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# Oral discourse competence-in-performance: analysing learner dialogues<sup>1</sup>

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## **Abstract**

Mastering a language implies being able to deploy a wide variety of speech genres (Bajtín 1952-1953). However, the features which define these genres are often obscure to students or ‘occluded’ in the sense used by Swales (1996). In this paper, nine dialogues between B1-level French learners in the context of an oral exam are analysed in order to describe the degree of dialogic competence-in-performance (Weigand 2017) achieved. Because these dialogues were of two types, an exchange of opinions and a guided interview, our analysis reveals hybrid results. This hybridity affects the opening and closing sequences of the dialogue, floor-taking in the central part and the linguistic resources used by the students to give their opinions. These findings identify formative needs as well as the indicators of achievement that are required to assess students’ oral competence-in-performance.

**Keywords:** dialogue, assessment, oral communication, speech genres, French as a Foreign Language, exam

## 1. INTRODUCTION

There exist a large number of fundamental pedagogical speech genres (in terms of Bajtín 1952-1953 [1986]) that are limited to the classroom setting (the language classroom, in our

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case). Two examples are oral exams and essays. However, by learning these texts (whether oral or written) within the context of a language course, it is assumed that students will be able to master skills needed for communication outside the classroom including speaking, writing, interacting and mediating. Nevertheless, this assumption presents two difficulties: on the one hand, classroom-specific language uses do not strictly correspond to any vernacular ones; on the other hand, ‘imported’ texts (e.g., letter of complaint, interview, etc.) have an ‘intruder’ addressee (the teacher) and a pedagogical function, thus not an everyday use, but an institutional one (Weigand 2017). These issues complicate the assessment of students’ productions in their language learning process.

A further difficulty is the frequency with which both the features of a text and the criteria used to assess it remain hidden to students. Swales (1996) coined the term ‘occluded genre’ to refer to discourse genres (what Bajtín calls ‘speech genres’) for which students do not have in mind the same indicators of achievement as their teacher-raters, probably because the expected characteristics of the requested discourse have not been previously described in class. As a result of this lack of explanation students have difficulty putting what they have learned in their language classrooms to use in other settings. Since language teaching and learning is oriented precisely towards training socially competent users (CERF 2001, 2018), the question arises as to whether the assessment criteria used with discourse performances in an academic setting can be transferred to everyday life.

Thus, given their academic and social impact, we need to study the defining characteristics of language activities frequently used in classrooms in order to assess what we call in our study the *discourse competence-in-performance* of students learning a second or additional language (henceforth ‘L2/AL’). The unit that we will focus on is *discourse* (text and context, in situation, Van Dijk 1978) and we also follow the framework of dialogic competence-in-performance as defined by Weigand (2017). Thus, the oral exam that we study here is organized in two different kinds of action-reaction sequences, that is to say, in two specific dialogic *action games*, as Weigand (2010) calls the core unit of dialogue in her holistic theory of language use: in the first part, students exchange opinions (*échanges* in

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French) about a given topic, whereas in the second part, they are interviewed by the teacher. The purpose of these two specific action games is to demonstrate the degree of oral competence-in-performance achieved in the L2/AL being learned, that is, the students' dialogic performance, even though the dialogue (i.e., the use of language) in each of the two activities is different. Thus, it is important to recognize which communicative patterns can be considered most appropriate for each part of the exam, and which characteristics indicate successful use.

The aim of this study is to describe the oral production of students of French as a L2/AL in terms of the two aforementioned action games (exchange of opinions and guided interview) and analyse their performance in terms of authentic models. This study identifies formative needs as well as indicators of achievement to be taken into account at the threshold level (B1). Our results call into question the validity of standard tests used to assess oral discourse competence-in-performance.

In the following section (§2), we define discourse competence-in-performance in order to apply the concept to the assessment of students' productions, particularly to the different sequences of action-reaction in their uses of language. In the Corpus and Methodology section (§3), we describe the samples collected for analysis and the procedure employed to study them, and this is followed by results and discussion (§4). In the final conclusions (§5) we lay out the pedagogical implications of this study with regard to task design and assessment tools.

## **2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: DISCOURSE COMPETENCE-IN-PERFORMANCE AND ORAL COMMUNICATION**

Discourse competence has traditionally been considered a subcomponent of communicative competence (Hymes 1971, Van Ek 1986, Canale 1983, Celce-Murcia 2007), alongside other subcompetences recognized in language pedagogy, be they linguistic, pragmatic, sociolinguistic, intercultural, multilingual or strategic (see below). In actual language use all these components are integrated, as competence-in-performance cannot be achieved

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simply by adding up parts. For language learning purposes, nevertheless, we need to analyse these parts in order to turn the object of study of linguistics into a topic that bears on teaching and learning. Discourse competence is thus defined in previous works as the knowledge and skills needed to produce texts that follow the structural schemata and linguistic conventions of discourse genres in use, both oral (debates, conversations, anecdotes, interviews, public presentations, etc.) and multimodal (personal electronic communication, blogs, professional websites, etc.).

The most recent version of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR 2018), the Council of Europe's reference pedagogical guidelines for general language learning, notes that the components of communicative competence are of three types: linguistic, sociolinguistic and pragmatic. Pragmatic competence includes the 'discourse (sub)competence'. The CEFR's (2018, 138) definition of 'pragmatic competence' is as follows (our italics):

A simple way of understanding the linguistic/pragmatic distinction is to say that linguistic competence is concerned with language usage (as in 'correct usage') and hence with language resources, knowledge of the language as a system, whereas *pragmatic competence is concerned with actual language use in the (co-)construction of text*. Pragmatic competence is thus primarily concerned with the user/learner's knowledge of the principles of language use according to which messages are:

- a) *organised, structured and arranged ('discourse competence')*;
- b) used to perform communicative functions ('functional competence');
- c) sequenced according to interactional and transactional schemata ('design competence')

In this context, 'discourse competence' is defined as follows:

Discourse competence concerns the ability to design texts, including generic aspects like *Thematic development* and *Coherence and cohesion* as well as, in an interaction, cooperative principles and *Turn-taking*. (CEFR 2018, 139)

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We note that the model of discourse competence used in the CEFR includes ‘design competence’, related with “the ability to design texts”, which involves utilizing “interactional and transactional schemata” singular to each discourse genre. It is assumed that the CEFR follows an artificial procedure which is not in accordance with the state of the art in dialogue analysis. On one hand, the aspects covered in the CEFR as part of discourse competence are very general, a fact noted in the framework itself (“generic aspects like ‘thematic development’ and ‘coherence and ‘cohesion’”). A similar lack of precision appears in the discourse genres described, as we will see below (§2.2). Thus, it is necessary to develop our knowledge of particular speech genres so as to be able to interpret and select relevant features from each one and make teaching and assessment explicit (Black and Wiliam 2009, Weiss 1991).

