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Autor: Fasel Lauzon, Virginie
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The interactional architecture of explanations in the second language classroom

Virginie FASEL LAUZON

University of Neuchâtel
Center for Applied Linguistics
Pierre-à-Mazel 7, 2000 Neuchâtel, Switzerland
virginie.fasel@unine.ch

L'explication est une pratique interactionnelle courante tant dans les conversations quotidiennes que dans de nombreuses interactions institutionnelles. Cette pratique ne résiste pas à une description en termes formels, car une explication peut virtuellement prendre une infinité de formes: la valeur explicative d'un segment de parole dépend de sa position séquentielle. Cet article se propose d'esquisser l'éventail des possibilités de réalisation des explications en décrivant l'architecture interactionnelle d'explications en classe de français langue seconde. Les analyses montrent que cette architecture est localement élaborée par les participants, non seulement pour répondre à des enjeux de compréhension au niveau local, mais également au regard d'enjeux plus vastes liés à l'institution dans laquelle prennent place les interactions. On distinguera ainsi entre des épisodes 'émergents', destinés à (r)établir une compréhension mutuelle, et des épisodes 'didactisés', où l'explication est au service d'objectifs d'enseignement/apprentissage. On montrera également que les épisodes explicatifs ne sont pas toujours aisés à délimiter. Néanmoins l'observation des orientations des participants donne des indices sur la manière dont ils envisagent un épisode comme 'en cours' ou terminé.

Mots-clés:

analyse conversationnelle (AC), classe de langue seconde, explication, français langue seconde, interactions en classe, interactions en contexte institutionnel, interactions sociales.

1. Introduction¹

What is an explanation? How are explanations organized in naturally occurring social interactions? How are they used by interactants to achieve institution-specific goals? This contribution aims at answering these questions by providing a conversation analytic (CA) account of explanations in the second language (L2) classroom. The study is based on twenty lessons, each 45 minutes long, video-recorded in French L2 classrooms situated in the Swiss German part of Switzerland. It focuses on describing the interactional organization of dialogic explanations rather than on the linguistic means used to build the core of the explanation (i.e. the *explanans*). The analyses illustrate the wide range of possible realizations for dialogic explanations in the L2 classroom, going from basic short sequences to extended and rather complex instances in which the boundaries of the explanation are blurred. They show that the notion of explanation is best described as a context-sensitive interactional practice whose 'architecture' reflects and accomplishes the

¹ I would like to thank two anonymous reviewers for their valuable comments and suggestions on a first version of this paper.

participants' local concerns (e.g. solving a problem of understanding) but possibly also wider underlying institutional goals (e.g. learning a language).

2. Describing explanation in social interaction: issues and challenges

Explaining is an everyday practice that participants to social interactions generally recognize and put to use unproblematically: every reader of the present paper can certainly say that they have already asked for, heard or produced an explanation. However, explanation has not often been broached as a central analytic object by conversation analytic (CA) studies. One reason for this is that explanation is hard to describe precisely as an *action*. When looking closely at naturally occurring data and attempting to characterize the actions performed by the interactants – a basic analytic step in CA research, see e.g. Pomerantz and Fehr (1997) for a presentation – what can at first glance be characterized as *explaining* can usually also be described as another action, such as informing, answering, accounting, repairing or describing. More problematically, at second glance, any action seems to bear a sort of explanatory value: every turn-at-talk exhibits some understanding of the action(s) performed in the previous turn(s) and thereby at least minimally provides an explanation of what was understood: "in the appropriate context, any utterance [or even none] could be an explanation in some sense" (Antaki 1988: 6).

Because of the wide scope of meaning associated with the notion of explanation and of this difficulty to grasp this scope empirically using *action* as the unit of analysis, CA studies on explanation usually narrow down their focus to one specific category of explanation, which can be more easily described at the level of action. It is the case of CA studies on accounts used in dispreferred first and second pair parts, such as requests and refusals (Heritage 1984a, 1988; Goodwin & Heritage 1990; Sterponi 2003; Taleghani-Nikazm 2006; for an extensive description of dispreferred first and second pair parts, see Schegloff 2007). In these studies, the notion of explanation is sometimes invoked to describe the type of discourse used to perform an account, but explanation and account sometimes also seem to work as synonyms (for a critical discussion, see Fasel Lauzon 2009). Other CA studies focus on specific categories of explanations in institutional settings, documenting explanations as institutional practices. It is the case of CA-SLA classroom studies on instructional explanations (Seedhouse 2009; Koole 2010) and on vocabulary explanations (Markee 1994; Lazaraton 2004; Mortensen 2011; Waring 2013), as well as of studies on causal explanations in medical interactions (Gill 1988; Gill & Maynard 2006).

