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Face issues in second language teaching via videoconferencing: the role of smile as a co-verbal semiotic resource

Agnès Pétilat¹, Anne-Laure Foucher², and Ciara R. Wigham³

Abstract

Synchronous online language teaching involves the simultaneous employment of a range of techno-semio-pedagogical competences (Guichon, 2012). Indeed, given their flexibility and versatility, digital tools and the Internet can render teacher-student interactions dynamic. Among the necessary professional skills and strategies for online synchronous teaching, this paper focuses on the specific dimensions of affective competences and the social need to maintain a climate of comfort during one-to-one online tutoring interactions.

We focus on a particular social phenomenon that is strongly linked to emotions - facework (Goffman, 1967). Applied to CALL, we analyse how this social practice unfolds in an interactional environment where the perception of the other is mediated by a videoconferencing platform. We noted four different types of facework triggering situations: lexical breakdowns, private anecdote tellings, overlaps and interruption of learner reflection time. Our multimodal analysis of facework reveals the frequent use of smile as a mimicry semiotic resource and highlights the phenomenon of interactional synchrony.

Keywords: socio-affective skills, online language learning/teaching, facework multimodal analysis, smile

1. Introduction

This study examines the socio-affective competences of trainee-teachers of French as a foreign language during one-to-one online tutoring interactions. Our theoretical framework explores the competence of emotive communication (Arndt & Janney, 1991) through the multimodal analysis of facework acts.

As a sociological concept, “face” refers to “the positive social value a person effectively claims for himself by the line others assume he has taken during a particular contact” (Goffman, 1967: 213). Closely intertwined with face, “territory” or “negative face” is defined as the extension of identity that coincides with material and immaterial possessions. From an interactional perspective, facework refers to a set of regulations applied by interactants to protect faces (their own and their interlocutors’) by avoiding Face Threatening Acts (Brown & Levinson, 1978) or by completing Face Flattering Acts (Kerbrat Orecchioni, 1992). Contextualised to our research area, diverse situations engage teachers and learners in facework phenomena. Cicurel (2011) argued that when a teacher avoids unjustified correction and depreciation of skills, he clearly attempts to protect the learner’s face. Dausendschön-Gay (1995) observed, in a corpus of exolingual interactions, that native speakers avoided inconsistencies and restriction of allowed speaking time to preserve interlocutors’ knowledge and territories. Guichon (2017) noticed that self-territory disclosure helps teacher-learner relationships gain in connivance.

Facework is a complex multimodal process comprising a range of exchanged semiotic resources. In particular, *smile* attracted our attention in the study corpus. Indeed, in their logbooks, trainees reported having observed learners smiling and associated this with different triggering situations including understanding and appreciating the activity, experiencing motivation, feeling encouraged by the tutor and sharing with him/her a mutual trusting relationship. Relying on those declarations and given that smile has been commonly considered as a softener, a listening backchannel, an affiliation and a social inclusion marker (Crivelli & Fridlund, 2018), our analysis focuses on this semiotic resource.

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2. Method

Data for our study was collected within the telecollaborative project Vadim (Videoconferencing for language learning, Intercultural and Multimodal project). The project formed part of a Didactics of French as a Foreign Language Master’s course at *Université Clermont Auvergne* (UCA). Thirty-three trainee-teachers from UCA tutored 33 learners of French who were based in Denmark and Italy. Their online synchronous interactions were conducted over a two-month period in Spring 2019 via the videoconferencing platform Adobe Connect and the virtual bulletin board Padlet.. Vadim’s aim was to help the learners practise and develop their oral communication, linguistic and interactional skills. From the trainee-teachers’ perspective, it offered hands-on experience of online tutoring, allowing trainees to report upon and analyse their own practices.

