

# LEARNING TO CONVERSE THROUGH DIALOGIC SPEECH ACTS

## An approach to the development of interactional skills

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**Abstract** – This paper presents an approach to the development of oral interactional skills, field-tested with intermediate-level University students of English as a foreign language based on the provision of specific input and training. Its aim was to build a repertoire of communicative strategies and automatize conversational behaviour in the production and reaction to speech acts (apologies, thanks, complaints, compliments, offers and requests). The approach shows how conversational skills can be developed by exposing learners to model interactions, guiding them in the analysis of dialogues' formal-functional properties, and engaging them in activities motivating their autonomy.

**Keywords:** speech acts, teaching and learning of pragmatics, foreign language learning, oral skills, interactional skills, functional components

## 1. Introduction

Engaging in conversation places a number of requirements on communication participants. These have to know how to get their meaning across, and how to pursue their transactional and interpersonal goals. That is, conversational competence involves making oneself understood (i.e. conveying plausible and logical content), achieving one's purposes (i.e. ensuring communicative effectiveness) and protecting one's own and the interlocutor's face through positive and negative politeness strategies (i.e. ensuring social acceptability). Therefore, when communicating, speakers are social actors, "who do not just need to get things done but must attend to their interpersonal relationships with other participants at the same time" (Kasper, Rose 2001, p. 2) In addition, interlocutors need to know how to *interact* (e.g. when and how to take the floor and respond, how to unobtrusively sustain each other through active listening) – given that "in talk-in-interaction, the appearance and sequencing of communicative acts are jointly accomplished" (Kasper 2001, p. 52) – and to be able to do so in a multi-modal environment (using appropriate intonation, facial expression and gestures).

The requirements of conversation may go unnoticed because conversation is the most common form of verbal interaction, apparently taking place effortlessly. In our native language, we are socialized into it and become expert at it without any formal instruction. But conversation is structured, rule-governed and complex, characterized by distinctive phraseologies, sequencing patterns, and socio-culturally constrained in terms of its allowable contributions and interactional styles (Rühlemann 2007). We conform to the typical interactional behaviour of our community, unaware of such complexities, because, usually, things just work all right.

However, when we transfer our interactional skills to a new language, and apply our linguistic competence to a new context, we may come up against communicative misunderstandings and interpersonal failure. We may be unable to perceive the "new" inter-

actional rules and preferences taken for granted in the target community, and if there is a hidden clash of conversational styles, the consequences are more social than linguistic, because interaction management creates an impression of interlocutors not merely as more or less competent language users, but rather as more or less functional individuals in a relationship with others (Mir 1992, p. 2). The risk of communication breakdowns increases when the interaction deals with interpersonal rights and duties (i.e. negotiations about preferences, needs, goals and decisions) and/or participants' feelings (i.e. the preservation of social harmony), which is often the case when speech acts are produced (e.g. Huth 2006). That is, pragmatic norms are transferred below the level of consciousness, and because they are less visible, they are "less easily forgiven" (Yates 2010, p. 288). Additional difficulties may arise when participants' cultural backgrounds attach different importance to given situational factors (Spencer-Oatey, Jiang 2003). That is, unawareness of the sociolinguistic rules of the target culture may lead to unintentionally unacceptable behaviour (Wannaruk 2008), or, as Martínez-Flor and Usó-Juan (2010, p. 423) put it, "an error of appropriacy may characterize the non-native speaker as being uncooperative, or more seriously, rude and offensive."<sup>1</sup>

Conversation is therefore worth of pedagogic attention within an instructed foreign language learning context, also because "learners do not always capitalize on the knowledge they already have" and need to be made "aware of what they already know" so that they can use it in their language learning contexts (Kasper, Rose 2001, pp. 6-7). Students cannot be expected to pick up interactional strategies as a matter of course. That is, learners have to be alerted to them and practise them before they can master them. This requires modelling, supervised practice and the provision of feedback with regard to clear enunciation, congruence between communicative intent and expressiveness, relevance to the topic co-negotiated with the other party, and co-ordination of turns (McCarthy 2005's notion of con-fluence). Unfortunately, there is limited availability of ready-made instructional material in this domain, in the sense that textbooks with conversations "generally fall short of providing realistic input to learners" (Bardovi-Harlig 2001, p. 25) and under or mis-represent the range and distribution of structures and formulas found in naturally occurring data (Eisenclas 2001, p. 59). (Exceptions are Barraja-Rohan, Pritchard 1997; Carter, McCarthy 1997; and Yoshida *et al.* 2000). At the same time, there is "a strong indication that instructional intervention may be facilitative to, or even necessary for, the acquisition of L2 pragmatic ability" (Kasper, Rose 2001, p. 8) in the sense that explicit instruction is more effective than implicit teaching or mere exposure (Félix-Brasdefer 2006, p. 168; Kasper, Rose 2002, p. 273; Wannaruk 2008, pp. 332-333) – in both foreign and second language settings (Martínez-Flor, Usó-Juan 2010b, p. 429), including in the study abroad context (Shively 2010) – even if its impact might not necessarily be sustained over time (Halenko, Jones 2011; Takahashi 2010, p. 137) and even if it may sometimes be more beneficial in understanding pragmatic elements than producing appropriate pragmatic utterances (Koike, Pearson 2005). In fact, "there are pragmatic aspects that are not acquired, even after a student is immersed in the target culture, unless they are taught" (Bataller 2010, pp. 172-173; Takahashi 2010, p. 137) so that it is "explicit metapragmatic discussion coupled with authentic input" and having "opportunities to practise and use pragmatic features" that "facilitates the development of both pragmatic awareness and competence (Riddiford 2007, p. 98).

<sup>1</sup> In addition, bi-directional, that is both forward and backward, transfer between foreign language learners' pragmatic competences in their two languages has been documented (Su 2010).