In this paper we aim at proposing a description of the interactional architecture of dialogic explanations in the L2 classroom. Three categories of explanations

were identified in our data – vocabulary explanations, discourse explanations and explanations of situations (see Fasel Lauzon 2014). However, we aim here at providing a description that is not category-bound, but rather that subsumes all three categories and that is representative of all the instances of our corpus; in other words we aim at providing a generic (rather than category-specific) account of dialogic explanations in the L2 classroom. Following Gülich's (1990) conversation analytic account of explanations and studies in discourse analysis which descriptions converge with that of Gülich (see e.g. Salo I Lloveras 1990; de Gaulmyn 1991; Ducancel 1991; Lepoire 1999), explanation will be broached as a three-part episode made of:

- An opening, where a (potential) problem in understanding and the need to solve it (or to prevent it from emerging) is displayed;
- A core, where a candidate solution to the potential problem in understanding is provided;
- A closing, where the solution provided in the core is accepted and where the problem in understanding is thereby displayed as solved.

Several different actions can be put to use in each of these three parts: for example, an explanation episode may be opened using requests (*what does that mean? could you explain it to me?*) or assessments (*that's really weird, I don't get it*).

This paper aims at describing how actions are organized by participants to shape three-part explanation episodes as an interactional practice. It shows that the organization of explanation episodes is less a matter of linguistic structures than a matter of mutual adjustments and of the participants' exhibited orientations towards the accomplishment (or the 'restoration') of intersubjectivity. For this reason, explanation as an interactional practice can only be described by adopting an emic perspective and by documenting the participants' local orientations to the activities they are involved in.

3. The present study

The data used for the present study consist of 20 L2 French lessons video-recorded at a public high school in German-speaking Switzerland². The recordings were fully transcribed using the conventions of conversation analysis (see Appendix). The lessons mostly consist of discussions on literary works or society issues.

² The data belong to a corpus recorded for the CODI research project (FNS-405640-108663/1). For more information, see Fasel Lauzon (2009, 2014). A single video-camera was used for the recordings, facing the students. The teacher is often not visible on the camera. Some students (up to one third, depending on the size of the group) may not be visible either because of the camera angle. For this reason, the data only offer limited possibilities for multimodal analysis.

The analyses were conducted within the conversation analytic framework (for recent introductions on CA, see e.g. Liddicoat 2010, Sidnell 2010, Sidnell & Stivers [eds.] 2012). The approach is strictly empirical and adopts an emic perspective on the interactional phenomena under scrutiny. The description of interactional phenomena is based on a cumulative analysis of a collection of instances within a coherent set of data.

The identification criteria used for elaborating the collection of explanations in the present study were chosen on the basis of an exploratory study on the participants' orientations to the process of explanation, broached as displayed in their use of the words 'expliquer' (*to explain*) and 'explication' (*explanation*) (Fasel Lauzon 2009; see Marra & Pallotti 2006 for a description of 'logonyms' and their interest when conducting research on institutional data). The findings showed that the participants orient to the necessity of producing an explanation in two kinds of situations:

- When a word, a stretch of talk or a situation is topicalized as being surprising, strange, i.e. as deviating from at least one of the participants' expectations; for example, a stretch of talk is described as a '*drôle de façon de parler*' (*weird way of talking*), or a situation is assessed using '*c'est bizarre*' (*it's strange*). The participants orient to the necessity of producing an explanation that makes the topicalized object understandable and therefore not surprising or strange anymore (see Gülich 1990; Antaki 1994; de Gaulmyn 1991; Sterponi 2003 for similar descriptions).
- When the understanding of the meaning of a word, of a stretch of talk or of a situation is displayed as not being equally shared among the participants and when that 'unbalanced' distribution of understanding is oriented to as problematic (e.g. because it might impede some participants' adequate participation to a classroom activity). The participants orient to the necessity of producing an explanation that re-establishes a shared understanding among them.

An explanation occurs in a situation where it is oriented to as necessary as long as at least one of the participants presents him/herself as willing and able to provide an explanation, and as long as the co-participants accept the action of explaining as a legitimate one.

The collection of explanations used in the present study was elaborated by searching for all instances of these two kinds of situation in the data. In all instances, a participant was recognized as legitimately willing and able to provide the necessary explanation. Consequently, in all instances an explanation was found following orientations to the surprising or weird character of an object and following orientations to a problematic lack of shared understanding. Among the collected instances, a subset containing all

dialogic explanations was analyzed (n = 105): within-turn explanative expansions were set aside³. Three categories of explanations were identified: explanations of vocabulary items, explanations of stretches of contextualized discourse and explanations of situations (see Fasel Lauzon 2014 for an extensive presentation of these three categories). Three excerpts of the same category – discourse explanations – are presented in the present paper for reasons of coherence in the analytic section, however the findings concerning the interactional architecture of explanations are relevant to all the instances of my collection and therefore apply to the three categories.