On the other hand, the knowledge needed to effectively use different dialogic genres goes beyond merely understanding the features of text such as moves, grammar and lexis. Research in what is known as *text linguistics* (e.g., Van Dijk 1978, Bernárdez 1982), the perspective of *discourse analysis* (Fairclough 1995), the so-called *linguistics of speech genres* (Ciapuscio 2007) and the holistic and unified theory of dialogue analysis (Weigand 2009) has shown that in order to adequately use language in any type of communicative setting it is necessary to be familiar with the social and cultural roles of the genres (Bajtín 1978) as sociocultural practices (i.e., their cultural significance, the power dynamics they generate, the identities they involve, etc.) as well as pragmatic factors conditioning their use (e.g., intentions, the relationship between participants, the channel, etc.). Thus, discursive competence-in-performance, that is to say, using speech genres in performance, is by nature multidimensional.

In this article, we analyse an oral exam comprising two forms of communication, an exchange of opinions and a guided interview, in order to describe the discourse competence of B1-level students of French. The model we follow includes previous work on spoken discourse genres (§2.1) as well as the CEFR (2018) (§2.2).

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## **2.1. Oral communication: dimensions and units of analysis**

Despite the contributions of conversation analysis and proposals for teaching oral communication in an L2/AL (see Brown and Yule 1983; Van Lier 1989; Vázquez 2000; Council of Europe 2001, 2018; Moreno Fernández 2002; Cestero 2005, etc.), from a pedagogical point of view the need is still felt for a typology of dialogic discourse genres that will serve to delimit them with clear criteria for their learning and assessment.

In addition to this lack of a systematic typology, difficulty arises from the ‘occluded’ (Swales 1996) or ‘semi-occluded’ (Samraj and Monk 2008) nature of many spoken genres used in the language classroom, especially when it comes to assessing L2/AL oral competence-in-performance. As a result, participants do not know exactly what is expected of them in the oral communication task; what their communicative behaviour should be; what their role is; what the purpose of the interaction is; how to start, continue and conclude; what linguistic structures to use; etc. These speech genres need to be thoroughly described in order for learners to assimilate them. They are indeed crucial for language students, because successfully using them will demonstrate their oral communication skills.

### *2.1.1. Sociocultural dimension*

In communicative ‘activities’, it is necessary to know how to ‘act’ in oral production in each language and each sociocultural context, what can and cannot be said in each discourse genre, and how to say it (in keeping with social conventions), whether in an informal conversation, a debate, an exchange of opinions, etc. In addition, the ability to take a critical stance must be taken into account (Fairclough 1995). This means knowing how to identify the setting of the interaction, the interests served by discourses that are produced, the voices they include (polyphony) and those that are silenced, and the meanings of the linguistic choices made. In other words, it means using language in an active, personal manner, taking a stance with regard to its ideological content. This active approach favours full participation in the sociocultural practices in which the text acquires meaning, by making explicit the student’s and others’ points of view, uncovering the values

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and implicit social representations in the text to be used, and raising awareness of the ways these ideological contents interact with one's own ideas in polyphonic discourse.

### 2.1.2. *Pragmatic dimension*

As specialists in conversation analysis point out (Briz 2000, Cestero 2005), while all conversations are dialogues, not all dialogues are conversations. In order for 'interaction' to occur, there needs to be engagement with another person's words: each participant's contributions need to affect the communicative behaviour of the other participants (this is the nature of action games): thus it is not merely a question of verbally 'acting' for a listener who becomes a speaker in a subsequent turn, but rather of 'inter-acting' with the listener in such a way that he or she truly becomes an 'inter-locutor'.

The pragmatic criteria that need to be considered are the degree of conventionalisation and planning in the interaction, the purpose of the interaction, the roles of the participants and the relation —one of equal or unequal power— between them. Following these criteria, Cestero (2005, 19) describes 'conversation' as involving a low degree of planning, without a predetermined social objective ("talk for talking's sake") and without any specific participant responsible for regulating turn-taking. These features distinguish conversation from other types of interactive communicative activities like transactional interactions (interviews, medical visits, etc.) and institutionalised interactions (debates, panels, etc.).

### 2.1.3. *Textual dimension*

When it comes to the textual dimension, as in pragmatics, the most extensively studied speech genre is colloquial conversation, structured in a hierarchy of units: 'acts' > 'moves' > 'exchanges' > 'turns' > 'topic sequences' (Briz 2000). Various speech acts can belong to a 'move', defined as each of the contributions made by the participants in a conversation. Moves can take the form of 'initiative acts' (offering, inviting, requesting, asking, stating, ordering, etc.) or 'reactive acts' (accepting, responding, rejecting, evaluating positively or negatively, etc.), what Weigand (2009) refers to as the fundamental types of minimal action games.

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If the move of one of the participants is not acknowledged by the other participants, it is not considered a 'turn'. A 'turn' is a "gap or speech position filled with informative productions which are recognised by interlocutors through their manifest, simultaneous attention [...], the unit which causes the conversation to progress within a certain order" (Briz 2000, 235: translation ours). Thus, a move by a speaker which is not acknowledged by the floor-holder is not, strictly speaking, a 'turn'. Moves that are not turns are considered 'supporting turns' (Cestero 2005) or 'backchannels' (Yngve 1970). 'Backchannels' are characterized by their particular communicative functions, such as expressing agreement, understanding, attention, appreciation, conclusion or completion of the turn in process, recapitulation, knowledge and reaffirmation. In language learning, it is of fundamental importance to know the ways in which different cultures use backchannels.

The 'turn-taking' which organises conversation is governed by the 'principle of alternation'. 'Transition-relevance places' in a conversation use various types of verbal, prosodic and gestural cues (and silences) to make this turn-taking predictable, along with the endings and the beginnings of turns. Thus, transition or alternation between turns is organized in dialogue in such a way that it is possible to identify when it is appropriate to start a new turn and when it is not. Finally, interruptions of turns are also culturally interpreted in terms of the rules of each language.

The combination of exchanges creates different types of topical or functional sequences: a 'conversational sequence' is characterised by a change in discourse activity. Three macrosequences or macropropositions (Adam 1992) appear in dialogues: an opening one (which uses formulaic language routines, Van Dijk 1978), the body of the dialogue (the core sequence or topic sequences) and the closing sequence (also characterized by routine language or formalities. In addition to these three parts, Van Dijk (1978) identifies as part of the general structure of conversation a preparatory sequence that follows the opening, a sequence orientating towards the topic of conversation and a conclusion or summary preceding the closing sequence. The opening and closing sequences serve to 'frame' the conversation (Cestero 2005). Other sequential units can be identified if there are topic

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changes (and topic changes are, after all, one of the defining characteristics of conversations), whether these are ‘linked’ (hierarchically equal) or ‘inserted’ one into another (Cestero 2005).

Linguistic (lexicogrammatical) mechanisms are also relevant in accounting for the textual dimension of discourse genres. In a learning situation, they serve to show the degree of learners’ language competence.