This paper presents an approach to the development of oral interactional skills, focused in particular on speech acts (i.e. apologies, thanks, complaints, compliments, offers and requests), which represent a core area of pragmatics, in which the structural, systematic co-construction of discourse as a result of participants' sequentially ordered contributions can be seen at work (González-Lloret 2010, pp. 59-60). It first describes the educational context in which the approach was field-tested (i.e. an intermediate-level University course of English as a foreign language), and then it presents the activities used in class to familiarize students with one specific kind of speech act (i.e. the apology). The central part of the paper, therefore, outlines how the approach was based on the provision of specific input and training, the aims being to help learners to build a repertoire of communicative strategies and to automatize their conversational behaviour both as initiating and as responding participants. In particular, the paper describes how conversational skills can be developed by exposing learners to model interactions, guiding them in the analysis of dialogues' formal-functional properties, and engaging them in activities motivating their autonomy (e.g. understanding the content and purpose of an interaction; recognizing, accounting for and using its relevant communicative strategies; identifying and recycling its appropriate phraseologies; imitating and role-playing the interaction). In the end, the paper briefly reflects on the pros and cons of the approach, reports on the students' perception of the course, and discusses how explicit metalinguistic and linguistic training can help foreign language learners develop pragmatic competence and interactional skills.

## 2. Context

In the faculty of education at the University of Padua, Italy, between 2005 and 2009, I was in charge of a course targeting B1 level English learners. The course, which comprised 15 class meetings (30 hours) and attracted groups of 15-25 attendees, was offered to future primary school teachers who chose foreign languages as their area of expertise, and was meant to provide training in pronunciation and conversation, on one hand, and paragraph writing, on the other.<sup>2</sup> With regard to the former goal, I wanted students to engage in conversational exchanges that they could perceive as plausible – relevant to the goals of everyday interactional experiences – and that could help them develop desirable transactional, interactional and communicative skills (i.e. the ability to achieve a context-relevant goal, to handle role-relationships, to use appropriate phraseologies). For this reason, by means of open role-plays, I gathered material relevant to common speech acts, that is goal-driven communicative acts which handle and balance out interlocutors' social debts and credits, are characterized by specific formulaic expressions, and are likely to reveal interactional patterns similar to real-life extracts (Vilar-Beltrán 2008, p. 128).

I wrote out descriptions of scenarios calling for the realization of goal-oriented interactions. The scenarios prompted interlocutors in different role-relationships (i.e. intimates vs. strangers, and of equal status vs. superior-subordinate) to perform and react to six types of speech acts (apologies, thanks, complaints, compliments, offers and requests) which favour the regulation of interpersonal relationships (i.e. safeguarding the interlocutors' face).

I gave the scenarios, with brief instructions, to two pairs of native speakers. These chose the scenarios they liked the best – slightly modifying them on occasion – engaged in

<sup>2</sup> On this part of the course, see Gesuato (2012).

interaction by drawing on the scenarios, and recorded their conversations on tape. In total, I elicited 26 dialogues, which I then transcribed (about 8,000 words), and minimally adapted on a couple of occasions, by re-sequencing occasional overlaps and by replacing inaudible chunks of speech with alternative, plausible text segments.<sup>3</sup> I then collected the transcripts, prefaced them with short contextualizing information and prepared a set of graded activities, based on the material, meant to develop students' interactional skills (Gesuato 2005).

### 3. A possible approach

The activities I devised form a seven-step approach aimed at raising awareness of interactional mechanisms and to activate conversational skills. It involves exposing learners to model interactions, guiding them in the analysis of their formal-functional properties, building a repertoire of discursive formulas and communicative strategies for automatizing conversational behaviour, and developing learner autonomy (cf. Olshtain, Cohen 1990; Rose, Kasper 2001). The approach is based on the consideration that “[w]ithout input, acquisition cannot take place” and that learners need help in interpreting “the social use of speech acts” (Bardovi-Harlig 2001, p. 31), something they do not get to experience in teacher-fronted encounters or through textbooks (Bardovi-Harlig 2001, pp. 25, 30). The rationale for the approach mainly derives from the hypotheses that interventional studies in second language acquisition are based on: Schmidt's (1993, 2001) noticing hypothesis, Swain's (1996) output hypothesis and Long's (1996) interaction hypothesis: first, input cannot be turned into intake unless it is registered under awareness”; second, productive, non-formulaic language use requires “analyzed knowledge” and “repeated productive use”; third, “negotiation of meaning” and interactional adjustments “facilitates acquisition” (Kasper 2001, p. 50). In addition, the approach considers that learning requires attention, that is, noticing has to be accompanied by processing of input through practice, which is then followed by storing in long-term memory (Alcon-Soler 2005, p. 429). As Holmes and Riddiford point out (2011, p. 383), “[l]earners need to notice and attend to new information and to consciously reflect on socio-pragmatic dimensions of analysis, as well as to observe and engage in social interactions where the new learning can be used and practiced”. The approach is outlined and illustrated below with reference to the speech act of apologizing.

#### 3.1. *The nature and interactional function of an apology*

The first step in the chosen approach involves determining what a given type of speech act, in this case an apology, is for and about, in general terms – that is, what type of event may trigger it, what consequences it may have for the parties involved, what content can be conveyed through it, and how a(n) (un)cooperative addressee can respond to it. Students can brainstorm on the nature of an apology by answering questions leading them to assess the interlocutors' attitude toward each other and the interaction, such as: What do

<sup>3</sup> The minimal adaptation partly led to the removal of performance errors, which made some scripts less authentic, but more accurate as models to emulate, and thus easier to understand, reproduce and act out (cf. Grant, Starks 2001, p. 43).

an apologizer and an apologizee want from each other? What do they want for themselves? What are their interactional options and obligations?