4. 'Basic' three-part emergent explanation episodes

Some instances of the collection can be described as three-part episodes (see section 2) with clear boundaries. The interactional architecture of these instances can be described as expanded sequences made of a question-answer adjacency pair followed by a sequence-closing third (SCT, Schegloff 2007: 118 sqq.), by means of which the participant who has produced the question displays his/her reception of the answer and his/her understanding using a change of cognitive state token (Heritage 1984b).

Excerpt 1 is taken from an activity during which the teacher (T) has shown a cartoon to the students and asked them to describe and analyze it. The cartoon represents a classroom with a blackboard on which one reads *I feel like burning a car, You feel like burning a car, He feels like burning a car* ('J'ai envie de brûler une voiture, Tu as envie de brûler une voiture, Il a envie de brûler une voiture'). In front of the blackboard stands a teacher who says *The next student who writes "feel like burning" [FR: brûler] without a circumflex will have to deal with me* ('Le prochain qui écrit "envie de brûler" sans circonflexe aura affaire à moi').

Excerpt 1 – CODI L2-secll-JM-3 – 'affaire à moi'

- 01 T: ça c'est une chose,
that it's one thing
- 02 *oui,
yes
*the teacher points to Danielle, who has her hand raised
- 03 Dan: j'ai une question, [euh]
I have a question uh
- 04 T: [oui.]
yes
- 05 (0.1)
- A 06 Dan: qu'est-ce que ça veut dire,
what does it mean

³ In other words, I investigated the cases in which a participant sets up an explanation slot for another speaker but not the cases in which a participant sets up his/her own explanation slot (see Antaki 1994 for an extensive description of both types of explanation slots).

Excerpt 1 shows an explanation in which the three-part episode described in the literature is easily identifiable – opening in A (l.6), core in B (l.9), closing in C (l.12). The interactional architecture is made of a question-answer adjacency pair (A and B) and of a change-of-state token as a sequence-closing third (C). Two important comments must however be made about this excerpt:

- a) The 'core' of the explanation episode does not end immediately after the change-of-state token is produced. The teacher indeed finishes the turn construction unit she is producing (l.11) after the change-of-state token is uttered (l.12). Moreover, after a pause (l.13), she produces an increment that prolongs the core of the explanation (l.14). Expansions of the core of the explanation after change-of-state sequence-closing thirds are common in the data, whether the core of the explanation is produced by a teacher or by a student⁴. Such post-expansions may be followed by a repetition of the sequence-closing third or by an absence of uptake from the recipient of the explanation, which works as an implicit ratification and re-signals that the episode can be closed (see the pause, l.15)⁵. In sum, the participants involved in the explanation episode do not always display similar orientations to the role and aim of the episode. The participant who has interrupted the main course of the classroom activity usually orients to a minimization of the interruption by signaling that the problem in understanding is solved as soon as possible, sometimes in overlap with the core of the explanation (see l.12). In other words, the participant who has requested the opening of an explanation episode displays willingness

⁴ Here is an instance of vocabulary explanation where a student reworks the core of the explanation after a change-of-state sequence-closing third.

Excerpt 1' – CODI L2-secll-DK-B-4 – 'imam'

A 01 Rit: °was heisst imam?°
+what does imam mean ((in German))+
 02 (0.8)

B 03 Fab: °euh imam,° (0.6) is- euh: islamischer priester.°
uh imam is- uh +islamic priest ((in German))+

C 04 Rit: °aha:°
oh

-> 05 Fab: °(ä) pfarrer.°
+a pastor ((in German))+

06 Rit: °aha:°
oh

07 ((the students read silently: 10.1))

In spite of the production of a change-of-state token by Rita at line 4, Fabio continues working on the core of the explanation by producing a reformulation at line 5. Rita then displays the solving of the problem in understanding again by re-enacting her change of cognitive state at line 6. The sequence is closed by both students' re-engagement into a silent reading task.