## **2.2. Spoken discourse genres in the CEFR (2018): Assessment criteria**

For the general language learner, the CEFR (2018, 83) offers specific descriptors of eight interactive oral communication activities, using a more notional-functional orientation (with macrofunctions) than a dialogical one. However, only four of these communicative activities can properly be regarded as speech genres: ‘conversation’, ‘informal discussion’, ‘formal discussion (meetings)’ and ‘interviewing and being interviewed’. The other four interaction types do not correspond to genres, but rather belong to heterogeneous levels of description: ‘information exchange,’ ‘goal-oriented co-operation’, ‘obtaining goods and services’ and ‘using telecommunications’.

We can relate the first part of the oral communication in our corpus (the exchange of opinions) with the rubric for ‘information exchange provided by the CEFR (2018, 90) for B1-level skills: “Can summarise and give his or her opinion about a short story, article, talk, discussion interview, or documentary and answer further questions of detail”. The oral exchange activity which we analyse below shares these characteristics. Furthermore, the CEFR (2018, 100-102) describes three types of classroom interaction strategies, namely *taking the floor (turn-taking)*, *cooperating*, *asking for clarification* [sic], which are considered crucial components of the ability to participate in collaborative learning. However, they are not related to any specific speech genres.

The CEFR lists six criteria to assess general oral communication: ‘range’, ‘accuracy’, ‘fluency’, ‘interaction’, ‘coherence’ and ‘phonology’. These criteria also correspond to

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different dimensions or levels of linguistic analysis: ‘phonology’ to phonetics and phonology, ‘range’ and ‘accuracy’ to the lexicogrammatical level, ‘interaction’ and ‘coherence’ (understood by the CEFR as ‘cohesion’) to the textual level and ‘fluency’ to communication strategies. Discourse competence-in-performance as we defined it at the beginning of this section consists of knowing which aspects of ‘range’, ‘accuracy’, ‘coherence’, etc. characterise each of the different speech genres in particular.

### **2.3. Description of speech genres**

To focus assessment on particular oral speech genres, we need to differentiate between two broad types of conversation, ‘colloquial’ and ‘formal’ conversation. As dialogues managed by multiple participants, these conversation types possess the following features or defining conditions of production and reception (following the model proposed by Briz and Grupo Val.Es.Co 2002, Fernández and Albelda 2008):

- Three primary features: goal of the interaction (interactive/interpersonal or transactional), presence or absence of discourse planning and register (degree of formality)
- Four colloquialising features: type of social/functional relationship between interlocutors (hierarchical or between peers), closeness or distance in terms of shared experience (common background between participants), interaction setting (physical location of interlocutors and the role it plays) and topic of the dialogue.

These features allow us to establish degrees of formality in speech genres, relating them to the more immediate context of discourse production and, thus, with the register used. As ours is a holistic and didactic perspective, we find it relevant to consider, in addition to the pragmatic dimension (§2.1.2), the other two dimensions described above: sociocultural (§2.1.2), and textual (§2.1.3). In Table 1, we summarize the features of four speech genres likely to be taught and learnt at a B1 level, including these three dimensions, named with transparent labels —some of them, such as *pragmatic*, not directly in accordance with the current state of the art— but better known by our students. We list the features of the conversation (informal/formal) as a prototypically oral genre (see above); additionally, we describe the ‘discussion’ and the guided interview as speech genres that would correspond,

in the classroom, to each of the parts of the exam we have analysed, namely the exchange of opinions and the guided interview.

**Table 1.** Parameters to describe different speech genres

| <b>Parameters</b>                         | <b>Informal conversation</b>  | <b>Formal conversation</b>  | <b>Discussion</b>   | <b>Guided interview</b>   |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| <b>SOCIOCULTURAL DIMENSION</b>            |   |   |   |   |
| interaction setting                       | + everydayness  | – everydayness  | – everydayness  | – everydayness  |
| conventionalisation                       | – turn regulation   | – turn regulation   | + turn regulation   | + turn control  |
| <b>PRAGMATIC DIMENSION</b>                |   |   |   |   |
| topic                                     | + general/familiar<br>– predetermined   | + general<br>– predetermined                                      | – general<br>+ predetermined  | +/- general<br>+ predetermined                                  |
| goal (interpersonal, transactional)       | + interpersonal, interactive  | + transactional   | + transactional   | + transactional   |
| degree of planning                        | – planning  | + planning  | +/- planning  | + planning  |
| register                                  | – formal, colloquial  | + formal  | + formal  | + formal  |
| type of social or functional relationship | + equal   | +/- equal   | + equal   | – equal   |
| common background                         | + shared  | – shared  | – shared  | – shared  |
| <b>TEXTUAL DIMENSION</b>                  |   |   |   |   |
| conversational sequences                  | + frame sequences,<br>+ several topic sequences<br>+ frequent side sequences                                  | + frame sequences<br>+ one core sequence                          | + several topic sequences   | – frame sequences<br>+ one core sequence<br>– lateral sequences |
| turn-taking                               | + frequent overlaps (speaking simultaneously)   | +/- overlaps  | + turn designation by a moderator                                       | – overlaps  |
| backchannels                              | + frequent and varied backchannels  | + backchannels signalling attention                               | – backchannels  | + backchannels signalling understanding                         |
| linguistic and paralinguistic components  | + routine opening and closing formulas<br>+ use of deixis<br>+ ellipsis<br>+ conversational discourse markers | + formalities<br>– ellipsis<br>+ conversational discourse markers | + formalities<br>– ellipsis<br>– discourse markers focusing on distance | + formalities<br>– ellipsis<br>+ epistemic discourse markers    |

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In this way, we can describe different speech genres to facilitate learning and assessment, rooting our description in text linguistics, discourse studies and dialogue analysis.

### **3. CORPUS AND METHODOLOGY**

The corpus in this study is composed of nine oral production tasks collected during the final exam of a B1-level course (June 2017) at a university centre dedicated to teaching foreign languages. Eighteen students of French participated (5 male and 13 female).<sup>2</sup> Their L1 was Catalan or Spanish, and most were bilingual in those two languages. To ensure anonymity, each student is identified here by a number preceded by the letter S (for ‘student’), from S1 to S18.

The oral exam studied here consisted of two parts: a) an exchange of opinions between peers regarding the topic dealt with in a text, and b) a ‘guided interview’ (which is asymmetrical given the fact that, although it can take the form of a more or less lengthy conversation, it does not involve the freedom of topic characteristic of a conversation). The pairs of students who participated in the study were selected from among the full group by the teacher-rater on the basis of their being pairs “who had a friendly relationship, to put them at ease, as a lot of the students in the group are quite shy”, in her own words. Prior to the exam proper, each pair of students was given a short text on a somewhat controversial topic, to serve as a ‘trigger’ for oral expression.<sup>3</sup> The text was accompanied by some questions to guide the students’ interaction. The two students were separated and given 15 minutes to read and understand the text, take notes and prepare their opinions. They then entered the examination room and were seated at a table facing each other and the teacher-rater. The oral exam, which was intended to last about ten minutes, followed a fixed sequence. In the first stage, the students (S) shared points of view with each other (S-S). In the second part, the teacher-rater also participated, helping to get stalled production restarted and, perhaps, elicit other types of spoken interaction.