Students should come to realize how the interlocutor's role-relationship is affected by the unfolding interaction, and thus be guided to make motivated observations about the social role of an apology, such as those offered here. As Bellachhab (2009, p. 116) observes, an apology is a remedial verbal act that is meant to symbolically neutralize an offense so that it may be accepted or forgivable, and so that ritual equilibrium may be restored. More specifically, before an apology is uttered, the apologizer is indebted to the apologizee for causing damage to them and wants to make it up to them, while the apologizee expects the apologizer to offer an explanation and (non-)verbal compensation for the damage the latter has caused. Through the apology he/she utters, the apologizer tries to make the damage caused be perceived as unintentional, while as a result of the apology he/she receives, the apologizee is able to be recognized as the unfairly offended party. Once the apology is successfully performed, the apologizer will be forgiven, accepted and understood, while the apologizee will feel that they have received adequate compensation for the loss suffered. Therefore, through an apology, both parties restore the balance of their relationship – i.e. offset a damage caused/suffered with the offer/acceptance of a (verbal) benefit of comparable value – and cancel previous debts/credits. They cooperate towards that goal from their complementary perspectives, the apologizer engaging in self-denigrating behaviour that damages their positive face, the apologizee claiming or obtaining compensation that safeguards their positive face.

In addition, learners should brainstorm on the content possibly characterizing an apology – expressing sorrow and/or admitting responsibility for the damage caused; referring to the cause, effect, emotional impact, nature and/or extent of the damage; mentioning the circumstances accounting for the damage; offering to make up for the damage; committing to beneficial courses of action; referring to the value of the relationship with the interlocutor – but also reflect on the strategies available to the interlocutor that responds to it – asking for, accepting or rejecting the apology, the explanation and/or the offer of compensation; referring to, and complaining about, the extent of the damage suffered and its negative consequences; reproaching the apologizer for his/her past conduct; warning her/him not to engage in similar behaviour in the future.

Once learners have worked out a characterization of the apology as a type of speech act, they can start working on instances of it so as to identify situation-specific properties and familiarize themselves with relevant phraseologies.

### 3.2. Contextualization

The second step in the approach involves familiarization with the context and content of the transcripts of specific apologies, since exposure to input is a pre-condition for the development of pragmatic competence. As Bardovi-Harlig (2001, p. 30) puts it, assisting learners with comprehension and providing them with representative input can be called “fair play: giving the learners a fighting chance”. (Kasper, Roever 2005). The scenario and text I use for illustrative purposes is from Gesuato (2005, pp. 21-23):

**Scenario:** Rita is visiting Susan, a friend she hasn't seen in a long time. While looking for a book in Susan's living room library, Rita accidentally knocks a vase off the shelf, and the vase goes into pieces. Rita apologizes to her friend for the damage caused.

Script: plain

1. **R.:** Oh, Susan, I'm terribly sorry. I've just knocked the vase off the bookcase.
2. **S.:** Oh, no! What have you done! How did it happen?

3. **R.:** Well, you know, I wasn't really looking very carefully, because I wanted to look at that book on art, and I pulled it out —
4. **S.:** Yes?
5. **R.:** — and I just knocked it over.
6. **S.:** Oh, dear! What am I gonna do? This vase was so important, you have no idea!
7. **R.:** I'm so sorry.
8. **S.:** It's been in my family for ages. My brother and sister are gonna kill me.
9. **R.:** Why don't you let me buy you another one?
10. **S.:** I don't think that'll work.
11. **R.:** Well, I know someone who's really good at repairing china.
12. **S.:** Do you?
13. **R.:** Yeah, I could take him all the pieces, and see if he can put them back together.
14. **S.:** That would be great.
15. **R.:** You know, my mother had a nineteenth-century cup repaired last year. And now you can hardly see where it was broken.
16. **S.:** Wow, I think that's a great idea!
17. **R.:** Ok, let's pick up the pieces and go.
18. **S.:** Ok, good. Fantastic. Thank you so much.

Students are to make educated guesses about the interactional options and constraints specific to the apology at hand with the help of situation-specific awareness-raising questions such as the following: What are the participants' social roles, expectations, rights and duties? Who is speaking/reacting to whom and why? What circumstances lead them to engage in the specific interaction? Observations relevant to the above scenario follow.

Independently of the specific interaction underway, Rita and Susan are intimates of equal status. They are on familiar terms, in a symmetrical relationship, and have similar expectations of being treated fairly and nicely – probably more affectionately than deferentially. Rita, who takes the floor first, is the apologizer, the pro-active participant in the current discourse: she moves the interaction forward. Susan, instead, is the apologizee, the reactive participant who ratifies Rita's choice of topic and orientation to it – a recent unexpected event seen as negative. Their conversation topic – Rita's accidental breakage of Susan's vase – is the reason why they are engaged in the present interaction: the recent non-verbal damage caused by Rita requires her immediate verbal remedial action. And indeed, Rita's engaging Susan in interaction is an attempt to offer at least *verbal* compensation for the damage caused, by expressing sorrow and taking responsibility for her action. Susan's reaction to Rita's news – expression of surprise, disappointment and dissatisfaction – eventually leads Rita to remedy the situation in a way that is satisfactory to Susan.

At this stage, students are also to be helped notice interesting or critical linguistic/textual aspects of the dialogue. The teacher should thus (a) clarify aspects of grammar and lexicon that may be unfamiliar to, or are likely to be misunderstood by, her/his students (e.g. the meaning of *over* as 'movement in an arc-like fashion' in turn 5, and of *work* as 'be acceptable' in turn 10); (b) highlight the grammatical/communicative function of given structures (e.g. the present perfect in turns 1, 2 and 8); and (c) point out the interactional role played by formulas and intonation patterns (e.g. "why don't you..." signals the expression of an informal suggestion in turn 9; minimal responses and rising intonation signal attentive listening and prompt the interlocutor to contribute to the unfolding discourse in turns 4 and 12).