⁵ Withdrawing gaze could also be a way for the student to indicate that the explanation episode can be closed. However Danielle's gaze orientation is not visible on the video-recording because she sits on the second row and her face is largely 'hid' by a student sitting on the first row.

to reduce the duration of the interruption created in the course of the main classroom activity. The participant who produces the explanation, however, regularly does not display that same concern⁶ but rather exhibits a search for the most adequate explanation through a sometimes long series of reformulations, even after the production of a sequence-closing third by the co-participant. This observation of diverging concerns from the participants involved in an explanation episode suggests that the whole episode, and especially its point of completion, is the result of the negotiated adjustments of all the participants. The person who has opened an episode cannot alone decide when to close it: deciding when an explanation is complete rests under the common responsibility of all the participants.

- b) Observing a massive amount of instances resembling excerpt 1 would advocate for three-part 'basic' explanation episodes to constitute the prototypical architecture of explanation in the second language classroom. However, finding a 'basic enough' explanation episode in the collection was actually not an easy task. Explanation episodes made of three turns-at-talk – one for the opening, one for the core and one for the closing, – and of three specific actions – a request in the opening, an answer in the core and a change-of-state token in the closing are exceptions rather than routine in the data. An important amount of instances are made of actions that are sensitively different from the ones observed in excerpt 1 (see section 5). Moreover, the boundaries between the three parts of the explanation episode – opening, core and closing – are sometimes blurred (see Section 6).

5. Institutionalized explanation episodes

In the collection, a significant amount of explanation episodes are 'institutionalized', i.e., they reflect institution-specific concerns and they are designed for institution-specific purposes. This is most visible in episodes that are 'didacticized'. In opposition to emergent explanations that by essence are not planned in advance but opened when the participants are confronted to a potential problem in understanding, didacticized explanation episodes are planned in advance by the teachers. These episodes are organized around teachers' requests that are not aimed at solving a problem in their own understanding, but at testing the students' understanding and if necessary at correcting an 'incorrect' understanding (de Gaulmyn 1991). The Question-Answer-Comment or Initiation-Response-Feedback/Evaluation sequence (Sinclair & Coulthard 1975; McHoul 1978; Mehan 1979) is in these cases used as a template for organizing the explanation.

⁶ Despite a regular logic of *economy* rather than *exhaustivity* in vocabulary explanations, see Fasel Lauzon (2009, 2014).

Excerpt 2 is taken from an activity in which the students and the teacher analyze lyrics (from the song *Petit frère*, IAM). The teacher has distributed a worksheet with four stretches of text taken from the lyrics and instructed the students to discuss what these stretches meant in small groups.

1. Expliquez les vers suivants:

a) Il marche à peine et veut des bottes de sept lieues³⁴.
 Petit frère veut grandir trop vite/Mais il a oublié que rien ne sert de courir, petit frère.

Fig. 1: Part of worksheet distributed to the students before ex.2. Translation: "Explain the following verses: a) As soon as he walks he wants seven-league boots / Little brother wants to grow up too fast / But he has forgotten that running solves nothing, little brother."

After letting the students work on the task in small groups for 09m30s, the teacher asks a student to read and explain the first stretch of talk.

Excerpt 2 – CODI L2-secll-JM-2 – 'petit frère veut grandir trop vite'

- 01 Chr: ((reads)) il marche à peine, et veut de bottes de sept lieues.
as soon as he walks he wants DET seven-league boots
- 02 (0.8)
- 03 Chr: ((reads)) petit frère veut grandir trop vite,
little brother wants to grow up too fast
- 04 ((reads)) mais il a oublié (0.1) que rien ne sert de courir.
but he has forgotten that running solves nothing
- 05 (0.3)
- 06 Chr: ((reads)) petit frère.=
little brother
- 07 T: =voilà.
right
- A** 08 j'ai dit donc lisez et: pardon et expliquez?
I AUX said so read and sorry and explain
- 09 (0.6)
- 10 T: donc maintenant vous pouvez expliquer,
so now can you explain
- 11 qu'est-ce que ça veut dire.
what does it mean
- 12 (1.0)
- B** 13 Chr: c'est un: un- un garçon [qui:]
it's a a a boy who
- 14 T: [mhm,]
- 15 Chr: qui veut: (1.0) réaliser les choses qui (1.6) °°euhm°° (1.2)
who wants to do DET things that uh
- 16 pas encore sont °nécessaires.°
not yet are necessary
- 17 T: qui ne sont pas encore nécessaires, pour- oui:.,
that are not yet necessary wh- yes

- 18 pourquoi elles sont pas encore néc-
 why are they not yet nec-
- 19 elles sont pas encore nécessaires, ces choses,
 are they not yet necessary those things
- 20 Chr: °il est trop jeune.°
 he is too young
- C 21 T: voilà.
 right
- 22 il est encore trop jeune.
 he is still too young
- 23 hein, ouais.
 huh yeah
- 24 qu'est-ce qu'on veut dire par il veut:
 what does one mean by he wants
- 25 .h des bottes de sept lieues?
 DET seven-league boots

After the student has read the stretch of talk, the teacher reformulates her instruction ('j'ai dit donc lisez et: pardon et expliquez', *I said read and: sorry and explain*, l.8) as a mean to request an explanation from the student. The request however remains unanswered (l.9) and the teacher re-initiates it, specifying that she expects an explanation of the meaning of the stretch of discourse (i.e., what we labeled 'discourse explanation'; 'vous pouvez expliquez, qu'est-ce que ça veut dire', *can you explain, what does it mean*, l.10-11).