Data collection included 76 questionnaires received from all participants, 383 pedagogical texts (including teachers logbooks and reflexive reports) and 132 video recordings⁴. Our analysis followed a four-step process:

- delineate a study corpus of seven tutorials that had in common a phraseological semantic activity dedicated to understanding some standard French fixed expressions;
- segment meetings into sequences using ELAN (Sloetjes & Wittenburg, 2008), referring to Grigg’s metalinguistic sequences model (2007);
- create a facework acts categorisation tool based on models by Brown and Levinson (1978) and Kerbrat-Orecchioni (1992) and the concepts of “learning territory” and “conversational face” (Dausendschön-Gay, 1995; Cicurel, 2011) (Figure 1);
- annotate facework communication modalities, referring to McNeill’s (1992) model for gesture, the ICOR convention for verbal communication (ICAR, 2013) and the *Facial Action Coding System* (Ekman & Friesen, 1978) for mimicry. From the latter, we created a four-level smile scale (Figure 2).

		Absence of threat <i>Consolidate faces</i> (positive politeness acts)	Presence of threat <i>Repair faces</i> (negative politeness acts)
Conversational face	Tutor’s act		
	Learner’s act		
Learning territory	Tutor’s act		
	Learner’s act		

Figure 1 - Facework categorisation table

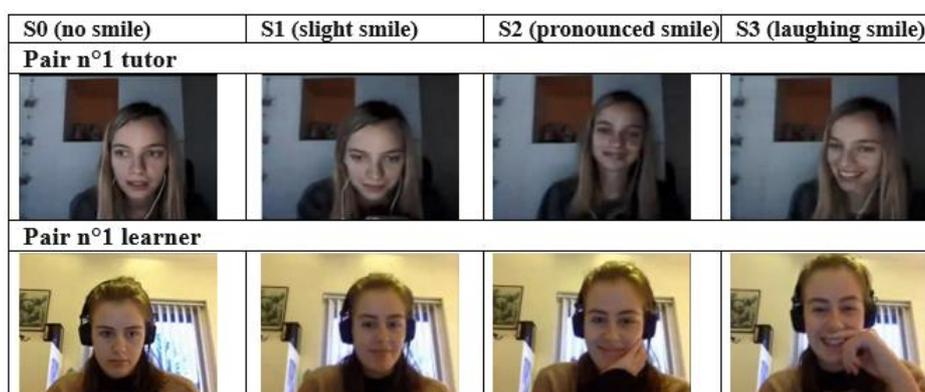


Figure 2 - smile scale

⁴ Ethical consent was obtained from all participants. The majority agreed for their images to appear unedited in scientific or pedagogical publications.

3. Results and discussion

From the annotation of the first 20 minutes of video recordings from the study corpus, four situations that trigger facework emerged:

- learners' lexical breakdowns that stop or slow down the activity's progress;
- private and personal anecdotes recounted by the learner or tutor;
- verbal overlaps between interactants;
- learners' reflection time that is interrupted by the tutor.

We propose to illustrate two of these triggering situations.

In the first excerpt, the learner tries to guess the meaning of a non-contextualised idiomatic French expression. The learner takes time to think and formulate an initial idea in response to a solicitation. The tutor interrupts in the verbal mode, asking him to answer and offering a "lexical hint". This interruption of the learner's immaterial territory could be categorised as a face threat. To make it less intrusive, the tutor launches a softening multimodal support for his action: he intensifies his smile (Figure 3) then verbally minimizes the fact that the learner does not have an answer before producing a forward-backward upper body movement (UBP).

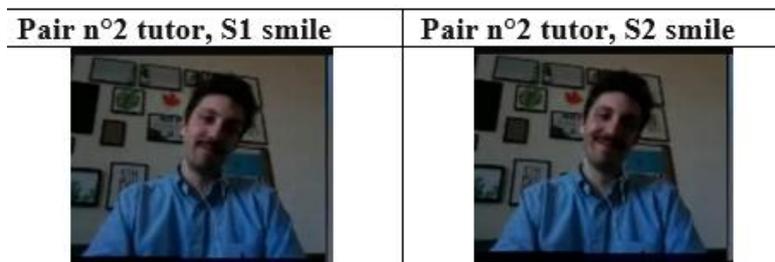


Figure 3 - Tutor smile's intensification (S1 to S2)

In response, the learner smiles while saying "no, no, no". He also produces an intensified smile and then executes a forward-backward UBP similar to that of the tutor (Figure 4). Finally he attempts to answer without the proposed lexical hint. Considering the time⁵ that separates the tutor's smile and movement from those of the learner (Figure 5), we suggest this sequence is an example of interactional synchrony in which there is the expression of an affiliation want; an "affective tuning process" (Cosnier, 1996).