### 3.3 Supervised practice

In the third step, learners become aware of the meaning-making potential of prosody. They are thus exposed to model reading out of the script, provided by the teacher in class, but also through an audio-file recorded by native speakers accessible on the web.<sup>4</sup> Next, in pairs, they read out the dialogue, focusing their attention, and receiving the teacher's feedback, on chunking, intonation and expressiveness, which are crucial to communicative accuracy and effectiveness.<sup>5</sup>

First, the segmentation of utterances into information units, each pronounced as an uninterrupted stream of speech, ensures the understandability of turns: their enunciation preserves the unity of thought groups. The identification of the beginning and end of chunks is often revealed by punctuation marks. But pauses may also occur across phrase boundaries – and be characterized by a non-high pitch level (see below); (e.g. “I’ve just knocked the vase | off the bookcase” in turn 1, and “And now you can hardly see | where it was broken” in turn 15).

Second, intonation is important because it ensures the identifiability of the communicative function of turns: for instance, rising intonation in turns 4 and 12 signals requests for confirmation; a non-low-pitch level in turns 3 (on *carefully*, *art*, *out*) and 13 (*pieces*) signals the current speaker's breaking off the conversation; while falling intonation, elsewhere, signals turn completion.

Finally, expressiveness is the emotional colouring of words that gives credibility to the content conveyed. In the dialogue above, the apologizer is likely to sound: apologetic (turns 1, 7), conciliatory (turns 9, 11, 17), hopeful (turns 9, 13), reassuring (turn 15) and sorry (turns 1, 7). Words that she may utter with special emphasis are: *terribly* (turn 1), *so* (turn 7), *another* (turn 9), *good* (turn 11). The apologizee, instead, is likely to sound: annoyed (turns 6, 8, 10), conciliatory (turns 14, 16), reassured (turns 12, 14, 16), surprised (turn 2) and understanding (turn 18). Words probably under special emphasis are: *done*, *happen* (turn 2), *do*, *so important*, *no idea* (turn 6), *ages*, *kill* (turn 8), *work* (turn 10), *great* (turns 14, 16).

### 3.4 Rehearsal

Step 4 involves moving from a faithful to a relatively free role-play of the dialogue. In pairs, students reproduce, at first, sections of the script, and then the entire script, as faithfully as possible to the original. Next, they engage in an enactment of the dialogue with no visual access to the script: they interact in line with the original scenario, but they can choose, skip, add and/or reformulate the original turns. Finally, students freely adapt the dialogue to their preferences, possibly modifying the interlocutors' communicative goals, strategies, contributions and reactions, thus causing the dialogue to unfold in a different direction and have a different outcome. Because the activity is repeated, but with increasing degree of autonomy, it promotes the automatic retrieval and personalized re-use of appropriate phraseologies together with fluency and confidence. This type of practice helps “to focus on other conversational skills such as turn taking or negotiation strategies that are often neglected in pragmatic instruction, which is mostly concerned with the teaching of speech acts” (Alcón-Soler, Guzmán-Pitarch 2010, p. 77).

<sup>4</sup> Since the course was later discontinued, the dedicated website was also removed.

<sup>5</sup> For more on feedback, see section 4 below.

### 3.5 Functional analysis

Step 5 requires matching dialogic text segments – which may or may not coincide with turns – with glosses specifying what strategic-functional and conversational-organizational moves are made by the interlocutors (Bachmann 1990). The goal is for students to become aware of the micro verbal actions that make speech acts effective and acceptable, and to notice how interlocutors gradually co-construct interaction by intertwining mutually relevant turns driven by complementary needs. The underlying rationale is that noticing and understanding are fostered by manipulation of input, and more generally that “explicit instruction by means of raising” students’ “metapragmatic awareness of specific features of the input” can facilitate the development of learners’ interactional ability (Félix-Brasdefer 2008, p. 492). The dialogue between Rita and Susan is reproduced below together with functional glosses in italics, in square brackets:<sup>6</sup>

Script: analysis

1. **R.:** Oh, [*hesitator: introducing something new*] Susan, [*attention-getter*] I’m terribly sorry. [(a) *first expression of the illocution: apologizing, in emphatic terms*; (b) *revealing the emotional impact of the object of the illocution: expressing sorrow*] I’ve just knocked the vase off the bookcase. [*identifying the object of the illocution: mentioning the damage caused*]
2. **S.:** Oh, no! [*negatively reacting to the news about the object of the illocution: expressing surprise and complaining about the damage suffered*] What have you done! [*assigning responsibilities regarding the damage: identifying the interlocutor as the culprit*] How did it happen? [*inquiring about the origin of the damage: asking for explanations about contextual circumstances*]
3. **R.:** Well, you know, [*cajolers: planning the upcoming discourse: filling in the turn with set phrases while thinking about what to say next*] I wasn’t really looking very carefully, because I wanted to look at that book on art, and I pulled it out — [*providing contextualizing information about the damage: explaining the circumstances that caused it*]
4. **S.:** Yes? [*prompting the interlocutor to contribute to the discourse: soliciting information about the origin of the damage*]
5. **R.:** — and I just knocked it over. [(a) *providing contextualizing information about the damage: additional explanations about contextual circumstances*; (b) *limiting the extent of one’s involvement in the damage: referring to its fortuitousness or unintentional cause*]
6. **S.:** Oh, dear! [*revealing the emotional impact of the damage: expressing surprise, annoyance and worry*] What am I gonna do? [*reflecting on a suitable course of action relative to the damage: wondering about how to repair it*] This vase was so important, [*pointing out the extent of the damage: referring to the value of the damaged object*] you have no idea! [*criticizing the interlocutor: declaring their ignorance about the value of the damaged object*]
7. **R.:** I’m so sorry. [(a) *repeating the illocution: apologizing in emphatic terms*; (b) *revealing the emotional impact of the damage: expressing sorrow*]
8. **S.:** It’s been in my family for ages. [*contextualization: giving evidence in support of the claim about the value of the damaged object*] My brother and sister are gonna kill me. [*referring to contextual circumstances: mentioning the negative consequences of the damage*]
9. **R.:** Why don’t you let me buy you another one? [*taking remedial steps regarding the damage: offering compensation*]
10. **S.:** I don’t think that’ll work. [*rejecting the interlocutor’s suggestion on how to remedy the situation: pointing out its inadequacy*]
11. **R.:** Well, [*hesitator: introducing a reply*] I know someone who’s really good at repairing china. [*contextualization regarding the damage: providing information relevant to an alternative form of repair*]