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<sup>2</sup> To ensure an ethical use of data, the students signed an informed consent form.

<sup>3</sup> Here, three topics were proposed: 1) social networks, 2) volunteering and 3) truthfulness in news. See Appendix.

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The resulting nine oral productions were digitally recorded and orthographically transcribed (or transliterated) to enable analysis. Student errors in French (morphological, syntactic or lexical) were transliterated as spoken, as were the occasional uses of their L1 (Catalan or Spanish). Since the recordings did not include video, we restricted our analysis to verbal aspects, and excluded non-verbal cues such as gestures, gaze, posture, etc.

By way of illustration, an extract from the transcript of one exchange is shown in (1). Beginnings of turns are labelled with lower-case Roman numerals between brackets.

(1)

(i) S6— *J'utilise le Facebook, l'Instagram, le WhatsApp.*

‘I use the Facebook, the Instagram, the WhatsApp.’

S5— *Ah, oui, les mêmes.*

‘Oh, yes, the same.’

S6— *J'ai essayé de non, de ne pas mettre sur l'Internet des photos de quand je fais de la fête ou comme ça... mais peut-être un autre personne les mis. Et tu, quelles utilises?*

‘I have tried to no, to not put photos on the Internet of when I go partying or like that...but perhaps another person puts them. And you, which ones do you use?’

(ii) S5— *Moi, j'utilise aussi Facebook, Instagram et WhatsApp, principalement pour parler, parfois publier des photos et parce que [...]*

‘I also use Facebook, Instagram and WhatsApp, mainly to chat, sometimes publish some photos and because [...]

Here we observe that the first move by S5 counts not as a turn but rather as a backchannel, since s/he does not wish to take the floor but simply reaffirm her/his partner's statement.

Conditioned by the nature of our data, we carried out first an overall quantitative analysis of the data, then a discourse analysis, using the conversation analysis approach mentioned in the theoretical framework above, and the dialogue perspective of action games.

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#### 4. ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

In Table 2, we present descriptive results for the duration of the two parts of the oral exam, that is, the exchange of opinions between students (S-S) and the guided interview (S-S-T), as well as the difference between the two durations.

**Table 2.** Duration of the two parts of the oral exam

| Pair          | Length in minutes |              |              | difference<br>S-S vs. S-S-T |
|---------------|-------------------|--------------|--------------|-----------------------------|
|               | S-S               | S-S-T        | total        |                             |
| 1             | 3.36              | 3.34         | 6.7          | 0.02                        |
| 2             | 4.22              | 2.16         | 6.38         | 2.06                        |
| 3             | 5.14              | 3.39         | 8.53         | 1.75                        |
| 4             | 3.39              | 3.15         | 6.54         | 0.24                        |
| 5             | 5.21              | 4.15         | 9.36         | 1.06                        |
| 6             | 5.26              | 5.01         | 10.27        | 0.25                        |
| 7             | 5.16              | 3.42         | 8.58         | 1.74                        |
| 8             | 5.12              | 3.37         | 8.49         | 1.75                        |
| 9             | 3.0               | 3.59         | 6.59         | -0.59                       |
| <b>Totals</b> | <b>39.86</b>      | <b>31.58</b> | <b>71.44</b> | <b>8.28</b>                 |
| <b>Mean</b>   | <b>4.43</b>       | <b>3.51</b>  | <b>7.94</b>  | <b>0.92</b>                 |

The total length of the corpus was almost 72 minutes. We observe that only two of the pairs (5 and 6 in the table) talked for the full 10 minutes planned for in the instructions. The mean duration of the oral exam per pair was 8.28 minutes. In general, the first part of the exam (the exchange of opinions) was roughly 1'30" longer than the second (the guided interview), except in three cases where both durations were similar (pairs 1, 4 and 6). Only pair 9 distances itself from this trend, because the dialogue between the two students was notably shorter than what we see in the other pairs. Perhaps for this reason, the transcript shows the teacher trying to lead them to produce more speech, in order to have more material to assess.

Below we present an analysis of the data following the units of analysis related to the textual dimension which we laid out in our theoretical framework. A discussion of the conversational sequences seen in the data (§4.1) is followed by analyses of, respectively,

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turn-taking, S-S (§4.2), S-S-T (§4.3), backchannels (§4.4) and finally the linguistic resources deployed by the participants (§5.5).

#### **4.1. Conversational sequences: framing and topic sequences**

Regarding the opening sequence, the pairs of students do not present a single approach to starting the exchange: two of the nine pairs start with a greeting, a classic linguistic routine (*bonjour* [hello])<sup>4</sup> in action games; the majority, however, enter directly into the exam task, applying one of the following two strategies:

- a) In four of the seven exchanges, one of the participants takes the initiative and reformulates a question from the instructions to make their partner express a position on the topic. The students are aware that the expectation in the task is for them to produce standard exchanges.<sup>5</sup>
- b) In the three remaining cases, one of the participants starts in directly with the exam material, describing and justifying their experience with the assigned topic. In fact, these productions are often short monologues that go uninterrupted by their interlocutor—or at most receive backchannels with different functions (see below) which end when the student yields their turn.

An initial observation regarding language pedagogy is that there appears to be a need to contextualize the activity so that students will know whether ritual opening formulas are necessary, and so that they can adapt the register used, politeness markers, etc. to the communicative situation.

The first part of the exam is brought to a more or less abrupt end by the instructor making a move. Responsibility for ending this part thus does not lie with the learners. However, the two students have joint responsibility for how the exchange proceeds, in other words, the

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<sup>4</sup> It is not clear whether these students greeted each other because they believed greetings to be a requirement of the genre or because doing so would allow them to break the ice or buy time, although the latter seems unlikely given that pairs had to wait together for some time before it was their turn to take the exam.

<sup>5</sup> From a linguistic point of view, we observe that they convert the question with subject-verb inversion (characteristic of a formal register) into an *est-ce que* interrogative, characteristic of neutral register.

topics engaged with in the core sequence in the first part of the exam, the amount of discourse they produce and the way they manage their moves throughout the exchange. Table 3 shows the number of turns students take in the part corresponding to the S-S dialogue. We observe that the average turn duration is 0.46 seconds, that three of the pairs (3, 7 and 8) approach one minute and that one pair (4) goes longer than a minute. This means that, unlike the typical situation in spontaneous conversation (Cestero 2007), these students produce long or very long moves more typical of monological discourses than conversational exchanges. Bearing in mind that the characteristics of the context in which the *échanges* are produced, it seems as if the students are aware of the need to produce a maximum of speech in an exam assessing oral speaking and interaction, so as to give the teacher-rater sufficient content to assign a mark, although this may entail transgressing conversational rules, provided students are aware of them.