The formal distinctive feature of didacticized explanation episodes is found in the way they are received and closed rather than in the formatting of their opening and core. Excerpts 1 and 2 show explanation episodes opened by using requests with a similar formatting (*what does it mean*) and in which the core is similarly accomplished through a reformulation of the stretch of discourse; the closing of these episodes is however different. In excerpt 2 the teacher produces a continuer (l.14) before the student's explanation has reached a point where it can reasonably be understood as complete, after a first 'chunk' of content has been produced ('c'est un garçon', *it's a boy*, l.13). Such 'early' marks of reciprocity, which ratify the participant's engagement into the task of producing an explanation and encourage its pursuit, are absent in emergent explanations: in emergent explanation episodes the recipients usually display their reciprocity through change-of-state tokens rather than continuers and only after a significant (i.e. with an explanatory value) piece of content has been provided (see ex.1). Even after the student produces a final intonation and thereby displays a candidate completion point for the explanation core (l.16), the teacher does not provide a change-of-state token: she instead produces a recast that ratifies the content while correcting the word order used by the student ('qui ne sont pas encore nécessaires', *that are not yet necessary*, l.17) and a continuer ('oui:', *yeah*., l.17). She then asks for additional information (l.18-19), thereby scaffolding the organization of the

explanation core. The student's answer to the additional information question (l.20) is followed by a positive evaluation from the teacher who thereby displays that she considers the explanation complete ('voilà', *that's it*, l.21). The teacher then reformulates the student's answer, thereby 'sharing' the explanation with the rest of the class, and uses a tag question ('hein', *huh*, l.23) by means of which she asserts her "epistemic primacy" (Raymond & Heritage 2006: 692 sqq.) over the content of the explanation core. She then moves on to opening another explanation episode, linked to the previous one, by asking for the meaning of a specific part of the stretch of talk (l.24-25).

Excerpt 2 allows observing how explanation episodes can be shaped in order to meet specific institutional goals. Didacticized explanations differ from emergent explanation episodes in the following aspects (all related to each other):

- They regularly do not *emerge* in and through the local interactional context. Rather, they may be *planned* in advance in order to reach specific learning goals. In ex.2, the discourse explanation episode is planned in advance by the teacher, as shown in the worksheet that she distributes to the students (see Fig.1). Consequentially, explanation episodes may not be organized as exchanges that momentarily put on hold the 'main course' of an activity (as in ex.1). Rather, they may themselves constitute didactic activities (as in ex.2).
- The main goal of the explanation may not be to prevent or solve a problem in understanding. This is not to say that this goal is absent: preventing and solving problems in understanding is underlying any explanation, and in ex.2 the stretch of discourse may have been chosen by the teacher because she considers it a potential source of difficulties in understanding for the students. However, that goal is subordinated to another one, which is to test the students' understanding and ability to explain. This is visible in the teacher's focus on the accuracy and 'exhaustivity' of the student's explanation rather than on its efficiency for establishing a shared understanding within the class.
- The explanation is not primarily addressed from a K+ speaker to a K- speaker (i.e., from a speaker 'who knows more' to a speaker 'who knows less'; see Heritage 2013). Rather, the situation is the opposite. Explanations are opened by means of 'display questions' from the teachers, and explanation cores are addressed by students in a K- position to the teacher in a K+ position. The K- position adopted by the students is regularly visible in explanation cores that end with a rising intonation, by means of which the student indicates that the explanation is submitted to the teacher's appreciation. The K+ position adopted by the teachers is visible in their scaffolding of the students' explanations and in tag questions that assert their epistemic primacy (see ex.2, l.13).

- The completion of the explanation core and the closing of the episode do not rely on a display of understanding. An explanation is brought to a closing when it is evaluated as correct and exhaustive enough by the teacher. The change-of-state tokens found in emergent explanation episodes are replaced by continuers to indicate that the teacher expects 'more to come' and by evaluation tokens (*that's it, exactly, very good, etc.*) to bring it to a closing.