<sup>6</sup> The script was also accompanied by organizational glosses, adapted from De Leo and Savy (2006), illustrating conversation management strategies (e.g. exchange/transaction/topic-opening and exchange/transaction/topic-closing moves; initiating or response-eliciting and reacting or response-providing moves; and autonomous, self-addressed moves), which have been removed from here.

12. **S.:** Do you? [*prompting the interlocutor to further contribute to the discourse by asking for confirmation: showing interest in, or expressing incredulous hope for, the suggestion on how to recover from the loss suffered*]
13. **R.:** Yeah, [*interjection: confirmation*] I could take him all the pieces, and see if he can put them back together. [*taking remedial steps regarding the damage: suggesting and explaining how to repair it by alternative means*]
14. **S.:** That would be great. [*accepting the suggestion on how to repair the damage: positively evaluating and approving of it*]
15. **R.:** You know, [*emphatic introduction: presenting new information*] my mother had a nineteenth-century cup repaired last year. And now you can hardly see where it was broken. [*motivating the alternative remedial steps suggested: pointing out the positive effects of comparable event*]
16. **S.:** Wow, [*interjection: expressing surprise and admiration*] I think that's a great idea! [*expressing the emotional impact of the interlocutor's account of a previous, relevant event: positively evaluating the suggestion on how to recover from the damage*]
17. **R.:** Ok, [*reacting to the interlocutor: expressing agreement/acceptance*] let's pick up the pieces and go. [*taking remedial steps regarding the damage: acting immediately to repair it*]
18. **S.:** Ok, [*reacting to the interlocutor: expressing agreement/acceptance*] good. Fantastic. [*reacting to the interlocutor's immediate remedial steps taken: accepting and positively evaluating them*] Thank you so much. [*politely closing the interaction: thanking the interlocutor for taking it on herself to remedy the situation*]

### 3.6. Categorization of moves and expansion of vocabulary

Students also need to be familiarized with the varieties of functional moves that can make up speech acts, and the range of phraseologies through which such moves can be expressed. The reason is that external modifiers of head acts are crucial to a successful fulfilment of speech acts (i.e. communicative effectiveness) and their social acceptability (i.e. social adequacy in terms of display of consideration for the interlocutor's face needs; Martínez-Flor 2007), while their choice and wording is crucial to their pragmalinguistic accuracy (Campoy-Cubillo 2008, p. 99). Phraseologies include both alternative expressions realizing the same types of moves identified in the script examined, and additional expressions suitable for the realization of further types of moves, which the learners feel the need for during their free enactment of the dialogue. New phraseologies, therefore, are provided by the teacher on the students' demand, and partly identified in other scripts. So, as exposure to and practice with speech acts goes on, phraseologies are revised and expanded over the entire course. For students to easily retrieve, make sense of and re-use such phraseologies, these have to be logically arranged. The teacher systematizes this type of information by providing labels for moves and classes of moves, and helps students sort out the phraseologies into the appropriate groupings (see below for examples). The compilation and updating of this "glossary" of phrases and moves is therefore an activity that proceeds throughout the entire course, with new formulas and functional glosses being added as more scripts are examined. The following communicative options for apologies are based on Blum-Kulka, House and Kasper (1989), Cohen *et al.* (1986), Cohen and Olshtain (1981), Olshtain and Cohen (1983), and Trosborg (1987).<sup>7</sup> The relevant expressions come partly from the literature, partly from the corpus, and partly are made up.

<sup>7</sup> More recent coding schemes for apology strategies (e.g. Bataineh, Bataineh 2006; Bataineh, Bataineh 2008; Chang 2010; Gonzales 2012; Mir 1992; Sugimoto 1997; Tanaka *et al.* 2000) either draw on those presented in these earlier studies or are empirically derived variations thereof, their slightly different categories accounting for the specificities of the data examined (see also the CARLA project at <http://www.carla.umn.edu/speechacts/apologies/american.html>).

### **A. Phrases for the apologizer**

#### **A.1 Alternative expressions realizing communicative functions encountered in the script**

Apologizing

*I owe you an apology.*

Apologizing emphatically

*I'm sorry, I really am.*

Apologizing and mentioning the damage caused (or failure to act)

*Sorry for the stain.*

Explaining the cause of the damage

*It slipped my mind.*

Suggesting or explaining how to repair the damage

*I'm sure an antique dealer can easily fix it.*

Offering to repair the damage

*I'll see what I can do.*

Offering compensation

*I'll clean up tomorrow.*

Offering an alternative form of compensation

*Or I can talk to him and explain that I didn't let you know in time.*

Pointing out the positive effect of the offer of repair

*You won't even notice where it was broken.*

#### **A.2 Additional functions and expressions**

Mentioning the damage and/or its consequences

*We didn't know you were looking for us.*

Acknowledging one's shortcomings

*You know me, I'm never on time.*

Expressing self-criticism [it can overlap with the previous function]