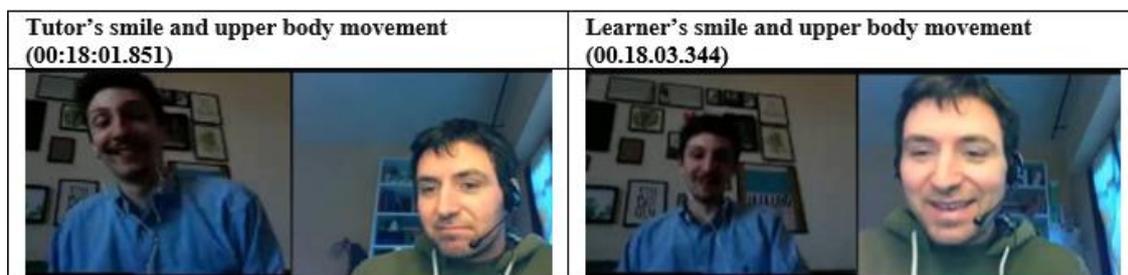


Figure 4 - Interactional synchrony

⁵ 643 milliseconds separate the learner's perception of the tutor's smile and his own. Regarding upper body movements, 1492 milliseconds separate the tutor's production from the learner's.



Figure 5 –S1 and S2 smiles in red (up is tutor’s smile, down learner’s one) and UBPs or “repositionnements” in green (up is tutor’s movement, down is learner’s one) synchrony

In a second excerpt from another pair, a learner’s lexical breakdown initiates a facework episode, structured as follows: the learner acknowledges that she forgot the word that could have helped her to give the right answer: “I am rather ashamed because we spoke about it last time!”. This verbal self-accusation is supported by a S3 smile combined with an auto contact gesture and upper body sways. Receiving this multimodal message, the tutor quickly minimizes the self-accusation stating “never mind!”. The verbal modality is enhanced by a S3 smile and an upper body forward movement. Again, we notice mirroring regarding the multimodal density of the interaction (Figure 6).

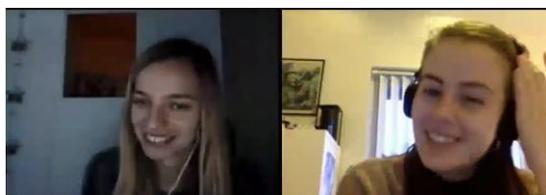


Figure 6 - Mirroring in tutor and learner's facework mimogestuality

4. Conclusion

To conclude, our study suggests that facework comes into play in situations including overlaps, reflection time interruptions, lexical breakdowns and disclosure acts. Smile is a semiotic resource employed to introduce, soften or enhance face-threatening and face-flattering acts. In the episodes studied, tutor and learner gaze at each other and their smile exchanges result in interactional multimodal synchronies. Concerning our short-term research perspectives, we intend to study facework episodes when tutor and/or learner attentions are poly-focused: in the online environment the participants must manage different windows simultaneously making gaze and smile exchanges difficult. It would be interesting to observe how facework is managed when tutors and learners do not pay continual visual attention to each other. Indeed, testimonies from trainee-teachers report that, despite difficulties in seeing each other because of screen sharing, smiles can be aurally transmitted: “Her voice intonation rises when she is happy and I can hear her smile”. Regarding long-term perspectives, our objective is to create pedagogical materials that could be used in teacher training and that would allow trainees to study and discuss face issues. This way, they could be motivated to reflect on their skills, their duties and orient their own practices.

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