**Table 3.** Number and duration of turns in S-S dialogues

| Pair          | Number of turns | Duration in seconds |             |
|---------------|-----------------|---------------------|-------------|
|               |                 | Mean of the turn    |             |
| 1             | 11              | 3.36                | 0.31        |
| 2             | 10              | 4.22                | 0.42        |
| 3             | 9               | 5.14                | 0.57        |
| 4             | 5               | 3.39                | 0.68        |
| 5             | 14              | 5.21                | 0.37        |
| 6             | 11              | 5.26                | 0.48        |
| 7             | 9               | 5.16                | 0.57        |
| 8             | 10              | 5.12                | 0.51        |
| 9             | 8               | 3                   | 0.38        |
| <b>Totals</b> | <b>87</b>       | <b>39.86</b>        | <b>0.46</b> |
| <b>Mean</b>   | <b>9.67</b>     | <b>4.43</b>         | <b>0.46</b> |

Regarding turn-taking procedures, the transcript shows that students yield the floor in two ways. On occasions, due to the constraints of the exam context in which they are required to exchange opinions, the students directly ask their partner's opinion once they have finished giving their own. For example, in (2), S8 talks about the use she makes of the

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digital press; on concluding, she apparently regards her contribution to the dialogue on the topic as adequate and asks her partner a direct question, which cannot be ignored.

(2)

S8— [...] *moi si je veux suivre l'actualité, je cherche information que je veux savoir sur l'Internet, avec mon ordinateur, ahhh je cherche, pour exemple les journaux digitales. Si je veux pour exemple un restaurant, je prends le journal mais je ne l'achète pas parce je crois que ce n'est pas nécessaire, tu peux trouver l'information sur l'Internet. Qu'est-ce que tu en penses?*

'[...] if I want to follow current events, I look for information I want to know on the Internet, with my computer, ah I look, for example digital newspapers. If I want for example a restaurant, I take the newspaper but I don't buy it because I think it's not necessary, you can find the information on the Internet. What do you think about this?'

On other occasions, the turn-taking system is more genuinely conversational, not forced by the academic context. In these instances, the speech act used by the student yielding the floor can be one of several: a request for clarity, a request for an opinion (more or less unrelated to the text topic), etc. In (3), S11 describes her experience as a volunteer in a South African school and S12 shows interest and asks for details about what S11 says.

(3)

(i) S11— *Oui, l'été dernière je suis allée en Afrique du Sud pendant quatre semaines et, oui j'ai fait de bénévolat là : j'étais la professeure des enfants de quatre ans dans une école à Cape Town.*

'Yes, last summer I went to South Africa for four weeks and, yes I volunteered there: I was the teacher of four-year-old students in a school in Cape Town.'

(ii) S12— *Et qu'est-ce que vous enseignez aux enfants?*

'And what do you teach the children?'

S11— *Pardon?*

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‘Pardon?’

S12— *Qu’est-ce que vous enseignez aux enfants?*

‘What do you teach the children?’

(iii) S11— *Simplement je jouais avec les enfants et de temps en temps je lisais un livre. Mais ils étaient petits, donc, on faisait des jeux et des choses faciles, pas des... des leçons de grammaire ou pas du tout.*

‘I just played with the children and now and then I read a book. But they were young, so we did some games and some easy things, not any ... any grammar lessons or not at all.’

Additionally, a change in turn can be caused by a student’s inability to successfully finish a turn. In these cases, an incomplete utterance with sustained pitch invites the partner to speak, whether by taking full responsibility for continuing the exchange, or by cooperating to help solve a specific problem. In (4), we see that S15 has certain fluency-related difficulties, such as repetitions and the use of filled pauses (*ehm*) (Poyatos 1994, Norrick 1995). This student fails to finish the utterance because of her/his inability to come up with the term *version papier* [print edition] which contrasts with *version numérique* [digital edition]; the transitive clause remains incomplete, with no explicit direct object.

(4)

(i) S16— *[...] et tu peux avoir le journal sur le portable.*

‘[...] and you can have the newspaper on your laptop.’

(ii) S15— *Ah, oui, oui ehm chez moi, par exemple, ehm mes mes parents utilisent seulement ehm leur tablette pour ehm pour pour pour lire pour lire les journaux. Ils ils n’utilisent pas ehm de ehm ...*

‘Oh, yes, yes ehm at my house, for example, ehm my parents only use ehm their tablet to ehm to to to read to read newspapers. They don’t use ehm any ehm...’

S16— *De portable?*

‘Laptop?’

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S15— *Oui, non, le portable ou les journaux ehm physiques...*

‘Yes, no, the laptop or newspapers ehm physical...’

S16— *En papier?*

‘On paper?’

S15— *En papier, oui, ehm parce que c’est c’est c’est simplement plus pratique de regarder avec la tablette.*

‘On paper, yes, ehm because it’s it’s it’s just more practical to look with the tablet.’

Lastly, we observe in our data that, unlike what parallel studies indicate (Acosta, in press), there are no long periods of silence signalling the end of a turn to a partner: any silences are created by the partner delaying the start of a turn.

As mentioned above, in some instances, student moves in the opinion exchange part of the exam are nearly ‘monological forms’ that alternate as the task progresses, characterised by considerable length and explicit turn-taking and turn-ending cues. In other cases, turns are shorter and alternate rapidly in fragments with characteristics nearer to ‘dialogic forms’. Some of these episodes match speech co-construction strategies whose objective is to repair obstacles to communication and help the partner avoid losing face in the exam setting. These obstacles often stem from difficulties in students’ lexical competence, not only with supposedly difficult words, but also with some which are taught in the beginning stages of L2/AL learning. In (5), S6 is unable to find the French word for *nouvelles* (‘news’) and S5 contributes it (having already used it in the first reply).

(5)

- (i) S5— *Moi, j’utilise aussi Facebook, Instagram et WhatsApp, principalement pour parler, parfois publier des photos et parce que mes amis sont, par exemple, j’ai une amie qui habite pas ici ou des pages de séries et de nouvelles, rechercher des plans pour faire le weekend, no sé.*

‘I also use Facebook, Instagram and WhatsApp, mainly to chat, sometimes publish photos and because my friends are, for example, I have a friend who

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doesn't live here or pages of series or news, look for plans to do at the weekend, *no sé* [I don't know].'

- (ii) S6— *Oui, c'est très utile pour communiquer avec des amis qui vivent à un autre pays ou dans un autre cité, bueno village, aussi pour être connectée, lire des ahmmm*

'Yes, it's very useful for communicating with friends who live in another country or in another district, *bueno* [well] village, also to be connected, read some ahmmm'

S5—*Nouvelles.*

'News.'

S6—*Nouvelles, ...*

'News...'

We can see that in (5) acceptance of the term proffered is expressed by repeating the term, but S6 does not continue with the explanation of the utility of social networks because at that moment she is interrupted by the teacher.

#### 4.2. Turn-taking in S-S (*échange*)

Having described the typical strategies used, we will now analyse the ways in which these students signal transitions between turns. Changes in conversation need to be signalled (Cestero 2005) so that the interlocutor is aware of their responsibility to advance the interaction. Our data reveals two different approaches to signalling transition, depending on whether the participant wishing to yield the floor marks the transition or not. In 48.6% of cases, transitions are not linguistically marked, but the speaker signals a transition by simply ceasing to speak, as seen in (6).