*I wish I could be more patient.*

Taking responsibility

*It was all my fault.*

Inquiring about the existence, cause, extent or consequences of the damage

*Have I done something?*

Pointing out the exceptionality of the damage

*You know I am a conscientious person.*

Admitting doing a non-damaging action

*I did open the door, but I didn't push anybody.*

Expressing the emotional impact of the damage

*I wish it had happened to me.*

Sharing the interlocutor's viewpoint

*I can see why you feel hurt.*

Denying the validity of the interlocutor's viewpoint

*You're overreacting.*

Explaining the cause of the damage, by defending oneself

- e.g. by ascribing responsibility to others

*But Mark didn't do anything to avoid it, either.*

- e.g. by pointing out the inevitability of a situation beyond one's control

*I couldn't help it.*

- e.g. by referring to the fortuitousness/unintentional cause of the damage

*I didn't mean to.*

Challenging the interlocutor (i.e. raising doubts about the damage itself, denying one's fault and/or questioning the need to repair for the damage), by acting innocent, reproaching others or re-interpreting the situation

*I'm the one who should feel hurt.*

Minimizing the extent of the damage caused

*But it's not so bad after all.*

Inquiring about how to repair the damage

*I want to make it up to you – just tell me how.*

Expressing the inability to repair, or offer compensation for, the damage caused

*I'm afraid you'll have to do this by yourself now.*

Committing to positive future behaviour  
*It won't happen again.*

### **B. Phrases for the apologize**

#### **B.1 Alternative expressions realizing communicative functions encountered in the script**

Complaining about the damage suffered

*Just my luck.*

Pointing out, or inquiring about, the interlocutor's responsibility/involvement in the damage

*Did YOU do it?*

Asking for explanations about the cause of the damage

*Were you trying to do two things at the same time?*

Expressing worry about the damage

*That's the worst thing that could have happened.*

Wondering about or asking (for advice on) how to repair the damage

*Is there anything you can do about it?*

Pointing out the extent of the loss suffered

*This is a real blow.*

Pointing out the value of the damaged object

*It meant so much to me.*

Mentioning the negative effects of the damage

*I can't go on with my work until you've done your part.*

Pointing out the inadequacy of the interlocutor's suggestion on how to remedy the situation

*That will not do.*

Showing interest in, or expressing hope for, the interlocutor's suggestion on how to repair the damage

*Are you sure it is going to work?*

Approving of the interlocutor's suggestion on how to repair the damage

*That's exactly what we want.*

Thanking the interlocutor for taking steps so as to repair the damage

*I appreciate what you are doing.*

#### **B.2 Additional functions and expressions**

Manifesting the need to speak with the person deemed responsible for the loss suffered

*Is this a good time to talk?*

Reproaching the interlocutor

*That is just not done.*

Pointing out, or inquiring about, the circumstances that could have prevented the damage from happening

*With all due respect, you should have double-checked.*

Expressing the emotional impact of the damage

*I'm not very happy about this.*

Accepting the explanations provided

*I would have done the same in your place.*

Rejecting the explanations provided

*How could you forget? I'd sent you an email.*

Informing the interlocutor about the damage

*Do you know you've parked your car in my spot?*

Asking the interlocutor to, or telling him/her how to, repair the damage

*I'm sorry, but there is a fine to pay.*

Making a suggestion about how to prevent damage in the future

*Why don't you put a stronger fence around your garden?*

Warning the interlocutor about her/his future conduct

*Don't let me catch you doing that again, ok?*

By reflecting on the strategic roles played by phraseologies in interaction, learners become aware of the many-to-many correlations between form and function (i.e. of the fact that one function can be expressed through various means, while a given expression can serve multiple purposes), of the degree of conventionalization of given strategies in the target

language, which may differ from that of the language they are most familiar with (Fernández Amaya 2008, pp. 20; Kasper, Rose 2001, pp. 7-8), and also of the typical semantic formulas and content of instances of the same kind of speech act (Bardovi-Harlig 2001). This is a form of explicit metapragmatic instruction, which has been shown to be more efficacious than other teaching strategies (Alcón-Soler 2005; Kasper 2001, p. 53; Takahashi 2001) and which can “serve as a guide to the basic shape” of speech acts (Ishihara, Cohen 2010a, p. 56).

### **3.7 Autonomous interaction: new role-playing scenarios**

At the final step of the process, learners are presented with new communicative scenarios that call for the realization of, and reaction to, the same type of speech acts they have been practising. These can be used both for classroom practice and as follow-up, autonomous pairwork. To be plausible, the scenarios draw on realistic communicative situations, such as interactional circumstances that the teacher has taken part in or been a witness to. Also, to be suitable, they describe situations that they students can relate to, because familiar to their interactional experiences, and/or because comparable to those examined during the course, in terms of participants’ role-relationships. As the following example shows, a scenario distinguishes between the interlocutors’ initiating vs. responding roles, and is phrased in the second person in the form of instructions:

*Apologizer:* You are a university student. One of your course mates, Paula, needs her professor to sign her study-abroad scholarship application in time for tomorrow’s deadline. But Paula is sick at home, and so she asks you if you can go to her professor’s office hours in her place so as to have the form signed. You agree, but then you get tied up with your daily routine and forget. As a result, Paula cannot apply for the scholarship anymore. In the evening, you go over to her place and inform her of what you have failed to do and apologize to her for your forgetfulness.

*Apologizee:* You are a university student. You need your professor to sign your study-abroad scholarship application in time for tomorrow’s deadline. But you are sick at home, so you ask one of your course mates, Lucy, if she can go to your professor’s office hours in your place so as to have the form signed. Lucy agrees at first, but then she forgets. In the evening Lucy comes over to your place and informs you of what has happened. You express your frustration and ask for an explanation.