Taken separately, none of these features is institution-specific: an explanation episode taking place in a non-institutional, everyday conversation can be planned in advance and constitute the main topic of a conversation (*I've meant to ask you for years: could you explain to me...*), and/or it can be used to assess a co-participant's understanding (*You don't even know what the words you use really mean [prove it if you do]*). However, in classroom interaction these features are recurrently combined and configured so that the interactional architecture of explanation episodes fits the QAC / IRF/E 'template'. Didacticized explanations are then part of the "interactional fingerprint" (Heritage & Clayman 2011) of classroom interaction.

6. Extended explanation episodes and blurred boundaries

While being different from emergent explanations, didacticized explanations share a similar three-part structure, usually made of a question-answer adjacency pair and a sequence-closing third. In excerpt 2, the question is found at l.11 (*what does it mean*), the answer at l.13-16 (*it's a boy who wants to do things that are not necessary yet*). A third turn is found in l.17 (*yeah*) but is not oriented to as closing the sequence. It rather prefaces a "non-minimal post-expansion" (Schegloff 2007, chapter 7) in which the teacher challenges the base second pair part (i.e., the answer) by pointing to an aspect that remains unexplained (*why aren't these things necessary yet*, l.18-19). The completion of the post-expansion sequence by the student, who provides an answer to the teacher's request for additional information (*he is too young*, l.20) is ratified by an evaluation that works as a sequence-closing third (*that's it he is still too young huh yeah* l.21-23). In sum, despite the presence of a non-minimal post-expansion, the 'basic' architecture of the explanation episode and its boundaries are clearly visible. In this section, however, we observe that the interactional architecture of explanation episodes in the classroom is not always so clear-cut. Excerpt 3 is taken from a classroom activity during which the teacher asks the students to describe movie characters (from *La Haine*, M. Kassovitz).

Excerpt 3a – CODI L2-secll-JM-1 – 'pas sérieux'

01 T: comment vous trouvez: (0.3) said?
 how do you find said
 02 (2.9)

- 03 T: ou il- il- il est:
or he he he is
- 04 (1.2)
- 05 T: oui, sarina.
yes Sarina
- 06 Sar: il est pas très sérieux.
he is not very serious
- 07 (0.8)
- 08 Sar: et il est drôle, (0.5) °°un peu.°°=
and he is funny a bit
- 09 T: =oui(h) (h) oui, .h oui bon.
yes yes yes well
- 10 euh- bon, (0.8) je sais pas si un des trois est sérieux:,
uh well I don't know if one of the three is serious
- 11 vraiment.
really
- 12 (0.2)
- A 13 T: ou ou: qu'est-ce que vous entendez par sérieux.
or or what do you mean by serious
- B 14 Sar: non je veux dire que- (0.3) euhm (0.8)
no I mean that uh
- 15 °il° (0.3) °fait des bla:gues et:° (0.5) °ouais.°
he makes DET jokes and yeah
- 16 T: mhm, (0.4) ouais, (0.2)
mhm yeah
- 17 oui, (0.1) carole,=
yes Carole

At the beginning of excerpt 3a, the teacher selects a student, Sarina, to describe one of the movie characters (l.1-5). Sarina provides a description ('il est pas très sérieux', *he is not very serious*, l.6). The teacher does not display reciprocity of the description (see the pause⁷, l.7) despite the final intonation that shapes it as complete, prefacing a possible negative evaluation (delayed as a dispreferred action). Sarina reacts to the absence of uptake by 'reworking' her answer (l.8). The teacher then produces a mitigated evaluation (*yes well* in a laughing voice, l.9) and a comment that challenges the relevance of Sarina's answer ('je sais pas si un des trois est sérieux vraiment', *I don't know if one of the three [main characters] is serious, really*, l.10-11). However the teacher then puts her mitigated evaluation 'on hold' and gives Sarina an opportunity to explain her answer and thereby warrant its relevance: 'ou qu'est-ce que vous entendez par sérieux', *or what do you mean by serious* (l.13). The teacher thereby displays her evaluation of the student's description as pending and as expected to be delivered after Sarina's response to the explanation request. Sarina's explanation of her own stretch of talk therefore is aimed at solving a

⁷ The teacher is not visible on the video-recording, so it is not possible to see whether she acknowledges the student's turn-at-talk non-verbally (e.g., by nodding).

potential problem in understanding but also at accounting for and legitimizing her description.