(6)

- (i) S10— *Oui, par exemple si tu as un ami, par exemple on Facebook et ton ami eeee pose des photos avec, tu viens, situations, ne pas professionnelles, c'est dangereux... oui, ouais c'est un danger.*

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‘Yes, for example if you have a friend, for example on Facebook and your friend eeeeh poses some photos with, you come, situations, not professional, it’s dangerous ... yes, yeah it’s a danger.’

- (ii) S9— *Oui, et c’est important aussi de lire, non lire, mais tenir les, eee tout la privacité bien contrôlée parce que, sinon, tout le monde peut voir tes photos et toutes ces choses.*

‘Yes, and it’s important also to read, not read, but hold the, eeeh all the privacy well monitored because, otherwise, everyone can see your photos and all the things.’

In the remaining 51.3%, turn-taking cues are observed, predominantly (76.3%) through the formulation of a question, with other types of markers (23.6%) being less frequent. Thus, it appears that questions are the favoured strategy for signalling that the speaker wishes to end a turn. These questions, which frequently could stand alone as a turn, have two principal functions:

- a) To ask the partner a direct question about the topic under discussion (S5: *Alors, est-ce que tu penses que les réseaux sociaux sont un danger maintenant?* ‘So, do you think social media are a danger now?’; S10: *Alors, est-ce que tu penses que les réseaux sociaux sont un danger maintenant?* ‘So, do you think social media are a danger now?’),
- b) To ask for the partner’s opinion about what was said regarding the topic (S3: *Tu penses ça aussi?* ‘Do you think so, too?’; S18: *Et vous, qu’est-ce que tu penses?* ‘And you, what do you think?’; S4: *Toi?* ‘You?’).

Other resources used to indicate a change of turn include the greetings mentioned above and some more or less categorical expressions used to end a turn: S3: *je pense*, ‘I think’, S6: *Et tout ça*, ‘and all that’ S10: *Yo qué sé*. [L1] ‘What do I know!’

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### 4.3. Turn-taking in S-S-T (guided interview)

As mentioned above, the teacher's move marks the end of the peer-to-peer portion of the opinion exchange and initiates the part we term 'guided interview'. Her moves are intended to pursue the topic in greater depth, generally by means of a question that connects to what the students have previously said: *Alors, j'ai une question, justement...* 'So, I have a question, actually' (pair 1); *L., tu disais tout à l'heure que (...).* 'you were just saying that...' *T'as pas la sensation que ça détourne l'objectif, qu'on est un peu égoïste finalement?* 'Don't you feel that that changes the reason, that in the end one is a little bit self-centred?' (pair 6). In other cases, what is put forward is an invitation for students to speak: *Qu'est-ce que vous pensez du titre du texte?* 'What do you think about the title of the text?' (pair 9).

After the teacher takes the floor and starts managing the interaction, she is also the one who decides when the exam is over and does so when she believes she has enough data to assess the participants. In her moves she uses a colloquial register and various expressions of approval or compliment (*d'accord* 'O.K.', *ça marche* 'that's all right', *super* 'great', *parfait* 'perfect') always followed by the expression of thanks *merci* 'thanks'. In half of the instances, students react, again, using linguistic routines, through expressions of approval (*très bien* 'very good', *d'accord* 'O.K.') or thanks (*merci* 'thanks', *merci beaucoup* 'thanks a lot'), two speech acts directly related to politeness; in the other half, the students do not react to the teacher's moves and it is the teacher who declares the task completed.

Table 4 shows the number of turns and their durations in the guided interview. The mean duration of turns is 0.28 seconds, noticeably lower than that for S-S dialogues. The brevity of pair 1's turns is noteworthy due to the fact that both students are very active and have a high number of turns, which brings their dialogue very near to a genuine conversation. In contrast, pairs 3 and 6 have the longest average durations, more than half a minute. Two distinct patterns emerge here: in pair 3, S5's moves are nearly only speaker's action (without interlocutor's reaction), while S6 participates very little; in pair 6, however, both students demonstrate long, nearly 'monological-forms'.

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**Table 4.** Duration and number of turns in S-S-T dialogues

| Pair   | Number of turns | Length in seconds         |      |
|--------|-----------------|---------------------------|------|
|        |                 | Mean duration of the turn |      |
| 1      | 26              | 3.34                      | 0.13 |
| 2      | 9               | 2.16                      | 0.24 |
| 3      | 8               | 3.39                      | 0.42 |
| 4      | 10              | 3.15                      | 0.32 |
| 5      | 20              | 4.15                      | 0.21 |
| 6      | 12              | 5.01                      | 0.42 |
| 7      | 11              | 3.42                      | 0.31 |
| 8      | 15              | 3.37                      | 0.22 |
| 9      | 16              | 3.59                      | 0.22 |
|        |                 | 31.5                      |      |
| Totals | 127             | 8                         | 2.49 |
| Mean   | 14.1            | 3.51                      | 0.28 |

The turn-taking procedures in the second part of the exam are more complex than in the first due to the participation of three persons, one of whom is in a situation of ‘power’. The teacher is responsible for managing the interview, and can directly request an answer from one of the participants, as we see in the following examples: *S15, tu es d’accord?* ‘do you agree?’ *C’est ça aussi?* ‘Is that also true?’; *O. K. Et toi, S1, tu fais comment, alors?* ‘O.K. And you, S1, what do you do, then?’. However, student self-selection in response to questions not directly addressed to any one student in particular has a different dynamic, which we do not have space to expand on here.

Suffice it to say that we have observed dialogues in which the teacher interacts with one of the students, then with the other (with a variable number of turns); exchanges initiated by the teacher in which both students participate in a balanced manner; and others in which an imbalance perceived by the teacher leads her to nominate one of the students, as we have just seen. This is why we describe this second sequence as a ‘guided interview’.

Two strategies regarding turn-signalling mechanisms are used by the teacher: questions (see above) and requests for confirmation about the content of what has been said: *D’accord, tu vérifies la place qu’il prend dans les moteurs de recherche* ‘O.K., you confirm the place it occupies in search engines’ (pair 5); *Vous voulez dire que ça permet d’exprimer sa*

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*personnalité* ‘You mean that it lets people express their personality’ (pair 6); *D’accord. Donc tu crois ce qui est officiel et le reste...* ‘O.K. So you believe what is official and the rest...’ (pair 4).

#### **4.4. Backchannels**

Apart from turn-taking, verbal interaction means knowing how to appropriately use aids for joint dialogue management (plurimanagement): this allows the speaker to demonstrate their active participation in the conversation without co-opting the turn. In part 4.1, we concluded that the dialogues being studied can be characterized as a series of turns alternating between the two or three partners, in which backchannels are minimally present. We could hypothesise that the stress of the exam setting leads students that do not have the floor to be more focused on preparing for their next turn, rather than showing their active participation to their interlocutor. Given the infrequency of occurrences, we do not present a statistical description but will proceed directly to the qualitative analysis.