Students then role-play dialogic interactions based on the new scenarios by recycling strategies and phraseologies encountered before and logically organized in their glossary of moves and expressions. At this stage, students are familiar with the content and features of comparable speech acts – and reactions to them – and required adapt them to the new contexts, thinking of what to say and how to say it without the support of specific prompts. That is, students are not supposed to mimic previous interactions, but rather to co-construct their own, by drawing on their previous interactional experience and metalinguistic training, without consciously reflecting on it. At this final stage, therefore, learners autonomously put into practice what they have been practicing all along under the teacher’s guidance.

## 4. Pros and cons of the approach

My experience suggests that a move-analysis approach to dialogic speech acts is helpful to foreign language learners. Every year, course participants became progressively more fluent, accurate, confident and interested in using – and learning about – the language and interactional strategies for speech-act related purposes. That is, they became more aware of, and got better at using, the communicative (i.e. interactional and transactional) power of the building blocks of discourse. This was possible both because of the dual focus of the approach on the development of metalinguistic and communicative skills, and because of the gradual nature of the approach.

With regard to their metalinguistic skills, the students learned the associations between form and function that characterize the strategies involved in the production of and reaction to speech acts (awareness of the content that makes discourse relevant and effective, and pragmalinguistic knowledge; Barron 2003, pp. 243-244). In addition, they were sensitized to the contextual appropriateness of communicative strategies and verbal expressions (awareness of the content and phrasing through which consideration for the interlocutors' face is displayed, and rights and duties are tactfully handled: sociopragmatic knowledge).

With regard to their communicative skills, learners developed their conversational competence gradually, by brainstorming and working on model texts – and learning the relevant phraseologies – before engaging in autonomous interactions (awareness of the gradual co-construction of conversational exchanges through cooperative interactional work). More specifically, students were first shown what competent speakers did; then they were made aware of how these conversation participants ensured effectiveness and politeness in their contribution to discourse; next, they were given practice in using conversational building blocks in more demanding activities appealing to their sense-making ability; finally, they were invited to autonomously manage entire interactions.

One advantage of the approach, therefore, was that learners could concurrently develop linguistic and social skills, through which they became competent and polite interactants. This also informed my practice of giving feedback to the students. The feedback had a twofold focus: on the one hand, on the correction of linguistic-strategic choices detrimental to the learners' utterances in terms of: communicative effectiveness (understandability of content and interactional success); relevance (to the interlocutor's specific turns and the interaction at large); and social acceptability (awareness of one's relationship with the interlocutor; safeguarding one's and/or the interlocutor's face), and on the other hand, on the provision of expressions relevant to the learners' turn-specific communicative goals (expansion of communicative strategies and vocabulary). The provision of feedback, therefore, involved a shift of attention to form-plus-function triggered either by perceived communicative problems to be overcome or by stated communicative goals to be achieved (cf. Ishihara, Cohen 2010b, p. 89; Kasper 2001, p. 53), and was meant to make learners become aware of their output (Martínez-Flor, Usó-Juan 2010a, p. 15) and expand their communicative options.

An additional advantage of the approach was that learners developed their skills in a relatively stress-free environment, namely the classroom, where practice of the target language's pragmatics does not have the consequences of real-life interaction (Kasper 1997). That is, as a result of the teacher's feedback, learners could become aware of the unintentional interactional risks involved in poor conversation management, without having to pay for the consequences. The importance of designing "simulated and anxiety-free environments for students to practice pragmatics" (Yang and Zapata-Rivera 2010) has re-

cently been underlined: if learners can test their pragmatic knowledge and adjust their strategies as a result of feedback provided, they can feel more motivated to expand and hone their communicative skills.

On a more general level, the approach benefited from an explicit focus on pragmatics, a combination of reflection and practical activities, a gradual introduction of learning challenges, and repeated, monitored practice (i.e. pushed output; Martínez-Flor, Usó-Juan 2010a, p. 13). Similar approaches, which involve “appropriate input, opportunities for output and provision of feedback” (Martínez-Flor, Usó-Juan 2010a, p. 9), have also shown to be successful in foreign language instruction (see, e.g. Uso 2008 – which comprises the teacher’s explicit presentation of speech act strategies, the learners’ practice in the recognition of their sociopragmatic and pragmalinguistic features, the learners’ production of speech acts in simulated communicative contexts, and the teacher’s feedback on their performance – and Kondo 2008 – which comprises exposure to speech acts, role-play of speech acts, classification and analysis of communicative strategies, cross-linguistic comparisons of strategies, and further practice).<sup>8</sup>

One problematic aspect of the approach lay in the quality of the material to be presented to the learners. Although it could show how speech act strategies evolve across the interaction over various turns, it could not be claimed to faithfully correspond to naturally occurring discourse, because it consisted of simulated data (Félix-Brasdefer 2010, pp. 53-54).

An additional downside of this type of approach is that the collection and preparation of suitable material (i.e. exemplifying target speech acts in plausible circumstances), and the design of appropriate instructional activities (i.e. requiring increasing learner autonomy) – through which learners may become aware of and later use the communicative-linguistic strategies of competent (i.e. effective and polite) interactants – requires a considerable investment of time and effort. This is due to the fact that, unfortunately, there is still “scarcity of materials suited for pragmatic development of students” (Eslami-Rasekh *et al.* 2004). This obstacle might be overcome if researchers and teachers could collaborate together so as to develop and test “learning materials for L2 pragmatics” (Sykes 2010, p. 258).