Sarina provides an explanation that clarifies what she means by *not serious* (l.14-15) and therefore, indirectly, by *serious*. At that point, a sequence-closing third by the teacher would be a next relevant action, whether it displays acceptance of the explanation or not. However, the teacher does not produce a sequence-closing third, but only continuers (*mhm yeah*, l.16), before selecting another student, Carine, who has bid for a turn (l.17). At that point then, whether the explanation episode remains open or is closed by the selection of another student is ambiguous.

Excerpt 3b – CODI L2-secll-JM-1 – 'pas sérieux' (cont.)

- 18 Car: =euhm je pense c'est:
uh I think it's
- 19 il n'a pas son: (0.1) eigene: opinion.=
he does not have his +own ((German))+ opinion
- 20 T: =il a- il n'a pas sa euh:: (0.2) s: (0.6) sa propre opinion.
he ha- he does not have his uh his own opinion
- 21 Car: oui.
yes
- 22 (0.6)
- 23 Car: il (0.2) euhm:: (1.4) euh parfois il d-
he uh uh sometimes he s-
- 24 il fait des choses, (0.3) des: des choses, (1.1)
he does DET things DET DET things
- 25 euhm comme vince, et: seulement parce qu'il est
uh like Vince and only because he is
- 26 peut-être une (0.4) (xx) ou(h) je sais pas.
perhaps a or I don't know
- 27 T: ouais, (0.1) ouais, (0.3) tout à fait.
yeah yeah that's right
- 28 (0.8)
- 29 T: oui? (0.1) marisa.
yes Marisa
- 30 Mar: je pense qu'il est toujours un enfant,
I think that he is still a child
- 31 T: mhm,
mhm
- 32 Mar: il (0.2) on peut <l'influer> (0.3) [l'influ-]
he one can influe influ-
- 33 T: [influ]encer.
influence
- 34 Mar: oui, (0.6) très bien et: (1.3)
yes very well and
- 35 il (0.3) raconte (1.4) euh (0.4) beaucoup des: (0.2) histoires,
he tells uh a lot of DET stories
- 36 et il (0.8) oui.

and he yes
 37 (1.4)
 38 T: oui.
 yes
 39 (0.3)

Carine produces a description of the movie character (l.18-26). Because of its sequential placement, after an explanation core and continuers, it may be broached as an addition to the explanation core. However, Carine's description is not explicitly oriented to clarifying what *serious* or *not serious* mean when used to describe the character. On the level of content it rather seems to address another dimension of the character, thereby responding to the teacher's initial request for description (l.1) rather than extending the explanation episode. After an embedded correction (Jefferson 1987; l.20), the teacher positively evaluates Carine's description (*yeah that's right*, l.27) and selects a third student, Marisa, who has also volunteered to take a turn (l.29). Marisa produces a description that the teacher acknowledges ('oui', yes, l.38). During all excerpt 3b, it remains ambiguous whether the explanation episode about the meaning of (*not*) *serious* is still open or whether it has been implicitly closed by the resuming of the main course of activity, i.e. the general description of the character. Because of the lack of explicit orientation from the participants towards the explanation episode, it could be interpreted as closed. However, in excerpt 3c the teacher orients to explaining the meaning of *serious* again:

Excerpt 3c – CODI L2-secll-JM-1 – 'pas sérieux' (cont.)

→ 40 T: c'est: (0.1) je crois ce que vous dites aussi
 it's I think what you say too
 → 41 quand vous dites c'est- il est pas sérieux c'est un peu ça,
 when you say it's he is not serious it's a bit that
 → 42 c'est ce côté euh:: (0.4) enfant.
 it's this side uh child (=*this childish side*)
 43 (0.2)
 44 T: hein? il est il est #euh:# il est très: (0.2)
 huh he is he is uh he is very
 45 oui il est très drôle,
 yes he is very funny
 46 parce que il fait (0.4) il fait un peu le clown.
 because he does he clowns a bit
 47 (0.2)
 48 T: ouais.
 yeah
 49 °oui?°=
 yes
 50 Nic: =je crois il fait aussi des mauvaises cho- euh-
 I think he also does DET bad thin- uh

After minimally acknowledging Marisa's description, the teacher turns back to Sarina, which she directly addresses ('vous dites', *you say*, l.40 and 41), and to the issue of explaining the meaning of (*not*) *serious* referring to the movie character. By claiming *what you say when you say X is Y*, the teacher provides a candidate explanation of what the student meant to say, thereby contributing to the elaboration of the explanation core ('ce que vous dites aussi quand vous dites il est pas sérieux c'est un peu ça', *what you say when you say he is not serious it's a bit that*, l.40-41). The teacher then builds on the description of the movie character, using Marisa's and Sarina's own formulations ('enfant', *child*, from Marisa, l.42; 'drôle', *funny*, from Sarina l.45). She finally produces a ratification token with a final intonation ('ouais', *yeah* l.48) and selects another student, who provides a new descriptive element of the movie character.