Both simple and compound forms are present in the backchannels observed (Oreström 1983): *ouais* ‘yeah’ (S1), *d’accord* ‘O.K.’ (S3), *oui, oui, oui* ‘yes, yes, yes’ (S9), *moi aussi* ‘me too’ (S14). As for their values, following Cestero’s (2000) classification, we observe a variety of functions for student-produced backchannels.<sup>6</sup>

The use of backchannels signalling attention varies between pairs and becomes more frequent as spoken turns become shorter and more numerous. Their function is to show that the listener is following the message (Cestero 2000, 31). Linguistically, only the discourse marker *oui* appears in our corpus (it also appears repeated: *oui, oui, oui*), as seen in (7), where S9 has the floor and S10 gives signals of following S9’s move.

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<sup>6</sup> We focus on student backchannels, given that the teacher’s degree of conversational competence is of a higher order of magnitude and is not our primary object of study.

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(7)

- (i) S9— *Je ne sais pas, c'est un peu dangereux, aussi. Mais si tu fasses la bonne utilisation, je crois que eeee elles sont utiles, pour exemple par contacter avec tes amis des autres parts de monde...*

‘I don't know, it's a little dangerous, too. But if you make proper use of them, I think that eeeh they are useful, for example by contact with your friends from the other parts of world...’

S10— *Oui...*

‘Yes...’

S9— *... par contacter avec tes amis des autres parts de monde, parce que, je ne sais pas, tu n'as pas le temps de parler avec tous tes amis et...*

‘...by contact with your friends from the other parts of world, because, I don't know, you don't have time to talk with all your friends and...’

S10—*Et au même temps.*

‘And at the same time.’

S9— *Oui, oui, oui. Et alors comme ils, je ne sais pas, comme ils font quelque poste ou au Facebook tu peux suivre ça que ils font, alors...*

‘Yes, yes, yes. And then since they, I don't know, since they make some post or on Facebook you can follow that what they do, so...’

- (ii) S10— *Tu peux commenter la photo ou... tu parlais avec un ami de... en Afrique ou en Amérique ou un ami de l'enfance aussi...*

‘You can comment on the photo or... you were speaking with a friend from... in Africa or in America or a friend from childhood also...’

S9— *Oui, oui, oui.*

‘Yes, yes, yes.’

Backchannels signalling agreement serve to show agreement with the content of the message being produced (or which has already produced) by the speaker holding the floor. In other words, they allow a participant to show agreement with their interlocutor (see below §4.5 regarding linguistic resources). Backchannels signalling concluding clearly

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contribute to the co-construction of the exchange; in it, participants not holding the floor help their interlocutor finish an utterance or part of an utterance. Thus, they are eminently cooperative. In (8), S1 finishes an utterance which S2 has left incomplete, lacking the direct object of the verb *avoir*, essential for the utterance to make sense.

(8)

(i) S2— *Nous sommes responsables, mais la plateforme n'a pas...*

‘We are responsible, but the platform does not have...’

S1— *... de responsabilité directe.*

‘direct responsibility.’

S2— *Ouais.*

‘Yeah.’

As for recapitulative backchannels (i.e., those containing a summary of the utterance in the turn), they are notably infrequent in the corpus. This is probably due to the fact that the participants are more interested in expressing their own opinions than reformulating someone else’s. In (9), following a noticeably long turn from S11, S12 shows agreement (*oui* ‘yes’) and summarises in a single utterance S11’s discourse on the importance of skills students can acquire during their education for when it comes time to choose a job. S12 shortens the contents of the turn by affirming that employers take both marks and previous experience into account.

(9)

(i) S11— *Oui, parce que, par exemple, imaginez-vous, imaginez que vous êtes les recruteurs, ou moi, je suis le recruteur, d'accord? Et alors je veux un étudiant pour un stage. Je ne vais le demander ahhh... éducation supérieure ou tout ça, je le demanderai si vous savez Excel si vous avez fait des expériences à l'université, si vous avez des activités à l'université et, par contre, imaginez-vous que je veux trouver un contrôleur, c'est par exemple, un poste dans un département financier. Vous voulez éducation supérieure, de l'expérience en ce poste et tout ça. C'est très différente la manière d'évaluer.*

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‘Yes, because, for example, imagine yourself, imagine that you are the recruiters, or me, I’m the recruiter, O.K.? And then I want a student for an internship. I’m not going to require of them ahhh... higher education or all that, I will ask them if you know Excel if you have had some experiences at university, if you have some activities at university and, on the other hand, imagine yourself that I want to find a comptroller, it’s for example, a position in a financial department. You want higher education, experience in this position and all that. It’s very different how you assess.’

S12— *Oui, ça dépend du travail aussi de les qualifications que les recruteurs cherchent.*

‘Yes, it depends on the job also on the qualifications that the recruiters are looking for.’

Finally, reaffirming backchannels consist of a question to confirm the content of the utterance in progress, encouraging the speaker to keep the floor, but offer more information (Cestero 2000, 44). In (10), S10 describes personal Instagram use and a recent change of habit regarding privacy; S9 responds with a question aimed at getting S10 to say what the advantages of S10’s chosen security measures are.

(10)

(i) S10— *Et j’ai Instagram, mais je l’ai fait complètement privé, le mois dernier, alors, je le contrôle un peu, yo qué sé.*

‘And I have Instagram, but I’ve made it completely private, last month, so, I control it a little, *yo qué sé* [what do I know].’

S9— *C’est mieux privé que publique?*

‘Private is better than public?’

S10— *Oui, parce que des gens emmm voient mes photos et commentaires, gens que je ne sais pas qui sont, alors ça... c’est que je l’ai fait privé. Et le Twitter, je l’ai publié mais...*

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‘Yes, because some people ehmmm see my photos and comments, people who I don’t know who they are, so that... it’s that I’ve made it private. And the Twitter, I have it public but...’

#### 4.5. Linguistic resources

Regarding analysis of the linguistic dimension of the students’ oral production, the *Référentiel* (Béacco et al. 2011) for B1-level French as an L2/AL provides an inventory of forms corresponding with the three principal discourse functions involved: expressing a point of view, expressing agreement and expressing disagreement. For each of these functions, the *Référentiel* includes a list of utterances representing what learners should acquire at a B1 level (as well as what they should already have acquired), although the authors clarify that “These are not guidelines for utterances learners/users are expected to produce” and that “It is by no means a matter of privileging its [the *Référentiel*’s] French forms as a teaching objective” (Béacco et al. 2011, 43, translation ours). On balance, we believe that determining the gap between this repertoire and the linguistic forms produced by students in the exam data will allow us to describe oral competence-in-performance in the sort of oral exam we are studying.

As mentioned above, the task proposed to the students is designed to have them express a rationally argued point of view. Analysing the strategies applied by the students to argue their positions goes beyond the scope of this article, so we will limit our analysis to the linguistic procedures they use to express their point of view, given that they are related to the sequential structuring of the exchanges described above, as well as to the critical attitude characteristic of a discursively competent user (§2.1.1).