Of course, the approach leaves room for improvement. It can be enriched through a more careful consideration of the contextual factors and constraints affecting the verbal encoding of interaction, in particular its politeness strategies: the internal variables of the speech act (power, distance, magnitude of cost/benefit), the nature of the speech act (face-threatening vs. face-enhancing), the type of interaction (more transaction- or more interaction-oriented), the degree of formality of setting, and non-verbal behaviour (Kasper, Roever 2005; Mir 1992, p. 15; Nikula 1996). As Kasper and Rose (2001, p. 3) point out, “it is one thing to teach people what functions bits of language serve, but it is entirely different to teach people how to behave ‘properly’”. Also, even advanced learners “can diverge greatly from target language norms, hence lacking in appropriacy” (Atkuna, Kamişli 1997, p. 152). Indeed, effective learning has been shown to occur “when the tasks provide learners with opportunities for processing both pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic features of the target structures” (Takimoto 2009, p. 22). In class, the (in)appropriateness of moves – in terms of their functions, wording and expressiveness – with respect to the participants’ degree of social distance and power differential *was* pointed out to students, in

<sup>8</sup> For an overview of other gradual approaches to the teaching of speech acts, see Martínez-Flor and Usó-Juan (2010b).

particular in phases 2 and 5, as the scripts were examined; however, specific activities focused on these aspects were not worked into the approach itself in a systematic way. This is possible, for example, if the educational goals of the course are given more depth and less breadth, for instance, by restricting the focus of the course on only one type of speech act at a time.

## 5. Students' perception of the course

At the end of the semester, students were asked to fill out course evaluation forms, which consisted of two parts.<sup>9</sup> In the first, students rated the course along several parameters on a scale from 1 to 10, with 10 representing the highest possible score. Table 1 shows how the 49 students that filled out the forms positively evaluated most aspects of the course, including the course logistics, the teacher's effectiveness and attitude, the teaching activities and learning tasks proper, and the course as a whole. The only exception was item E, which aimed to check whether students perceived the course material to be adequate in and of itself for self-study purposes and exam preparation in lieu of active participation in the class.<sup>10</sup> Overall, the average course rating was 8.22/10.

Question Item	Academic year (number of valid responses)						
	2004-05 (n= 0) <sup>a</sup>	2005-06 (n = 13)	2006-07 (n = 16)	2007-08 (n = 6)	2008-09 (n = 14)	2009-10 (n= 0) <sup>a</sup>	All (n = 49)
A	NA	6.54	7.81	8.00	7.25	NA	7.33
B	NA	7.46	7.50	7.00	7.00	NA	7.28
C	NA	7.50	8.56	9.33	8.29	NA	8.29
D	NA	NA <sup>b</sup>	8.50 (n = 6) <sup>c</sup>	7.66	6.23	NA	7.08 (n = 26)
E	NA	3.08	4.12	5.66	5.17	NA	4.33
F	NA	8.23	8.93	8.33	8.77	NA	8.62
G	NA	7.23	8.87	9.50	7.86	NA	8.22

Table 1  
Students' rating of the course along 7 dimensions

*Note:* All values represent average scores. *A:* was the number of contact hours adequate to cover the course topics? *B:* Do you feel you had the knowledge and competence necessary to attend the course? *C:* Was the teaching material appropriate? *D:* Did the amount of home study required accurately match the number of course credits? *E:* Would it have been possible to master the course topics and prepare for the exam without attending the course? *F:* What was your level of interest in the course topics? *G:* What was your level of satisfaction with the course? (my translation from the Italian)

<sup>a</sup> No questionnaires were distributed in 2004-2004 or 2009-10.

<sup>b</sup> The 2005-06 questionnaire did not contain question D.

<sup>c</sup> Only 6 valid responses were provided to Question D in 2006-07.

In the second part of the evaluation form, the students answered open-ended questions in which they were asked to identify positive and negative aspects of the course, to state why they would, or would not, recommend it to other students, and to provide suggestions to make the course more effective in the future. The students' answers revealed that, on the positive side, they found the course interesting and relevant to their educational goals (i.e.

<sup>9</sup> However, not all students were in class on the days the forms were handed out. Also, in two academic years, the university simply did not provide any forms.

<sup>10</sup> Attendance was not compulsory.

becoming more confident and feeling more at ease in using the English language), and that they perceived the activities as useful, varied and enjoyable. On the other hand, their observations also showed that they found the course homework-intensive and the class meetings packed with too many activities. With regard to background preparation and course attendance, their comments indicated that the students felt they needed to already have mastered the grammar of English to be able to participate in a meaningful way, and that active, steady participation was fundamental to achieving good performance.

Overall, therefore, the course appeared to be perceived both rewarding and demanding.

## 6. Conclusion

Being able to manage interaction while verbally negotiating social rights and duties, and safeguarding participants' face at the same time, is quite a communicative feat, and one that individuals may be called on to accomplish on a daily basis in real life. However, in an instructed foreign language context, opportunities for engaging in this challenging type of interaction are not likely to arise spontaneously, and may have to be specially provided. The need for explicit training in this domain is determined, in general, by students' limited exposure to or participation in the interactional practices of the target culture, but in particular, by the important interpersonal-social consequences of well-honed conversational style – the achievement of effective communication and the preservation of social harmony or ease.

The move-analysis approach to dialogic speech acts outlined above is a possible, partial answer to the need to activate and develop interactional oral skills. The underlying assumptions are that illustrative input can model adequate communicative practices, and that this input, if appropriately contextualized and examined, can foster the development of crucial conversational-social skills, namely the verbal co-negotiation of interpersonal debts and credits. More specifically, the above approach to dialogic speech acts has three aims: familiarizing students with communicative choices (i.e. the strategies and expressions usable as conversational building blocks); raising their awareness of the regularities of dialogues (i.e. the logical motivation of interlocutors' turns, which are driven by complementary needs); and helping them develop the ability both to ensure the interlocutor's interactional cooperation (through contributions that are mutually relevant and co-oriented towards making sense), and to safeguard their face (through contributions that are sensitive to contextual social variables).

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