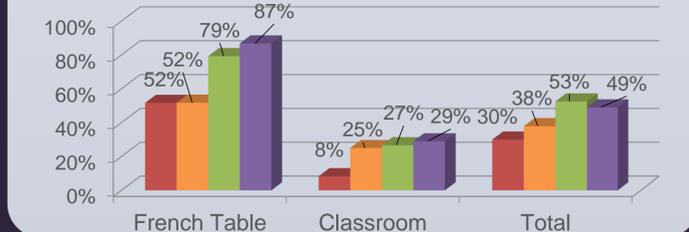In describing her language classroom, Wendy stated:

"We're all kind of at the same level, so we don't have to worry about someone thinking that I'm lame, that I don't know what I'm doing."

Observation analysis showed students were more likely to mark their speech and listening with affect tokens (laughter, smiling, nodding, shaking head) and gestures at the French Table than in class, as shown below.

Gesture Use During Speech

	French Table	Classroom
David	95%	100%
Isaac	80%	0%
Margaret	93%	70%
Wendy	82%	68%

Affective Token Use

	French Table	Classroom	Total
David	52%	8%	30%
Isaac	52%	25%	38%
Margaret	87%	27%	53%
Wendy	79%	29%	49%

Conclusions

Students show more physical engagement, by using gestures and affective tokens, with the language context in the informal French Table environment than in the formal classroom environment, which could be indicative of a higher level of interest in the French Table context. Learners would benefit from experiencing language in this context within the familiar classroom environment. The higher levels of anxiety and the lack of interest expressed by the beginner students could be countered by bringing an informal, conversation-led activity into the language learning classroom.

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