To express their opinions, a majority of learners in our corpus use the verbs *penser* ‘think’, *croire* ‘believe’ and *trouver* ‘find’, which are learned before reaching the B1 level. A clear overuse of the first two (especially *penser*) is observed, perhaps due to the existence of clear equivalent in the L1 (*pensar* ‘think’ in Catalan and Spanish, *creer* ‘believe’ in Spanish / *creure* ‘believe’ in Catalan); the verb *trouver* does have an equivalent in Catalan

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(*trobar*), but not in Spanish.<sup>7</sup> Beyond these forms, we only observe two occurrences of *à mon avis* ‘in my opinion’ (in theory, a discourse marker learned at the A2 level) and two of the form *personnellement* ‘personally’, a form listed as belonging to the B1 level. Thus, expression of opinion is poor in use of forms in our corpus as regards the variety of linguistic resources used: students do not use verbs that would allow them to contrast their own point of view with others’ using quoting in a polyphonic move, one that would show a critical attitude of reacting to something read or said by their partner.

In exchanging opinions, as seen in the corpus, expressing agreement and disagreement is essential to bring the exchange forward. We observe that students tend to support their interlocutor’s opinion and virtually never express disagreement. All things considered, it would be necessary to analyse the instances of the verbs *penser* and *croire* in greater detail, differentiating between affirmative and negative forms, and establish whether negatives are used to express disagreement.

The lack of expression of disagreement could just as well be due to the task design as to the characteristics of the communicative setting: on one hand, expressing personal points of view (as the task requires) does not necessarily entail that the two perspectives will be different; on the other hand, showing disagreement in an exam with a peer could be perceived as a potentially face-threatening act on the part of the students. In fact, of the 18 instances of the adverb *non*, only in one case does it express complete disagreement.

Finally, the function ‘expressing agreement’ can be subdivided into the following sub-functions (following Béacco et al. 2011):

- following a positive or negative formulation,
- with some reservations, and
- admitting certain points.

Our data suggest that students do not express reservations or admit points; they only express overall agreement with their interlocutor’s opinion. The expressions they use to do

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<sup>7</sup> With the function of introducing an opinion.

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so all belong to pre-B1 levels: the adverb *oui / ouais* ‘yes / yeah’,<sup>8</sup> the expression (*je suis*) *d’accord* ‘I agree’ appears 38 times in the corpus and, sporadically, *tu as raison* ‘you’re right’ and *c’est vrai* ‘that’s true’.

## 5. CONCLUSIONS AND PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

In this article we have described a typical oral exam intended to assess discourse competence-in-performance, at the B1 level, as a hybrid language use comprising two specific dialogic *action games*: an exchange of opinions and a guided interview. The hybrid character of the dialogical communication here impacts the opening and closing sequences in the oral exam, the managing of turns in each of the two parts —the first being symmetrical (S-S) and the second asymmetrical (S-S-T)— and the linguistic resources used by the students to change turns and express their point of view. We have identified learning needs for each of these aspects for L2/AL French learners.

In this regard, it is necessary to communicate to students that we use language in dialogue and that, consequently, they have to be aware about which dialogic features characterise the speech genre they will produce in the classroom, as these features will be the criteria applied in the assessment process, including the final exam. It is also a good idea to make them aware of both similarities and differences between the language produced in class and its analogue in non-educational settings. In the particular case we have analysed, it would be advisable to discuss the concept of what an exchange of opinion consists of (using information from our analysis) and what a guided interview entails. The discursive behaviour observed in this study reveals that the dialogue that comes from a text-based opinion exchange in an exam context is not very interactive, unlike what might happen in another context. Similarly, the guided interview analysed here presents certain idiosyncrasies that differentiate it from other types of interview, be they journalistic, professional, etc.

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<sup>8</sup> It would be necessary to analyse the more than 150 instances of the adverb *oui* in our corpus in order to distinguish between its use in negation and as a planning discourse marker (Borreguero and Thörle 2016).

The pedagogical challenge here is to find a way to transfer learning from speech genres practiced in the L2/AL classroom (exchange, interview) to non-educational communicative situations. To achieve this, we are in need of the exact parameters that define each of these genres and must identify what aspects change when used within or outside of the classroom. In this article, we have identified what scientific ‘concepts’ need to be borne in mind when teaching the dialogical genres included in the studied oral exam. We systematise these ‘concepts’ in Table 5 below. Grey shading indicates features shared by the two speech genres included in this study.

**Table 5.** Description of the B1 final exam for assessing L2/AL oral discourse competence

| PARAMETERS                              | Part 1 (S-S)  |                               | Part 2 (S-S-T)   |  |
|---|---|-------------------------------|------------------|--|
|   | EXCHANGE OF OPINIONS                                    |                               | GUIDED INTERVIEW |  |
| SOCIOCULTURAL DIMENSION                 |   |                               |                  |  |
| interaction setting                     | – everydayness: academic                                |                               |                  |  |
| topic                                   | + social  |                               |                  |  |
| PRAGMATIC DIMENSION                     |   |                               |                  |  |
| pedagogical goal                        | + assessment goal: certifying oral discourse competence |                               |                  |  |
| planning                                | + planning  | – planning                    |                  |  |
| register                                | + formal  |                               |                  |  |
| social relation between interlocutors   | + equal   | – equal                       |                  |  |
| common background                       | + shared  | – shared                      |                  |  |
| TEXTUAL DIMENSION                       |   |                               |                  |  |
| conversational sequences                | frame sequences   | closing frame sequence        |                  |  |
|   | one topic sequence                                      | several topic sequences       |                  |  |
| turn-taking                             | no overlaps   |                               |                  |  |
| backchannels                            | few backchannels  | teacher-rater backchannels    |                  |  |
| linguistic and paralinguistic resources | – formalities   | + formalities                 |                  |  |
|   | – routine opening and closing formulas                  | + routine closing formalities |                  |  |
|   | – verbs of opinion                                      |                               |                  |  |

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However, if we accept that the general communicative purpose of dialogue is to come to an understanding, we must acknowledge that this purpose is not the main communicative goal of the students. Actually, they do not seem to be as interested in the interlocutor's actions as in showing the teacher that they can produce a certain amount of discourse.

All these factors must be considered when designing activities and assessment tools from a discourse perspective, so that the student can know how to communicate in each situation, both within and outside the classroom: how to initiate and finalise dialogues in each speech genre, when moves are allowed, how to mark transitions, how to interrupt another person, how to change topics, how to end the dialogue, and so on. All these abilities ('communicative strategies', Robles Garrote 2017) are part of discourse competence-in-performance.

Simply by presenting in class the parameters that indicate how to successfully achieve the communicative behaviour expected in each context, whether academic or non-academic, it will be possible to produce interactive dialogues in which the student acts as a true 'interlocutor'. Discourse competence can be effectively developed by helping to make visible to students those elements that are otherwise 'occluded' or hidden: what 'interaction' involves contributing input on relevant to the topic of discourse, using appropriate backchannels, initiating and reacting, etc., and what linguistic resources can enable it.

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