By turning back to Sarina after nominating two other students and by referring to the object of the explanation (*what you say when you say he is not serious*), the teacher exhibits the completion of the explanation episode as still pending. By linking Sarina's formulation (*he is not serious*) to Marisa's description (*still a child* → *childish side*), she points that Marisa's description played a role in the completion of the explanation core, even if it did not seem to 'belong' to the explanation episode and even if the explanation episode seemed on hold or abandoned at that point. Finally, by proposing a candidate explanation of what Sarina meant rather than by evaluating Sarina's own explanation, the teacher shifts her position from recipient to co-producer of the explanation core: she collaborates in building the core of the explanation rather than simply 'validates' an explanation produced by a student.

Excerpt 3a-c challenges the basic description of explanations as three-part episodes with clear-cut boundaries in at least three aspects:

- While the opening and (part of) the core of the explanation can be identified (see A and B in excerpt 3a), what exactly constitutes the core and when the core ends is ambiguous. It is possible that the participants' perspectives themselves differ about it.
- The boundaries between the 'main' course of the classroom activity and the explanation episode are blurred: Marisa's turn, for example, is descriptive and contributes to the main course of the activity, but is also oriented to by the teacher as relevant for the explanation episode. The relevance of the distinction between a 'main' course of activity and an explanation episode that puts on hold that main course is challenged.
- The participants' roles and epistemic stance within the explanation episode are not purely asymmetric and complementary: the teacher is at the same time the recipient of Sarina's explanation and a co-participant to the collective construction of the explanation core.

7. Conclusion

This paper has described the interactional architecture of explanation episodes by investigating a corpus of second language classroom interactions. It has shown that the length and complexity of explanation episodes present a great deal of variation, even within a coherent set of data. In institutional interactions, explanations can be used and transformed as a practice that allows reaching institution-specific goals, such as, in the second language classroom, solving L2-related problems in understanding, verifying and evaluating understanding, practicing and assessing oral communication skills. In other words, explanation episodes in the classroom may be of two kinds: they may be 'emergent', like in everyday conversations, aimed at solving problems in understanding and at restoring intersubjectivity; they may also be institutionalized, and more specifically 'didacticized' in order to fit the traditional QAC / IRF/E template and to address institution-specific goals. However, the distinction between emergent and didacticized explanation episodes is not always straightforward: the participants locally configure explanations as emergent or didacticized.

When dealing with somewhat large collections of a given interactional phenomenon or practice, it is tempting to start analyzing the simplest instances and to declare that they constitute the 'basic' realization of the phenomenon. More complex instances are sometimes investigated as 'deviant cases'. However instances that are not 'basic' but not oriented to as deviant by the participants either are often subject to less attention, because their complexity or their length make them seen as unsuitable for publication. A problem with this way of doing is that the most basic instances are not always the most representative of a collection, and presenting them as such in publications results in a biased picture. A second, more practical problem linked to the first is that it limits the possibility for researchers to compare their sets of data, specifically because the instances that are presented as basic in a paper may actually be rare. For this reason and in order to avoid that bias, the present paper aimed at doing justice to the entire collection it relied on, by showing not only 'basic' explanation episodes but also more complex and ambiguous ones. A description of their respective interactional architecture was provided as well as an account of how the participants themselves deal with blurred boundaries between explanation episodes and other kinds of classroom activities. The study therefore is aimed at contributing not only to research on explanation as a social interactional practice, but also to the current reflections on the organization of complex extended sequences of social interaction.

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Appendix: Transcription conventions

| | |
|-----------------|---|
| T: | indicates the speaker: teacher |
| And: | indicates the speaker: student's name |
| %and: | indicates a participant deploying non-verbal conduct |
| [] | overlap |
| = | latching |
| (0.5) | measured pause, in seconds |
| coul- | cut-off |
| ce: | lengthening of preceding sound |
| chemin? | rising intonation |
| train, | slightly rising intonation |
| trainç | slightly falling intonation |
| temps. | falling intonation |
| b <u>e</u> soin | accentuation |
| NON | louder than surrounding talk |
| °ça fait tout° | softer than surrounding talk |
| .h | in-breath |
| h. | out-breath |
| >enfin< | faster than surrounding talk |
| <mais> | slower than surrounding talk |
| ((laughing)) | transcriber's comment |
| + | start of the stretch of talk to which a transcriber's comment refers |
| * | indicates the beginning of a gesture or change of gaze orientation; the gesture or change of gaze orientation is written in the line below the translation |